



The Dark Castle Lords presents

Bedeviling Dulcie



S. J. Konayne

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Dedication

While I had thought to thank several people with this first book, I hope they will forgive me as I instead remember someone very dear to me. I am dedicating this first book in memory to my grandfather James. Thank you for never making me feel as though I was wasting my time, intelligence, or talent. Thank you for all of your love and support. Thank you for watching over me now from Heaven. I love you, Grandpop.

Chapter One

Lady Dulcie Brighton sat in the corner of the ballroom, her mother her only company. She tried to sigh but couldn't take a deep enough breath. The stays of her corset dug into her hips, chest, and under her arms. Her only thought was that of getting home and taking off the damn thing. Viscount Stanby passed, deigning her with a polite but distant nod.

"Mother, can we not leave? Please?"

Her mother, still lovely and vibrant at the age of three and fifty, tsked. "You haven't been on the dance floor once this evening."

"Well, I would, Mother, but it would be a bit strange, dancing by myself." Dulcie huffed in exasperation. She loved her mother dearly and on any other occasion would be happy to sit and be her company, but she could no longer do it tonight. "Mother, my dance card is empty. Let me walk out of here with a tiny shred of dignity."

As Dulcie saw it, if she left early, no one would know for certain her card didn't have even a single name on it. It would appear she was feeling sour and decided to leave before any possible suitors were able to make their way to her.

"Dulcie!" She cringed as her friend, Caressa, called out to her.

Lady Caressa Davenport, only daughter and youngest child to the Duke of Courtney, was flitting her way to Dulcie's corner. Dulcie's father, the Duke of Rothshire, had been friends with Caressa's father at University. If it hadn't been for lifelong exposure, Dulcie wondered, would the slim, effervescent Caressa be the friend of plump, dowdy Dulcie?

With her ethereal blond hair, Wedgwood blue eyes, and fairy-like body, Caressa was everything a woman should be. Dulcie's heavy copper strands, mud brown eyes, and body to

rival that of the walrus housed at the menagerie, she was far from what the men of the ton were looking for in a wife. The idea of what one would think of the body she had to look upon in the mirror everyday made her sigh again.

Caressa claimed the seat to her right and grabbed Dulcie's hand. "Isn't this wonderful?"

"Hmm," Dulcie replied noncommittally. For the first time she noticed the two men Caressa had in tow. One was Malcolm Tripford, the Viscount of Trewston. Handsome, tall, with dark blond hair and piercing gray eyes, and a considerable fortune, he was considered one of the top catches of the Season. Next to him was the Honorable Kirkland Perry, the oldest son of the Baron of Xander. He had curly brown hair, green eyes, and stood to inherit a not so small estate himself. He had a kind smile, which was more than could be said for Malcolm, who only seemed to tolerate her presence because she was a friend of Caressa's and the daughter of a Duke. And, though he was not as handsome as Malcolm, Kirkland was still an attractive man.

A new song started and the Viscount cleared his throat. "I do believe this dance is mine, Lady Davenport."

Caressa giggled into Dulcie's hand and leaned over to tell her that the Viscount had claimed more than half of the evening's dances. Dulcie smiled and patted her friend's hand. "Then you had best not disappoint him."

She extricated her hand from Caressa's and made shooing motions. Caressa giggled again and spirited off with the man. Kirkland watched them drift off and Dulcie wondered if the man had claimed the other half of Caressa's card. As if remembering she was there, Kirkland turned and smiled down at her.

"Are you enjoying the party, Duchess? Lady Brighton?"

Her mother nodded serenely, as if relieved a man was finally speaking to Dulcie. Dulcie nodded as well. “Lord and Lady Wrenley certainly outdid the Earl of Stockton’s soiree.”

Kirkland laughed gently. “Indeed, and the Earl is simply steaming about it.” He looked around until he located the man of whom they spoke, and pointed him out to Dulcie. “Never mind that his daughter is one of the most coveted girls of the season. The Baron had the gall to out perform a superior.”

When he looked back at Dulcie, Kirkland was silent for a moment. She watched as a blush crept up his neck, over his jaw and into his cheeks. “I am, of course, speaking to the most coveted,” he murmured.

Dulcie blushed in embarrassment. It was obvious Kirkland was trying to be nice, but did he have to make her feel even more inadequate? “It’s all right, Mr. Perry.”

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them and Kirkland looked around. The wispy Miss Leticia Downey floated past and snagged Kirkland’s attention. He looked after her before looking back to Dulcie. She smiled, her heart tugging a bit as she nodded, relieving him of standing guard. He bowed over Dulcie’s hand and took off in the direction of the magistrate’s daughter.

Dulcie uncrossed and re-crossed her ankles, silently cursing the slippers, which fell off her feet yet again. She sat through another two dances, seeing more of her friends twirl by in the arms of handsome, wealthy, and enamored gentlemen. Whenever one spotted her, she’d smile as though nothing were wrong, even waving occasionally.

It wasn’t unknown to her friends that she had yet to have even one gentleman caller, let alone an offer for her hand. Nor had it escaped anyone’s notice that the end of the Season was drawing near. It was looking as though she’d be back next year, with another line of younger

girls and unappreciative men. As it was, this was her fourth time out and if she didn't receive any attention this time, she feared her parents would insist on making a match for her. Dulcie shuddered to think to whom they would sell her.

She was about to suggest to her mother, again, that they leave, when someone behind her said, "There's our girl! See, I told you we would find her."

It was her brother, William's voice. She turned to find her two older brothers, one older sister, and their spouses. Miles, third in birth order stepped away from his very pregnant wife, Arian, and kissed the top of her head. Elaine, second oldest, hugged her tightly, before William kissed her cheek.

"So, Pixie, how has the evening been?"

Dulcie was about to answer but was cut off by a hastily covered snicker. The second son of the Duke of Stromworth cleared his throat before glancing at them and walking quickly away. Dulcie could feel her cheeks heating. She had heard many such snickers over her family's pet name for her. Ever oblivious, her brothers and sisters awaited her answer. She pasted as wide a smile as she could muster across her face. "Wonderful."

"Good. Would you like anything to drink, Pixie?"

"They have some lovely punch on the table on the other side of the room."

Her brother-in-law, Daniel, patted her hand before kissing her sister's knuckles. "Would you like some, love?"

"That would be lovely. I'll wait with Mother and Pixie."

Miles helped Arian onto a chair and kissed the tip of his wife's nose. Elaine settled next to her and William's wife Reagan sat on the opposite side of Dulcie, between her and her mother. The three men left and her sisters began chattering immediately.

“They’re going in the wrong direction,” Dulcie announced.

Regan looked after them. “Are they?”

“They’ll find their way to the punch, Dulcie. Anyway, the longer they have to look, the longer we get to talk, just us girls.” Arian smiled, smoothing her hands over her distended belly.

Elaine grabbed up both of Dulcie’s hands. “So? Who have you bewitched this season?”

Dulcie smiled, another tug pulling at her heart. “Oh, you know Pixie, Elaine. She probably has a dozen suitors vying for her attention,” Arian said in her dulcet voice.

Dulcie knew her sisters weren’t trying to be cruel, but their encouragement merely served to remind her, that at the ripe age of twenty-three, Dulcie was beginning to approach the shelf. She looked around in time to see Stromworth walking quickly past them, tugging his jacket and smoothing his hair. Moments later, her brothers returned, glasses for the five women.

When Daniel bent near, Dulcie whispered, “What did you three do?” Her brother-in-law had the nerve to smile and wink before straightening to stand behind her sister’s chair. She groaned into her punch glass.

Her siblings and their spouses chattered at her. Dulcie nodded, made the occasional sound that could be interpreted as either a sound of agreement or dissent.

“Damn it all.”

“Miles!” Their mother admonished her brother for his curse.

“Sorry,” he murmured. He, William, and Daniel were all looking to the front of the room. Dulcie stood to see what could have caused her brother to damn anything.

Suddenly, the room was too small. Nausea began to rise from the pit of her belly. “I need some air,” Dulcie whispered. She broke away from her family and headed for the French doors behind them.

She burst through and walked down the length of the balcony. At the end, she took a deep breath, easier standing up than sitting, before falling onto a small stone bench. Tall topiaries stood to either side, and blessedly blocked her view of the ballroom. Miles had been right. Damn it all.

Jackson Cornell, Marquess of Torningate, watched the silken copper hair flee the room. He swung his gaze back to the doors of the ballroom. Bartel. Of course.

He walked out onto the balcony. Perhaps now was time to approach the duke's lovely daughter. He could make her out on the bench. Light dappled her face and chest as it filtered through the plants between her and the windows. He pulled a cheroot and match from his breast pocket, clamped the thin cigar between his lips and struck the match.

“Oh!”

Her husky voice floated to him, seeping into his pores before tightening his skin all over his body.

“My goodness, my Lord, you scared me half to death.”

“My Lord?” he taunted her. Since taking on the responsibilities of his father's lesser title, Dulcie had been much more formal with him. It saddened him that a woman once so genuine and open toward him now distanced herself. Especially when it was the last thing he wanted.

“What would you have me call you, then?” Her peevish return made him want to laugh.

“Oh, I don't know. Jackson? Jack? Even Cornell would be preferable. One you called me in social settings. Another when only our families were together. The last, when you were so annoyed you couldn't even think straight enough to call me one of the first two.” He smiled as he

stepped up to her. So as not to spook her, he leaned a hip against the stone balustrade rather than sit next to her on the bench.

Her perfect front stayed up for another second before that beautiful, soft smile of hers touched her full pink lips. “Of course. How are you, Jackson?”

“I was doing quite well until someone allowed a boar into the room.”

“What?”

“Hmm, yes, this one runs around in the guise of a peer. Blond hair, black eyes. Looks up as many skirts as he can?”

Understanding settled over Dulcie’s beautiful features. “Well, if he has papers, one can’t very well refuse him, can one,” she murmured.

“Like hell.”

“Jackson, please. There’s really no point.”

He tried not to let his irritation at her tired tone show on his face. He pulled in a puff of aromatic smoke and released it. “You shouldn’t feel you must leave a room simply because some fool has arrived, Dulcie.”

“Perhaps if said fool had proposed to you as part of some colossal joke, you’d want to flee his presence as well. Cornell.”

He loved how she added his last name as an afterthought, letting him know he had annoyed her. Jack dropped his cigar and held out his opposite hand to her. “Come on, Dulcie. Let’s show him he’s nothing more than a speck. After all, he may be a Baron but you were born of a Duke and Duchess,” Jackson said with a smile.

Dulcie chewed her bottom lip and Jack was hard-pressed not to do it for her. She reached out hesitantly. Crushing the glowing, forgotten stick under his boot heel, Jack pulled her to her

feet and they walked back into the room just as a waltz began. “Why, I do believe this dance is mine, Lady Dulcie.”

She smiled and shook her head but allowed him to lead her out to the dance floor. She moved beautifully with him. “See, now you’re the center of attention. Just as it should be.”

Glorious cinnamon eyes peered out from under thick black lashes and her cheeks and ears pinkened delightfully. He loved when her porcelain skin blushed. It covered not just her cheeks and perfectly shaped ears, but also crept down her chest and Jack wondered where else her skin heated.

When the dance ended, Jack reluctantly returned Dulcie to her family. She carefully extracted her hand from his arm. “There, Mother, I’ve danced. May we leave now?”

“Oh, all right, Dulcie.” Her mother rose from the chair with much grace.

“I’ll walk you fair ladies out.”

“Oh, Jackson, no. It’s all right.”

“I insist, Dulcie.”

She ducked her head but didn’t argue further. After helping them into their carriage, Jackson no longer felt like staying, either. He was on his way to his transport when someone called his name.

“Jack?”

He turned to find Dulcie’s brothers walking toward him. “Will, Miles, Daniel. How may I help you?”

William spoke up first. “We were wondering at that performance you were putting on in the ballroom.”

The Great Wall, these three were. “I thought my lifelong friend deserved to have at least one dance. Especially when the peacock was present.”

William looked to his brothers and they nodded. “All right. Good night, Jack.”

“Good night, gentlemen.” His coachman opened his door and lowered the step for Jack to climb in. As they drove away, Jack laughed at the antics of Dulcie’s brothers.

Chapter Two

“Hello?”

“It’s us, darling. How are you feeling tonight?” Moira Brighton bent and kissed her husband’s cheek. She pulled back abruptly as he sneezed into his handkerchief. “Have you eaten anything tonight?”

“That evil minion of yours forced his broth down my throat earlier,” Abraham croaked.

Moira laughed softly as she stroked her husband’s shoulders. He sighed as she pressed into the stiff muscles. Dulcie entered the room, kissed each of their cheeks and bid them good night.

“Well, wait a moment, now. How did the evening go?”

Their youngest child pressed her hand to her forehead. “Please, father, let us save this for tomorrow. My head aches miserably.”

The duke sighed and nodded. “Good night, darling,” Abe said through a stuffed up nose.

“Good night, Papa.”

Moira listened until she heard her daughter’s door close. She circled the armchair in which her husband sat and settled on the footstool in front of him. “Oh, darling, I have wonderful news.”

“What, my love?”

“I believe I know who we can get to marry Dulcie.”

“Oh?”

Moira nodded excitedly. “Jack!”

“Who?”

She huffed. “Jackson Cornell.”

“Little Jack? You can’t be serious. He’s little more than a child.”

Moira squinted at her husband, looking into his eyes. “Give it to me.”

Abe looked around unconvincingly. “What?”

“The flask, darling. You shouldn’t drink when you’re ill.”

“Oh, humbug.” Abe grumbled but handed his silver flask to his wife. She pulled a key from the small bag looped over her wrist, unlocked the cabinet in the corner, and deposited her husband’s contraband into it before relocking the doors.

“Jackson is a fully grown man now, love. You forget he’s nearly Elaine’s age.”

He seemed to be in thought for a moment. “I suppose he must be. But why do you think we should give him our little pixie?”

Moira began to pace before her husband. “Because, Abe, she isn’t a pixie anymore. She is three and twenty. This is her fourth season when, in all rights, it should be her sixth or seventh. Jackson hasn’t offered for anyone’s hand and at nearly thirty, he must begin thinking about an heir.

“Dulcie will be at William’s tomorrow. While she’s there, we’ll ask for Jack to come here and we’ll put it to him.”

“Dulcie will be angry if she finds out we did this.”

“Then we’ll have to make sure she doesn’t find out until after the wedding.” She knelt next to his chair and took hold of his hand. “Please, Abraham. It pains me to watch all those little...little...bastards hurt our baby girl by ignoring her in favor of girls nowhere near her.”

He smiled down at her, that indulgent smile she loved so well. “All right darling. Pen him a note tonight. If we get it to him now, he may just agree to come over tomorrow afternoon.”

Moira squealed and hugged her husband. She dashed off to write the note, but turned back at the last minute. “The moment you’re all better, love, you had best be ready.” She sent him a lascivious smile.

Abe laughed in response. “Go. And send your minion to help me get upstairs.”

“Oliver! Take the duke to his room and return to me in his office.” Moira called out as she practically ran to her husband’s office.

“Yes, my Lady.”

She wrote her missive and handed it to Oliver once he returned downstairs.

“I’ll have it sent over right away, madam.”

“Thank you, Oliver.”

Oliver bowed and left the office. Moira sat in one of the wingchairs in front of the fireplace, writing pad and pencil in hand. She had much planning to do.

* * *

Jack knocked on the front door of the London townhouse he had spend many a day at in his childhood. He looked at the note Lady Moira had sent to his own home the night before. *A matter of terrible importance*. He had no idea what could be so serious, but if Dulcie’s family needed something of him, he was only too ready to provide a solution.

When the missive arrived at his home so early this morning, Jack had been stunned. The urgent knocking had had his tired mind dreaming it was Dulcie, there to beg him to take her into his arms and his bed. When he saw the note in the decidedly not-Dulcie footman’s hand, his hopes had risen that at least the note was from Dulcie. Instead, it had been from her mother. So, in his perhaps misguided devotion to their lovely youngest child, here Jack stood. The door swung open, admitting him.

The butler took his calling card and Jack waited in the foyer while the man delivered it. Oliver returned in less than a minute. “This way, your Lordship.”

Lady Moira greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. Jack gently shook the duke’s hand. “Come now, boy. I’m ill, not dying.”

Jack smiled and gripped the older man’s hand harder than before. He sat in the chair the butler indicated and Oliver asked if they would like some tea. “That would be lovely, Oliver. Thank you.” Lady Moira replied.

When the man left the room and shut the doors behind him, Jack looked to the couple. “What can I do for you?”

Lady Moira looked to her husband and back to Jack. “Tell us, Jackson. You’re fond of our daughter, yes?”

Intriguing. “Dulcie?” Jack asked for clarification. The lady looked to her husband, a note of uncertainty on her face this time, before returning her gaze to Jack. She nodded. Jack smiled gently. “Yes, my Lady, I am fond of her.”

Lady Moira and Lord Abraham both beamed at him. Oliver returned with a teacart. Once he poured and provided each of them with a biscuit, he was gone again. The duke’s wife was shaking as she placed her cup on the side table. When she looked back to Jack, the uncertainty from before had returned.

“Understand, Jack. We love our daughter very much, and we would do anything to make her happy.”

“Dulcie deserves happiness.”

Her parents nodded and the duke spoke. “Tell us, Jack. Have you met any young ladies this season for whom you think you might set your cap?”

Jack shook his head. Lord Abraham continued. “And don’t you think perhaps it is time you married and started a family?”

Shock rolled through him. Here Jack had thought he’d ask for their daughter’s hand and they were giving it away! “Of course, I do.”

Lady Moira took control again. “We were thinking, Jackson. You and Dulcie get on so well. You need an heir, and Dulcie, though she has never said it, wants so badly to be a mother. What would you say if we suggested you marry our daughter?”

