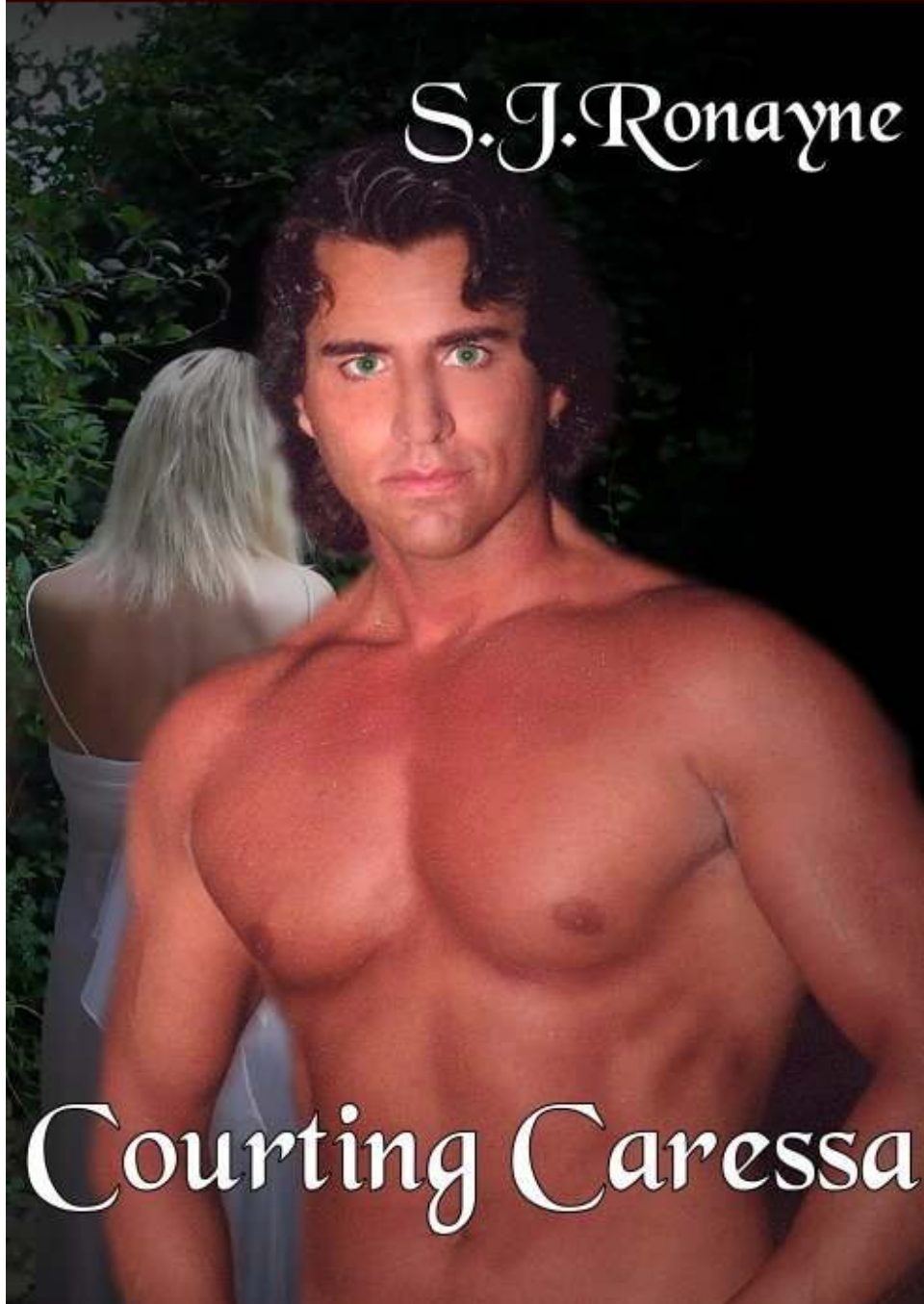




The Dark Castle Lords present

S.J. Ronayne

Courting Caressa



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Dedication

I want to thank two of the most wonderful women I know. They are both beautiful, fantastic women and I love them dearly. To Jean Watkins and Jan Douglas. Thank you both for being truly great women and insightful editors.

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. The moonlight glinted silver on Kirkland's dark brown hair as he brought his head down to Dulcie's titian one.

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.

Chapter One

Caressa and her parents, The Duke and Duchess of Davenport, sat in the chapel pew, watching her friend, Dulcie Brighton marry Jackson Cornell. At the end of the ceremony she would be the new Marchioness of Torningate. Dulcie looked beautiful. Her dress was layers and layers of fine white cotton. Small pink ribbon roses dotted the long skirt and silver lace trimmed only the empire waistline. Her thick red hair was twisted into curls that cascaded like a waterfall from a braided knot atop her head. Jackson looked exceptionally handsome dressed in a royal blue coat and fawn trousers. His gold tasseled Hessians gleamed in the morning light streaming through the chapel windows. His black hair was caught at his nape with a black cord, sweeping his hair from his face, showing his striking features.

She was happy for her friend, truly. Knowing everything Dulcie had felt – never believing she was good enough for Jackson, her disbelief that someone as handsome as Jackson would want a full-figured lady – Caressa couldn't be happier for her dearest friend. She remembered how elated Dulcie had been when Jackson had declared his intentions and begun to court Dulcie. She also remembered her friend's heartbreak and insecurity when she had learned her parents had asked Jackson to marry her. Caressa was delighted that Dulcie decided to follow her heart and had forgiven Jackson. Wickedly, she was delighted for more than one reason. It was that reason that was coloring her excitement of the day.

Dulcie's sister by marriage, Reagan, and her eldest niece attended her. When Dulcie had asked Caressa, she hadn't been able to bring herself to accept. She was still torn between her sisterly love for Dulcie and her jealousy that her friend had been kissed by Kirkland Perry. *Kirkland....*

Caressa's eyes wandered to the opposite side of the chapel. Kirkland sat with his own family. His curling brown hair was the color of her favorite chocolate treats, cut ruthlessly short to discourage the curls from growing out of control as they did when he was a child. His firm, defined lips were set in a hard line as he watched the ceremony. Three lines were formed between his emerald green eyes, giving away the frown he was obviously trying to hide. He looked away as Dulcie recited her vows. Caressa bit the inside of her cheek at the dull, painful thudding of her heart.

She had waited so long, gently declining when any other man had asked for her hand. Waiting for Kirkland to offer for her. Now she knew why he never had.

The ceremony ended and, amidst the cheering people of Rothshire, Dulcie and her new husband left the chapel. The townspeople offered happy wishes to the smiling couple. Everyone followed the newly wedded pair back to the Duke of Rothshire's estate where a large breakfast buffet awaited.

The house was buzzing with activity. Oliver had every available hand and some Caressa assumed to be hired on for the day, as she didn't recall ever seeing them before, taking coats and hats, carrying about trays of food and beverage. When Tory, the stable boy, slid across the hallway floor, dressed in fine livery two sizes too big, Caressa released a startled laugh. Yes, Oliver had every available hand helping with the reception.

Entering the large dining room, Caressa took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and walked up to Dulcie and Jackson. A forced smile curled her lips as she hugged her friends. "I am so very happy for the both of you!" Her voice seemed to screech falsely inside of her own head.

"As am I," a deep, soft voice said from behind her.

Caressa looked over her shoulder at Kirkland. She had been so certain he hadn't been in the room when she had decided to approach Dulcie. Kirkland leaned forward and kissed Dulcie's cheek. Caressa felt her chest burn but smiled and hugged Dulcie again.

She watched Kirkland shake Jackson's hand. Kirkland congratulated Jackson on marrying "one of the most wonderful women in all of the English Empire."

Jackson laughed. "I am merely lucky I was finally able to convince her *to* marry me."

The men continued to talk and laugh. When Dulcie rubbed her back and tweaked her earlobe, Caressa realized she was still holding on to Dulcie as if for dear life. Dulcie looked into her eyes. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing." Caressa cursed her voice as it broke on the single word. She felt tears well in her eyes.

Dulcie walked with her to the other side of the room. "Please, Caressa, tell me what is the matter."

Caressa bit her tongue before she could, indeed, tell her friend everything that was upsetting her. She forced another smile and even a small laugh. "I must admit to just the tiniest spot of jealousy. Please forgive me, Dulcie. I am so very happy for you and Jackson."

Dulcie smiled that sweet, beautiful smile of hers. “There is nothing to forgive. You could have any man in England. I am willing to wager I will be watching you take your own marriage vows before the year’s end.”

Caressa knew she could not have any man she wanted, the one man she wanted. “I certainly hope you do not wager very much,” Caressa said darkly.

Dulcie looked at her as though she had grown a horn. Caressa forced another laugh. “Come, I should return you to Jackson. He is undoubtedly lost without you.”

After depositing Dulcie at Jackson’s side, she made her way to the table, heavily laden with food. The best she could find was the champagne. She took up glass after glass until she had to sit for the bubbles filling her head. Another glass of champagne danced before her face. “May I offer you another?”

Caressa looked up to find Alexander Conrad, the Viscount of Godfrey and his two identical brothers weaving before her. “Wait, you do not have any brothers,” she murmured.

The viscount laughed and sat next to her. “No, my dear, I don’t.” He reached for the champagne flute Caressa had taken from him. “Perhaps you have had enough?”

Caressa twisted away, ignoring the chill that washed over her glove as the cold liquid sloshed over the top and spilled over her. “Thank you, but I will keep it.”

She tried to keep a note of primness in her voice but had to hold the glass with both hands to guide it to her lips. Still she felt some of the effervescent drink trickle from the corner of her mouth. She wiped the back of her already wet hand across her mouth. “Thank you.”

The viscount smiled down at her, towering over her small form even when they both sat. “You look lovely today, my dear. While everyone else was watching the new marchioness, I had eyes only for you.”

Caressa blushed and giggled. “Oh sir, you do flatter me.”

“It is not vain flattery,” he said in a low voice. The viscount brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek and leaned forward.

A large hand wrapped around her upper arm. “Come along, Caressa.”

She looked up into snapping green eyes. Kirkland’s soft, generous mouth was pressed into a firm, unsmiling line. He pulled her up from her chair and out into the main hall. Once out of sight of those in the ballroom, Caressa tried wrenching her arm away from him. “Le’go o’ me. Wha’d’you think you’re doin’?”

“I am making certain you do not do anything to damage your person or your reputation.” Kirkland spun her around to face him and the world around her wouldn’t stop revolving. “Do you have any idea who you were speaking to? That was the Viscount of Godfrey. The man is known for turning innocents, such as yourself, into... into.... I can’t even say it. As if that was not bad enough, he prefers to be more cruel than kind to his bed partners.”

“Humbug. How coul’you poss’bly know?” Caressa’s voice grated out of her throat. She wondered where the servants with the champagne had gone.

“Everyone knows!” He released her and paced away from her then back. “What is wrong, Caressa? You have been acting strangely for weeks. Ever since the Duke’s Christmas gathering, you have been a different person. Where has our lovely little Caressa gone, hmm?”

Caressa felt herself hiccup as the first sobs came. Kirkland shushed her softly, crooning soft, murmuring sounds as he pulled her into his arms. She allowed it for all of a minute before she began beating on his shoulders and chest. Kirkland snuggled her tighter to his chest. “No, no, le’ me go.”

“Tell me what is wrong, Caressa. Please.” One arm was wrapped like steel around her back. The hand of the other arm rubbed soothing circles over her back.

“What’s so wrong with me, ’Land? Why don’ you wan’ me?” She continued to beat against his chest but her arms were losing strength while his single arm didn’t seem to loosen even one little bit.

“What? What are you talking ab—” Caressa pushed herself up onto her toes and pressed her lips against his. She had seen couples kiss but had never allowed any of her suitors to kiss her; now she cursed her reticence. Perhaps if she had allowed one or two to steal a kiss, she would know what to do now. She tried to clear her mind, to remember what she had seen.

Caressa opened her lips and pulled Kirkland’s lower lip into her mouth. She didn’t know just what to do. Experimenting with this new experience, Caressa sucked on Kirkland’s full, soft lower lip, lapped at it with her tongue, nipped with her teeth.

Kirkland gasped and pulled back from her. He stared deep into her eyes before threading his fingers into her hair and bringing his mouth down on hers. He thrust his tongue into her open mouth, brushed it against hers. Caressa felt as if her body had caught fire, moving from her lips to her breasts and lower.

Kirkland backed her into a dark corner. The arm banded around her slid free. His hand cupped her cheek, glided over her neck, and traced the lacy scooped neckline of her dress before settling on one breast. Caressa gasped as he massaged the small globe, rubbed her nipple.

His mouth left hers and followed the line of her chin, her throat. Caressa grabbed a hold of his head, pressing him close to her. His hand pulled the neckline of her dress, shift, and corset. When she felt his mouth close over her nipple, Caressa cried out. The heat of his mouth was intense. His teeth bit gently on the sensitive flesh.

Caressa gasped. She let her head fall back against the wall as she sighed and begged Kirkland to never stop.

“Caressa!” Her eyes snapped open at her mother’s voice.

“Kirkland, let go of her this instant!” Kirkland’s mother whispered vehemently.

Kirkland lifted his head and turned, keeping Caressa behind him. She looked around him but wasn’t able to see very clearly. The sight wavered before her. The floor beneath her feet seemed to pitch back and forth like the deck of a ship.

“Kirkland, what are you doing to the Duke’s daughter?” Lady Beatrice Perry demanded of her son.

“Your Grace, I am so sorry for my son’s actions,” Lord Konnor Perry uttered vehemently to the Duke of Courtney.

“No,” Caressa slurred. “I did it.” She scrambled out from behind Kirkland, her head protesting the movement. “I wanted him to touch me.”

“Caressa! Be quiet you little fool!” Her mother came forward and yanked her away from Kirkland.

Caressa’s head swam. “Mama, I do not feel well,” she whispered seconds before her world faded to black.

Chapter Two

Kirkland leapt forward, catching Caressa in his arms. He gently lifted her into his arms, gazing into her beautiful face. All of the color had drained from it, leaving her stark white with rouged lips, looking like a child's doll.

There was a commotion at the doorway to the ballroom. Kirkland looked up to see the Duke and Duchess of Rothshire, closely followed by Dulcie and Jackson, coming toward them. Kirkland couldn't help but think how lovely Dulcie looked today. *Perhaps because she has just wed the man she loves*, some cruel voice whispered inside of his head.

Kirkland tore his gaze from her and returned his eyes to Caressa, feeling his conscience stab at him. He had just held Caressa against his body, taken liberties he had no right to take, and now he was mooning over Dulcie.

The smaller woman's words came back to him. *What's so wrong with me, 'Land? Why don' you wan' me*, she had demanded of him. He had no answer aside from that she wasn't Dulcie but he could not, *would* not say such hurtful words. He had known Caressa as long as he had known Dulcie. The little tow-headed sprite was his friend and he would not hurt her with such damning words.

Dulcie's father looked over the group gathered in the hall. "Into my study. We'll not parade Caressa in front of all of London." The Duke led the way, Kirkland immediately behind him.

When they all entered the room and the door was shut and locked, Kirkland breathed a sigh of relief on Caressa's behalf. He set her in one of the wingback chairs that faced one of the two large windows in the room. Dulcie, her mother, and Caressa's mother immediately swarmed around her. Jackson stood next to Dulcie, his hand rubbing her back in soothing circles.

Kirkland joined his father, Dulcie's father, and Caressa's father across the room. "Well," the Duke of Courtney said quietly, "what do you intend to do about my daughter, Perry?"

Kirkland opened his mouth but Konnor spoke up first. "Truly, Your Grace, my son is terribly sorry." When Kirkland remained silent, his father elbowed him in the ribs. "Are you not, boy?"

Kirkland looked to the chair in which Caressa sat. Her hand fluttered up and she sat forward, cradling her head in her hands. Was he terribly sorry? “Yes,” he replied but wondered if it was the truth.

“There, you see? Now, why don’t we give the dear girl a chance to rest before returning to the celebration,” Konnor suggested.

Kirkland looked at Lord Davenport’s face. He could see the man was not satisfied with his father’s answer. Kirkland cleared his throat. “I will marry Caressa, if you would allow it.”

The Duke and his father looked at Kirkland, his father aghast, Caressa’s father looking relieved. “We will procure a special license first thing tomorrow morning,” His Grace intoned.

Kirkland’s eyes rounded as in dread. “A special license, Your Grace?”

“Yes. You have already been showing my daughter attention during the Season. Now, with this,” the Duke waved a hand toward the door, “it will appear as though you are truly smitten and want to marry as soon as possible. I will request a special license from the Archbishop of Canterbury. Soon after you two will be married and that will be the end of it.”

Kirkland tried to swallow past the dryness in his throat. The idea that he would have more time to come to terms with the idea of having a marriage so much like his parents’ was doused. Knowing it was the right thing to do, Kirkland nodded.

* * * *

Kirkland’s turned up his collar against the blustery wind as he, his father, and Davenport left the archbishop’s office in Doctor’s Commons. The duke carried the special license for which he had just paid thirty guineas. In six days, Caressa would be his wife.

Bile bit the back of his throat but Kirkland swallowed it down. It wasn’t the thought of marrying Caressa that made him sick, but rather than taking time to choose which path he would take, which *wife* he would take, his grief and undeniable lust had chosen his path and his wife for him. He thought back on the morning of Dulcie and Jackson’s wedding.

A well of protective anger had sprung to life in him when he had seen Godfrey poured over Caressa. He had extracted himself from a marriage minded mother and her too young daughter to rush to Caressa’s rescue. When he had gotten her to the hall and she had turned a

massive swirl of emotions on him, he had wanted to comfort her. Her lips on his had shocked him into stillness but her fiery passion had goaded him, flushed heat and lust through his body.

The events of the day had coalesced in that one moment and had blinded him to his actions. He had been guided by instinct. His cock had told him to take what comfort Caressa was offering. He wasn't angry with Caressa but with himself for allowing his control to break. He had never felt in such desperate need of completion as he had at that moment. What he was most surprised by was that it was a tiny little creature like Caressa that had brought him to his knees.

Chapter Three

Caressa sat in the drawing room with her mother, nervously awaiting Kirkland's arrival. Her brothers had been made to leave for White's earlier than they normally would have. Their parents didn't want to take the chance Henry and Geoffrey wouldn't make good on the threats to Kirkland's health they had been spouting since hearing of the events at Dulcie's wedding breakfast.

"Oh, good heavens!"

