

One

Cecily Swann Ingham, the Seventh Countess of Mowbray, was on the steps of the office annex, looking out across the stable block, her eyes focused on Cavendon Hall perched high on the hill in front of her.

It was a lovely June morning, and the luminous light so special to the North cast a sheen across the soaring roof and chimney tops, which appeared to shimmer under the clear, bright sky.

How glorious the house looks today, she thought, stately grand, strong and safe. She smiled wryly to herself, not quite sure of this last assumption. It wasn't safe at all, in her opinion. Not in reality.

Cecily had always held the belief that being in the middle of a large and diverse family was the most dangerous place to be in the world; nothing would convince her otherwise. Many families were the same, rife with free-floating emotion . . . jealousy, envy, anger, greed, and possessiveness. There were dramas, tragedies, grave sorrows by the minute, but also love, compassion, understanding, happiness, and joy. And somehow it all worked out in the end, despite the rows, the quibbling, the silly

disagreements, and bickering about matters which were so unimportant in the long run, and in their lives.

Sadly, as grand as the house looked this morning, it was facing serious trouble once more in its long life, and she was genuinely worried about its future, the future of the entire estate, including the grouse moor, and the family itself, as well.

Cecily sighed, closed her eyes, shutting out the view of Cavendon. It had bled them dry for years, and taken an enormous amount of their time. They had each made huge sacrifices for it, not to mention pouring money into the bottomless pit it had become, particularly her money.

Opening her eyes, straightening, she wondered how on earth they would manage to stave off the encroaching trouble which was slowly but steadily moving forward to engulf them. If she was truthful with herself, she had to admit she had no idea. For once in her life she felt entirely helpless, unable to create a foolproof plan of action.

The clatter of hooves cut into her worrisome thoughts, and she opened her eyes. Her brother, Harry, was crossing the cobbled stable yard, accompanied by Miles, who walked alongside the horse.

Her husband spotted her, raised his hand in greeting, smiled at her . . . that very special smile reserved for her alone. Her heart tightened, as it usually did when that adoring look crossed his face, because he had seen her unexpectedly.

Harry waved; she waved back, and watched her brother leave the yard. He was off on his Saturday-morning rounds of the entire estate. Harry reveled in his job as the estate manager and had made such a huge difference in numerous ways. The new gardens he had created after he had been invalided out of the air force were startling in their uniqueness and beauty, and thousands of visitors came to see them, as well as doing tours of the house.

Miles joined her on the steps, put his arm around her. "I missed you at breakfast. As adorable and entertaining as our children are, they can hardly take your place, my love."

“I needed to get to my desk, go over the latest figures Aunt Dottie sent up from London. Before going to the meeting.”

“Bloody hell! I’d forgotten about the Saturday-morning meeting of the Cavendon women,” Miles exclaimed, frowning, and sounding annoyed.

Cecily gave him a nod and grimaced.

Miles said, “Come on then, madam, buck up at once! Gird on your sword and prepare to do battle. You have no alternative, you know. The die is cast!”

“Indeed it is.” She then broke into peals of laughter at his teasing. “I’m off,” she added, “there won’t be a battle, maybe a bit of grumbling, and whining, but that’s all.” She blew him a kiss.

“I know *that*. Still, just think, next week we’ll be all alone with our little brood and Aunt Charlotte. The rest of the family will have gone off on their holidays, thank God.”

“Like you, I can’t wait,” she replied and left him standing on the steps of the annex. She made her way across the stable yard, heading for the terrace which ran along the back of the house, facing Cavendon Park.

When she stepped onto the terrace a few seconds later, Cecily looked through the French doors, which stood open, and saw that her sisters-in-law had not yet arrived. She sat down in a wicker chair, her gaze resting on the lush park which flowed to the edge of Little Skell village.

On the left side of the park was the lake where the two white swans floated, a matched pair, bonded for life, as were all swans. It had been the first earl, Humphrey Ingham, who had decreed there must always be swans at Cavendon to honor his liegeman, James Swann.

Humphrey and James had been business partners in the seventeen hundreds, and after Humphrey had been made an earl he had Cavendon Park built. It was James Swann who had helped to turn it into a great stately home where the Inghams and Swanns still lived.

The spectacular view had not changed over the many years, not since the seventeen hundreds, in fact. But everything else had. Things were different now . . . nothing was the same anymore. Anywhere.

Cecily sat drifting with her thoughts, thinking of the last four years. In 1945, when the war had ended in victory, the euphoria of the public had been high. Unfortunately, that sense of pride, triumph, and relief had soon drifted off, and the rot had set in. The country was broke, the Great British Empire was creeping away, disappearing into nothingness, and everyone grumbled, complained, and couldn't wait for things to get better. *They didn't*. The worst thing of it was that Churchill was out of office; the Labor Party had won the election and Clement Attlee was made prime minister.

City councils without funds were unable to properly function. Bomb sites, great gaping holes in the ground that were eyesores in every big city, were untouched for lack of money and materials. It was the same with ruined buildings; there were piles of rubble everywhere, and all of them made everyone miserable because they were constant reminders of the war.