Jack had never felt such a sensation in his life. His stomach clenched, his palms dampened, and he had to readjust himself to hide the evidence of his agreeability to their idea. “I care a great deal for Dulcie, and, in all honesty, can’t imagine a better woman to bear the next Marquess of Torningate.”

“Oh, Jackson, that is wonderful!” Lady Moira rose and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

Jack smiled and patted her forearm before she released him. When she was again seated beside her husband, Jack clapped and rubbed his hands together. “So, should we prepare a contract now, or wait until Dulcie joins us?”

Lord Abraham spoke again. “There’s another thing we would ask of you.”

If it was as good as their first request, Jack knew he’d not refuse them. “Yes?”

“We do not want Dulcie to know we have gone around her to make this match, so we ask that you make it appear that you want this match. We would like you to woo our daughter.”

Abraham looked a tad uncomfortable with his request but made it anyway.

Jack sat back for a moment. Dulcie didn't know her parents were asking him to marry her. If she didn't know, she hadn't asked them to set this meeting. What if she didn't want what they were asking? What if she didn't want him?

Well, he'd just have to convince her she did want him. "There will not be a person in England who doesn't know I am out to marry Dulcie."

Her parents smiled, seemingly relieved. After drinking his tea, Jack bid Dulcie's parents goodbye. They made plans to meet at Lord Higgins's ball that evening. When Dulcie looked at her card tonight, she would find every dance filled. With his name on each line.

Normally, Jack disdained high fashion, preferring comfort, but for the ball, he acquired a new suit, new Hessian boots, and trimmed his thick black hair. His final purchases were made at a flower cart. There he bought a rose for his lapel and several blossoms of freesia. He held the delicate white flowers to his nose and breathed deep of the scent that always brought the image of Dulcie to mind. All year round, she smelled of the heady flower. And one day, that scent would cover his bed and sated body as well.

At the ball that evening, Jack waited impatiently for Dulcie's arrival. Finally, her and her mother's names were announced. He slipped his hand into his pocket. Fingering the dance card he had already filled with his name, he approached the two.

"Good evening, ladies."

"Good evening, Jackson," Lady Moira replied.

Dulcie was distracted. Looking over her place setting, she frowned. "Mmm, yes, good evening, Jackson."

"Is something wrong?" He asked.

Dulcie smiled as she looked at him. “No. I suppose they have merely decided not to waste a dance card on me.”

Jack didn’t know which bothered him more – that Dulcie believed their hosts would do such a thing or that the thought didn’t seem to affect her much at all. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the beribboned paper.

“Hold out your hand.” She did and he tied the emerald silk around her wrist.

She looked surprised. As she was about to open it, Jack took Dulcie’s hand and led her onto the dance floor. He pulled her into his arms as the next song began. “I do believe this is my dance.”

Jack only allowed her to sit once dinner was served. He sat at her table and told stories of his time spent traveling before he was called home when his father had fallen ill. He told her of Africa and the Orient.

When the dancing resumed, Jack took her hand to lead her back to the dance floor. He led her around and around until she begged for mercy. He agreed and led Dulcie into an alcove created by one of the ballroom’s cathedral windows and heavy brocade curtains. Jack leaned against the window and Dulcie took a seat on a padded velvet upholstered bench.

She was so beautiful. Her violet dress looked black in the dim light of their enclosure. Moonlight sparkled off the garment’s beadwork and made her skin glow. Dulcie looked up at him and he smiled, feeling oddly shy at having been caught ogling her.

“You know, Jackson, if you dance with only me tonight, people will think you’re courting me.”

“Only think it, Dulcie? That simply won’t do.”

She frowned. “What?”

Jack got on his knee beside her. “After tonight, not a single person in that room, nor the whole of England, will question my intentions toward you.”

Even in the moonlight, Jack could see Dulcie’s cheeks color. She sputtered indignantly. “What are you talking about, Cornell? You have no intentions toward me.”

“On the contrary, lovely Dulcie, I intend to make you mine.”

“Ha! Since when?” Her ire was rising and Jack loved it.

“For a long time now, Dulcie. For a very long time.” Before she could say anymore, Jack leaned forward and captured her mouth with his.

Oh, my goodness. Dulcie couldn’t believe what was happening. Jackson Cornell had his mouth pressed softly against hers so that his lips surrounded her top lip as hers surrounded his bottom one. His fingertips came up and brushed her cheek. She had never felt anything so sweet as Jack’s kiss. He pulled away and Dulcie whimpered, but he was merely repositioning his head.

When he returned, the kiss invoked a hunger she had never known she possessed. Jack pressed his tongue forward and licked her bottom lip before pushing against her teeth. Dulcie moaned and opened her mouth. Jackson hummed his approval and found her tongue with his. As he rubbed the wonderfully textured surface against every bit of her mouth, his hand left her cheek to stroke down her neck. When he reached the base, his hand covered much of her bare upper chest.

Jack pulled away again, this time kissing his way to her ear. “I’m going to touch you, Dulcie. I have to. I’ve waited so long to have you in my arms, I have to touch you.”

“Where?” Dulcie asked breathlessly.

“Your breast, Dulcie.” His deep voice was thicker than usual and it sounded as though she was not the only one having trouble breathing. “I’m only going to hold you in my hand, but if we had somewhere more private I would kiss it. I would lick your skin and suck on your nipple, Dulcie.”

As he spoke his hand covered her breast, warming her through the layers of her dress and her shift and the new corset her dress maker had convinced her was the height of fashion. Jack continued speaking and Dulcie thought she just might swoon. “I would nibble on it, bite down hard then lick the pain away.” He squeezed and Dulcie’s breath stuck in her throat.

Jack turned his face into her throat and licked her skin before asking, “What color are your nipples, Dulcie?”

“What?” She couldn’t make her brain work. It sounded like he was speaking underwater.

“Your nipples, Dulcie. What color are they?”

She swallowed hard. Jackson knowing the color of her nipples seemed exceedingly more intimate than his touches, but she wanted to tell him. She needed to. “They are dark pink,” she whispered. “Almost red. And they hurt so much right now, Jackson. They are tight and hard.”

Jackson growled and squeezed harder, this time catching her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Dulcie would have screamed to the exquisite pleasure it sent from her breast to her womb had Jackson not chosen that precise moment to kiss her again. This kiss was more demanding than the ones before. He pressed her mouth open as wide as it would go and plunged his tongue in and out of her mouth. Then she realized his hips were moving against her thigh in exactly the same rhythm; that the juncture of her thighs throbbed right along with his movements. She felt an unusual trickling sensation.

Dulcie reached up. One hand covered his at her breast, pressing him closer, positioning his fingers where they could pinch her again. Her other hand landed on the soft fabric of his shirt. She touched his chest, pressing her fingers into the firm flesh before smoothing up to his neck and tangling in his hair.

He caught her nipple again, this time squeezing and releasing in time to his thrusting tongue and hips. She whimpered again and began moving her hips, trying to rub the strangely pinched spot between her legs. She pulled his hand from her breast and began to guide it down her stomach. Dulcie desperately needed Jack to stop the throbbing below but he pulled his hand away and sat back from her.

Dulcie tried to pull him back into her arms but he shook his head. Jack stood and turned to the window, pressing his body against the glass. She stood, finding it very hard to get her legs to hold her. When they finally held steady she walked up and stood next to him, pressing her cheek to the cold pane. He opened his beautiful hazel eyes and Dulcie found herself unable to keep the contact. "I'm sorry, Jackson."

He laughed. "You have nothing to apologize for, Dulcie."

Dulcie moved away from the window, crossing the tight space to peek through the curtains. She dropped the fabric and asked, "Then, why did you stop?"

Jackson came up behind her. His hands settled on her shoulders and his chin came to rest in the curve where her neck met her shoulder. "Because, if I didn't stop, I was going to make love to you right here, with all of London on the other side of that fabric, and I wouldn't have cared a single bit." He kissed her neck and Dulcie shivered. "You mean too much to me, Dulcie. So, while I have the presence of mind to let you go, walk out. I'll follow when I've gotten a hold of myself."

Unable to stop herself, she turned into his arms and rose onto her toes. Not nearly as experienced or knowledgeable as Jackson, Dulcie just pressed her lips to his. His hands came up and cupped her face. He didn't advance the contact anymore than that, just touched her skin, and only barely. Dulcie slowly stepped away from him, not taking her eyes from Jackson's until she had to step out of alcove and onto the dance floor.

Dulcie returned to her mother's side. She knew her cheeks should be flaming and shame should be filling her, but Dulcie couldn't summon one single bad feeling from what had happened. Jackson had kissed her, and touched her. He wanted to marry her. A smile pulled at her lips and she wondered when they could next be alone.

* * *

Jack handed Lady Moira up into their carriage. With her mother inside, Jack turned to Dulcie. She was looking at him shyly through her lashes. Unable to resist touching her, he took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles, keeping his lips on her hand longer than etiquette deemed proper. Dulcie tilted her chin up and smiled at him, soft and intimate; it felt like a kick to his chest and a stroke to his cock. He handed Dulcie up and closed the door.

Lady Moira looked out. "Jackson, the duke and I would love to have you over for the evening on Wednesday."

"Would anyone else like my company for the evening?"

Dulcie moved aside the window curtain, leaving her face silhouetted in the moonlight. "I would enjoy it greatly if you would come."

Though he understood Dulcie didn't know what she said could be taken out of context, Jack hardened knowing he would enjoy it greatly, too. "Then I shall be there."

"Six o'clock, then?" Lady Moira asked.

“Six,” Jackson agreed. He stepped back and the carriage rolled out of the drive.

Jack turned to find Dulcie’s brothers waiting for him. “You and Dulcie were missing for sometime, Cornell.” Will said darkly.

“Care to tell us what you’re up to?” Miles asked.

“Not at all, *brothers*. Not at all.”

The three men looked to one another. Jack started to make his way to his own carriage. Daniel spoke as the men followed him. “It might be bad form to beat him. At the moment, anyhow.”

The other two murmured their agreement. Jack threw a good evening to them over his shoulder and climbed into his vehicle. He knew they were worried for Dulcie, but he had no intention to give them a reason to fear.

Chapter Three

Dulcie looked at herself in the vanity mirror one last time. Her hair was up in a casual but pretty style that allowed curls to tumble down her neck and tendrils to frame her face. Her hands shook as she raised the double strands of white pearls forming a collar style necklace to encircle her throat. That was it. The last piece was in place. All she had left to do was go down stairs and join her family.

So why couldn't she move? She had had dinner with Jackson many times before. Tonight was exactly the same. Her family would be present, as always. Dulcie cheeks flushed as her conscience reminded her why it was different. Jackson had kissed her. He had touched her. Intimately. Her nipples hardened and her breath left her in a rush just at the memory. She picked up the dance card from the night before and opened it to see Jackson's name written in his masculine yet elegant script on every line.

A gentle knock clicked against the door. "Miss?"

"Yes, Oliver?"

"The Duke and Duchess and the Marquess are waiting for you, milady."

"Please inform them I will be down shortly." Dulcie straightened the items on her vanity. The silver handle of her hairbrush was cold and she picked up the object, hoping to cool her sweating palms. Another knock and she replaced the brush and rose from the vanity bench. "I said I would be down shortly, Oliver."

Dulcie marched to the door and threw it open only to be confronted with the ever handsome Jackson. "What...What... What...?"

“You are taking a very long time getting ready, my dear. I thought I would come see if there was any way I could help.” Jackson stepped into her bedroom, closing the door behind him. Dulcie’s heart stopped beating.

“N-no, no, Jackson. There is nothing you can do.... What are you doing?” Dulcie asked breathlessly. She was backed up against the side of her bed. Jackson stood directly in front of her, the toes of his highly polished boots brushing the hem of her green silk dress.

When he stepped those last few inches forward, Dulcie felt her body dissolve. His hands skimmed up her back, his fingertips tickled her neck. He reached her hair and began plucking out the carefully arranged pins. “I want to see your hair down tonight, darling.”

“All right,” she breathed. As her hair fell in long spiraling curls, Dulcie watched Jackson’s face. He paid careful attention to his task, obviously afraid he might hurt her. His fingers felt wonderful as they threaded through her hair. She sighed as she leaned into him. Her hands rose to his chest and flattened her palms against the wool of his dinner jacket. The dark grey material felt cool beneath her fingers as she swept them back and forth. Even through the heavy material, however, she could feel the erratic beating of his heart. It matched hers.

When he finished arranging her hair around her shoulders, he looked into her eyes and smiled softly. “You are so very beautiful, Dulcie.”

“You make me feel so, Jackson.”

“Call me Jack.”

Dulcie smiled. “Say please,” she taunted softly. She didn’t know where this sultry seductress had come from but she hoped she stayed.

Jackson gently but firmly gripped the back of her head and pulled her close to his lips. “Please.”

“Jack,” she whispered.

Jackson kissed her, his tongue going deep, brushing against her tongue, engaging her. Dulcie sighed, following his movements as though it were a dance. It was a dance she wanted to continue, especially when his hand came between them to cup her breast. *Her breast!* She remembered the wondrous feelings he had created the last time he touched her there. She remembered what he said he would do if they hadn’t been at that soiree with all of those other people. Dulcie leaned away, breaking their kiss.

Jackson merely rubbed and pinched her pebbled nipple. He made no move to pull her flesh into his mouth. It was very frustrating. He teased her flesh and, by the smile on his face, he knew it.

“Jackson—”

“Jack,” he corrected in his husky, intimate voice.

“Jack,” she said breathily. “Please. Kiss me.”

“Where, darling?”

“There,” she said.

“There?” Jackson asked.

“There, Jack. Down... there. Please,” she begged softly as he pinched and twisted gently.

Jackson smiled and bore her back against her bed. “It would be my utmost pleasure to kiss you... down there, darling,” he whispered before taking her lips again. This time his kiss was slow, still deep but not fast and uncontrolled like before. His previous kiss had been like a thunderstorm, in like a flash, loud, shaking, and frightening. This kiss was like the fog. It was slow and thick, it found every nook and filled it as if with mist and mystery and made everything seem like a dream.

She was light-headed when Jackson pulled back. He kissed her just beneath her bottom lip. He kissed her chin and the soft flesh underneath, her throat, the center of her collarbone. He kissed her breastbone above the bodice of her dress, kissed the silk outline of each distended nipple. Dulcie didn't realize what Jackson was doing with his hands until she felt her legs being pressed wide open. "Jack, wait," she said weakly.

"Just one taste, darling. I promise on your heart and soul I will not do more than kiss you."

When Dulcie felt the first touch of Jackson's fingers in the cluster of auburn curls at the top of her thighs, all of the stiffness left her body. She didn't understand. It was as though his touch produced a drug her body responded to immediately; as though laudanum seeped from his pores into hers.

His fingertips sifted through the curls and edged along the seam of her sex. When he pulled her open, it was a strange sensation. Cool air touched the hot wet flesh but she wasn't exposed to it for long. Dulcie let out a soft cry when Jackson's lips touched her sex. They were soon followed by his tongue. The pointed tip circled then traveled up to the front of her sex where it found the most painfully sensitive piece of flesh she had never realized existed. She couldn't prevent how her hips bucked when he flicked the spot with his tongue.

Jackson lifted his mouth. "No, no, no," Dulcie begged quietly.

"Shh, darling. Do you know how delicious you are? How exquisite you are? How could I stop?" Jackson lowered his face back to her sex and flicked his tongue against that spot again.

"This is your clit, darling. It is a most beautiful knot of feeling, isn't it?"

"Yes," Dulcie replied, drawing it out in a hiss.

"And here," Jackson said as his tongue moved lower, "is where I will claim you on our wedding night." Jackson's tongue slid in slow and deep and Dulcie groaned. He repeated the

motion two, three more times before pulling away and looking into her eyes over the length of her body. “There is a piece of flesh in there we will break on that night. Tonight, right now, we will practice making you feel so very good you will not notice when I break it.”

With a wicked smile, Jackson’s mouth returned to her clit and Dulcie buried her fingers in his hair. The feeling was so sharp and pleasurable, tears crowded her vision. His tongue circled and flicked while he suckled on the nub. When she felt one of his fingers circle her opening in time to his tongue circling her clit, her entire body rocked and shuddered.

Dulcie would have cried out loud had Jackson not pushed himself up at the last moment and covered her mouth with his. His lips tasted salty and sweet. It was a strange flavor though not unpleasant. He didn’t pull away until her body had stopped shaking. “How do you feel?” He asked.

“I’ve never felt anything like it.”

Jackson chuckled and she felt it rumble through her body. “Is that good or bad, Dulcie?”

“Good, Jack. Very good,” she replied quietly. Dulcie could feel her cheeks heat.

Jackson tipped her chin up, not an easy task as they were still lying on her bed, until she looked at him. “I’m glad for it then. We will make each other happy, Dulcie. I know we will.”

Dulcie had no doubt Jackson would make her happy. She had been half in love with her friend all her life. However, she knew she did not compare to the bright, shining, petite beauties so popular among the ton. She wondered if she really could make Jackson happy or if he was settling for some reason that completely escaped her.

Chapter Four

Dulcie again smoothed the emerald silk over her thighs. It was ridiculous. She knew her dress was in perfect order, but she couldn't help remembering the skirt around her waist. Nor could she forget Jackson's face between her thighs, his mouth delivering the most incredible sensation in the world.

"Are you all right, Pixie?"

Dulcie looked up to find her mother staring at her with concern. "Yes, mother, why?"

"You haven't touched your food," the duchess replied. "And you look a tad piqued. Are you certain you are all right?"

Dulcie laughed and picked up her fork. "Yes, yes, I'm fine. See?" Dulcie made a grand show of taking several bites of the delicious veal dinner.

Her mother smiled and turned her attention to Dulcie's father. Dulcie let her gaze drift to Jackson. He was watching her intently. When she raised her head and looked him square in the eye, his lips curled into a secretive smile that turned her bones to water.

