

To Tempt A Demon

Excerpt 2

By

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Chapter Twenty

Jackson moved through the still night, his passing barely stirring the leaves littering the ground. You'd think someone with enough money to live in a mansion could afford to have the ground maintained. But then, maybe Simon St. John spent his money on other, more physical pursuits.

Like the woman from the strip club.

Or treasure hunting.

Jackson was very familiar with St. John. Oh, he hadn't met the man, mostly knew him by his notoriety. Along with reclusiveness, St. John was reputed to possess one of the largest, most eclectic collection of artifacts outside a museum. And to protect his

collection, St. John's mansion boasted security second to none. Or so Jackson heard. He was figuring on testing those claims tonight.

Not that the tight security mattered a helluva lot. Jackson had entered more secure places. He crouched behind a low hedge then reached for a glossy, leaved branch. In the next moment, he let out a hiss as a sharp pain pierced his fingertips.

He shoulda known better. Ah hell. Just 'cause a chicken has wings don't mean it can fly. Swearing under his breath, after calling himself all kinds of fool, Jackson eyed the offending plant. How many years He'd been skulking about in the dark for years, yet he'd never been as stupid as to not anticipate non-traditional measures.

Security was never just about bells and whistles. It was as much about the most innocuous object masking as the most dangerously effective.

The low-lying, dense shrubbery packed a wallop, providing an effective barrier. Jackson upped his estimation of St. John. An inconvenience, this hedge. Meant he had to continue around the house. Not his first plan, but he'd make it work. He needed to get into the mansion, find the woman and get her to give up the amulet and this jar his employer described.

Creeping along the shrubs, Jackson turned a corner. There, a break in the form of a cellar entrance. He hesitated. His favorite motto, Fools rush in, crossed his mind. Risky he was, a fool, most definitely not.

His instincts screamed a warning. Jackson had barely enough space to leap to the side as a figure dressed in inky black detached itself from the night, landing on the ground near him. No grunt of exertion or muffled thud sounded from the figure's obviously long distance jump.

In a brief moment, Jackson assessed the intruder. Not an inch of flesh was exposed to the chill fall air. Even the mask showed no glint of white from eyes. In fact, Jackson wasn't sure he could see eyes.

Only his instincts saved him. The figure bent into a slight crouch, then launched a straight punch. Coming in low, the strike headed for his ribs. Somehow he knew if it connected, he'd likely end up with a broken rib or two. He brought his right elbow down, protecting his ribs. The strike connected, slamming his elbow to the side, deflecting the punch.

As if the figure expected such a response, it followed up with a spin then a roundhouse knee to his side on the heels of the strike. With as much grace as drunk, Jackson dodged to the side, narrowly missing the strike.

Christ, the attacker fought well. And hard. His skills by no means shoddy, Jackson found the attacker's deathly silence somewhat disconcerting. Which made him angry. He didn't like feeling as if someone had a secret he didn't share.

Worse, the longer he played, the more chance St. John'd discover him. An opening and Jackson took it. Lunging at the figure, he swept his outside leg into the figure's lower leg. Grabbing his opponent's left wrist, he placed a hand on the shoulder, pushing forward. At the same time, he chopped his heel against the bend of the figure's knee, jolting the figure's upper body forward.

Moving quickly, Jackson hooked his same-side arm around the figure, pulling him in then sweeping backward. The figure collapsed to the ground. Jackson followed, slamming his knee into the figure's chest, pinning him to the ground.

For the first time, the figure let out a sound. Part hiss, part growl. And feminine.

All feminine.

Aw hell, his momma had always told him never to strike a woman. Winging a silent apology to his mother, Jackson reached under the mask's edge and yanked it from the pinned woman's head.

Spilling from the cap, long red-hair tumbled about her shoulders and shimmered like fire, even under the half-light of a quarter moon, flickering and dancing about her face. High cheekbones in a porcelain face. A perfect face.

Except for the fangs showing under full lips pulled back in a snarl and the glowing red eyes.

In that moment, just as quick as the realization, Jackson lost his advantage. The woman bucked and hooked her legs behind him throwing him to the side and off. He continued the movement and sprang to his feet.