Caressa looked up at her mother's exclamation. The older woman was dabbing at her bodice with a napkin. "Mother?" Caressa giggled. She loved her with all her heart, but the woman had a tendency to be clumsy. "What happened?"

"Oh, bother. I accidentally tipped the cup before I had it at my lips and the damned thing was full."

Caressa giggled again at her mother's language. She excused herself to change her dress, leaving Caressa to let her mind wander more. She allowed it to wander to Kirkland, as it always inevitably did, and to her upcoming nuptials. As well as the upcoming wedding night.

A shiver ran through her when she remembered the feel of Kirkland's body against hers. Not many memories remained of Dulcie's wedding day, but Kirkland's kisses, his hands and mouth on her body, those broke through the drunken fog. She gasped as the ghost sensation of his lips sucking and his tongue flicking her nipple. Caressa held back a moan remembering the feel of his teeth gently nipping the sensitive peak.

"Caressa?" Kirkland's voice broke through her reverie. She looked up into his emerald eyes. "Are you all right? Your face is bright red."

Caressa swallowed. "Yes, I'm fine." Her voice practically wheezed past her lips. He took half a step toward her before backing away again. Color rose in Kirkland's cheeks and he looked down to his hands which were fidgeting with the brim of his tall hat. He hadn't removed his winter coat and his shoulders appeared rigid with unease under the thick wool.

The tension between them was an awkward thing. They had never been uncomfortable or at a loss of words when in one another's company. Now, the silence created a deafening buzz in Caressa's head. She wished she could reach out to him, touch him. She supposed in just a few

more days, she would have the right and freedom to do so. The prospect terrified her nearly as much as it excited her.

Finally, her mother reappeared, a smile on her face. The older woman stepped ever so subtly into the space that separated Caressa from Kirkland. Not that there was a true reason for concern if Kirkland's disregard of her was any indication.

Caressa bit her lower lip hard before forcing a smile. At the front door, she and her mother donned their cloaks. Kirkland took them into town to see the Elgin marbles. It was almost warm and many people were entering the front doors of the British Museum to see the ancient Greek sculptures.

As Caressa walked down the packed aisles with Kirkland and her mother, Caressa's cheeks were on fire. The marbles depicted naked men and Centaurs, their genitals on display for all to ogle. Knowing it was shameful for her to think of such a thing, Caressa couldn't help but wonder if Kirkland looked like the marble illustrations. Caressa was overheated and short of breath by the time they reached the end and were able to leave.

Caressa was grateful for the cold air outside. It sucked the heat from her face, the cold likely nipping her skin as pink as her embarrassment had. Kirkland treated them to a small bite to eat at a nearby teahouse. Her mother dominated the conversation which was fine by Caressa. Her mind continued to whirl around the marbles and Kirkland.

When he delivered them home, her mother invited Kirkland to stay for dinner. He respectfully declined, begging prearranged plans for the evening. Caressa escorted him to the door and looked up into his deep green eyes. The soft feel of Kirkland's fingertips grazing her face made Caressa's breath catch.

Kirkland pulled his hand away as though Caressa were on fire. He bowed over her hand, kissing the air above her knuckles before quickly straightening and leaving the house. He didn't look back, and Caressa felt disheartened and rejected.

Chest tightening, Caressa wondered why Kirkland hadn't begged off marrying her. Had he pushed, he would have been able to get out of it. Yes, it was true he had offered, but it had likely been no more than an automatic response brought on by years of training.

She could see it in the man's eyes, feel it in his touch that he had no interest in her. The thought of suffering a lifetime with the man she loved without his love in return terrified Caressa. She considered refusing to marry him, but realized something she didn't particularly

care for. She was too selfish to turn him away. Her heart yearned for him and would not allow her to call off the wedding. There was nothing she could do but go on with the show.

* * * *

The lights dimmed in the theater as the curtain rose to reveal a beautiful yet vicious young woman, Vitellia. Caressa loved *La Clemenza di Tito*. She loved the intrigue, the drama, and, of course, the benevolence of the wise Emperor Titus. For that matter, she loved Mozart's operas – even *The Magic Flute*. She argued that the Queen of the Night's maliciousness counteracted the romance, but secretly, she even loved the relationship between Tamino and Pamina.

Kirkland sat beside her. They were sitting behind their chaperones for the evening, Kirkland's parents, in one of the boxes of Her Majesty's Theatre. Looking at her intended, she noticed he was not paying attention to the opera. He had told her he had already attended an earlier performance, being an admirer of Mozart's, too.

It seemed odd to have known someone all her life, to have been in love with him for nearly as long, and to know so little of him. Turning her attention back to Vitellia and Sexto, she tried to concentrate on the characters. Unfortunately, they could not hold her attention.

As the handsome actor playing Titus walked onto the stage, Caressa looked back to Kirkland and reached over to lay her hand atop his. Kirkland looked down at their hands, turning his hand palm up and rubbing his fingertips over her gloved knuckles. Raising his eyes to her, Kirkland abruptly released her hand and returned his gaze to the wall at which he had been staring.

Caressa forced back the tears trying to slip free of her eyelids. She couldn't allow herself to cry, not while in Kirkland's presence. She couldn't allow him to see how deeply he was hurting her. She couldn't allow him to pity her.

Chapter Four

Three days later Caressa listened to a bishop friend of Kirkland's father as he droned out the wedding mass. It was Saturday afternoon, the end of January, dreary gray and bitterly cold outside. The special license her intended had obtained allowed for a later-in-the-day, private ceremony in the drawing room of her parent's London home. Not that the somber, sullen event was something Caressa would want to share with more than her family. Unfortunately, Dulcie had insisted she be allowed to attend.

I want to witness your happiest moment, Dulcie had said her voice gentle and loving as always. Had the circumstances been different, Caressa would have been more than happy to have Dulcie attend, but considering....

No! You will not think of it. You are marrying Kirkland today. Dulcie is married to Jackson. Dulcie is in love with Jackson and Kirkland knows that. You merely need to give him time. He will come around, Caressa. He just needs more than a week to do so.

Caressa squared her shoulders and listened intently to the bishop. She recited her vows; Kirkland recited his and placed her wedding ring on her finger. It wasn't a large diamond, but on her slim finger, it looked enormous. The platinum band fit just right on her finger. Earlier in the week, Caressa had noticed one of her rings had gone missing only to return Friday.

Caressa wondered which of her family members had smuggled the twined silver and rose gold ring to her fiancé. She looked to her oldest brother, Harry. Though he was mischievous, it was not likely something he would do. No, Harry would walk right up to her, lift her over his shoulder, and refuse to lower her until she gave him what he wanted.

Geoffrey might have. He had always known she had feelings for Kirkland and he approved because he knew Kirkland was a good man. Caressa also knew Geoffrey was observant enough to notice that, as good a man as her nearly-husband was, Kirkland was in love with another. It was even possible he intuited who Kirkland desired. Caressa didn't know if she could suffer seeing pity in her brother's eyes.

When the ceremony concluded and Kirkland pressed his lips chastely to her lips, Dulcie leapt to her feet, clapping. The others in the room, Jackson, Caressa's family and Kirkland's, followed suit. Forcing a strained smile to her face, Caressa signed the registry, followed by

Kirkland and then Caressa's brothers. Caressa pressed a hand to her stomach, finding it odd that she was more nauseous now than she had been before the ceremony.

The wedding party adjourned to the dining room and Caressa sat across the table from her new husband. Her father had requested all of Caressa's favorite foods to be made and asked someone to fetch Maisy, Caressa's maid, to join them for the "splendid occasion." Around her was not the joyous celebration of Dulcie's wedding but a somber gathering of family and friends. It seemed more like a funeral rather than a wedding had just taken place.

Her elder brothers, Harry and Geoffrey, sat to her left. Harry, ever boisterous and cheerful, tried to pull everyone out of their quiet musings. He asked the footmen to bring more ale and wine, told his amusing tales of his times at school and on the continent, and congratulated Kirkland profusely for finally catching his baby sister. Geoffrey, quiet and studious, often elbowed their older brother, telling him to keep quiet. More than once Caressa caught Geoffrey looking away but she could see the concern in his eyes. Caressa sighed inwardly, knowing he felt the pity she had feared.

Dulcie patted her hand, startling Caressa out of her thoughts. Her friend leaned over to whisper, "Are you all right?"

Caressa saw the genuine love and concern in her friend's gaze. Caressa summoned as bright a smile as she could muster. "Yes, why wouldn't I be?"

Dulcie sighed sadly and sat back in her chair. Caressa knew her friend wished she would speak honestly but what could she say? Caressa was married to the man she loved but he didn't love her. She wondered, when he touched her, would he be thinking of Dulcie? Imagining her friend's coppery hair, her full curves? She had half of what she wanted and would have to learn to live her life contentedly with only Kirkland's ring and not his heart.

When supper ended, the women followed Caressa upstairs to her childhood bedroom, the room she and Kirkland would share on their first night as husband and wife. Her mother and new mother-in-law helped her undress and put on a new white night rail they had purchased for her trousseau. She asked the older women to leave, leaving her alone with Dulcie.

Dulcie sat her at the room's small vanity, unpinned her hair, and brushed the long blond locks. "Dulcie, is it truly as horrible as my grandmothers have always told me?"

Caressa watched her friend's reflection, noting the blush that crept up Dulcie's chest, neck, then face. "N-no, it is not horrible." Dulcie cleared her throat before continuing. "The first

time can be frightening and there is a little pain, however, you can receive enjoyment as well as your husband.”

“My husband Kirkland,” Caressa said, looking for Dulcie’s reaction. She wanted to see for herself how her friend felt about her marriage to Kirkland.

As one would always expect of Dulcie, she smiled without jealousy or malice. It was the same smile she had always been so quick to give – one full of love and warmth. “Yes, your husband Kirkland.”

Dulcie set down the hairbrush and pulled Caressa to her feet over to the bed. “Are you happy, Caressa?”

Caressa nodded. “Of course. I have always wanted to have Kirkland, now he is mine.”

Again, Caressa looked for Dulcie’s reaction. Her friend pulled her into a hug. “Good. I only want for you to find the happiness I have found with Jackson.”

Caressa heard the truth and sincerity in her friend’s words. She smiled for Dulcie’s benefit, knowing she’d likely never be truly happy. Kirkland did not want her – he wanted the woman sitting beside her.

There was a knock at the door and Dulcie stood. “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I will ever be.” Caressa took several deep breaths, holding each for a moment before releasing the air.

Dulcie walked to the door and opened it. Kirkland stood on the other side of the threshold. He looked at Dulcie first and in his gaze Caressa could see yearning. Dulcie did not notice for she was smiling encouragement to Caressa. Kirkland stepped into the room and Dulcie quietly excused herself.

The only sound in the room was the crackling of the fire that had been built in the small fireplace across the room from her bed. Caressa looked on as her new husband walked to the other side of the bed and undressed in preparation for bed. When he stripped off his shirt, Caressa bit her lip in wonder. His chest and belly looked strong, defined by muscle, tanned as though he spent much time in the sun without one of his finely made shirts to protect him from browning. Kirkland didn’t immediately remove his breeches but instead pulled a long night shirt from one of the leather trunks that had been stowed in her room before the ceremony. Turning his back on her, he donned the nightshirt and finished undressing.

When he slipped under the blankets, Caressa's breath caught at how large he looked. While her delicate looking brass bed was large enough to accommodate two, Kirkland took up more than half and he looked thoroughly god-like, huge and floating on a cloud of white and gold.

Caressa quickly joined him, nervous and excited and scared and near to desperation to feel his touch. She stayed still, lying on her back, waiting – hoping – Kirkland would turn to her. Minutes went by as she waited until she no longer could. She turned to her side to face him and found him already asleep. Tears burned her eyes.

Caressa lifted his arm gently and curled around him. At least if he was asleep she could cuddle to his side as she cried without him being able to deny her.

Chapter Five

Kirkland kept his eyes closed. When he had felt Caressa's small hands pull his arm away from his side, he had wondered what she was about. Then she wrapped herself around him and he felt as her tears wetted the linen of his nightshirt. He didn't know what had made her cry but it tore him apart. He hated that his friend was so sad. *She is not just my friend anymore. Now she is my wife and it is my duty to stop her tears.*

Kirkland rolled gently to his side and pulled her against his chest, cradling the back of her head in one hand. "Shh, Caressa. I know this isn't what we wanted, but we will make the best of it, hmm?"

Caressa pulled back from him and looked into his eyes. She didn't speak, merely looked at him before wrapping one of her own small hands around his neck and pulling his lips toward hers.

Wanting to comfort her, comfort himself, Kirkland dipped his head and gently kissed Caressa's lips. When she opened her mouth and her tongue swept his lips, Kirkland could not help but respond. He touched his tongue to hers and groaned. He explored her mouth, the wet velvet feel of her tongue against his, the sharpness of her teeth, the softness of the inside of her cheeks, the hard, ridged roof of her mouth.

Caressa tugged his hand away from her head, dragged it down until he cupped her breast. His cock hardened as he gently massaged the small globe. He scraped his fingernail across the fabric covered nipple and she shivered and moaned.

When Kirkland pulled his lips away from Caressa's, she began whispering to him. Whispering words no genteel lady should use. But as she begged, Kirkland's body tightened and his erection turned painful.

"Please, Kirkland, I need you. Kiss me. Touch me between my legs. I need to feel you... everywhere. Touch me everywhere. Please," Caressa gasped into his ear.

This isn't right, Kirkland thought through his haze of lust. He shouldn't be taking advantage of Caressa like this. They were both distraught. If he hadn't touched her at Dulcie's wedding brunch, they wouldn't have had to marry.

Difficult though it was, Kirkland pulled away. Covering her breast, he looked deep into her clear blue eyes. “I’m sorry, Caressa. I shouldn’t be forcing myself on you. It is the stress of the day – of having to marry.”

The look on her face was one of horrified dismay. He pulled Caressa’s arms from around his neck, gently kissed her forehead, and turned to his side, facing away from her. After a short while, he heard her begin to cry, the sound muffled as though she had turned her face into her pillow. His attack on her body must have finally breached her shock. Kirkland only hoped she would forgive him in time.

* * * *

Caressa awoke before Kirkland. Her eyes still stung from crying herself to sleep. She had offered herself to her new husband, offered herself wantonly – hungrily. And he had turned away from her. She could not face him this morning.

Throwing her heavy robe over her shoulders, Caressa grabbed up a shift, corset, and dress and quietly left the room. She knew which room Dulcie and Jackson were sleeping in and hastily made her way there. Jackson answered her frantic knocking dressed in only undone trousers and an untucked linen shirt.

The expression on his face was thunderous until he looked at her. His face melted from anger to concern. He pulled her into the room. “Dulcie, something is wrong.”

Dulcie stepped out from behind a dressing screen, she herself in a heavy robe to ward off the winter’s cold. She looked worriedly at Caressa. “Caressa? What is the matter?”

Tears gathered and again spilled down her cheeks. Caressa had been so certain she had cried herself dry the night before. Evidently, she could cry oceans where Kirkland was concerned.

Jackson walked to his wife and gathered the rest of his clothing for the day. He whispered something to Dulcie and lightly kissed her lips. He left the room without a word to Caressa but with a gentle pat on her shoulder.

Dulcie hurried to her side and guided her to the bed. As they sat on the edge, Caressa cried on her friend’s shoulder, hiccupping her way through the previous night’s events though

she did not go into detail of what Kirkland did to her body. “It was h-horrible. It h-hurt s-s-so much when he t-turned from me. My heart shattered!”

“Shh, it will be all right, love,” Dulcie crooned. “Wait and see. Kirkland was likely terrified he would hurt you. Perhaps he was embarrassed to make love to you in your parents’ home. I’m certain everything is fine.”

Caressa doubted Dulcie was correct but did not doubt her friend’s sincerity. She would wait. What else could she do?

They stayed on the edge of the bed until Caressa’s tears stopped. Her throat felt raw. Her eyes felt as though someone had kicked sand into her face. When she felt under control, Dulcie helped Caressa into her corset and traveling dress. She didn’t feel she could face one of the maids, especially knowing they would see the lack of evidence of a marriage night coupling when they cleaned the room later.

As she pulled the laces on Dulcie’s half -corset, Caressa saw in her mind’s eye the kiss her friend had shared with Kirkland. She yanked on the strings, causing Dulcie to gasp.

“Caressa, I believe that is tight enough.” Dulcie’s voice was breathless.

Caressa gasped and loosened the corset strings so that her friend could breathe. She apologized profusely but Dulcie waved off her words, telling Caressa she knew Caressa was in poor spirits and distracted. Caressa’s face heated. Why did Dulcie have to be so understanding?

Once they were finished dressing, the two women entered the hallway to find their husbands waiting on them. Jackson walked up to Dulcie, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles courteously. It seemed a gentlemanly gesture but Caressa could see the wicked sparkle in Jackson’s eyes as he looked at his wife. Dulcie must have seen it, too, for she blushed and smiled at her husband.

Caressa turned to Kirkland. He was turned away from the scene before them. Sighing inwardly, Caressa walked to him and wrapped her arm around his. Kirkland looked at her, a dull shine in his eyes. He patted her hand and escorted her downstairs and to the dining room where their families awaited them.

After a light, quiet breakfast, Caressa, Kirkland and his family, and Dulcie and Jackson set off for Lord and Lady Perry’s estate, Lynwood Hall. The Baron’s estate was closest. They would have lunch there before Dulcie and Jackson would set off for Torningate.

Caressa felt tears threaten as she hugged her mother and father then each of her brothers. She was leaving one of the homes she had known since the day she was born. After spending the night at Lynwood Hall, Kirkland and Caressa would set out for a wedding trip to his father's hunting lodge further north of the estate.

An arm wrapped around each of her brother's necks, Caressa told them both to behave. She prayed all would be well with them. While Harry was all too likely to get some unfortunate girl with child, she feared Geoffrey's social ineptitude would continue to hinder his success in finding a wife. She wished she could be close by to help both of them, but now she was off to an uncertain future.

Caressa climbed into the carriage and stared out the window, watching first the city then the countryside roll past them. She refused to let the despair she could feel threatening flood through her. If nothing else, she had married the man she loved. After a time, he would grow to see her as a woman. As his woman, Caressa hoped.

Chapter Six

Lynwood Hall was an enormous Georgian manor house. Much of the first floor interior reflected the Egyptian décor so popular among the ton. Obelisks, canopic jars, and even a small replica of the Great Sphinx decorated the front parlor. A golden statue of a cat with a collar of ruby enamel disks and diamond-shaped eyes of sapphire blue enamel sat atop a table serving as an oil lamp.