For the rest of the evening, every time she looked at him, the same smile creased his mouth. He even had the nerve to wink at her! She had to hide her blush, and her smile, behind her napkin. If Jackson didn't stop soon, Dulcie was certain her face would be red forever.

After dinner, Jackson asked permission to take Dulcie out to the garden for a stroll. Her father looked suspiciously at Jackson but nodded and called for Oliver to get a shawl for Dulcie. With the velvet and lace wrapped around her shoulders, Jackson escorted her out onto the terrace and to the garden path dappled with moonlight.

The heady scents of late blooming flowers surrounded them. Jackson didn't touch her but stayed close to her side. Dulcie moved to pass a large topiary but Jackson's arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her behind the large, shaped bush. Dulcie looked up into his eyes.

The smile on his face now, here, in the quite and intimacy of the garden was warm and, dare she hope, loving. "Ah, Dulcie."

"Hmm?"

"I am thinking of how happy we will be when we are wed," he murmured.

Dulcie bit her lip and smiled. "Have I said I would marry you, Jackson?"

Jackson growled in response to her playfulness. They both knew she would marry him. "Should I remind you of one of the reasons *why* you should marry me?" Cool air touched her calves and she realized Jackson was raising her dress.

"Cornell! What do you think you're doing? We are outside!" Dulcie batted his hands away from her and jumped away. She smoothed her hands over her plump bottom, grimacing a little as she did. It was still hard for her to believe that Jackson would choose her above all others. She looked up and was intrigued by the look on his face. It was one she had seen before between her parents and her siblings and their spouses. It was a look of desire tempered by affection. Perhaps Jackson saw something she did not when she looked in the mirror.

"Come here," Jackson commanded.

Deciding she felt like being contrary Dulcie replied, "No."

One thick black eyebrow lifted. "I said come here, Dulcie."

She cleared her throat and stiffened her spine. "No."

Jackson stepped away from the topiary with a growl. Dulcie yelped and turned. She dashed through the garden, around now-headless rosebushes, even jumping over very low flowers.

Jackson laughed behind her and Dulcie giggled in response. He caught her just before she reached the terrace and pulled her into the shadows created by a niche between two tall conifers and the townhouse.

“No more playing tonight, hmm?” Jackson asked. His voice was husky and breathless. It made Dulcie shiver with a longing she wouldn’t have understood only a few days, perhaps even a few hours ago.

“I... I don’t know how much more of you’re playing I can take, Jackson,” she whispered in reply.

“Let us find out.” Jackson’s head dipped to hers. His lips skimmed over her eyebrow, across her cheekbone, down her nose. He nipped the tip and Dulcie whimpered. She couldn’t see his face, but knew he was smiling at her, damn him. His lips touched hers. And damn her, too, if that was where she had to go to follow him to receive more of his wonderful kisses and caresses.

Jackson’s tongue slipped into her mouth and Dulcie sighed, sifting her fingers deep into his hair. His movements were soft and slow and she couldn’t take it. She needed fire and passion. Dulcie aggressively brushed his tongue with hers. She breeched his mouth and explored all she could. His flavor was even stronger inside. Dulcie tried to get closer.

Jackson’s hands moved restlessly over her body. One moment they pressed into her back, the next they circled to her front to cup her breasts. When her nipples stood hard and aching, he left them. Cool air once again hit her legs as he raised her skirt. She didn’t care. When the silk was gathered around her hips, he wedged his thigh high between hers.

Jackson’s mouth left hers. “Spread your legs for me, love.”

When she did, his hard leg connected with her delicate sex, her sensitive clit. The raw silk material of his trousers chafed the nub directly. Dulcie gasped. Jackson’s mouth returned to hers.

Jackson kissed her hard and deep, stealing her breath as he guided her with his hands on her hips, shifting them. Back and forth, she rode his thigh.

Her chest seized as her body shuddered and the muscles deep inside of her contracted. Dulcie laid her forehead against Jackson's shoulder. "Dulcie," he said in a strained voice.

"Yes?"

"Forgive me."

"For what," she asked. His answer was to surge his hips against her belly, time and time again until he groaned her name. He shivered against her and Dulcie held him tight, wishing she could see Jackson's face.

Jackson's erratic breathing stirred the hair at her temple. "I shouldn't have done that," he whispered.

"Why not?" She tried to pull back so that she could look up into his face but he wouldn't allow it. He moved one hand to the small of her back, the other up to cradle the back of her head. The feel of his arms around her, holding her close, was so heavenly. Dulcie wrapped her arms around Jackson's waist and sighed. If this was how they would stay until he answered her, she could wait.

Insects chirped around them, leaves rustled, their breathing and heartbeats slowed. Dulcie was content to listen to it all. Unfortunately, the cold painfully pricked the skin of her legs and she shivered. Jackson removed his leg and laughed softly when she tightened her thighs, trying to stop him. They worked her skirt back into place and though her legs were no longer cold, she missed the contact with his body.

His hands smoothed her hair back from her face and cupped her cheeks. She looked up, able to make out his features thanks to the moonlight liming the strong lines. "I should have waited,"

he said. "I should have waited until I can be inside of you, fill you with my flesh." He looked up and stepped away, pulling her with him from the shadows. "In private."

"Dulcie? Jackson?" Her mother came out onto the terrace and approached the marble balustrade. "I'm sorry, Jackson. The duke isn't feeling terribly well. He apologizes for cutting the evening short, but he thinks it best..." her mother trailed off, too polite to ask a guest to leave.

"Of course, my Lady," Jackson said with a half bow to the duchess. He led Dulcie back inside and she decided it was time to retire for the evening. As they passed her, she kissed her mother's cheek and wished her a good night.

Her father, his complexion pale, sat before the fireplace in the study. She kissed the top of his head. "Good night, Papa."

"Good night, my dear." Jackson made to follow her from the room into the hallway but her father stopped him. "Jack, please, stay for a few moments."

Dulcie looked up into his eyes. "Good night, Jackson."

"Jack," he murmured intimately.

"Good night, Jack," she said with a small smile.

"Good night, Dulcie." He lifted her hand to his lips, but instead of kissing her knuckles, he kissed her palm.

Closing her fingers in to capture his caress, Dulcie hurried up to her room for a night of glorious dreams and fitful sleep.

Jack watched until the last bit of Dulcie's dress was no longer visible before turning back to her parents. The smile faded from his face when he saw the stern expressions on theirs. Lord

Abraham started to talk but a coughing fit overtook him and Jack hurried to get the older man a drink of water. When he was comfortable, Lord Abraham started again.

“You were upstairs for a long time earlier, Jack.”

“Yes,” he saw no point in denying it. The man could easily tell time.

Lord Abraham looked at him for a moment before rubbing the skin at either side of his mouth. Lady Moira made a disgusted noise in her throat. “Abe!”

“Ahem. Look, I expect you to behave yourself, Jack. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Good. Now then, my other children and their wives and husband are going to the Tower tomorrow.” The duke pulled a handkerchief to his mouth and coughed.

His wife went to him and rubbed his back as she spoke to Jack. “You can meet them at eleven in the morning and you and Dulcie will stay with them and in sight at all times.”

“Of course, my Lady,” Jack assented. It took everything within him not to smile. He did not want his future mother-in-law to think he was mocking her. He just knew that nothing would stop him from finding even one moment alone with Dulcie. However, he would never, ever hurt her. “I would never do anything to embarrass Dulcie in public, Lady Moira, rest assured. I respect and admire her too much.”

The duchess nodded her approval. “Thank you.” The duke’s coughing grew louder. “Oh dear. Jack, if you wouldn’t mind showing yourself out, I need Oliver to take my husband to bed.” She called for the butler and instructed the man to move the duke to his room immediately.

Not wanting to interrupt the delicate moment, Jack left the room, pulled on his wool jacket and hat, and left the residence. His coach pulled up in front of the house but he couldn’t help looking back one last time. In the front right window was Dulcie’s curvaceous outline. A smile

tipped his lips as he swept off his hat and performed a full court bow. When he looked back, Dulcie's hand rested on the window, as if reaching out to him. He touched his fingers to his lips and blew her a kiss before climbing into his coach.

Chapter Five

Dulcie gripped her hands tightly, willing herself not to move the curtain and look ahead for Jackson. There would be too many people and they were still too far away to see him, she reminded herself. She forced her hands apart and skimmed them over the fine, fluttery material of her pink morning dress and adjusted the bottom and cuffs of her Spencer jacket.

“Dulcie, dear, stop fidgeting,” Arian said.

Reagan took Dulcie’s left hand in both of her smaller ones. “You look perfect.”

“He won’t be looking at anything but you,” Elaine predicted. They were all quiet for a moment then her sister said, “We are all going to be keeping close eyes on the two of you. The men especially, I am sure. Mama is suspicious that something... improper may have transpired in your bedroom last night.”

Though she tried desperately not to think on it, Dulcie’s cheeks heated. A shadow of feeling tugged at her clit as she remembered the way Jackson had licked and sucked on her. The other women burst into fits of giggles which only made Dulcie blush more. Reagan and Arian begged to know what happened while Elaine begged her to remain silent. Dulcie didn’t think she could ever speak of the things she and Jackson had done in her room. She just wanted to do them again. And find out what else they could do together.

The carriage drew to a stop and they waited as the coachman opened the door. Her brothers, brother-in-law, and Jackson were all waiting for them. She noticed Jackson was straightening his clothing and that his hair had been mussed. Growling in annoyance, she stepped down first to help Arian. Miles rushed forward to assist them. Under her breath, she spat at her brother, “We will be having a discussion later on how to treat long standing family friends.”

Miles had the gall to smile as he said, “We know how to treat them, Pixie. That’s why he isn’t swimming in the Thames.” Once her pregnant sister-in-law was safely on the ground, Dulcie punched Miles in the arm.

She walked to Jackson who was smoothing his hair back into place. A rueful smile split his face and Dulcie shook her head. “I am sorry for them.”

“Don’t be. It warms my heart to know my bride-to-be is so well protected.” He kept his voice low but light.

A blush heated her cheeks and she broke eye contact. “You keep saying things like that and I will expect a wedding sooner or later.”

“It is a promise I make and intend to keep, Dulcie. Do not question that.” She looked up through her lashes. His expression was serious but gentle and her heart melted anew. Jackson leaned forward and Dulcie turned her face up to his. Just as his lips were about to touch hers, someone to her very immediate left cleared his throat.

William stood so close his chest brushed against her sleeve. “I believe we should be getting inside now. Everyone stay close, we wouldn’t want to lose anyone.” Her brother inserted himself between Dulcie and Jackson as the group walked to the building that housed so many treasures, everything from royal to natural.

She bent back a little as she walked and looked at Jackson. He was watching her and when she caught his gaze, he winked. The twinkle in his eyes told her he had something on his mind. Something that made her blush.

Try as they did, however, there was no evading the men of her family. One always seemed to be at her side. There was never an opportunity for a private moment with Jackson and after what she had experienced at his hand it was frustrating not to be able to feel those sensations again.

When they left the Tower and bid Jackson good evening, he took a chance. Though her brothers were close at hand and they stood outside for all to see, Jackson took Dulcie in his arms and kissed her deeply.

He released her and tipped his hat to her family, disappearing into the crowd before her brothers and brother-in-law could extricate themselves from their wives to go after him. Dulcie watched after him even though she couldn't see him for long after he left her side. Smiling to herself, Dulcie climbed into the carriage.

Daniel stuck his head into the vehicle and smiled at the women. "We are just going to go catch up with Jack and see if he wants to go to the club for a drink."

"You three will do nothing of the sort," Dulcie said slowly.

William leaned in around their brother-in-law. "It's just a friendly drink, Pixie."

"That's right!" Miles contributed.

"I don't want you three harassing him anymore. Jackson isn't hurting me and, though I do not wish to get ahead of myself, he has been speaking of marriage to me. So, as much as I love the three of you, if you hurt him, I will wreak havoc upon you. Understand?" Dulcie looked between the three men.

"Marriage?" William asked.

"Yes."

Comically, the trio turned as one to look in the direction Jackson had disappeared. They turned to each other and nodded before looking back to Dulcie. "We'll leave him be. For now," William promised her.

Knowing it was the best she would be able to extract from them, Dulcie smiled her gratitude. Just before Miles closed the door, Arian said to him, “We need to stop by Madame Elise’s to pick up our dresses for tomorrow night’s ball at the Duke of Chelsey’s.”

Miles took his wife’s hand and kissed her knuckles lingeringly. Dulcie could see the love between her brother and his wife and wondered if she and Jackson would have that; if they could build on their attraction and tenderness to an enduring lifetime of love. If not, she wondered if her love for him, the love she had never realized was so strong, would be enough.

“Dulcie?” Elaine placed her hand on Dulcie’s arm and squeezed gently.

“Hmm?” She turned to her sister who was looking at her with concern.

“Are you all right? You drifted away from us,” Elaine said.

Dulcie laughed, shaking her head, scattering her questions to ponder later. “Yes, I apologize. I was merely thinking of... something.” When the other women asked her to elaborate she declined. The others groaned good-naturedly and Dulcie laughed. She didn’t want to admit she had doubts about her future with Jackson, she only hoped those fears were unfounded.

Chapter Six

Dulcie and her mother entered the ball room of the Duke of Chelsey's London home. Her heart stopped at the sight of Jackson standing at the bottom of the stairs. He was smiling up at her with open tenderness and desire. His immaculate evening wear was so far from his norm it made Dulcie feel very special to think he may have dressed so for her. As she came to stand before him, Jackson gave her a very proper bow and took her hand in his.

He kissed her knuckles before tucking her hand in the bend of his elbow. Jackson offered his other arm to her mother then returned his full attention to her. "You look beautiful, Dulcie."

Heat stung her cheeks but she was very happy he was so pleased by her appearance. "Thank you, Jackson. You look very nice tonight, too."

Jackson grinned down at her and led the two women further into the room. He gently rubbed her fingers, letting his slide between hers. Dulcie shivered at the intimate sensation. She shivered as she again thought of what those fingers could do. Her inner thighs grew damp and she blushed.

They found Arian who was sitting out most of the dances due to her pregnancy. Lady Moira released Jackson's arm and sat with her daughter-in-law. After bowing to the women, Jackson turned to Dulcie and, with a wicked smile on his handsome face, said, "I have yet again claimed all of your dances for myself."

Dulcie blushed as Jackson led her out onto the ballroom floor. She knew he likely had no competition, but that he would imply that he did made her practically giddy. On the parquet, Jackson took her in his arms and they moved in practiced steps to the music. His strong arms told her where he wanted her to go and she followed blindly. The music changed and with it the

dance. Dulcie sighed as she and Jackson were made to separate and not be as close as the waltz allowed.

Two lines formed on either side of the ballroom. It was the first time that night she saw Caressa who waved her over to stand next to her in line. They were not far from the front, being daughters of Dukes. Lord Chelsey and his betrothed stood at the head of either line. As the pair began their progression, everyone laughed and cheered.

Caressa nudged Dulcie with her elbow. "I see Jackson is being very attentive, as he was at the last ball. Tell me, is something happening between the two of you?"

Dulcie felt herself blush. "Jackson has made his intentions known," she said to her friend in a whisper.

A beatific smile spread across the smaller woman's face. "And what does he intend?"

"He has spoken of... a future," Dulcie provided evasively.

"Oh!" Caressa squealed, hugging Dulcie's arm tightly. "I am so happy for you, Dulcie." She looked across the dance floor. When Jackson moved his eyes from Dulcie to Caressa, the small woman smiled and clapped her hands at him. Jackson smiled and bowed slightly, acknowledging her friend's praise.

As they progressed to the front of the line, Dulcie smoothed the apple green silk of her skirt, wondering if she and Jackson would find time to themselves tonight. Caressa and her dance partner walked a short way down the aisle created by the rows of people. When they began to dance, Dulcie laughed and clapped for her friend. She looked across to Jackson who was smiling at her with not a small amount of heat shining in his eyes. Unable not to fidget, Dulcie adjusted her white satin gloves, the tops of which came half way up her upper arms.

Caressa and her partner made it to the end of the aisle and Jackson stepped into the middle, holding his hand out to Dulcie. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and placed her hand in his. Their contemporaries were not used to seeing Dulcie on the dance floor over much. In the country dance, everyone could see you, everyone watched. She allowed Jackson to lead her past the first few pairs of dancers before he took her back into the circle of his arms and waltzed her to the end. Though it was a dance they had all been taking part in only moments ago, the two of them dancing it alone in front of everyone could be considered shocking.

She heard several scandalized indrawn breaths and murmurs from the women's side. From the men's side came low chuckles, words of encouragement to Jackson, and, if she wasn't mistaken, two threats on his life. She had no doubt from who they were and laughed at William and Daniel.

At the end of the aisle, Jackson kissed the palm of her hand before releasing her. When she went back to standing next to Caressa, the smaller woman giggled into her hand. "That was quite the show, dear. You had best watch out or there will be talk of a different nature before the night is through."

Dulcie, who had always concerned herself with propriety, didn't much care what the *ton* thought of her dance with Jackson. All she cared about was how Jackson made her feel. How he touched her. "I do not care."

She looked down at Caressa who was staring at her as if she had never before seen Dulcie. It didn't sound like her, she knew, but it was the truth. "Well, then," Caressa said, "I...I... I don't know what to say except I am happy for you." The expression on her friend's face was one of confusion but she still wore her happy, sparkling smile.

Dulcie stared across the dance floor at Jackson. He watched her in return, his lips curled in that devilish smile she had come to love. Caressa sighed next to her. “He looks positively taken with you.”

“I certainly hope so,” Dulcie said quietly.

As the dance came to an end, couples came together again as a reel began to play. Jackson appeared at her side, his hand at the small of her back. “Come with me,” he whispered in her ear.

They made their way to the rear of the room where French doors led to the veranda. Once outside, Jackson took her hand and hurried down the side of the duke’s home. They came upon the doors to the duke’s library which stood slightly ajar. Jackson guided her inside, closing the French doors behind them.

