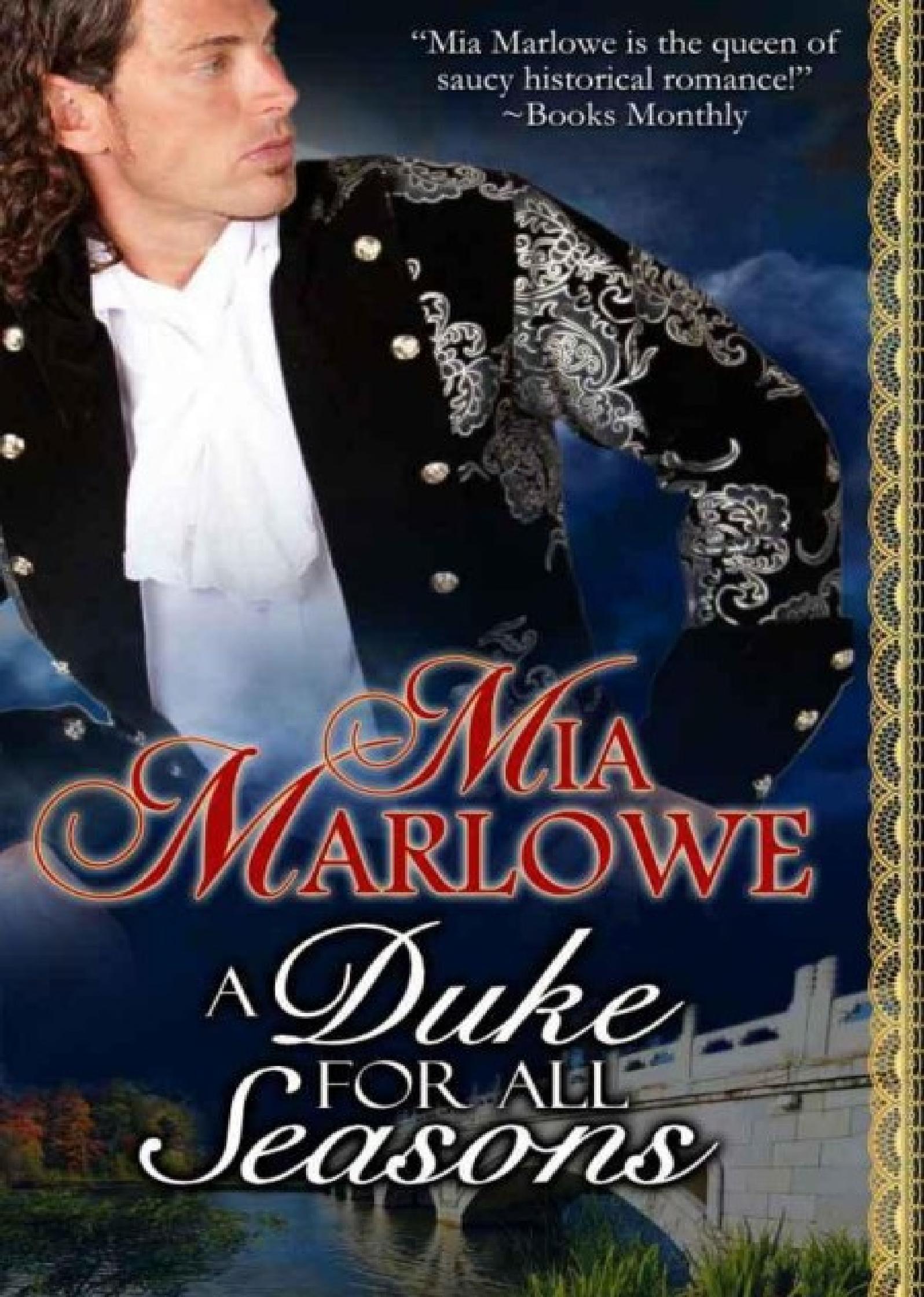


“Mia Marlowe is the queen of saucy historical romance!”

