

To Tempt a Demon

By

Cassiel Knight

© Copyright January 2008, Cassiel Knight

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

Surrounded by a sea of blurred faces, the shadow-shrouded man grabbed Lexie Harris' attention, forcing her focus as if a spotlight caught him in its beam. For a brief moment, she froze while her music throbbed around her, a pulsing, rhythmic beat she felt in her soul.

Snap out of it, you dolt. After the internal scolding, Lexie raised her chin and started moving again, her hips falling naturally into the motions she knew by heart.

Normally, she didn't notice the men in the audience. She looked at them, but she never saw a single face. Way too personal. She danced because she enjoyed it even if the environment sucked. If she watched the men, dancing would lose its magic.

And she didn't want to see what looked back.

Except for him. The man she couldn't seem to drag her gaze from.

He sat, motionless, his body ramrod straight yet appearing relaxed. Three other men occupied the same table. No one spoke to him. They talked around him. As if they didn't know he sat with them.

Her eyes narrowed with the effort to identify his features. All she saw was a male silhouette. Vague, yet visible at the same time. Similar to viewing an object from behind a full glass of water.

Flickering, wavering.

There, but not there.

From behind the shadows over his face, she felt as if he held her gaze, a long, silent moment suspending between them as if spun from silk into a finely made and equally fragile gossamer thread. A wealth of unspoken words hung in the air, words she could only imagine. Words directed at her.

For her.

Only her.

An urge to step from the stage and go to him tugged at her legs. Her whole body trembled with anticipation. She tried to throttle the dizzying current flooding nerves taut with anticipation. Without a thought she could remember thinking, her movements changed.

In place of her usual shimmy walk and stomach undulations, her hips swayed, arms snaking in and out. Her eyes closed, yet she still danced. For him.

A brief moment of lightheadedness as her world shifted, took a deep breath and held it. Waiting. She stumbled a bit from the onslaught of dizziness. Heavy silence surrounded her.

Her eyes snapped open.

Mild twilight sun heated the inside of the throne room, washing its pale glow across the stone. Warm light caressed her body with its golden rays. The silk of her costume and colorful veils drifted with soft brushes against her sensitive skin, skimming across her nipples until they peaked.

The heat of the sun was not the only warmth. Her gaze found and locked on the night-embraced man lounging in the plush cushions to the left of the fair-haired Prince.

She took a deep breath and began to dance. Her hips swayed, while her heart beat with the pulse of the music. Even as she moved, her eyes stayed locked onto the man. The ends of his robe separated, revealing a muscular, tanned chest dusted with dark hair.

Her gaze traveled upward until she stared into piercing silver eyes. She sucked in a breath. By the throne of Isis, what eyes!

A wan shaft of setting sun struck his hair, illuminating the black depths with flashes of fire. Her gaze tracked back to his face, to his full, sensual lips. She licked her own lips, imagining the press of his. Would they be soft? Punishing or gentle?

Tearing her focus from his mouth, she met his gaze. Seeming to examine her as intensely as she did him, his scrutiny dropped from her face to her shoulders to her breasts. Embers kissed her skin everywhere his eyes rested. Her heart leaped before settling into an erratic rhythm that threatened to steal her breath away.

The Prince leaned toward the dark-haired stranger and whispered something. Never taking his eyes from her, the stranger responded. Whatever he said seemed to please the Prince who smiled and nodded.

What brought the man to this place, this night? Fate or chance? Or something else? She did not know. She did not care. Without words, the silver-eyed man spoke to her. Touched her soul.

In unhurried movements, she drew off each veil, every motion designed to tantalize, tease and torment. Even as she moved, she knew she never danced as well as she did now. It echoed in the man's silver regard, which turned molten with heat. The same heat pooled in her loins as her body responded to his ardor.

When the last veil floated to the ground, she bent backward, a final flourish, knowing as she did so, she delivered a message.

Straightening, she came face to face, nose to nose with the silver-eyed man. The faint caress of air from his breathing skimmed her lips, parting them in response. A mere breath apart. Blood course through her veins like an awakened river. Their eyes connected as their breathing came in unison.