Kirkland asked Bowers, the butler, to see after their friends before he personally escorted Caressa up to his apartments. His rooms were appointed much more simply, but, in Caressa's opinion, more comfortably. The colors were all very masculine with dark greens and blues dominating the space.

He opened the door to his bedchamber – *their* bedchamber – and her eyes rounded at the size of his four poster bed. The massive mahogany pillars and slabs that framed the bed, broken only by the heavy green velvet drapes that gathered at the end of each of the rods that connected the posters at the top, made her feel small as a babe. There was little doubt in her mind that Dulcie would feel so intimidated. She reckoned five people could easily sleep in the bed and do so without complaint.

That thought made Caressa's cheeks burn. She wondered if her husband had ever truly put the size to use. More heat infused her face. Caressa ducked her head and preceded Kirkland into the bedroom. He guided her to a bureau atop which sat a basin and a steaming pitcher of water, face towels folded neatly beside them. "You can wash up here. I was told your personal maid and belongings have arrived from your father's estate. I will have her sent in to help you change out of your traveling clothes."

He turned her by the shoulders and tilted her face up to his. "It will be all right, Caressa. We'll make the best of things, hmm?"

Caressa gave a watery smile and nodded, knowing she would do all in her power to make more than the best of their situation. Kirkland smiled down at her and kissed her forehead before leaving her alone in the room.

Scrubbing the tears she refused to let fall from her eyes, Caressa removed her jacket. Steam wafted into her face as she poured hot water into the basin. The door opened behind her.

"Miss Caressa! How are you, deary?"

Maisy, her maid since childhood, picked her way to Caressa. She watched the older woman look around cautiously. Having known each other for so long, Caressa knew her maid was not entirely comfortable in new situations. Until Maisy was more comfortable at Lynnwood Hall, she would be stepping carefully, watching closely, even breathing shallowly if she must.

Caressa smiled bravely. "I am wonderful, Maisy."

Her maid turned wide, owl eyes on her and smiled in return. "Finally landed yourself that fine young man, my lady. You must feel wonderful."

Caressa felt her smile slip a little. She nodded and turned back to the basin. She dampened a cloth and lifted it to her face.

"Here, now, Miss. You are going to ruin your fine clothes. Here, let us get those off of you and while you refresh yourself. I will choose something suitable for you to wear to dinner with your husband's family." Maisy helped her undress down to her shift, chuckling over Dulcie's efforts of securing Caressa's demi-corset. She imagined her friend would hear similar chuckling from her maid as their knots were more artful than useful.

Once Caressa was clean to her satisfaction without benefit of a tub, Maisy helped her dress in a lovely rose colored muslin dress. The sleeves skimmed down her arms, the neckline, while demure enough, still left much of her upper chest exposed. Her maid pinned her hair to allow tendrils of her curling blond tresses to fall and frame her face.

Stepping into her slippers, Caressa prayed she did nothing that night to embarrass herself in front of her new husband's family. Kirkland awaited her in the sitting area of his – *their* – suite. She felt a sense of pride when his eyes widened as he looked at her. She smiled. Kirkland's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

Kirkland escorted her down stairs and into the long formal dining room. His family and Dulcie and Jackson poured into the room behind them. The cook and her kitchen staff had prepared a large, elaborate supper with mutton, pheasant, and roast pork. Every vegetable imaginable filled bowls and platters and all smelled delicious.

This evening's meal was less strained than the previous night's. There was quiet but happy talk around the table. Beatrice asked after Dulcie's new niece and when she and Jackson were planning on giving her cousins. Caressa saw, from the corner of her eye, Kirkland blanch.

Dulcie blushed and Jackson chuckled. "We plan to wait for a short while," he said.

When Lady Perry began to admonish them lightly, Kirkland cleared his throat. “Mother, if they want to wait, they may wait. You are neither Dulcie’s nor Jackson’s mother. Stop badgering them.” He took a long swallow of his wine and signaled for more from the footman.

Caressa ducked her head, feeling her cheeks heat in mortification as the dining room fell silent. She could feel eyes on her. Lifting her chin just a little, she looked through her lashes. Her friend looked somewhat flabbergasted at Kirkland’s outburst.

Trying to dispel the tension suddenly filling the room, Jackson said lightly, “That’s right, Kirkland. Shouldn’t you be needling your son for grandchildren, my lady? What fine children they will make, I daresay.”

Caressa cut her eyes back to her husband to see him staring, almost aghast, at their friend. She had trouble swallowing around the lump in her throat and she picked up her wine glass, hoping to dislodge it. The alcohol burned her throat and she gasped and coughed.

Kirkland clapped her lightly on the back. “Are you all right, Caressa?”

She looked up into his eyes, seeing concern but not the strong emotions she saw in Jackson’s eyes when he looked at Dulcie. She supposed choking on a bit of wine wouldn’t normally inspire such a look, but she had never seen Jackson without that loving glint in his eyes. She wanted that look from her husband. Caressa didn’t want Kirkland to think of her as only his friend, but as his lover, his love.

“I – no, I’m not feeling very well. I think I would like to go upstairs and lie down, now. If everyone would excuse me?” She rose to her feet, purposefully swaying slightly so that Kirkland would reach for her.

“Come along, Caressa. I will take you upstairs so that you may rest.”

Seeing this as an opportunity to angle her husband into bed, she plotted as Kirkland guided her back to their suite and into the bedroom across the suite from the one he had shown her to when they’d arrived. The furniture was smaller, almost delicate – more like the furniture in her rooms at home.

Noticing her trunks and several of her larger possessions around the room, Caressa was confused but decided her seduction of her husband could easily begin here. Caressa crossed the threshold and began to unpin her hair. She looked over her shoulder at Kirkland. He stood outside the room, watching her.

“Would you help me undress, Kirkland?”

He shifted from foot to foot. “I will – ahem – I will ring for Maisy to help you.” Kirkland entered the room, heading for the bell pull that hung down one wall.

Caressa stepped in front of him. “Please, Kirkland, you are here. It will take Maisy time to get here, if she doesn’t get lost in the unfamiliar house. I am tired and would like to go to bed.” She stepped closer, so close the tips of her breasts brushed his chest. Caressa looked up at him through her lashes. “Please Kirkland,” she whispered.

He took a deep breath and faced her away from him. His gentle fingers released the hooks and ties along her back. Caressa shivered as Kirkland’s fingers brushed her skin as he pushed the thick fabric over her shoulders and down her arms.

She could hear his breath rasping in and out of his mouth. He tugged the ties of her corset to release her from the confining material. She breathed a sigh of relief as he pulled the stiff garment from her. She felt him step away, the loss of his heat sending a chill across her back. Caressa turned to her husband. His deep green eyes trailed down her length and she wondered what he could see of her through the shift shielding her nude body.

When his eyes returned to hers, she swore they sparked with a heat with which she sincerely wanted to warm herself. He coughed into his hand and turned his gaze from her. “Is there any other way I can assist you?”

Caressa decided to see if the sparks of attraction she had seen in his eyes could be turned into an inferno. She stepped up to Kirkland and placed her hand in the center of his chest. He looked at her and she saw again the way his eyes widened and the green was almost eliminated by black.

Caressa slid her fingers down and over the thick fabric of his vest and dinner jacket. She slowly worked at the buttons. Kirkland stood motionless, looking at her as she stared into his eyes. He was running his gaze all over her. When his eyes stopped on her mouth, Caressa licked her lips.

Kirkland groaned and brought his mouth down on hers. Caressa eagerly met his kiss. His firm lips were warm and smooth. He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and skimmed his velvety tongue along the sensitive skin. Caressa gasped and worked faster at removing Kirkland’s clothing.

She had finished with his jacket and was now unfastening the last button on his vest. Kirkland shrugged out of them, throwing them to the floor before gathering Caressa into his

arms. His tongue rubbed against hers and Caressa felt herself growing lightheaded. She needed him.

The thin fabric of her shift tightened around her waist. She felt his hands drag the material up her body until he had to pull away from her lips to pull the shift over her head. His eyes once again traveled down her body. Gentle fingers followed his gaze.

Caressa's breath hitched when his gentle touch brushed one of her nipples. She held back a small giggle as his fingers glided over the sensitive skin of her stomach. However, she could not contain the moan as he sifted through the hair over her mound. He slid his fingers between her thighs and pressed the longest against her. A sob tore from her throat when he rubbed a delicious, tingling spot. It was so pleasurable it almost hurt.

Kirkland continued to circle his fingertip over the spot, making the pleasure and pain mount higher and higher. Caressa clawed at his shirt and the buttons on his trousers. His hands left her body to finish undressing himself. When he was bare, Kirkland pulled Caressa into his arms once again. One of his large hands curled around the back of her neck as the other traced down her spine and pressed her body to his.

Caressa gasped at the hard, searing hot length of his member pressing into her belly. Her fingers clutched his shoulders, scraped at his back, squeezed the hard globes of his rear. She pressed against Kirkland, her hips twitching in time to the throbbing low in her belly.

He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed. Caressa held out her arms to Kirkland and he laid the length of his body along hers. Instinctively, Caressa's legs fell open to cradle Kirkland's body between her thighs. Kirkland pressed his sex against hers, thrust the length of himself against the delicious spot he had been rubbing only moments ago. Caressa whimpered and clasped Kirkland's hips with her legs.

Tremors started in her womb. They turned into flames that quickly engulfed her entire body. Caressa cried out and clawed at the strong muscles of Kirkland's back as her body shook hard. Kirkland pulled his hips back and thrust forward, his body invading hers. She cried out as pain burned away the last of her pleasure and she tried to crawl away from him, but Kirkland wouldn't allow it.

He stayed inside her, not moving his hips at all. His large hands clasped her head as he brought his down for a kiss. His tongue forged deeply but gently into her mouth. Kirkland's

tongue rubbed against Caressa's, making her shiver. He nibbled her lips, making them feel swollen, making her want more.

His lips left hers and skimmed down her chin, the soft skin underneath. Down the length of her neck and across her collarbone. Kirkland nuzzled his nose in the valley between her small breasts and licked the sensitive skin, making Caressa sigh.

When the wet heat of his mouth engulfed her nipple, she gasped and buried her hands in his hair. He sucked hard and began to move his hips. Caressa shuddered at the feel of him dragging out of her body and sliding back into her. His sharp teeth nipped the tip of her nipple before he soothed the pleasurable pain with his velvety tongue.

Sighing, Caressa lifted her hips to meet Kirkland's. His hands clasped her hips and pinned them to the bed. He looked up into her eyes, his mouth still around her nipple, and he slowly shook his head. Kirkland sucked hard as he pulled his head away from her breast. He moved to her other breast, lovingly torturing it as had the first.

Kirkland pushed in and ground his groin against her. The motion brushed that spot again and Caressa felt herself begin to shake all over again. He moved slowly in and out of her, pulling the shattering sensation from her. Caressa wrapped her legs around Kirkland's waist, begging for more. Kirkland thrust harder until Caressa heard the slap of his skin against hers.

A scream ripped from her throat, the feeling rolling through her was so intense it caused shards of light to explode behind her eyes. Kirkland groaned, "Caressa, oh Caressa." She felt his body go rigid above her.

Completely spent, Caressa's arms and legs slithered from around Kirkland. Never had she felt anything so wonderful. Kirkland rolled to the bed beside Caressa and pulled her to his side. She looked into his face, reaching for a kiss. A soft snore rumbled from his throat. He was asleep.

Caressa laughed and snuggled down against his chest. She would get her kiss in the morning.

Chapter Seven

Caressa woke to the sweet and savory smells of breakfast and the soft tinkling of china against silver as a maid carried a tray, heavy with food and juice, into the bedroom. A smile curled her lips and she rolled her head only to find Kirkland gone from her bed. She told herself not to be hurt. He likely had some business he needed to attend to early this morning before they set off on their trip.

Caressa ate her breakfast before washing up and allowing Maisy and the other maids dress her and fix her hair. She hoped wherever Kirkland was that he returned quickly so that they could leave soon. However, when she arrived downstairs, she found her new husband. He was bending over Dulcie's hand, brushing her knuckles with his lips.

Dulcie looked up at her. "Caressa! You're finally awake!" Her friend's full mouth tipped into a smile. She pulled away from Kirkland and came to Caressa.

Caressa saw Kirkland look at her quickly, his cheeks taking on a faint blush before turning back to Jackson and talking to the Marquis in quiet tones. Swallowing her disappointment, Caressa smiled at Dulcie, giving her lifelong friend a hug. "I'm sorry we must leave so early this morning," Dulcie apologized. "We promised Jackson's parents we would be back in time to see them off. They are going to the Orient." Dulcie laughed. "If I know his mother, she will bring back toys for grandchildren she doesn't even have yet."

Caressa laughed and smiled warmly. She was so happy for Dulcie. Her friend had been terrified her husband's parents would hear about what had happened between Dulcie and Jackson before they had married and would not want their son to marry her. Dulcie had been very wrong. Jackson's parents, the Duke and Duchess of Waterton, loved Dulcie. They had long known of their son's intentions to marry Dulcie and had encouraged him to offer for her for years.

Now, if only Caressa could turn Kirkland's head as Dulcie did. She had often been envious of her friend's voluptuous figure. Now her jealousy was strengthened by her husband's reaction to Dulcie. She surreptitiously compared her small breasts to Dulcie's larger ones and wondered if they were what made the difference to Kirkland.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to be done about her child-like body. Caressa bit the inside of her cheek and forced herself not to cry and to smile up at Dulcie. "I am so happy you could be with me," she whispered to her friend.

“I am so happy you allowed me to come,” Dulcie replied. “I wish the two of you all of the happiness in the world.”

They hugged again and Caressa looked over at her husband, watching Kirkland watch them. She wondered if she and Kirkland would be able to find happiness. Maybe even... love?

* * * *

Kirkland looked on as Dulcie and Caressa spoke in low tones at the foot of the grand staircase. His cheeks still burned at Caressa finding him bent over Dulcie’s hand. He supposed it was more guilt than embarrassment he felt. While it wasn’t out of the question, and was even expected, to brush one’s lips across the air over a lady’s knuckles, Kirkland was fair to certain he had more than touched his lips to her skin. Kirkland was afraid he had been caught by Caressa practically devouring Dulcie’s hand.

“Kirkland?”

He looked to his friend Jackson. He cleared his throat. “Thank you for coming to the ceremony. I know it meant very much to Caressa. I’m just sorry it cut short your own wedding trip.”

“Nonsense. Dulcie and I wouldn’t have missed it for anything. Had I even suggested such a thing, she’d have likely had my head for it,” Jackson chuckled.

Even as he forced the words past the lump in his throat, he forced his jaw, neck, and shoulders to loosen. Kirkland felt ready to break. The week had been more than difficult. First, he’d had to watch the woman he wanted marry another man. Then, he had forced himself into a marriage that mirrored that of his parents.

He told himself Dulcie was better off with Jackson. They loved each other madly, had been destined for one another. He also told himself it wasn’t Caressa’s fault she wasn’t Dulcie.

Kirkland felt as though he should be strung up by his toes. It was unfair to Caressa to wish she was someone else. Caressa was a gentle, kind woman. She was worthy of more than a husband who looked at her and pictured rich copper hair in place of her thick golden tresses. A man wishing for light brown eyes rather than deep blue ones. Part of Kirkland had always felt Dulcie’s deliciously curved body could better withstand his passion than any other lady of the *ton*. However, last night in Caressa’s bed, he found a very compatible bed partner.

If nothing else, he and Caressa would have a fine marriage after dark. He had been pleasantly surprised by how excitable his little bride had been. As she had scratched her sharp little nails along his skin, trails of fire had burned in their wake. The way she had responded to his control over her had fed the desire he had been surprised to feel for her.

It made him think back on the day of Dulcie and Jackson's wedding. He had sought comfort in Caressa's arms. Even knowing she had been too inebriated to defend herself against his advances, Kirkland hadn't been able to stop himself from taking her in his arms. He wondered what he would have done to her had their parents not arrived in the hallway to find him manhandling her.

He thought of her words to him that day. *What is so wrong with me, Kirkland?* He still did not understand. Men had approached her parents since prior to her first Season but they had always declined their offers. Why would they do that to her? Did her parents not wish for her to marry? Did they only agree to her and Kirkland's union due to the circumstances?

These questions weighed heavily on Kirkland's mind. Caressa was a lovely woman. She was sweet, intelligent, talented, and he now knew she was passionate. The only reason for her to have gone unmarried as long as she had could be her parents. But why?

He sighed. It no longer mattered. She had been forced to wed Kirkland and now they must make the best of the situation. He would continue to bed her until she got with child. Once he had an heir, he would no longer need to trouble her at night.

Kirkland turned back to Jackson who was chuckling and looking at him with a devilish light in his eyes. "Can hardly wait to be rid of us, eh?"

"Pardon?" Kirkland asked, confused.

"With the way you are looking at your bride, I would imagine you are ready for us to leave so that you may take her back to your suite and make the most of your time." Jackson clapped him on his back and Kirkland issued a noncommittal murmur.

The women joined them at the front entrance, arms linked together. Both women were scarlet with tears in their eyes and the hiccupping remains of giggles on their lips. "I suppose we had best be on our way, husband. Your parents will never forgive us if we are not there to say goodbye." Dulcie hugged Caressa one last time and walked to Jackson, the look of love heavy in her eyes.

Kirkland held out his arm for Caressa and she slipped her hand through the bend at his elbow. They followed their friends outside and waved to them as their carriage took them away from the manor house. Once inside again, Kirkland kissed the back of Caressa's hand. "You will have to excuse me for a short while, Caressa. My father requires my help on some business. I will return shortly then we can be on our way."

Kirkland left Caressa in the entryway and headed for his father's office. Truthfully, there was no emergency, but he felt the need to get away from Caressa. He was certain she wanted to talk to him, maybe even shout at him, about what she had seen when she had arrived downstairs. She had every right to be angry. How embarrassed she must have been.

Kirkland had to learn to control himself. He owed it to Caressa to be more respectful to her. He knew men who did not care for the hearts of their wives and intendeds. They humiliated the women in their lives at every turn all because they could. Though Kirkland did not fool himself that this marriage was a love match, he cared very much for Caressa. If nothing else, they were friends. She deserved to be treated with respect.

He had to let go of his foolish desire for Dulcie. He had known for a very long time she and Jackson would be married, had even deterred other potential suitors. There had been one fleeting moment when it looked as though Kirkland could have her, but one kiss had told him it was not meant to be.

Tonight, he would join Caressa in her bed once again. At least there was heat between them in bed. If that was all they had, so be it.