~Books Monthly



# Mia Marlowe

A Duke  
FOR ALL  
Seasons

## **Praise for Mia Marlowe:**

“Historical romance has never been so much fun!”~ Barbara Vey, *Beyond Her Book*

"Mia Marlowe is the queen of saucy historical romance!" ~ BooksMonthly

"Mia Marlowe proves she has the touch for strong heroines, wickedly sexy heroes, and *love scenes* so hot they singe the pages." ~ Jennifer Ashley, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

# **A Duke For All Seasons**

**by Mia Marlowe**

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### **A Note of thanks from Mia Marlowe**

This novella began as an adventure shared with my readers. I started it on my website in January 2010, intending to write a chapter a month, posting as the story grew so my readers could offer their suggestions for what should happen next. Half way through the year, I found myself under contract to write 5 full length novels and a novella for two different publishing houses. I believe in honoring my contracts, so that writing had to come first. But I also felt I'd entered into an implied contract with my readers for this story. I had to find out how Sebastian and Arabella's love affair turned out. Now I know and I'm thrilled to share it with YOU! Thanks for your interest in my books. Hope you'll love *A Duke for All Seasons* as much as I do!

Wishing you love that lasts,

*Mia*

*P.S. Hope you'll visit me at [www.miamarlowe.com](http://www.miamarlowe.com)! You never know when I'll start other online story!*

*'A woman, like a blooded hound or fine steed, has a finite period of usefulness. When that time has run its course, a prudent man divests himself of the asset without regret.'*

~ A Gentleman's Guide to Keeping a Mistress

# Chapter 1

Sebastian Blake hated to wait for anything. Fortunately, he was the Duke of Winterhaven. It was a simple matter to let others wait for him. That's why His Grace settled into his private box at the theatre after the house lights dimmed and the gas footlights illuminated the Olympic's red velvet curtain.

Sebastian preferred to miss most of the overture, if he could. His late arrival kept him from having to brush off those who would use a chance meeting at the opera as an excuse to curry favor.

Or worse, ask for one.

"Celeste isn't joining us?" his friend Neville Granger whispered as the orchestra finished the overture with a flourish.

"Her season has passed," Sebastian said with a shrug. "We parted ways and she left with a generous pension."

Neville shook his head. "They don't call you *The Ice Duke* for nothing."

"Nonsense. Celeste knew exactly what to expect." Sebastian was faithful and devoted to his mistresses, but he always dismissed them with the turn of each season and found a replacement. The rules were explained at the start. In this way he never grew bored, never had to end a relationship in anger or face tearful recriminations. It was simply a function of the calendar, eminently logical, utterly civilized. "She has a new diamond necklace and I have my freedom, as per our agreement."

Neville brought his quizzing glass to one eye and swept the crowd below them. "Someday, my friend, you're going to meet a woman who can't be bought."

"On that day, I'll give you a bottle of that rare vintage of Spanish port you favor," Sebastian said. "Provided you stop grumbling at me about it now. This is how I've ordered my life. Four times a year, I engage in a brief chase and then give myself three months to enjoy my prize. Don't spoil this part of the process for me by scolding like a fishwife."

"Make it a case of that port and we have a deal."

"Done." Sebastian leaned back in the tufted seat, sure he'd never be called upon to make good that wager. "Now, tell me about this soprano you think I'd like."

"Arabella St. George. Shh! Here she comes."

Neville leaned forward so far, Sebastian feared he might tumble out of the box. Then his gaze flicked to the stage and he realized why Neville was willing to risk life and limb.

Normally Sebastian favored petite brunettes, but the footlights shot this woman's long pale hair with strawberry highlights. Tall and willowy, with striking, even features and luminous dark eyes, Arabella St. George possessed a fierce, almost other-worldly beauty.

Sebastian didn't consider himself the sort given to flights of fancy, but his imagination soared at the sight of her. She might be a changeling princess, offspring of the hollow hills. Or a pagan priestess demanding sacrifice. Or one of the three queens who bore King Arthur's body to Avalon.

Lord knew, he'd let her take *his* body anywhere she pleased.

Then the ethereal Miss St. George opened her mouth and began to sing.

*No wonder Neville calls her a diva.* Her voice was liquid seduction, a fiery blend of passion and pathos. Sebastian decided then and there, whatever else she was, Arabella St. George was going to be his.