“Beautiful, beautiful Dulcie,” Jackson murmured, pulling her into his arms. His lips touched hers and Dulcie grabbed hold of his shoulders, kissing him back with all the fervor he gave.

Jackson walked her backwards and turned. Something hit the backs of her knees and he pressed her shoulders for her to sit. He bent forward and lifted her hands to his lips before standing upright and holding her open palms to his chest. Guiding her hands with his, Jackson trailed them down the front of his body. “I need you to touch me, Dulcie. Don’t be afraid, darling, please. I just need to feel you.”

Their hands came to rest against the front of his trousers and he molded her fingers around a long, thick bulge. He squeezed her fingers and groaned, his head falling back. Dulcie felt her sex grow wetter than before and moved her hands along his hardness. She squeezed gently, using the same amount of pressure he had. Jackson groaned, his hands falling away from hers.

His hips began to sway from side to side against the motions of her hands. Jackson jerked away from her and unfastened the buttons of his pants. “Take off your gloves, love.”

Dulcie didn't question his thick-voiced command, merely pulled the slick material down her arms and dropped them on the floor. She watched Jackson shove his trousers partway down his thighs and when he stood up straight his sex was at her eye level. The end was dark pink and shaped like a plum, large, smooth and round with a cleft along the top. The shaft was long and thickest in the middle and had blue lines tracing under the skin. A large sack hugged tight to the base. She had never seen anything quite like it and while it frightened her, she also could not stop herself from reaching out to touch him.

Jackson sucked in a breath then released a harsh groan. She looked up and his eyes bored into hers. He licked his lips. His fingers touched her cheek. "I know... I know this may scare you, but, please, kiss me."

Dulcie smiled and stretched up to press her lips to his. Jackson shook his head. "No, kiss my cock. Remember how I kissed you in your bedroom?" Dulcie swallowed and nodded. He smiled and she knew he was trying to be gentle as his voice softened. "Please, kiss me like that. Take me into your mouth."

Dulcie looked at the organ in her hand. It seemed impossible that she would be able to take much of him inside but she leaned forward, placing a gentle kiss on the tip before opening her mouth for him. The taste of his skin was intoxicating and she lapped at the head. Her teeth scraped against him and he hissed softly. Afraid she had hurt him, she curled her lips over her teeth to protect him.

"Ah, yes, Dulcie." Jackson's voice was shaky as were his hands as they touched her face, her neck. He tore the pins from her hair and delved his fingers into the heavy mass. "Suck, love."

She did as he asked and his hands guided her head away and forward, over and over. Dulcie took the lead and moved on her own, sucking and licking. Moans and groans left Jackson's

mouth in a constant stream until he pulled out of her mouth and turned away from her. He pulled his cravat from around his neck but she couldn't see what he was doing. The tight globes of his rear and the ropes of muscle along his thighs convulsed again and again.

When he turned back to her, Dulcie could see his *cock*, as he had called it, was softening and shrinking. Jackson tossed his balled cravat on the floor with her gloves and knelt down in front of her, wedging his way between her legs. He cupped her jaw and kissed her hard and deep. Dulcie dissolved into the kiss.

She felt Jackson's hands move to her shoulders and push the sleeves of her dress and the straps of her half corset down her arms. He continued until he had uncovered her breasts. They spilled out of the silk and cotton and Jackson pulled back to look at them. "What a beautiful sight," he said and leaned down to press his firm lips to the peaks.

Dulcie's fingers inched the hem of her skirt up her legs until she could spread her thighs wider. Jackson looked down then back up to her face, his wicked smile again curling his lips. "Now that is a sight worthy of worship."

Dulcie blushed and pulled his head close again. This time, Jackson opened his mouth and sucked her nipple into his mouth. Dulcie sighed and gasped. The sensation seemed to go straight through her down to her core.

Jackson's fingers glided up Dulcie's leg and she shivered. He traveled his way up the inside of her thigh straight to her weeping center. Dulcie couldn't contain the squeal that left her lips as he pressed his fingers as deep as he could into her sheath. "So hot and wet, my darling Dulcie. I can hardly wait until we are wed."

Dulcie couldn't reply as he began thrusting his fingers in and out in a pleasure inducing rhythm. His lips returned to her breast and he suckled on her. Dulcie grabbed a hold of the back

of his head and curved her back, offering him all she had. When her climax came over her, Dulcie cried out her lover's name, her eyes squeezed shut as ecstasy rolled through her. When she returned to earth, Dulcie opened her eyes to smile at Jackson.

The vision before her was not one she wanted to see during a clandestine meeting with Jackson. The hallway door to the library stood open. In the doorway were a gaping Duke of Chelsey, his betrothed, and many of their guests, including one man who stood laughing and clapping.

The man who had once claimed to love her and had offered for her, the shining Baron Frederick Bartel pointed and laughed. "Had I known you could be that much fun, Dulcie, perhaps I'd have gone through with the marriage!"

Jackson pulled away from her and turned to rush the baron. Her brothers were on him before he made it far, however. William tackled Jackson to the floor. Miles knelt beside the two, punching Jackson anywhere he could reach. Daniel fell on the pack, holding Jackson's arms as he tried to defend himself.

Dulcie didn't know how long she sat there with her skirt pulled up and her bodice pulled down. She finally came to and fixed her clothing as she rushed to Jackson's aid. "Get off of him! William, Miles, leave him be! Daniel, let go of his arms!"

She jumped into the fray and her brothers stopped immediately, likely afraid they would hurt her. None would look at her as they wheeled away from her and Jackson. A red lap blanket was draped across a wingback chair that was within reach and she grabbed it, laying it over Jackson's exposed lap. She cradled his head in her lap, noting the bruises already forming on his face.

The Baron walked over and knelt on one knee beside her. He picked up a lock of her hair. “Seeing as how your current *suitor*,” he said snidely, “is incapacitated, perhaps you would care to join me in one of the guest bedrooms?”

Dulcie saw red as she turned to look at the man she had thought she loved all those years ago during her first season when she was seventeen. Her brain hadn’t even completed the thought before her knuckles slammed into his perfect nose. The baron fell backwards, clutching his nose. “You stupid bitch!”

“I was once,” she agreed, referring to when she had agreed to marry him seven years ago. “I am not anymore. Come near me again and suffer the consequences.”

She looked down at Jackson who smiled up at her from her lap. “I believe I am supposed to defend your honor.”

“And how do you propose to do that in your current state?” Dulcie asked gently, smoothing his hair from his forehead.

“She has no honor left to protect, thanks to you,” William said from behind her. “Get up, Cornell.”

Her oldest brother reached down and grabbed the front of Jackson’s shirt. Dulcie tried to hold on to him, but Daniel held her arms. William and Miles dragged Jackson from the room. Dulcie’s mother, whom Dulcie hadn’t noticed among the crowd, walked up to her and said stiffly, “Come along, Dulcie. Your brothers are taking Jackson back to our townhouse. Let us go.”

Dulcie could feel the displeasure and humiliation rolling off of her mother. She rose from the floor on shaky legs and was helped by Daniel outside and into their waiting carriage. The short trip home was excruciatingly quiet. Neither her mother nor her brother-in-law would look at her.

When they reached their destination and walked into the house, Dulcie could hear her father yelling. Her mother took her hand in a near painful grip and led her to her father's study. Inside in one of the two chairs that faced her father's desk sat Jackson. He was mussed and bloody. Dulcie sat in the chair next to his and reached for his hand.

Jackson looked at her and tried to smile. She squeezed his hand, grateful for the encouragement. She looked at her father who was staring out the window, taking deep breaths.

He was standing, which Dulcie knew was not a good thing. He wheezed and coughed into his hand. His entire body was shaking as he turned to look at Jackson and her.

"How could you, Jackson? How could you touch our daughter, in the middle of a party filled to the rafters with our friends and acquaintances?" Her father coughed again and shook his head. "She was an innocent girl and you've turned her into a...a—"

"Papa!"

"Well, it's true! We trusted you, Jackson. When Moira and I asked you to woo our Dulcie, we didn't ask you to molest her like she was some common trollop."

Her father's words turned her blood to ice. It froze in her veins as she heard her father's words over and over in her head. *When Moira and I asked you to woo our Dulcie.* They had asked him?

Dulcie felt Jackson's hand squeeze hers as he said her name. It was muffled as though he stood far away from her. "Dulcie?"

"You asked him to woo me?"

Everyone stopped and looked at Dulcie. She looked at Jackson. "Tell me it isn't true."

Jackson swallowed and looked from the duke to the duchess and back to Dulcie. "I cannot. But Dulcie, you have to believe—"

“No,” she said, pulling her hand free of Jackson’s. Her head felt shattered. This was a millions times worse than when the baron had betrayed her.

The way Jackson had spoken to her; the way he had held and touched her. She closed her eyes as a wave of nausea overcame her. “How could you?” Dulcie looked at her parents then at Jackson. “How could the three of you...?”

“Dulcie, let me explain,” Jackson said.

But she couldn’t. Dulcie ran from the room and up the stairs, slamming her bedroom door shut and locking herself inside. Jackson had never wanted her. Her parents had had to ask Jackson to woo her, no doubt to convince her to marry him. They went behind her back and arranged a match between her and Jackson. He had done his best to seduce her. The liberties she had allowed him to take made her stomach dip and she barely pulled out the chamber pot in time to wretch.

Chapter Seven

Dulcie crept across her bedroom floor one final time. She carefully placed her favorite books on top of the dresses she had stuffed into her traveling bag. She closed the large bag and pulled it off the bed, being careful not to let it crash onto the floor. It was barely five in the morning as she tiptoed from her room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen where the staff was already preparing breakfast.

“Good mornin’, milady,” said the head cook Polly, Oliver’s wife.

“Good morning, Polly. Is Oliver here?”

“He’s out back overseeing the gardeners and collecting flowers for the household.” The short, thin woman smiled warmly and glanced down at Dulcie’s bag.

“Thank you, Polly.” Dulcie ran out the back door and found Oliver instructing one poor man in a tree which branches needed to be removed. “Oliver, I need some assistance.”

The butler turned with a startled look on his face. He looked her over, his wise old eyes staying a few moments on the bag she carried. He looked back to her face and smiled. “Yes, miss, how can I be of service?”

Dulcie cleared her throat. “I am returning home to Rothshire early this season. Please have a carriage prepared.” She reached into her bag, withdrawing a note she had addressed to her parents. “And give this to the duke and duchess when they come down for breakfast.”

Oliver took the letter, looking with concern between her and the note. “Is everything all right, my lady?”

Dulcie forced a smile to her lips. “Of course. I just do not feel as though this season has been productive and wish to return home.”

Oliver bowed and went to have her transport made ready. Dulcie smiled to the gardener and went back into the house to wait. The kitchen buzzed with activity but Dulcie was not up to being around people. She asked Polly to prepare some food for her and the carriage driver so they may eat on the journey to her family's country estate. Once she was weighted down with the baskets, Dulcie left the kitchen and walked into the foyer.

As she passed, Dulcie looked into her father's office and was struck by visions of the night before. She heard her father's words, felt the tightening of her stomach, saw their blank, wide stares as she asked the question that had destroyed her.

After she had fled to her room, her mother and Jackson had followed her upstairs. They had banged on her door for an hour, her mother leaving first. Jackson had tried to cajole her into opening the door, had tried to threaten her into it. In the end there was one shuddering thud against the solid oak door and much cursing from Jackson. He had sworn to return, everyday, until she would speak to him. Through it all Dulcie had cried, her heart feeling as cold as ice.

The plan to leave had formed when the tears finally ran dry. She hadn't slept at all that night, staying awake and writing to her parents. The first dozen letters had been full of pain and rage and she had torn them all to shreds. A furious note would seem the act of a petulant child. She didn't want that. Dulcie wanted them to understand how much they had hurt her.

Her last note was simple. *I am returning home to Rothshire. There is no reason left to stay. Please do not return until after the end of the Season.*

A shudder wracked her body and she turned away, squeezing her eyes closed and breathing deeply. A hand landed lightly on her shoulder. "The carriage is ready, my lady."

Dulcie took one last deep breath and turned to bestow a smile on the butler. "Thank you, Oliver."

The faithful servant escorted her outside to the waiting transport and after helping her up, he cleared his throat. Dulcie looked at him expectantly. The words he spoke brought new tears to her eyes. “My lady, I would like to say that your parents love you very much and want only what is best for you. Nothing they may have done was meant to cause you pain.”

“Thank you, Oliver, again. I merely need a little time to myself.” Her throat was sore, her voice choked.

“Of course, my lady.” Oliver bowed and closed the door. He instructed the carriage driver to move on and the still-quiet streets of London filled with the eerie sound of but two horses’ hooves striking the cobblestones. Exhausted by her sleepless night, Dulcie laid the baskets of food and her one bag on the floor of the vehicle and turned sideways, lifting her legs to rest along the length of the seat.

With the exception of stopping to eat the lunch Polly had prepared, Dulcie slept the entire way to Rothshire. She was awoken by a hand gently jostling her shoulder. “My lady? My Lady Dulcie?”

She opened her eyes and yawned. Her dreams drifted away but she knew they had included Jackson. Her breathing and heartbeat were rapid and her thighs were slick. She had one fleeting vision of Jackson’s fingers pumping into her before she ruthlessly burst it like a bubble in her mind.

The carriage driver helped her down and she thanked him as well as the skeleton staff who stood in the drive for her arrival. She told them she would not be down for dinner, she merely wished to rest until tomorrow. The two maids, cook, single footman, and the driver bowed to her as she walked into the manor house.

Rothshire was a beautiful house. It was large and full of light. It was home. Most importantly, at least for the moment, it was safe. Safe from the prying eyes of London, safe from her meddling parents as long as they stayed in London, and safe from one Jackson Cornell.

Chapter Eight

Jack's carriage pulled to a stop and he didn't wait for his driver to come down from his bench to open his door. He flung it open and jumped down onto the walk in front of the Duke of Rothshire's townhouse. He had received a message from the duke and his wife at half past eight in the morning. Twenty minutes later he was standing on their doorstep, pounding on the door.

When Oliver finally opened the door, Jack was close to kicking it open. "His Grace and the duchess are in the library."

Jack shouted his thanks as he moved past the man without even removing his hat and coat. He found them inside the book-lined room. The duchess paced the width of the room. The duke drummed a heavy staccato with his pencil against the tablet of paper resting on his lap. They both looked up but neither stopped, as though they were deep in thought and Jack was not a worthy distraction. He sat in a chair facing the duke, removing his hat respectfully.

"Where has she gone?" Jack asked quietly. The note in his pocket merely stated that Dulcie had left London.

"Dulcie has gone back to Rothshire," the duke said tiredly. "She has asked us to stay away. I cannot say that I blame her."

Jack swallowed roughly. His throat still ached from last night as he had stood outside Dulcie's bedroom, begging, challenging, threatening Dulcie. He had tried everything he could think of and his shoulder was still damn sore for it. None of it had done any good. He had left the hallway, the door still closed and locked. He had told her he would be back but she had fled before he could return.

He couldn't believe that she had left, slipping away in the wee hours of the morning to evade him. Now she was back in Rothshire, alone, giving her parents orders to stay away from her.

She is alone.

Jack's brain came back to that thought. Dulcie was back at her parents' estate, alone but for what was likely only a handful of household staff. No one was there. *No one to interfere.*

Jack cleared his throat, hoping he didn't sound giddy as he said, "If Dulcie wishes to be alone we must abide by her wishes."

"I cannot stand the thought of our little girl being so angry with us," the duchess said. She stopped her pacing so abruptly her skirts whipped around her ankles. Jack swallowed as she turned on him. "This is all your fault. If you had not touched our Dulcie in such a dishonorable manner she never would have learned of our arrangement."

Jack was sick with his own guilt, and he suspected her parents were as well, but he refused to allow the woman to try and place the blame solely on him. "Had you waited but a few days longer, I would have been on your doorstep, asking for Dulcie's hand myself." Jack didn't yell at her, but spoke quietly, hoping to make Dulcie's parents understand. "I should have come to you earlier, perhaps even years ago. I care deeply for your daughter and had made up my mind long ago to have her for my wife."

Lady Moira sobbed once and turned away. Lord Abraham sighed and coughed into his handkerchief. "Why didn't you tell us, son?"

"You gave my pride a why to remain silent of my feelings for her. Now, she has left and we are all to blame." Jack felt he owed them that truth before he lied to them. "I think it would be best if we gave Dulcie the time and space she needs."

Her parents nodded their agreement. Jack apologized for his actions at the Duke of Wesley's soiree and left. He told his driver to get him home as quickly as possible. There, Jack ordered several bags packed as he hurried to his office.

Jack sat at his desk and pulled a key from his vest pocket. In the bottom drawer of his desk was a simple white birch box, small versions of their family crests carved in the front. The initials DNB were carved in an elegant scroll on the top. Dulcie Nan Brighton. Jack brushed his fingers across the letters before unlocking the box and lifting the lid. Inside was every trinket he had bought for Dulcie and had never had the courage to give to her. Earbobs, hair pins, bracelets, necklaces,... a ring.

The ring was the last object he'd acquired. A large emerald cut diamond in a white gold setting. It was pure and clean, understated but beautiful, just like his Dulcie. And she was his. In a few hours she would know.

* * *

Dulcie heard the hoof beats but thought nothing of them. She had sent one of the cook's sons into the village of Rothshire to acquire some of the freesia scented soap and oil she enjoyed using in her baths. Those items had been left behind in her hurry to leave London.

She grew suspicious when heavy knocking sounded at the door. The cook's son would have ridden to the back of the house and entered the kitchen, leaving the items for her with his mother. She saw the footman, Neil, hurry past the salon door. The deep smooth voice she heard was not a welcome one. He was too far away for her to hear his conversation with Neil, but the voice could not be mistaken.

