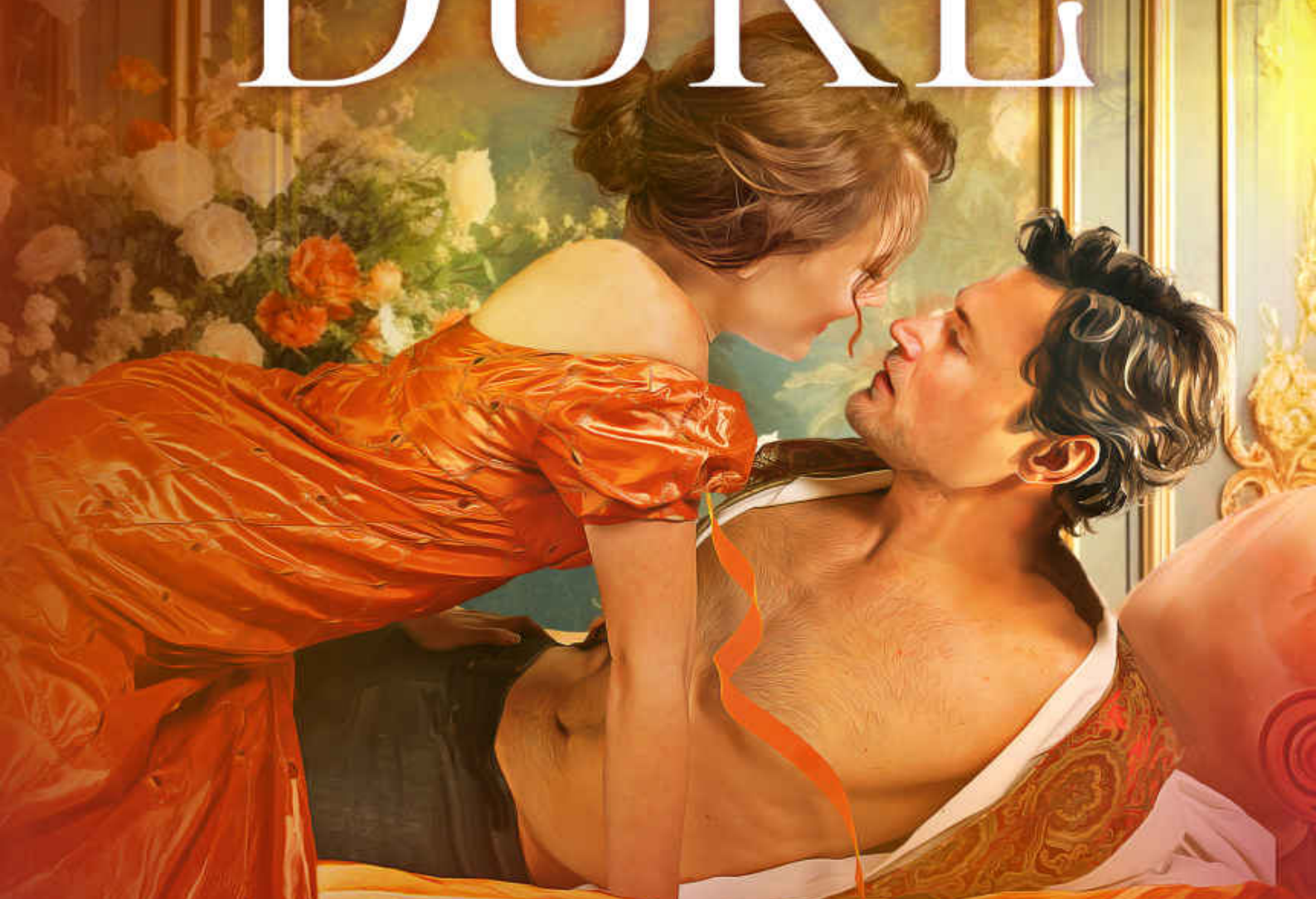


Dalliance and Dukes
MY VIRTUOUS
DUKE



TAMARA
Gill


MY VIRTUOUS
DUKE

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Dalliance and Dukes, Book 1

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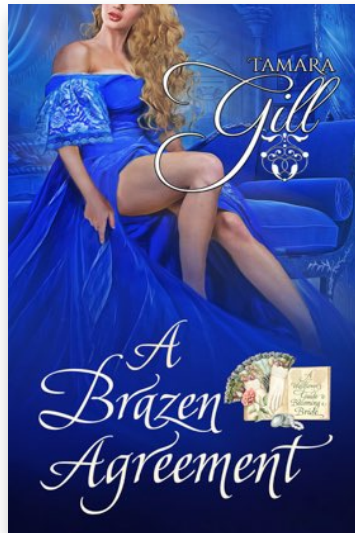
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Please know

MY VIRTUOUS DUKE WAS PART OF THE
I LIKE BIG DUKES & I CANNOT LIE
ANTHOLOGY.

Chapter
One

“**D**ee Dee, are you at home?” Arthur called from the foyer.

“In the library,” Deandra, or Dee Dee to her closest friends replied, standing up from behind her desk to meet one of her oldest friends she had not seen since last Season. Too long, since she always loved Arthur’s company.

The Duke of Beaufort entered, his smile as warm and wide as hers, and pulled her into a tight embrace. “Oh, how I have missed you.” He did not let her go until he had squeezed her, as was their usual greeting after such a long absence.

She chuckled and lifted her head to take in his magnificence, which she had always been fond of, even if never in a romantic light. Well, except for that one time when she was eighteen and enjoying her first Season in town.

“Come and sit,” she said. “I shall have tea and cake delivered so we may catch up. I’m certain there is much to discuss now that you’re back in town and the Season has commenced. What took you so long to arrive? I was starting to think that you would never return.”

“Ah, well, as to that, I’ve been at a house party in Surrey, the one Lord Digby holds each year. I met a delightful young lady who’s having her coming-out this year. In fact, she should

be in town by now, and if my belief is correct, I should have an invitation waiting for me on my desk for her ball tomorrow evening.”

“Well, that does sound promising,” she said, walking over to the mantel and pulling the bellpull. “So I gather from your conjecture that you fancy the young woman to be a potential bride for yourself. I was starting to wonder when you would marry. You are not getting any younger, after all, Arthur.”

She smiled when the duke scoffed and tried to appear offended, not that he ever fooled her. They had been friends far too long for any secrets to still be between them. “Not everyone marries their first Season like you, Dee Dee. But my uncle has started threatening me with castration if I do not secure the ducal line, and soon. He forever reminds me that his sons are married with boys who can take up the mantle if I’m not man enough to complete the job. Which even I’m loath to fail. My father, dearly departed as he is, would come back and haunt me if I did not secure the line.”

“That would be a shame, yes, especially when the Beaufort line has been strong for over four hundred years.” Deandra smiled at the memory of how proud his mama was of her only child and son. Not that she herself had been blessed with children, no matter how much she and Lord Coleridge had tried during their short marriage.

She shook the melancholy thoughts aside, knowing that while Arthur’s ability to sire sons was not hindered by age, hers most certainly was. And at nine and twenty, the same age as Arthur, her time to become a mother had long slipped away. And she was not entirely sure she could carry a child, not after all the disappointments she endured, month after month,

failing the one thing that could have given her happiness in the marriage.

“So,” Arthur said, slapping his knees as he sat beside her. “This is one of the reasons why I’m here today seeing my oldest and best friend.” He stared at her a moment, his gaze turning serious. “I need your help, Dee Dee.”

“My help?” she stated, pointing to herself and forgetting for a moment they were the only two in the room. “Whatever do you need my assistance for? You’re a duke, and a wealthy one at that. I would be of little service to you.”

“Ah, but you see, that is where you’re wrong. You are part owner of one of the wealthiest gaming and gentlemen’s clubs in London, and a widow. And with that comes experience and information I think I shall find useful, especially since I have been locked away in Somerset for the past two years taking over the estate after my father’s death.”

Deandra frowned, unsure where this conversation was going or what he wanted from her. “What are you asking? You have me thinking all kinds of things, and none of them comforting.”

“Well, I thought it would be obvious. You know that I’m not like most men.”

That was very true. In fact, for several months many years ago, Deandra had thought Arthur had preferred the company of his own sex over the fairer one, but his interest soon turned toward the feminine side of society, and so she forgot about such thoughts. But now, what on heaven’s door was he talking about?

“I think that the fact you’re not like most men is a blessing, not a sin, but please tell me what you’re after so I can say

either yes or no to your request. You are being quite elusive.”

“If I’m being reticent, it’s only because I’m nervous to ask you. Some things regarding men ought to be kept an enigma, and I’m concerned that you will judge me.”

Maybe her past thoughts on his sexual preference were correct after all, and he was going to ask her how to help him overcome that to marry this debutante he’d met. “Arthur, say it now or leave. My patience is waning,” she said, throwing him a pointed stare.

“Very well, I shall ask what I need to and declare something I know you’ll find difficult to believe, but please do not laugh at me, for all I’m about to say is true.”

She schooled her features and nodded. “I promise not to laugh or judge.”

Arthur took a fortifying breath and met her gaze. “While I enjoy female company and have almost kissed a lady or two, not debutantes mind, I do not want to find myself hitched to someone who is not whom I want. I have never actually been with a woman. I’ve not the skills to seduce whom I would like as my bride, and that’s where you come in. My best friend and closest ally who would never do me ill or wrong, now would you, Dee Dee?”

She gaped at him, unsure she heard his words correctly. “Are you asking me to school you in the art of seduction and sex?”

His cheeks turned a bright pink, and Deandra had the answer to her question.

“I fear I shall disappoint whomever I marry, and since you’ve already been married and own a gaming hell where all sorts of trysts occur, you know the intimacies of the

bedchamber.” He paused. “And, well, we already love each other as friends. I thought, who better to ask than you?”

