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An Excerpt From: LOVE'S SURRENDER

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She had almost reached the relative seclusion of the retiring room when a small noise to her right made Vanessa stop. It had sounded a little like distress, but not quite. Was it a man or woman? Again, Vanessa wasn't sure. It might have been a cat, even.

The noise came again and Vanessa turned her head slowly until she gazed into the dark shadows of a small hallway, partially hidden by a chest of some sort. She couldn't immediately discern what was happening. There appeared to be a couple, or perhaps more? They were hiding in the shadows, and a gentleman was holding a woman up. The dark material of his coat sleeve stood out in stark relief against the lady's pale dress. Vanessa took a step toward them, still silent. The man raised his head from the woman's shoulder and his eyes met Vanessa's.

Her heart stuttered and then beat erratically. His eyes were black, one speck of light burning in each, mesmerizing her. She was frozen in place by the heat and intensity of his stare.

The moment was broken when the woman in his arms squirmed and sighed. The sound was the one that had caught Vanessa's attention. Breaking eye contact with Vanessa, the man bent over the woman's shoulder, one hand cupping the back of her head to hold her steady. Then he licked her neck.

Vanessa's breath caught in her throat. It was an assignation. She'd stumbled upon lovers, it seemed. Embarrassment burned in her cheeks. Only the man was aware of her. Vanessa was uncharacteristically flustered. Should she turn and hurry on to the retiring room, probably alerting the woman to her presence? Or should she quietly back out the way she'd come? That seemed somehow like a retreat, a surrender to the challenge she'd seen gleaming in the gentleman's dark eyes.

When a second man stepped out of the shadows and took the woman's hand from the first man's shoulder, Vanessa gaped like a green girl. He, too, was watching Vanessa as he kissed the woman's hand. His hair gleamed in the faint light from the hallway sconce; it was obviously golden, though light or dark she couldn't tell. He was taller than his companion. The woman giggled and it was then Vanessa recognized who it was. Miss Dorsett. Not a woman then, but a girl too young to understand the trouble that had found her. With a sigh, Vanessa realized it was up to her to rescue the foolish chit.

Before she could make her presence known the blond gentleman spoke quietly. "We must return you to the drawing room before you are missed, Melinda." His voice was a deep whisper, a mere rumble that carried across the hall to Vanessa, and she shivered. The dark-haired man smiled at her as if he'd seen the telltale sign of her discomfort and it amused him.

"Oh pooh," Melinda said, sounding like a spoiled child. "I was told you two were dangerous, a threat to my virtue. A few kisses and a pinch or two and you're sending me off? That hardly

signifies. I shall have to tell everyone your reputations are much exaggerated.” Vanessa could picture her pouting, though she faced away from Vanessa.

The dark-haired man laughed quietly. “So now you know our secret. We are truly saints in disguise.” He untangled her arms from around his neck. “Go now. We shall follow after so no one suspects your virtue was threatened.”

“Well, it wasn’t,” Miss Dorsett declared testily. “I was hoping for some fun with you two this season before I must settle into a staid marriage with someone appropriate. God knows I can’t encourage you as suitors, but I thought at least you could satisfy me in private. I begin to think I shall have to find a different lover to do so.” She patted her hair. “Don’t ask me to dance again. Mama had a fit when I agreed earlier. You are not marriage material, after all.”

Miss Dorsett turned toward the drawing room and Vanessa swallowed a gasp and stepped back quickly, pressing against the wall behind her as if she could blend into the garish oriental print on the paper there. Even though Miss Dorsett faced the opposite end of the hallway from where Vanessa stood, she feared the girl would detect her presence. She needn’t have worried. It was apparent the young lady was quite put out and too self-interested to notice her surroundings.

“I shall send for you if I want you,” Miss Dorsett said dismissively. “Until then, stay away. I won’t have you two ruining my chances at a brilliant match. Mama says I am the catch of the season.”

The dark-haired gentleman bowed over her hand as if in agreement, keeping her attention focused on him while the taller one moved to stand between Vanessa and Miss Dorsett as if to help her hide from the girl. “Of course,” he said in reply. Vanessa recognized the amused disdain in his voice. It was quite confusing as to who had been using whom in their little assignation, for there was clearly no love lost between the three.

Without a word or look in Vanessa’s direction the two men ushered Miss Dorsett between them down the hallway, leaving Vanessa feeling like an eavesdropping fool as she hurried to the retiring room.

Once they were out of sight of the blonde beauty, Nick watched as Oliver grabbed Miss Dorsett’s hand, slowing her retreat to the drawing room. “Melinda, my dear, a question, if you will.”

