

Conquering Cassia

By

Tabitha Black

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Table of Contents:

Prologue	5
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two.....	14
Chapter Three.....	25
Chapter Four	35
Chapter Five.....	43
Chapter Six.....	58
Chapter Seven	70
Chapter Eight	80
Chapter Nine	87
Epilogue	96
Author's Note:	100
Tabitha Black	101
Ebook Offer	103
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	104
Blushing Books.....	105

Prologue

The little girl had soft golden curls and wide eyes. If she was distressed at the sudden turn her life had taken, she did not show it. Instead she met his eyes directly, with a haughty tilt to her chin.

"My name is Lord Alexander Surrey. You will be in my care now, under my protection, until you come of an age to wed and inherit your father's estates." His words were met with a sullen silence.

"Apologies, milord, she doesn't talk much." The stooped, elderly custodian turned to the girl. "Cassandra, answer the gentleman."

"Cassia."

Lord Alexander suppressed a smile at the custodian's dumbfounded expression.

"I beg your pardon?" the man spluttered.

"My name," she began slowly, as though speaking to a complete fool, "is Cassia."

Alexander took a step forward and crouched down, so as to be on the same level as the child. "And how old are you, Cassia?"

"Nine, my lord."

"Do you know why you are here?"

Mutely, she shook her head. The custodian sighed. "Cassandra, we discussed this. Your father has passed away and Lord Surrey has kindly agreed to take you in as his ward."

"I *said*, my name is Cassia!"

Ignoring her, the man addressed Alexander. "She's a trifle choleric, this one. Clever enough, and cute as a button—until she opens her mouth. Hope you've some experience with administering discipline, she certainly doesn't seem to have had any thus far. Prime example of what happens when you spare the rod."

Lord Alexander winked at the girl before straightening up to face the custodian. "Yes, well, as it happens I have plenty of experience when it comes to teaching a young lady her place. I'm sure Cassia and I will both profit greatly from this arrangement with her mother."

"From your lips to God's ears, milord. Best of luck to you."

"And to you. Thank you for delivering my ward safely to me." Once the man had taken his leave, Alexander took a seat on his favourite chair and motioned for Cassia to approach him. She did so without hesitation.

"Are you afraid?"

"No, my lord."

"Good. You have no need to be. I have chambers prepared for you and you will have a tutor, as well as anything else you might require. I will look after you, teach you and protect you. In return, I expect you to obey me. I have no tolerance for rudeness or inappropriate behaviour. Do not think to address me the way you just did the custodian, not ever. Do you understand?"

Cassia nodded, her tawny eyes still directly on his.

"Good girl. Do you have any questions?"

She thought for a moment. "Do you have horses?"

He chuckled. "Of course, I have plenty."

"May I see them?"

"Yes, you may, in a little while. First, let me show you your new chambers." Standing, he reached out to her and smiled as she took his broad hand in her own little one.

Chapter One

"You know what to do. Assume the position."

Cassia rolled her eyes even as her pulse quickened at his words. With an arrogant toss of her head, she turned around and began to slide her heavy damask skirts up to her waist.

Lord Alexander reached for the birch rod. "I mean, really. A groom?"

"Mary should learn to mind her own business. She's merely envious because she took a shine to him—but he preferred my company to her own."

"You are from old, noble stock, Cassandra. You are of marriageable age now and no man likes a harlot."

"That's not what Alice says," Cassia retorted, savouring the way the cool air was brushing her exposed thighs. "She says a man likes a woman with experience."

"Alice is not my ward, nor is she an authority on what men of noble birth like to see in a potential wife. You know full well that maidservants are not subject to the same... restrictions... as those of noble birth. You are. Now bend over and ask me for it nicely."

Reaching down, Cassia grasped her ankles and closed her eyes. "I've been a bad girl, Uncle Alex. I let Duncan the groom kiss my lips, my throat, my breasts—"

The soft thwack of the birch, as it landed across her bared rump, caught her off guard and Cassia let out a low moan at the familiar sting.

Lord Alexander began to lecture her, pausing only to deliver more strokes as if to punctuate his words. "One would think..." *thwack*, "that after ten years as my ward..." *thwap*, "you would know what will happen..." *thwack*, "when you disobey my orders."

Biting her lower lip, Cassia let his lecture wash over her as the heat in her backside grew, igniting an altogether different fire between her legs. Her secret place began to throb in time with her pulse, and she knew her nipples were as hard as pebbles beneath her tightly laced bodice. If only her guardian knew...

"How many birch rods have I worn out on this backside of yours over the years? And still you display that same insolence you did on your very first day here! I grow weary of it, Cassandra!"

She loved the tone of his voice when he was scolding her. He only ever used her full name during a punishment, and that was the only time she enjoyed hearing it. But of course, her guardian did not know that. Raising her head so that she was looking up at him over her shoulder, she met his eyes defiantly. "And I grow weary of reminding you to call me *Cassia*."