It seemed to Cecily that Britain had just stood still in those days. Now, in 1949, things were improving; people were becoming more optimistic once more and there was a sense of cheerfulness in the air.

On the other hand, Britain was still a country mostly made up of old men, women, and children. Hundreds of thousands of young men had not returned from battle, had died in foreign lands. She knew how much this had affected Cavendon. They were an agricultural estate that needed sturdy men to till the land, harvest the crops, tend the cattle and sheep.

Miles said they were lucky that two of the Land Army girls had stayed on, and were running several of the tenant farms; by advertising in local newspapers, Harry had managed to hire three families to move into tenant farms in the nearby villages of Mowbray and High Clough.

Hearing voices, Cecily swung around and immediately stood up. Through the French doors she saw Aunt Charlotte, who was talking to Eric Swann. He was now head butler at Cavendon, and had been for some

years. Sadly, their devoted Hanson had died during the war, passing away in his sleep, a gentle death, for which she and Miles had been thankful.

Cecily went into the library to greet Aunt Charlotte, exclaiming, “Good morning, I didn’t expect you to come today, Aunt Charlotte.”

“Hello, Ceci, and why not? It’s the last of the meetings for the summer. I should be here.”

Looking across at Eric, Cecily said, “I see you’ve brought in coffee, Eric. I’d love a cup, please. And what about you, Aunt Charlotte?”

“Yes, of course, I will join you. We can have a chat before the others get here.”

“Right away, my lady,” Eric said, and turned to the tray on the table.

Charlotte, now Dowager Countess of Mowbray, walked over to the fireplace and sat down, and beckoned for Cecily to join her. “There is something I must tell you . . . privately.”

Once they had been served cups of coffee, and Eric had left, Aunt Charlotte said, “Quite recently, I came up with an idea I thought would help Miles to overcome some of the financial problems of the estate. I had to do a little research, and when I had certain answers for myself I was sure I was correct. But I needed to discuss it with an Ingham, a born Ingham, I mean.”

“I understand,” Cecily said, and took a sip of coffee. “So whom did you choose to speak with?”

“Dulcie. Mostly because she was appropriate, and also because I understand her. After all, I brought her up. She was excited about my little scheme, shall we call it, and stands with me.”

“So what is your little scheme, Aunt Charlotte?”

“There’s a bit of explaining to do, so I would prefer it if you would wait until the others arrive . . . when I intend to bring it up.”

Cecily smiled at her aunt. “That’s perfectly fine with me.”

Before she could say anything else, the door of the library opened and Diedre came in, followed by Dulcie and Paloma Swann, Harry's wife. After they greeted each other, Dulcie said, "I'm going to have a cup of coffee, does anyone else want one?"

Diedre and Paloma declined, and went to join the other two women near the fireplace. Dulcie followed them with her coffee cup. Once they were all settled, Diedre looked at Cecily, and said, "I just want to congratulate you on the success of the gift shop, you've done a marvelous job, and certainly the income from it is proving very useful."

"Thank you," Cecily answered, and smiled at Diedre, to whom she had remained close. It was Diedre who was usually the peacemaker when any problems arose and squabbles started. "I honestly had no idea people would be interested in so many small things related to Cavendon."

At this moment the door opened and Daphne stepped into the room. It was obvious that she was dressed for traveling. Gliding forward, she greeted them and then added, "I just came to say farewell. I'm not staying for the meeting. Nobody listens to me anyway."

A fleeting, wry smile crossed her face, and she went on. "Hugo and I are leaving very shortly. We wish to have supper with the children in London this evening. Then we are off to Zurich tomorrow, as you know. What I want to tell you now is that we won't be coming back for a long time. Perhaps not for another year."

Diedre looked startled, exclaimed, "Goodness me, Daphne, a whole year! Why ever would you, of all people, stay away from Cavendon for so long?"

"Because I can't really bear it here anymore," Daphne promptly answered. Her voice was level, steady as she exclaimed, "I cannot live amongst the public milling around the house and gardens. Everywhere, in fact. I keep stumbling over them. It's perfectly ghastly."

Daphne paused and stared at Cecily for a prolonged moment. "It's become far too commercial for me, Ceci. Almost like a giant store, an extension of Harte's, what with the shops, the café, and the art gallery." She

shook her head, her beautiful face suddenly grim, and without uttering another word she left the library, closing the door quietly behind her.

There was a stunned silence.

Daphne's two sisters, Diedre and Dulcie, looked at each other. The amazement on both of their faces proclaimed that this was as much of a surprise to them as it was to Cecily and the others.

Aunt Charlotte spoke first. "I think we must excuse Daphne and her words. She's been exhausted for a long time and has put a lot into Cavendon. I do believe a few weeks of quiet and tranquility in Zurich will help her feel better."

"She blames me," Cecily said in a low tone. "Ever since the end of the war she has been saying I was making Cavendon too commercial. She and Hugo have never stopped grumbling . . . about the house tours, in particular."

"But it's the money we make from the public that keeps us going!" Dulcie cried, her voice rising slightly. "And she blames me too, because you let me build the little extension on the back of the café in order to create my art gallery. But all of the profits go to Cavendon, not to me."