At least for the coming season.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good show, Bella," the stage manager said as he passed her open dressing room door.

"Thanks, William. Have you seen Irene?" Arabella called out from behind her dressing screen. The costume mistress was nowhere to be found just when she was most needed. Arabella had learned early in her career that there was no room for modesty in an opera troop, not with as many quick changes in the wings as she had to make during the course of a performance. "I've bungled the knot rather badly, I'm afraid. Step in here and unlace me, would you please?"

She turned her face to the wall and heard the clack of his heels on the hardwood. Capable fingers tugged at the knot and worked it free. Her corset loosened as the laces slipped through the eyes. The whale-bone prison fell to the scuffed wood floor. As a singer, Arabella always breathed deeply, expanding her ribs against the stays, but now she was finally free to move.

"Oh, that feels wonderful." She arched her back, lifting her arms over head in a huge stretch. Her thin chemise was of fine linen, but it strafed her nipples with enough friction to make them rise to attention. "Thank you, Will."

"You're welcome."

The rumbling baritone did not belong to William.

Arabella whirled around and looked up into a classically handsome face. His dark eyes glowed with a slow sensual fire and his lips turned into a practiced seductive smile. He might have stepped directly from a playbill for *Don Giovanni*, the tale of the consummate lover.

"You're not William."

"No, I'm not. Forgive me for not introducing myself, but when a lady is in distress, my first inclination is to first come to her aid." He removed his top hat, revealing a head of unruly dark waves Lord Byron might have envied. "I am Winterhaven."

She recognized the name and knew he expected her to curtsy and fawn over him, but she realized immediately who he *really* was. He was wearing the specified top hat, bearing a dozen roses and wore a white carnation stuck in his lapel.

He was the contact she was told to expect.

All she wanted was to rid herself of the cursed envelope as quickly as possible. But in case anyone might happen by her dressing room door, she decided she ought to treat him as if he were simply another opera devotee come to offer the usual overweening praise.

*Honestly, does he have to pretend to be a duke?*

She straightened her spine, ignored the fact that she was practically naked and offered him her hand.

“Arabella St. George, Your Grace.”

“Enchanted.” He bent and pressed a courtly kiss to her knuckles. His lips were warm and his breath feathered over the back of her hand. “Your performance was magnificent.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m gratified to have pleased you.” She accepted the bouquet and placed the fragrant offering in a waiting vase.

“Then perhaps you’d consider pleasing me more,” the man said smoothly. “Do me the honor of joining me for supper. I’ve arranged for us to partake of a midnight repast in a private dining room at The Peacock’s Tail.”

Arabella had overheard one of the opera dancers telling her friends about The Peacock’s Tail. It was an elegant establishment that boasted a French chef and sumptuous rooms designed as trysting spots for the upper crust’s *affaires du Coeur*. Midnight supper at such a posh establishment was an enticing offer, but when she agreed to bear the envelope from her last singing engagement in Paris, she hadn’t signed on to become someone’s plaything.

“How kind, sir, but how premature. Alas, I’m elsewhere engaged this evening.”

“I should have expected as much. A beautiful woman never dines alone.” He took a step closer and lifted a hand to her cheek. “Allow me to tempt you to change your plans.”

His mouth descended to hers before she realized he intended to kiss her.

Arabella appreciated directness in a man, so she didn’t protest. She was no nun. She’d been kissed by adoring lovers, by tenors who’d really rather have kissed the baritone, and by a French count who knew a dozen delightful uses for his wicked tongue.

She considered herself well-versed in love play, but this kiss wasn’t merely an appetizer. It was a feast.

A feast that made her hungry for more. Her body softened against his hard one without her conscious volition. Every bit of her tingled with awareness, with anticipation, with heat. Her bed had been cold for more months than she cared to contemplate, but her body had no trouble remembering the pleasure it was designed for.

But however much her insides ached, this man was part of the blasted game she’d been unwillingly sucked into. She wouldn’t let herself be coerced into more. Arabella pulled away from him.

“With regret, I must decline.”

*With buckets of regret*, she thought ruefully.

