



Her Deal with the Devil

By Nicola Marsh

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Better the devil she knows...?

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Sapphie has sacrificed everything for her jewelry business and very nearly lost it all. She *hates* that to rescue it she needs to work alongside her nemesis—Patrick!

It was supposed to be business only, but Sapphie quickly realizes that when you make a deal with a devil this scorching, someone's going to get burned...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Nicola Marsh has always had a passion for reading and writing. As a youngster, she devoured books when she should've been sleeping, and relished keeping a not-so-secret daily diary. These days, when she's not enjoying life with her husband and sons in her fabulous home city of Melbourne, she's busily creating the romances she loves in her dream job. Readers can visit Nicola at her website: www.nicolamarsh.com

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Sapphire interlocked her fingers and stretched overhead, savouring the slight twinge between her shoulder blades. The twinge was good. It meant her muscles were functioning, which was more than she'd been able to say a few months ago.

But she wouldn't go there. Not today.

Today was all about relaxation and easing back into work. Minimal stress. Positive thoughts. Focus.

She tilted her face to the Melbourne summer sun, enjoying the rays' warm caress.

She should have done this more often. Then maybe she wouldn't have ended up at the brink of collapse and almost losing her cherished family business.

If it hadn't been for her younger sister Ruby... Her shoulder muscles spasmed and she lowered her arms, shook them out, using the relaxation techniques she'd learned during her enforced three month R&R at Tenang, the retreat that had nursed her weary body back to health.

She couldn't afford to get uptight. Not with so much at stake. Not when she had so much to prove in facing her nemesis tomorrow.

With hands on hips she twisted from the waist, deliberately loosening her spine. Some of the tension eased and she closed her eyes, breathed deep. In. Out.

Calm thoughts. Zen. Centred. Relaxed.

'Never thought I'd see the day when the great Sapphire Seaborn connected with her inner yoga chick.'

That voice. No way.

Her eyes snapped open and her Zen evaporated just like that.

Patrick Fourde. Here. In the tiny backyard behind the Seaborn showroom. Seeing her in daggy pink yoga pants, purple crop top and hair snagged in the morning mail's elastic band; not in the fabulous designer outfit she'd planned to wow him with tomorrow.

Freaking hell.

She could feel the blood rush to her face. A virtual red flag to her mortification. Considering their past, she'd

be damned if she let him know how truly flustered she was.

The guy had made her last year of high school a living hell and she'd rather grind coal to diamonds with her teeth than work with him now. But she had no choice. She had to reaffirm her leadership of the company. Had to prove she could handle the job physically. Had to ensure she never came that close to losing it again.

She strolled towards him, stopping about a foot away. Close enough to see tiny flecks of cobalt in a sea of grey. His eyes reminded her of a mood stone: bright and electric when he was revved, cool and murky when he had his game face on. Like now.

Lucky for him she'd wised up since high school and could outplay him. Never again would the cocky rebel get the jump on her.

'Was there a problem with our meeting time?'

He grinned—the same wicked quirk of his lips that had driven her batty during Year 12 Biology—and leaned against the doorjamb.

'No problem. I happened to be in the area. Thought I'd drop by for old times' sake.'

This wasn't how she'd envisaged their first meeting after ten years. Not at all.

She didn't like being on the back foot. Not around him. Not when she needed to convince him Fourde Fashion couldn't live without Seaborn's fabulous gems for the upcoming Melbourne Fashion Week.

'Or maybe I couldn't wait 'til tomorrow to see you?'

There it was: the legendary charm. What had it taken? All of five seconds for him to revert to type?

Pity her opinion of the silver-spooned, recalcitrant playboy hadn't changed over the years.

Indulged. Spoiled. Never worked a day in his life. Everything she'd despised in the rich guys she'd grown up with at the private school she'd attended. The type of guys who thought they could snap their fingers and have a harem falling at their feet.

Not her. She'd save her seven veils for strangling him if he didn't agree to her business proposition.

'Still trying to get by on lame flirting?'

'Still the uptight, stuck-up prude?'

Ouch. That hurt. Especially as she wasn't the same person—not any more. Working her butt off to learn the family business, losing her mum and having a bruising brush with chronic fatigue syndrome had seen to that.

Besides, she'd never been stuck up or a prude. Uptight? Maybe. But he'd always brought out the worst in her. Riling her with his practised charm, swanning through high school with an entourage of popular kids, teasing her whenever he got a chance.

For some unfathomable reason he'd taken great delight in annoying the hell out of her during their study

sessions, succeeding to the point where she'd been flustered and irritable.

The more she'd ignored him, or feigned indifference, the more he'd pushed, niggling until she snapped. Sadly, her cutting remarks would only spur him on, so she'd learned to curb her annoyance and focus on their assignments in the hope he'd get the message.

