

PART ONE



Powerful Allies

Edward & Neville

‘Princely to behold, of body mighty, strong and clean made.’

Sir Thomas More

‘Yet there was magnanimity in him, and if he is not quite a tragic protagonist, he is a memorable human being. He refused to admit that there were disadvantages he could not overcome and defeats from which he could not recover, and he had the courage, and vanity, to press his game to the end.’

Paul Murray Kendall

‘Their relationship, like their division of authority, was amiable and undefined.’

Paul Murray Kendall

CHAPTER ONE

Yorkshire 1904

Edward Deravenel galloped ahead at great speed, leaving his brothers behind, rapidly gaining the advantage. He urged his white stallion forward, oblivious to the icy weather, the lash of the wind on his face.

At one moment, half turning in the saddle, glancing behind him, Edward laughed out loud, his hilarity filling the air as he waved to his brothers: George, trying to catch up, his face grim in its determination . . . Richard, struggling even farther behind, yet laughing and waving back. But then he was the youngest, and much less competitive, the baby of the family and Edward's particular favourite.

For a split second Edward considered slowing down and allowing Richard to win this race, which had come about so spontaneously a short while before, then instantly changed his mind.

George would inevitably contrive to finish first, by pushing Richard out of the way in his overriding desire to be the winner. Somehow he always managed to do this, whenever he had the opportunity, no matter what the circumstances. And this Edward could not permit. Not ever. He strived to make certain Richard

was never humiliated, never diminished by George, who was older than Richard by three years.

Edward continued at a gentler pace along the narrow path, glancing down to his left as he did. The plunging cliffs fell steeply to the rocks and the beach; six hundred feet below him the North Sea roared under the gusting wind, like polished steel in the winter sunlight.

The surging waves frothed and churned against the jagged rock formations, while above him kittiwakes, graceful and buoyant in flight, squawked stridently as they wheeled and turned against the pale sky. Hundreds of these beautiful white gulls with black-tipped wings made their homes on projecting ledges of rock on the cliff faces; as a child he had watched them nesting through his binoculars.

He shivered involuntarily as the sudden remembrance of a tragedy of long ago hit him. A man in his father's employment, who had been bird-watching, had plunged to his death from this very spot. Now, instinctively, Edward veered away from the precarious cliffs, headed in the direction of the dirt road which led across the moors and was much safer terrain.

This morning the moorland was dun-coloured and patched with slabs of frozen snow, and there was no question in Edward's mind that he much preferred riding up here in the warmer months.

He mentally chastised himself for taking his brothers out on this January day. He had realized, rather late, that it was far too bitter, especially for Richard, who tended to catch cold so easily. He dare not contemplate his mother's ire if the boy fell sick because of this ill-conceived outing on the cliffs.

Swinging his head, he saw that the boys had again slowed and were lagging behind, were obviously even more fatigued by the long ride. He must spur them on, encourage them to move forward, get them home without delay and into the warmth of the house.

Beckoning to them, he shouted, ‘Come on, chaps! Let’s get a move on!’ And he set off at a brisk canter, hoping they would follow suit.

Once or twice he glanced behind him, pleased that they had heeded his words and were hard on his heels. Within minutes, much to his profound relief, their ancestral home was in his direct line of vision and he couldn’t wait to arrive there.

Ravenscar, the beautiful old manor house where the Deravenels had lived for centuries, stood on high ground, was set back from the sea, and dominated the surrounding landscape. Dark-green trees, ancient, tall and stately, formed a semi-circle around it on three sides, and these in turn were backed by high stone walls; the fourth wall was a natural one – the North Sea. This stretched into infinity below the tiered gardens and sloping lawns that ended at the edge of the precipitous cliffs.

As Edward drew closer he could easily make out the crenellation along the line of the roof, smoke curling up from the chimneys, and the many mullioned windows glittering in the sunlight. Within seconds he was bringing his horse to a slow trot, riding through the black iron gates and up the long, tree-lined drive. This ended with some abruptness in a small, circular courtyard covered with gravel and with a sundial in its centre.

The house was built of local, pale-coloured stone that had mellowed to a soft-golden beige with the passing of the centuries. An Elizabethan house, it typified Tudor architecture with its recesses and bays, gables and battlements and many windows of differing sizes. Ravenscar was one of those grand houses from the past, utterly unique, with a lovely symmetry and a charm all of its own. To Edward there was a sense of timelessness about it, a quality of serenity and peace dwelling in its gently flowing façade, and he understood why his forebears had always cherished and cared for this treasure.