All she had to do was. . .

A loud crash of shattering glass, followed by a woman's squeal, snapped Lexie out of her trance. She blinked rapidly and shook her head.

Familiar sights and sounds of the club slammed into her mind. She tripped, her balance shaken as if the world started to spin again.

What the hell had just happened? Some kind of daydream? Her gaze trained on the man. He'd been there. Hadn't he? After all, she couldn't see his face. Yet she still felt as if he and the man in her dream were the same.

God, she was losing her mind.

Another loud protest, this one with a desperate edge of fear, thrust aside her worries over her sanity. After a second shake of her head to clear the cottony sensation of disorientation, Lexie searched for the source of the feminine alarm.

A short distance from the stage, Samantha Jones, one of the waitresses, stood surrounded by three men, her tray tight to her chest. One of the men held her arm. The wince on Sam's face told Lexie the jerk's grip was bruising.

She stiffened, her gaze fixed on Sam. Pale blonde hair, smallish, barely topping out at five two, a heart-shaped face, blue eyes and a full, rounded figure. Polar opposite to Lexie's tall, athletic form, dark hair and pale brown eyes.

Lexie scanned the area. Where the hell was Gary? The head bouncer's skyscraping, bruiser form was nowhere to be seen among the caterwauling sea of men. In fact, she didn't notice any bouncers.

"Let go of me!"

Sam cried out for a third time. The man dragged her closer to him. By this time, the other two men at the table stood. Now five men besieged Sam. Shit. The terror on her face left Lexie's own gut clenching in response.

She recognized the helpless awareness, the knowledge you weren't strong enough to handle what happened to you. She'd never forget the icy fingers of fear squeezing her insides or the pressure of her own heart pounding so hard she wondered why it hadn't leaped from her chest.

Freaking, unreliable Gary.

Ever since a new dancer, Regina, started, Gary kept his focus on her instead of the stage and his job. Why her schmuck of a boss, Howard, hadn't fired the bouncer's ass by now was a constant source of amazement.

Before she talked herself out of getting involved, Lexie took a steadying breath and jumped down from the stage. The nauseous scents of sweat, beer and the acrid bite of smoke churned around her as she pushed her way to the small group.

“Get your hands off her,” she said, around a throat tight with anger and fear. “Now.”

Five men, make that five lust-filled men, turned from Sam and faced Lexie. What the hell was she doing? She wore nothing but her dance bra and pantaloons. Way to think ahead, Lex.

Turning bloodshot eyes on her, the man holding onto Sam released her arm and shoved her aside. Even in the dim lights, his face appeared sallow, his lips down turned and pouty. Stubble along his not-so-strong jaw line and the delightful scent of sweat and heavy cologne completed the picture.

His gaze traveled down her body and up. Reaching her face, he smiled in a parody of a leer little more than crossed eyes. Lexie's skin crawled with distaste. Sam's grabber was a little boy playing at grown up in a wrinkled Pierre Cardin suit stained with God only knew what.

“Hey, babe, you're hot.” The words slurred from his lips, much like dental patient dribble. “Wanna party with me and my friends?”

She sighed. His oh-so-supportive friends egged him on, the catcalls and hoots getting louder. He closed in and stumbled over his own feet in the process.

“So, what do ya’ think?” he continued.

Ah jeez. Lexie’s nose wrinkled, and her lips curled. His breath smelled of something gone bad. She shook her head. “Thanks for the invite. Not interested.”

Despite her cool, polite tone, his jaw tightened. Denied, and he didn’t like it. He cocked his head and did that leering thing again. “Come on,” he whined, drawing the words out in one long breath.

Oh God. Using every ounce of her willpower kept her from moving away as the one, long, stinky breath released in an exhale of beer mixed with garlic, onions and heaven help her, something infinitely vile washed over her.

Freaking terrific.

“Sit down, dude,” she said. “You really don’t want to do this. I’ll get you and your friends a drink. On me.”