Deandra stared at him for several moments, the urge to laugh absent even after his absurd question. “Arthur, you’re a natural at whatever you do in life. I’m sure it’ll be the same when it comes to taking things further with your betrothed, whomever that ends up being. You do not need me to school you in such things, and when you mention schooling, do you mean we’re to sleep together? Have sex?”

His eyes widened, and he sat back in the chair, stunned. “Oh dear, no, I would never ask that of you. I merely need you to explain things to me and show me how things work without actually having to do any deeds together. As much as I wished I could have slept with women, and many of them, to this day, I have not. It never seemed honorable, if you understand. To follow through on such an act was tainted and wasteful when it was not with the right woman.”

A little piece of her heart melted at his explanation. She reached out and clasped his hand. “I think you having not ejaculated yourself around London is commendable, Arthur.”

“Oh dear Lord, Dee Dee. That is a visual I do not wish to imagine.”

She chuckled, having thought the imagery quite hilarious herself. “So many men, my husband included, thought it a hoot to squirt all over London, and with some of my friends, no less, even though they think I do not know their treachery. That you have not only makes you more darling in my eyes than you were before, and so yes, I shall help you. Owning the gaming hell, one does see many things others do not, and as a widow, I think I can help you become a master of your art, so whomever you marry will be well pleased.”

“You’re a sweetheart, and I thank you. Now, what shall you teach me first? I must know as much as I can and as soon as possible. Lady Mabel’s coming out ball is tomorrow evening. If I’m to be a leading candidate for her hand, I must be suave and seductive, without being unnerving.”

“I think first I must watch you at the ball, see how you perform without my infusion so I know where your skills may be lacking and where I can help most. So tomorrow night, we shall attend the Ryder ball, and I shall observe. But truly, Arthur, I do not think you’ll need my help. You ought to give yourself more credit for being such a gentleman and coming to a marriage without having rutted half of London. One never wants to marry a man and be fearful of catching syphilis or some such ailment. A fear I, too, held after marrying Lord Coleridge.”

“You did?” he stated, surprised.

She threw him a dubious look. “Do not play dumb with me, even you know what kind of man I married. Now, off you go. I have work to do, and I shall see you at the ball tomorrow evening.”

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Thank you, Dee Dee. You are the best person I know.”

She smiled and watched him go. “As are you,” she whispered into the empty room as she heard the front door shut.

Chapter

Two

He was an utter disaster.

Deandra wasn't sure she had ever seen someone so uncomfortable and awkward around people of their status. Arthur stumbled over his words, even when she stood beside him, smiling and helping the conversations he had with several young debutantes, but nothing could help the silence when it descended on them all or the pleading looks from the young ladies toward their mothers to get them away from the bore.

Even if he was the Duke of Beaufort.

“So, how do you think I'm faring?” Arthur asked her, smiling and clearly unaware of how terrible he was and out of practice he was at wooing women.

“I think there is room for improvement, but it is not so very bad,” she lied. “Nothing that cannot be rectified with a little practice.”

He nodded, a small smile on his lips that made her heart clutch. How ignorant and sweet he was because of it. She watched him for a moment, debating whether what he told her yesterday was true. Surely he was not a virgin. If he were, he would be one of the oldest in England, and possibly the continent too.

She sipped her ratafia, nodding toward Lady Mabel, who sauntered toward them. The very debutante whom Arthur had set his sights on. However, on closer inspection of the young woman, the hairs on the back of Deandra's neck spiked when she came up to them and curtsied. The young woman smiled, the gesture smug and lofty, as if she thought herself above even the duke who stood before her.

She should not. Even if Arthur were very timid, he had her as a friend, and she would not let him be led astray or made a fool of. Not even for a wealthy debutante eleven years his junior.

The thought gave her pause. Maybe Lady Mabel was too young for Arthur. Perhaps her friend needed an older woman, one who could match his intelligence and look upon society with one's eyes open to the politics and fickleness that she had not known at eighteen.

"Your Grace, Lady Coleridge," Lady Mabel said, dipping into a perfect curtsy, her eyes demurely glancing up at Arthur before fluttering closed. Deandra schooled her features and smiled, determined to give the young woman a chance to impress her, since she had clearly impressed Arthur at the house party he attended.

"Lady Mabel, how very lovely to meet you. I understand this is your first Season."

"Yes, my lady," she said, barely glancing at her before giving her full attention to Arthur, who stood beaming like a man blinded by the sun.

"Although I've been to London numerous times. My parents did not like leaving me in the country when they came up to town to enjoy the Season, so I know the city well." Lady Mabel paused, turning toward Deandra and now giving her

full attention. “Are your children in town, my lady? I should imagine you have many since you were so fortunate, as fortuitous as I wish to be, to be married during your first Season.”

Deandra cleared her throat, taking a fortifying sip of her drink before she answered. She did not dare glance at Arthur, whom she felt was waiting, too, for an answer, but perhaps not the one that Lady Mabel was expecting.

“I was fortunate to marry Lord Coleridge during my coming-out, but alas, no children.”

“Oh, I’m so very sorry. You reside on Curzon Street, do you not? The home is one of the largest on the road. What a shame that only you and Lord Coleridge are living there.”

Deandra couldn’t help but think she was purposefully being discourteous. Few in London did not know Lord Coleridge had died while under his whore. “It is only me, as his lordship passed some years ago,” she explained, fighting to keep a calm demeanor. Lady Mabel’s smirk, barely hidden by the dip of her head, made her hackles rise, and perhaps what she said next was beneath her, but nor could she help to say what she did. “Your fichu is a little low, Lady Mabel. Perhaps you should move to the retiring room and repair it before you give the incorrect impression to all the young men here this evening.”

The young woman looked down at her gown in horror and hastily excused herself and fled the ballroom, not comprehending that her fichu was perfectly fine.

Deandra watched her depart, fighting off the urge to giggle. The silly little fool.

“Dee Dee, you know perfectly well that her fichu was as it should be. Why did you scare her away?” he asked, looking after the young lady with a sullen expression that annoyed her more than she was already.

“My first lesson to you, Arthur, is not to look so desperate for her attention. You’re coming across as a man who’s already decided on whom he wants for his wife.”

“But I have made up my mind. She’s perfect as the next Duchess of Beaufort. She has the right breeding and a good dowry, and she’s very pretty, not to mention young enough to give me sons before my uncle has an apoplexy.”

“Again, and I cannot stress this enough, you sound desperate, and she’ll smell that distress like a shark after a school of fish. Do you not want a little passion in your marriage? Speaking from experience, when there is none, the lack of it is taxing, and you’ll end up wishing you listened to me and followed my advice.”

Arthur sighed and ran a hand over his mouth, a quizzical line between his brow. “I do believe I have felt this passion that you speak of, but many years ago, and I long lost hope for that future when ...” He paused and cleared his throat. “In any case, the connection was not meant to be, but that does not mean I’m totally without some clue of what I ought to feel for a woman. For instance, when I’m around you, I find you attractive and amusing. We’re friends, and I love you as you love me ...”

Deandra watched as a bright, rosy hue covered Arthur’s cheeks, and his words halted. Where on earth was he going with his words and thoughts? That she did not know, and nor would she ask him only to further his embarrassment. “I will teach you how to court a woman and ensure that with

whomever you marry, there is at least a spark of attraction. Do not marry a woman merely because she ticks your precise boxes. I want more than that for you.”

“When will our lessons begin? The Season is underway, and if I do not convince you that Lady Mabel is suitable as my future wife, I’ll have to look elsewhere, which will take time.”

“You may escort me home in your carriage, and we shall discuss further my plan for you, but I will warn you now, Arthur, it will involve touching and kissing. Something I know you may feel uncomfortable with, considering your beliefs to remain chaste until marriage, and because we’re friends.”

His lips pursed, and he studied her with an intensity she had never seen before. The pit of her stomach fluttered, a reaction she had not felt in years, and for a moment, she was left a little discombobulated as to what to think or say next.

“You are my friend, and if I’m to kiss anyone without any repercussions, it should be you. I trust you, Dee Dee. I know you only have my best interests at heart.”

She reached out and clasped his hand, squeezing it. “I shall always put you before anyone, Arthur, and not lead you astray. I promise.”

“Good evening, Dee Dee, Your Grace,” her sister, and spinster sister at that, said before dipping into a curtsy.

“Dorothy, I did not expect to see you here this evening. Are you back from Bath so soon?” Deandra asked, having thought her sibling was in the country for the entirety of the Season.

“I’ve returned. Lord Ponsonby was being a bore, but now that I know you are enjoying the Season and with His Grace, I

think I shall remain and enjoy this society much better,” her sister said with a smirk.

Deandra ignored her sister’s words, determined to discuss Ponsonby at another appropriate time, and turned back to Arthur. “Arthur was about to escort me home, so our little reunion will have to wait. I hope you do not mind,” she said, not wishing to go into what her sister was insinuating at the Ryder ball.

“Oh, of course. Our conversation can keep until tomorrow.”

Deandra clasped Arthur’s arm and guided him away from her sister. “Until tomorrow then, Dot.”

“I cannot wait,” she heard her sister call out from behind.

Chapter
Three

Arthur sat opposite Dee Dee and couldn't help but admire her beauty. Her long, dark locks coiled atop her head, the Coleridge diamonds adorned her neck, and pretty little pearl pins strategically placed in her hair twinkled in the street's lamplights.

He could not remember a time when he had not had Dee Dee in his life, nor did he want to imagine a period with her absent from it. He hoped that his upcoming marriage, hopefully to Lady Mabel, did not impede their friendship. He was loath to lose her.

“Do you think you'll ever marry again?” he questioned, unsure where the inquiry came from, but now that he'd asked it, he needed to know if there was someone she thought to have in her future. A look of disgust crossed her features before she shook her head, the diamonds around her neck he admired before glittering.