The Deravenels had lived in their house by the sea since 1578, the year it was finished. Before then, for many centuries, the family had occupied the fortified castle that had stood at the bottom of the gardens on the edge of the cliffs; a ruin now, it was nonetheless a well-maintained ruin. This stronghold had been built in 1070 by the founding father of the dynasty, one Guy de Ravenel, a young knight from Falaise, liegeman of William, Duke of Normandy.

Duke William had invaded England in 1066, claiming his right to the English throne through his cousin, the deceased monarch Edward the Confessor, who had promised him that the throne would be his one day. But for political convenience, Edward the Confessor had reneged on that promise and passed over William in favour of his wife's brother, Harold, bequeathing the throne to the man who became, briefly, Harold III.

Believing his claim to be absolutely legitimate, William had crossed the English Channel with the six knights who were his trusted childhood friends, and a large army. He defeated Harold III at the Battle of Hastings, was proclaimed William the Conqueror and crowned on Christmas Day of 1066.

Some time later, William had despatched Guy de Ravenel to the north to act as his marshal. Based in Yorkshire, Guy had followed William's orders, had kept the peace, by force when necessary, built defences and forts, and ensured the north's loyalty to his friend the Norman king. And Guy had been enriched by William because of his staunch loyalty and unparalleled success.

Ever since that time, some eight hundred and thirty-five years ago, descendants of Guy de Ravenel had lived on this long stretch of coastline high above the North Sea. Nearby was the ancient seaport and spa of Scarborough; a little farther along the expansive stretch of coast was a picturesque fishing village with the quaint name of Robin Hood's Bay. Both dated back to Roman times.

Moving forward, Edward rode out of the courtyard and around to the back of the house, heading for the stable block. He clattered into the cobbled stable yard, his brothers following behind him, and jumped off his horse with his usual vitality and energy. As he hurried over to his youngest brother, he greeted the stable lads cheerfully; a moment later he was reaching up for the eight-year-old Richard, exclaiming, ‘Let me help you down, Dick!'

Richard shook his head vehemently. ‘I can manage, Ned. I truly can,’ the boy protested, stealing a surreptitious look at George through the corner of his eye. He knew only too well that George would tease him unmercifully if Ned helped him to dismount.

But Ned paid not the slightest attention to Richard; he put his strong arms around him, obviously determined to lift him out of the saddle. Richard sighed, swallowing another protest that had sprung to his lips. Accepting that he now had no other choice, he slipped his riding boots out of the stirrups and reluctantly slid into his brother’s enfolding arms.

For a split second, Edward held Richard close to his chest, hugging him tightly, and then he put him down on the cobblestones, noting, as he did, that the youngster’s narrow face was pinched with cold and drained of all colour. My fault, he chided himself, regretting even more than ever his thoughtlessness of earlier that morning.

‘Thank you, Ned,’ Richard murmured, staring up into Edward’s face through his steady, slate-grey eyes. His eldest brother was six feet four, broad of chest, very strong and athletic. His brilliant eyes were as blue as the speedwells that grew in the summer meadows, and his thick hair was a stunning burnished red-gold. To Richard, and every woman who met him, Edward Deravenel was the handsomest man alive, with a warm, outgoing and endearing personality. He was affable, inordinately friendly, and blessed with a beguiling natural charm

that captivated everyone. Richard loved him more than anyone else in the family, was completely devoted to him, and he would be all of Edward's life.

'Inside the house as fast as you can,' Edward cried, giving Richard an affectionate push towards the side door, which led to the mud room. 'And you, too, George, my lad. No dawdling around this morning.'

The two boys did his bidding, and as Edward followed them at a quick pace he called out to one of the stable lads, 'The horses have been ridden hard this morning, Ernie. They need your very best rub-down, and put the heavy wool blankets on them before you give them water and feed.'

'Aye, Master Edward,' Ernie shouted back, glancing at him. He and the other stable lad took the reins of the three horses and led them across the yard in the direction of the stables and the sheltered stalls where the tack room was also located.

Once Edward and his brothers entered the mud room they felt the warmth of the house surrounding them. Shedding their black-and-white checked caps and thick woollen Inverness capes and hanging them up, they scraped their riding boots free of dirt. A moment later they all went down the corridor at the back of the house, heading toward the Long Hall at its centre.