He reached out; maybe to grab her, hug her, she didn’t f-ing care, even as she pictured her boss yelling in her ear about taking care of the customers. Yeah, and standing there while a bunch of hormone-hopped perverts put their grungy hands on her was a delightful way to spend an evening.

Good customer relations, my ass.

Lexie jabbed the heel of her hand into his chest. The grabber stumbled backwards, his arms flailing. It appeared as if she’d shoved a tractor at him. Honestly, she hadn’t hit him that hard. Drunken idiot.

His friends broke his fall. From the dumbfounded expressions on their faces, catching him equaled accident.

Then five pairs of bloodshot eyes fastened on her.

Simon lifted a hand to his face, surprised to find his fingers trembling. Not only had the woman locked on to him in a seething crowd of mortal males, she danced for him. Him alone.

For a moment, a range of emotions fought for control. Lust. Anticipation.

Possession.

Possession of the exotic woman whose hips begged for his touch. Whose lithe, sensual movements offered a piece of heaven.

He appreciated, far too well, what resulted in succumbing to the allure of lush bodies, full lips and soft, perfumed skin.

It took all the willpower he commanded to stop his traitorous body from jumping onto the stage to take the woman where she danced.

His legs quivered with the wanting.

Suddenly, Simon sensed a change come over the mortals. In bodies filled with lust, enjoyment in sensual pleasures, depression and anger, he identified something else. Evil seethed, slapping against his shields.

He straightened, the flush of passion dissipating as if water from the frigid north crashed over his head. Another immortal was near. Like him, but not like him. The presence leaked the sulfuric tinge of the Netherworld into the smoke-heavy air. A demon lurked in one of the mortals.

Simon dropped his shields and scanned the men. Nothing. Except the scent. Whoever the immortal was, he, or she, boasted powerful concealment skills. Maybe even better than his own. Only one possibility. An Apex demon.

His mind whirled with the implication of the demon's presence. Apex demons did not leave the Underworld often, but when they did, chaos, and death, human death, followed. For the Apexian to be present now, in the same location, could only mean Beliel now knew where to find the female.

A furious outburst tore him from his thoughts. Simon glanced at the stage expecting to see the woman. The empty space seemed to mock him. Hell's balls, where was she?

He stood, his gaze roving about then latching onto her standing in the midst of men acting like ravening wolves. With one containing the evil soul of an Apex demon.

Cursing under his breath, Simon pushed through the crowd, pulling his power about him like a mantle—a predator stalking its prey. He'd not lose the woman to a pack of lust-heated mortal men. Or a hell-birther demon.

At the same moment Lexie settled into a defensive square stance, she caught a glimpse of Gary's red head bobbing her way. About damn time. She was still going to kill him. After he got rid of the drunken yuppies.

Out of the corner of her eye, another movement in the crowd grabbed her attention. Like freaking Moses parting the Red Sea, the dark stranger she noticed, and, oh god, danced for, headed in her direction.

A glowering mask of scalding fury darkened his face. The rage had such a tangible presence she wondered how the mob didn't sense the roiling emotion.

Looking beyond his anger, she noticed something else. Something that was impossible. Something that had to be a trick of the lights. A silver glow suffused his eyes

increasing in brilliance until she couldn't focus on anything except the incandescent flash. Her stomach clenched, and alarm skittered in her veins.

Unable to turn away, Lexie watched the man close the distance. A flicker of motion from behind the man tore her immersion into his glowing eyes.

Black wings unfurled from over his shoulders and back. And not only one pair. Two pair, one larger, the feathers more defined, and a smaller, more delicate-looking set, stretched up and out. Like him, the wings not fully solid, but she saw them.

Didn't she?

Lexie closed her eyes. No way was she seeing this. She opened her eyes and flicked her gaze in his direction again. Nope. Nothing wrong with her vision.

Or her imagination.

If she had a Bible in front of her, and believed in that sort of thing, she'd raise her right hand and swear she'd seen four wings, complete with shimmering black feathers, spring out of his back.