“No, not at all. It's not something I want, nor do I need to marry, not for status or wealth. Coleridge left me a sizable fortune upon his death, the one mercy he bestowed since there were so few in our marriage.” She paused, and he couldn't help but wonder just how bad the union had been. He knew the understanding had been arranged by her parents and the late

Lord Coleridge. Two great families who had wanted to become more powerful than anyone else if they could manage it, and they did for a time, but at the expense of their children.

“I wish you had not had to suffer through that ordeal,” he said, reaching for her hand and pulling her to sit beside him.

She came willingly, and he settled her into his arms. The contact, the embrace was so natural and common between them that when the scent of rose wafted from her hair, igniting a burning ache in his stomach that he’d never experienced before, he frowned.

“Will you not miss the conjugal relations that you had with your husband?”

She scoffed and looked up at him. Her large, blue eyes, almond-shaped, and always direct, made the ache in his stomach burn hotter.

“What marital relations, other than the ones to get me with a child? Other than those, Lord Coleridge wasn’t interested in me as a wife, or even a human being. And this is why I worry about you so, Arthur. I do not want you to have a loveless, passionless marriage. Nothing is worse than going through life knowing you have made a mistake that no one can undo.”

Of course, he understood where Dee Dee was coming from, and he did not want a marriage such as the one she had had. But surely love would come, especially if one was committed to the union, such as he would be. Lady Mabel may seem a little aloof now, but he was sure she would mature with time.

“Are you certain about the lessons? I do wish to learn, but I do not want to make you uncomfortable. I know it would be scandalous of us to interact so, even if only for lesson’s sake.”

“We will be careful, and no one will witness us. And anyway,” she said after a moment’s pause. “Who else will instruct you on the art of seducing your intended?”

He chuckled, nodding in agreement. “Touché. So tell me, what are you going to prepare me for first?” he asked, eager to start. He had always wondered what kissing Dee Dee would be like. She had the prettiest lips in London, full and wide when she smiled. There was little not to like about her, if truth be known.

“First, you must learn the art of making a woman eager to be kissed. Such as when we’re alone, just as we are now, sitting beside one another with no one else about, you ought to sit beside me, look at me longingly for an extended period, and let the lady you wish to kiss read in your eyes that is what you want to do, what you intend.”

Arthur took a fortifying breath and prepared to do as Dee Dee instructed. His stomach was in knots, and his heart raced for what he was about to do. Never before had he kissed a woman, and certainly not one who knew how to be kissed. He doubted the late Coleridge would not have participated in such a pastime with his wife. Even if they were not a love match, there would be no man in London who did not lust after the delectable Lady Coleridge.

She clasped his hand and brought it to her face. He cradled her cheek, the butterflies in his stomach soared, and nerves almost got the better of him.

“Now, look at me as if you want to kiss me, Arthur.”

Not a hard proposition. Was he really about to kiss his closest and most-loved friend? A woman he had once thought could be a potential wife before she became betrothed to another? He met her eyes and could not glance away.

His hand slipped to cup her chin, and he heard her startled intake of breath. A good sign, he hoped. His attention dipped to her lips, pouty and open from her gasp, and he lowered his head, taking heed to slow his progress. Common sense told him to tread lightly and with consideration in this situation.

But a breath from her lips, the scent of wine and her sweet perfume of lilies filled his senses, and he lost all governance of his faculties. Damn, she was pretty and his to kiss as much and for as long as she wished to continue the lessons.

The moment their lips touched, he realized the mistake they both had made partaking in such a game, such lessons. Anyone who kissed Dee Dee would never wish to kiss another. Ever again.

Her mouth parted willingly, letting him kiss her soundly. Their tongues tangled, and their breaths became one. He clasped her face with his hands, bending her to his desire, kissing her with all the longing that years of being chaste had built up within him.

She did not pull away, far from it. Her hands reached and entangled in his hair, drawing him against her in a way that made his cock stand on end and pulsate. The image of them in a bedroom, atop his bed, making love filled his mind, and he knew that if they were to keep kissing, if he allowed the lessons to continue, that was where they would end.

But could he stop the inevitable?

Hell no.

She was a rich widow, protected by a title and money. He was unmarried and would be hurting no one if they were discreet.

The moment the idea materialized in his mind, he cast it aside. They could not do that, he would not ask that of his friend. It was wrong.

But nor could he deny how right it felt with Dee Dee in his arms.

Her body against his gave him a sense of her breasts. They were full and soft and squashed against his chest. His hands moved to clasp her waist, holding her against him.

She did not draw away, her little mew of delight drove him on, made him eager to please her, give her what she wanted.

Was it him?

Somehow between kissing and holding Dee Dee, she moved, almost straddling his leg. He clasped her ass, pressing her against his thigh, and she moaned. The sound nearly undid him, as much as the feel of her rubbing his leg most seductively.

“Tell me that you feel pleasure? What we’re doing is what you would suggest I do to the lady of my choosing?” he asked, desperate to please her, offering her what she would suggest he show to another.

She wrenched from the kiss, leaving him bereft. Her eyes widened as if startled by the situation and position they now found themselves. He did not mind the location of their bodies, but by the blush that burned her cheeks, she was not of the same opinion.

Dee Dee scrambled off his lap and sat as still as a marble statue, her gaze focused ahead. “That’ll be all for tonight’s lesson, Arthur,” she said, her breath labored. “You did well regarding your first kiss.”

The carriage rolled to a stop before her town house, and before he could respond, she had fled the vehicle, not even waiting for her footman to open the door or lower the step.

“Goodnight,” he called after her to no reply but for the closing door of her home.

Arthur sat back in the squabs and ordered the carriage home, pleased by his abilities. For anyone who could discombobulate, Dee Dee, as he had this evening, would have no problems seducing an eager debutante hunting for a husband.

Chapter
Four

Deandra slammed the door on the vision of Arthur, ruffled and utterly desirable after their kiss in the carriage. What had she been thinking, agreeing to help him? He was supposed to have kissed her with a degree of ineptitude, but instead, he had thrown her world into a spin. Kissing her with such skill, such a seductive air, that she had lost all ability to think straight or to remember she was kissing her best friend.

She balked, knowing she had practically thrown herself at him, taking what he offered, giving life back to her romantically starved self that craved the touch and contact of another man, anyone who was not her late husband.

However would she face him come tomorrow?

Deandra strode into her library and skidded to a stop at the sight of her sister asleep on the settee. A book lay slumped upon her breast and partially covered her mouth.

“Dorothy,” she said, kneeling beside her and shaking her shoulder. “Dorothy, wake up. You’ve fallen asleep on my settee.”

Her sister mumbled something about Lord’s Ponsonby before her eyes fluttered open, and comprehension flooded her sister’s face. “Oh, Dee Dee, you’re home. I waited for hours.” Sitting up caused her book to fall to the floor with a thump.

Deandra picked it up and placed it on the small table before them. “I do not think it’s been hours. I only left the ball half an hour ago, and you were still there. Did you follow me to be here so quickly and fall asleep? Are you well? It’s not like you to collapse as you have without something wrong with your health.”

“Oh no,” her sister said, smiling. “I ... that is, my evening before I was out late, and I’m still not caught up on my sleep. But yes, I saw you leave, and since the ball was a bit of a bore, I requested my carriage to come here for a cup of tea, only to find you were not home. Where have you been?” Dorothy asked, her piercing blue eyes brooking no lie, not that Deandra could think of one.

She decided someone needed to hear her sordid tale and help guide her out of the predicament she had found herself. Not that she would usually confide in her sister, she had been known to meddle, but nor could she keep what happened bottled up inside. “You know how Arthur and I have been friends since childhood? He’s my best friend, and I love him dearly.”

“Of course,” Dorothy said, a small smile playing about her lips. “Does not everyone in the *ton* know that you two adore each other but will not act on devotion?”

“Act on it?” Deandra gasped, having never heard this rumor before. “What do you mean, ‘act on it’? We’re childhood friends. There is no need to act on anything.”

Her sister scoffed and shook her head. “All I’m saying is that he looks at you as if the sun and the moon shine out of your *derrière*, and you cherish him. More than you ever did your husband, which society has not ignored.”

“Well,” she fumbled, trying to find the words. “Of course, I did not look at Lord Coleridge the same way as I do Arthur. My marriage, if you have not forgotten, was arranged by our parents, against my will, and his for that matter. It did not make for happy nuptials or a life.”

“Maybe you ought to look to the duke and have a life with him. I think you could be happy with His Grace, Dee Dee.”

“I could never,” she said, even though the idea, she had to admit, had been something she had thought herself in the dead of night when she was alone and missing someone to talk to, to love with her body, to share her hopes for the future long taken from her.

“Of course, you could. Rumor has it he’s finally ready to settle down and marry, but as we all know, he’s the least romantic man in London. Do you even suppose he knows how to talk to a woman? Other than you, he seems to struggle to form a sentence without blundering some part of it.”

“Do not be so mean to Arthur. He’s shy, nothing more. And believe me, he’s quite capable of seducing a woman.”

Her sister’s mouth gaped, and quick with her wit, she did not miss the meaning behind Deandra’s words. “Oh ho ho, sister, what do you mean by that? Did something happen between you both? Was it this evening when you left with him?”

Deandra stood and poured herself a hefty glass of whisky from the crystal decanter. “I’ve made a wretched mistake, and I do not know how to fix it,” she admitted, downing the amber liquid quicker than she ought, making her head spin more than it did with Arthur in the carriage.

“What did you do, Dee Dee? Did you kiss the duke?”

She nodded without turning to her sister, unable to face her just yet. “I agreed to help him win the hand of Lady Mabel Ryder.”