'I shall ask Cook to make us a small snack and hot tea,' Edward informed them, an arm on each of their shoulders. 'Perhaps she'll be able to rustle up some of those delicious Cornish pasties of hers.'

'Oooh, I hope so,' George exclaimed, and added, 'And sausage rolls as well. I'm very hungry.'

'And what about you?' Edward asked, glancing down at Richard. 'Aren't *you* ravenous?'

'I will enjoy the hot tea,' Richard answered, smiling up at his brother. 'But I'm not really very hungry, Ned.'

‘We’ll see about that when you smell some of Cook’s tidbits. You know how they make your mouth water,’ Edward said and shepherded his brothers into the Morning Room.

The boys raced over to the huge fire roaring in the grate, stood warming their hands, glad at last to be thawing out. After doing exactly the same thing, Edward swung around and went back to the door. ‘I’m going to have a word with Cook. I’ll be back in a few minutes.’ Closing the door behind him, he left them to their own devices.



Mrs Latham, the cook at Ravenscar, glanced up expectantly when the door to her kitchen opened. Instantly her mouth broke into smiles. ‘Why, good mornin’, Master Edward!’ Her surprise and pleasure were evident.

‘Hello, Mrs Latham,’ he responded in his usual polite manner, giving her one of his most beguiling smiles. ‘I’ve come to beg a small favour. I know how busy you are on Tuesdays, but would it be possible for you to make a large pot of tea and something to eat for us? The boys are famished after their ride on the cliffs.’

‘By gum, I bet they are!’ She wiped her big, capable hands on a tea towel and strode across to the long oak table standing in the middle of the huge kitchen. ‘I’ve just been baking a few things –’ She broke off, waved a hand in front of her morning’s work and added, ‘Pork pies, fishcakes, Cornish pasties, sausage rolls and savoury tarts. Take a look, and take your pick, Master Edward.’

‘How splendid,’ he said, grinning at her. ‘A veritable feast, Cook. But then you’re the best in the world. No one has your remarkable skill in the kitchen, no one.’

‘Oh, get along with yer, sir. It’s a real flatterer yer are.’ This was said with a hint of pride at his compliment. Straightening her back, she added, ‘I knows yer all like the Cornish pasties, and Master George is ever so fond of my sausage rolls. I’ll get

a tray ready for yer, sir, and send young Polly with it in a tick, once I've made the pot of tea. Does that suit, Master Edward?’

‘It does indeed, Cook. I can’t wait to sample some of this fare, it smells delicious. Thank you so much, I do appreciate it.’

‘My pleasure,’ she called after him, watching him walk over to the door.

Swinging his head, he grinned at her, waved and was gone.

Mrs Latham stared at the door for a moment, her eyes filled with admiration for him. Edward Deravenel was blessed with the most pleasant nature as well as those staggering good looks. She couldn’t help wondering how many hearts he would break in his lifetime. Scores, no doubt. At eighteen he already had women falling at his feet. Spoil him, that they will, she thought, clucking to herself, turning to the ovens. Aye, they’ll all spoil him rotten, give him whatever he wants, and that’s not always a good thing for a man. No, it’s not. I’ve seen many a toff like him ruined by women, more’s the pity.

She swung around as the door opened again and muttered, ‘There yer are, young Polly. I was just wondering where yer’d got to –’ Cook broke off and clucked again. ‘Bump in ter Master Edward, did yer, lass?’

The parlour maid nodded and blushed. ‘He’s ever so nice ter me, Cook.’

Mrs Latham shook her head and sighed, but made no further reference to Edward. Instead she continued, ‘Set a large tray, please Polly. I’m preparing a mornin’ snack for Master Edward and his brothers. When it’s ready yer can take it ter the Morning Room.’

‘Yes, Cook.’



After crossing the Long Hall, Edward made his way back to the Morning Room where he had left his brothers. He was lost in

thought, contemplating his return to university. Today was Tuesday, January the fifth; in two days he would travel to London and go up to Oxford that weekend. He was looking forward to returning and especially pleased that he would be reunited with his best friend and boon companion of many years, Will Hasling, who was also an undergraduate.

His attention suddenly became focused on the end of the corridor. He had just caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark skirt and jacket, a froth of white at the neck, a well-coiffed blonde head. And then there had been the click of a door closing.