Someone jostled her, diverting her focus from the stranger in order to protect her own ass. Gary waded into the churning melee, grabbed men by the scruff of their necks, tossing them to the side. Ah, brute strength in poetic action.

Gary didn't get the chance to toss Sam's bully. The man tripped over the bouncer's feet and stumbled forward. His lowered head aimed for Lexie's midsection, then jerked upright.

Sensing what was about to happen, Lexie shuffled backward. Not far enough. And her luck?

Really, really, gone.

The top of his head crashed into her chin, snapping her head back. Her mind flashed to the cartoons where stars always spun around a character's head.

What a bunch of bullshit.

Blinding pain shot through her jaw and ground her teeth together. But no freaking stars.

Lexie's first instinct was to smack the shit out of him. Instead of the reciprocating pain she wanted to inflict, she settled for spewing a satisfying string of unpleasant words.

“Ah, Christ, I'm sorry, Lex.”

Gary hovered near her shoulder, practically wringing his hands like a damsel in distress. Standing off to the burly head bouncer's other side--Regina.

The bastard.

Lexie suspected the bouncer had been with Regina, a new dancer, instead of doing his damn job. Gently fingering the throbbing spot on her jaw, she ignored Gary and his way too damn late apology.

Besides, after what she witnessed, his job shirking occupied a tiny piece of her mind. She stared over the rapidly dissipating audience. The dark stranger was gone.

Except—the spot where he once stood remained empty. As if the stranger continued to occupy the space, his body creating a vacuum.

Who was he? Even more, what was he?

And why had she day-dreamed about dancing for him?

“Lexie, you okay?”

At her side, Regina's nasal twang scratched on Lexie's spine invoking an involuntary shiver. She glanced at Gary's current crush. The reason he wasn't doing his job by saving her ass. Or her jaw.

Regina, a pixie-faced brunette who barely topped out at five one, was the newest addition to Blush's happy family. Gary had latched on to her as if she was the oasis to his desert.

For the moment, Lexie ignored Regina, focusing on her boss, Howard. Tall, stick-thin, all angles and edges, he waved his arms at two boys in blue standing at the bar. Every once in a while, Howard cast a glare at Lexie.

It wasn't pretty.

It was downright frightening.

"Lexie?" Someone touched her arm. She jerked. Regina let out a squeak of alarm and scampered back a couple of steps.

"I'm good," Lexie finally replied once she was sure she wouldn't start swearing again. Damn it. She didn't like to be touched.

Regina licked her lips a couple of times. "Gary's really sorry, honestly," she finished.

"Yeah, I know he's sorry. Forget it." Lexie waved the brunette away and turned to go.

Childish, yes, but she had a problem with the new dancer. She'd never done anything to cause such an emotional reaction on Lexie's part. Just a belief that Regina was not...right.

"Lexie, wait!"

Sighing, Lexie turned and faced Gary's paramour.

Regina held out a white business card. "A man gave this to me. He said I needed to make sure to hand it right to you."

Lexie took the proffered card and flipped it over several times. She frowned. No writing or pictures covered the stark, white surface. Blank. Only an expanse of nothing on both sides of the card. "Is this a joke?"

Regina shook her head, then shrugged. What the hell did that shrug mean? Lexie said thanks and took off for the dressing room. As she walked away, Regina's gaze seemed to drill a hole through the back of her head.

Lexie resisted the urge to hunch her shoulders. Something about that stare left her uneasy. Without a backward glance, she yanked open the dressing room door and went inside. Thankfully, the room was empty. Collapsing into one of the rickety lawn-type chairs, she took a deep breath.

Suck it up, Lexie.

Shaking her head, she scanned the card again. Her eyes widened. This time, one side of the card held a sigil like none she'd ever seen before. And she'd seen a few symbols in the class on Western magic she took last semester. Not because she believed in the woo-woo stuff.

Extra credits. Those she believed in.

The business card now contained a small, blank circle encircled by three other circles. Evenly spaced in those three other circles were letters. English letters, although they didn't form a word. Placed in a random pattern, they didn't appear to have the structure of any type of familiar language.

