

Chapter One

If one were looking for a wife, a masquerade ball where every woman's face was covered and a gambling den were perhaps not the best places to look, but Owen Granville chanced them anyway. He'd hoped to have a few more years before casting his anchor into the marriage pond, which he'd quite happily avoided until now, however the death of his father last month had altered nearly every aspect of Owen's life, not the least of which was the need for a wife.

Owen snagged a champagne flute off the tray of a passing waiter and sipped the sweet wine as he wandered the edge of the main gambling floor. The smell of smoke and heavy spirits mixed with the boisterous laughter of the men and women casting smoldering looks of decadent promise at each other from behind a mask of anonymity. Owen was no stranger to the Lyon's Den and its many vices, of which he'd imbibed more times than he could count. It still came as a surprise to receive a golden invitation to Mrs. Dove-Lyon's *Mystère Masque*. The *Ton* shunned the night of gambling and carnal delights while secretly coveting them. Unlike many of his peers, he never gave a whit about the golden *Invocation Mystère*, and as he pushed his way through the edge of the crowd, he wondered if the invite hadn't come because of his untimely change in circumstances. As the new Baron Granville, Owen was now a man of both title and wealth.

The invitation to the *Mystère Masque* came at the perfect moment. He'd heard quite a bit of talk regarding Mrs. Dove-Lyon's matchmaking, often to the unsuspecting gentlemen partaking in her establishment. Whether the gentlemen were willing to make the matches or coerced into them was a subject of debate, but such things didn't signify tonight. Owen intended to seek the woman out to inquire of his own matchmaking. He needed a wife quickly and any

suitable young woman would do. His stomach clenched uncomfortably at the thought, and he set his half empty glass of champagne on a nearby table.

The delicate face of a dark-haired beauty brushed his mind. Owen frowned and banished her visage. He couldn't have the woman he wanted and thinking of her only made his chest ache. He'd made a promise to his best friend, George Twisden, about it a decade ago. Then, as now, he meant to keep that promise. Just as he meant to keep the one he'd given his father on the man's death bed—he'd stop gambling and living recklessly, and he'd marry and have an heir to keep the title from passing to his cousin Richard.

As if conjured by his thoughts, an unmistakable braying laugh broke over the sounds of music and revelry. Owen spotted Richard's unmistakable form amidst a crowd of gentlemen. The man looked remarkably like their grandfather, with his thick brown hair, narrow face, and dark brown eyes, currently concealed by a simple white domino mask. He carried a bit of weight around his middle, but dressed well and had impeccable manners that hid a fierce temper from polite society.

What the bloody devil was he doing here, anyway? He couldn't fathom why Richard Granville gained entry to the exclusive party any more than he had. What games did Mrs. Dove-Lyon play here? Because as sure as he stood here wearing a domino mask, he knew the woman must be scheming something. She was too intelligent to do otherwise. Inviting the two of them could be for no other reason.

Owen turned away from his cousin and wandered toward the gardens. He'd yet to see their enigmatic patroness welcoming her guests. Had she retired to her private chambers or did she too wish for a breath of fresh air away from the stifling press of bodies?

The moment he stepped through the open door into the moonlit gardens, a body bumped into him and he heard a soft, feminine "oof". Owen gently gripped the woman's arms to steady her and looked down—way down—into eyes so familiar, that his breath caught in surprise.

The lamp light shone down on luxurious, dark brown hair fashioned in ringlets and tied with golden ribbons that matched the mask covering half of her face which had a fan of short peacock feathers to one side. He didn't need to see behind it to know the soft curve of her cheek or the dark sweep of lashes over the brightest blue eyes he'd ever seen. As small and delicate as she was, she fit perfectly in his arms, and Owen couldn't help his instinctive reaction to pull her closer. His hand slid down one arm to encircle her waist and anchor her to him.

Call it destiny, luck, or whatever else came to mind. Owen had come to the masquerade in search of a wife and found the woman of his dreams. God help him because George would kill him, but right at that moment, he couldn't summon the will to care. Grace Twisden was in his arms again, and if he had any say in the matter, she would stay there.

"Gracie," he whispered, savoring her nickname on his lips. A name he'd forbidden himself from speaking for far too many years. She looked ravishing in her deep blue gown embroidered with green and gold peacock feathers, accentuating the curve of her hips and delightful bosom.

She stiffened in his arms and took a half step back, her eyes wide behind her mask. Then she slapped him.