Dulcie had just risen from the chaise, intending to close and lock the door before Jackson could find his way to her. Unfortunately, Jackson moved faster than she did. He was standing in the portal before she was half way to the door. “Hello, darling.”

His rich voice spouting the false endearment made her heart kick inside of her chest. “What are you doing here?” Dulcie had intended for her voice to sound unaffected and strong. Instead it came out in the barest whisper.

Dulcie backed away as Jackson came into the room. He didn’t stop until Dulcie had herself pressed against the pink silk covered wall. Raising a hand, Jackson gently cupped her chin. “It seems that you have misunderstood a great many things, love. I am here to set you straight.”

Dulcie sputtered indignantly but Jackson ignored her. He moved into her stance until Dulcie was certain not even air could pass between them. “You will marry me, Dulcie. And it will have nothing to do with your parents or any obligation I may feel.”

Jackson placed his free hand against her chest, just above her erratically beating heart. “It will have everything to do with this,” he tapped his finger once. “And this.” Dulcie gasped as Jackson pressed his lips against hers. He didn’t try to force her mouth to open or make her take his tongue inside. The simple kiss was filled with purity and emotion.

Jackson pulled away and looked down into her eyes. Dulcie felt disoriented as she looked into his earnest hazel eyes. *No!* She shook her head to clear it. She would not fall for his lies and deceptions again. Pushing against his shoulders, Dulcie scrambled away from him.

“Leave this very moment, Cornell.”

“No,” Jackson replied, straightening his jacket and tugging his cuffs.

Dulcie shook with anger. “What?”

“I said, no.” He looked over her shoulder. “Ah, Neil, when my carriage arrives from London, please place my things in the room across from Lady Dulcie’s.”

Dulcie whirled and looked at the footman. “Do nothing of the sort, Neil.”

Not having heard him move, Dulcie jumped when Jackson’s hands came down on her shoulders and he nuzzled her nape. “So, you would prefer they be placed in your bedroom?”

“Certainly not!” Dulcie exclaimed.

“The room across from Lady Dulcie’s, Neil.”

The man looked between the marquess and Dulcie five times before bowing out of the room, assuring Jackson it would be done. Jackson’s fingers began to knead her tense shoulders and Dulcie tore herself away from the heavenly sensation. “Stay away from me, Cornell. I want you to leave in the morning. My concern isn’t for you but for that poor horse you must have ridden so hard to get here. It is also for any misguided highwaymen who might have the misfortune of trying to steal from you. Wouldn’t do for any of them to be heartbroken by the likes of you.”

Dulcie immediately snapped her lips shut. She hadn’t meant to say that aloud. She hadn’t meant to let him know how terribly he had hurt her.

“Were you heartbroken, Dulcie?” His eyes looked remorseful. “It was not my intention to bring you pain, love.”

“Intended or not.” It was all she could say before tears clogged her throat. She would not cry in front of him; she needed to leave the room immediately. Dulcie turned her back on Jackson and left the salon. Once in the hallway, she dashed to the staircase and ran up to her room where she locked herself away. The tears came quickly. Humiliated tears, enraged tears, pained tears.

Dulcie could not believe he had followed her. How dare he! How would she live through his stay?

Jack watched Dulcie leave. When she was out of sight, he landed heavily on the settee. Her scent still lingered and his heart hurt. The pain in her eyes felt as though it just might kill him. He hated himself. All he had ever wanted was Dulcie and now she wouldn't come near him.

Neil appeared in the entrance of the room. Jack looked at the man who had condemnation written plainly on his face. The servant stepped into the room and, without concern that he was speaking to a nobleman, said, "I believe you should leave. I do not know what happened between you and my lady but the rest of the staff and I would prefer not to see her in such a state."

"It is my sincerest hope to make Dulcie smile again, Neil. I will not leave until that, at the very least, has been accomplished." Feeling the strength return to his legs, Jack got to his feet and made to leave the room.

Neil stepped into his path. "Perhaps she would smile if you would leave."

Jack smiled a little. It was truly a measure of how good a woman Dulcie was that so many loved and protected her. It was even a measure of her character, in his opinion, that so many of the *ton* treated her with such lack of appreciation. She was above them and they all knew it. And she treated her servants as though they were not beneath her. Dulcie was truly a rare creature and he loved her so much the thought of living without her nearly crippled him.

Jack patted the footman on the shoulder. "I'm afraid I cannot go without seeing a genuine smile for myself. If I were to leave, how would I see it?"

The man's nostrils flared but he allowed Jack to pass. Just outside the door, Jack bent down and retrieved his white birch box. He needed to rest. The stairs seemed to rise into Forever, but Jack dragged his tired body up and to the doorway of the room he requested. The pull to look across the hall was too much to resist. He could hear the faint sounds of crying and his heart

broke. He swore that whatever it took, he would never cause Dulcie to cry in sadness again. Tears of joy, he prayed for; tears of passion, he craved. But never again would she cry another tear in pain if he had his way.

Chapter Nine

Dulcie looked into the dining room and wanted to curse Jackson for the warmth that curled around her heart. The gas wall sconces were turned very low. Votive candles sprinkled light over one end of the long table. Jackson stood, in formal dinner attire, next to one of the high-backed chairs. He looked at her with a gentle smile.

Dulcie swallowed hard and entered the room. Jackson pulled out her chair. She didn't thank him as she sat. "You look lovely tonight, my Dulcie."

Her eyes and nose were red from crying, her hair sat atop her head in a sloppy knot, and the dress she wore was plain, brown, and several years out of fashion. If there was one word that would not describe her tonight, it would be lovely. "I am not your Dulcie."

Jackson rounded the end of the table and sat down across from her. "You will be," he replied cheerfully.

The maids served them roast beef with thick, fragrant gravy, yams, and asparagus. Once they poured Jackson some wine and Dulcie her favored cider, the maids retreated to the kitchen. "I shan't," Dulcie spat at him.

"We shall see." Jackson lifted his glass to her and took a healthy swallow before digging into his dinner with what looked to be ravenous hunger. Though he displayed impeccable manners, the speed with which he ate gave Dulcie a stomach ache.

She looked at her own plate. Though the food smelled wonderful, she did not have the appetite to eat it. Dulcie still couldn't believe Jackson was here at Rothshire. That he had followed her as she tried to escape her humiliation at his hand infuriated her. She felt like throwing her entire plate at his head.

When her hand seemed to work of its own volition to turn a spoonful of gravy and launch it like a trebuchet at Jackson's head, Dulcie wasn't the least bit surprised. Dulcie looked across the table. She had always had wonderful aim. The gravy had landed square in the middle of Jackson's forehead. The look on his face was that of dumb shock.

For a moment there was complete silence and stillness, the next, a slice of yam hit Dulcie in the chest. She gasped as the slick, buttery vegetable slid below her neckline. Dulcie picked up a dripping piece of beef and hurled it across the table. Food flew across the table. Jackson picked up the tureen full of asparagus; Dulcie lifted the silver gravy boat. Candles were extinguished until they were left in almost total dark.

Laughter and heavy breathing filled the room. Strong, slippery arms wrapped around her and brought her chest flush to Jackson's. His lips found her cheek first, finding his way to her mouth by feel. Gravy and butter was smeared across her face as Jackson opened his mouth over Dulcie's.

She gasped and Jackson's tongue thrust into her mouth. Dulcie's body reacted immediately. Her knees quivered as she grew hot and slick between her thighs. She couldn't let this happen, Dulcie knew. Jackson sucked on her lower lip as he pulled away to reposition his head.

The edge of the table came up against the backs of her thighs and Jackson pressed his pelvis against her belly. Dulcie felt light-headed. When Jackson's hands began pulling at her clothes and his lips left hers, Dulcie was dragging in deep, sobbing breaths.

"My beautiful Dulcie, I want to hear you cry out for me."

She would never cry for him again. Dulcie had promised that to herself that afternoon. Oh she knew that wasn't what he was asking for, but she would not give him the chance to break her again.

Dulcie pushed Jackson away, putting all of her strength into shoving his stronger body away from hers. His hands slipped from her gravy covered arms and Dulcie ran. Her right thigh caught the corner of the table and she stubbed her toe on the leg of the sideboard, but neither slowed her down. Nor did the stairs. Dulcie didn't stop until she made it to her bedroom.

She had to stay away from him. When he touched her, the room spun and she allowed him access to all parts of her body. That was no longer an option for them. Taking a steadying breath, Dulcie walked away from the door to go to her dressing room.

One look in the mirror had Dulcie falling to her knees, laughing so hard she could barely catch her breath. Her dress clung to her where gelatinous globs of gravy had soaked through the fabric. Her hair hung in heavy disgusting ropes around her. Her skin was smeared brown and yellow.

It took several minutes before Dulcie was able to pull herself together. She rung for a maid and asked for a bath to be prepared. With the dress covering most of her, the worst of the mess was confined to her hair, face, chest, and hands. After scrubbing bits of yam and beef, and pulling an asparagus spear from her hair, Dulcie rubbed a soapy cloth over her skin until she was pink. In the back of her mind she knew she was trying to scrub away the feel of Jackson's hands. She was trying to make herself forget.

It didn't work. When the slightly rough fabric brushed her nipples, she imagined it was Jackson's hands. Taking her freesia scented soap in hand; Dulcie touched it to the lips of her sex. Her breath left her in a rush and she shivered as the slick bar taunted the hard bud of her clit. Dulcie sighed and continued to touch herself.

Jack climbed the stairs and entered his guest room after washing his hair in the bathroom on the first floor. He heard a strange scraping in the hallway. He was undressing for bed but was still wearing his trousers. He cracked the door open and watched as maids carried water into Dulcie's room. They bid her good night and left her, closing the door behind them.

After waiting a few moments, Jack crept across the hall and quietly opened Dulcie's bedroom door. She rose from the water, her hair slick, water beading on her shoulders. Jack stopped breathing, terrified he'd reveal himself.

He watched as she washed herself, the heady scent of freesia filling the room. She gasped and Jack wondered if he made some sound but knew he hadn't when her head tipped back and she sighed in pleasure. His cock hurt with his need of her but he stayed and watched.

She reached out to the small table beside the tub, dropped a dripping cloth and picked up a bar of soap. Though he couldn't see what she was doing, he knew. The catch of her breath, the sigh that turned into a tortured moan told him what she was doing with that bar of soap.

Jack felt as though he was going up in flames. Dulcie whimpered his name as she reached back to grip the edge of the tub behind her head. Her cries grew louder and her head thrashed from side to side. Jack wanted to go to her, bring her to climax with his fingers, his mouth, his cock but he couldn't.

She didn't hate him, he knew, but she was hurt. Had he offered for her himself, long ago, rather than taking her parents' offer, things might be different. They could have been married for years now if he had asked her to marry him during her first season. Jack had been worried she was too young. When that bastard Bartel had asked her parents for their youngest child and they'd agreed, Jack had been devastated.

When he had heard about Dulcie and her family walking in on the orgy Bartel had been hosting in his London apartments, Jack had been unable to staunch the relief he'd felt. He had seen her the next day, held her as she'd cried. Her tears had ripped into his gut but he couldn't have been happier with the dissolution of her betrothal. He'd been even happier when she had confided in him that her tears were not for a love lost, but for the humiliation she and her family had suffered. Dulcie had called herself a fool. A fool to believe someone as seemingly perfect as Bartel had truly wanted her. Jack had taken her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes as he told her that she was perfect and any man who didn't know that and grovel at her feet was an imbecile.

He had been about to kiss her even though he had thought her too young. He was going to curl his arms about her and hold her close and take his first taste of her. Dulcie had moved first, though, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face in his shoulder. Jack had lost his nerve and merely hugged her back.

It hit him now how similar this situation was. He was holding back, staying away, giving her time to heal. Except this time was deliberate. She needed to get past her anger. He would be here when she did.

Jack focused his eyes on her. He watched as Dulcie lost control, listened as she keened his name on her completion. Jack stepped back, silently closing the door as he left. In his room, Jack undressed to his skin. A basin and jug of steaming water sat atop a dressing table along with soap, a cloth, and a thick towel.

He washed himself, thinking of Dulcie. He quickly cleansed all of his body but his shaft. Like his love, he dropped the cloth and used just the soap and his hand. Once he had a heavy layer of lather, Jack dropped the soap and washed his cock and balls thoroughly. He didn't miss

a spot, went over them all again and again. Dulcie's voice whispered though his mind, asking to let her do it for him.

Jack tightly squeezed his eyes shut and pretended it was her washing his painful erection. It didn't take much time, minutes, maybe seconds before he grabbed up the soaked cloth and came on it. Jack's chest heaved for a few moments. He carefully rinsed his softening cock and hanging balls. He laughed, thinking that was likely the cleanest they'd ever been.

As he climbed into bed naked, he considered what they could do tomorrow. Something relatively harmless, but also with a certain level of intimacy. He thought a horse back ride would do nicely. He needed to mend the rift caused by his dishonesty. Oh, he had never lied to her about wanting her, about caring for her, but he hadn't been honest and told her about his arrangement with her parents. At the time, he had thought it best, believing she would think he didn't truly want her, as she thought now.

Jack had to make her understand he was taking the opportunity to catch the woman he wanted. Not that he was giving her parents, and ultimately her, the opportunity to snatch a very eligible man for her. He would make her understand that she was his and he was hers, any way he had to.

Chapter Ten

Dulcie came down stairs fidgeting with the riding habit the two maids had forced her into after she had awoken just after eight. She entered the dining room, frowning at the lack of breakfast waiting. Walking through to the kitchen, she found the servants eating their own morning meals. They stopped eating, stood, and looked at her expectantly.

“Did I miss breakfast?” Dulcie asked, feeling suspicious as she noted the number of eyes that pulled away from her gaze.

One of the maids curtsied to her and said, “Of course not, my lady.”

The cook took Dulcie’s hand in a motherly fashion and escorted her out of the kitchen. “It’s such a beautiful morning; we thought you would perhaps like to eat outside.”

The cook continued to guide Dulcie along as her dread continued to grow. “I think not. I would prefer to eat in the dining room, or perhaps the solar.” She tried to dig in her heels but the cook was larger than Dulcie and very strong for a woman more than twice her age.

When the cook opened the front door, still without releasing Dulcie, she knew she was in trouble. Pulled out onto the fieldstone steps, Dulcie swallowed her anger as she looked at Jackson. He sat atop his large grey stallion with her little grey mare standing next to them. That wasn’t a surprise considering the horse was a birthday present from Jackson a few years ago.

The buff-colored breeches faithfully skimmed Jackson’s legs, showing every curve of muscle and bone. They buttoned just above the calf-length black leather riding boots. His navy blue cut-away riding jacket looked as tight as a corset, accentuating the breadth of his chest and shoulders. A cream and pale blue brocade vest peaked out from under the jacket, stretched taut

over his lower belly. A cream cravat, tied simply, brought attention to his strong chin and jaw line.

Dulcie had to force herself to breathe deeply several times before she could speak. “What is going on?”

Jackson smiled and Dulcie felt her knees give a tiny bit. “I thought it would be nice to go for a ride before breakfast. I was hoping you would join me.”

“No,” Dulcie said without hesitation.

“Now, Lady Dulcie, you shouldn’t be rude to guests. His lordship would just like the pleasure of your company.” The cook patted her hand and smiled sweetly.

Dulcie didn’t want the house staff to think poorly of her for being ungracious. Though Neil knew something was wrong between herself and Jackson, she didn’t believe the footman knew what. Dulcie sighed, filling the sound with resignation. In her mind she plotted. She would make him pay for that little deceit and for convincing the members of the staff to help him.

* * *

She was thinking too hard. His Dulcie was trying to think of something deceitful. Jack could feel it. He could also see it in the crease between her delicate brows. Dulcie was fantastically bright but didn’t have a cruel bone in her lush body. She had to work hard to come up with something that would intentionally hurt someone.

They had ridden for nearly an hour and now Jack was spreading a blanket near a creek. The gentle sound of flowing water, the chirping of the birds that had yet to migrate for the winter, the soft rustling of autumn-turned leaves made this small spot perfect for a picnic. From the package the cook put together Jack pulled out sweet buns, sliced fruits, slices of ham, and a flask filled with wine.

He looked up and watched Dulcie pace back and forth on the bank of the creek. One hand was curled into a fist against her hip as she chewed on the thumbnail of the other. She stopped, looked at him quickly then shook her head and resumed her pacing. Jack bit back a laugh but couldn't hold in a small smile. She was adorable.

“Dulcie, come and eat.” His voice was slightly stern, trying to keep his merriment quiet.

She turned to him and squared her shoulders. “Perhaps I do not want to eat, Cornell. And don't think to order me about on my parents' land. I understand the three of you don't believe I can cope without interference, but I assure you, I am quite capable.”

That annoyed Jack a bit. He had never thought of Dulcie as unable to do anything. He knew she was intelligent, had a wicked sense of humor, and was kind and gentle. He had seen her weather being the object of cruel remarks and crueler people. Only once had her humiliation been too great. He remembered the whispers even while her parents had hidden her for several seasons.

New scandals always arose but if something could be even distantly compared to a previous occurrence, it was. Members of the *ton* loved dwelling on the embarrassment and pain of others. If they could relive it, live vicariously through memories, they did. They also used it to distract others from their own demons. Whenever he had heard Dulcie whispered about, he made certain the person understood he was... displeased.

“Come and eat, Dulcie. Please.” He held his breath as she turned away from him. Her arms were folded across her front, curving her back. She looked as though she was trying to fold in on herself, hide inside of herself. Jack wanted to go to her and wrap her in his arms. He would tell her he loved her if she would listen, but he knew she would not.

Curls danced across her nape as she shook her head. Her spine stiffened; her shoulders straightened. When she turned to face him a small, strained smile curved her lush lips. Jack was not certain if that boded ill or well.

Dulcie joined him on the blanket, curling her legs out to her side. He gave her half of the breakfast and watched her pick at it while he ate. She nibbled at a few items but left most of it uneaten. He would not have his Dulcie making herself sick.