* * *

She was lying on her velvet bedclothes, on her stomach. Lord Alexander Surrey did not take kindly to displays of impudence—especially while he was administering a punishment—and Cassia's buttocks had paid the price for her tongue. They were now scarlet, sore and swollen beneath her skirts, and her hand was between her thighs, rubbing slowly but deliberately, to alleviate a different sort of ache.

Cassia did not know when she had first begun to enjoy being punished, but it seemed as though it had been a long time. Lord Alexander was kind, just, and though not quick to anger, he brooked no nonsense. Ten years in his care had taught her exactly what to say and do to ensure herself a sound dose of discipline, and she could neither explain nor deny the effect his hard hand, whistling birch or even, occasionally, freshly peeled switch, had on her. The sounder the thrashing, the more intense her arousal became, until she was dripping, shuddering, desperate for release.

There had been no dalliance with a groom. Cassia had an arrangement with her servant and dearest friend. Mary would accidentally let details of inappropriate behaviour slip to Lord Alexander, and Cassia was more than happy to share her considerable collection of gowns and trinkets with Mary in return.

Her guardian had no idea, of course, he simply thought that he was doing his duty. He also thought that he was continuing the punishment by sending her to bed so that she might 'reflect on her bad behaviour'. Instead it provided the perfect setting, the solitude she so desperately needed once her behind had been sufficiently roasted. The servants knew she was not

to be disturbed—after all, she had been sent to bed in disgrace—leaving Cassia free to indulge herself.

Rolling over on to her back, she gasped as her welted bottom took her weight. Soon her fingers had once more burrowed beneath her skirts and found that tingling little nub of flesh, stroking it in circles, faster and faster until she held her breath, shuddered, and reached her culmination, her thighs trembling with the sheer pleasure of it, her quim sodden with desire.

As she lay there, still gasping from the force of her release, Cassia wondered what it would feel like to be touched by a man. Contrary to Lord Alexander's belief, she was still as much a maid as she had been when he had first taken her into his care. Mary, Alice and the other members of the household were free with their gossip and advice, but Cassia had no experience of her own.

She smiled as she imagined how her guardian would react if he were to know the truth; that she had fabricated most of his incentives to discipline her, purely because she derived such a deep and shameful enjoyment from it. Would he be angry? Would he understand? With a sigh, she rolled back over on to her belly. Despite the fact that she had spent over half her life in his castle, under his care, Cassia had to admit to herself that she knew very little of his Lordship's thoughts and opinions. He was always kind and calm, but there always seemed to be a veil of courtesy disguising his true emotions. No matter whether she was playful, sweet or temperate—or wild, disobedient or wilful, his demeanour always remained the same. It made her respect him all the more. And at the same time, it infuriated her.

* * *

"Would you care for some wine, your Grace?" Without waiting for a reply, Alexander motioned to the servant to fill his guest's goblet. "I'm glad that you were able to come at such short notice," he continued. "I have need of advice."

The Duke of Weymouth took a long swallow of his wine, closing his eyes as he gulped it down greedily. "Of course. Does it, perchance, have anything to do with that delightful ward of yours?"

"Delightful, perhaps, but she is also becoming tiresome. I think it high time we found a suitable match for her."

Godfrey chuckled. "Good gracious, Alexander, what is wrong with you? It's been years since the Lady Surrey passed—God rest her soul—and you have not had a woman since. Now you have an enchanting creature already living with you, one already known to your household, and to you, and yet you wish to hand her over to some unworthy young fop. Any red-blooded man in his right mind would marry that girl himself! God knows, if I were but five years younger, I would ask you for the honour!"

Lord Alexander raised an eyebrow. "A mere five years?"

"Very well, ten perhaps. But really, you're still young. Why not wed her yourself? I don't need to tell you how much she stands to inherit when she makes a suitable marriage. A small fortune, not to mention all her father's lands."

"I am well aware of her inheritance, your Grace. I have, after all, been entrusted with the care of it ever since I took her in. More wine, please." Holding out his cup, Alexander waited until the Duke's goblet had also been refilled before continuing. "Truth be told, Cassandra is... difficult. I'm no longer as young as I was and I fear that she does not respond to my brand of discipline—if anything, her behaviour has worsened over these past few years. She has become a woman, and she needs a man, preferably a very strong and extremely patient one."

The Duke stroked his grey whiskers. "Did you ask me here to offer her to me as a bride?"

"Of course not!" Lord Alexander gentled his tone before continuing. "You know that I have the utmost respect for your Grace, but as you would be the first to admit, you are twice widowed and even older than I."

"Would that it were not so. I would give almost anything to be able to reclaim my youth. Oh, to be one and twenty again." Godfrey's eyes sparkled. "The stories I could tell you. They would make your beard curl."

"Of that I have no doubt. No, your Grace, I asked you here to enquire as to whether you might know of anyone suitable. A young man of noble stock—and preferably with a will of iron. He would need it with Cassia as his wife, God help the poor lad."

"Leave it with me, Alexander. I will see what I can discover. Unless you'd like to send the girl to court for a time?"