He hurried forward, passing the Morning Room, not stopping until he reached the last room at the end of the corridor. Pausing at the door which had just closed, he listened intently. There were no voices, only the sound of someone moving around, the rustle of papers. Tapping lightly on the door, he did not wait to be summoned inside. He simply walked in.

The woman in the room stared at him, obviously startled.

Edward closed the door, leaned against it. ‘Hello, Alice.’

The woman took a deep breath, then exhaled. After a moment she inclined her head, stared at him, but said not one word.

Stepping forward he took hold of her arm just as she started to move around the desk, wanting to put it between them.

Holding her arm, pulling her closer, he leaned forward and murmured, ‘Alice, my dear, you didn’t come to see me last night. I was devastated . . .’

‘Please,’ she whispered, ‘let go of me. Your mother might walk in at any moment. Please, Master Edward.’

‘Not *Master Edward*. Surely you mean Ned . . . that’s what you whispered to me in the dark last week.’

She looked up into the handsome face, was momentarily blinded by the vivid blue eyes, and closed her own.

Edward was instantly alarmed. ‘What is it, Alice?’ he asked in concern. ‘Are you ill?’

She opened her eyes, shook her head. ‘No, no, I am not ill. But I can’t see you anymore. I’m afraid of . . . what might happen to me if we were to continue our . . . intimacy.’

‘Oh, Alice, darling, don’t be frightened –’

‘And then there’s your mother to consider,’ she cut in peremptorily, her eyes darting to the door. ‘She would be furious if she found out about our liaison. You know she would dismiss me at once. And I do need this position . . .’ Her voice trailed off and she swallowed hard.

Looking down into her pretty face, Edward saw the tears glistening in her hazel eyes, and he noticed the fear and anxiety gripping her. He nodded. ‘Yes, I’m afraid you’re correct, Alice.’ He studied her for a moment. If she had been from the working class, or even a woman of his own class, he would have pressed his suit, certain that there would be no serious repercussions. But Alice Morgan was from the middle class, and also very vulnerable, and because of that he knew he must show consideration to her. She was the widow of a local doctor with a small child to support, and she did indeed need this position as his mother’s secretary. And so because he was a compassionate young man and had a kind heart, he let go of her arm and stepped back.

A rueful smile touched his lips and he let out a small sigh. ‘I won’t trouble you any further, Alice,’ he said in a very low voice. ‘You are perfectly right, everything you have said is true. And I don’t wish to be a nuisance to you or cause you any difficulties.’

Leaning forward, she touched his cheek with one finger, and then she swiftly edged around the end of the desk, where she stood looking at him.

‘Thank you,’ she said in a voice as low as his had been. ‘Thank you for being such a gentleman.’

He left without glancing at her again, and as he closed the door behind him he did not hear her say, 'It's not because I don't want you . . . I do. But I know you're the kind of man who can't help but break a woman's heart.'

CHAPTER TWO

Cecily Deravenel, matriarch of the family, was aware that Edward had followed Alice into the office. She had been walking along the minstrel's gallery above the Long Hall when she had seen first one and then the other enter the room.

Neither Alice nor Edward had noticed her, and she had continued on her way, heading for the wide, curving staircase which led to the ground floor. As she was descending Edward had suddenly come out into the corridor in a great hurry and rushed into the Morning Room, closing the door sharply behind him.

Once again, Cecily's presence had gone unnoticed, and this pleased her. She had no wish to confront her eldest son about his interest in the young widow whom she employed.

Cecily Deravenel had always been a good judge of character and she knew Alice Morgan very well. She trusted her to handle the situation with practicality, decorum and the utmost discretion, since she was well brought up, a proper young woman. Fully understanding that it was a passing fancy on Edward's part, if it *was* anything at all, Cecily was nonetheless relieved that he would be going to London on Thursday, and then back to Oxford at the weekend. She knew how much Edward loved

university life, and his studies would absorb him completely, as they always had. Also, his absence would bring the matter of Alice to a close, if it had not already died a natural death, or been terminated by one of them a few minutes before. Even if it had been non-existent, she was glad he was going. At Oxford he was safe.

She sighed under her breath. He could be wild, even reckless at times, acting impulsively, without considered thought. And, women of all ages found him utterly irresistible.

It had long ago occurred to Cecily that temptation was always under his feet and in his way; in fact, poor Edward was forever stumbling over temptation, more so than the average man.

It would take a saint to resist everything thrown in *his* face, she muttered to herself, as she stepped into the Long Hall, still thinking about her son.