He hadn't.

She'd become an expert in patience, honing a cool tolerance in an effort to fight back her way. Until the day she'd had no comeback. The day he'd kissed her. 'Why are you really here, Patrick?' 'Honestly?'

She rolled her eyes. Did he even know the meaning of the word, with his glib lines and smooth charisma?

'I heard the rumours and wanted to see for myself.'

Uh-oh, this was worse than she'd thought.

She could handle him seeing her without make-up and in workout clothes. She couldn't handle him knowing about Seaborns' reputed financial woes. It would undermine everything and scuttle her entire plan before she'd had a chance to present it.

'You of all people should know better than to listen to a bunch of rumours.'

She attempted to brush past him but he snagged her arm. The zap of *something* was beyond annoying.

Ten years and he still had that effect on her? *Grow up.*

'The reports of my life in the media are highly exaggerated. How about you?'

She could try and outbluff him but, considering she had to meet him at his office tomorrow for the pitch of her life, it wouldn't be the smartest move.

'What have you heard?'

'That Seaborns has been doing it tough.'

'No tougher than most during an economic decline.'

A blatant lie. Not that she'd let him know. If her sister hadn't married mining magnate Jax Maroney the jewellery business that had been in their family for generations would have gone under.

And it would have been entirely Sapphie's fault. She'd been too busy playing superwoman, trying to juggle everything on her own, to let anyone close enough to help. Her stubborn independence had almost cost her the company and her health.

The bone-deep fatigue and aching muscles had scared her, but not as much as the thought that she'd almost failed in making good on her promise to her mum.

No way would she take the business so close to the edge again. She'd do whatever it took—including play

nice with this guy.

'Really? Because the grapevine was abuzz with news of Ruby shacking up with Maroney to save Seaborns.'

Bunch of old busybodies—socialites who had nothing better to do than spend their lives sipping lattes, having mani/pedi combos at the latest exclusive day spa and maligning people.

She'd spent a lifetime cultivating friendships in the moneyed circles she'd grown up in, had made an effort out of respect for her mum with Seaborns' bottom line firmly in sight. Rich folk liked to be pandered to, and with the 'old school' mentality at work they stuck to their own. Which equated to them spending a small fortune on Seaborns jewellery.

But it was at times like this, when gossip spread faster than news of a designer sale, that she hated their group mentality.

'You heard wrong.'

She hated having to justify anything to him, but she knew how hard Ruby had fought for Seaborns and she'd do anything for her amazing sister and their company.

The fact that Patrick was partially right—Ruby *had* initially married Jax for convenience to save Seaborns—rankled. If they hadn't fallen head over heels Sapphie would have personally throttled her self-sacrificing sister for going to such lengths for their business.

'Ruby and Jax are madly in love. They can't keep their hands off each other.'

'Lucky them.'

His gaze dipped to her lips and she could have sworn they tingled in remembrance of how commanding his kiss had been for an eighteen-year-old...how he'd made her weak-kneed and dizzy with one touch of his tongue...how he'd made her lose control.

Her lips compressed at the memory. Damn hormones. Just because it had been over a year since she'd been with a guy it didn't mean she had to go all crazy remembering stuff from the past.

Or noticing the way his dark brown hair curled around his collar, too long for conventionality. Or the way stubble highlighted his strong jaw. Or how he never wore his top button done up, making the tanned V of skin a temptation to be touched.

Yep, damned hormones.

'You're flustered.' He took a step closer and it took all her willpower not to step back. 'Anything I can do to help?'

Oh, yeah. But she wasn't going there, and especially not with him.

Once she sealed this deal she needed a date. A hot guy with nothing on his mind but drizzled chocolate and a sleepless night.

As if she'd ever find a guy to live up to her fantasies. The guys she dated were staid, executive types on tight timelines who demanded little. Guys like her.

'Yeah, there is something you can do.' She met his gaze, determinedly ignoring the quiver in her belly that signalled Patrick Fourde would be the kind of guy to make all a girl's fantasies come true. 'Be prepared to be wowed by the best designs Seaborns has ever produced.'

He inclined his head, the sunlight picking up spun gold streaks. 'I'll keep an open mind.'

'That's all I'm asking for.'

'Pity.'

How one word could hold so much promise, so much sizzle, she'd never know. The guy had *suave* down to an art. He'd had that elusive something as a teen and it had evolved into a raw, potent sex appeal that disconcerted her.

Not that she couldn't handle him...it...whatever. 'Did that practised schmooze work for you in Europe?'

Those cobalt flecks flared and an answering lick of heat made her squirm. He didn't speak, and his silence unnerved her as much as the banked heat in his steady stare.

'Because personally it doesn't do much for me.'