The bulge in his trousers was formidable and if his kiss was any indication, the “duke” was a lover of considerable skill. Despite his chilly formal demeanor, he was all fire underneath and his nearness sent a flurry of conflicting sensations coursing over her. She steeled herself not to meet his gaze as she donned the wrapper that had been draped over her dressing screen.

“Allow me to offer you a libretto of this evening’s opera as a parting gift.” She had tucked the incriminating envelope within its pages earlier, figuring her contact might appreciate a method of concealing the volatile thing he carried. She held it out to him now.

He stared at the *Don Giovanni* libretto, his brows nearly meeting over his fine

straight nose.

“You’ll find what you seek within its pages,” she said pointedly.

“No doubt, Giovanni has many things to teach a man, but unless I find you within this little booklet, I will continue in disappointment,” he said, taking the libretto and tucking it in his waistcoat pocket. “Thank you, Miss St. George. I will treasure this memento of our first meeting. However, you should know I am not accustomed to accepting defeat. You are a spectacular actress, but I recognize real passion when I encounter it. You were as moved by that kiss as I.”

She bit her lip. Could he scent her arousal over the roses?

He dipped in the shallowest of bows and put on his hat in a fluid motion. “My driver and equipage will remain at the stage door for one hour, should your plans change. I sincerely hope they do. Good evening.”

He strode away without a backward glance.

Arabella closed the door behind him, lest she be tempted to follow. The deed was done, the envelope delivered. Fernand and his cohorts would leave her in peace now. She'd never have to see any of them again. She escaped the ill-advised adventure with nothing worse than a few sleepless nights.

But why did her contact have to be such a delicious man?

She removed her stage makeup and re-applied a judicious amount of rouge for her exit from the theatre. It wouldn't do for a *diva*, even an exhausted one, to look like a washerwoman. Then she donned a simple gown, grateful that unlike her heavy stage costumes, she could dress herself in street wear. She was tying the bow of her bonnet, when someone rapped on her door.

“Come,” she called out.

A man stepped into her dressing room, wearing a top hat and bearing roses. A white carnation winked at his lapel.

“*Bonsoir*, Arabella. I believe you have something for me.”

Her heart shuddered at the sound of his voice. Fernand de Lisle closed the door behind him.

*“Under no circumstances should a gentleman involve himself with a woman who has entanglements of a sort that might diminish his enjoyment of her.”*

~ A Gentleman’s Guide to Keeping a Mistress

## Chapter 2

“Fernand,” Arabella said, aghast. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“You were told to look for a man wearing a top hat with a white carnation in his lapel, and bearing a dozen roses, *non?*” He made a sweeping bow and dropped the flowers on the floor. “Now, the envelope, where is it?”

Panic coiled her belly. “Why didn’t Jean-Louis simply tell me you were the one who would meet me?”

*So I could arrange to be where you wouldn’t find me!*

“Because, *ma petite*, you don’t need to know everything.”

Fernand swept her into an embrace with the assurance common to handsome men. She’d found his pale eyes beneath blond brows uniquely enchanting once. Now they seemed reptilian. She tried the firmness of his grip and decided a struggle would be pointless.

“As much as I would love to stay and renew our oh-so-pleasant acquaintance, I have some rather pressing matters to attend.” His voice was a silky bass, but there was an underlying tone of menace she hadn’t recognized when she first met him years ago. Now it was all she could hear. “I’ll take what I’ve come for and be gone.”

For a moment, she considered telling him that the Duke of Winterhaven was in possession of the wretched envelope and that he could be found at The Peacock’s Tail.

But that would put an innocent bystander in Fernand de Lisle’s path.

Not that Winterhaven was innocent. No man who kissed as he did could be considered such. But Arabella knew what Fernand was capable of.

Winterhaven didn’t.

She forced a musical laugh as she extricated herself from his arms. “Honestly, Fernand, you don’t think I keep it here, do you? Anyone could come into my dressing room.”

“And no doubt *anyone* has. You have no secrets from me, remember.”

She made herself smile at him. “The point is I don’t have it with me at present.”

“Then let us go collect it.”

“I can’t,” she said, trying to keep her voice even, as if her heart weren’t pounding hard enough to leap from her chest. “I’m . . . dining with the Duke of Winterhaven this evening.”