The woman had also settled into a half-crouch, her arms out to her side. Red hair curled in loose waves about her face. A face not so much lovely, but strong, rimmed with hardness.

She hissed again, her lips pulling back to show the fangs he'd half believed, hoped, he'd imagined earlier.

"Mortal, you trespass." The woman's words curled around the fangs, her accent thick, yet with a purr he could feel to the tips of his toes.

Feral.

Lovely.

Deadly.

Jackson didn't know what she was; just that he wanted to stick his fingers into her fire to see how much he'd be burned. Shaking off the odd desire, he bent his head to the woman.

"Pardon me, ma'am. I seem to be lost." He swept a hand through the air, encompassing the house. "I thought this was my friend's house."

An inward grimace. That explanation sounded lame even to his ears. The skeptical glint in the woman's red eyes told him she agreed. Perhaps deciding on how to best evict him. Or, if her arched fingers, tipped with long nails painted in bright red were any indication, eviscerate him.

"You lie." The woman said, her lips now relaxed, yet her head was canted to the side, much like a puppy does when first learning to listen to its human family. On her, it wasn't cute. On her, it was more the calm before the tornado.

Jackson shrugged. "A bad habit."

"What do you want?"

"I need to see the woman."

"No."

"She has something of mine."

The redhead's lips twitched. "I doubt it."

"Shoot. Got me again." Jackson managed a sheepish grin. "Actually, it's my employer's. He's paid me a lot of money to return his property to him." He winked. "I don't like to fail my employers."

"I'm afraid you'll be doing just that. Go away before you get hurt."

Mari watched the handsome man's lips pull back into a wide grin. He fought without precision and ill-defined grace, yet there was untrained power behind his defenses. If she hadn't her own skills, the fight might have very well ended with her still pinned beneath his powerful form. A disconcerting thought.

"Well, now, I can't do that. My reputation is at stake."

She firmed her stance. "And what reputation is that?"

"Besides my charming ways with women?" A half quirk of his lips. "I find lost things."

"Lost things? Or stolen?"

He shrugged. "I'm not hired to care either way. However, I always find what I'm looking for. In fact, that's my motto; Jackson McKay always finds what he's looking for."

"Cute."

Lights surrounding the building snapped on. Mari tilted her head to look at them, yet still keeping Jackson McKay in her view. She had a feeling turning her back to him was tantamount to asking for trouble.

While light didn't bother her, she was used to working in the darkness so ended up squinting against the glare. "I'm afraid you'll have to return to your employer empty handed. There is nothing for you here."

"Well, I don't know. I figure what I'm looking for is behind these huge walls."

Behind the man's nonchalant and flippant attitude, Mari suspected he was acutely aware of his surroundings and the fact the lights would indicate he had little time left.

"Indeed. Yet, if you stay too much longer, you'll be spending the night in jail."

She could almost hear the thoughts whirling around in the mortal's mind.

“Ah, well, another time then.” He sketched a slight bow. At the same time, keeping his eyes on her, he backed up.

Mari considered chasing him down. Instead, she merely held his glance and did nothing as the mortal turned and melted into the shadows. When she was sure he was gone, she allowed a smile to stretch across her face. The mortal was charming in a bad boy way. She had no doubt he'd return.

And she'd be waiting.

“Lexie.”

The voice calling her name whispered through her mind on a soft sigh.

“Lexie, help me.”

The pain in the voice tugged at her heart. She knew that voice. Knew that soft and clear tone, the fragile edges. Devyn.

Lexie sat upright, her sleep filled eyes searching the shadows. One of the shadows shifted and separated, forming into the petite figure of Devyn.

Was this real? The line separating real from imaginary no longer seemed solid. Its boundaries had been scuffed and broken in places, leaving Lexie adrift. She didn't know how to act to the appearance of Devyn. So, she simply stared at the apparition.

A weak smile pulled at the young girl's lips, but didn't reach her gray eyes. At odds with the smile, reproach filled the soft depths. Did Devyn blame Lexie for not saving her in the first place or because she hadn't found her?

Whispers filled Lexie's head. Whispers of a place cold and dark. Of tiny sounds in the dark, scrabbling against stone walls. Of unfamiliar smells. Dark smells, evil smells. Devyn never opened her mouth, yet Lexie heard it all.