"That is most kind, but no. Cassandra is not only headstrong, she is also most clumsy. Her needlework is appalling, and she is wont to tread on your toes if you attempt to dance with her. I would pity any Lady upon whom that girl was called to attend."

"You are quite fond of her, I think." Godfrey's moustache twitched. "You speak so unabashedly of her foibles, yet are so hesitant to praise the girl."

Alexander realised that he was clenching his fist, and forced himself to take a deep breath. "She is indeed, a stunning beauty. She has a quick wit and a sharp mind, when she chooses to use it. I am sure that with the right man, and under ideal circumstances, she would grow more temperate over time. I, however, am not that man."

"As you wish. I shall make some enquiries and send you a list of potential suitors for the girl. If you're sure."

"Your Grace is most kind. Thank you. Yes, I am absolutely sure. Now, let us discuss other matters. I hear you are selling some of your best horses?"

As the Duke began to speak, Alexander sat back in his chair and let his thoughts wander. He was more fond of Cassia than he cared to admit—even to himself.

Something about her had fascinated him ever since their first meeting, all those years ago. Even as a little girl, she had displayed an indomitable spirit and he had never seen her cry. She came from tragic circumstances, and yet there was a strange wisdom in those huge tawny eyes. No matter whether she was at rest or at play, Cassandra always exhibited a quiet dignity. And now that she was older, he was finding it more and more difficult to resist her. His fist clenched on his thigh once more as he thought of her lithe, graceful body and enticing mouth. Even the once-tedious chore of administering the birch to her had become a torment since she had become a woman grown. The way she writhed as he lashed her, the gasps and moans she emitted from behind the curtain of curls which hid her face when she was bent over for punishment—it was almost as though she enjoyed it. Once or twice he thought he'd spied a glistening between her slender thighs... But no, he dare not think of that. The sooner she was safely wed to another man, the better.

Forcing his attention back to the present, Alexander motioned for more wine and put his ward out of his mind, as Godfrey continued to prattle on about his stables.

* * *

"I have decided it is time for you to marry."

Cassia set down her spoon and stared across the table at her guardian, aghast.

Lord Alexander held her gaze, as though challenging her to protest. When she said nothing, he continued. "Naturally I am as fond of you as if you belonged to mine own family, which is why any and all suitors will be vetted most carefully. You shall have the opportunity to meet them over the course of the next few weeks."

Her mind raced as she tried to absorb the meaning of his words—and decide how she should react. Playing for time, she raised an eyebrow. "Are you certain that I'm ready for marriage, Uncle Alex?"

"Most assuredly, Cassia." The corner of his mouth twitched. "I fear I am no longer able to keep you in hand, and would willingly hand that task over to someone with more... energy."

The smell of cold meat and congealed fat wafting from her plate suddenly made Cassia want to retch. She stared at the man who had cared for her ever since she had been a child; taking in his thick brows, deep brown eyes and long, aquiline nose. His wide, generous mouth was framed neatly by a trimmed black beard, and he was wearing a tunic she had always admired on him—deep blue, with elaborate silver embroidery. As she continued to look, she began to notice details she never had before; the way his black hair was showing silver in places, and the fine lines around his eyes. Guilt and fear gave her voice an unintentionally hard edge. "Then pray tell me this, if marriage is something one should aspire to, how is it that you yourself never remarried?"

"We are not discussing my need to wed. We are discussing yours, young lady."

She tossed her head, haughtily. "Of course we are. You, being a man, have no need of a wife in order to retain your lands and title. We women are nothing but chattel, passed from father—or guardian—to husband, never free to make our own choices."

"I see your tutor had no qualms about passing on his views to you. Or was it Alice who filled your head with such nonsense?" Before she could answer him, Lord Alexander set down his knife and pushed his plate away. "Like it or not, you cannot remain in my care forever. And I could not imagine why you should want to."

Because I like it here, she wanted to say. Because I feel safe with you. Because you make me feel things I cannot imagine feeling with anyone else. Instead, she reached for her cup, hoping the small ale would help alleviate her suddenly dry mouth.

His tone softened. "My darling girl. I know it seems unfair to you, but such is the way of this world. And surely you are of an age now where you would like to run a household of your

own? Your behaviour with the groom is proof enough that you are ready to meet a man... to beget children..." He trailed off, and Cassia noticed that his cheeks were glowing sanguine in the candlelight.

"You're right, Uncle Alex," she said quietly. "I suppose I am."

He brightened. "Don't fret, my dear. I'm sure we will find you a wonderful match."

"You won't simply send me away with the first suitor to appear at the door?"

Lord Alexander chortled. "Of course not. Perhaps the second."

"Uncle!"

They both began to laugh.

"Sweet Cassia," he said eventually, "I care for you as much as I would mine own daughter and I want with all my heart to see you happy. You shall be introduced to as many gentlemen as necessary, for when all is said and done, your husband will be of your own choosing."

Raising her cup once more to her lips, Cassia suppressed a smile. Sometimes her guardian made things almost too easy.