“He is rather—what is the word?—‘high-in-the-instep’ for you, *non?*”

She shrugged. Perhaps the Winterhaven name projected enough power to protect her for as long as it took for her to retrieve the envelope. “His Grace left his coach and driver for me and he doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Neither do I, *chérie*.” Fernand grabbed her forearm, twisted it painfully and pulled her close enough to whisper in her ear. “It was a mistake for you to move your family from the townhouse on Bent Street. It shows a lack of trust I find most troubling.”

“This is between you and me, Fernand. Leave them out of it.” She stomped on his foot and wrenched herself away from him, knocking the vase with Winterhaven’s

roses to the floor with a crash. It shattered into hundreds of shards and the perfume of dying roses filled the room afresh.

A rap sounded on the door. "Everything all right, Bella?" the stage manager called out.

Fernand's eyes flashed a warning.

"Fine, Will. Just a little clumsiness." William was a nice man. He had a family. The last thing she wanted was to put him in danger. "You'll have to send in the dustman after I leave."

"Right-o." Will's footsteps retreated.

"You know the difference between you and me, Bella?" Fernand popped his top hat back on his head. "You have a care for what happens to others. That, my dear, is a weakness you can ill afford."

"I mean it. Leave my family alone."

"Certainly. So long as you and I deal well with each other, there's no reason to involve them. I will be back tomorrow. Disappoint me at your peril." He paused at the door. "I found the child once. Do not imagine I can't find her again."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Arabella St. George is otherwise engaged this evening," Sebastian admitted.

"She turned you down?" Neville plopped into one of the two wing chairs that flanked the fireplace. A grin brightened his face. "Oh, my friend, you cannot imagine how my heart bleeds for you."

"Oddly enough, all I have to show for my trip to the opera is a new libretto, courtesy of Miss St. George." Sebastian took the *Don Giovanni* libretto from his waistcoat pocket and laid it on the stack of books he'd brought for Neville from his library. Then he settled into the other wing chair with a snifter of brandy for each of them. He'd break out the cigars later. He kept a townhouse in London, but since his aunt and younger sister were in residence there, he preferred to confine his personal pleasures to the suite he leased at the Peacock's Tail.

"She'll come round," Sebastian assured his friend. "This is but a momentary set-back."

"And Waterloo was but a lost wager for the French." Neville took a sip of his brandy. "Admit it. Have you ever been turned down before?"

"You're enjoying yourself at my expense."

"Not at all, Winterhaven," Neville said with a laugh. "Once I claim that case of port, *then* I'll be enjoying myself at your expense."

"You are far too consumed with my private affairs."

"Because I wish you to see you settled," Neville said. "You devote a great deal of time and energy to securing four women a year. If instead you found one you could love for the rest of your life, you'd be a much happier man."

"Granger, I'm delighted you've found your Christine, but just because you've decided to marry, it doesn't signify that all men should." Sebastian sipped his brandy. His father had devoted himself to one woman and died a disappointed wretch. "Besides, what makes you think I'm not happy?"

"You haven't got an heir."

"There's time for that." A duchess was on his horizon, but her shadowy figure

was the far in the distance. A woman might be trusted to bear a man's heir with careful watching, but he knew better than to trust one with his heart. "And even once I marry, there's nothing to prevent me from continuing to order my personal life to suit me. A wife should have no cause for complaint so long as a man is discreet."

Heaven knew his mother hadn't been.

There was a rap on the door. Neville hopped up to open it and Arabella St. George stepped into the elegant suite with the same alluring presence she projected on the operatic stage. She was a *diva* to her bones.

"Good evening, Lord Granger." She offered Neville her hand. "Lovely to see you again. Are you joining His Grace and me for supper?"

Sebastian saw him fight the urge to swear.

"Unfortunately, no," Neville said as he dropped a kiss on her gloved knuckles. "However, I hope you'll consider another recital for my mother and her friends very soon."

"Please tell the countess I'd be delighted," Miss St. George said.

Even her speaking voice was musical and sultry. Sebastian was stirred by the mere sound of her.

"The opera company's season will soon be over. We might arrange something then. An evening of *liebesslieder* to celebrate your engagement, perhaps?"