Lexie threw back the covers. She hesitantly approached the young girl. "Where are you?" As she neared, the skin on Devyn's face—moved. Shifted, a rippling movement. No, not the skin but something under the skin.

Lexie froze, feeling the clammy touch of fear tip toe up her spine. Something was very wrong.

Without warning, Devyn raised her hands, the fingers turning into claws and lunged at Lexie.

With a gasp, Lexie woke. Jerking upright, she looked wildly about the room. In the semi-darkness of dawn peeking in through the windows, only the familiar outlines of furniture had form. No Devyn.

No sylph-like girl with claws where fingernails should be.

Raising a shaking hand, Lexie brushed back damp hair from her cheeks. A dream then. No, that's not right. A nightmare.

Her room door flew open, crashing into the opposite wall. Another dark figure stood in the doorway. Lexie's breath caught.

While the sensible part of her mind scoffed at the thought freaky Devyn had returned, the experienced, street-smart side reached slowly for the dagger she kept beside her bed.

"Who's there?"

"Simon." A pause. "I heard a cry. Are you okay?"

Lexie puffed out a breath on an exhale and slid the knife back into its resting place. “Yeah, just a bad dream.”

“I felt a disturbance.”

She reached over and flipped on the lamp by her bed. The soft glow lit up the room, its gentle light extending around the bed yet failing to penetrate the corners. Nevertheless, she felt comforted by its glow.

And, speaking of disturbance, Simon’s attire, or lack thereof, did more to disrupt her state of mind than a visit from a claw-wearing visitor. Damn near naked in flannel-type sleep pants. The navy blue pajama bottoms hung low just enough she could see the sprinkling of dark chest hair arched to a point below the waistband.

Even worse, his body may look alert, his languorous expression and tousled hair gave an entirely different message. One that her body, if not her mind, ached to reply.

Yikes.

Shaking off the affect of Simon’s sleep-softened appearance, Lexie cocked her head. “A disturbance? What, like the force? Do I call you Luke now?”

As usual, she attempted to find refuge in humor. And as usual, it fell flat. How do you joke with someone who doesn’t get the references? As evidenced by Simon’s current puzzled expression.

“I don’t understand your reference.”

See what I mean? Shrugging inwardly, Lexie grinned and then shook her head. “Never mind.”

She sat up and looked over at the clock on the nightstand. Three a.m. She was up. He was up. Maybe they could get in some practice. Then, she'd get him to go out to try to track down some leads on Devyn.

Real or not. Dream or not. Either was enough to remind Lexie she'd made a deal with Simon, and it was time he started honoring it. For nearly a week, she'd practiced, studied and learned.

To her mind, her skills in close contact fighting, thanks to the intensive Krav Maga sessions, had increased significantly. Yet, sometimes, Lexie saw a lingering concern and disappointment in Simon's expression. Like he wanted, no needed, something more from her.

Eons ago, previous to this past week, and before her life imploded around her, she had told Simon he couldn't have her faith. Maybe that was what he believed she lacked. Didn't matter. She'd warned him. The only faith she had was in herself.

So what if she had this empty feeling inside? She'd lived with it most of her life. This little hiccup in her life was just that. A hiccup. Nothing she'd seen so far had changed her mind that anything about the human race was worth saving.

Enough. She threw back the sheet and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "So, what do you say to some training? And then we need to..." Her voice trailed off, whatever she'd been about to say draining from her mind.

Simon's dark gaze captured hers. The smoldering flame in his eyes startled her. Okay, her mental voice dragged out the syllables. Now what?

Simon's gaze dropped, traveling down her neck and lower. Lexie looked down and an exasperated grunt escaped her.

Ah, shit. She'd forgotten she went to bed in a light camisole and shorts. The points of her breasts pressed against the thin material, as if recognizing an audience.

Lexie's gaze flew back to Simon's, only to find him standing by her side, his eyes now completely silver. She started to skitter back, across the opposite side of the bed when he lunged. Grabbing her by the shoulders, his hands hot against her skin, he yanked her to her feet.

She had barely enough time to let out a squeak of protest before those sensual lips she longed to touch were on hers.