“That cold fish?” Dorothy spat. “He would be as miserable as you were with Lord Coleridge should he marry her. I hope you are not in earnest in saying such things. It would be best if you married the duke and no one else. Neither of you will be happy if you’re not together, everyone knows this, and most do not understand how you both seem oblivious to the notion that you’re made for each other.”

Deandra turned and gaped at her sister. “That cannot be true. I will have you know,” she continued, needing a moment to think straight. “Men and women can be friends, you know. The *ton* needs to understand that when a man and woman form a friendship, it does not always mean that they’re in love or suited to one another for the marriage act.”

“Except in the case of you and the duke, you are. Why can you not see that, sister?”

“Arthur is my friend. I could never marry him.” Deandra thought about her words, and yet, after their kiss, maybe she could and did see him in a romantic light. How odd that she had never done so before this evening, but that kiss changed everything.

She had never been so hungry for another person’s touch, wanted them with such a need that it had almost made her reach out, take his hand, and place it on her breast, or other places she could not voice.

Even now, she burned with a desire for him to be near her again. However would she act indifferent after this evening and what transpired in the carriage?

“What were his kisses like? I cannot help but think as much as he appears to be a man who had not one speck of a clue on how to seduce a woman, he achieved it well and truly with you.”

Deandra poured herself another whisky and downed it as quickly as the first. “His kiss ... oh dear, however could I describe it to give it the worth that it deserves.” She closed her eyes, remembering every delicious moment of her time in his arms. “The kiss started like any other, slow, tentative, coaxing, but something happened, hastier than I thought it would, and one moment I was guiding him, giving him tutelage on how to kiss, and then he did not need it anymore. He kissed me with such an expert ability that I lost myself. I forgot myself, more like, and the kiss morphed into something hungry, desperate, and all too consuming that I did not know where I was or who I was with.

“All I knew was that I wanted Arthur with every ounce of myself. I threw myself into his arms, and he accepted with far too much eagerness to quell my wayward thoughts. We lost ourselves within each other’s arms, did things ...” she said, remembering how she all but straddled him, rocking against him, wanting release like a woman starved of touch. “Wicked things that no unmarried woman ought, and I cannot take it back. Not that I wish to, if I’m being honest; if anything, I think I want to kiss him again. I want to teach him far more than we did tonight.”

“But you do not wish to marry him?” Dorothy asked, a smirk on her lips. “Oh dear sister, if you continue this game, that is where you shall end. Do not let the duke marry another. He has always been yours; you must win his love and make him see that the woman he wants has always been before him, not across the room in the form of the debutante Mabel.”

Deandra took in her sister's words, knowing they were true but understanding they were also a dream that would never come to fruition. "Even if I wanted to move our friendship to lovers, it is impossible. He desires children, Dorothy. And that is something I cannot give him."

Chapter
Five

Awkward was not a word that Deandra would normally associate when around Arthur, but the following evening at the Smither's ball, that was precisely how she felt. Not that she was transferring that emotion outwardly or letting it get the better of her features, but her stomach was in knots, and her heart raced each time Arthur bent down and spoke to her.

Was he not at all discombobulated as she was after their kiss last evening? Or had he thought that this was what his lessons would entail the whole time he was kissing her? That such a kiss was what he ought to do with Lady Mabel when the time came to entice her to be his bride.

Oh dear Lord, whatever would she do. However would she tell him that what had transpired between them had not been typical at all. Had, in fact, been quite the opposite. It had been transpiring, life-changing, enlightening like nothing had been before in her nine and twenty years.

Not that Arthur would know, of course. A man who had yet to sleep with a woman or kiss one up until their shared embrace would not know that their shared passion had been extraordinary.

"I've been thinking about what you suggested the other evening about not appearing so desperate for Lady Mabel's

attention. I thought this evening I may try dancing with other women to see if that helps with my suit.”

His words pulled Deandra from her musings, and sipping her drink she almost dripped some of the wine down her chin. “Oh, of course, Your Grace. I think that would be best,” she said, hoping her voice did not sound as brittle as it felt.

Their kiss must not have affected him at all. Not if he was still so keen on marrying Lady Mabel.

He threw her a confident smile and excused himself. Deandra watched as it did not take him long to find a willing partner and escort her onto the ballroom floor. She took in the room, the people milling about the floor, and happened upon Lady Mabel, but she was not watching the duke. Instead, her glare was centered on Deandra, her mouth missing her normal smile but pulled tight into a displeased pout.

Did the lady suspect something more between her and the duke? Impossible, since no one knew of their agreement or what had happened in the carriage. Perhaps the young lady disapproved of their friendship. If the duke should marry Lady Mabel, Deandra hoped it would not affect their friendship, but then she supposed it would in the end. He would put his wife’s needs first, and if Lady Mabel did not like their close relationship, Deandra would soon be required to find alternate friends to enjoy her nights out with.

But she would miss Arthur. There was not a day in her life that she could not remember them being friends. Just as her memories were filled with her sister and her growing up, so was Arthur in those. Always present, a constant and protective confidante.

Deandra moved her gaze back to Arthur and watched him dance with Lady Miller, recently married to a mutual friend

and perhaps not who Deandra would have chosen him to dance with. Not if he intended to make Lady Mabel jealous. The poor, unknowing soul really was clueless sometimes.

“I see everything seems to be back to rights between you and the duke. I’ve been watching you, and he appears his usual, jovial self.”

“Yes,” Deandra replied to her sister, who’d joined her. “He does not seem affected at all by what happened in the carriage. I think it is best that I, too, forget and stop thinking more about what transpired or reading further into the situation than I need to.”

“Maybe it’s a front on his behalf. Maybe he is hiding his true feelings also. I know you are,” her sister blurted, raising one skeptical eyebrow.

“I think because I’ve been married and I’m a woman, I see and feel things that I should not. Women are not like men, I suppose, who can slake their lust and not have any emotional attachment.”

“Well, you may not, but others may disagree with your notion.”

Deandra cast a sharp look at her sister and, about to ask what she meant, was interrupted by the duke.

“Dorothy, how good to see you. Would you like to dance the minuet with me? We have not had a turn about the floor for some time.”

Dorothy dipped into a pretty curtsy, far too low for Deandra’s liking, and agreed with a mischievous light in her eyes. “Why, that would be lovely, Your Grace. I should enjoy that immensely.”

Deandra could not voice a word of disapproval. How could she? Dorothy was her sister, and Arthur her friend. There was nothing wrong with them dancing. Except for the fact her sister liked to meddle, and most especially now, she knew more history sat between the duke and herself than it ever had before.

Arthur smiled down at Dorothy and could see the resemblance to her sister. But unlike the sight of Dee Dee, Dorothy did not cause a knot of hunger in him simply from gazing upon her.

Of course, he cared for Dorothy and had known her too since childhood, but it had always been different with Dee Dee.

More so than ever after their kiss last night.

This evening it had taken every ounce of his ability to keep his cool, to appear disaffected and indifferent to what occurred in the carriage, but even he knew, as naïve as he was and untutored, that their kiss had been anything but ordinary.

Extraordinary came to mind.

Having Dee Dee in his arms, his to kiss, to devour, just as he had long wondered about, had been a dream come to fruition. Not that his plan to learn how to court a woman, woo her to be in favor of his suit, had been a way for him to kiss his lifelong friend. But now that he had, little else occupied his mind.

Last evening, when he had returned home, his body had lain awake for hours, burning, hungering for a release he did not want to find on his own. He wanted Dee Dee's hands on

him, wanted her lips drawing him into a world of pleasure, and nothing else would do.

“Are you well, Your Grace? You appear a little flushed,” Dorothy said, a small, knowing grin on her lips, lips so similar to Dee Dee’s but perhaps a little less full.

“The room is quite warm, do you not agree? I think I shall take the air afterward or partake in wine.” Satisfied he had answered her question without giving his true thoughts away, he swept her into a turn and wracked his brain for what else they could speak of.

“You do not fool me, Your Grace. You are preoccupied. Care to tell me who fills your every thought?”

He fumbled for words, hoping Dee Dee had yet to tell Dorothy of their agreement. He would never live down the embarrassment. “I assure you, nothing but our dance occupies my thoughts and hope that I do not tread on your pretty slippered feet.”

“Liar.” She chuckled. “But I shall allow you to fool me with your words, and I shall drop the subject, but know this, Your Grace. Do not make the mistake of deceiving yourself regarding anything you want in this life. Do not settle just because you think you must due to your station.”

He met Dorothy’s eyes and nodded, hoping he would never do so. But then, was he not doing so by wishing to court Lady Mabel? A woman who had yet to appear more interested in him than any other gentleman present. Yes, she had a substantial dowry, was beautiful, and from nobility, but was that what he wanted? Was having the perfect duchess on parchment worth it when married to her for the rest of his life? Without friendship, affection ... love even, could a marriage sustain a lifetime?

Lady Mabel was not as true or as beautiful, inside and out, as Dee Dee, who stood at the side of the room, watching him dance with her sister.

She smiled across the sea of heads, and the gesture thumped him in the gut like a punch at Gentleman Jackson's.

Dear God in heaven, how could he make Dee Dee see that maybe he was more than a friend to her? That they could be so much happier together than apart.

Chapter

Six

Arthur returned to Dee Dee after his dance with Dorothy. She stood alone, a position he had become accustomed to seeing her occupy the last few years since becoming a widow. He schooled his features, hoping that his intruding, discombobulated thoughts did not appear on his expression. He did not want to alarm her, nor want her to think that he had transferred his thoughts of marriage to her instead of Lady Mabel after one kiss.

Which, if he were being truthful with himself, was exactly what he had done.

A fickle man he was not, or a man who was versed in changing his mind on a whim. But that kiss ...

Dear Lord in Heaven, even he knew that her teaching of such a gesture was not ordinary or commonplace. It had rocked him to his core, sent his wits spiraling, and caused his cock to remain hard the rest of the evening.