In a soothing voice, Diedre interjected, "Don't let's get excited about this. Frankly, I agree with Aunt Charlotte, Daphne's been bone tired for years and I think she deserves a long rest, and she loves the villa and Switzerland. She'll get her strength back, soon be her old self again."

Dulcie, looking from Diedre to Aunt Charlotte, asked, "Do you both think Daphne does have some kind of *illness*?"

Aunt Charlotte shook her head. "Not really, but she has put so much of herself into the house, she's sort of, well . . ." Charlotte paused before finishing, "A little *possessive* of it, should we say?"

Diedre nodded in agreement. "The public does get on her nerves, but if we didn't have the house and garden tours, and the shops . . ." She broke off, her hands raised in a helpless gesture. "I don't know where we'd be."

"Broke," Cecily said. "Well, not quite, but almost."

"And aren't we lucky the public are so terribly fascinated by Cavendon

Hall and the gardens,” Paloma remarked. “Especially since they pay through the nose for the privilege of touring them.”

Dulcie laughed, and so did the others, breaking the dour mood.

“Perhaps we should just skip the meeting, go on about our own business,” Diedre suggested.

“I believe we should do that in a few minutes. But I have something I would like to discuss, and if you would all stay I would be so appreciative.” As Aunt Charlotte finished speaking she glanced at each of the younger women.

“Of course we’ll stay!” Dulcie exclaimed, right on cue.

“What do you wish to tell us, discuss with us?” Cecily asked, keeping her face totally blank.

“The estate,” Charlotte answered. “As you are aware, I was the personal assistant to David Ingham, the fifth earl. Your grandfather.” She glanced at Diedre and Dulcie. “And as such, I know more about the entire estate than anybody else, even Miles. It struck me about ten days ago that Great-Aunt Gwen had no right to leave Little Skell Manor to Diedre, because she didn’t actually own it. Neither did her sister, who had left it to Great-Aunt Gwen. You see, Cavendon Hall, all of the buildings on the estate, the thousands of acres of land, the grouse moor and the park belong to whoever is the earl. However, for the past fifty-five years or so the last few earls have allowed family members to live at the two houses *rent-free*.”

Again on cue, Dulcie announced, “James and I should be paying rent, because we live at Skelldale House, and so should Diedre and Will, because they are occupying Little Skell Manor.”

“That is correct,” Charlotte replied. “To be absolutely sure, I checked in the files I created years ago and came across the relevant documents, which confirmed what I’ve just said. However, I realized immediately Charles hadn’t remembered this, because when Hugo Stanton returned, after a long absence, Charles thought he had come back to claim his inheritance . . . Little Skell Manor, which his mother had lived in all of

her married life. Great-Aunt Gwen, who had lived with her, just automatically took it over when she died. But of course Hugo had not wanted the house at all.”

“Will and I can well afford to pay rent, and we shall do so immediately,” Diedre said, smiling at Aunt Charlotte. “I’m so glad you thought of this. It means we can contribute to the upkeep of the estate.”

“And so will we,” Dulcie cried, laughing. “Gosh, this will make a difference, won’t it? I mean getting a bit of extra cash, Ceci?”

“It will, but we must convince Miles to accept the idea. He might not want to do it.”

“There are the papers I found to prove my point,” Charlotte reminded Cecily. “I know they were overlooked by the fifth earl, because I worked with him, and obviously the sixth earl did the same thing. Now the seventh earl can put it all straight.”

“Aunt Charlotte, what about our house?” Paloma Swann asked, staring across at her. “Shouldn’t we be paying rent as well?”

Charlotte shook her head, smiling at Harry’s lovely young wife. “No, not at all. You see, that house belonged to me. It was built for me by the fifth earl, and gifted to me. I had held deed until I gave it to Harry. He inherited it from me and it does belong to him. It’s yours.”

Paloma nodded, smiling. “Thanks for explaining.”

“If there’s nothing else to discuss, I think I’ll go and finish packing,” Dulcie announced, rising. “There are lots of my clothes here which I want to take with me to Beverly Hills.”

“How long will you be in Hollywood?” Cecily asked. “Miles said James has two films to make for MGM under his old contract.”

“Yes, that’s correct, but I think we’ll be back in time for Christmas. At least that’s what we’re planning. Also, James wants to do a play in the West End next year.”

“That’s good to know,” Cecily said. “Christmas wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Diedre remarked, “Talking of packing, I’d better go and do the same

thing. Will and I leave for Beaulieu-sur-Mer early next week.” Glancing at Cecily, she went on, “Will’s brother Ambrose is letting us have his house in the south of France for six weeks, and we’d love you and Miles to come down and stay, Cecily. And why don’t you come along as well, Aunt Charlotte?”

“That’s a lovely invitation, Diedre, and I just might do that, providing Cecily and Miles are coming. You see, I do prefer to travel with someone these days. I’m getting to be an old lady, you know.”

“Nonsense!” Diedre exclaimed. “You don’t look or act your age, and you’re as fit as a fiddle. But I know what you mean about traveling alone. Just let us know when you can come.”

There was a little more chitchat, and then the women dispersed until lunchtime.

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