'What does?'

'Pardon?'

'What *does* do it for you?' He leaned in deliciously, temptingly close and she held her breath. 'Because I'd *really* like to know.'

His breath fanned her ear, setting up a ripple effect as every nerve ending from her head to her toes zinged.

She could feel the heat radiating off him, could smell a delectable combination of crisp designer wool and French aftershave with a spicy undertone.

Heady. Tempting. Overwhelming.

Powerless to resist, she tilted her head a fraction, the tip of her nose within grazing distance of his neck.

And she breathed. Infusing her senses with him. Closed her eyes. Imagined for one infinitesimal moment what it would be like to close the gap between them and nuzzle his neck.

She had no idea how long they hovered a hair's breadth apart, the inch between their bodies vibrating with an undeniable energy.

'Hey, Saph, you out the back?'

She jumped, snagged her sneaker on a rock and stumbled. His hands shot out to grab her, anchoring her.

She should have been grateful. Instead, with his burning gaze fixed on her, a host of unasked questions she had no hope of answering flickering in the grey depths, she felt embarrassment burn her cheeks.

Patrick Fourde was the master of seduction. Always had been. It came as naturally to him as waking up in the morning. So why the heck was she responding to him on a level that defied explanation?

She couldn't be attracted to him.

Her business depended on it.

Besides, she didn't like him. She'd never liked him. He'd been a major pain in the ass during high school and by the way he'd breezed in here, determined to rile her, it looked as if nothing had changed.

For there was nothing surer—his turning up here today, twenty-four hours before their scheduled meeting, was nothing better than a ploy to unnerve her.

She might need his business, but working alongside him wouldn't be easy.

'Thanks,' she muttered, brushing off his hold in time to see Ruby propped in the doorway, a delighted grin matching the astute glint in her eyes.

'I didn't know you had company.' Ruby winked at Patrick. 'And such fine company at that.'

Debatable.

'Looking good, Rubes.' Patrick saluted her sister. 'Marriage suits you.'

'Thanks.' Ruby's assessing gaze swept over Patrick, and by her growing grin she approved of what she saw. 'Could say the same about you and Europe.'

'Paris is okay, but Melbourne can hold its own.' For some inexplicable reason he glanced her way. 'This city is filled with beauty.'

To her annoyance, Sapphie's blush intensified as Ruby stifled a guffaw.

'You're full of it,' Sapphie muttered under her breath.

In response, he snatched her hand and lifted it to his lips before she could react.

'Maybe so, but you missed me anyway.'

He kissed the back of her hand—a soft, butterfly brush of his lips that almost made her sigh. Almost.

'In your dreams.'

'Count on it,' he whispered, squeezing her hand before releasing it. 'See you tomorrow.'

Damn the man for doing it to her again. Deliberately taunting, trying to make her flustered—and succeeding. Her stupid hand still tingled where he'd kissed it. That whole in-her-face practised French charm...? Yet

another of his tricks to tease her. What she couldn't understand was why. Was he trying to get her off-guard before their meeting tomorrow? Trying to disarm her and make her stuff up?

Whatever the answer, she mulled over it while watching one very fine ass as he farewelled Ruby and disappeared into Seaborns on his way out.

Ideally, she would have returned to her relaxation stretches to banish the disturbing sensations Patrick had elicited.

How many times had she done her best to ignore him in Biology, when her recalcitrant lab partner doodled rather than rote-learn the nerves in the human body, would deliberately distract her with stupid jokes, poke fun at everything from her ruled margins to her neat handwriting.

It made what had happened on graduation night all the more annoying, because it had been *him* she'd let her guard down around, *him* who'd been there to offer comfort, *him* who'd made her tingle all over just like the stupid buzz still zapping the skin on the back of her hand.

To add to her discomfort she now had to face a rampantly curious Ruby, who waited until he'd left before bounding towards her.

'Jeez. How seriously hot is Patrick now?'

Sapphie refrained from answering on the grounds that she might incriminate herself.

'I mean he was always hot, with that whole bad boy thing he had going on at school, but now?' Ruby fanned her face. 'He's a babe and he's totally into you.'

Sapphie shook her head and stuffed her hand into her pocket. 'You know better than that. The guy flirts all the time. It's his thing.'

Ruby shifted her weight from side to side, bouncing on the balls of her feet. 'Well, his thing is making you glow.'

'Bull.'

Ruby grabbed her arm and dragged her to a window. 'Go ahead. Look.'

Blowing out an exasperated breath, Sapphie glanced at the glass. Even through a film of dust and rain spots she could see pink cheeks and wide eyes. But it was the expression in those eyes, the glazed confusion of a thoroughly bamboozled woman, that sent her hopes of forgetting the past spiralling on a downward trajectory.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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