The touch of Simon's lips on hers sent a shock wave through her entire body. Not gentle, not soft, the press of his mouth demanded a response. Her emotions whirled and skidded, the drugging kiss sapping her desire to move. To flee.

Instead, after a final shudder, she challenged his kiss with one of her own. Savoring the hard velvet of his lips, her senses reeled as if short-circuited.

His warm hands cupped the side of her head, gently pressing into her cheeks, yet forcefully pulling her closer. And not just her head, but her whole body until she felt every contour of his lean form.

When his lips left her mouth to trail a fire-hot path down her neck, into the hollow of her throat, Lexie felt her knees buckle. Only his arm about her waist kept her upright. Otherwise, she feared she'd have dissolved into a warm puddle of human goo.

Oh my god, she thought. She couldn't ever remember when a man's kiss had left her in such a state. If one ever had. A moan slipped through her lips.

In the back of her mind, sensible Lexie screamed and beat against the mental barrier that this was wrong. That she didn't want to feel. Not so sensible Lexie couldn't believe she'd denied these feelings for so long.

His warm hands left her face, to slide up her thighs, pulling her lower half closer to his. She gasped as those same hands snuck up under her sleeping boxers to reach the curve of her ass.

Almost of their own violation, her hands came up to caress the solid surface of Simon's back, exploring the ridges and planes of his firm skin.

He pushed his body against hers until the back of her knees hit the edge of the bed. Her knees gave away and she fell backward onto the bed she'd recently vacated. She barely had time for a brief moment of concern before his lips reclaimed hers, more demanding this time.

His hands slip across her belly, the rough hardness sending shivers of desire dancing across each tiny nerve ending until she felt like arching from the bed. Energy rushed through her, filling each molecule with a charge.

Her center pulsed, the space between her legs throbbing with need. A need she hadn't fulfilled in years. A need less associated with mere release, but more completion. As if she'd been waiting for Simon.

His hands slipped under the waistband of her shorts. She lifted her hips, freeing the material so he could slide them down. She wanted him inside her. Thrusting, filling her up until she couldn't take anymore.

“Lucifer's balls!”

The shout had the effect of ice cold water dumped over Simon's head. He stared down into Lexie's gaze, the pupil so large it almost engulfed the iris.

In Heaven's name, what was he doing? Traveling a path he knew led to the loss of his soul. For centuries, he'd been able to ignore mortal women's charms. Why did this one affect him so strongly? She was not the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Striking, yes. Sensual, extremely. Strong of mind and soul, most assuredly.

"Simon?"

The grating voice of the shape-shifter pulled his attention from the woman and his perplexing attraction to her.

Simon glanced over his shoulder at the hovering demon. The immortal's dark gray skin mottled into a pebbly ash. A visible acknowledgement for how shocking, and discomfiting at finding Simon about to make love with a mortal woman. He knew this because he had the same sense of uneasiness.

"Yes?" he finally asked.

"Marisol has words."

Simon looked back down at Lexie. While still obviously affected, he could see the realization of what had almost happened begin to glow in her cinnamon gaze. That realization would soon be followed by anger.

"I'll be down momentarily."

"Uh, okay. I'll tell her."

This time he sensed what he hadn't before. Rocky exited his soul-light disappearing. As wrapped up in being with the woman, Simon hadn't felt Rocky's

presence. Another reason being with Lexie cried danger. How could her protect her when his abilities were clouded by his desires?

When he was sure they were alone, Simon gently pushed off Lexie. He rolled to the side then off the bed rising to his feet. She yanked at the disheveled covers, pulling them over her body. Their gazes clashed. Humiliated fury lit her expression. He wondered what she saw in his.

“I am sorry,” he said.

For a brief moment, he didn't think she planned to respond. He saw her throat pulse as she swallowed. “Get out.”

Simon nodded. Yes, he expected her anger. He felt it as well. She was a lost soul in need of his guidance and what did he do? He nearly dragged her into the depths of his personal hell.

“Mari has news you'll want to hear.”

Without waiting for a reply, Simon turned around and walked out the door.

Lexie clutched the thin covers against her body, staring at the door where Simon had just left. What had just happened? She'd been so ready to give herself to him. In fact, if Rocky hadn't popped in when he had, she would have had sex with Simon.

With an angel.