Why would someone give her a card like this? And what the hell was she supposed to do with a business card with no business or contact information? She shrugged. Another weird thing in a night chock full of weird things.

Like men who sprang wings from their backs.

She tucked the card into her backpack and slipped out of her dance costume to change into street clothes.

As she pulled her t-shirt over her head, the doorknob clicked and the door flew open, crashing into the opposite wall with a crunch. Pieces of drywall drifted down to join the other crap littering the floor.

Good thing she had finished dressing. Fixing a glare on the intruder, she felt the glare slip when Howard entered. Her mental alarms screamed danger. Her boss should look pissed. He didn't.

Yikes.

“Lexie, you were fantastic tonight. Hot and sexy. Really outdid yourself.”

Howard sauntered over and stood behind her, staring over the top of her head into the mirror. She kept her expression cool and remote as she stared back. His thin lips pulled into a smile. When that smile made its appearance, she mentally geared herself up, complete with shield and a sword, for a fight.

Hey, when she made mental protection, she went all the way.

Her boss never came to the back except to yell, and he certainly never smiled or gave compliments. Unless he wanted something. Lexie didn't need to sacrifice brain cells to figure out what that something was.

“There’s a request,” he continued when it was obvious she wasn’t going to comment. Smart guy. “A very important man wants a private word with you.”

Bingo. As soon as she’d seen that smirk on his face, she’d known exactly what he wanted. Nearly every night he cajoled, coerced or threatened her into doing a private dance for one of his cronies. She never did. He never stopped trying.

Lexie considered making a sign to hold up whenever he came near. Wonder if having the sign say kiss my ass would get her fired?

“No, Howard, for the hundredth time. I’m not into that shit.”

Watching his face in the mirror, it didn’t surprise her when his lips tightened. “He’s important.”

Here we go. She sighed. They all were important. Wanting to make sure he observed the resolve in her face, she turned to face him directly.

“I don’t care how important he is,” she said. “He can play with the other girls all he wants. For the last time, I’m not for sale.”

“Damn it, Lexie! I’ve had it with your refusals.”

Moving faster across the room than she’d have given him credit for, Howard lunged. Oh, crap!

He grabbed her wrist and yanked her out of the flimsy chair. Lexie tensed, stumbled and tried to wrench free from his grasp. Her first reaction nearly cost her a dislocated elbow. The *hap ki do* training flashed into her mind.

Instead of continuing the futile effort of wresting her arm from Howard’s punishing grip, she let her arm relax. The pinching hold eased slightly. Pushing the

advantage, she rotated her wrist as if she were taking a drink then flicked her arm out. His hand fell away. Astonishment, swiftly followed by irritation, touched his red face.

Way to go, Lexie. Losing her job appeared to be a foregone conclusion after all.

Just as Howard parted his lips, the door opened again. The way her evening was going, she expected to see the dark stranger. Wouldn't that cap her night?

Instead, a tall man with coppery light-brown hair, hazel eyes and a crooked smile, strolled up to Howard and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Her boss whirled around. Lexie couldn't discern his expression. However, she did watch as the lines of his body turned rigid.

"Tsk, tsk, Howard, I told you to ask her, not bully her."

The brown-haired man's fingers clenched. Howard's face squinted into a grimace, but he nodded his head.

Wow. Despite under weighing her boss by at least fifty pounds, he'd gotten Howard to back down.

Brown-hair released Howard's shoulder and turned to Lexie. She revised her initial opinion. Slender rather than tall, he radiated confidence and charm. She suspected his classically handsome features helped build his assuredness. Hard to say no to someone who could have been the model for Michelangelo's statue of David.

Her gaze wandered over the silver ash double pocket shirt hanging out over dark, marbled utility pants. Only her imagination knew what the expensively casual fabric covered and it wasn't sharing.

Damn it.

“My apologies, ma’am,” the stranger said. The recognizable Texan accent thrummed through her body. “In my enthusiasm to speak with you, apparently I conveyed a stronger summons than I intended. I’m Jackson McKay.”