He wanted her in his bed. His best friend in all the world. A woman who had married the wrong man many years ago and now refused to consider the union again. However would he gain her as his duchess? Or better yet, convince her his feelings were honest and true.

“Did you enjoy your dance?” she asked without meeting his eyes.

He took the opportunity to observe her, drink in her beauty, and store it in his memory forever. “Your sister is always amusing and insightful. I enjoyed the dance very much.”

“Let us hope that Lady Mabel did not,” she mentioned, and he frowned, not caring if the young debutante was put out by his dancing with anyone at the ball. In truth, Lady Mabel was vain and aware of her popularity within the *ton*. It did not make for a woman who was empathetic or graceful to those less fortunate than herself.

Dee Dee was right in that opinion. Just because Lady Mabel was perfect on parchment did not make her ideal for him.

“Yes, let us hope,” he agreed so that he did not let on that his position had changed. “What else would you suggest you teach me, Dee Dee? Surely there is more to your lessons that I ought to know.”

Her eyes widened as she stared up at him like a fox being chased by a hound. “Well, I think,” she answered in a whisper, “that you’re well-versed in kissing, I do not think there is much more I can teach you there.”

Pride filled him, and he could not wipe the grin from his lips. “Are you telling me that I’m a good kisser?” he asked, his tone teasing.

Her cheeks brightened to a rosy hue, and he chuckled. “You are, are you not? Tell me the kiss we shared last evening made your head swim as much as mine.” He had not thought to convey to her that his soul had practically left his human

form after their kiss, but it had. She had pitched his world off its axis, and there was no hiding that fact.

She bit her lip, and he almost groaned, wanting to retake those sweet lips and make her senseless with desire.

“It was just a kiss, Arthur. Do not make more of it than is necessary.”

Her words tampered his hope somewhat, but he would not be swayed, not when she would not meet his eyes. Was she trying to fool him as well as herself? He could persuade her to his way of thinking. Get her to see that as friends, it made perfect sense that they would make an excellent partnership as husband and wife.

“Of course,” he agreed, “and therefore, more tutelage will be necessary, yes?” He needed to hear her say that they could continue his lessons. He could not go another day without kissing her again. As it was, it was already too many hours.

She took a fortifying breath which, God help his soul, made her breasts push against her empire silk gown and give him a delightful view of her bosom. Breasts that last night had been pressing against his chest, teasing him unmercifully. Dee Dee did not know how desirable she was or how many men turned to ogle and admire her whenever she passed them by.

But Arthur noticed, far too often this evening alone, and he did not like it one iota.

“I suppose the next lesson would depend on how far you wish your lessons to go. I’m not a maid and have been married before, so the act of bedding a man does not frighten me as it would a debutante. But you’re still innocent, and I fear that if we continue these lessons, you may not be by the time you’re married.”

He could only hope that was the case, not that it mattered, for he was now determined to marry her and no one else. “Then what would you suggest?”

“Well, mayhap we could waltz this evening, and during the dance, I shall instruct you on how you could seduce a woman without any heavy petting or kissing such as last evening.”

He thought over her suggestion a moment. Was such a way possible? He shrugged, happy to oblige and see what she meant. “I shall do whatever the master tells me.”

She scoffed. “Very good, now go and mingle with the *ton*, do not monopolize my time, you have a lady to make jealous and others to chase you until you declare yourself. Standing beside your widowed best friend will not score you points with the debutantes.”

He bowed and did as she asked, not that he cared what the debutantes or Lady Mabel thought of his friendship with Dee Dee or how much time they spent together. For an hour or so, he joined conversations about the rooms, even sat down in the gaming room, and had a game of whist. But Dee Dee was never far from his thoughts, and not often out of sight.

Before long, the first notes of a waltz floated through the room, and he made his way toward Dee Dee, holding out his hand and bowing before her. She clasped his hand, and a bolt of energy sizzled up his arm and through his body.

Would it always be like this between them, this fire and need that he had never dreamed of, especially with his oldest and most-loved friend?

He did not think he could be more fortunate or desperate to make her his.

Deandra all but floated into Arthur's arms as the waltz began. He was tall for a man with broad shoulders. A fine specimen of a gentleman who enjoyed the outdoors and horse riding. A man that, after one kiss, she knew would be as good in bed as he was at everything else.

His hand settled against her waist, his fingers tightening, flexing against her flesh through the silk of her gown, and she fought not to shiver. But it was no use; his mere proximity to her left her reeling. Her mind at sixes and sevens.

She looked up and met his gaze and could not glance away. His deep-blue, stormy eyes watched her with a raptness she had never seen. Deandra swallowed her nerves, hoping she would not misstep and give away how thrown she was by what was happening between them.

After all, she was supposed to be the master of seduction. Be the one teaching him how to go about getting a wife. Not have him seduce her, only to leave her to marry another, longing for a future that she could only dream about.

“How is this?” he asked, pulling her closer still.

The hem of her gown brushed his Hessions, her breasts but a breath from his chest. They were too close by society's standards, anyone would know that, but the crush of dancers on the floor meant very few would notice ... this time.

“Adequate.” Her fingers moved farther on his shoulder, and she could not help but take the opportunity to feel the corded muscles in his back as they flexed during the dance. Warmth pooled at her core, and she had the urge to throw herself at his head, having him hold her as he had last evening and give her what she wanted.

Release.

His hand moved from her waist to her back, his touch too familiar as his thumb brushed her spine. “I’ve never noticed before, and to my detriment, but you dance like a queen and are as beautiful this evening as I’ve ever known you.”

Deandra fought not to sigh at his delightful words. The man was far too accomplished for his own good. How had he become so well-versed in seduction with no prior training? It would not take much for any woman being held in his arms to become a puddle of liquid at his feet.

“You flatter, but it is not me you need to seduce Arthur,” she replied, her tone light and teasing, wanting to make a jest out of his words instead of believing them. Allowing herself to be carried away by them.

There was no future for her with him. He wanted things in life she could not give him, even if she desperately wanted to.

“But for this to work, I’m to seduce you before anyone else.” He paused, dipping his head far too close for propriety. “Is it working, my darling Dee Dee?”

Her gaze, damn herself, dipped to his lips, and she nodded without thinking. “You are a master already.”

Chapter
Seven

Arthur did not think he could control the pent-up desire that rioted within him a moment longer. Thankfully the waltz came to an end, and without thought as to who may be watching him and Dee Dee, he dragged her off the dance floor and through a nearby door, away from the crushing throng of guests.

He closed the door, and the muffled sounds of the ball floated through into the space, but he only had one purpose, one thing that he needed to do before worrying about who surrounded them.

“Arthur, what are you ...”

He didn't give Dee Dee a chance to finish her question before his lips slammed against hers. For a moment, she stilled in his arms before her fingers spiked through his hair, pulling him against her with a wantonness that roused him further.

He walked her backward until her back hit the wall. Their mouths fused. The kiss was heavy, wet, and demanding, everything new and wonderful, a replay of last night when he'd first kissed the woman in his arms.

Without heed of where they were or who could come across them, he stooped to clasp her gown, needing to feel her, wanting to touch her in the most private way a woman could

be touched. She did not flinch from his hand running along her silk-stockinged leg.

Oh no, she did not, but perhaps she ought to have.

“Arthur, touch me. Feel me,” she urged him, clasping his hand and lifting it higher on her person.

He did as she asked, needing to learn every part of her as much as she appeared to want him to. His fingers brushed against her pantalets. He cupped her mons through the slit in the fabric, sliding his fingers between her wet core, rubbing, teasing her flesh.

The guttural sound of liberation she made would be one he would never forget. “Yes, Arthur, like that,” she purred in his ear, her fingers clawing against his back, holding him close.

His cock spiked and ached, release imminent, but he could not take her here. Not this close to society. As it was, anyone could come through the door and catch them in the most compromising position of his life.

Never had he touched a woman so intimately, and that it was his friend, his Dee Dee, that writhed, begged, ached, and undulated in his arms at his touch made the moment the most memorable and delightful of his existence.

“Is this how I’ll make you come?” he asked, sliding his fingers against her wet core, the lubrication making his contact easy.

“Yes, yes, just like this.” Her breathless answer spurred him on, and at that moment, even should they be caught, he would continue. Needing to see her shatter in his arms, to find release.

Her hand dipped down his chest and cupped his balls, her palm pressing against his cock. He moaned, pushed into her

hold, and undulated like a man starved of touch.

“I want you to feel as I do,” she declared.

He nodded, closing his eyes and savoring the moment her nimble fingers ripped his falls open, and her hand clasped his cock, stroking him, pulling him toward a release in the middle of a shared passageway.

“I want to fuck you,” he admitted, hoping she did not shy away from the truth becoming clearer each moment they were alone.

She bit her lip, her hips rocking into his hand. With instinct, he slipped a finger into her warm core. “Another, I need more, Arthur,” she begged him, lifting her leg against his hip to give him more access to her.

He did as she beseeched. It would be impossible not to do as she asked. He would do anything she wished, so lost in her arms was he.

His balls hardened as she pulled him toward discharge, her hand firm but gentle.

The door handle at their side rattled, and he ripped away from her and stole into a nearby room, leaving Dee Dee alone in the passage.

He stood in the darkness, his cock upright and out of his breeches. Thankfully the room was dark and empty, even though he could hear Dee Dee quickly right her clothing before a feminine voice joined hers in the passageway.

“Oh, Lady Coleridge, I thought I saw you steal away in here. I wanted to ensure you were not lost. The retiring room is out through the entranceway passage, not this one,” a woman stated, her voice innocent, but a note of censure

coursed through her airy tone as if she suspected Dee Dee was up to something.

Which, of course, they were. In fact, should have Dee Dee allowed it, he was certain he would have lifted her skirts and impaled her on his cock and let her ride him, ride them both, to release right there in the passage.