Chapter Eight

Caressa watched her husband's retreating form. Once he was out of sight, she climbed the stairs and returned to their suite. When she had seen him kissing Dulcie's hand, Caressa had felt sick. She wanted her husband to lavish attention upon her, not Dulcie, nor any other woman! Caressa decided she would seduce him.

She had asked Dulcie if she knew of anything she could do for her husband. As Dulcie proceeded to describe things she could do *with* Kirkland and *to* Kirkland, Caressa's heart had begun to race. In her mind, she had been able to see herself perform all of the acts Dulcie had described.

She looked through her armoire, pulling out all of the lovely nightgowns her mother had picked out for her months ago. Every new Season her mother insisted on buying her a new trousseau. Now she would finally be able to wear these lovely items of sheer and lacy gowns. She looked them over critically. Some were too young, meant for the girls who had only now been presented at court. One, though beautiful, was entirely too daring, even to wear when alone, let alone in the company of one's husband.

She settled on a gown with a sheer cream back and skirt and pale green lace bodice. The back was laced with a wide cream satin ribbon. The sleeves were long but slit the entire length with only a single tie at the elbow. She placed it as well as the rest of her trousseau into one of the bags being brought to the hunting lodge.

They left not long after Dulcie and Jackson, riding north. Sitting on the bench across from her new husband, Caressa snuggled under the blanket she pulled up to her chin and rubbed her feet over the heated brick under them. She watched the man she loved as he seemed to forget she was in the carriage with him.

Kirkland was absorbed, writing in a journal. It made Caressa think of her brothers and their grand tales of devilishness. She knew much of Harry's and Geoffrey's stories were just that – stories – but she loved to listen and laugh over them, anyhow.

She had once suggested they turn the tales into stories to be published. Her father had laughed say that wasn't a proper past time for the sons of a duke. It was strange, thinking back on that day. She could have sworn Geoffrey had lit up just a tiny bit at the thought, his face falling when their father had rebuffed the idea.

Recently she had come across her brother writing furiously. She had entered the library of their London home and he had been sitting at the desk, which was against a wall of windows. She had tiptoed up behind him but he had swiftly flipped the papers over and told her she would be punished for spying. He had chased her around the house and out the kitchen door. He had also ruined one of her favorite dresses when he'd knocked her into the fountain in the center of the garden. She smiled remembering how she had insisted he help her out – when he had reached in for her, Caressa had yanked on Geoffrey's hand, unbalancing him into the water, too. They had laughed until their parents and brother had come out and found them. Their mother had stood there admonishing them. Their father, though he had a stern look in his eyes, had been holding his hand over his mouth to stop his laughter. Harry had been quite annoyed that he had missed the fun. Even the memory nearly had Caressa choke with laughter.

Kirkland looked up from the leather-bound pages but Caressa merely shook her head at the question in his eyes. "Just reminiscing." Clearing her throat, she stretched her neck in the direction of Kirkland and his book. "What are you writing?"

Kirkland looked tiredly at the paper. "I am writing down some notes for a meeting my father and I must attend in London when you and I return to Lynwood Hall. An old business partner of his has been trying to undermine investors' confidence in Father's capabilities. We are meeting with the biggest of the investors to settle their fears."

Caressa nodded and stretched forward trying to see the notebook. The carriage hit a rut throwing Caressa into Kirkland's chest. The book tumbled from her husband's lap as he reached for her. His arms closed around her, holding Caressa tight to his chest. "Are you all right?"

Looking into Kirkland's glass-green eyes, Caressa felt her blood race as memories of the night before crashed around in her head. Caressa grasped his shoulders and stretched up, pressing her lips to Kirkland's.

At first, his lips remained pressed together. But then she laced her fingers through his hair, upsetting the flat topped hat he wore, and tickled his lips with the tip of her tongue. A growl vibrated against Caressa's lips before her husband invaded her mouth.

Pushing her skirt up to her hips, Kirkland pulled her astride his lap, leaving her legs and rear vulnerable to the chilled air in the carriage. His hands rubbed roughly down her thighs until he cupped her knees. Using the pad of his thumbs to rub small circles into the tender flesh covering the muscles of her inner thighs, Kirkland slowly petted his way to her dampening core.

Caressa whimpered against Kirkland's mouth as he gently rubbed the surface of her nether-lips. The hair covering her mound twisted and pulled making her hips jerk involuntarily. Kirkland's thumbs breeched her and he pressed hard against that sensitive, tender spot he had manipulated the night before.

Wrapping her arms tightly around Kirkland's shoulders, Caressa pressed her chest against her husband's, trying to alleviate the ache in her neglected nipples. She's had no idea prior to her first night with Kirkland just how sensitive the innocuous little buds could be. Now that Kirkland had shown her the pleasure to be had by their manipulation, Caressa was greedy for more.

Kirkland released her mouth to tilt his head at a new angle and took her lips again. Caressa gasped as he rubbed deep and hard with both his tongue and his thumbs. Lower belly tightening, tingle rushing through her legs, Caressa moved her hips backward and forward. As Kirkland pressed one thumb deep inside her body, Caressa came, crying her completion into her husband's mouth as the exquisite and frightening sensation rolled through her.

After her body melted against his in utter contentment, Kirkland removed his hands from her thighs and lifted her to reposition her across his lap. He readjusted her dress before pulling over her the blanket she had lost when thrown into his arms.

Drowsiness pulled at Caressa's eyelids. She fought to keep her eyes open, wanting to spend this quiet, perfect moment with Kirkland. He must have noticed her drifting off, though, for he kissed her eyes closed. "Go ahead and sleep, 'Ressa," he murmured. "We still have hours to ride before we arrive."

Nodding against this shoulder, Caressa let herself drift off even as a part of her brain told her not to succumb. Her mind tried to remind her of the hard shaft pressed against her hip, but the lure of rest was too much. Sleep pulled her under, Kirkland's arms wrapped around her.

* * * *

Kirkland and the carriage driver carried in the few items he and Caressa had brought with them to the lodge. Caressa was warming herself by the fire he had set first thing upon their arrival. Once everything had been unloaded and taken into the lodge, Kirkland dismissed the carriage driver who told them he would return for them in a week.

Kirkland heard Caressa sigh, though the sound wasn't very loud. He didn't feel she was trying to show her disappointment in him but he couldn't help but feel responsible for the tiny sound. He knew a week wasn't much time, but he needed to return to business sooner than he might have had to, given more time to prepare.

I did the right thing. I did the only thing I could do. Kirkland had told himself those words every day for the past week. The words were true, but he didn't like the way they made him sound a martyr. That wasn't fair to Caressa. And if the previous night was any indication, marriage to his life-long friend would not be the hardship he had first thought it might.

A skeleton staff of a single maid, a cook, and a valet arrived in short order, taking his and Caressa's clothing and the trunk of foodstuffs to all be stored for use during the week. Kirkland joined Caressa by the fire, rubbing his hands together.

He looked to his companion, tried to think of something to say to the small woman beside him. It seemed so odd, to have nothing to say to a person he had known for so long but about whom he knew very little. When nothing came to mind, Kirkland returned his gaze to the flames dancing in the fireplace.

When he felt a delicate hand settle on his knee, Kirkland felt his heart trip and his cock tighten. Without looking down, he picked up Caressa's hand and lifted it to his lips. He thought of how strong that small hand had felt as she had clutched his back, clawed his skin. Heat flushed Kirkland's cheeks, not with embarrassment but desire. He pressed his lips against the thin skin on the inside of her wrist.

A small whimper erupted from his friend – his wife, and he looked up, seeing Caressa's eyes had glazed over with lust. Before Kirkland could pull her into his arms, someone cleared their throat behind them. Kirkland and Caressa both turned to find the cook smiling at them.

"Would you prefer to rest while I prepare a large meal or would you like something light tonight and retire early?"

Kirkland looked at Caressa from the corner of his eye. "I believe something light will suffice for tonight."

Caressa gasped but she squeezed his hand, conveying her agreement. The little time they had to wait seemed an eternity to Caressa. Wanting nothing more than to be in her husband's arms again, she could do nothing but sit there, fidgeting. Self-doubt began to swirl in her belly, causing her stomach to sour slightly.

She toyed with her bowl of chicken soup, chasing pieces of chicken and vegetables with her spoon. Kirkland ate quickly and voraciously, devouring three bowls in the time it took Caressa to finish her first and only.

Patting her lips dry with her napkin, Caressa hid her mouth when her breath grew short as Kirkland scraped his chair back from the table. His hand appeared before her. "Time to retire, Caressa."

Her hand shook as she laid the stiff linen beside her empty bowl. Setting her trembling fingers in her husband's palm, Caressa allowed Kirkland to pull her to her feet and guide her to a room with a low, wide bed, a roaring fire, a dressing screen and no other furniture.

The maid stood beside the dressing screen and the valet was across the room. Caressa and Kirkland parted, allowing the servants to undress them before leaving the room. Stepping out from behind the screen, Caressa smoothed the lovely rose lace shift over her belly. She looked up to find Kirkland, naked, staring at her, a predatory glint in his eyes.

Kirkland matched her moves as she placed first one then the other knee on the feather mattress. Her shift clutched in her fists, she crawled forward to meet Kirkland in the center of the bed. He reached up and cradled her head in his hands. Kirkland's tongue flicked out and teased her lips.

His fingers traced down her cheeks, the sides of her neck, to rest on her shoulders. He peeled the thin shift from her shoulders, pushed it gently down her arms. His warm, dry palms slid over her breasts, lightly abrading her nipples and eliciting a whimper from Caressa.

The thin cotton of her chemise floated down her waist, past her hips, and pooled at her knees. Kirkland's hands slowly followed its descent. His fingertips grazing the ticklish flesh of her ribs and belly caused Caressa to gasp, swallowing a laugh. When he reached her hips, one hand slid to her front, the other to her back.

Caressa bit Kirkland's lower lip. Her hands grasped his shoulders, her nails digging in to the hard flesh. She needed to hold tightly to something, anything. The large hand at her back slid down to cup one globe of her rear. His other hand petted the hair at the apex of her thighs.

Kirkland's fingers spent what felt like hours just stroking the hair covering her wet mound. Caressa whimpered, begging without words. Kirkland tugged on the crisp hair, causing her to cry out, finally finding her voice. "Please! Touch me, please, 'Land, please!"

She felt her husband smile against her chin. "Of course, Caressa."

Slowly, his fingers moved between her thighs. He pressed against her weeping nether lips, rubbing her, the moisture from her body reducing the nearly painful friction into pleasure. Two fingers slid inside of her. His thumb found that hidden bud that tingled so mercilessly. “Yes! Kirkland!”

Caressa bit into Kirkland’s muscled chest, trying hard to stifle her cries. Cruelly, her husband pulled his hand away but quickly jerked her against his body. He kissed her, his lips hard, his tongue forceful as he stroked into her mouth as his body had stroked into hers the night before. Kirkland urged her down to the feathered mattress.

Caressa spread her thighs, inviting her husband between them. He pressed her into the ticking, rubbing his hard sex against her weeping one. Kirkland reached between them and she felt the bulbous head of his sex against her, pushing inside of her.

Still unused to the stretch of her body, Caressa gasped at the small bite of pain but it quickly slid into pleasant pressure as Kirkland slid into her. Caressa moaned and Kirkland pressed his open mouth to hers. He kissed her deeply, his lips crushing hers. As he pulled back, his teeth clamped onto her bottom lip, scraping on the sensitive flesh. Whimpering, Caressa circled her arms around her husband’s neck as her legs wrapped around his waist. She pulled him back to her, wanting more of his kisses – cruel and punishing or soft and sweet, it didn’t matter to Caressa.

Using her legs, Caressa squeezed her husband closer to her. She squirmed, wriggling her hips, praying silently that he would move. Finally Kirkland pulled away from her, slowly sliding out before dropping his hips, pounding himself into her. Caressa gasped around his tongue and Kirkland’s lips left hers.

Kirkland untangled her arms from his neck, sliding his hands to hers and weaving their fingers together. “Tell me you love it. Tell me you love my cock inside of you.” His voice was smoky and gritty as she had never heard it before. Caressa nodded her head vigorously but couldn’t make herself say the words he wanted to hear.

His hips stopped, his sex deep inside of her. “Tell me, Caressa. I want you say it.” Kirkland ground his hips against her. Caressa cried out in pleasure. “Say it.”

“Yes!” Caressa cried. “Yes, I love your c-c-cock. I love it inside of me. Please!”

Kirkland slammed his lips onto hers. Caressa thrashed as Kirkland withdrew and returned. He groaned into her mouth, meeting Caressa's whimper. Kirkland pulled his mouth from hers, looked into her eyes, held her gaze as he thrust harder and faster.

Caressa's heels sought for and gained purchase on the bed beneath her. She pressed up as Kirkland ground down and she cried out with every thrust of her husband's hips. It felt as though someone was wrapping ribbons around her waist, silken yet strong, and growing tighter and tighter with every movement of her and Kirkland's bodies. Her eyes slipped shut.

"Caressa."

Without being told, she knew Kirkland wanted her to open her eyes, wanted her to look at him. Blue eyes clashed with green, Caressa couldn't even blink.

Suddenly the ribbons were cut and Caressa screamed the pleasure of her release. She sank her teeth into her bottom lip, her fingernails into the flesh on the back of her husband's hands. Kirkland pumped his hips one more time, groaning her name as he pulsed inside of her.

Kissing her softly one last time, Kirkland pulled away from her, laid beside her and pulled Caressa into his arms. Sleep dragged her eyelids closed as she listened to her husband's slowing heartbeat.

So the days went for their abbreviated wedding trip. Silent days filled with passionate nights. Every time he called her name into the darkness, Caressa hoped she heard more tenderness, heard a little love. She did not know if she was looking for that which wasn't there, but she allowed herself to believe – to hear what she so desperately wanted to hear – if only in those dark hours.

Chapter Nine

Caressa's parent's had returned to welcome Kirkland and Caressa home. Her mother and father had tea with her and told her how empty their home seemed without her shining presence to fill every corner. Caressa laughed as her mother told her stories of her brother's foibles.

"I swear those boys are more excitable without you there, darling. Even our ever-responsible Geoffrey has been misbehaving. Harry convinced him to go into town with him and Geoffrey, uncharacteristically, had a small drink. That hideous little man Bartel was there. He started an argument with your brothers. Harry turned his back on the baron and Bartel hit him with the metal grip on his walking stick."

Caressa's mother shook her head dramatically. "To hear Harry tell it, Geoffrey launched himself at Bartel. Harry insisted it took six men to pull your brother off of the little heathen."

Caressa was truly shocked her subdued brother Geoffrey would do such a thing. "What did Bartel say to start the argument?"

"You brothers will not say. I can only imagine it was horrible. Likely just his ugly venom."

Caressa wasn't convinced. Even full of whiskey, large and solid Harry would not have needed Geoffrey to protect him. And Geoffrey knew that. Whatever Bartel said to her brothers, it was out of the ordinary and far worse than anything they may have already heard from him. Caressa told herself to remember to ask Geoffrey when next she saw him.

Caressa listened as her mother continued to chatter. She was happy for the comfort of the older woman's voice, even if she had little interest in the gossip. She nodded, smiled and laughed when her mother did, but her mind was not on the words her mother was speaking. Her mind was on that night, her husband, and the pleasure he would bring her.

* * * *

Caressa pressed her hand against her knee to stop her leg from bouncing. Her nerves ran riot as she waited for the meal to end. She listened to the conversation with less than half an ear, unable to repeat anything said even seconds later. A footman appeared at her elbow, offering to take her half full plate.

Before dessert could be served, Caressa excused herself, begging an aching head. Maisy was in her room waiting for her. "Oh, Miss Caressa, this is a lovely gown." Her maid smoothed the delicate fabric of the night dress Caressa had chosen earlier.

"Isn't it? Hurry, Maisy, I want to be ready by the time my husband comes upstairs."

"Of course, deary." Her maid helped her change her clothing and arrange her hair to fall softly around her shoulders. Maisy left her with a squeeze to Caressa's shoulder. It wasn't long before she heard the main door to the suite open and Kirkland's heavy tread. The only disconcerting thing was he was walking in the wrong direction.

The door across the suite from hers open and closed. Caressa walked into the sitting room, saw no trace of Kirkland, and so decided she would have to follow him. As she stepped up to the door, she contemplated knocking first but decided against it. Caressa pressed on the lever and opened the door.

Heavy, dark Hepplewhite furniture dominated the room. The deep, masculine colors of the draperies and bed linens seemed to swallow the modest light from the candles and banked fire. Caressa felt as if her small figure was made even more diminutive in the grand scale of the room. She couldn't help but think that Dulcie could walk in here with confidence. Biting her lip, Caressa looked at her husband.

Kirkland was almost naked, his back to her. She let her gaze wander over the sleek muscles that curved into a deep groove along his spine. His smooth rear flexed as he removed one stocking and suspender and then the other.

Unable to resist the call of his gorgeous body, Caressa walked silently to him and laid her hands on his back. His skin was burning hot and she pressed herself closer to that heat. Caressa kissed the smooth skin, brushing her lips across the hard points of his shoulder blades, moving down until she was just above the small of his back. She finally settled her mouth in the valley down the center of his back. Needing to know his taste, the flavor of him on her tongue, Caressa licked up along his backbone.

Kirkland shuddered and turned to face her. His green eyes were bright with passion. He picked her up and placed her on the bed. Before he could lower himself on top of her, Caressa slid from the bed to kneel before him on the floor. She thought of what Dulcie had told her to do. Looking at the size of her husband's cock, Caressa was doubtful she would be able to fit it inside her mouth. But she would try.

Caressa leaned forward and kissed the tip. The skin was smooth and wet. She licked her lips and decided she liked the taste. It was salty and thick. Caressa licked the round cap and Kirkland groaned. She opened her mouth wide and took the top inside. She slid her lips down, but had to retreat when she choked. Wrapping her hand around the root of his cock, Caressa looked at it, trying to decide how she would perform this act.

Kirkland wrapped one hand around hers on his shaft and cupped the back of her head with the other. She looked up into his eyes and he smiled down at her. "Take it slow, love. Just open your mouth and let me do the rest."

Caressa felt her heart flutter at the endearment and did as he asked. Kirkland slipped in past her lips and moved slowly, shallowly, in and out of her mouth. He moved their hands together, stroking the portion of his shaft left untouched by her mouth. He pulled out completely and told her, "Lick along the bottom."