Cecily was a tall and regal woman in her mid-forties, handsome, graceful and elegant. She was usually dressed in fashionable clothes even when she was here at Ravenscar, the family's country seat.

This morning she was wearing a navy-blue wool day suit with a long skirt slightly flared from the calf, and a matching tailored jacket over a white cambric blouse with a high neck and frilled jabot. The jacket was short, ended at her narrow waist; it was cut in the style of the moment, with puffed sleeves which became narrow and tight from elbow to wrist.

Cecily's hair was one of her loveliest features, a glossy chestnut which she wore upswept on top of her head; arranged in a mass of curls, these moved forward to the front, just above her smooth, wide brow. This was the latest and most fashionable style, as every woman in England, from every station in life, was copying Queen Alexandra. Ever since Queen Victoria's son, Albert Edward, had ascended to the throne as Edward VII, his queen had become the arbiter of fashion, style and taste. Edward's wife, a Danish princess by birth, was much

admired by the public as well as those in the top echelons of society.

When Cecily was living at Ravenscar she wore little or no jewellery, unless there were house guests in residence or she and her husband were entertaining members of the local gentry. Today was no exception. Her choices were simple: small pearl earrings, her gold wedding ring and a fob watch on the lapel of her jacket.

Now Cecily looked at the watch and smiled. The small hand was just moving onto eleven. Her husband forever teased her, insisted that he could set his pocket watch by her, and in this assertion he was absolutely correct. She was the most punctual of women, and every morning at precisely this hour she set out on her tour of the downstairs rooms at Ravenscar.

What had begun when she was a young bride had, over the years, turned into a daily ritual when she was in residence here. She needed to be certain that all the rooms in this grand old house were warm and comfortable, that everything was in order with not one thing out of place. She was fastidious about this, as in most things.

Over twenty-six years ago, when she had come to Ravenscar as Richard Deravenel's wife and the new mistress of the manor, she had at first been startled, then terribly saddened to find this Tudor jewel, glorious in its overall architecture and design, to be so utterly unwelcoming, so uninviting. The sight of it had filled her with dismay and she had baulked, momentarily.

The rooms themselves were of fine proportions, with many windows that flooded the interiors with that lovely crystalline Northern light. But unfortunately these rooms were icy cold and impossible to occupy for long without freezing to death. Even in summer the cold penetrated the thick stone walls, and because of the nearness of the North Sea there was a feeling of dampness, especially in the wet weather.

Richard had explained to her that the house was basically

only suffering from neglect, that its bones were good, as was its structure. In effect, his widowed mother had grown parsimonious in her old age. She had closed off most of the house, since her children lived in London, and had occupied a suite of rooms which were easy and cheap to keep heated. The remainder of the house had been ignored, and for some years.

When walking through it, that day long ago, Cecily had quickly discovered that the warmest place to be was the huge kitchen, along with the small rooms which adjoined. It was in these rooms that the cook and staff lived, because of the warmth that emanated from the kitchen fire and ovens. All the other rooms were covered in dust-sheets, closed off to the world.

Richard, trusting Cecily's judgement, had told his young wife to do what she wanted. Within a week of her arrival she made sweeping changes. Every room was thoroughly cleaned as was every window; the walls were repainted, the wood floors polished. Fires were soon blazing in every hearth, and great quantities of wood were chopped, the logs stored in the cellars, so that fires could burn throughout the year if necessary.

In London, Cecily purchased beautiful Turkey carpets and the finest Persian and Oriental rugs from the most reputable importers, as well as beautiful velvets, brocades and other luxuriant fabrics in rich jewel colours. The rugs went down on the hardwood floors, the fabrics were cut and sewn into handsome draperies for the many windows, furniture was polished and re-upholstered if necessary. Because she had fine taste, a sense of style and a good eye, within a few months Ravenscar had been transformed, brought back to vibrant life through Cecily's tireless and loving ministrations.

In a certain sense, none of this happened by accident. Cecily Watkins Deravenel was accustomed to homes of great splendour, as the daughter of a titan of industry who had made an immense fortune in the industrial revolution of the Victorian age. She had grown up in a world of stunning beauty, amidst priceless objects

of art, sculpture, great paintings, and fine furniture, as well as tremendous, almost overwhelming, luxury. And so it was these particular elements which Cecily sought to introduce at Ravenscar, because she herself loved them and was comfortable with them. She succeeded, although only in part in the beginning, because it took a great deal of effort and time to collect unique and beautiful artifacts. Only now, after twenty-five years of painstaking work, had she finally accomplished what she had set out to do so long ago.