"Enchanting. My fiancée adores German love songs." Neville scooped up the stack of books Sebastian had brought him, including the *Don Giovanni* libretto, and made a hasty exit. "Goodnight, Winterhaven. I trust you'll think about what I said."

*Not bloody likely.* Why should he settle on one woman when the world was filled with the gorgeous creatures? Sebastian sent his friend silent thanks for leaving so quickly and closed the door behind him.

"May I take your wrap?" Not waiting for her answer, he stepped behind her and slid the velvet cloak down her silken arms. A few tendrils escaped the chignon at her nape and a whiff of violets tickled his nostrils. Anticipation clenched his gut.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"Call me Winterhaven." He crossed to the sideboard and poured two glasses of the best French vintage The Peacock Tail's cellar boasted.

"Winterhaven." She rolled the syllables around on her tongue as if she were tasting them. "Is that your name?"

"For all normal purposes."

"Dining with me is not normal for you," she said as she accepted a glass. "My friends call me Bella. What do you think? Shall you and I be friends?"

"I sincerely hope so." Sebastian felt himself tumbling into her dark eyes.

"Then what is your name?"

Against his better judgment, he gave her the name only his mother had ever used for him.

"Sebastian. I like it. It suits you." She touched the rim of her glass to his. "To a lovely dinner."

He smiled down at her. "And to dessert."

*“Selecting a mistress involves more than finding a pleasing bed companion. A gentleman must be sure the woman is an ornament to his arm and a credit to his reputation as a man of discriminating taste.”*

~ A Gentleman's Guide to Keeping a Mistress

## Chapter 3

“And when the second act began, the tenor and mezzo-soprano were nowhere to be found, so William, our stage manager, had to send in their understudies.” Arabella took a sip of her wine.

Sebastian couldn't tear his gaze from her lips. Even though it felt like something a callow youth might claim, he truly did envy the glass because it touched her red ribbon of a mouth.

“Well, the principal singers were furious of course,” she went on, “but the maestro told them that if the rest of the company had to wait till after the final curtain to seek their lover's couch, they could too.”

Sebastian smiled indulgently. It had been a while since he met a woman who was so frank about matters of the flesh.

“Of course, the mezzo was just covering for the tenor,” Arabella said before she popped a bite of orange into her mouth. “He was actually in the property mistress's closet with one of the baritones from the chorus.”

Sebastian laughed. Arabella St. George told such engagingly ribald stories. They tripped off her tongue as easily as her high notes. She regaled Sebastian with naughty tales of the backstage doings at the opera company and sly little tidbits about heads of state for whom she'd sung private recitals. He easily envisioned her moving smoothly among his peers as they made the rounds of demimonde haunts, charming everyone as she went.

The only problem was that she seemed a bit distracted sometimes. He caught her gaze flitting about the room now and then as if she were looking for something in particular. It seemed out of character—as if the lady were in actuality a cutpurse looking for a likely victim. But then she'd flash him such a beguiling smile, he decided he'd imagined the whole thing.

By the time they reached the main course, he was thoroughly convinced he'd made the correct choice for his next mistress. Then she stumbled badly.

“But I've occupied the conversation for far too long,” she said. “Tell me about yourself, Sebastian.”

He shrugged. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

That was far too wide a net. He decided to limit it. “I am a Whig in matters political.”

She laughed. “Our costume mistress has a parrot that claims to be a Whig if you offer him a cracker, a Tory if you give him cake! Rather like a real politician, I should think. You've told me nothing.”

That was his aim. The whole point of having a mistress was *having* an entertainment, not *being* one. “I am the 8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Winterhaven.”

“An accident of birth.” She waved away the attribute that so entranced his other women. “Your title tells me about your station, not about you. Tell me something you like.”

He frowned. None of his other women ever contradicted him or pushed him to reveal himself like this. “I like you,” he said, not so sure he truly did now.

She raised her glass in salute. “Flattering, but you’re stalling, sir. Tell me something I don’t already know.”

While he was perfectly willing to share his body with this delectable woman, he always kept a firmly erected barrier between himself and his mistresses. When he looked into her eyes, he realized he’d not advance his cause a bit by holding back.

