

LORD OF SEDUCTION

EXCERPT

Highly suspicious now, Thorne peered through his lowered eyelids at the interloper. She had stopped on the beach a short distance away—the moment he'd rolled over, in fact—and was staring at him as if fascinated.

If she was a blasted husband-hunter, he would send her packing. And if not....

He couldn't deny she was a beauty, with her delicate, fine-boned face, flawless ivory skin, and nicely curved body. Her high-waisted muslin gown of dark blue flattered her slender, shapely figure and firm, high breasts, and sent an immediate shaft of awareness lancing through his loins.

She looked, however, to be a bit older than the usual debs who pursued him, perhaps in her mid-twenties. She wore her rich dark hair pinned up in a simple knot, Thorne noted. And her eyes, which were just as dark and lustrous, held awe and curiosity as she surveyed him.

Deliberately he opened his own eyes fully and locked gazes with her.

The impact made him feel an instantaneous heat—an involuntary physical response that came as a sweet, if unwelcome, shock.

She felt the same sweet shock, he was certain. She had stiffened, looking wary and unsettled now, as if all her feminine instincts were on keen alert. Just as all his male instincts had suddenly roared to vibrant life.

To Thorne's further irritation, he could feel himself hardening. It was difficult to remain unmoved, though, when a lovely young woman was contemplating his body so intently.

Cursing his swelling erection, Thorne pushed himself up on one elbow. "Do you realize you are trespassing on private land?"

"Your servants said I might find you here."

Her low, husky voice sent a further charge of heat along his nerveendings. "Did my father send you?" he demanded. "If so, then pray let me inform you that I have no intention of wedding you."

She blinked at that. "I beg your pardon?"

"The last young lady to see me nude claimed I compromised her and insisted that I wed her. If that is your aim, sweeting, you can turn around at once and take yourself away."

He watched as her sensual mouth thinned in a wry smile. "I promise you, my lord, you are safe with me. I have no interest in marriage whatsoever."

Her claim reassured him to a degree, yet Thorne couldn't let himself relax. "You obviously have an interest in my body."

Color rose in her cheeks, and she looked flustered to be caught ogling him. "Forgive me. I was contemplating you with an artist's eye... trying to determine how I would paint you."

Thorne's lips curved in a sardonic grin. "Now *that* is a novel tactic no one has ever used on me before."

Her chin lifted with a trace of defiance. "I am perfectly serious. I am an artist."

He regarded her for a long moment. "If that's true, then I suppose I should be flattered by your attention."

"It is true. You would make an admirable subject for a portrait."

"Is that all? You see me as one of your subjects?" He arched a taunting eyebrow. "You don't feel the slightest urges beyond the artistic?"

"I regret to disappoint you, but no, my interest in your male anatomy is purely objective."

"How lowering. I am mortally wounded."

Her wry smile held genuine humor this time. "I should think you would be pleased. By all reports, you have an army of eager females fawning all over you."

"A regiment, at the very least," Thorne drawled, feigning a shudder. "And all with matrimony in mind."

"But you have no desire to be leg-shackled," she said in understanding as she took a step toward him. "Well, you can rest easy, my lord. I have no intention of wedding anyone, most certainly not a man of your rakish reputation."

"I am hardly a rake."

"If you were a gentleman" —she gave his lower body a pointed glance— "you would cover yourself."

Realizing his manhood was fully erect now, Thorne reached for his shirt. "I confess that a beautiful woman staring at my loins has an arousing effect."

The flush in her cheeks fascinated him. In truth, she fascinated him. From her bold appraisal, he had to conclude that she was no meek-mannered miss. Nothing like the chaste, featherheaded young innocents who often pursued him. If he hadn't sent her scurrying away in fright by now, she had to have some measure of experience. An enticing thought, Thorne reflected.

Draping the shirt around his hips, he tied the sleeves together and rose to his feet. "Better?"

"Yes... I think so."

"I *am* a gentleman, you know—although my father would sometimes dispute it. What of you?" His gaze slid down her body. "Most ladies would think twice before coming to a secluded cove where a strange man was sea-bathing in the nude."

Her eyes kindled a little at that. "Of course I am a lady."

"Yet you come here alone, and you don't shy from the sight of me."

"I wished to speak to you in private. And I must warn you, attempts to intimidate me usually have precisely the opposite effect. You won't frighten me away."

Thorne realized he was beginning to enjoy himself. Certainly he no longer wanted to drive her away. Instead he wondered if he could persuade her to stay. "In that case you are welcome to join me. But you have on far too many clothes. You would be far more comfortable without your gown."

Her eyes widened at his brazen suggestion.

"Wouldn't you care to take a swim?" he pressed, moving toward her. "The water is a bit cool but invigorating."

"I don't know how to swim."

"I would be delighted to teach you."

With an unwilling smile, she shook her head sadly. "I should have known the tales I've heard about you are true. You are indeed a seasoned rake."

"Oh, no," he murmured, halting before her. "If I were truly a rake, I would take advantage of having a beautiful woman alone and try to steal a kiss from her."

He'd often been accused of having a wicked sense of humor, so he wasn't surprised that his brazenness didn't appear to shock her. Yet suddenly she was no longer amused. She lifted her chin again, eyeing him coolly.

The directness in her gaze, in her stance, was challenge incarnate.

And he could never resist a challenge. Especially not from a woman so alluring as this one.

Her lips were temptingly close and perfectly shaped, while all his senses avidly relayed the fact that she was lushly curved in all the right places. He wanted to draw her down into the sand with him and slowly strip her gown from her body, exploring those sweet curves with his hands and mouth....

A jolt of pure desire sizzled through Thorne at the prospect.

He took the final step toward her, so their bodies almost touched. It startled him, how badly he wanted her. He couldn't remember ever being this aroused this swiftly.

Neither could Diana.

Gazing up at Thorne, she felt transfixed. His eyes were a stunning hazel—gold dappled with flecks of green—and deep enough to drown in.

She drew a shaky breath at his unsettling nearness. Any well-bred lady would doubtless have fled at the first sight of his nudity. But dismayingly, her strongest urge was to touch him, to see

if his skin was as warm and supple as it looked. If the muscle and sinew rippling beneath the surface was as hard as she suspected. If his firm, beautiful mouth would taste as arousing as she imagined it would.

Excerpt from Lord of Seduction by Nicole Jordan
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