One of Cecily's latest innovations had been the introduction of electric light throughout Ravenscar, which she had installed several years earlier. Gone were the gas lamps at long last, finally abandoned and replaced with shimmering crystal chandeliers and bronze wall sconces which bathed the rooms in a resplendent glow during the day as well as at night.

Today, as she walked down the Long Hall, glancing around as she did, Cecily noticed damp patches near a line of windows facing the sea. She made a mental note to point them out to the handyman, so that they could be dealt with promptly.

Entering the corridor off the hall she opened doors to different rooms, looking inside, checking the fires, the state of the furniture, and the general appearance of everything. Sometimes she went inside, straightened a floor-length cloth, or corrected the way a curtain fell. And her eye, always keen, sought the slightest imperfections.



Half an hour later Cecily found herself standing outside the Morning Room, hesitating, debating whether to go in or not. Finally making up her mind, she turned the knob.

Three heads swung to face the door as she stepped inside . . . three of her four sons . . . three of her seven children. She had borne twelve babies but only seven had lived and grown up.

George, at eleven, was more irrepressible than ever, and failed to hide his feelings. He was grinning at her now, his face open and revealing. He came to see her constantly . . . to confide, even to admit his misdeeds and mistakes, but also to carry tales, and frequently she had thought he had a touch of envy in his nature, and perhaps even treachery as well. But this morning he looked positively angelic; with hair the colour of wheat, he was the blondest of all her children.

There was such a contrast between him and his brother Richard it was quite startling. There *he* was, sitting next to his adored Ned, his face so very grave, and now he offered her a solemn sort of smile, a sad smile for a little boy of eight. How steady his grey-blue eyes were; such a serious child, so dedicated in everything he did, her Richard. For a split second she wanted to ruffle his black hair, but she knew he would not appreciate that, because he would think she was babying him. He was the darkest in colouring of all her children, dark like her, and he had inherited some of her traits, her stoicism, her stubbornness particularly.

Finally, Cecily's eyes came to rest on her eldest son. Edward, too, was smiling at her, a loving smile. His eyes were so vividly blue they startled her, but then they had since his childhood. His red-gold hair, inherited from his Normandy forebears, resembled a polished helmet above his face, and as his smile grew wider and his white teeth flashed she thought of those women who fell all over him – yet he was so young, still only a boy . . . not even nineteen . . .

For a long time she had believed that his inherent wildness did not negate his other qualities, especially his natural ability in so many areas. And he *was* very able. She never underestimated him, although his father occasionally did. Even so, her husband was fully aware, just as she was, that with Ned family loyalty was deeply ingrained in him, bred in the bone. Family came first; she knew it always would. She relied on it.

As Cecily stood there for a moment longer, she stopped ruminating about the three boys present, thought for a moment of her second son, Edmund, gone to Italy with his father several days ago. Edmund, who was seventeen, seemed the most responsible of her sons, and he had begged to accompany his father on this business trip. He was practical, had his feet firmly planted on the ground, and was very much his own man. It was his two elder sisters whom Edmund most resembled, at least in his colouring . . . They had light brown hair, hair which her fifteen-year-old daughter Meg characterized disparagingly as *mousey*. Meg was blonde, but not quite as blond as George.

Edward said, ‘Please come and join us, Mother, won’t you? We’ve been having a snack. Would you like to partake of something . . . a cup of tea perhaps? Should I ring for Polly?’

‘No, no, but thank you, Ned,’ she replied, walking across the floor to the sofa. As she seated herself on it, George jumped up and rushed across the room, fell onto the sofa next to her, leaned against his mother possessively. Automatically, she put her arm around him protectively. Years later she would remember this gesture from his childhood, and wonder why she had done this so often then. Had she somehow had a premonition that he would one day need protecting?

Ned ventured, ‘I wonder, Mother, if you know when you plan to return to town?’

‘In a week. I told your father we would all be waiting at the Mayfair house when he returned from Italy. Of course, you yourself will be at Oxford by then.’ She glanced down at George, lolling against her, and then across at Richard, before adding to Edward, ‘Mr Pennington will be joining us at the end of the month. He will tutor the boys as he did last year when we were in London. And Perdita Willis has been engaged as governess to tutor Meg. Where is she by the way? Have any of you seen your sister since breakfast?’

