

Chapter One  
The House Party

England  
Spring 1870

“Come and meet my cousin now,” Gregory Cardwell said eagerly.

“You mean the pretty one?” Aidan Kavanaugh, the Earl of Whitlock, asked with slight skepticism, fresh drink in hand.

For the last few minutes Gregory had been extolling the heavenly virtues of his newfound cousin. Truth be told, Aidan had only been half-listening to his garrulous friend, although the point that Gregory was describing an unusually attractive person had penetrated his preoccupied mind.

“All my cousins are pretty, my fine friend,” Gregory explained with an unabashed grin, his merry eyes twinkling. “We’re a handsome family.”

It was a true enough statement, for Gregory was an attractive man despite his ruddy complexion and many freckles. Since their days at Cambridge years ago, he and Aidan had been good friends.

“You know I was speaking of your meeting my most beautiful cousin. But I must warn you, Aidan. She may just tempt you away from the fair Helene.” Gregory raised and lowered his eyebrows in a devilish manner.

Aidan gave him a doubtful look as they made their way through Bingham Hall’s massive ballroom, where sophisticated and fashionably dressed people swarmed about. A full orchestra played at one end of the elaborately decorated ballroom and couples danced in the center. The Duchess of Bingham’s invitations were always extremely popular and highly coveted, for she was renowned for her lavish and extravagant

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entertaining. Her informal style and manner were often imitated but never matched, for no one could host a party quite like the Duchess of Bingham, and her house parties, like this one, were particular favorites. Tonight was the Welcome Ball to commence the weeklong round of lively and engaging activities for the fortunate guests who were extended an invitation.

As he and Gregory pressed through the crowd, Aidan ignored the heads that turned in his direction, the majority of which were of the female persuasion. As one of the most eligible bachelors in England, he was used to women flirting with him and fawning over him. In fact, he would be surprised if women did not look his way, but he paid no attention to them. He idly wondered where Helene was and knew he would have to seek her out sooner rather than later.

A decision about Helene Winston was one that Aidan needed to make in the near future. He probably should just propose to her and be done with it. She expected it by now, and perhaps even deserved it, but she was too much of a lady to ever pressure him. Somehow he could not bring himself to take that first step and ask her to marry him. Oh, Helene was desirable enough for a wife. He did not know why he held off on this, much to his mother's dismay and, he presumed, Helene's.

He truly did not even wish to be at this house party in the first place.

More than a little worried about his shipping business, Aidan recalled the dreadful week that passed. After one his largest shipments ever of cotton from America was mysteriously lost, there had been a disastrous fire at his shipping warehouse two nights ago. The double financial blow of missing an entire cotton shipment in addition to losing a large warehouse filled to the brim with merchandise was almost ruinous, but fortunately

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not one of his employees had been injured in the terrible, late-night blaze. For that Aidan was most thankful. He had spent years building his shipping company up from nothing, devoting himself to making it a success. He was not about to let it go up in smoke.

Yet he had his suspicions that the fire was not accidental. There had been too many "accidents" lately, and the events of the past week were clearly deliberate.

And he had a fairly good idea of who was responsible for it. Proving it would be a most challenging enterprise, however. He would rather have stayed in London to manage these matters personally, but he had made a promise to his mother, as well as Helene, that he would attend the Bingham's party, and he could not break it. He had finally arrived at the estate, although rather later than expected. His mother had not been pleased by his delayed appearance, but then again, she was rarely pleased by anything.

His mother's wishes were not easily thwarted; she had wrangled this particular promise out of him when he had been overly distracted with work and afterward he had seen no decent way out of it. If it had not been for the mysterious fire the night before last, he actually might have enjoyed a week of relaxation in the country; going for long walks, riding, and hunting. Lord knew he needed to clear his head. However he was too anxious about the cause of the fire to relax now.

Clearly not in the mood for the evening's unavoidable social obligations, he took another sip of the excellent whiskey in his glass and followed his friend around the crowded and noisy perimeter of the dance floor, nodding briefly in greeting to the many faces who recognized him.