Before she could defend herself, Jack toppled Dulcie to the blanket and covered her body with his. He straddled her hips, using his knees to pin her arms to her sides. Her breasts cushioned his chest. Dulcie tried to buck him off and Jack felt himself grow hard. She opened her mouth and Jack dropped a bite-sized piece of cinnamon cake between her teeth.

Dulcie growled but chewed and swallowed. When it looked like she would try to speak again, Jack dropped a large blueberry in her mouth. He didn't give her another opportunity to speak. He fed her little bits of food until most of her plate was clean. She would buck and try to roll when he would relax but Jack was always ready for her to try and escape.

For a moment he wondered if he was sick. Thinking of her tied to his bed, helpless under him as she was now, was testing his control. She tried again to free herself. Dulcie's breasts pressed against his chest and her hands groped around until they landed on his buttocks. Her hands tightened as she tried to drag him up and shift him off of her.

Jack couldn't stop himself. He pressed his groin into her soft belly and claimed her lips in a deep kiss. Dulcie shrieked into his mouth but he was relieved when she didn't bite down on his tongue. Jack curled one hand around her neck, his thumb caressing her jaw. His other hand worked between them to cup her breast.

Dulcie stiffened a moment before sighing and softening into his touch. Her entire body loosened and her tongue engaged his in the kiss. Rather than trying to push him out she invited him in and Jack nearly groaned at her welcome. He was able to stop himself by remembering the night before. She would have allowed him to touch her had he not spoken.

Dulcie moaned and tried to spread her legs. Jack shifted and raised Dulcie's skirts until he could lie between her thighs, pressing his cock against her pussy. A voice in the back of Jack's mind begged him to stop. He wasn't supposed to be seducing Dulcie. He was supposed to be talking to her, begging her to understand.

He tried to pull away but Dulcie wrapped her arms and legs around him. He couldn't contain his groan as she pumped her hips against him. The front of his trousers became damp as Dulcie grew wet. He had to stop, before it was too late.

Jack tore his lips from Dulcie's and buried his face against her neck. "Love, we must stop."

"No." Her breathing was labored and her hips pumped faster. "I am so close."

Jack swore. He would deprive himself anything, but not Dulcie. He ground his hips against hers and she soon began to shake. "Yes," she gasped, "more."

"Please, Dulcie, please come." He panted against her ear. His hips moved faster, gently rubbing and grinding his erection against her clitoris.

Dulcie cried out, her body convulsing. As her hold on him slackened, Jack pulled away, rolling to the blanket beside her. When he felt her hands groping at the buttons of his trousers he jumped up and put some distance between them.

"I did not mean for that to happen, Dulcie. I wanted to be alone with you so that we might have the chance to talk." Jack leaned his forehead against the trunk of the tree they picnicked under, trying to slow his heartbeat.

“There is nothing to talk about.” Her voice was cool and distant.

Jack turned on her. “What do you mean there is nothing to talk about? What of us? Our future together? I made an error in judgment, yes, but please do not throw away everything because of that.”

She rose first to her knees then to her feet, smoothing her skirts as she stood. “There is nothing to throw away. Honestly, Cornell, it hasn’t even been a month that you have shown an interest in me. Prior to then you treated me as my brothers do; as a pleasant annoyance. Not that it matters. How do you think word of any betrothal would be received once your parents hear of what happened at Chelsey’s ball?”

“They will be ecstatic,” Jack exclaimed.

Dulcie’s eyes bulged and she threw her hands into the air. “They will be mortified! In the eyes of the *ton* I am no better than a whore. A whore with lofty aspirations, I’ll grant you, but one nonetheless.”

“Don’t you ever call yourself that word again! You are not a whore, Dulcie.” Jack closed the distance between them and grabbed her by the upper arms. He shook her as he spoke. Pain lacerated him that she could think of herself in such a way.

“Men can act any way they wish to in our society, Jackson.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Before and after marriage they can have mistresses. There are even those who prefer men in their bed and do not bother to hide the fact. They drink, gamble, engage in deviant sexual practices and yet when a woman slips, even a little, even once, she is condemned. Society will call a dishonorable man rambunctious and an unfortunate woman a whore. It is the way of our lives, Jackson.”

Dulcie yanked her arms from his hands and ran for her horse. He allowed her to get into the saddle and ride away. It was obvious she needed time alone, as did he. She was correct about the way the *ton* worked. There were different rules for men and women. It was possibly even true that they were being vicious about her in London. Whispering about her and of their indiscretion at every available event. She was wrong about him, but Jack was beginning to fear it was too late to prove that to her.

Chapter Eleven

It had been two days since the picnic by the stream and Dulcie had seen neither hide nor hair of Jackson. He was still in the house, of that she was sure. She could hear him roaming the halls, smell him after he had been in a room, and feel him throughout the house. She wasn't sure whether to be happy he was still at Rothshire or curse him for not leaving.

If he left, she could discount all of his pretty words as lies. If he stayed... if he stayed, she had a feeling it meant even more than he was saying. She didn't understand why that should scare her so except that she was so confused and it seemed so hard to trust him now.

The library doors opened behind her and Dulcie held her breath.

"My lady?"

Dulcie sighed heavily but put as much cheer as she could into her voice. "Yes, Neil?"

"The Marquess is here," the interim butler announced.

"Yes Neil," Dulcie replied dryly, "I am aware of that."

"Forgive me, miss. I mean your brother and his wife. In fact both of your brothers as well as your sister, their spouses, and their children have just arrived."

Dulcie popped up from her seat and hurried to the door. "What?"

"Yes, miss. And I am sorry to tell you they have already seen the Marquess of Torningate."

Dulcie could hear in his voice that he was not sorry to tell her that at all.

As she entered the hallway, Dulcie could hear shouting and cursing. Dulcie lifted her skirt above her slippered feet and ran to the group at front door. A physical fight was close to breaking out; William had Jackson by the lapels.

Miles caught her before she could throw herself into the fray. "Stop it! Let him go!"

“He shouldn’t be here, Dulcie. After all he’s done....” William cut a quick look at her before turning back to Jackson and Daniel.

“He didn’t do anything I did not allow him to do!”

Silence rang out after her exclamation. Her brother and brother-in-law released Jackson. He jerked his clothing back into place. Miles’ arms tightened around her momentarily before releasing her and stepping away. Her sister and sisters-in-law and William’s children stood in the doorway of the front drawing room.

“Dulcie—” William stepped toward her but she held up her hand between them.

“We will finish this later.” She patted her hair and took a deep breath before plastering a smile on her face. Dulcie turned to her niece and nephew, going down on one knee to match their heights. “Hello, my loves!”

The three and four year olds ran into her arms and she hugged them tight. “Come along, goslings. Let’s see what there is to play with in the nursery.”

She stood and led them to the stairs. William’s son Jacob tugged on her finger. “I’m not a goslin’ anymore, Auntie. I’m a dragon.” Jacob bared his tiny white teeth and curled his short pudgy fingers into claws.

“A dragon?” Dulcie gasped. “Oh no, Clarissa, what will we do?”

“We must run, Auntie,” her niece cried, laughing at her younger brother’s antics.

They went up the stairs. Dulcie took her time. The children’s legs were too short to go very fast and in the end she carried them the rest of the way from the landing half way up the stairs. She spent her day laughing and playing with her niece and nephew.

Dulcie hadn’t realized she had already begun imagining the children she and Jackson could have had together. The children she could have raised and loved and taught. Children she had

never before believed would be possible because she never truly believed there was a man out there for her to love.

That night Dulcie begged off dinner claiming a headache. When her brothers and sister came to her door after the children were put to bed, she turned them away telling them they could speak on the subject tomorrow.

It was sometime after midnight when she went to the kitchen to heat water for a cup of tea. Jackson was already there. His black hair was soft. He wore only a pair of black trousers and a white shirt.

“Would you like a cup of tea, Dulcie?”

It didn't surprise her that he knew she was there. She always seemed to know when he was about as well. Tonight she was distracted but, truth be told, when she had seen the glimmer of light coming through the door, she had hoped it would be him. “Yes, thank you.”

She took a seat at the servants' table and thanked him when he set the cup in front of her. He sat opposite her, not looking at her, simply sat there, staring into his cup. It was horrible that their years of friendship had been reduced to this – this awkward silence in the middle of the night.

“I never meant to hurt you, Dulcie,” Jackson said softly.

Dulcie sighed. “I know,” she conceded.

“May I ask why an arranged marriage is such an abhorrent idea?” Jackson still didn't look at her.

“Honestly? To spend the rest of your life with someone paid to take you? Whether or not they wanted you? I've been told my entire life how undesirable I am to men, Jackson. I... I just want what the rest of my family was so lucky to find. People to love them, not for titles or money, but for who they are, for their minds and their hearts.”

“And you are so certain we could never have had that?” Jackson finally looked at her.

Dulcie took a large sip of her tea as she laid her heart out to be crushed. “You would have. I’m not so sure about myself.”

He ran his hands through his hair. “Damn it, Dulcie, haven’t I shown you—”

“What you’ve shown me is that you could have performed admirably well had you been stuck with me as your wife. But kisses and touching, Jackson, they are not the same as talking, as getting to know each other as we should have.” Dulcie left the table and was almost out the door when he spoke again.

“I will be leaving tomorrow. I have some matters to set to rights with your family before I go and then I will be heading back to London. Perhaps, someday, you will stop being angry. And perhaps I will still be waiting.”

I hope so, Dulcie thought to herself.

Jack had asked Dulcie’s siblings to meet him in their father’s study after their morning meals. Daniel, Arian, and Reagan insisted they be allowed to attend any meeting that involved the welfare of *their pixie*. Everyone loved Dulcie and considered her theirs. If only she would allow him....

He shook the thought away as he looked at the six people across the room. The men looked at him with hard, angry glares. The women’s gazes carried pity. He wondered if they understood. If they knew how much he cared and how much it was killing him to walk away. He sighed and leaned back against the bookshelves behind him.

“I know you don’t want to believe this, Will, but your sister means everything to me. I never wanted to hurt her. I never wanted to disgrace her.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you just stay away from her?” William stepped forward threateningly but Jack made no defensive gesture.

“I would imagine for the same reason you never stayed away from Arian,” he replied, a sad smile on his face. “Tell me you never held her before the vows were said.”

William charged up to him until the toes of their boots bumped and crumpled Jack’s cravat in his fist. “Are you maligning my wife’s character?”

“No, old friend, I am maligning yours. I remember our youth. We raised Hell a time or two. You did not go to your marriage bed pure as the driven snow, Will.” Jack laughed into William’s reddening face.

“I may not have, but Arian did,” Dulcie’s brother replied.

“Ahem, darling....” Arian’s light voice called from across the room.

William turned his head to the side, his eyes stretching in her direction and a small smile curved his lips. “Ahh, yes,” he said quietly.

He let go of Jack and took a step back. “It is not the same, however. Dulcie is my sister and the babe of the family. She has always had a hard time of it socially, and then there was her disastrous engagement to the heathen. This will be the final straw, I’m afraid. She had already told our parents she did not want to do another Season.”

“Our Dulcie has so much to give,” Reagan said. “I remember when I first met Miles. He tried so hard to get me to notice him but I never realized because no man ever wanted my attention. Dulcie became my dearest friend and introduced us and insisted I dance with him, all night if need be. That perhaps the other men in the room merely needed to see what I could do. It didn’t matter. By the end of the evening I was in love with Miles and I thanked the saints for his little sister.”

“When I first met Dulcie,” Daniel chimed in, “she hit me with her parasol.” The man chuckled. “She hadn’t meant to. Another man was accosting Elaine and I was coming to her rescue. So was Dulcie. Just as she was bringing the umbrella down on the man’s head, I stepped in to pull him off my love. Without missing a step she apologized to me and continued to beat the man. I stood there feeling completely useless until she suggested I help her sister into the nearest shop and send for a constable.

“Elaine had started yelling at me for leaving little Dulcie all alone with her attacker. Dulcie was still hitting the man and refused to stop until the constable arrived.” Daniel looked at him and frowned. “You see, Cornell, we all love Dulcie and will protect her to the end. Even from a man we call a friend.”

Jack chuckled sickly, shaking his head. “You never really understood, did you? Any of you?”

He pushed away from the bookshelves and walked to the door. He made his way up to his room where he spent the day packing what he’d brought with him. When he came to the box containing Dulcie’s gifts, Jack couldn’t bring himself to take them home. He would leave them at Rothshire.

Jack sat at the writing desk in the corner of the room and tried to compose a letter to Dulcie. He had never considered himself a poetic man and his lack of consideration was spot on. The words would not flow onto the paper as they should have. When Neil came up to inform him lunch and then supper was served, he declined the invitations, asking merely for tea then brandy.

He heard footsteps and muffled voices and realized the siblings were retiring for the night. Jack stared at the sheet of paper in front of him. In all of the hours he had been sitting there, he had written only six words. Those words wavered in front of him; the result of more than a little brandy.

Disgusted with himself, Jack rose from the desk and staggered to the bureau, hoping the cold water would clear his head. All he got for his trouble was being drunk, cold, and wet. He ripped off his cravat and shirt, using them to dry himself.

A light knock sounded at the door. “Jackson?”

Dulcie’s voice was soft and hesitant. “Yes?” He asked just as softly, walking to the door. He rested his hand and his forehead against the wood, wishing he was holding her.

“I wanted to make certain you were not ill.”

Jack bit back a bitter laugh. “Never fear, my sweet. I can leave tomorrow, just as I said I would.”

She was silent for so long, Jack thought perhaps she had left. Just as he turned away from the door he heard her. “I did not say I wanted you to leave, Jackson. It merely hurts so much to have you stay.”

Padded footsteps hurried away from his door, followed by a heavy thud. Jack’s head throbbed almost as badly as his heart as he walked away from the door. How could everything have been mucked up so terribly? It was all going so well. He had been days away from officially asking Dulcie to marry him. He would have made the grand gesture of obtaining her parents’ approval which he’d already had. Now he had nothing.

It was impossible to believe. This wasn’t how events were supposed to happen. Since he could remember, Dulcie had been the girl he would marry. He had watched her grow up, waiting for the precise moment. Now she wanted nothing to do with him. His very presence in her house caused her pain. And the thought of losing her was causing his death. Perhaps that was surpassing melodramatic but it felt as though he was dying.

Jack stormed back to the bedroom door and opened it. He looked either way, looking for any of her brothers. When he saw that none stood guard, he crossed the hall and gently opened the door to Dulcie's room.

She sat at her dressing table. No maids were present; she must have sent them off directly after helping her with her clothing. Her copper hair was settled around her lawn covered shoulders. She drew the bristles of her silver brush through her hair, making the thick tresses gleam and fall in gentle waves.

Jack quietly closed the door behind him and moved so that he could see his own reflection in the mirror behind Dulcie. Her hand jerked to a stop. Dulcie laid the brush on her dressing table but did not turn to face him.

“What are you doing here, Jackson?”

Her soft voice tore at him, hardened his cock. He knew exactly why he had come to her room. “I've come to say goodbye.”

Chapter Twelve

Dulcie stared at Jackson's reflection. He crept forward but it wasn't a timid motion. His was the movement of a predator. Jackson Cornell was stalking her. She rose from her perch on her vanity bench and slowly turned to face. "Goodbye, Jackson. Safe journey. Now, if you wouldn't mind, I need to get to sleep."

"I do mind, Dulcie. I mind many things." Jackson walked toward her and Dulcie swallowed. His eyes were bright, his hair loose. She couldn't stop her eyes from taking in the skin left bared by his open shirt. Her fingers tingled as she imagined running them through the light dusting of dark hair covering his chest. Her temperature spiked as he stopped in front of her. The scent of man and brandy drifted over her, intoxicating her as much as if she had imbibed the alcohol herself.

"I mind that you believe I would ever intentionally hurt you. I mind that you are ejecting me from your life. I mind that you are more willing to let sadness and loneliness pervade our lives than allow us the love and happiness we could have together." Jackson wrapped his arms around her, pulling her hard against him. She could feel the erratic thump of his heart as it slammed against her own wildly beating one. "I mind that I will not again have the chance to hold you in my arms and kiss you, touch you like I should for the rest of our lives."

His mouth crashed down on hers, his tongue pressing inside to lash at hers. Jackson swept his hands down to her rear and cupped her hard, bringing her hips to him. He ground his pelvis into her belly, thrusting his hard cock against her softness. Heat tightened in her groin and had her growing wet between her thighs.

Jackson's mouth left hers to trail biting kisses down the side of her throat. "Jackson," she panted. "Please."

He growled against her skin making her shiver at the sensation. The world spun as he turned with her in his arms and walked her backwards to her bed. When her feet left the floor, Dulcie gasped. Jackson tossed her on the bed and stared down at her as he pulled his shirttails from his trousers and pulled the garment off over his head. His large hands moved to the buttons of his trousers and clumsily unfastened them. He kicked the clothing away and stood naked beside the bed.

Jackson placed his hands on Dulcie's bare ankles and slid them slowly up her legs. His lips followed, moving up the calf of one leg, the thigh of the other. "Raise your hips, Dulcie." His voice scraped out of his throat, sounding harsh with the command.

"I...I can't. Jackson, please...." Dulcie was out of her head with desire. She knew she shouldn't allow him to touch her, tried to make herself tell him to stop but she couldn't.

"I will just have to find another way to my prize," he murmured softly. Dulcie's lungs squeezed when she felt Jackson's hot breath through the thin cloth of her night rail. His mouth and nose nuzzled the thatch of hair at the apex of her thighs. He opened his mouth over her cloth covered mound and closed his lips, tugging on the hair at her sex.