Ned and Richard shook their heads, but George spoke up, murmured, 'I saw her going up to the attics.'

'When was that?' Cecily asked swiftly.

'I can't really remember the exact time, Mother.'

'Force yourself,' she said a little sharply for her.

'Oh, about an hour ago,' he muttered.

'I wonder why she was going up there?' Cecily frowned, looked puzzled.

'Oh, heavens, Mother! I think *I* know why,' Edward announced. 'I've suddenly remembered. She told me her friend Lillian Jameson is being given a spring ball for her sixteenth birthday. Meg said she was going to look in those trunks up there -' Edward broke off, glanced at the door which had opened to admit his sister.

'There you are, darling!' Cecily exclaimed, rising, moving towards her daughter Margaret. 'I was just wondering where you were and Ned said you'd probably gone to look in those old trunks.'

'Yes, I did, Mama,' Meg answered, gliding into the room; she was as graceful as her mother, and she looked pretty this morning in a red wool dress, black stockings and black shoes.

Cecily knew Meg was blossoming into a very pretty girl indeed, and smiling at her youngest daughter, she murmured, 'You didn't mention that Lady Jameson is giving a spring ball for Lillian's birthday.'

'It's not actually definite yet, Mother. The invitations haven't gone out. And they won't for weeks and weeks. If it happens at all. Well, you see . . . Lillian is *hoping*, and so am I. It might be rather fun, don't you think? However, her mother hasn't actually said yes.'

'Are boys going to be invited?' George asked, sitting up straighter, staring at her intently.

Meg laughed. 'You're incorrigible, George, truly incorrigible. Imagine *you* thinking *you* could be invited.'

'Why not? I'm a Deravenel. We're invited everywhere.'

'The likes of Papa, not you,' Meg said with cool authority.
'You're too young to go to cotillions, dances, that sort of thing.'

'No, I'm not, am I, Mother?' He gave her an appealing look.

'Well, George, perhaps . . . at this moment, let's say. By the spring you'll certainly be a little older,' Cecily replied quietly, wanting to mollify him.

'There, you see, Margaret! Our mother says because I'll be older by spring I could go. I'll think about it, and maybe I will come after all . . . I shall give it considered thought, as Papa always says.'

Edward chuckled. 'I hope you'll ensure I get an invitation, Meg,' he teased, winking at his sister, wanting to make light of all this, since George looked sulky.

She laughed and nodded. 'Of course I will. And if you come you'll be the envy of every other man there.'

He looked surprised. 'Why?'

'Because all the young women will be falling at your feet,' George announced. 'Everybody says you're a ladykiller.'

'That's enough, George,' Cecily cut in, although she spoke mildly. 'None of that type of vulgarity here, if you please.' Turning to Meg, she asked, 'Well, did you find anything interesting in the trunks?'

'Oh, yes, Mama, I *did*: some wonderful frocks, all beautifully packed away in cotton bags. They're like new. Will you come and look?'

'I'll be happy to,' Cecily answered, taking her daughter's arm. Laughing, the two of them went out together.



The attics at Ravenscar were large, and ran the entire length of the house, under the eaves. Since she was such a stickler for cleanliness and perfect order, Cecily had them cleaned and dusted

once a month. Because of this, it was easy to find everything, and her neatness and talent for organization meant easy access to the chests, boxes and trunks which were stacked there.

Earlier, Meg had taken out several gowns, and laid them across a sofa which had been covered in a dustcloth. The gowns were made of silk, a light featherweight silk, since they had been designed to wear over bouffant underskirts, or hoop skirts, which had been so prevalent in the middle of the Victorian era.

Meg ran over to the sofa and picked up one made of pale green silk and held it against her. ‘I thought this colour would suit me. What do you think, Mama?’

Cecily stood facing her daughter, studying her for a moment. Then she nodded her head. ‘I must agree with you, it’s a pretty colour and perfect for you. I am sure we can have several of them remodelled to fit you. Madame Henrietta is such a good dressmaker, and innovative, she’ll create more up-to-date designs.’ Reaching for another gown, Cecily handed it to Margaret. ‘Let me see how this shade looks: it’s such a lovely blue, it reminds me of cornflowers.’

‘And Ned’s eyes,’ Meg murmured as she took the dress, held it in front of her.