He offered his hand. Lexie hesitated for a moment, then took it but didn’t offer her name. After the bare brush of skin to skin, she tried to pull back her arm. Her fingers jerked reflexively when he locked his fingers around her hand.

Terrific. That’s what she got for taking his hand. Instead of stomping on his toes as the urge demanded, she lifted her chin and met his smoky green gaze dead on. She hated the Neanderthal crap some men inflicted on women. Big tough guy squeezes little woman’s hand as if that’s supposed to impress her with his prowess.

In and out of bed.

Fine. He wanted to play hardball. No problem, she could play caveman too.

A slight twist of her wrist and instead of her fingers lying limply in his grasp, her nails dug into his palm. Not that the short nails would do a lot of damage. Enough so he’d realize she was not about to let the tough cowboy beat down the little woman.

First, nail gouging. Next step, a punch to the solar plexus.

McKay dropped her hand. An expression of respect mixed with something she couldn’t identify flashed into his eyes. Without looking away from Lexie, he jerked his head. “Git. No one enters.”

Howard, who had by this time stepped back and to the side, bent his own head and scuttled to the door. Upon Howard’s departure, McKay gestured to one of the dancer’s chairs.

Lexie shook her head and leaned her backside against the vanity, her palms resting on the wood a mere finger's length from her kubotan, a self-defense key chain.

Despite his clean, urban cowboy-scruffy style, he didn't appear to be dangerous. Not that appearances, good or bad, couldn't be deceiving.

Stop mimicking a shrub, Lexie. "Excuse me."

Jackson lifted an eyebrow. How the hell did people do that? She tried and tried but never managed to lift even one eyebrow.

"Just because my boss kisses your ass," she said, and since she was going to lose her job she might as well go all the way, "and your introduction was charming doesn't mean I'm going to give you a private show."

The lines at the corners of his eyes deepened. "I'm not looking for a private, uh ... show. Although, I wouldn't say no to one." A pause. "I just want to talk."

Uh, huh. Lexie shrugged. "So talk."

"I'll get to the point. You own an object my employer is all worked up about, and he'll pay whatever sum you desire for the transfer of ownership."

Suspicion rose. Something didn't feel right. Was it the smooth, whiskey tone or the overly innocent expression? Or the way he'd made Howard dance at the end of a string like a studly version of Geppetto to Howard's Pinocchio?

"What makes you think I have the item?"

A twisted of his lips. "Well now, my employer is never wrong so you must. Something your parents passed down to you."

Her brow rose. "He's wrong now. My parents didn't leave me anything."

“Now darlin’,” McKay’s hazel eyes scanned her from head to toe. A lock of copper hair tumbled onto his forehead. “I wouldn’t say they left you nothing. A fine young filly like you. I suspect you got all their best qualities.”

Great. Another man who thought charm and flattery made the difference. Probably did for others. It just pissed her off.

Adopting an air of nonchalance while her stomach clenched with anger, she said, “I thought you were going to get to the point.”

McKay’s eyes narrowed. Probably disconcerted that his good looks and Texan charm didn’t have her falling over herself to give him whatever he wanted.

“Fine,” he continued, “my employer is certain you possess the object and will pay handsomely for it. He has enough money to burn a wet dog. More than you can dream.”

“I don’t know; I can dream pretty big.”

McKay’s gaze bored into hers. Finally, he nodded then reached into his jacket pocket. Lexie tensed, mentally judging the distance between where she stood and whether she’d be able to strike before he pulled out a gun.

Instead of a gun, he pulled out a black card. “Here’s my card. That’s my private number and will ring me wherever I am. Think about what you’re doing.”

With the card, Lexie mockingly saluted him. “Don’t wait up, cowboy.”

“Think about it,” he repeated and with a final crooked half-grin, opened the door and sauntered through. Cocky bastard.

A few seconds later, she heard raised voices outside the door. The strident near bellow sounded like Howard and the steel-laced soft drawl belonged to McKay.

