

One



Cecily Swann knew it well, this path. She had walked it all of her life, and it was an old familiar. Lifting her head, she looked up at the grand house towering above her on top of the hill. Cavendon Hall. One of the great stately homes of England, it was the finest of all in Yorkshire.

The house was her destination this morning, as it had been so often when she was growing up. Her parents and her brother, Harry, lived in Little Skell village, at the edge of Cavendon Park, just as their ancestors had done for more than one hundred seventy years.

It was a lovely Friday morning in the middle of July, and there was no hint of rain today. The sunshine streamed down, bathing the house in that crystalline northern light which gave the exterior its soft, peculiar sheen at different times of day.

Cecily glanced about as she walked on. She had half expected to see Genevra loitering here. But there was no sign of the gypsy girl. The Romany wagons were visible on the hill at the far end of the fields; Genevra's family

still lived on the sixth earl's land, that was a given. He had always permitted it; she supposed they would stay there forever.

But so much else had changed. Cavendon Hall looked the same, but it wasn't what it used to be. It was a different place; in fact, many things were different now. The Great War had changed everything. And everyone. As her father, Walter, was forever saying, the good old days were over, and nothing would ever be the same again. And his words were only too true.

Thankfully, her father and her brother had come back safely from the Great War, but Guy Ingham, the heir to the Mowbray earldom, had not. He had died for his country fighting in France, and was buried there alongside his comrades-in-arms.

They had all mourned him . . . every person in the three villages, as well as his family. Not because he was the heir, but because he had been one of the nicest of young men. Now it was Miles who would one day inherit the earldom and everything that this entailed.

Miles Ingham.

Her heart tightened at the thought of him. He had been her constant companion throughout her childhood, her best friend and later her sweetheart. She had loved him with all of her being; she still did. And he had told her many times that he felt the same, and that one day they would be married. But that had not happened.

Miles had been forced to marry another girl. A suitable girl. Clarissa Meldrew, the daughter of Lord Meldrew. The right kind of girl, who would give Miles an aristocratic heir. That was the way it was with the gentry . . . future heirs dominated their lives and their destinies.

Cecily came to a stop as a sudden thought struck her. After a moment, she veered to her left and headed in the direction of the rose garden. She needed a few moments to think, and anyway, she was too early for her meeting.

A few seconds later, she was pulling open the heavy oak door and going down the steps. It was a fragrant spot, this old walled garden filled

with the scent of late-blooming roses. She breathed in the heady smell as she sat down on a wrought-iron garden seat. This spot had always been a haven of peace and beauty.

Holding herself completely still, she closed her eyes, wondering why she had agreed to do this . . . to help Miles manage the events planned by the earl for the family reunion. It was probably the most stupid thing she had ever done in her life.

Only if *you* are stupid, she told herself. Obviously Aunt Charlotte thinks you are capable of handling a difficult situation or she wouldn't have asked you to help out.

Her aunt's voice echoed as she went back in her mind to the discussion they'd had a week ago. She remembered her aunt's words very well. "Lady Daphne is the only one capable of managing the weekend with Miles, but she has so much on her hands, what with running Cavendon and five children underfoot. I personally would appreciate it if you would help him, Ceci."

She thought now of the way she had tried to wriggle out of it, not liking the idea at all. She had muttered something about one of his other sisters being better at that job. But her aunt had fluffed them off with a dismissive wave of her hand. "There might be difficulties, Ceci, and we need someone strong like you. Someone who can be tough, if needs be."

Well, she could be tough, she knew that. But mostly she would have to be tough with herself. And with Miles Ingham.

She had not had a conversation with him for the last six years. They'd spoken, the odd times they had run into each other here at Cavendon, or waved, but that was all. Six years ago she had vowed never to let him near her again, and her aunt had nodded her approval when she had confided in Charlotte.

"I'll walk alone and devote myself to my career as a fashion designer," Cecily had said, and Charlotte had looked pleased, and relieved. Unexpectedly, Charlotte had asked her to help Miles out now, and it puzzled Cecily. Actually she had no choice.

Cecily sighed, and sat up straighter. She owed Charlotte Swann everything. It was her aunt who had backed her fashion business, presented her with her first shop in the Burlington Arcade, made her career possible. And it was Charlotte's money which had originally funded the venture. They became business partners, and they still were, and worked extremely well together.

She trusts me to handle myself correctly, Cecily decided. She knows I won't succumb to his charms, become involved with him on a personal level. She understands that the pain he caused me runs far too deep. Besides, she's fully aware I'm devoted to my business, that it's my life.

Standing up, Cecily walked out of the rose garden, and went on up the hill toward the house. She felt better. She could handle Miles Ingham. She wasn't afraid of him. She wasn't afraid of anyone, for that matter.

In the past six years she had learned to be truly independent, to stand on her own two feet, and to make her own decisions. Furthermore, she was a big success. Women loved her clothes, bought them by the cartload. And not only in London, but in America as well. Already, she had made two trips to New York, and her name was well known on both sides of the Atlantic.

Miles had his problems. And so did Cavendon.

Her future was full of brightness and challenge, and even more success, with a little luck. Miles Ingham was part of the past. Her eyes were focused on the future.

She would help him out this weekend, and then she would go back to London and get on with her work, and leave Miles to his own devices. There was no place in her life for him . . . she would never forget that day, six years ago, when he had told her he was getting married to another woman. He had broken her heart, and she would never forgive him.