Miss Dorsett turned to Oliver, her look smug and self-satisfied. Nick almost laughed at her misconception. Oliver had never been interested in her at all. Nick had been randy, and Miss Dorsett obviously willing. Though she had preferred Oliver’s blond good looks, it had been Nick playing at seduction while a bored Oliver looked on. But someone else had clearly caught Oliver’s attention.

“There was a blonde woman, tall and rather cool, talking with your aunt earlier. Who is she?” Oliver asked. He placed a tender kiss upon Miss Dorsett’s palm, as if the question was merely meant to delay her and not the only reason Oliver hadn’t walked in the opposite direction when they parted ways.

“A cool blonde?” she asked with a frown. Then she laughed, and there was a wicked gleam in

her eye. "You must mean Lady Vanessa Carlton-Smythe." The way she said the name clearly indicated she did not care for the quiet, blonde beauty.

When Nick heard the name his heart sank. Even he had heard of the Carlton-Smythes. Lady Vanessa, the daughter of an Earl, was as out of reach as the moon to fellows like him, no matter what Nick had seen in her eyes as she'd watched him. His sinking heart turned to an acute pain in his stomach as he recognized the look on Oliver's face. Oliver wanted a new toy, and he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"Don't bother," Miss Dorsett said dismissively. "She won't grant you an audience. The high and mighty Lady Vanessa is too good for the likes of you. She thinks she's too good for the likes of just about everyone." Her look turned spiteful. "But I'd like to see you try. Wouldn't that set everyone's tongues wagging?" She laughed. "Lady Vanessa, unwed at twenty-two, reduced to accepting you two as suitors. How rich!"

Nick didn't care for her tone. Actually, he didn't care for her at all. When she kept her mouth shut she was only tolerable. When she spoke she became completely intolerable. With a sigh he realized he wouldn't have wanted to go any further with her than he had, even if they hadn't been interrupted. He'd lost interest in her almost immediately. That had been happening more and more lately to both him and Oliver. It was the reason they'd come back from the continent after almost three years abroad. Nick was beginning to think there wasn't a woman alive who could hold their interest for more than an hour.

"Yes, how rich," Oliver agreed in a pleasant tone. "Now, off to the drawing room with you." He dismissed her lightly with a little tap on the bottom, as if she were a naughty child. With a huff, Miss Dorsett turned and stalked out of view.

"I hope you don't come to regret that rather cavalier dismissal," Nick observed, leaning his shoulder against the wall.

"What could you have been thinking to choose that one out of all the women here tonight?" Oliver asked, exasperated. "A ready quim is one thing, of course, but I know for a fact you are not that desperate. I distinctly remember sharing a rather nice fuck just the other night."

Nick shrugged with one shoulder. "I wanted to fuck tonight. I wasn't aware there were limitations on that particular pastime."

"There aren't." Oliver leaned his back flat against the opposite wall and crossed his arms while he regarded Nick. "But you aren't one to indiscriminately fuck when the urge strikes. Care to tell me why tonight was different?"

"It wasn't." Nick looked away, toward the drawing room. "I was very discriminating. I determined that this party was a crashing bore and the only thing that could save the evening was a nice, clandestine fuck. With my best friend, of course," he added, bowing slightly in Oliver's direction. "And I chose the most willing, and likely, candidate in the vicinity."

Oliver bowed back. "I thank you for the thought. But next time, let me choose the candidate."

"Oh no," Nick said, standing up straight. He pointed at Oliver and glared. "I choose young ladies

with loose morals and absent chaperones. You choose wide-eyed, innocent, well-bred young ladies who get us shot.”

“I got shot. Not you. And you have never been disappointed in any of my choices.”

“I was greatly disappointed in Mathilde, since she got you shot.”

Oliver sighed. He sounded so long-suffering that Nick had to grit his teeth against his annoyance. “Before I was shot, you were not disappointed,” he pointed out, irritatingly patient. “And I readily admit she was an ill-conceived choice, but how was I to know her ancient husband was such a good shot? Spaniards aren’t known for their accuracy, after all.”

“But they are well-known for their passionate tempers,” Nick ground out. He shook his head. “I knew that too, and should have said no.”

Oliver grinned conspiratorially. “She was worth it, no?”

“No.” Nick’s reply was flat but adamant. “And neither is this one.” He pleaded, his hands outstretched. “Please, Oliver, not again. There are plenty of merry widows who would gladly share our bed. Please leave this Lady Vanessa alone.”

“She looked so...isolated,” Oliver mused. “As if she lived separate from the world.” He looked at Nick then, and Nick was frozen by the desolation in Oliver’s face. “I know that feeling. She’s very lonely.”

And that was that, wasn’t it? If Oliver wanted Lady Vanessa, then Nick would help him get her. For both of them.