

## THE SEDUCTION

### EXCERPT

Their gazes locked and warred.

"Is the price too high, my lovely?" Damien inquired lazily.

Vanessa swallowed at the question. What he suggested would ruin her. But would ruination be too high a price to save her family?

"What...would I be required to do as your mistress?" she asked, stalling for time.

He cocked an eyebrow. "You cannot guess?"

"I suppose you would expect us to share...carnal relations."

"That is the usual custom, yes." His mouth curved in dry amusement. "But I daresay you would not find your duties too onerous. I would visit your bed whenever I wished, naturally, and you must learn to please me."

"You will likely be disappointed in me. I have no talent in that direction."

"I won't know until I have you beneath me."

Her breath caught at his bold speaking, yet his continued attempts to intimidate only angered her. "I have no experience as a mistress, only a wife. My only intimacy with a man has been with my husband. And I found that side of marriage...extremely unpleasant. Indeed, I cannot comprehend why your gender finds lust so agreeable."

Her tone at the end was scornful, cutting, yet Damien couldn't tell if she was angry solely at him, her late husband, or males in general.

"But then by all reports, your husband was a boor. And by your own admission, you have never had the benefit of a proper lover. At the risk of seeming immodest, I am skilled enough to teach you whatever you need to know. I believe I can safely predict you will enjoy your education."

Her chin rose regally. "How can you possibly divine what I might or might not enjoy? You know nothing about me."

"But I know women, cherie. And I understand pleasures of the flesh. You cannot be so different from the vast majority of your sex. One night in my arms and I'll have you trembling for me."

"You were correct, my lord. You are a devil. An arrogant one."  
He smiled. "My crimes are legion, sweet."

When she remained silent, Damien studied her curiously, wondering if her scornful haughtiness was an act. If she was feigning reluctance in order to excite his interest, her ploy was working. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so aroused by the mere presence of a woman.

And why else would she hesitate to snap up his extremely generous offer? No mistress, however magnificent, was worth a hundred thousand pounds, and he was giving her a chance both to redeem that enormous sum and to save her worthless brother. She would be a fool to refuse.

He doubted Vanessa Wyndham was a fool. Obviously accustomed to scandal, she must be experienced and sophisticated and worldly enough to use her body to gain her ends, as were so many of the grasping, shallow beauties of his acquaintance.

It was possible, he supposed, that she truly was cold and unfeeling, incapable of real passion. Then again, it could be pride or fear driving her. Was that guarded vulnerable look in her dark eyes genuine?

"Do you fear me, Lady Wyndham?" he asked quite seriously.

"Considering the tales told about you, it would be remarkably imprudent of me not to fear you -- a man for whom no rule is sacred and from whom no woman is safe."

"You have no reason to be afraid."

"Said the wolf to the lamb."

He smiled at her sharp tongue. It was strangely refreshing to find a spirited beauty who wasn't afraid of earning his dismissal by speaking her mind.

Casually Damien walked over to a rosewood side table, where he searched in a drawer. Withdrawing a deck of cards, he held it up.

"I beg to differ, my lady. I am no wolf. But I am a gamester, as you said. So I propose to give you a sporting chance. We each draw a card; high card wins. Even odds. If you are the victor, I forgive your brother's debt entirely. Lose and you serve as my mistress for the summer."

She stared, her dark eyes wide and uncertain. Damien fancied he could see himself in their lustrous depths, even across the room.

"Your answer, my lady?"

Vanessa shut her eyes as she struggled with the impossible dilemma. It was an outrageous bargain, trading her honor in a desperate bid to gain his aid. She had sold herself once, in marriage, and had vowed never to do so again.

Yet would giving her body to this man be any more repugnant than her marriage had been? Many women would leap at the chance to share Damien Sinclair's bed. He possessed a legendary reputation for lovemaking. Woman found him undeniably desirable -- and she was no different, Heaven help her.

And he was offering her an even chance to triumph. She might actually win. But if she lost? She would be ruined.

His proposal was dishonorable, even cruel. But her passion was his price for his mercy. And to shield her family from his wrath, she would bargain with the devil.

"You give me little choice," she replied in a low, toneless voice.

To his credit, he showed no amusement. "You may do the honors. Shuffle the deck and draw first."

She moved reluctantly toward him and accepted the deck. She had played whist and piquet often enough to be proficient at shuffling, but her hands were so unsteady, the task took a moment.

"Choose your card, sweeting," Lord Sin prompted.

Spreading the deck on the table, she drew a single card and turned it rightside up. A jack of hearts. Hope rose in her breast. It was possible a jack would outrank his draw. Vanessa held her breath, feeling her heart thud.

Lord Sinclair selected his card then, turning it over with long, elegant fingers.

Vanessa stared down at the king of spades, unable to hide her despair. She had lost.

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