“I . . . like raising horses on my country estate.”

She smiled. “Good. Why?”

“Because it’s the done thing.”

“Oh, how deplorably dull. Never say that’s the real reason or I’ll believe you haven’t an original idea in your head.”

By thunder, no man had ever spoken to him thusly. Certainly no woman. “Miss St. George—”

“Bella, please,” she corrected. “Do you know why I sing, Sebastian? Because it *moves* me.” She leaned toward him and he forced himself not to be distracted by her décolletage. “Music is a demanding god. I can’t have a normal life because of the odd hours, the travel, and the slightly disreputable company. But when I sing, the glory of sound shivers over me. Music gives me so much, that the dusty theatres, the despicable critics, the terror that something might go horribly wrong—none of those things matter. I’m never more fully alive than when I’m pouring out my soul in song.”

“That’s what moves me.” She laid her hand on his. “I want to know what moves you. Now, tell me what you like about raising horses.”

He liked the smell of a horse, the dusty warm scent of a gelding’s shaggy coat on a brisk fall morning. He liked their soft noses and sweet breath. The homely comfort of a low whicker of greeting when he approached. He loved giving a spirited mount its head and flying across the—

“Freedom,” he said softly. “I love the freedom of riding. The speed. The thrill of controlling a powerful animal with only my knees, reins and will.”

Her smile washed over him. “You don’t have to be the 8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Winterhaven on the back of a horse.”

“No, I don’t,” he said, surprised that she’d divined his deeper thoughts so accurately.

“Someday, Sebastian, I should like to see you ride.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*It’s not here.* Arabella rifled through Sebastian’s greatcoat pockets while he stepped out to see what was keeping their dessert. *Oh, God, it’s not here.*

All during supper, she’d furtively surveyed the sumptuous room, looking for the libretto. There weren’t that many horizontal surfaces where he might have laid it aside absently. She checked the small bookshelf, but there were only a few novels whose spines had never been cracked. The escritoire in the corner was locked, but surely he wouldn’t have felt the need to place the libretto under lock and key.

Unless the duke had found the envelope tucked within *Don Giovanni*’s pages and opened it. Unless he *knew*.

“Calm down,” she ordered herself. Sebastian was a very closed off, very private

person, but she'd been able to read him fairly well. She'd know if he had found it.

She brushed her fingertips over the window ledges to see if he'd propped the libretto there. The door opened behind her and she turned guiltily to face him as he came back in, followed by a footman.

"Looking for something?" Sebastian asked.

"Looking *at* something," she said smoothly. "Did you know you can see St. Paul's from here? It's really quite lovely by starlight."

"And some things are lovely even without benefit of starlight." His appraising gaze washed her with masculine approval.

She smiled at his compliment and settled back at the dining table where the footman put the finishing touches on their dessert. With a fine fork, he pricked the sponge cakes resting in shallow dessert-dishes. Then he poured on raisin wine and brandy in equal parts and once the cakes were thoroughly drenched, he sifted sugar on each of them. Just when Arabella didn't think she could handle another ounce of decadence, he spooned a generous dollop of custard alongside each cake.

The footman bowed and left them to enjoy their sweets.

"I'll never fit into my second act costume if I eat all that."

"Try it before you decide not to like it," Sebastian said, forking up a bite and offering it to her.

She opened her mouth and let the flavors burst on her tongue. "Oh, my! That's worth a trip to the tailor."

He offered her another and she took it.

"Oh, there's a bit by the side of your mouth," he said.

She ran the tip of her tongue around her lips.

"No, you didn't quite . . . allow me." He leaned over and licked the corner of her mouth, right at the juncture of smooth skin and moist intimacy. Then he pulled back slightly and looked into her eyes.

She wasn't sure what he saw in hers, but she saw . . . loneliness in his and her chest ached.

Then he kissed her.

His kiss in her dressing room had been practiced, smooth. This one wasn't. There was no sense of seduction, no hurried taking. It was more a gentle exploration. His mouth slanted over hers with surprising tenderness.

Then the kiss took a decidedly wicked turn. He stole her breath and nipped her bottom lip. His tongue made rough love her to mouth and her whole body sang. She draped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. He stifled a groan.