Dulcie moaned and pressed her hips up against his mouth. Jackson's tongue probed her through the cloth as his hands raised her nightgown. She cried out in dismay when his mouth left her and screamed in pleasure when he returned, this time without the cloth separating his mouth from her sensitive flesh. He slipped first one then two fingers inside of her. Jackson pressed his tongue between the lips of her sex and stroked from where his fingers penetrated her up her clit, which throbbed so hard her body jerked violently when he touched it.

His mouth and fingers left her sex and continued to push her gown up her body. Dulcie buried her fingers in Jackson's hair and tried to tug him back down. "Please, more."

"Believe me, love, you will get much more." He exposed her breasts and covered one nipple with his mouth.

Dulcie groaned as he sucked hard, pulling and distending her nipple almost to the point of pain. He turned to the other, rubbing his bristled chin against the stiff nub. Dulcie pressed his face to her breast and sighed when he finally opened his mouth and took the nipple inside. This one he suckled gently, using his tongue to roll it against the roof of his mouth.

Jackson pushed her arms over her head and removed her gown completely. His fingertips tickled the sensitive undersides of her arms. He pulled away from her breast, releasing her nipple with a loud, wet sound and brought his body up until he was aligned perfectly with her. His cock settled between her thighs, tight against her center. Jackson looked deep into her eyes. One of his hands coasted down her side and came between them. His fingers threaded through the hair at the apex of her thighs and then she felt the thick, round head of his cock pressing against her.

Jackson's eyes slipped shut as he slowly sank his body into hers. Dulcie bit her lower lip as her body stretched around his. His thumb rubbed gentle circles around her clit, making her hips jerk, making her take more of him in. She whimpered as he went deeper and deeper. He was large and it hurt.

He stopped and opened his eyes. "Hold on to me, love." With that, Jackson pulled back his hips and plunged in, breaking the barrier inside of her. Dulcie cried out at the burning pain.

Jackson kissed her, his tongue thrusting deep as he moved in and out of her body. He stopped petting her sex to pull her leg up and Dulcie wrapped both of them around his hips. The pain began to fade. Jackson continued to pump slowly in and out of her body. His thumb returned to

torment her clit. She was grateful. Soon, pleasure began to bloom through her lower belly. It radiated outward, growing stronger and stronger. Dulcie worked her hips in tandem to Jackson's. She grabbed hold of his back, dragging her nails down to his rear and cupping and squeezing him hard.

"Please, please, yes, Jack. Don't stop." Sweat covered her body and his, making them slippery but that only added to the pleasure as his chest hair abraded her sensitive nipples.

"Never, I'll never stop..."

Dulcie missed the rest of what Jackson said as her world came apart. Her body spasmed over and over again. Jackson kissed her, muffling her screams of pleasure. He stopped moving and pulled away from her.

"Where are you going?" Dulcie gasped the question, wanting to feel Jackson lose control just as she had.

"Nowhere, love." Jackson rolled her to her left side and raised her right leg. He brought it across his chest and over his left shoulder. When he entered her this time he was deeper than before.

Still throbbing and sensitive from making love face to face, it didn't take long for Dulcie to come again. Nor did it when he turned her to her belly and put pillows under her hips. With her bottom in the air he thrust hard and fast. When she moaned at how good it felt he told her to be quiet.

She thought he must be jesting. She moaned again when he twisted his hips. Jackson's hand slapped her rear and Dulcie yelped, which earned her another smack. Surely she must be wicked for she enjoyed the sensation.

Dulcie reached between her legs and touched herself as Jackson touched her. With every sound she made, he spanked her lightly, making her rear heat and her pulse pound. She came again and Jackson turned her to her back, returning to their original position.

He entered her and loved her so slowly and sweetly, tears came to Dulcie's eyes. He kissed her face, her neck, her shoulders. When she climaxed, Jackson came with her, his mouth on hers, his hands framing her face. He whispered to her how precious she was, how beautiful.

Dulcie fell asleep in his arms, hoping he would be there when she awoke. She knew, however, that her wish would not be answered.

Chapter Thirteen

Jack looked down at a sleeping Dulcie. His chest hurt at having to leave. Making love to Dulcie was everything he had ever thought it could be. The way she had responded to him; the feel of her around him.

He had to leave now. If he didn't, he would not have the strength to leave later. Hoping he wouldn't awaken her, Jack leaned down and lightly kissed her temple. "I love you," he whispered and left the room.

Stopping only to grab his boots and overcoat from his room, Jack made quick work of leaving the house. He hurried to the stables and saddled his horse. The sun was nowhere near rising but Jack didn't need the light. He knew the duke's land as well as he knew his own. He wouldn't make it to Torningate before he fell from his horse in exhaustion but that wasn't truly his intent. He needed to put distance between himself and Dulcie. He needed to forget, if only for a short time, that Dulcie even existed.

* * *

Sunlight and a cold bed greeted Dulcie as she woke. She turned to her back and looked at the canopy. "I will not be ashamed. I will not be ashamed of myself nor my actions."

Her whisper seemed to echo cruelly through her empty bedroom. Tears slipped from the corners of her eyes. "Damn it all," she whispered harshly as she scrubbed at the tears with her fists.

Dulcie threw back the covers and gasped as the cold morning air touched her naked skin. The blanket that usually lay across the foot of her bed was wedged between the corner of the mattress and its post. She wrestled it loose and wrapped herself as tightly as one might swaddle a baby.

She left the bed and looked at the sheets. Just off center was a rust red stain. There were drops in other places as well.

Evidence of her final ruin stared her in the face. The tears had dried on her cheeks but she expected more. As she looked at the proof of her lost innocence, she expected to cry and rant and scream. She felt no inclination to do any of that.

She remembered last night. Every detail presented itself in full crisp color and definition. For all of his lies and all of his deceit, Jackson had given Dulcie one thing. And it was beautiful.

Dulcie dressed quickly, not bothering to ring for one of the few maids on hand. She even put the bed into some semblance of order, hoping they would see the smooth covers and not worry to change the linens. With a last look in the mirror to make certain her hair and dress were in place, Dulcie stepped into the hall.

Neil and the maids had the door to the guest room across the hall open. Several traveling bags and trunks were set outside the door. Jackson was nowhere in sight. Dulcie's stomach knotted. "Neil? Where is the marquess?"

Neil bowed to Dulcie and smiled gently at her. "It would appear that his lordship left sometime during the night. When the stable boy awoke this morning, he reported that he'd found the marquess' steed gone."

Dulcie's stomach dropped. He had run away in the dead of night. He hadn't waited to say goodbye. Bile burned the back of Dulcie's throat. Dulcie clutched her stomach. She walked down the stairs, her feet feeling like lead, and her heart threatening to beat from her chest.

As she entered the dining room Dulcie could hear the cacophony of a joyous breakfast. Her brothers, sisters and the children were talking and laughing as they ate. William saw her first.

“Pixie! Good Morning! Did you see that donkey left last night? A good thing, too. Miles, Daniel and I were going to throw him out if he didn’t leave first thing this morning.” William laughed and turned to their brother, toasting him in camaraderie.

She had promised herself she wouldn’t cry. Not again. Not for Jackson. Then again, perhaps the tears rolling down her cheeks were not for Jackson.

“Dulcie? What’s wrong?” Elaine left the table, followed closely by Reagan and Arian. When they reached her, a sob tore free of Dulcie’s throat and she collapsed against her sister. “Dearling, please tell me what is wrong.”

“Damn it, Dulcie!” William roared as he stormed toward the woman. “Did he touch you?”

“William!” Arian admonished.

“Well?”

“Oh, do be quiet, Will! You stand there all high and mighty and holier than thou when you have absolutely no ground to stand upon. Name one day in your adult life you were pure and I will bow to you.” Dulcie waited and watched as her oldest brother’s face turned bright red. “I thought not.”

She shoved past William and marched to the table, sitting on the side of the children as far from the other adults as possible. The rest of breakfast passed in an uncomfortable silence. Dulcie couldn’t find her appetite. Her stomach was tied in so many knots she didn’t know if she’d ever feel like eating again.

As the days went on, Dulcie avoided her brothers whenever possible, unable to tolerate their bruised eyes. She was hurt by their accusing stares. What time she didn’t spend alone, which was most of her day, she spent in the company of her sisters and niece and nephew.

Dulcie rode out to the creek where she and Jackson had picnicked. She sat on the ground under the tree where he had brought her such physical joy. She no longer knew which was worse, being deceived by Jackson or being left by him.

Chapter Fourteen

Dulcie's parents returned to Rothshire. Though they normally would have stayed in London until all of the Christmas parties had come and gone, they had decided to return early since none of their children were in London for the holiday. Her mother talked of hosting her own Christmas soiree. Unfortunately, she wouldn't be able to invite many people as there were few not talking of Dulcie's indiscretion.

Immediately upon the duke and duchess's return, William took their father into the duke's study and closed the door. It wasn't long before Dulcie heard her name shouted throughout the manor house. *If nothing else*, Dulcie thought to herself, *it appears father is feeling better*.

Stiffening her spine, Dulcie walked into the study. Her father's face was bright red and her brother stood to the side of their father's desk. Dulcie was tired of William's domineering of late. Never had her brother treated her as he had in the past month. She wavered between crying over the change in their relationship and wanting beat him about the head with a blunt object for treating her so cruelly when she needed his love and support.

"Sit!" Her father had his fists planted in the center of the desk and he kept his eyes off of her. "Please tell me what Will has told me is not the truth."

"It would all depend on what it is he has told you." Dulcie looked at her brother. She held his gaze until he cleared his throat and looked away. Dulcie began thinking of objects in the room she could use on her dear brother.

"He told me you and Cornell.... That you two.... Ah, damn it all." He rubbed a hand over his face and fell heavily into his large high backed chair. "You know what he told me, Dulcie. Why? How could you?"

Dulcie laughed bitterly. “Isn’t it what you wanted father? For him to beguile me?”

“Your mother and I wanted to see you married, we wanted to see you happy. What if there is a child?” He looked her over a concerned frown creasing his forehead.

“I can tell you with all confidence that there is no child, father.” When her monthly flow had come two weeks after making love to Jackson, Dulcie had cried. Even now she could not say for certain if it had been in relief or disappointment.

“No, I suppose there is not. What has happened to you, Dulcie? Your cheeks have thinned and your figure is not as full as it once was,” her father remarked.

Dulcie had found her appetite had waned since Jackson’s departure. She no longer found pleasure in the things she once had such as music, reading, and food. “Nothing has happened, father.”

The old man sighed. “Dulcie, you can go. Ask your mother to come in here. We have matters to discuss.”

“Only if Will leaves with me.” Her father and brother both began to protest. Dulcie held up her hand. “No, William is the oldest, next in line, a marquess with profitable lands of his own; all of this I know. He has also turned into a terrible busybody, as much of a gossip as many of the matrons of the *ton* and I will *not* have him, of all people, aiding to decide my future.”

“Fine. Will, you won’t be included in the conversation. Leave with Dulcie.” Their father nodded toward the door.

“Father, it is my duty to Dulcie to help her protect her future.” William huffed indignantly.

Dulcie was beginning to grow tired of how childish her brother was acting. Never had she known him to act like such an obnoxious adolescent, angry for not getting his way at every turn. Dulcie sincerely hoped the day would come that they could put this behind them and be the

brother and sister they used to be. As for now, however, she would treat him as she treated his children when they were unruly. She would ignore him and allow his parents to settle the matter. Unfortunately for William, it took much more for the children to upset her than it was taking for him to.

“I will not leave unless he does.” Dulcie stood her ground. She couldn’t fathom where the Dulcie who was so docile for her family had gone. She did know, however, that she would no longer be cowed by heavy-handed men like her brother. Like Jackson.

“Go, Will,” their father intoned.

William turned and scowled at Dulcie. She waited, making him precede her out of the room. Their mother stood outside the door and Dulcie stood aside, motioning her in and closing the door behind the smaller woman. Just to make certain William didn’t misunderstand, Dulcie stood guard, her cheeks heating as she heard first her mothers outraged cry then her pained sobs.

The door flew open behind her, her father shouting her name. “Dulcie! Oh, Dulcie, sorry dear. Come in here. Your mother and I need to speak to you.”

Dulcie once again entered her father’s study. Her mother sat in the large leather chair behind the desk, her face in her hands, her slim shoulders hunched. Dulcie felt her heart twist.

“Take a seat,” her father said.

Dulcie sat in one of the wingback chair before the fireplace. The heat of the fire barely warmed her as she sat and waited to hear her parents’ decision. She rubbed her frozen hands together, trying to chafe some heat into her skin.

“We have decided to have a Christmas ball, Dulcie, here at Rothshire. We will invite all of the eligible titled gentlemen in England and your mother and I will choose a suitable match for you.” Her father’s voice was gruff, telling her he did not want to have to force her hand but that

she had left him no choice. “The next day we will negotiate a marriage contract. We will have to provide a larger dowry to compensate for your indiscretion but I do believe we should be able to settle you with an agreeable husband.”

Dulcie bit her lips to prevent herself from crying out. She didn’t want an *agreeable husband*. She feared, however, that it might already be too late for what, or rather whom, she did want.

Chapter Fifteen

Christmas Eve had dawned that morning dull, damp, and cold. Had she been superstitious Dulcie might have believed the weather was an omen. As it were, she had little faith this night would bring more than humiliation for either her or her parents.

Dulcie sat at her vanity as two maids curled and coifed her hair. A deep burgundy velvet dress was laid across her bed. The center line of the bodice and skirt were golden satin. Stitching in the bodice made a diamond quilt pattern, garnet beads sewn in where the lines crossed.

Tonight her parents were going to choose a husband for her, or attempt to at any rate. Dulcie wasn't all together convinced it mattered how much curl they put in her hair, how much color they put on her cheeks, or how prettily they dressed her. What mattered was a man's willingness to look past her overly soft body, which none ever had. What mattered was a man's willingness to look past the spectacle she had made of herself at Lord Chelsey's ball, a highlight few would ever let her forget. What mattered would be a man's willingness to forgive her lack of purity, which was a farfetched notion, indeed.

Dulcie flinched as the maids pushed pins, tipped with jewel encrusted ladybugs, into her hair. Torn from her musings, Dulcie sighed frowning as they began to apply spots of color to her eyes, cheeks, and lips. She raised a hand to bat her offenders away and wash off the irritating cream. "Not to worry, milady, not much is needed with your lovely coloring," one maid commented. She rapped Dulcie's knuckles with the thin silver handle of the brush she was using to apply color to Dulcie's lips.

Once they were finished torturing Dulcie, they forced her into a corset and gown. She sniffed indignantly, pulling at the beautiful dress as though it were a sack. "I do not even see why I must

attend. My parents are going to make the decision completely on their own. They have no need for me. I should be allowed to remain here in my room and not uncomfortably stuffed into this dress.”

“Now, milady,” said the same maid who had admonished her earlier. “If you want to know uncomfortable, I can tell you stories of the dresses and corsets that used to be in fashion. But that is not the true matter, love. Your parents are trying to do right by you and you have turned into a spoiled, petulant, rotten little child.”

Dulcie could feel her cheeks heating under their paint. She turned her eyes down to the floor and folded her hands in front of her. If a member of the staff was willing to speak so plainly to her of her obnoxious behavior of late, she must truly be acting horribly.

“Now, I know your heart was broke, lass, but your parents are doing what they feel is best for you. So you will go downstairs tonight, dance with all of the gentlemen your parents direct you to, and acquiesce to your parents’ decision. Do you understand, milady?”

“Yes,” Dulcie said softly.

The maids helped her put on her burgundy slippers and touched up her hair. Miles came to escort her downstairs. Oliver announced her arrival. At the large double doors of the grand ballroom. Dulcie tightened her hold on her brother’s arm, terrified she would drop from fright. Miles patted her hand and whispered, “It will be all right, love.”

She knew he was lying. It would never be all right. Dulcie smiled brightly, her eyes tripping over all of the curious faces. Few of them looked at her with an ounce of the kindness they once did. Her smile didn’t falter even as she tried to swallow her lump of fear.

At the foot of the stairs, Caressa came fluttering to her, wrapping her arms around Dulcie’s waist. In Dulcie’s ear she whispered, “I don’t care what they say. You are my truest of friends.”

Tears formed in Dulcie's eyes but she blinked them back as she returned Caressa's hug. "As you are mine."

They separated and Caressa followed as Miles escorted Dulcie to where their parents were stationed on a raised dais at the side of the room. She kissed each parents' cheeks and waited. With the exception of Arian, who was sitting with her two month old in the nursery, all of the brothers and sisters were present and she kissed them as well.

First to approach her was Frederick Gander. As the third son of the lord of Hillford he would be expected to either make his fortune on his own or marry into it. Apparently he had chosen the latter. By her brothers' disapproving scowls, she knew they didn't like him. Dulcie did not feel one way or the other about the man. When they had had the chance to meet, Frederick had always been cordial. He seemed even-tempered, was well-educated, and she had never heard tell of scandal in connection with his name. While he wasn't unattractive, she considered as they danced, he was rather unnoticeable. His hair was so fair it was practically the same shade as his very pale skin. His eyes were a medium shade of brown. His features were round and soft.

She was so intent on her study she hadn't realized he was speaking. "Your parents have a lovely home. Al-most as l-lovely as their daughter."

She could tell by his stutter and sickly smile that he did not truly find her lovely. Dulcie smiled, understanding his discomfiture. Frederick frowned and a blotchy blush stained his cheeks. "Thank you."

The song ended and Frederick escorted her back to her parents. That was how the night progressed. Dulcie was passed from one unmarried gentleman to the next. It was a relief when Kirkland Perry came forward for his dance. Kirkland may be no more inclined to marry her than any other man in the room but she liked him well enough to consider him something of a friend.

He bowed over her hand, his lips grazing her knuckles. It struck Dulcie that Kirkland had never before done that. She wondered for a moment if he believed she would allow him liberties because of her past with Jackson. When he raised his head to look at her, however, she could see no sign of deception in his gaze.