“Lady Pitt,” he heard Dee Dee answer, her tone calm and not at all breathless, as he experienced right at this moment.

He clasped his cock, the sound of Dee Dee making it ache and thrum, close to release. Arthur stepped deeper into the room, allowing the darkness to swallow him before he righted his clothes and forced his dick back where it would not be on public display.

They had been so close to being caught. He supposed one consolation to being seen together in such a position would mean marriage, whether Dee Dee wished it or not.

“Thank you, I am aware, I was merely taking a moment to myself. The waltz was more taxing than I thought.”

“Perhaps your dance partner ought to fetch you a glass of wine,” he heard Lady Mabel’s voice break into the conversation, and he realized there was more than one woman who had come to see what Dee Dee and he were up to. Had they seen him steal her away to the passageway and hoped to catch them in a compromising position?

If only they knew how close they had come to doing so ...

Knowing that Lady Mabel had come seeking them out left a sour taste in his mouth regarding his previous choice of bride. Was she a scheming, troublemaking miss who had nothing better to do than try to ruin other people’s reputations? No one else would do now that he’d been with Dee Dee. He

would marry her and convince her he would not be like her departed husband. That he could make her happy, give her children, and everything she ever hoped for in life.

“The Duke of Beaufort, I believe he has departed the ball and therefore could not fetch me a beverage, but I shall mention his lapse of gentlemanly behavior the next time I see him,” Dee Dee answered Lady Mabel. “I thank you for your concern, however, and I believe I’m ready to return to the ball.”

Arthur heard their slippers move along the stone floor before the door to the ballroom closed, muffling the sound of the entertainment beyond once again.

He supposed now that Dee Dee had stated he had already left, he better do just that and sneak away without being seen. Arthur quickly checked his attire, ensured his cravat was in place, and his falls were buttoned before striding from the room and heading for another that would allow him into the gardens. Best to avoid the entrance hall, just in case.

But come tomorrow, he would call on Dee Dee first thing, speak to her, and promise her everything if only she would agree to be his wife. The fire between them was too scorching to ignore and live without, and he would not. He had spent enough years alone, and so too had she.

It was time they were happy, and he could not see them any happier unless they were together. He had watched her marry before, he would not do so again.

Chapter
Eight

As planned, Arthur left his town house on Grosvenor Square and rode toward Dee Dee's home, determined to discuss what was happening between them and ensure their future was together and not apart as it had been up to this Season.

His horse trotted onto Curzon Street and he pulled his mount up at the sight of Dee Dee cantering out of the mews at the back of her home. He frowned and called out her name, but this far away and with the noise of early-morning coal carts and street cleaners going about their business, she did not hear.

Not deterred, he followed and was soon alarmed by the direction of her travel and the hastiness of it since she seemed to be heading out of the city through areas where no lady ought to ride alone without a chaperone or armed carriage driver.

What on earth was she about?

“Dee Dee?” he called again. Something about her determination and severe expression told him that wherever she was going, she wanted to leave without fuss or warning. “Lady Coleridge, wait.”

She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes widening at his presence before pulling her mount to a stop. “Your Grace? What ... what on earth are you doing? Are you following me?” she asked in an accusatory tone, and not one he was used to her speaking to him with.

He pulled his horse up beside hers, shaking his head. “Of course not. I was coming to call on you this morning and watched you leave the mews. You were alone, and I wanted to speak to you, so I followed.”

She sighed and pushed her mount forward, her pursed lips telling him she was far from pleased. “You ought not to have. I do not need a man protecting me from assailants who do not exist in Mayfair.”

“Ah, but you’re no longer in Mayfair. You do realize you’re on the road leading out of London.”

“Of course, I know,” she all but bit out. “If you must know, I’m heading to Loxley Hall in Cambridgeshire.”

“Lord Coleridge’s country estate? On horseback? Where is your carriage? Why are you leaving London without a by-your-leave, I should mention.”

She shook her head, stubbornly looking ahead and not at him. “Because I have to go. Last evening,” she started, a blush stealing across her cheeks before she glared at him. “We should not have done what we did. Not just because we’re friends and I agreed to help you learn the ways of flirtation for another lady, but because we could have been caught. We’re far too close to having been ruined for my liking.”

“But we were not caught, Dee Dee. There is no harm done, and you cannot ride a horse all the way to Cambridgeshire.

That is too far, even for a competent horsewoman such as yourself.”

“You ride to Surrey and no one ever says a word about it. Why should it be different for me? Are you saying I cannot do so because I’m a woman?”

Arthur raised his hands in surrender, not wishing to die on that particular hill today, there were other, more critical, and impertinent matters to discuss. “Of course not, but it will not be an easy journey. I’m just concerned for you, that is all.”

“You need not be. I intend to stay the night at the Hogs Breath Inn.”

“But that is ten miles out of London.” A rumbling from the sky appeared at that moment, and Arthur glanced toward the heavens and cringed at the darkening atmosphere. “It’s going to rain, and with some degree of force, I fear. We ought to turn back to London. We may get a little wet, but we should be able to dry off without too much trouble if we go no farther now.”

“I will do no such thing. I’m for Loxley Hall, and that is where I’ll continue, thank you very much, Your Grace. You’re more than welcome to return to London.” As headstrong as she was, she kicked her mount forward, and, taking a deep, calming breath of patience that Arthur needed right at this moment, he followed.

He would not leave her to travel the north road alone. If only he had brought his penknife, flintlock, or packed attire for a night or two away from London. He studied the determined set of Dee Dee’s shoulders and her visage that brooked no argument and couldn’t help but debate why she was fleeing London at all.

The Season had not long started, and it was too early to leave town. No, she was running away, possibly because of him and what had happened. They rode for several miles before he could not stand the silence a moment longer. “My sincerest apologies for last evening. My emotions got the better of me, Dee Dee. I shall not molest you in such a way again should you just come back to town with me and not carry on in this ridiculous farce.”

“What is ridiculous was what happened between us. I should never have allowed myself to teach you anything, you seem quite capable of flirting and learning the art of lovemaking without any of my input. We should have kept our friendship as it was, platonic, and not confuse it as we have. I can offer you nothing, and do not forget you wish to marry another. The whole situation is outrageous.”

No, he would not hear such words, not anymore. So much had changed between them, and she needed to realize that as much as he had. “That is why I came to see you this morning. I wanted to talk about ...”

The heavens chose that moment to open upon them, and with torrential force, the rain fell. Within minutes, their clothes hung on them, soaked and heavy, dripping with water. If that were not bad enough, along with the rainstorm came a fierce wind as chilled as the air was from the Artic Circle’s icy caps.

“We’re closer to the Hogs Breath Inn, than London. I do not wish to speak again about what happened at Lady Pitt’s ball. We should count ourselves fortunate we were not caught,” she repeated, her nose turning red and her lips blue.

“I will not let you continue on your own. I’m coming with you, whether you want me to or not,” he said, determined to push through her anger and get her to see sense. Have her

realize that he did not want Lady Mabel, but her. And he would, as soon as they were out of this blasted tempest.

Deandra wanted to scream. All she had wanted was to escape London and all the complications she had added to her life since arriving for the Season. How could she have allowed herself to become involved with Arthur's absurd scheme?

Her riding gown clung to her, soaked down to her shift and stays, and a shiver stole over her, along with a sense of unease that she should not have been so hasty and should have waited for the carriage instead of traveling by horseback.

Not that she would admit to such foolishness, and certainly not in front of Arthur, who would never let her forget her folly. "Do you realize how close we came to being forced to marry? The idea sickens me," she barked at him, even though she had just said she did not wish to speak of their kiss. But when her mind refused to stop churning the memory, what option did she have?

"Would marriage to me be so horrendous, Dee Dee?" he asked. The question sent a spike of warmth through her chest, as short-lived as it was.

"I should imagine I could stomach it well enough, but it would not be long until you could not. I'm not suited to marriage and have endured one that was far from pleasant, as you well know. I do not wish to be beholden to another again." Not to mention she could not give Arthur children, and as the Duke of Beaufort, he required an heir to continue the line. Should she marry him and be barren as she suspected she was, he would never become a father, and she could not do that to him, no matter how much the thought of being his wife drew her like a moth to a flame.

“Do you not think that is up to me to decide? You must admit, what has occurred between us these past days has been marvelous and all-consuming. I do not think I could imagine being with anyone else but you, Dee Dee.”

“Well, you must,” she stated, shivering and pushing her mount into a canter, needing to get to the inn before she froze in the saddle. Her bonnet sat limp about her face, and steam came out of her horse’s nostrils with each breath.

“We will discuss the situation further at the inn, but come,” he urged. “Push your mount harder still, or we’ll both be ill if not on death’s door by the time we arrive.”

Deandra did as he advised, regretting her choice tenfold now and hoping the inn’s welcoming lights soon materialize before them, especially when the weather looked as determined to remain near her as Arthur.

Chapter
Nine

The rainstorm became torrential and would not relent. By the time the inn came into view, Arthur was seriously concerned for Dee Dee. Even after he had slipped his coat about her shoulders many miles before, her pale features and trembling were getting worse.

A young stable lad ran out to greet them, and Arthur dismounted, stumbling himself when his cold legs refused to work correctly. He righted himself and went to Dee Dee. She reached for him without dispute, and he helped her from her horse, lifting her into his arms when she started to sink to the muddy ground. The innkeeper came out to greet them, his warm smile fading when he noticed their condition.

“Your best room and hot bath if you please, and quickly,” Arthur ordered, entering the inn which was quiet, save for two laborers who sat at the bar, a tankard of ale in their hands.

“Of course, my lord.”

“Beaufort, and I shall pay you handsomely if you expedite the bath and have the room warmed posthaste.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Right away.” The innkeeper shouted orders, and soon, two maids and a male worker were hurrying up and down the stairs, carrying wood and a bath.