‘Ah, yes, that is true,’ Cecily acknowledged, Ned’s eyes indeed. They were close, Edward and Margaret, with only a few years difference in their ages. Meg, like Richard, adored her eldest brother. He could do no wrong as far as she was concerned, and for his part Ned was protective of her, had kept a watchful eye on her since childhood. In turn, it was Meg who took charge of her younger brothers when necessary, mothering them when Cecily was away, guiding them in so many different things.

‘The blue is enchanting,’ Cecily now exclaimed, liking the way the colour enhanced Meg’s grey eyes. ‘We shall take the green and blue to London with us next week, and before we leave do go through the other trunks. Perhaps you’ll find several more which can be remade.’

‘Oh, how kind, Mama, thank you so much.’ Margaret stepped closer to her mother and hugged her in a sudden show of affection, the silk frock crushed between them.

Cecily, who was not a particularly demonstrative person, began to laugh. ‘It’s my pleasure, but Margaret, my dear, you’re ruining the dress.’

Meg let go of her mother at once, and shook the frock out. ‘I don’t think any real harm has been done,’ she murmured, scrutinizing it with some intensity.

With her head slightly tilted to one side, Cecily studied Margaret for a split second, realizing once again how pretty she had become, with her flowing fair hair and those large grey eyes, which were so beguiling. Instantly Cecily’s thoughts turned to the girl’s future, her marriage prospects. Meg would grow into a lovely young woman, that was clear. And she would definitely make just as good a marriage as Cecily’s two eldest daughters Anne and Eliza had done.

‘I shall speak to Lady Jameson next week when we return to town, Meg, in an effort to ascertain what her plans actually are. It has suddenly occurred to me that perhaps your father and I should consider giving you a small afternoon tea dance later this year, to celebrate your fifteenth birthday.’

‘Oh, Mama, that would be wonderful!’ Meg was startled by this suggestion, which was so unexpected, but the happy smile on her face revealed her genuine pleasure at the idea.

Cecily had also startled herself. She was not usually so spontaneous or impulsive, and normally spent days in deliberation about important things such as this. She wondered if she had made an error in bringing up the idea of a party for Meg, but immediately decided she could not backtrack now without upsetting her daughter. She would talk to Richard next week, but she was perfectly certain he would make no objection. He had always been quite content to leave such matters to her . . . the raising of their children . . . the running of their homes.

Richard. Such a good man. So devoted to his family, a wonderful father. The best husband any woman could ever have. She could not wait for him to come home. Her life was empty without him by her side, and lonely.

She hadn't really wanted him to go to Italy but he had felt obliged to do so. There was some sort of problem at the marble quarries they owned in Carrara, and as the assistant managing director of Deravenel and Company, he agreed with Henry Deravenel Grant, the chairman, that he was the best person to investigate the situation. And so off he had gone with Edmund, who had never been to Italy before and was genuinely excited about making the trip.

Her brother Rick and her nephew Thomas went along to keep her husband and son company; Richard and Rick had been extremely close friends for many years, enjoyed each other's company and travelling together. Also, Rick hoped to buy some paintings and sculpture in Florence; he was in the process of remodelling his town house in London and only the very best in art and artifacts would do. He was something of a connoisseur and had a great eye, and he had said to her only two weeks ago that the thought of Florence made his mouth water.

Rick and she had been close since childhood, and after their father's death it was Rick who had taken over the family business. If her father had been one of the greatest magnates in industry, then Rick had surpassed him a thousandfold; today he was one of the richest men in the country, and because of his flair and genius in business her own inheritance had increased. This was a great relief to Cecily. Her husband was always at odds with Deravenels when it came to money, and it was a company that really belonged to him at that. At least he should have been running it, not Harry Grant. Like all the Lancashire Deravenel Grants, he was incompetent when it came to finance. As for Harry's French wife, Margot, she was a woman who was riddled with overriding ambition and greed who managed Harry

like a puppet master and sought to run the company herself. She probably *is* running Deravenels, Cecily now thought, and more's the pity.

'Shall we take the frocks downstairs, Mama?' Meg asked, interrupting her thoughts.

'Oh, yes, of course, let us do that, my dear.' Cecily looked at her fob watch and exclaimed, 'Good heavens, it's almost time for lunch.' But as they went downstairs her mind went back to the Grants; they were never far from her thoughts. Henry Grant's father had always cut her husband out, cheated him, and the hatred had escalated over the years. Now, Margot Grant was making things even more intolerable. There was going to be another battle between Richard and Henry, of that she was convinced.