Kirkland led her onto the parquet. A waltz began and more than a few dance partners left the floor. Dulcie mentally sighed. While he was a wonderful dancer, she did not fit Kirkland that way she fit Jackson.

She slammed her eyes shut and forced the thought away. She had to stop thinking of Jackson. It had been months since that night. *When would it stop hurting?*

“Dulcie? Are you all right?” Kirkland’s voice broke through her memories. She opened her eyes and felt a tear she could not stop slip down her cheek. The song had not yet ended but Kirkland pulled her to the side. “Oh Dulcie.” He wiped the tear away. “Come, you need some fresh air.”

Kirkland led her out of the main doors of the ballroom. They somehow avoided her family and Oliver as well as the rest of the household staff, who were all busy with the party. They made their way to the front door where her escort hastily grabbed a coat and a thick shawl and stepped just outside.

Not caring who the fur-trimmed wool shawl belonged to Dulcie happily wrapped herself in its warmth. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“Why are you doing this, Dulcie?” Kirkland asked.

“Pardon?”

“Why are you doing this to yourself and Jack? The two of you belong together. You would be happy together.” Kirkland said quietly.

Dulcie chuckled bitterly as she stepped gingerly down the front steps. “Did the other men in there put you up to this? ‘Go ahead, Kirkland, she likes you the best. Convince the cow she doesn’t want to marry one of us.’ Thank you very much.”

“No, Dulcie, that isn’t what this is about at all.” Kirkland followed her, taking her shoulders in his hands and turning her to face him. “Let me tell you a story. It is about my years at Eton, then at Cambridge. Do you know was who one of my closest friends during those years? Jackson Cornell. Jack was brilliant at many things – mathematics, science, history – but what I liked most about him was his ability to tell a tale. And there was one character he told tales of most frequently. The strange thing was I knew this person. She was tall for a girl, had long red hair, brown eyes, and was the sweetest girl I knew. And Jack’s favorite story to tell of her was how he was going to marry her one day.

“There was a problem though. I wanted her for myself, as did several other chaps we knew. When we went to university there would be nights several of the boys and I would go to one of our fathers’ clubs and meet women of... questionable virtue. The few times Jack accompanied us he always found a woman reminiscent of the woman from his tales.”

Kirkland released her shoulders and stepped away from her, turning away from her for a moment as if adrift in memories before returning to her. “One night I remember we had all been drinking, Jack and I much less than the others, to the point that the others passed out cold long before midnight. I told him that I would have you, Dulcie. That he could find someone else for the youngest Brighton child would be my bride. Do you know what he said to me?”

Dulcie shook her head. Kirkland walked up to her, coming close so that only a hairsbreadth separated them. “He said, ‘I love her, Kirk. I think I must have loved her before I was even born for I don’t remember a time I didn’t love her. She is everything good in this world, everything

good in me.’ That gave me pause but something inside me still told me to reach for you.” He lifted a hand to her cheek, grazing her cheek with his fingertips.

“Then, that summer at his parents’ estate, I saw how you acted around him. How you blushed whenever he paid attention to you, how you laughed and smiled at him. How you would glance at him when he wasn’t looking and look for him when he wasn’t near. That was when I knew I had to look elsewhere for my bride. I could see that you were in love with him, too.”

Dulcie shook her head. “How could you know when I didn’t?”

“All I had to do was look at you looking at him. You were still young, Dulcie. You still had to grow and learn.” Kirkland wrapped his free arm around her waist and caressed her jaw with his fingers. “Now, though, could you find room in your heart to love another?”

Kirkland lowered his lips to Dulcie’s. His kiss was soft and gentle, his tongue gliding across her lips, entreating her to open. When she did, he explored softly. It was a beautiful kiss, one that would live in Dulcie’s memories, she knew. But it did not touch her heart in the way Kirkland claimed he hoped it would.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. “You do not feel as I do, do you Dulcie?”

“No, I am sorry, Kirkland.” She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him close, laying her head on his shoulder. “I never knew you felt this way. You were always kind to me, certainly, but you never showed an interest in me. You always follow around after... smaller women.”

Kirkland squeezed Dulcie close as if reluctant to let her go. “That was because I knew you and Jack were made for one another. To come between you two would have been wrong. I warned off the others who had their eyes on you. The only one to not listen was Bartel and that was because he was an ass who wanted to cause mayhem more than anything else.”

“As for the women, it isn’t just a body that suits me. And there is nothing wrong with yours, Dulcie, believe me. You are beautiful. I always thought so.” Kirkland kissed the top of her head.

Dulcie uttered a choked, “thank you.”

“Come along, love. We need to get you into the house before you catch your death.” Kirkland escorted her back inside and took the shawl from her shoulders. “Before we go back into the ballroom, let me say one last thing. A lifetime is a long time to spend with someone you do not love and who does not love you. My parents, for the good face they show to the *ton*, have not had a happy marriage. They were both in love with other people when their parents forced them to marry one another. I’ll admit, they are... friends but they have never truly loved each other.”

Kirkland took her back into the ballroom and to her parents. He bowed over her hand, lingering over her knuckles and giving her a sad smile before walking away. Once he was out of earshot her mother said, “Where have you been? You missed your dance with the son of the Earl of Cardiff.”

“I’m sorry, mother. I wasn’t feeling well. Kirkland took me outside, thinking it might help.” Dulcie felt her cheeks heat thinking of the kiss Kirkland had given her.

A man with graying hair and mustache was making his way up the few stairs of the dais. “Here comes the Duke of Coddington. Try not to wonder off with him, please.”

“Mother,” Dulcie admonished quietly.

“Dulcie,” Lady Moira returned. She sighed, “Dear, you only have a few more dances then you can retire for the night.”

Dulcie nodded and accept the duke’s hand when he approached. For the next two hours Dulcie continued to dance. When her parents allowed her, she left the party and slowly climbed

the stairs. At the top Dulcie stopped, pulled not to her door but to the door of the room Jackson had used during his stay.

Picking up a decorative oil lamp from a table against the wall, Dulcie opened the door and stepped inside. Maids had been in the room dozens of times since Jackson had left. As far as she could tell, no trace of him remained, but she felt closer to him nonetheless.

Dulcie walked around the room, letting her fingers touch on the fabrics covering the bed, the wood of the furniture. When she came to the desk, she found something odd. A small chest sat atop the desk, two crests were engraved on the front. One was her family crest, the other was Jackson's. On the top of the box, her fingers followed the letters DNB. The key was in the lock.

Dulcie lifted the lid and peered inside. Inside were a number of smaller wooden boxes. She picked up a small but beautifully painted square box from the center. Dulcie gasped when she opened it and found a beautiful diamond ring. Each box contained a beautiful piece of jewelry or a small trinket. One box held a gold locket; inside one half was a snippet of black hair, in the other were engraved the words *my heart is yours*.

Dulcie's chest ached with too much emotion. She laid the necklace on the desk, straightening the chain, trying to make sense of everything. Something caught her attention. The corner of a piece of paper peeked out from under the chest. Dulcie pulled it out and read the words scrawled in Jackson's elegant handwriting.

I love you. Please forgive me.

Sobs tore free from Dulcie's throat.

Chapter Sixteen

Jack looked out over the snow covered hills of the Torningate estate. His parents had tried to insist he join them a few miles away at their manor house in Waterton but he had promised to join them for dinner. For most of the day, Jack wanted peace, he wanted solitude, he wanted... He wanted Dulcie.

“Ha!” Jack laughed bitterly at himself. He had a better chance of Father Christmas appearing before him.

“My lord, you have a visitor,” Jack’s butler, Wilcox, called from the door of his study.

Jack looked at the man over his shoulder. “I am not receiving any visitors today, Wilcox.”

“And I am not leaving until you speak to me.”

Very slowly Jack turned to see Dulcie standing just behind his butler. “Leave us.”

“Yes, my lord.” Wilcox bowed and left the room, closing the doors behind him.

Neither of them said anything for several minutes. He looked at her. Her eyes were red. She had lost weight since the last time he had seen her, hollowing her cheeks slightly and defining her collarbone. The glint of a gold chain caught his eye. She was wearing the locket.

She had found the box. He wondered when. He wondered if she had found anything else. Dulcie stepped forward and her scent of freesia and woman drifted toward him.

Dulcie was the first to break the silence. “How are you, Jackson?”

Jack didn’t know what to say. He was half tempted to lie, to tell her he was wonderful. He couldn’t. “I’m miserable, Dulcie.”

She took another step toward him and Jackson took a step toward her. “So am I, Jackson.” She looked away and chewed on her lip.

Jack took three large steps, almost closing the distance between them. “Why did you come, Dulcie?”

Jackson’s whispered question steeled Dulcie’s resolve. She looked into his eyes. “I came for you,” she responded and closed the distance between them.

“Why?” Jackson placed his hands on her waist. Her knees went watery at his touch.

“Because I need you, Jackson. I need you by my side, day and night. I need to hold you in my arms and I need you to hold me. Because I love you, Jackson. More than anything.”

Jackson kissed her, his mouth seizing hers. He kissed as if he were starving for the taste of her. Dulcie understood this for she felt the same way. Her hands roamed his body, threaded through his hair, tore at his clothing. She needed to feel his skin against hers. Jackson pulled away, took her hands in his and held them to his chest, and looked into her eyes. “I love you, Dulcie. I always have and I will for the rest of my days.” He kissed her finger tips. “Say you will marry me.”

“I will,” she replied.”

Jackson smiled and pulled her back into his arms, his hands going to the fastenings at the back of her dress. He stopped as the dress began to sag. “Come with me,” he whispered, placing a kiss on the tip of her nose.

Jackson led her upstairs to his bedroom. He stood her before a full length mirror in the corner in the room and continued to remove her dress, kissing her skin as he bared her. He removed her half corset and shift and simply stared at her reflection as she stood nude before him.

“You are so beautiful, Dulcie. My love.” His hands touched on her hips and slid forward to her stomach. He brought them up to cup her breasts, pulling and plucking her nipples to hard points. Dulcie dropped her head back to his shoulder, seeking his lips with hers.

Against her mouth he whispered, “You have lost weight, my love. We have to work on building your appetite.”

Dulcie smiled. “Please do.”

One of Jackson’s hands slid down her body. He pressed his fingers between her legs, seeking her clit. Dulcie gasped and cried out as he massaged her. He pressed the nub harder and harder, faster and faster until she exploded. Dulcie cried out, “Jack!”

Jackson held her until her shudders became shivers then took her hand and led her to his bed. He pulled back the blankets and guided her to lay back. Dulcie turned onto her side, watching her love as he undressed for her.

Once he was naked, Dulcie sighed at the sight of his beautiful body. The long, lean muscles of his arms and legs, the chiseled curves of his chest and stomach made her salivate. The sight of his long, hard cock made her shivers begin anew.

Jackson climbed in next to her into the bed. His hands smoothed over her body, tracing her curves, kissing her everywhere. When his teeth tugged her nipples, Dulcie arched her back, begging for more. He suckled and licked them, making her moan. Jackson kissed a line down the center of her body. Her hips bucked when she felt his hot breath ruffle the hair covering her sex.

“Please, no, I cannot wait this time.” Dulcie pulled on Jackson’s hair. He rose above her, positioning the head of his cock at her entrance.

“I love you, Dulcie.” Jackson thrust inside of her, deep and hard.

Dulcie felt contractions begin deep in her womb. “I love you, Jackson,” she replied.

He smiled down at her and began to move, slow and deep. It felt so glorious Dulcie never wanted it to end. Already the contractions grew stronger, however. Dulcie wrapped her legs around Jackson waist and pumped her hips against his. The feel of his cock moving inside of her was heaven and hell, salvation and sin.

Jackson moved faster, his hips pumped harder. “More, please. Don’t stop,” she begged.

“I’ll never stop. I’ll never stop loving you,” Jackson gasped.

Dulcie cried out as she came, her vision graying. She grabbed Jackson’s back, burying her nails into his skin as her climax went on and on.

Jackson shouted her name as he ground his hips against her. Dulcie held him against her. She could feel her tears streaming from her eyes. Her lover lifted his head and kissed her tears from her face. “Did I hurt you, Dulcie?”

“No, that was beautiful, Jackson. Simply beautiful.”

Jackson smile as he looked down into her eyes. “We will be married as soon as possible, even if I have to buy a special license. You are not getting away again, Dulcie Nan Brighton.”

Dulcie laughed. This year for Christmas she received everything she could ever want. A man to love that loved her in return, a genuine proposal of marriage, and all of it with Jackson Cornell. Her hero, her love, her heart.

Epilogue

Eight Months Later

Dulcie held out her arms and took very small steps backwards. “Come along,” she said sweetly to the smiling, nearly toothless toddler. “Come along, Haley. Come to Auntie Dulcie.” The sunlight glinted off the sparse blond curls of Miles and Arian’s daughter.

The little girl giggled and her chubby arms reached for Dulcie as she followed along until Dulcie finally let the baby catch her. She swung the little one high in the air and around in a circle and the child laughed even harder. Dulcie laughed with her and brought her niece close to her for a hug. She looked up to see her husband speaking to her brother Miles. He looked at her and even at this distance she could see the softness that overtook his features.

She carried Haley to Arian and the little girl gurgled happily at the sight of her mother. Dulcie sat next to her sister-in-law who commented, “That man has a brooding look about him.”

Dulcie looked at Jackson and smiled. “He says that he enjoys having our time together but every time he sees me with one of the children his face softens in such a way that I wonder if he truly means it.”

Elaine laughed. “I don’t doubt he means it, dear. However, a man can’t help but picture the woman he loves caring for a child that is a part of them both.”

Reagan clicked her tongue before saying, “Not that they give you any peace when you are carrying the child. Constantly moving things out of your way as though you’re some great beast without the ability to move around objects.”

The others laughed and Reagan huffed, which only made them laugh harder. Finally Reagan joined in. Four shadows fell over their sunny spot and the women looked up to smile at their

beloved husbands. Jackson held his hand out for Dulcie and she took it and rose. “Is it time to leave already?”

“Only if we hope to reach Torningate tonight, my love.” Jackson looked deeply, hungrily into her eyes and Dulcie knew she wanted to return to their manor house tonight.

She turned to her brothers and sister and their spouses and waved the playing children in so that she could kiss them all goodbye. The children complained that they had only just arrived a few days before but Dulcie promised that they would visit again soon.

Her sister and sisters-in-law smiled knowingly at her as they hugged her. Conversely, her brothers and brother-in-law frowned as they hugged her. Her husband smiled as he shook their hands. As they walked away Dulcie whispered to Jackson, “It isn’t nice to tease them. They may still decide a night in the village gaol is worth thrashing you.”

He kissed her nose. “If it would make them feel better I might just let them do it. But then I couldn’t do this.”

“What?” She asked then quickly wished she hadn’t when he lifted her high and wedged her into the carriage. Dulcie looked at her husband through the small door as he jumped up through it and laughed at his antics as she batted his hands away.

“Take me and my lady home, Lon.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Jackson worked his hands up Dulcie’s legs and she laughed as she pretended to fight off his advances. He spread her thighs and pulled her bare groin tight to his restrained one. “So tell me, Marchioness,” he said silkily, “what can I give her to make my lady-wife happy for her birthday? Aside from the beautiful gala I have planned for her two weeks from tonight.”

“Your heart,” Dulcie demanded.

“I gave it to you long ago,” Jackson replied.

“Your soul,” she said softly this time.

“The good Lord made our souls as one so that we may go through Eternity together forever.

You have had that even before you were born,” he returned just as softly.

“Your love,” Dulcie whispered.

“Forever,” Jackson promised.

Dulcie remained quiet for a moment. When she spoke again her voice was choked. “Your child.”

Jackson smiled. “Your will.” He kissed her lips softly and set about to fulfilling her wish.

Coming soon to [The Dark Castle Lords](#): 'Courting Caressa' by S.J. Ronayne

Prologue

Caressa Davenport stared out of one of the tall, thin windows that flanked the front doors. Never had she imagined she would feel jealousy toward her best friend. Then again, never had she thought to see Dulcie in Kirkland Perry's arms, his lips pressed to hers.

When Caressa had watched them leave the ballroom, she had been worried something was wrong with Dulcie and had followed as soon as the dance was through. She had reached the front hallway just in time to see them step out the door. They had been talking and Kirkland had appeared agitated then he had pulled Dulcie close and kissed her.

Now, the pair stood locked in each other's arms. Steam puffed from lips as they spoke. Caressa watched for as long as she could. Her heart was thumping painfully in her chest. After all of these years waiting for Kirkland to offer for her, she had her answer as to why he never had.

Caressa returned to the ballroom, finding an empty seat in a darkened corner. It wasn't long before she could see flashes of Dulcie on the parquet. People whispered how lovely was beginning to look as she lost weight.

Though she had been torn apart by what she had spied, Caressa wanted to stamp on the feet of those who would suggest Dulcie was ever anything but beautiful. Her head spun with love and jealousy. Her head began to throb. Caressa closed her eyes and breathed deeply, in through her nose and out through her mouth, and rubbed her temples in an attempt to relieve the pressure.

“May I have... Lady Davenport? Are you all right?”

The air seized in Caressa’s chest. Kirkland’s deep, slightly gruff voice was soft and filled with concern. She opened her eyes to find her gaze filled by Kirkland’s handsome face. He had sat down in the chair next to hers and was leaning across her so that he could look into her face.

It was too dark to see the brilliant green of his eyes but she felt them staring into hers. He picked up her hand and rubbed it between his. “Caressa?”

She swallowed hard past the lump in her throat. Caressa wished she hadn’t seen them, silvered by the moonlight, but wishing wouldn’t make it so. “I am fine, Mr. Perry. My head ached a bit was all.” She smiled as brightly as she could, hoping it would convince him nothing was wrong.

Kirkland returned her smile. “Then may I have this dance?”

Caressa held her breath and nodded. She rose from her seat and allowed Kirkland to lead her to the dance floor. If she couldn’t have his heart, at least she could have this dance.