When the door didn't reopen to announce her boss had returned to finish firing her, Lexie quickly removed the rest of her war paint, snatched up her backpack and headed out the door.

The bulk of Blush's lingering crowd consisted of a few patrons who required physical strength to toss them out on their asses. Since it was nearing three o'clock, the ritual would start soon. Despite the high amusement value, Lexie didn't plan to stay and watch.

Once outside, the late night, early morning air enveloped her in a moist, comforting blanket. Streetlights sporadically glowed and sputtered up and down the avenue. Some places lighter, some considerably murky.

Coming out when the stars came to play didn't bother Lexie. Despite the earlier possibility of a stalker, the night continued to be her home. A place where she felt a sense of belonging. Not so much comfortable, never that, but as if the night sheltered her.

"Lexie, wait!"

The shout startled her. She hadn't heard the front door open or close, and the squeal of rubbing metal was hard to miss. Howard had never managed to find the time to oil the hinges, hence the chalkboard-annoying screech.

She recognized the voice. The sweet, soft-even-when-shouting voice belonged to Devyn Williams, a part-time waitress and belly dancer-in-training. And Lexie's number one fan.

How weird was that? Her number one fan was an eighteen year-old sylph-like girl with aspirations to become the next belly dancer. She'd even taken to adopting Lexie's

usual off-work outfit of dark jeans and t-shirts. At least Devyn hadn't morphed her honey-colored, curly hair into straight black strands.

Lexie avoided Devyn whenever possible. She reminded Lexie of someone she tried hard to forget.

Herself.

What similarity Lexie recognized in Devyn had no explanation. Maybe the hint of shadows in the young girl's eyes. Lexie knew if she stared in a mirror, she'd see her own deeper, darker shadows staring back.

Like Sam, Devyn possessed an innocence Lexie's heart yearned for. Something she remembered. Something lost to her forever. Still, her efforts, at times rude, to stay away from Devyn hadn't affected the girl. If anything, she seemed to double her efforts to pin Lexie down.

Like now.

"I almost missed you." Excitement pinkened Devyn's cheeks, unmistakable even under the flickering streetlights. "Big Joe told me you just left."

Lexie groaned under her breath. Thanks, Joe. After heaving a huge inward sigh, she commented, "You shouldn't be out here alone."

Devyn tilted her head. "I'm not alone. I'm with you."

Same cocky attitude too. "Go back indoors. I'll watch until your safe inside."

Devyn's lips thinned into a stubborn line. Great. The girl even managed to make a mutinous pout adorable. "You said you'd help me with the backbend."

I did? When Lexie repeated the question out loud, Devyn nodded.

"Yes, last week. At Wanda's birthday party."

Oh. Right.

She had stayed too long at the other dancer's party. Meaning she hadn't a chance to slip away prior to everyone getting shit-faced drunk. Not a pretty sight. Even gentle Devyn had too much. Lexie couldn't shake her, no matter where she went.

Finally, in an effort to escape, Lexie promised to show the inexperienced dancer how to do the Turkish fold, or backbend. The ploy worked. Devyn backed down. Breathing a sigh of relief at being able to make her escape, Lexie booked and promptly forgot about the promise, counting on Devyn being too drunk to remember.

Obviously, not happening. Lexie sighed. Not only did she not want to spend extra time with the young girl, she refused to contribute to the loss of Devyn's innocence. Her foot on the path to becoming a dancer in a strip club only hastened the inevitable loss. It would come; however, Lexie wanted no part of the natural course of life.

The natural course of life. Criminy, she hated that comment. But, the shrinks she'd been forced to visit after the loss of her parents and then each time she'd been shuffled back and forth between foster home to foster home all spoke the same refrain. As if the loss of innocence was natural in any way.

"Listen, Devyn, I'm pretty busy this week. Let me get . . ." Lexie's weak excuse died mid-sentence.

The distinctive tinkle of a tin can dancing across the street echoed in the quiet dawn. With the noise behind her, the only thing she caught at first was the widening of Devyn's eyes. Wide enough to fill her face.

That can't be good.