Caressa ran her tongue down his shaft to his sack which he urged her to take into her mouth. She sucked first one small globe then the other into her mouth, the coarse hair tickling her lips. "Run your lips along the sides of my cock, use your tongue."

Caressa pulled away from his sack, pressed her open mouth to the velvety skin of his staff and ran her tongue up to the tip. She sucked the leaking tip once before moving down the opposite side. Caressa swiped the underside of his cock with her tongue, coming back to the cap.

Kirkland reached down and pulled her off of him and to her feet. He turned her away from him and untied the ribbon at her back. The gown sagged and Kirkland caressed the delicate fabric from her shoulders. Caressa's arms hung at her sides and the gown slithered down her body unimpeded.

Kirkland's hands glided around Caressa's slim waist. She shivered, covered his hands with hers. She guided one hand up to cup her breast, and pulled the other down to cover her mound. He didn't press his way inside, instead his fingers rubbed the sensitive skin and crisp hair on the surface. Caressa whimpered and pressed her hips against their hands. She tried pressing his fingers against her, inside her, but he resisted.

"Please, Kirkland."

He rubbed harder. Caressa could just feel Kirkland's fingers against that sensitive nub between her legs. It was frustrating. It built her hunger until she was close to screaming at him.

Dulcie had told her how using words a lady shouldn't enticed Jackson. She had told Caressa what those words were. "Fuck me, Kirkland. I need your cock inside of me. Now. Please!"

Kirkland growled in her ear. "Where did you learn such naughty words, my lovely Caressa?"

"Fuck me," she persisted, ignoring his question.

Kirkland turned her to face him, sat her on the edge of the bed, and pressed her to her back. Standing beside the bed, he raised her legs so that the back of her thighs pressed against his chest. Caressa cried out as he plunged into her.

She watched Kirkland's face. His head tipped back, the cords of his neck stood out in sharp relief. His soft mouth was pressed into a hard line and Caressa saw a muscle tick in his cheek. Kirkland slowly moved his hips, drawing out the pleasure.

Wrapping his arms around her thighs, Kirkland moved his thumbs down and petted the nub of sensation between her legs. Caressa whimpered weakly. She tried to move her hips but Kirkland moved one big, elegant hand and pressed down on her belly, holding her in place.

Along with the pressure came even greater pleasure. Caressa cried, tears rolling across her temples and into her hair. Kirkland moved his hips faster and she begged him to stop. "Please... too much.... Stop...."

Even as she pleaded with him, Caressa reached up and curled her hands around Kirkland's sides, pulling him closer to her, into her. It grew to be too much. Her body spasmed as she reached her breaking point. "Kirkland! Yes, please!"

She scratched at his chest, having lost control of her body. Kirkland tipped his head back. "'Ressa!"

Kirkland fell to his knees, slipping from her so quickly and suddenly, she gasped at the loss. She felt his lips as he kissed the tender skin of her inner thighs. His fingers petted the soft hair covering her sex. One finger glided over the painfully sensitive nub.

Caressa groaned. It felt so good but it was too much. When she tried to push his hand away, Kirkland merely nipped her fingertips and continued to pet her. Her climax came but was not as near to pain as they had in the past. Instead, it lingered until long after Caressa had turned into a boneless mass.

Kirkland rose above her and moved her to the center of his bed. He lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms. She felt his lips and mouth nuzzle her hair and he placed a kiss on her head. Caressa wrapped both hands around his arm and listened as his breathing evened to the deep rhythm of sleep.

Looking into his face, she smiled. A deep warmth filled her chest. She knew that he must have felt something as he touched her tonight. Already, plans for tomorrow night swirled in her mind. She could hardly wait.

Chapter Ten

Caressa looked at the red stain on her shift, cursing her luck. Her woman's time had arrived early. Three weeks of the delicious sensations, of spending night after night in her husband's bed, or he in hers, but naught of it had produced a child. Now, not only did she not want her husband to touch her as she bled, she was not even certain she wanted to see him. She had known something was wrong when she had awoken in a black mood. It was a good thing Kirkland had not been in the bed with her that morning for she did not want him to see her in such a mood, or such a state.

She asked Maisy to bring her breakfast to her bedchamber, not in the mood to join their families for the morning meal. Caressa ate and allowed Maisy to talk her into dressing and joining her parents for the short time they had before they left that day.

She looked at the ring that glittered on her finger. It was a large sapphire surrounded by a dozen small emeralds. Even her dark mood could not stop the smile that came to her lips. Kirkland had told her the jewels reminded her of her eyes. Caressa turned the band this way and that, seeing the colors dance, the gems sparkle.

Maisy cleared her throat, pulling Caressa's attention from her wedding present. "Deary, maybe t'isn't such a bad thing, you bleeding right now. You've spent a lot of time in that young man's bed, but how much time have you spent in his company?"

"As you just pointed out, Maisy, I have spent every night since our wedding night with Kirkland," she replied.

Maisy shook her head, laughing gently. "No, no, Lady Caressa. How much time have you spent talking with him, spending time while not... most pleasantly occupied?"

Caressa shrugged. "We have known each other all our lives. What is left to learn of him?"

"You know him as a friend. It is time to get to know Mr. Perry as your husband and lover." Maisy took hold of Caressa's bejeweled hand and pulled her to her feet.

Caressa felt tears threaten. "He doesn't see me as a wife and barely sees me as a lover. Were I taller with a fuller figure and long red hair, perhaps I could capture his interest. But not this short, too-thin, yellow-haired urchin – I could not turn his head, no matter how hard I tried."

Maisy cupped her cheeks, wiping away the tears that rolled down Caressa's face. Her maid's eyes were kind, sympathetic, and they only served to make her feel more miserable. She sounded so bitter and hateful. And against her own friend! She tried to pull away but her maid would not allow it.

"Lady Dulcie is a fine woman. Beautiful in her own right, true. However, and perhaps it is because I am merely biased as I love you as my own, but she is not nearly as lovely as you. Mr. Perry will come to see this and Lady Dulcie will float from his mind as you consume his thoughts day and night." Maisy smiled and, because Caressa knew she was expecting it, she smiled in return.

Maisy sighed. "That sad excuse for a smile will have to do for now."

Her maid pulled her from the suite and encouraged Caressa down the stairs. Caressa smoothed non-existent wrinkles from the dark blue fabric of her day dress and went to join the family. She found her and Kirkland's mothers in the drawing room. They told her Kirkland was in Konnor's office with him and her father. They were likely discussing Caressa and Kirkland's future and settling the final arrangements of her dowry. She would not see her husband for some time if she knew her father and his penchant to talk business. Caressa sighed in relief.

She was still not ready to face Kirkland. Caressa needed time to regain her good mood and until she did, she didn't want Kirkland to see her. Not listening to the older women, Caressa simply listened to the soothing voices. She closed her eyes and allowed her mind to wander back over her time alone with her husband.

Though they had spoken little while at the cabin, Caressa would always cherish their time there. She would hold close the memories of her husband around her, inside of her, pushing her body towards strange and wonderful sensations with no chance of interruption.

"Do you not agree, Caressa?"

The direct use of her name pulled Caressa out of herself and had her looking to her mother. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Oh, look at her, that dreamy look of love." Kirkland's mother laughed.

Her own mother patted Caressa's knee. "You haven't heard a bit of the conversation, love."

That her mother made it a statement, rather than a question, Caressa was even more embarrassed than she might have been. She felt her cheeks heat and looked at her hands, twisting in her lap. “No, I haven’t. I apologize.”

“Oh, it is all right, darling. I well remember when your father and I were wed.” She laughed and looked to Kirkland’s mother. “We know the feeling well, don’t we?”

Kirkland’s mother made a non-committal noise and giggled along with Caressa’s mother. Forcing a laugh past her lips, Caressa sat up straight, her posture having wilted as she thought of her husband. She pushed her daydreams to the back of her mind and made a concerted effort to listen to her mother and mother-in-law.

The butler came and announced lunch. He informed them they would be eating alone as their husbands were still in her father-in-law’s office. The men didn’t surface until the women were nearly finished. When the large clock in the main hall sounded off three bells, Caressa’s mother and father announced it was time for them to leave. Caressa hugged and kissed her parents goodbye, feeling more bereft than when Kirkland and she had left for their wedding trip. Somehow, this seemed worse. As the door closed behind them, Caressa felt like a small child when she swiped a tear from her cheek.

* * * *

Kirkland walked into the library and found Caressa curled onto a settee, a book in her hands, her eyes flying across the pages. He cleared his throat and his wife jumped in her seat, the book falling to the floor. Her blue eyes flew back and forth from her book to him.

Kirkland walked over to her and picked up the fallen tome. He looked at the cover. George Walker’s *The Haunted Castle*. He raised an eyebrow at Caressa and handed her back the volume. A small frown disrupted the smoothness of the skin of her forehead. “I enjoy Mr. Walker’s work.”

“As do I,” said Kirkland as he sat in a leather chair caddy-corner to the chaise his wife occupied. Kirkland reminded himself every day to think of Caressa as his wife, believing it would get easier with time. “All of Mr. Walker’s books you will find in this room are mine.”

Caressa looked at him with surprise. “Have you read *Theodore Cyphon*?”

Kirkland smiled, “All three volumes.”

They spoke for the rest of the afternoon, comparing their favorite authors and tales. Kirkland was delighted to find out that Caressa hated the lighter stories intended for ladies. She enjoyed tales of mystery and suspense, of adventure and danger.

As the setting sun shone through the mullioned windows it painted Caressa's golden hair in pinks and purples. She looked like a fairy and for a moment Kirkland couldn't breathe. His friend was more beautiful than he had ever realized.

It seemed odd that he would notice that here, now. There was nothing remarkable about the moment, nor the setting. They merely sat there talking and he was struck.

Bowers walked into the room just at that moment and announced dinner was ready. Kirkland turned his attention from his wife and thanked Bowers. Later that night, after eating dinner and spending some time with his parents, Kirkland escorted Caressa to their suite.

He knew she would not invite him to her bed this evening, the fact of her condition obvious from her dark dress and the times she would grow quiet and unconsciously rub her belly. Kirkland lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. When Caressa reached up and curled her free hand around the back of his neck, Kirkland wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against his chest. He pressed his lips to hers, thrust his tongue into her mouth. The feel of the fingers softly skimming the front of his throat made him gentle the kiss. Slowly, he pulled away and let her go.

"Good night, Caressa."

She smiled shyly at him as she entered her bedchamber. "Good night, Kirkland."

The door closed with a soft click and Kirkland took a moment before he walked across the sitting room and into his own bed chamber. Unwilling for his valet to see his body in its excited state, Kirkland dismissed the man for the evening. He undressed himself slowly, hoping the urgency in his cock would lessen.

It didn't. When he stood bare, even having taken the time to fold the articles of clothing, Kirkland sat on the side of his bed, looking down into his lap. He was painfully erect and wanted to sink himself into Caressa's body. Unfortunately, tonight, that was not an option.

The head of his cock was wet. He slicked the fluid down his shaft. Kirkland lay back on the bed, his legs hanging over the side. One arm thrown over his eyes, Kirkland pictured a woman in his mind. She had long red hair, a generously curved body, and laughing brown eyes.

He had thought of Dulcie before and her image had always help as he calmed his ardor, but now there was something wrong. He shouldn't be thinking of her, another man's wife while he was another woman's husband. But it was more than that, too. It felt wrong.

It was only a fantasy. He was not the first man, he was certain, to think of a woman besides his wife. That didn't make what he was thinking all right. His hand slowed and he shifted the image in his mind. Red turned to gold, the body became slimmer, smaller, and brown turned the color of the sky on a clear, hot summer's day.

Kirkland pumped his hand as he imagined Caressa above him, riding him. His hands on her hips forcing her to his pace. He could almost feel her sharp nails scratching at his chest as she begged him to move faster. Before he could stop it, Kirkland came. He groaned through clenched teeth.

Kirkland lay there for a moment, allowing his breathing and heartbeat return to normal before getting up to clean himself. The revelation he had made moments ago would have to wait until tomorrow for further examination. He didn't have the energy to think on it now.

* * * *

The next day Caressa stayed in bed until after luncheon. Her stomach was in knots. Maisy brought her a bladder filled with hot water and she curled into herself around it. After she turned away not only breakfast but lunch as well, Kirkland came to visit her carrying a tray of hot broth and tea.

"Sit up, Caressa."

"No!" She pulled the blankets over her head and snuggled deeper into the mattress. She knew she sounded like a petulant child but she had no interest in food or company. She heard the muffled sound of Kirkland setting down the tray. The blankets disappeared from her head and Kirkland was leaning over her, frowning. "Come now, you must eat."

Caressa rolled over, presenting her back to her husband. She grumbled, "I am not hungry."

Caressa squealed as Kirkland slid his arms around her and lifted her from the bed. He carried her to the dressing table where he had placed the soup and tea and sat on the chair before the small vanity with Caressa in his lap.

She knew the small chair must be uncomfortable for Kirkland. He did not complain, however. Instead he fed her until she finally relented and took the spoon from him. He did not let her leave his lap until she had finished the broth and the tea. When she was done, he pulled her back against his chest and rested his chin atop her head.

“Do you feel better?”

Caressa sighed, plucking at the lacy cuff of Kirkland’s sleeve. “Yes, thank you.”

They sat quietly for a moment before Kirkland asked, “Is something else wrong?”

Caressa bit her lip, considering telling him everything rolling through her head. She wanted to tell him how she loved him, how it hurt that he loved another – her best friend. She wanted to tell him that she feared he would grow to hate her. Caressa wanted reassurances but was terrified Kirkland would be able to give them.

“No, nothing else,” she murmured against his chest.

Kirkland was quiet for so long Caressa knew he didn’t believe her. Finally, he sighed and lifted her from his lap, making her stand before him. She thought he would push her to tell him but instead he just stood and looked down into her eyes. He brushed her hair back from her face and looked into her eyes. “All right,” he finally murmured and kissed her forehead.

He released her and walked to the door. At the last second he turned back to her. “I expect you downstairs for dinner this evening.”

Caressa nodded and Kirkland left the room. She watched the door long after he left the suite. Sometimes Caressa wondered what her future would be like with Kirkland. She wondered if there would be more than friendship and tenderness. Resigning herself to the improbability of more was not only difficult but painful.

* * * *

That evening at dinner, Caressa tried to eat but her stomach was still too upset. She couldn’t eat more than a few bites of the tender lamb on her plate. Tired and feeling ill, she tried to participate in the conversation. Caressa even agreed to sit with Beatrice for a while after the meal.

Kirkland finally took pity on her. After only a short while in the parlor, with his mother, Kirkland entered the room and came to kneel by her chair. He brushed his knuckles down her cheek. “Come along, Caressa. Time to put you to bed.”

He took her up to their suite and dismissed Maisy as they entered Caressa’s chamber. Kirkland helped her to undress and put her to bed. He sat next to her, his hip brushing hers. Caressa wondered if he would ask to share her bed but he merely brushed back tendrils of hair that had fallen free of the ribbon that held the rest of her locks in a tail at the base of her skull.

Kirkland leaned down and gently kissed her forehead. “Goodnight, love,” he whispered.

Caressa’s heart stuttered as he uttered the careless endearment. She swallowed around the lump that suddenly blocked her throat. “Goodnight.” Her voice rasped and her eyes began to prick with the feeling of oncoming tears. She prayed they wouldn’t fall while he was watching and for once her prayers were answered kindly. Kirkland smiled down at her and left the bed, then the room.

Caressa stared up at the ceiling, tears rolling from the corners of her eyes, across her temples, and tickling her scalp as they filtered through her hair. With an upset stomach and an aching heart, she forced herself to find some small respite in sleep. If she couldn’t have his love in the waking world, at least she could in her dreams.

Chapter Eleven

Kirkland looked out the study window. For the past two nights, when he had gone to Caressa's bedchamber she had turned him away. While out of bed, she had walked around with a little frown wrinkling the smooth skin between her eyebrows. She barely talked to anyone besides his mother and her maid, Maisy. He knew what was wrong with her naturally, but he was beginning to wonder what was wrong with him.

It was not that he had never gone without a woman's company in his bed. However, it had never bothered him to be alone at night as it did now. He supposed it could be that he had a wife and she should be at his beck and call. That wasn't it.

He just wished she was there at his side for him to hold through the night. If she did not want to share her body with him during this time, he understood but that did not mean she could not sleep in his bed. He missed waking up with her wrapped around him, one slim, soft arm draped across his chest and one leg curled around one of his, her foot snuggled between his calves.

He missed the sensation of her breath fanning his chest. He wanted to press his nose to her silky hair and breathe in the delicious scent of honey that seemed to emanate from her. He needed to feel the soft roundness of her breasts pressed into his side and one pliant globe of her ass in his hand.

Kirkland had always thought Caressa was beautiful but he was beginning to find that she was exceptional. One of the things that had attracted him to Dulcie was her sturdiness. He'd believed she would be best suited to his hard, deep lovemaking. Over the years of admiring her beauty, intelligence and sweetness, he had grown to care very deeply for her. But, if truth be told, it was his perception that she could withstand how he made love to women. Caressa had always struck him as too small, too fragile to respond to him.

Caressa not only responded to his love making but reveled in it. He delighted in the feeling of her clawing at his skin. The way she loved his body with her mouth had shocked him the first time she had fallen to her knees before him. However, he had quickly grown to need that delicious and wanton mouth torturing him. It never seemed to shock or disgust her, what he wanted to do to her body. Tonight, he hoped, he could return to her bed to play.

At breakfast this morning, Kirkland had noticed the frown was gone. She had laughed with his parents over a story his father told. As he left the table, he had bowed to her and Caressa's eyes and smile promised the heat he so enjoyed from her.

Last night's snow had only dusted the landscape, muting the colors but giving everything a sparkling glow. As he looked out over the shimmering trees and hedges, Kirkland wondered why something felt wrong. He had felt guilty after the first few times he had bedded Caressa but the guilt had lessened each time she came to him and begged him so prettily.

Perhaps that was what felt wrong. While he had gone to her bed once or twice, she was the one who reached out to him more often. As he thought of Caressa now, he tried to remember how many conversations they'd had since they married. Too few. They had been friends once and if nothing else, he wanted them to remain friends.

Caressa deserved more, though. She deserved affection, not just physical attention, from him. He *was* fond of her, truly, but perhaps he had not shown her as he should have. Kirkland *knew* he did not show her as he should have.

His decision was made. Their wedding had been rushed due to a moment of blinding grief and need. He'd had neither the opportunity nor the inclination to court her. It was time he fixed that. Caressa deserved to be wooed, and he would begin tonight.