He had this power over her. A power that made her body quiver with desire.

The bastard.

After the vampy demon left with whatever news she had, and thank god for the timely interruption, she and Simon would need to have a discussion about what kept

happening. She wanted it to stop. No, she needed it to stop, and if he was continuing to use his powers on her—. Well, she wasn't sure what she'd do. She'd figure that out later.

Flipping the blanket back, Lexie got out of the bed. After quickly tugging on a pair of jeans and long-sleeve t-shirt, she hurried out of the room. What kind of news, however fortuitous for Lexie's state of mind, would bring Marisol here just before daybreak?

After making a brief stop in his room to put on his normal outfit of dark denim and black tunic, Simon entered the library. Mari faced the fire, her back to him. There was tenseness about her shoulders he didn't like.

“Simon.”

Her sultry voice rippled down his spine. Once upon a time, he'd considered a relationship with Mari. That had soon passed. First, compatriots in Lucifer's army, now friends. Family. The change didn't mean he remained unaffected by her potent presence.

Part of Mari's power rested in her ability to make men worship at her feet. A succubus. Lucifer had made extensive use of that ability to snare mortal rulers into his camp. Mari no longer worked her sensual wiles on males, immortal or mortal.

Regardless of her decision, her power over men remained unchanged. So, she hunted alone. Lived alone. Worked alone. He knew he was the only male she ever visited because he'd proven over the years to be unaffected by her power.

Simon often wondered what Mari did when she wasn't hunting or sparring with him. Where did she go? He'd never asked. What she did was her business.

Her mouth curved into an unconscious smile that didn't reach her eyes. Which were a deep, purple, like amethyst. She wore contacts when she was out among the mortals. Her fangs were retractable; her red eyes could not be changed.

“Mari.”

“I have found the female the Defender searches for.”

“Devyn? You found Devyn? Where?”

This from Lexie who rushed into the room as if she'd been running. Despite taking the time to slip into regular clothing, her hair still outlined her head in a disheveled mess, tumbling about her shoulders in waves of ebony.

Simon clenched his fists, fighting the urge to bury his fingers into the unruly mass. While a part of him damned the shape shifter's arrival, another part wanted to bless the timely interruption.

Mari looked over at him, a question in her eyes. He nodded, and she turned back to face Lexie.

“The girl is being held on a farm outside....”

“How is she? Is she hurt? Who has her?” The words tumbled from Lexie's mouth before she'd even fully entered.

“Lexie, please let Mari finish.”

Simon hid a smile as Lexie clamped her lips tight. She fidgeted from side to side. He could tell it took all the willpower she had to remain quiet.

Mari nodded then continued. “The human is damaged but in a relatively whole condition.”

“Damaged? What the hell does that mean?” Lexie’s patience had lasted all of two seconds. “And her name is Devyn, not the girl or the human.”

Yeah, she knew she sounded petulant at that moment, but she was getting mighty tired of these supposed immortals and angels labeling Lexie and her fellow mortals as humans. It wasn’t the terminology. No big deal there. It was the way their lips seemed to curl in disgust, as if being human was something much less worthy than being an immortal.

Her reaction stopped Lexie a bit. Since when was she worried about her fellow humans being thought of in such a disreputable light? Since when did she care? Had she changed her mind? In that instant, she mentally shook her head. Nope, she hadn’t.

Right?

“My apologies, Lexie. I meant no offense, nor disrespect.” Light stains of scarlet appeared on Mari’s cheeks. “It’s just that, well, I’ve spent a lot of time recently with other immortals who don’t share-oh, hell’s bells.” Her apology cut off.

Lexie took pity on the demon. “Yeah, I get it.”

“Mari, please continue.”

Lexie swung her head around and eyed Simon. Was that a trace of laughter in his voice? And what about that suspicious twitch of his lips? Despite her worry for Devyn, Lexie had to admit, in the deepest, darkest part of her, how much she enjoyed seeing the humor lighting his eyes.

“As I was saying, Devyn,” a nod at Lexie who sent Mari a half smile, “shows some signs of a struggle, and is somewhat banged up but she appears unharmed otherwise. None of the wounds is life threatening.”

Oh, God. Devyn. Icy fear twisted around Lexie's heart. How could she have let this happen?