Arthur followed them upstairs, the innkeeper not far behind, asking if he would like a hot meal and mulled wine.

“Yes, and please bring them up directly.” Arthur sat Dee Dee before the roaring fire and reached for a nearby drying cloth. She took it, her fingers blue, and wiped her face. He bit back his annoyance at her for being so stubborn as not to have turned back to London before the storm.

What if she caught a chill or some horrid ague? He would never forgive himself if anything happened to her, and he had not been demanding enough for her to listen to reason.

Bucket after bucket of hot, steaming water filled the sizable tub, and he dipped his hand within it and found it the perfect temperature. The room was soon warm, and food was delivered as promised.

“Will there be anything else, Your Grace?” a young maid asked at the door.

“No, we shall manage from here, thank you for your assistance.”

She nodded and closed the door. Arthur went and locked it immediately and then strode back to Dee Dee. “Right, stand, and let us get you out of this gown. You need to warm up, and quickly. A bath will assist with that.”

“I cannot bathe with you in the room,” she said aghast, but her attempt to be intimidating failed by her chattering teeth.

“You will because you have no choice. Now turn around so I can undo your buttons. I will not ogle you,” he lied, knowing he would probably sneak a look at her delectable form a time or two before the night was over.

She huffed out an annoyed breath but did as he asked.

It took them several minutes to discard her gown and stockings, ruined boots, and a corset that was as wet as if it had been laundered. She stood with her back to him in nothing but her shift, and the outline of the globes of her bottom teased him before he forced himself to give her his back.

“Right, I’ve turned around, you may now get into the bath.”

He swallowed hard as he heard the shift slap down on the floorboards before sloshing water, and a welcome sigh of delight filled the room. “I’m in the tub now, Arthur, and covered enough that I do not think you could see me even if you tried,” she said.

He did not try, as much as his gaze wanted to move to where she bathed. Instead, he started to discard his clothes, hanging them close to the fire with hers. If her gown were not dry by morning, he would send a female servant to fetch her some new clothing. Surely, the small village had a modiste of some kind.

“I’m feeling better already,” she said.

He did look at her then, and he was thankful her cheeks were rosy, and the chattering of her teeth had stopped. “You will stay in that bath until you’re warmed through. I will not have you fall ill.”

He rubbed his hands, placing them closer to the fire, the chill down his back telling him he should remove his trousers and shirt.

“Arthur?” he heard her call.

He turned and met her eyes and fought not to lose his head at the sight she made. The one woman he desired above all

others, his best friend, the love of his life ... “Deandra,” he replied.

She bit her lip, and fire ignited in his soul, burning away the residual cold thrumming through his blood.

“You should probably bathe as well. I would not wish for you to succumb to the ague either.”

“I will, once you’ve concluded yours.” He turned and stared at the flames, her concern for him giving him some hope he could still win her to his side and she would be his future wife.

“No, Arthur,” he heard her state. “I do not mean later. I mean ... maybe ... you ought to join me while the water is hot.”

His gaze flew to hers, and he could see by the determined light in her eyes she meant every word she uttered. He frowned. “A bath? Together?”

She chuckled and leaned back, the sight of her breasts floating to the surface and giving a view of her nipples almost made him groan aloud.

“Of course, together,” she answered.

Arthur’s mouth dried, and before she could change her mind, he ripped the shirt from his back and shucked down his trousers, as naked as she was but without the curtain of water covering him from her view. He strode toward her, not trying to hide his cock or save her modesty.

He stepped into the water, the heat prickling his chilled skin. He sank into the tub and sighed, but before he could say a word, she was in his arms, her warm body pressing against his chest, and he was lost, heart and soul.

Deandra did not know what came over her, but watching Arthur stand by the fire, trying to warm his body after their arduous morning ride out to the inn caused a longing, an unwavering, deep love for the man whose only concern was her, to overwhelm her, and she could not push him away.

She embraced his jaw and kissed him deep and long, settling on his lap and knowing there was no other place in the world she would rather be. His hands clasped the globes of her bottom, pulling her against his rigid cock, and she moaned, wanting him with a need that surpassed common sense.

Without thinking, she clasped his manhood and guided him into her. It had been years since she had been intimate with a man, and Arthur was rigid, longer and thicker than her departed husband.

“Deandra,” he groaned as she impaled herself to the hilt. He filled her, her body thrumming with excitement and expectation. Already she could feel herself at the crux of an orgasm. She lifted herself, rocked onto him, and their moans of delight mingled through their kiss.

His arms wrapped around her back, holding her against him. He sat forward, taking her lips in a kiss as searing as the water. Their coming together was frantic, desperate, and long overdue. Water sloshed over the tub’s edges, their chilled skin burning with desire.

Not that either of them cared, their entire focus on each other and the pleasure they wrought, not just here in a bath as they made love, but in society too, as best friends.

“This will not change anything, Arthur,” she gasped, moaning when her words elicited a hard thrust into her from

him.

“This changes everything, Deandra,” he replied, using her given name in full, his eyes heavy with need and determination. “Even if I have to fuck you into submission, you will be mine.”

His words, unlike anything she had ever heard him state before, pushed her ever closer to release. Where was her meek and gentlemanly friend? The virginal duke who needed schooling? Certainly, the man who thrust into her cunny with an expertise she did not know he possessed was not who she knew like the back of her hand.

Not that she did not adore this new side of Arthur. He was magnificent and with stamina she had never encountered before. How would she adhere to her own rules when such a man was at her disposal?

No, not disposal. She could not use him so. They could have this one night, then he needed to marry a woman who would give him what he wanted. A future, children. A woman who was not her.

“That may take some time, and you have a wife to lure,” she said, reminding him.

He shook his head. “No, I do not.” He lifted her from him and stood, before reaching for her and swooping her into his arms, more water spilling about the wooden floors. Without a by-your-leave, he carried her to the bed and tossed her onto the mattress.

“You will say yes to me before morning, or you’re the worst teacher in seduction, and I know you’ll dislike having that title.”

She ground her teeth, disliking the sound of it already. Her skin thrummed in expectation as his eyes lit with determination. He clasped her ankles and wrenched her to the side of the bed, knelt before her cunny, and licked his lips.

“Now I’m going to taste you, eat your sweet quim. The time for talking is later.”

She gasped as he dipped his head, swiping between her legs with an expertise she had not taught him. “Where did you learn such a thing was possible?” she asked.

“Virtuous and virginal duke I may have been, but there are books, and my library has an extensive assortment. You know how much I liked to read,” he stated.

She slumped back on the bedding, so glad her book-loving friend found those tomes. Something told her she would enjoy what he had in store for her next.

Chapter

Ten

Deandra tasted as sweet as a sugared plum. He devoured her notch, suckled, and kissed her sweet lips until she undulated on his face, telling him what she liked without words.

She was wet, coating his mouth with her delicious nectar. He fucked her with his fingers and reveled in her squirming, her breathless cries for more.

“Oh, Arthur.” Never had a sweeter sound been heard than his name on her lips, begging him to take her, to make her come, give her what she wanted.

He stood and stroked his cock, pushing it between her wet, glistening folds, and watched as he stretched and filled her to the brim. His balls tightened, and he knew he was close to coming.

“Arthur,” she moaned again, her hands coming up to her breasts and pinching both her nipples with her thumbs and forefingers. He thrust hard, taking her, wanting her to shatter on him, to pull his release forward.

He'd never imagined a woman touching herself so intimately was possible, and seeing Deandra engaged in such a practice ripped his control from him. The feel of her, the warmth and tight core that caressed his cock with every stroke,

was a man's dream. He never wanted to do anything else in his life than make love to the woman before him.

"You're so damn sweet." He settled atop her, kissing her deeply, their tongues twisting as he pumped into her like a man without sense. Her legs wrapped about his hips, the heels of her feet digging into his back. He clasped her ass, held her still so he could go deeper, force her orgasm to rip through her.

He did not have to wait long.

"Arthur, I'm coming. Oh God, I'm coming," she screamed, her fingers biting into the skin on his shoulders.

He steadied his pace, the contractions of her release tightening about his cock. He enjoyed wringing every ounce of her pleasure before his orgasm tore through him. "Deandra," he gasped, meeting her eyes as he came. "I love you so much," he admitted, and the realization in her gaze told him she understood it was not in the friendship way they usually declared.

No. The friendship was still there, of course, but the love was far more profound and deep, everlasting and eternal.

She shook her head, a tear flowing down her cheek. "No, Arthur, you cannot. We cannot do this. We have this night and no more."

"No, you're wrong, Dee Dee. We will have this night and every night until the last breath leaves my body. I will not marry another, nor have I wanted to, not since our first kiss. You have my heart and soul, you must know this." He slipped from her and came to rest at her side. He observed her and watched as she studied the raftered ceiling.

"I was married for years and was not suitable to the union, you know this. I was miserable and ..."

“You were miserable because you did not love him. I believe you love me more than a friend, and I am not Lord Coleridge. I adore you and have always cherished the ground your slippered feet walk on. You know a marriage with me will differ from the one you had before.”

She rolled toward him, reaching up to clasp his jaw. “Arthur, I was married some years and never fell pregnant. You told me at the beginning of the Season that you require a bride and wife to procure an heir. There is a possibility that I cannot give you that, and I will not take that opportunity from you. That would be selfish of me.”

Her words caught him off guard, and he stilled, having never thought that was why she had not birthed a child with Lord Coleridge.

“You tried for a child, and nothing ever came to fruition?”

Her lips pulled into a sad smile, and his heart broke for the pain he read in her features. Had she lost children? Or never carried one at all?

“We tried, he was desperate for an heir, and I bled on time each month. Never was I late once. My courses were like clockwork, and so was Lord Coleridge’s disappointment until he was on me again, trying the next month like a grunting pig.”