Chapter Twelve

After dinner that evening, Kirkland asked Caressa to join him for a sleigh ride. The idea of traveling the powder dusted countryside with Kirkland overrode the desire to stay inside where it was warm. She wrapped a thick wool scarf around her neck, tugged on kid leather gloves, and pulled a heavy, fur-lined cloak around her shoulders.

Meeting Kirkland on the front steps, Caressa smiled up into his emerald gaze. Kirkland returned her smile, taking her hand and carefully escorted her to the sleigh as the driver pulled the horses to a stop. Once she and Kirkland were settled in the back of the sleigh with a heavy blanket covering their laps, a maid came out of the house carrying two cloth wrapped bundles. Kirkland took one from the girl and bent over Caressa to raise her feet and place the heated brick under them.

He took the other brick and placed it under his own feet before telling the driver that they were ready. The horses jerked to life, pulling away from the house and into the night.

The moonlight reflecting off the snow made it possible to see the scenery they passed. The icy wind bit into Caressa's cheeks, nose, and forehead but she didn't care. The heat from Kirkland's body and the warmed brick kept the rest of her comfortable.

She looked out at the trees to the right of their transport. A family of deer stood at the wood line, their noses digging through the snow to get to the grass beneath it. They hit a small bump, which jostled Caressa, startling her and making her yelp. Kirkland reached out for her, pulling her back until she was nestled in his side, his arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

Caressa buried her nose in the wool of his winter coat, breathing deep the faint scent of him that underlined the smell of the wool. She tipped her head back, looking into the sky and gasped.

"What?"

Caressa pointed to the stars. "Look at that!"

Kirkland looked up and hummed when he saw the shooting stars flying across the sky. Caressa was enthralled with the display of flashing lights. Kirkland nuzzled the hood of her cape away from her ear and the sensation of his hot breath swirling into the sensitive shell made her shiver. "Make a wish."

Caressa watched and wished on the next star to rocket across the inky expanse. *Please*, she called out from her heart. *Please, let him love me.*

She closed her eyes, praying for the wish to come true. She felt Kirkland's warm lips press against her forehead. "What did you wish for, Caressa?"

Looking up into his eyes, she couldn't say the words aloud. Thankfully, the rules of wishes wouldn't allow her to tell. "If I want my wish to come true, I cannot tell you."

Kirkland chuckled and sat back, cuddling Caressa into his side. They continued around the estate. Caressa saw more animals, most staying close to the tree line, others bravely dashing across the snow covered fields. Three foxes, likely a vixen and her kits, ran along side the sleigh, their small but lean bodies matching pace with the horses. They veered off suddenly and Caressa supposed they caught the scent of a meal.

When she was younger, Caressa had wondered what it was like to run wild. To be free of the confines of society. To not have to be perfect. Those foxes could change their direction between one heartbeat and the next. They had no need to worry over their hair, their clothing, their posture, their stations in life.

But now, as an adult, Caressa no longer had to wonder. She sat beside the answer. His arm was curled around her, telling her why she had fretted and worked so hard to become the perfect lady. She'd had only one desire since she had met him – to be his wife, his love.

She could only hope that over time his feelings for her would grow. She knew he cared for her. She knew he lusted for her. Caressa hoped those two would coalesce in Kirkland's heart to create what she felt every time she thought of him, looked at him, kissed and held him.

She also knew her hopes were the romantic dreams of a child. More marriages than not contained no love. They were partnerships created by two families, or by His Majesty to better benefit the families or the king's intentions. She knew many of her married friends had lovers and their husbands, mistresses. She did not want that existence for herself and Kirkland. For the children they might someday have.

She felt the horses slow to a stop. Looking around, Caressa saw they had returned to the house. She had been so engrossed in her own thoughts, she hadn't realized they had turned around and made the return journey.

Kirkland stepped down from the sleigh then turned back to lift Caressa out of the transport. They made their way into the manor house and up to their suite. At her bedroom door, Kirkland whispered, "Goodnight."

He pressed a soft, chaste kiss to her lips before retreating to his bedchamber for the night. Caressa felt like she was walking on clouds. She also felt terribly bereft that her husband wasn't spending the night in her bed. Her monthly had gone and though she would have welcomed him, she was happy to wait a day before lying with him again.

* * * *

Caressa sat in Beatrice's solar. Her mother-in-law was sitting across from her, a small set of hoops and piece of linen in her hands. She had asked Caressa several times what she thought of the roses she was embroidering onto the piece of cloth. Caressa indulged Lady Perry, telling her they were beautiful. She did not tell the woman the small butterfly she had stitched perching on the edge was a frightening looking mass of black and red thread.

Caressa bent over her own rings, larger than those her mother-in-law was using. The embroidery pattern she was creating was a large oak tree. Its bare branches covered in snow as well as snow covering the ground. The backdrop was going to show more trees, less defined than the oak, and the night sky. There would be a bright star flying across the top. She was stitching a memory of her and Kirkland's sleigh ride.

Her stomach suddenly clenched, reminding Caressa of how nauseous she had felt that morning. She had eaten very little at breakfast. It was odd. While she had felt sick during her monthly, that was not unusual. It was, however, unusual for the feeling to continue afterward.

When Bowers entered the room to inform them that luncheon was served, Caressa followed Kirkland's mother from the room but wasn't truly happy to eat. She picked at the food on her plate but as she filled her stomach little by little, she began to feel better.

"Caressa?"

Looking across the table at Kirkland, she saw that he was staring at her. She looked around and found both of his parents with the same surprised look on their faces. She spied her plate, noticing for the first time that it was almost completely empty while theirs were still filled. A hot blush scorched her face.

“Sorry. I must have been hungrier than I realized.” Caressa kept her head down and refused additional portions, finishing what was left as slowly as possible.

Dinner that evening was much the same, only this time Caressa did not beg off from extra portions. She ate her meal three times over, feeling slightly bloated but satisfied when she could finally eat no more.

“That’s quite the appetite you have, my dear,” Lord Perry said after everyone was finished.

Caressa blushed but giggled as she did so. Everyone laughed with her and they retired to the lounge where Kirkland challenged her to a game of chess. Being raised to be a proper lady, Caressa let him beat her three times. She knew he had realized she let him win when he began positioning his pieces in easily beaten configurations. Caressa refused the bait.

“I know you’re better than that, Caressa.” Kirkland removed his dinner jacket and hung it off one of the wings of the chair he occupied.

“I don’t know what you mean, Kirkland,” she answered guilelessly.

He growled low enough so that only she might hear. “If you do not play with the skill I know you have, we will not leave this table.”

She could see the playfully challenging gleam in his eyes and smiled at him. Caressa won the next four games until Kirkland conceded. Though she could tell her husband was close to shooting himself in the foot for goading her into really playing, but he had a smile on his face, letting her know he had enjoyed the contest.

Again that night, Kirkland left her at her door with a sweet kiss. After eating so much at dinner, she was grateful he did not want to bed her. She yawned, her mouth stretching so wide the corners of her mouth stung. She prayed as Maisy undressed her and she slipped into her nightrail. Caressa prayed that tomorrow night her husband would come to her bed, or entice her into his.

Once in bed, with sleep forcing her eyes to close, she dreamt of all the delicious things she wanted to do to Kirkland the next night.

Chapter Thirteen

As she helped Caressa dress for dinner, Maisy flitted around, a small smile on her face. She avoided making eye contact with Caressa. Knowing her maid was hiding something, Caressa finally asked, "What are you not telling me, Maisy?"

Her maid stopped, looking at Caressa with large innocent eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about, deary." The maids removing the tub Caressa had used to bathe giggled. Maisy shot them a scowl before turning her attention back to Caressa.

Caressa opened her mouth to insist Maisy tell her the secret she was keeping, but the maid cut her off. "Now, now, Miss Caressa, it's time for dinner. Run along."

Caressa frowned as her maid pulled her from her seat and nudged her to the door of her bedchamber. As she stepped out into the suite's sitting room, she saw what could only have been Maisy's secret. All of the furniture had been moved to the perimeter of the room and small round table had been placed in the center. Kirkland stood next to the table dressed in dark blue dinner attire with a bright white shirt and cravat.

"Good evening, Caressa."

"Good evening, Kirkland." She watched as footmen entered the suite carrying serving trays. They deposited their items on the low table that would normally sit in the center of the furniture configuration and left the room. Maisy nudged her again, this time in the direction of her husband. Caressa looked back and scowled at her maid. Maisy only smiled at her, her eyes sparkling as she closed the door between Caressa and herself.

Kirkland pulled out one of the small chairs and waited while she walked forward and sat down. He rounded to table and took his own seat. The warm smile he sent her made Caressa's heart race faster, made her breath catch. Kirkland's eyes trailed down to her upper chest, left exposed by the scooped neckline of her dress.

Caressa felt the tips harden and watched as her husband's eyes darkened. Kirkland looked into her eyes once again and his smile went from warm to deliciously wicked. He turned from her and lifted the domes off of the servers and prepared a plate for Caressa then one for himself.

They ate in silence. Caressa had no idea what to say to Kirkland and he seemed perfectly content merely to watch her. Caressa toyed with the fragrant lamb on her plate. She watched Kirkland through her lashes, waiting for him to say something, anything.

Caressa took a bite and nearly choked when she felt Kirkland's foot rub against the inside of her ankle. The table hid his movement from view. She hadn't even seen him move an inch. She looked directly at him. Kirkland simply smiled at Caressa and continued eating.

When the meal was finished, Kirkland sat back in his chair and eyed Caressa so long she began to fidget. She brushed her fingers over her bodice and hair, trying to dust and smooth anything out of place. When he continued to just look at her, Caressa felt her cheeks heat and felt her chin take on a stubborn angle. "What?" She asked, exasperated by her husband's silence.

Kirkland's smile, the same wicked one he had worn all through dinner, grew wider. "I was just thinking of how lovely you look tonight. Thinking of how much lovelier you would be in my bed."

Caressa felt wetness grow between her thighs. Kirkland rose from his chair and held out his hand. Caressa slipped her fingers into his palm and rose to her feet. Kirkland walked her slowly into his bed chamber, to his bed, and turned to face her. He kissed her softly, undressed her slowly. Caressa shivered. The feel of Kirkland's fingers fluttering over her skin made her hungry, *starving*, for more.

When she felt his fingertips graze her nipples, Caressa stepped closer to Kirkland. His hands became trapped between them, his palms pressed against her breasts. Kirkland growled into her mouth and squeezed the small mounds, her nipples pinched between his fingers. Caressa whimpered. She curled her arms around his neck, pressing as close to him as she could.

Kirkland pulled his hands free, causing Caressa to cry out with loss. His long fingers, his strong hands, smoothed down her back, over her rear. He broke the kiss, trailing his lips down her cheek, her jaw, her neck. When his hands reached the backs of her thighs, his fingers curled around her legs. Lifting her, Kirkland pulled her knees up to his waist, turned, and tipped Caressa back onto the bed.

He nipped her lips with his teeth as he pulled away to stand up between her legs. Kirkland removed his waist coat and unbuttoned the vest beneath as well as the buttons at his wrists. He folded his sleeves up his arms until they banded above his elbows, exposing his tanned, muscular forearms. Removing his cravat took ages. When he finally threw the cloth aside, Caressa reached for the closure of his trousers but Kirkland stepped back before kneeling on the floor.

Kirkland's large hands swept up her legs, starting at Caressa's toes and smoothing slowly, sensually up until his fingers formed a triangle around her curls. Caressa vibrated with anticipation, waiting breathlessly for Kirkland to enter her. She jumped when she felt his tongue lick firmly up the crease of her sex. She gasped when she felt his fingers pull her open and the tip of his tongue lash lightly at the wonderfully sensitive nub.

"Kirkland," she moaned. "More. Please."

Caressa thrashed her hips, trying desperately to make him press his tongue harder, flick his tongue faster. Kirkland refused. He pinned her hips to the bed, continuing the frustratingly light strokes. Unable to tolerate any more teasing, Caressa reached down. She wound her fingers through his hair, dug her nails into his scalp.

Kirkland growled deep in his throat. She felt his lips circle the nub he was teasing. His tongue circled, hard and fast. Kirkland sucked on the nub like he would one of her nipples, making it throb, making the blood pound in that low, intimate region.

Caressa felt that wonderful tightening in her belly. Her body began to shake. Bringing her feet up onto the mattress, Caressa pushed her hips up to grind her sex against Kirkland's mouth. Sobbing as the tightness snapped, releasing energy in an explosion. Light danced behind her eyelids. Her belly convulsed.

Caressa bit her lip, forcing back words of love she could never give her husband. Kirkland kissed his way up her body causing her to shiver. He slipped an arm around her waist, moving her into the center of the bed. Kirkland collapsed beside her.

When Caressa finally caught her breath, she looked up into Kirkland's face. His eyes were closed, his mouth lax, and the movement of his chest was subsiding into the easy rhythm of sleep. With the hand caught between her body and his, Caressa hesitantly reached for Kirkland's shaft. She found it limp and wet. It seemed her husband had found pleasure in pleasuring her.

Smiling to herself, Caressa closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Kirkland awoke to the feel of Caressa's hand curled around his cock. He groaned softly into his pillow. He grew hard and pumped his hips. Her hand moved with him, frustrating him with the lack of friction.

Never having felt this lack of control, Kirkland rolled atop Caressa and kissed her awake. As she began to respond to his lips, tongue, and teeth, he pushed his way into her body. Caressa cried out, her legs curling around his hips.

The hot, tight, slick grip of her body had Kirkland's head spinning. He thrust in and out, hard and slow, savoring the feel of her body sucking him back into her. He wove his fingers through hers, pressing them into the pillow her head thrashed upon.

"Yes, yes, faster Kirkland, please!" The sound of her words, begging for more, shot heat down his spine, forcing his hips to pick up speed. Kirkland slammed his hips against her, ground and twisted his lower belly, working to abrade her clit before pulling away.

Caressa's body began to spasm around his cock. He slowed his pace, loving the way she moaned in distress as he took her away from the edge of her orgasm. Kirkland relished the bite of her sharp fingernails into the flesh on the back of his hands. She tried to thrust against him but Kirkland pinned Caressa's hips with his own.

"Please Kirkland, don't stop! Please move!"

Kirkland nuzzled aside the damp golden strands at Caressa's temple. "You love it when I make you wait. You love feeling desperate for me."

"You're cruel. I don't love it. I hate it. I hate it! Please!" She tossed her head violently.

"Not until you admit it." Kirkland twisted his hips, swirling his cock inside Caressa, grinding against her clit.

Sobbing, Caressa nodded her head violently. "Yes! Yes! I love it! Everything you do to me – everything!"

Kirkland began thrusting again, fucking so hard into her body he had to release her hands and wrap his arms around her to prevent her from banging her head on the solid wood head board. Caressa screamed, her nails scratching at his back, her body contracting and releasing his cock as she came so hard even Kirkland saw stars.

"Kirkland!" She screamed in his ear, practically deafening him.

"Caressa!" He cried out as he poured himself into her body. How had he gone so many days without bringing her to his bed? How had he gone so long without this sweet bliss he'd only ever reached with the woman in his arms?

Kirkland kissed her ear, her collarbone, her throat. He nipped the point of Caressa's chin. Her soft lips were parted as she gasped for breath and Kirkland swooped down, gently thrusting

his tongue into her mouth. Her hands smoothed down his back, as if apologizing for scoring his flesh.

He wanted to tell her she had no need to apologize. Kirkland wanted Caressa to understand that he loved it when she lost control, but he could barely find the strength to roll from atop her, let alone speak those words. Kirkland pulled her close, tucking the crown of Caressa's blond head beneath his chin, before closing his eyes and falling into an exhausted but sated sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

The smell of the breakfast foods had Caressa's stomach churning. She took a small bite of egg and ate a piece of dry toast before deciding eating was not for her that morning. In no mood to do any of the normal activities, she sat in the library and read.

Kirkland found her before setting out with his father to London. "I will return in just a few days, sweet. Is there anything you would like me to bring back with me?"

The endearment spread a warm feeling through her chest but she ignored it and concentrated on his question. Thinking of the chocolates her papa would buy her from a candy maker on High Street, Caressa shook her head. She would love some chocolates but with the sourness in her stomach of late, she didn't dare ask for them. "I cannot think of anything," she fibbed. "Just come back to me as soon as you can."

Kirkland kissed the top of her head then nuzzled her crown with his nose. "In a few days, then."

Caressa nodded after he pulled away and smiled brightly at him when he turned at the door for a last look. Only letting her smile fall after she heard the horses pull away, Caressa rubbed her belly. The nausea had subsided since breakfast but she was still in no mood to eat. Neither was she in the mood to stay there with only Beatrice for company. She was a lovely woman but Caressa could not take another day of being cooped up with Lady Perry.

She considered going to see her family but decided against it. Her mother and father would be livid at her should she arrive at their estate in Courtney with the roads in their current state. Torningate, however, was a possibility. She missed her best friend and wanted to see how Dulcie and Jackson were getting on.

Caressa called for Bowers and asked him to ready a transport so that she might go and visit Torningate. Bowers tried to talk her out of going. "If I may say, ma'am, the roads are very bad. If anything were to happen to you, Young Master Perry would never forgive me."

Caressa doubted that but said aloud, "It will be all right, Bowers. Nothing will happen to me or to the sleigh. Please, have it ready in half an hour."

Bowers hesitated before bowing. "Yes, ma'am."

Half an hour later, Caressa and Maisy were bundled into the sleigh with heavy blankets and heated bricks. The journey to Torningate took a few hours longer than it should have but

they made it to Jackson and Dulcie's estate not long after nightfall. Dulcie had a look of delighted surprise on her face as she hugged Caressa.

"I hadn't expected to see you so soon! What brings you here in such dreadful conditions?" She pulled Caressa into the dining room where Jackson waited for them. He came toward the pair, smiling in welcome. "Hello, Caressa."

Accepting a kiss on the cheek from her old friend, Caressa shrugged out of the heavy cloak she wore, allowing the butler to take it away. "Hello Jackson. I'm sorry to arrive unannounced. Kirkland and Konnor went to town for business and I was left all alone with the Baroness. It is nothing against Beatrice, Kirkland's mother is a wonderful woman, but I needed to get out of the house."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Dulcie exclaimed. "You are always welcome."

They all sat down and waited as the food was brought to the table. The conversation was light with Dulcie recounting gossip her mother sent in her last letter. "Ah, but you know Mother. She doesn't truly believe anything until it has been confirmed by the parties involved. She is, however, all too happy to believe what she heard about Bartel."