"No, this isn't . . . " He yanked himself away, taking a deep breath, obviously bridling himself. "I don't usually conduct my affairs in this manner."

"I thought it was a grand beginning myself," she said with a chuckle. "How do you usually conduct *your affairs*?"

"In a thoroughly civilized way. Before we proceed, it is important—"

"Proceed to what?"

"To . . . become better acquainted," he said, neatly sidestepping the obvious. "I have a contract I should like you to look over and sign."

"Indeed?"

"It's all quite standard, I assure you and generous to a fault, I'm told."

“What sort of contract?”

He walked over to the *escritoire*, unlocked it and pulled out a sheaf of papers. Then he returned to the table. “It’s all here, laid out neatly. You will receive a liberal stipend for each of the three months we are together and at our parting, a pension to be drawn out for a number of years. I enjoy giving my mistress gifts, so if you prefer emeralds over rubies, be sure to let me know.”

“You expect me to become your mistress?” She leafed through the contract in awe.

“I should think that's obvious.”

“And the contract is for a predetermined length of time?”

“Yes, three months is optimal for—”

“No.” She laid the contract on top of her brandy-soaked cake. A ring of gooey moisture soaked through the paper and made the neat script run together.

He couldn't have looked more surprised if she'd slapped him. “No?”

“No, I won't sign this contract. I won't become your *mistress*.” Then she rose, stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. “I can't promise to stay with you for three months. I might be hopelessly bored with you before that time is up, but . . .”—she walked her fingers down his chest to the buttons of his trousers—“I will become your *lover*.”

His breath hissed over his teeth. “When?”

She kissed his lips. Bella liked men. She liked Sebastian. And she needed more time to look for that envelope. “Right now.”

*“The first physical encounter with a prospective mistress sets the tone for  
all future interludes.*

*A wise man makes his expectations clear.”*

*~ A Gentleman’s Guide to Keeping a Mistress*

## Chapter 4

Sebastian knew it was the height of foolishness to engage in love play with a woman without benefit of a contract. She might decide to make more of their relationship than it was. She might make demands upon him he was unprepared to meet. An intimate encounter with a woman was not something a prudent man stumbled into without protecting his interests.

And his future freedom.

But at the moment, Bella's mouth on his made any thoughts of prudence flee away.

He loved the way she tasted, sweet with a hint of raisin wine and a splash of brandy. Her scent engulfed him, warm and musky. Her body pressed against his, her softness melding into his hardness. She didn't kiss like any woman he'd ever known. Usually his mistresses passively accepted his attentions. They took their cue from his level of passion, matching him surely but unwilling to initiate anything.

Bella took the lead, teasing him with her tongue and then withholding it. She kissed his cheeks, his jaw, his neck. A playful nip on his earlobe sent his groin into pleasurable agony.

"Bella," he murmured, not sure his voice would even work.

She pulled away and looked up at him, her lips kiss-swollen. "I like the way you said my name just then. It sounds as if you want me. Need me."

Her words were a dash of cold water. The 8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Winterhaven didn't *need* anyone. He cleared his throat. "I do want you." He plucked a couple pins from her hair and ran his fingers through the length that uncoiled. "That's not in dispute."

She caught up his hand and pressed a lover's kiss on his palm. He fought the urge to groan with wanting.

"But you don't need me?" she asked.

"Bella, I . . ." He clamped his lips shut. A duke, a man for that matter, ought not admit to need.

"Well, that's something of a challenge for me then," she said with a sly grin. "I shall have to make you need me."

The thought amused him. As if anyone could make him do anything he didn't wish. She wrapped her slender arms around his neck and turned her face up to him again. He claimed her mouth without further invitation.

"No, no," she said after a few moments, sliding her hands down so her palms pressed against his chest. "You're kissing me by rote."

"What?" No woman had ever complained of his kisses.

"Don't misunderstand. Your kisses would turn most women to water. When you kissed me before, it certainly weakened my knees, but this one was too practiced, too predictable. So many seconds slanted this way, so many turned the other. In another moment, I'll be presented with your tongue." She cocked her head at him. "A lady could set her pendant watch by that kiss."