Arthur pulled her into his arms, hating that she had endured so many years in such a loveless marriage. He could not imagine being forced into a union he held no desire for. “I have male cousins who are in line to the dukedom, Deandra. Let them beget the heirs if we cannot. I do not want something that does not exist to stop our happiness. Not when what I do want is alive and well, loving and beautiful, and in my arms

right now. I want you. I have always wanted you. I merely needed you to kiss me to remind me of such things.”

She grinned up at him. “You lie. You were not interested in me at all, admit it. You were determined to marry Lady Mabel, the perfect debutante, and I was merely your teacher.”

He chuckled and knew he could not lie to her. “Very well, yes, that was correct. However, the moment I kissed you in the carriage, I knew nothing would be the same for us again. I could not sleep for the need of you. I could only count down the hours until I saw you again. Please tell me that you will marry me. Tell me that I have a chance of winning you, for I cannot go another day without you being my duchess, my wife, my life.”

“But the babies, Arthur,” she stated again.

“There is a chance it could have been Lord Coleridge’s fault you could not conceive,” he said, thinking aloud.

“No, his lordship’s doctor told me the fault lay with me.”

Arthur scoffed, not believing that for a moment. “No doubt to soothe your husband’s fear that he was infertile, and not his wife. The man was always worried about his appearance and what people thought of him. Easier to lay blame elsewhere than admit to himself that he could be the issue.”

Deandra thought about Arthur’s words and, oddly enough, had never considered such a possibility when married to Lord Coleridge. Maybe it was her late husband’s difficulty and not hers. The idea sparked hope through her, and she prayed that the seed Arthur had gifted her would take root and blossom into a child of their own. Married or not.

“But if I never fall pregnant, you will not hold it against me?” She could not endure another row with a husband who shouted and screamed at her about her failings in the one thing she was supposed to do as a wife.

“Of course I will not. I hope you know me better than that to believe me capable of such cruelty. The dukedom, whether through my line or my cousin’s, is secure. But my heart will not be, not unless you’re my wife and my duchess. Nothing will make me happier than to call you mine.”

Deandra came over to him, lying partway on his chest. She studied his profile, so handsome, aristocratic, and hers. Hers from this day forward. However had she become so fortunate to have her friend, her lover, soon to be her husband? “Very well, Your Grace. I shall marry you so long as you promise to honor me every day through sickness and in health, so long as we both shall live.”

“I do,” he answered, his wicked grin making her chuckle.

“Well then, we’re already on the north road. Shall we continue and marry at Gretna?” she suggested, the idea, now that it had taken root, one that would not abate.

“I shall order my carriage from London, and we will travel directly from here as soon as it arrives, and before we return to town, there will be a new Duchess of Beaufort.”

“I shall adore having your name, Arthur. I have so long admired it.”

“I wish I could say the same for your name. However, now that I can change it to mine, it shall never be anything other than duchess ever again.”

“Promise?” she asked.

“Oh, I vow,” he stated, rolling her onto her back and sealing their pledge with a kiss that, once again, sent both their wits spiraling long into the night.

Epilogue

Two months later, London

Arthur sat up with a jolt as the sound of his wife's hurried footsteps across the bedroom floor startled him awake, along with the heaving that followed.

He threw back the bedding and started toward the privacy screen she stood behind, coming up to rub her back. "Darling, are you ill again? Do you not think it is time to call the doctor?" he asked. He tried to keep the overwhelming fear from his voice that something serious was awry with Deandra and that he could lose her so close to having just won her, but he knew he had failed miserably.

She reached out and squeezed his hand in an attempt to comfort him. "I sent a missive yesterday, and he'll be here this morning. In fact, he's probably downstairs already since we've slept later than we ought."

"Do you wish for me to ring for your maid?" He poured her a small glass of water and handed it to her.

"Yes, thank you, I shall see the doctor here. I do not feel up to getting dressed and going downstairs. Have Jane send him up if he should be waiting already."

“Very well.” Arthur did as she bade, and sure enough, Dr. Otamot was waiting downstairs and promptly came to their bedchamber to look over Deandra.

Arthur sat beside Dee Dee, not bothering to dress, merely throwing on a robe to protect the doctor’s discomfiture. But if Deandra was ill, he did not wish to leave her side.

The doctor opened his bag on the bedside cabinet after greeting them both and wishing them a good morning. “Please lie down, Your Grace, and if you’re willing, I shall inspect you.”

“Of course,” she answered, doing as the doctor bade, her hand reaching for Arthur’s. He clasped her small hand and held tight.

The doctor rubbed his hands together, apologizing to Dee Dee that they were cold, and started to press on Deandra’s body. “Any pain here?” he asked, pressing on her abdomen.

Deandra shook her head. “No, but I’ve been unwell for several days, and the illness lasts most of the day, Doctor,” she mentioned.

The doctor felt Deandra’s neck, near her shoulder blades, and then under her arms. “Any unusual lumps in the breasts?”

Deandra frowned, thinking upon the question. “No, but they’re uncomfortable and ache. Do you think there is something seriously wrong with me?” Her eyes snapped to his, and Arthur shook his head, hoping to dispel her fears. “I hoped perhaps I may be with child, but I know that cannot be the case for a previous doctor informed me I cannot have them.”

“There is nothing of concern, darling,” he answered, which she promptly ignored.

“Doctor, what do you think is wrong with me?”

The doctor continued his examination, pressing down on her abdomen toward her groin. The doctor's frown deepened, and for several minutes, he palpitated her lower stomach before he stood back and smiled.

"No, there is nothing wrong with you, Your Grace. Tell me, have you been lightheaded at times, and do certain scents and food make you nauseated?"

"Yes," she answered, agreeing to all the doctor said. "I used to love a cup of tea each morning, and now the very thought makes my stomach stir. What do you think it is?" she asked again.

Arthur sat beside Deandra on the bed, helping her sit upright when the doctor started packing his medical bag. "I think that congratulations are in order, Your Graces. You're going to be parents."

For a moment, Arthur thought he was afflicted with the same issue as Deandra as the room spun. He looked at Dee Dee and recognized the shock on her features that matched the emotions rioting within him.

"Pregnant?" they said in unison.

The doctor laughed. "Well, it is often in married couples, and I can feel the hardening of your uterus, telling me a child is growing in your womb. Along with your other conditions, sickness in the morning, sore breasts, aversion to certain foods and scents, yes, I'm certain that in seven or so months, you'll welcome the next Duke of Beaufort or a little lady." The doctor smiled, picked up his bag, and slipped on his hat that he had left on a chair near the door. "I shall leave you to enjoy this exciting news. I shall call in a week and see how you are, Your Grace."

“Thank you,” Deandra called after the doctor before gaping at Arthur. “I cannot believe it. I did not think it was possible ...” she murmured. “Arthur, a baby!”

“Our baby.” Arthur wrenched her into an embrace. His eyes burned with emotion, and he fought not to lose control of his sentiment. Not because deep down he had wanted a child, but because he knew Deandra had. Over the last few months of their marriage, he had seen her with children and had not missed the pain that had filled her eyes, believing she could never have one of her own.

“I’m beyond words.” A laugh bubbled out of her, and he chuckled.

“Believe it, darling, for it has been confirmed. You’re pregnant, and we’re to be parents. I suppose we ought to redecorate the nursery. It has not been used since I was a babe.”

Her eyes filled with excitement as the truth began to sink in regarding their situation. “After all this time, it was never me, Arthur. I was never the problem. For all these years, I thought myself barren, held myself away from the hope of another marriage for fear of disappointing another husband, and all for nothing. It was Lord Coleridge’s fault the entire time.”

Arthur fought not to hate the late Lord Coleridge more than he already did, but he could not forgive the earl for making Deandra feel worthless by not conceiving a child with him. How she must have suffered with her secret. “When such affliction prevents a person from having a child, it is cruel to make them feel valueless. Especially when there is little one can do on the matter. Lord Coleridge was wrong for reminding you of a flaw that did not lie with you. But no longer. The

strength of our love has given us this gift, and I shall be forever in your debt. I love you so much, Deandra. You are the best of everything in my world.”

She reached for him, holding him tight. “As are you to me. I love you so very much, Arthur, and our baby,” she said, cradling her stomach. “What do you think it will be? A boy or a girl?”

He covered her hand with his, thinking about her question. “I think the child is already full of mischief, and so I think she will be a girl, just like her mama.”

Deandra grinned. “Or a future duke.” She sighed, the sound of utter happiness. “Thank you for marrying me, for loving me, and giving me a baby. I love my life and you so very much.”

Arthur laid her back onto the pillows and took her lips in a searing kiss. “Well, I was determined to have you at my side after that first kiss. I had no other option, and I would not have given up.”

“I’m glad you did not relent, even though I was difficult to convince.”

He chuckled. “Well, there is a first time for everything,” he teased, closing the space between them and losing himself in her, his friend, lover, wife, and duchess.

Dear Readers

Thank you for taking the time to read my short, sexy novelette, *My Virtuous Duke*! I hope you enjoyed the first story in Dalliance and Dukes novelette series.

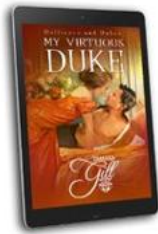
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Alternatively, you can keep in contact with me by visiting my website www.tamaragill.com or following me online. And don't despair, book two, *My Notorious Rogue*, is coming and will be available for pre-order soon.

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Outlaws

About the Author

Tamara is an Australian author who grew up in an old mining town in country South Australia, where her love of history was founded. So much so, she made her darling husband travel to the UK for their honeymoon, where she dragged him from one historical monument and castle to another.

A mother of three, her two little gentlemen in the making, a future lady (she hopes) keep her busy in the real world, but whenever she gets a moment's peace she loves to write romance novels in an array of genres, including regency, medieval and time travel.