Jackson cleared his throat, shaking his head when Dulcie looked at him. In a loud whisper that made her husband chuckle, Caressa's friend said, "I will tell you later."

After they were finished eating, Dulcie accompanied Caressa to her chamber. Once ensconced in the guest suite, Dulcie started to laugh evilly. Maisy helped Caressa undress and prepare for bed.

"Well?" Caressa prompted.

Clicking her tongue in a disgusted manner, Dulcie told her what her mother's letter said of the horrid man that Dulcie had at one time been betrothed to. "He was found with Lt. General Griffon's son, in a very compromising position."

"Dulcie, you found him in the center of an orgy!" Caressa reminded her friend.

"Yes, but he wasn't made to marry my spinster aunt. The Lt. General has a twin sister, never married, who has agreed to make Bartel's life hell! According to mother's letter, the sister will be bringing several staff members with her. If Bartel is ever found to be unfaithful to the Lt. General's sister, Griffin will call him out and Griffin is a massively better shot and a tremendously better swordsman than my dear ex-betrothed."

"I do feel rather bad for his soon-to-be-wife. I've met her. She's a lovely woman, in her way. Very humorous. Oh well, I think she is as disgusted with Bartel *infecting*, as she put it, her nephew as the Lt. General is." Dulcie shrugged.

Caressa laughed softly. Bartel deserved his *good fortune*. She thanked Maisy for her assistance, dismissing her for the night. Sitting beside Dulcie, Caressa asked about the suddenly thoughtful expression on her face.

"I feel rather bad for the Griffin boy. He's a very nice young man. Just another life damaged by that horrible man, Bartel. Cares more about his own pleasures than those hurt by them." Dulcie shook her head.

She shook her head before turning a bright smile on Caressa. Her friend pulled her into a hug before leaving her seat on the bed and walking to the door. "I'm so glad you came for a visit, Caressa. Have a good night."

After Dulcie left, Caressa climbed under the covers. Tossing and turning, her mind ran through that night months ago. Her best friend, the arms of the man Caressa loved wrapped around Dulcie. She had thought of that night many times. Her heart still broke at the vision.

Caressa fell into a restless sleep, the sight of Kirkland's lips touching Dulcie's foremost in her mind.

The next morning, as she sat with Dulcie and Jackson, Caressa fidgeted with her food, not eating much. The aromas made her stomach turn even though it smelled delicious.

Spending the day with Dulcie was harder than she had imagined it would be. Every time Dulcie laughed, the sound grated on her nerves. Every time Dulcie smiled, Caressa wished her teeth would fall from her head. Every time Dulcie touched her, Caressa wanted to slap her hand away, slap her face. She wanted to rage at Dulcie.

Before they separated to ready for dinner, Dulcie took her hands and sat with her on the chaise lounge in the guest room.

"Caressa, I've gotten the impression that something is wrong. You've barely eaten all day. I've seen more than one grimace on your face. You've barely laughed at all. What's wrong?" Feeling the tears roll down her cheeks, Caressa snatched her hands from Dulcie's grip.

"What's wrong? What's *wrong*? As if you did not know!" Caressa broke. She couldn't hold in her emotion anymore. Getting up to pace the floor in front of the chaise, she shouted at

the woman who had been her best friend since they were babes. “How do you think it feels, Dulcie, living with a husband, loving a man, who is in love with someone else?”

A look of horror came over Dulcie’s face. Her hands covered her mouth. “No... Caressa...”

“No! Don’t! I saw you! I saw you kissing Kirkland. How could you?”

Shaking her head, Dulcie rose and took Caressa by the shoulders. “No, Caressa, I didn’t kiss him.”

“You did! You kissed Kirkland! He kissed you! He denied me on our wedding night because of you!” A sob tore from her throat. “I will never hear him say the words *I love you* because he doesn’t love me. He loves you, Dulcie! I will never hold his heart because you have it in your hands, and you don’t even care!”

The door to the attached servant’s quarter opened, a wide-eyed Maisy poking her head into the room. “Maisy, pack our bags. We’re leaving tonight. Right now.”

Dulcie wrung her hands. “Caressa, please, listen to me. I never wanted to hurt you. Please, Caressa, please believe me.”

Caressa angrily swiped the tears from her face. “I can’t bear to look at you. I can’t bear to listen to your voice or be in your company a moment longer.”

Maisy had everything prepared in mere minutes. Caressa led the way down the stairs and to the front door. She pulled on her cloak, pulled up the hood, and walked out the front door without another word. There she waited until her driver pulled the sleigh to a stop in front of her.

Caressa and her maid got settled into the sleigh. She didn’t look back to the house until they pulled away. In the doorway, Dulcie was wrapped in Jackson’s arms, her body heaving as though with sobs.

“Oh, deary.”

Caressa looked to her maid. Her own tears began anew. Sobs wracked her body. As she laid her head in the older woman’s lap and cried, she wondered if she could ever find it in her heart to forgive her friend. And if Dulcie could ever forgive her.

Chapter Fifteen

Kirkland looked at the sapphire necklace he had bought for Caressa during his trip to London. He hoped she liked it. The minute he had laid eyes on the elongated oval sapphire with three small yellow diamonds on the bottom, three on each side, and three yellow diamonds set in the bale, he had known it would be perfect for his wife.

He laughed to himself. Thinking of Caressa as his wife was coming easier and easier. He enjoyed her body and he enjoyed her mind. He could not wait to arrive at Lynnwood Hall. He wanted to be alone with Caressa – and not only to give her his gift.

* * * *

The pain started shortly after she left Torningate. All the way home, her stomach spasmed over and over. Maisy made the driver pull over when they crossed an inn. She asked the innkeeper for broth and a hot stone for her lady.

Her maid had to force the broth down Caressa's throat as she would not voluntarily swallow the clear soup. They left after the driver paid for their service and the innkeeper passed a flannel hot stone up to Maisy. Her maid held Caressa in her lap, the stone pressed to her belly.

Now she lay in her bed, asking, begging for Kirkland. He had still not returned home from London. Caressa wrapped her arms around her middle, moaning as the muscles cramped yet again. She had already been sick several times since arriving back at Lynwood and now she suffered dry heaves as her stomach had nothing else to give up to the chamber pot.

Maisy brought another bladder filled with hot water. They were doing nothing to ease the rhythmic clench and release of her abdominal muscles. When her maid tried to make her eat, the clenching worsened at the smell of the food.

She heard rushed, heavy footsteps coming down the hall, into her and Kirkland's suite.

"Caressa?" She pried open her eyes at the feel of fingertips on her cheek. He was here. He was finally home.

Kirkland called out, told Maisy to send someone for the family doctor. Her heart would have warmed at the concern in his eyes, had her stomach not turned and sent more unproductive heaves to wrack her body.

“It’s all right, ‘Ressa. Everything is going to be all right.” Kirkland kissed her forehead. He left her but only for a few moments as he removed his jacket, boots, and cravat so that he could join her on the bed.

Kirkland wrapped his arms around her. He didn’t leave her side until late the next day when the doctor arrived. Even then, his father and several of the male members of the household staff had to pull him from the bedchamber.

He paced across the common room of the suite. When the doctor left Caressa’s bedroom he had a slight smile on his face. Kirkland crossed to the man. “Well?”

“Oh, I would say she’s well enough.” The doctor laughed but quickly choked off the sound when he saw the look on Kirkland’s face. “Ahem, um, yes. Lady Caressa is fine. The only real problem is that she is not eating enough. She should be eating for two and she is barely taking in enough for herself.”

Kirkland felt light-headed for a moment. “Eating for two,” he whispered. “Are you saying my wife is with child?”

The doctor nodded and clapped Kirkland on the shoulder, giving him a nervous smile. “That’s right, son. I would say in a few months I will be introducing you to your heir or a delightful princess all your own.”

Kirkland needed to sit down. Caressa was pregnant. Scrubbing a hand over his face, Kirkland took several deep breaths. That was it then. If they had a son, there was no reason to continue sharing Caressa’s bed. A shaft of cold shot through his chest but Kirkland dismissed it. He had told himself that once Caressa had given him an heir, he would no longer force himself on her.

The night before he left for London came to mind. When he made her admit that she loved what he did to her. When he had come so hard his heart had stopped. When it had only begun beating again when he had looked into her eyes. Kirkland pushed the memory from his mind. He couldn’t think of those moments. Not now. Maybe never again.

Through the sleepy haze of laudanum, Caressa watched Kirkland enter the room and approach the bed. The pain and retching had finally stopped but the doctor did not leave the laudanum behind, for which she was very grateful. A blurry Kirkland sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at her.

He lifted his hand and rested it gently on her belly. The feeling of his hand, rubbing in gentle circles, made Caressa sigh. "I cannot believe we are having a child."

Caressa placed her hand over his. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Kirkland's eyes flew to hers and he removed his hand from her stomach. "Yes, wonderful." He rose from the bed walked over to one of the large windows showing a cloudy sky. Absently, Caressa wondered if it would snow. Kirkland's voice breaking the silence startled her in her addled state. "The doctor told me your sickness should be over soon. He said it usually only lasts a few weeks early on in pregnancy, though some women will be ill every day until the child is born."

Her husband turned toward her, walking back to the bed to lean over her, his hands on either side of her head, his face directly over hers. "He also said you must eat. Whether you feel like it or not. Whether you feel sick or not. You must eat, not only for your sake, but the child's, as well. Understand?"

Caressa raised her hand, using her fingertips to gently trace his dark brows. "I understand, Kirkland."

He closed his eyes and turned his face into her caress. He pressed his lips to the sensitive skin of her wrist, placing a gentle kiss there before pulling away and walking to the door.

Caressa frowned. "Kirkland? Won't you stay tonight?"

"Yes, Caressa. I am merely going to see the doctor to the door. I will return momentarily." With that he left the room.

Caressa forced herself to stay awake until her husband returned. He was wearing a heavy robe of quilted green silk. Approaching the bed, Kirkland reached into the pocket and removed a long black box. Caressa took it when her husband presented it to her.

"My beautiful, wonderful wife. Thank you for giving me this perfect gift. Mine does not begin to touch the magnitude of yours, but I hope it conveys my esteem of you."

Smiling, Caressa opened the box and gasped at the necklace inside. The sapphire and diamonds sparkled in the flickering light of the candle that sat on her bedside table. Kirkland lifted the necklace from the box and placed it so the pendant rested on the exposed skin of her chest. Caressa sighed when her husband then kissed above, below, and to either side of the large stone. "Your beauty vastly outshines that of my gift, but it would not matter what I gave you."

"Thank you, Kirkland."

Her husband smiled down at her, caressing her cheek before rising and removing his robe. He wore a long sleeping shirt beneath and didn't remove it when he returned to the bed. Slipping in beside her, Kirkland pulled Caressa into his arms.

Caressa smiled, turning into his embrace and allowing her eyes to close. Finally allowing the laudanum to take her under, her drug induced sleep was deep and dreamless.

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, Caressa forced down a large breakfast. Her stomach protested but she refused to get sick. Her baby needed nourishment. Looking down at her belly, Caressa placed her hands over the flat surface. She could not believe she was having a baby. She and Kirkland had created a tiny being.

Caressa raised her head when Kirkland covered her hands with one of his. He had a gentle smile on his handsome face. "Have you had enough to eat?"

Caressa nodded, smiling at her husband. Kirkland escorted her back to her bedchamber, promising to be back when the midday meal was ready and they would take a short walk outside before allowing her to rest before dinner. Caressa insisted she wasn't so fragile that she had to remain in bed until the child was born. Kirkland argued that the doctor had insisted she was.

Huffing her irritation, Caressa asked, "Did he truly order me to stay in bed the majority of the day?"

Kirkland curled one arm around her waist and the hand of the other wrapped around her upper arm. He helped her climb up the stairs as if she were newly blind or completely soused. "If you hadn't worked so hard to make yourself ill to begin with, he wouldn't have felt compelled to order bed rest. Until you rebuild your strength you will see more of your bedchamber than any other room."

"I didn't make myself sick, I'm having a child," Caressa said irritably.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Kirkland turned her to face him. He took her face in his hands and stared deeply into her eyes. "Women in your condition are supposed to grow plump. If anything, you are thinner than the day we were wed. Your bones are more prominent. I hadn't realized before last night and I feel a hundred times the fool for allowing you to do such a thing to yourself. From now on you will eat full meals and rest."

Caressa felt her cheeks grow hot with the gentle reprimand. "There is no need to speak to me as if I am a child," she mumbled.

Kirkland pressed his lips to her forehead before steering her to their suite and her chamber. "I will return when lunch is ready. Don't forget to dress in something warm."

Caressa nodded and watched her husband disappear. Maisy entered and helped her strip down to her chemise then lifted the blankets and waited until Caressa crawled onto the bed. She

felt like she was a child again only now Maisy handed her a book rather than sitting down to read to her.

The morning passed too slowly. Caressa finished one book and asked Maisy to get her another. When footsteps sounded outside of her door, Caressa found Kirkland there, book in hand, rather than her maid. Caressa smiled and her husband smiled back.

There was something in his smile, in the expression encompassing his handsome face. He looked... sad, resigned. "Is something wrong?"

Kirkland jumped a little, as though he was surprised by her question. He quickly shook his head, his smile widening. "No, no. What could be wrong, hmm? My beautiful wife is having my child. No, Caressa, nothing is wrong." He walked to the side of the bed, gently laying the book he held on the small table beside the bed. "Luncheon will be served shortly. Maisy will be up in a moment, then we will go downstairs."

Kirkland looked at her for a moment, that same strange expression on his face, before leaning over to kiss her on the forehead. He left the room, her maid appearing only seconds after he disappeared from sight. Her maid tsked. "That handsome, insane man of yours told me to dress you warmly, that you're going out after you eat. It is bitterly cold outside! It snowed again last night. Insane man...."

Nonetheless, Maisy dressed her in a green wool dress, thick and warm. Kirkland reappeared and escorted her down to the dining room. After eating more than she normally would, under the watchful eyes of her husband and his family, he bundled her into her fur-lined cloak. Bowers opened the door and bowed to them as they passed.

A nearly pristine layer of bright white, broken only by a trail that wound its way along the front of the house and disappeared at either corner, covered the world with a delicate and cold beauty. The path was bordered by small mounded peaks of snow, all of it so fresh that it told Caressa the trail was cleared only today. They kept the pace slow. The cold nipped at her cheeks and the tip of her nose, but Caressa gladly suffered the small discomforts in favor of spending the quiet time alone with Kirkland.

They said nothing as they walked. Kirkland kept her hand tucked in the crook of his elbow, his hand over hers, holding tightly. By the time they had circled the house and were ready to go back inside, Caressa's nose was numb but she was smiling, happy. Kirkland insisted she return to bed until dinner.

Dinner was another large meal. Caressa was not feeling well but forced herself to eat until smiles creased the faces of her fellow diners. Beatrice cleared her throat. “We were thinking of having a celebration in honor of you and Kirkland having a child, Caressa. We will, of course, wait until the snow melts but I wanted to know how you felt about having a party.”

Caressa smiled broadly. “That sounds wonderful!”

Caressa looked to Kirkland who smiled indulgently and her and his mother. “Whatever you would like, Caressa,” he said, patting her hand.

For the rest of the evening, until Kirkland insisted she return to bed, Caressa and her mother-in-law planned and plotted the celebration. When Caressa tried to hide a yawn behind her hand, Kirkland chuckled and insisted she come with him to go back to bed.

Kirkland joined her in her bed, again dressed in a long sleeping shirt. His arms wrapped around her and she snuggled into his chest. As her eyes began to droop, she thought of how happy she was, in the arms of the man she loved with his child safely under her heart.

* * * *

Kirkland woke hard as stone and his wife kissing her way down his chest. His nightshirt was pushed up to his shoulders and Caressa’s lips were wrapped around one of his nipples, sucking hard and grazing the very tip with her teeth. Her slim, cool hands were running up and down his sides, every downward stroke bringing her hands closer and closer to his throbbing erection.

He groaned and her mouth came away from his skin. Looking down at him, Caressa smiled and moved her hips down from his belly until her soft rear rubbed against his aching cock. Caressa’s hands left his skin tingling as she pulled them away to drag the skirt of her shift slowly up her thighs.

Kirkland desperately grabbed her hands, stopping their progress. “We can’t.” He swallowed roughly around the lie he was about to tell. “The doctor said we can’t.”

The naughty smile that had been curving Caressa’s soft lips gradually slid away, pulling down into a frown. Kirkland pulled her down, turning so that they lay on their sides, facing each other. Kirkland kissed her forehead, her nose, her lips. “Hush, love,” he murmured. “It will be all right.”

“I-I need to feel you,” Caressa whispered, her cheeks coloring prettily.

Kirkland felt his stomach clench at the pleading tone in her voice. He kissed her again, softly licking her lips until they opened to him, licking deeply into the warm cavern of her mouth. Caressa moaned and grasped his face, thrusting her tongue between his lips. Kirkland raised her skirt and pulled one naked leg up and over his hip. She inhaled sharply when his fingers brushed against the soft blond curls covering her damp mound.

He pressed between the lips of her sex and firmly petted the bud of her clit. Caressa cried out and Kirkland swallowed the sound as he increased the pressure of his mouth on hers. Her leg contracted, pulling their groins together. Kirkland groaned as Caressa rubbed her belly against his erection, which was trapped tightly between them. He thrust two and then three fingers inside of her, rewarded by her undulating hips grinding harder against him.

Caressa’s body clenched around his fingers and he thrust harder as she came, drenching his fingers as he climaxed between their bodies. All the while, they continued to kiss, sharing breath and, Kirkland waxed poetically to himself, sharing their souls.

Chapter Seventeen

Caressa looked at herself in the mirror. Over the past six months her body had begun to go through many changes. Her belly was distended to the point that she had to lean back as she walked for fear she might fall forward and hurt the baby. Her breasts had grown larger but were so tender, any pressure on them hurt. Her cheeks were a little rounder due to all of the extra eating. And what she was eating! Night before last she had asked Kirkland to bring her some of the lamb they had eaten for dinner between two pieces of the sweet honeyed quick-bread the cook had laid out for breakfast that morning. It had been delicious.

And her evil husband was tickled whenever she ate those unusual combinations of food. *“My father warned me. He told me my mother’s favorite treat when she was having me was berries in beef gravy.”*

Which, come to think of it, didn’t sound so bad. Caressa made her way down stairs and headed for the back of the house to ask the cooks if they could make her such a fine delicacy. She stopped to allow two footmen carrying large potted trees to the ballroom to pass her. The party to celebrate the coming of the baby was this evening. Looking out of one of the tall windows at the front door, she realized the guests were likely to begin arriving very soon as it was already growing dark. *Perhaps the cooks will be too harried.* Caressa shrugged deciding all she could do was ask.