Then Gregory stepped aside, nudging Aidan lightly with his elbow and whispering to him in a low tone, "There she is."

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As Aidan glanced ahead, he stopped short, almost spilling his drink down the front of his expensive and finely cut evening jacket.

There, on the arm of Gregory Cardwell's identical twin brother George, was a woman of incredible beauty.

He stared as she gracefully turned her head and laughed at something George said to her, the sound of her laughter rich and warm. Her luminous smile lit up her exquisite face, which would melt the heart of any man looking at her, including —obviously— George Cardwell's. But then how could a heart not melt?

Silky black hair framed a face flawless and delicate in its bone structure. Her deep blue eyes were fringed by long, dark lashes with graceful brows arching lightly above them. She had a small, straight nose with high cheekbones in a slightly heart-shaped face with a creamy complexion. Full, sensuous lips smiled charmingly to reveal pearly white teeth. As he watched her, the breath in his chest constricted and his heart pounded forcefully.

He could not move.

Suddenly Aidan was hundreds of miles away. Rolling green hills spread before him, covered in a soft gray mist. The waves of a wild surf crashed on the shore below high windswept cliffs. The fresh scent of the sea saturated him. Heated kisses and sweet words; hands clasped and promises made. He could feel his heart pounding and his gut clenched.

He knew this woman.

No one else could have that face. That hauntingly beautiful face.

It couldn't be anyone other than Vivienne Montgomery.

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He could tell by the elegant curve of her neck. The graceful way she held herself. The ivory white skin that beckoned to be touched. The sultry sapphire eyes that sparkled and teased. The black hair that would fall in long, silky waves to her waist. He knew, for he had seen her wear it that way. God, he had run his fingers through it! Now those glossy tresses were piled fashionably around her head in sophisticated ringlets. The pale blue gown she wore covered perfectly rounded breasts that gave way to the slender waist of a petite body.

Desire coursed through his blood at the sight of her, although he fought against it. Anger surged through him next. White-hot anger.

*What in the hell is Vivienne Montgomery doing in England?*

Gregory pulled Aidan closer and said in a low, satisfied voice, "As you can see for yourself, I did not exaggerate her beauty. You can close your mouth now."

At his friend's words, Aidan mentally shook himself and closed his mouth, unaware that he had been gaping like a callow school boy.

Good Lord! The enormity of the situation hit him. *Vivienne Montgomery is Gregory Cardwell's cousin!*

"Vivvy, dearest, this is my good friend, Aidan Kavanaugh, the Earl of Whitlock," George introduced them easily. "Aidan, may I present my beautiful cousin, Miss Vivienne Montgomery."

Aidan stepped forward woodenly to greet the only woman who had ever turned his world upside down. She stood there composed and serene, looking for all the world like she had never laid eyes on him before. There was no air of recognition about her. Did she not remember him? Was she going to ignore him? How could she possibly have

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forgotten what had happened between them? So many years had passed, but not a day went by that he did not think of her, however unwillingly.

Vivienne's sapphire-blue eyes were looking up at him from beneath her long sooty lashes. Aidan's heart almost stopped beating completely. She had become even more breathtakingly beautiful than he remembered. Even in his dreams. Perhaps dreams were not an accurate description. Tortured nightmares was the more precise term for the images that endlessly haunted him in his sleep.

He simply stared at her, not oblivious to the watershed of emotions that were crashing through him at the sight of her before him. He never thought to see her again. Yet here she was, in the flesh and more beautiful than ever.

"Vivienne has just come to live with us," Gregory had gone on to say in his usual blithe manner, unaware of the stilted silence between Aidan and his cousin.

Aidan cleared his throat. "Miss Montgomery and I have already met."

The surprised expressions of the others were not lost on Aidan as he waited for Vivienne's response to him. Had she wanted to pretend they did not know each other? That they had never met? Well, he was not going to let that happen.

"Has it been ten years already, Aidan?" she asked softly.