As she passed Konnor’s office, she was caught by the sound of Kirkland’s voice. What she heard nearly tore out her heart.

* * * *

Kirkland was slumped in one of the leather chairs set before his father’s desk, looking back and forth between his parents. The past few months had been trying, to say the least. After that one last morning in Caressa’s bed, he had kept his distance at night. He would sit with her until she fell asleep before slipping away and sleeping in his own bed on the other side of the suite. It was the only way to keep his hands to himself as he had promised himself he would.

But watching her grow heavy with the life they had created, seeing her glowing, beautiful face everyday, had taxed his nerves to the limit. “You just don’t understand. My entire life I was terrified of ending up in a loveless marriage – whether it be for convenience or necessity – only

to get forced into one. And now, as the birth of the child gets closer and closer, I see my life spread before me with a wife who is a friend and nothing more. It's horrific."

"Kirkland, what has brought this on? When I see you and Caressa together, you seem happy. Has something happened? Is this because of your feelings for Dulcie?" His mother laid her hand atop his and squeezed gently. "Is it the prospect of her being here, of seeing her again after all this time?"

Kirkland refused to answer questions about Dulcie. Mostly because he couldn't. Whereas he wouldn't deny he had had feelings for his friend at one time, the mad passion he had felt for her as a young man was gone. She was still beautiful, he was sure, but he found the feelings of romantic love had been erased over the course of his marriage.

Now he harbored a burning love for a woman whom he had never planned to marry – who had never planned to marry him. One who had barely paid attention to him before they were wed. Before he and Caressa married, most of their discourses had been done while they would dance at parties. She had never flirted with him as she had other men and now the thought caused an ache in his chest.

"Nothing has happened. So is life. I'm in a loveless marriage, just like yours."

* * * *

Caressa couldn't listen to any more. For the first time in weeks, the urge to be sick grabbed her stomach. Hurrying from the hall, Caressa struggled up the stairs as quickly as she could and locked herself in her room.

* * * *

"Where did you get the idea your father and I don't love each other?" Beatrice asked. Her expression was a mix of shock and dismay. Kirkland's father came over and placed his hand on her shoulder.

Kirkland frowned, watching his mother clasp his father's hand. "Well... I... You never show each other affection. Not anything like I've seen from husbands and wives who are deeply in love. Your marriage was arranged by your parents – you were both in love with other people when you married." Kirkland took a deep breath, revealing his biggest piece of evidence that they didn't need to keep up their ruse for his sake. "You never had any more children. It was only ever me."

His mother sighed, the sound one of misery. “Oh, darling. Konnor and I, we’re well suited for one another.”

Konnor sat on the arm of the chair Beatrice occupied. “I will admit we are not people comfortable with showing our affection publicly. My father was a general as well as a baron, son, my mother a military wife. It was a strict upbringing. Your aunt and I knew we were loved but affection wasn’t much displayed in our parents’ household.”

“Mother was raised in a convent,” Kirkland’s mother said. “She was taught to be the perfect lady. Father was much older than her, and I will admit, there was not much love in their house. I would, on occasion, see unaccounted for bruises on my mother. Mother and my nanny taught me to be perfectly composed in public, knowing it would please Father.”

Kirkland leaned forward and took his mother’s free hand. His grandfather had died when he was young and he had never heard of his cruelty. Not even his grandmother, still alive today, spoke ill of the old man. His father wiped tears from his mother’s cheeks. She smiled up at him and continued. “When I was introduced to your father, I did fancy a young lieutenant. Your father had eyes for an earl’s daughter. However, we knew had little choice but to marry each other.”

His father chuckled. “We did try to thwart our parents, however. We schemed together, trying to come up with a way to get what we believed we wanted. Fortunately for me, the lieutenant was a smart man and never allowed himself to be caught alone with your mother.”

“The earl’s daughter was good enough to be caught being intimate with a footman and a maid.” Beatrice’s cheeks became bright red recounting the scandalous event. “So, with those we were enamored of unattainable, we were left with one another. Not that it mattered to me. The moment I met him, I felt something shift inside of me. The more time I spent in your father’s company, the more it shifted until I fell in love with him.”

“When I laid eyes on your mother for the first time after returning from Oxford, I couldn’t believe what a beauty she had turned into. And she was the epitome of everything a lady should be, it seemed.” Konnor laughed ruefully. “Ironically, part of my attraction to the earl’s daughter had been the tales I had heard about her. But I knew, almost from the start, that I would marry your mother for more than obligation. She made me love her, and for that I will always be grateful.”

His mother's and father's eyes locked, both of them smiling. When his mother looked back to him, her smile turned sad. "We wanted more children. Not because you're not perfect," she was quick to assure him. "But I lost one child before you were born and three children after. We would have loved to give you brothers and sisters, but it wasn't meant to be."

Kirkland couldn't believe what he was hearing, but the truth of their words was there before him. His parents didn't suffer a loveless marriage, but thrived in one full of love and passion. Their love was quiet but strong.

Maybe there was hope, then. Maybe Caressa could come to love him as he had come to love her.

Chapter Eighteen

Caressa pulled the cool, damp cloth from her eyes and looked into the mirror. Some of the puffiness had gone and all of the redness. There was a knock on the door and she patted her face dry before nodding to Maisy, signaling her to open the door. Kirkland stepped in and her maid left with a short curtsy to him.

Caressa looked up, looking at his reflection as he came to stand behind her. Kirkland picked up the sapphire necklace he had brought her from London. When he had given her the gift, Caressa had thought it beautiful, a sign that his feelings for her were turning. Now, as it was raised before her she saw it for what it was, a garish leash meant to appease her. She didn't want it but let him encircle her neck with it, marking her as Kirkland's. But not truly, for Kirkland didn't want her.

His hands cupped her shoulders. "Are you all right, love?"

Her heart seized at the endearment, wishing so much that it was true. Not trusting herself to speak she nodded and allowed him to take her hand and escort her down to the ballroom. When Bowers announced them as the people of the hour, Caressa forced a smile to her face. Looking around the room, she saw Dulcie and Jack standing with Caressa's family. Dulcie gave a little wave, sadness overwhelming her features when Caressa found it impossible to return the gesture.

Caressa had neither seen or written to Dulcie since her last visit to Torningate. Caressa knew the circumstances of her marriage were not Dulcie's fault but that didn't stop the spark of pain when she looked at the woman. Kirkland's damning silence when Beatrice asked if his concern was due to Dulcie's presence just further condemned Dulcie – unfairly or not.

They wove through the crowd of well-wishers, accepting belated congratulations on their nuptials as well as for the upcoming birth of their child. When they reached Caressa and Kirkland's families, Caressa's brother's each took a turn at awkwardly hugging her. Normally they grabbed her up, lifting her off her feet as they squeezed the breath from her body. Now, with her belly protruding, they seemed at a loss.

Kirkland turned her toward Dulcie and Jackson. The taller woman had tears in her eyes but a smile on her face. "Congratulations, Caressa. I know you will be a wonderful mother." Her voice was barely above a watery whisper. "Excuse me," she murmured and walked away.

Jackson looked down at Caressa. “She’s misses you, Caressa. I know what happened and I know my wife would beg your forgiveness. It would make her so happy if you would give it.”

Jackson looked to Kirkland. The skin around his mouth tightened almost imperceptibly. “Congratulations, Kirk.” The men shook hands and Kirkland grunted. When Jackson left to find his wife, Kirkland shook out his hand and massaged his knuckles. So Jackson did know what had happened, then. Caressa bit the inside of her cheek, forcing herself not to smile.

As the night wore on, Caressa was forced to sit and relieve her feet. Kirkland continued on through the party-goers. It wasn’t long before she lost sight of her husband. She toyed with the center stone of the necklace that sat in the dip of her collarbone. Though they had been lying against her skin for hours, the stones had picked up no warmth, they were still as cold as the day Kirkland had given them to her. She wished she could tear it from her throat but she would not do something that would so publicly embarrass her husband.

Insisting on doing as much as she could without assistance, Caressa stood and headed for the buffet table, needing something to wet her parched throat. When she saw Kirkland and Dulcie talking to each other, Dulcie’s hands flying in large gestures and showing her exasperation, Caressa had to force herself not to scream. The pain and anger that gripped her blinded her to everyone else in the room.

Caressa hurried from the room, away from the pair that caused her so much pain. She sought refuge in Beatrice’s solar, throwing herself onto one of the chaise lounges set against the huge wall of windows. Caressa was crying so hard she didn’t realize she was not alone in the room until a hand touched her shoulder.

Squeaking in surprise, Caressa looked up to find the Viscount of Godfrey standing over her. “G-good evening, Viscount.” Caressa wiped at her burning cheeks. “Are you enjoying the party?”

“Mmm, it’s very nice.” He looked down at her. When his eyes lingered on her breasts, Caressa rose from the chaise, looking to put some distance between the viscount and herself. He followed her step for step.

“Well, I really must be getting back. Kirkland will be looking for me.” She hurried to the door as fast as her new girth would allow. The viscount cut off her escape. Caressa gasped in pain as the man gripped her arms cruelly.

“He is otherwise occupied. Now, why don’t you be a good little girl and get on your knees?” He twisted her arms and pulled down until her legs gave out beneath her. When the man twined his hand in her hair and yanked her head back, Caressa screamed as loud as she could.

The viscount slapped her so hard she fell to the floor. Free of him, Caressa screamed again as she scrambled away from her attacker. He advanced on her, unbuttoning the placket of his trousers. “You like being punished, don’t you, lovely? I’m going to tie you to my bed and whip you until you sing out in exquisite pain.”

The viscount’s words were spoken seductively as though he truly believed it were an attractive prospect. Caressa found herself wedged into a corner, the viscount right in front of her. Caressa screamed again but her throat was raw and the viscount struck again, his large fist connecting with her jaw.

“Caressa!” She heard Kirkland’s voice trying to break through the waves of black dragging her under.

* * * *

“Get away from her!” Kirkland pulled Godfrey away from Caressa. He had gone looking for his wife after he and Dulcie had had a chance to speak. When Dulcie told him that Caressa had seen the kiss they shared that night so many months ago, Kirkland felt his heart trip. The second he had stepped out of the ballroom, a piercing cry had shot down the hall.

Kirkland had run to his mother’s solar to find Godfrey standing over Caressa, his fist colliding with her chin. Kirkland threw the man to the ground and felt even more anger roll through him when he saw his cock standing out of his open trousers. Kirkland fell on him, punching him again and again, banging the viscount’s head into the floor.

Arms wrapped around his shoulders and dragged him from the unconscious man. “Kirkland!” Jack shook him and turned him so they looked each other in the eye. “Stop! He’s down. If you kill him, you’re done for. Do you understand?”

Kirkland tried to pull away but Jackson spun him to see Caressa. Dulcie held his shaking wife in her arms. She petted Caressa’s hair, murmuring gentle words, reassuring her that she was safe. “You sopped him from attacking her. But if you do not stop, now, before you kill him, you will never see her again. Never hold her again. You will never see your child. He is not worth ruining your life with Caressa.”

Kirkland dropped to his knees beside them, taking Caressa from Dulcie. The fear was slow to drain from him but at least he held his Caressa in his arms. He never had to let her go.

He held his wife close, pressing kisses everywhere he could. Caressa clutched him in return. "Shh, my love, I won't let him near you ever again."

Caressa began shaking harder. Sobs wracked her body. Kirkland settled onto the floor and pulled Caressa onto his lap. "Please, love, let me know you're all right."

"Stop it," she cried. "Stop calling me love. You don't love me. You never will. I know that so just stop."

Kirkland gently cupped her face and tilted her head back so that he could look into her eyes. He felt tears sting his eyes as he took in her bruised jaw and pained eyes. He kissed the tears from her cheeks. "You're wrong, love. I do love you. I wish I could tell you I loved you from the start. That I always did. But I can tell you that I love you now. I fell in love with you somewhere along the way and I hope to God you can forgive me for being such a simpleton."

Caressa buried her fingers in his hair. "Say it again. Make me feel it."

Careful not to cause her any more pain, Kirkland pressed his lips to hers. He kissed her deeply but softly, letting his tongue feather against her lips, her tongue, the roof of her mouth. Against her lips he whispered, "I love you, Caressa. More than anything. More than I ever thought it was possible to love another person. I love you."

Caressa pulled him in for another kiss, full of the passion he had come to associate with her. "I love you, too."

Shouting erupted behind them and Caressa ducked her head, tucking herself as deeply into his lap as she could, hiding from her attacker. "Darling, I have to take care of this. I will be right back."

"No, please, just hold me." Caressa dug her fingers into his arms, holding on to him with all of her desperate strength. Much as it broke his heart to do so, he pulled her arms from around himself and urged her to let Dulcie hold her. Dulcie rocked them back and forth, singing very softly to Caressa, trying her best to sooth her.

When he rose and turned to the Viscount, he was poking Konnor in the chest. "You and that monster you call a son are in trouble deep, Perry. I will make certain the King hears of this."

“And I will make certain His Majesty hears of how you tried to rape the married daughter of a duke. Perhaps that will finally convince His Majesty to look into the servant women who have mysteriously gone missing from your estate.” Kirkland closed in on Godfrey.

“Their little lives might not have meant anything to His Majesty but a viscount attacking the daughter of one of His closest friends? That will mean a great deal to the King – a much greater deal than a few bruises on such a lowly creature as you. And I promise you, if you ever come near my wife again, nothing and no one will stop me from taking your life.” He looked down on Godfrey from his superior height. As Kirkland watched the man pale beneath his threat, he smiled. “Do you understand me?”

“P-p-perfectly.” Godfrey ran from the room, looking back over his shoulder to make certain Kirkland wasn’t following him.

Kirkland returned to where he left Caressa in Dulcie’s care. He encouraged Caressa to stand. She wrapped her arms around his waist and let him take her from the room. He guided her upstairs and into his room where he carefully undressed her. He told her to get into bed. He left the room, sprinting across the suite and into her bedchamber.

Kirkland pulled clothing from her armoire and carried it to his own chamber. Caressa’s eyes went enormous at the sight of him carrying an armful of ribbons and lace into his room. He dropped the dresses onto one of the chairs that banked the floor to ceiling window through which moonlight streamed.

He went back again and again until a large pile of dresses, chemises, slippers and more covered the chair and the surrounding floor. “From now on, you will sleep in here with me. I’ll not spend another night alone when I am married to the woman I love and can have her in my arms.”

Caressa giggled and nodded. Her arms opened and she tipped her head to one side. “Come to me, Kirkland. Please? I need you.”

Chapter Nineteen

Caressa watched as Kirkland shed his clothes as quickly as he could. As he settled next to Caressa, he caught her mouth in a deep kiss. She knew that he could not make love to her as much as they both would like to. Kirkland kissed her swollen breasts, sucking very gently on her nipples. Caressa gasped and scratched his back. The feeling was almost painful but exquisite.

When she felt Kirkland's fingers slide over her sex, she cried out. He barely touched her core before her sex contracted and she cried out his name. She had been waiting so long for him to return to her and now that he had, Caressa's body sang a joyous refrain.

Kirkland pulled back, chuckling. He looked down into her eyes and Caressa blushed. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be sorry. That your body craves my touch so much that I can make you cry out by barely even touching you is like a dream." He kissed her again and continued to slide his fingers over her sensitive clit, into her aching channel.

Caressa began to breathe hard. She reached down, clamping her hand around his wrist. She could feel her body beginning to tighten again. Kirkland rose above her again, looking into her eyes as her climax grew nearer and nearer. "I love you, Caressa." He whispered the words and she tipped over the edge.

"I love you!" Caressa cried out at the top of her lungs, screaming her love for the man in her arms.

Chapter Twenty

Caressa sat, exhausted, in the middle of her and Kirkland's bed. Maisy had cleaned her, wiping away the sweat five hours of pushing and straining had created. In her arms she held Eloisa Jayne Perry. Caressa smiled. Her sweet little daughter was covered in fine dark hairs, a thick mop of brown curls covering just the very top of her head. She was somewhat strange to look upon, really, but the midwife had told her the dark hair would leave her tiny body after a time. Caressa didn't care, she loved the precious bundle in her arms, no matter what she looked like. Strange or not, Eloisa was the most beautiful thing Caressa had ever seen.

Kirkland poked his head inside the room. Apparently Maisy had finally ended her sentry duty outside the bedroom door. When Caressa smiled, he entered, coming to sit beside her on the bed. He looped his arm around her shoulders and looked down at their daughter. "Such a shame," he said, shaking his head.

Caressa looked up to see him smiling. "What is?"

"Well, she's a girl, isn't she? That means we will have to keep trying." A look of pure wickedness came over his face and Caressa laughed quietly.

"I suppose we will." She sighed dramatically. "You're correct. It is a horrible shame."

Kirkland laughed and kissed her, deep and hard. "I love you. And I love her." Kirkland reached into his pocket, pulling out a beautiful necklace.

It was a cameo of two people, a man and a woman, looking at each other. Kirkland unhooked the closure and reconnected it behind her neck. She looked down at it where it lay on her breast. "What is this for?"

Kirkland kissed her on her crown and stroked a circle around the cameo. "I want to show you that I am going to spend the rest of our lives courting you as I should have. Even when we are old and gray, I hope I can make you feel as young and loved as you are."

Caressa looked up into his face, her smile so wide her cheeks hurt. Kirkland returned her smile and dipped his head, kissing her again. Caressa had never been so happy. Caressa had everything she could possibly want and she looked forward to the lifetime to come.

Author Biography

I am the second of four children raised in a very Catholic (clergy in the family and everything) predominantly Irish family. We are a crazy lot with ups and downs and cursing and yelling for cursing, but there is always love. I have two nephews and a niece that I adore. I was born and raised in New Jersey until my family moved to Virginia when I was fifteen. When I was twenty-four I moved to Florida but ended missing my family and friends and moved back home to Virginia after a year and a half. I haven't traveled the world over except through the thousands of books I have read – most of which are romance novels.

I love reading romance and began writing when I was twelve. Of course, back then my writing was innocent with hand holding, hugs, and pecks on the cheek. My style has matured considerably since then. Most of my heroines share a common thread. They're not perfect by today's standards of model beauty. I don't believe a woman has to be a size zero to be beautiful. And while not all of my heroines will be on the heartier side they all have heart. As do my heroes.

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