

TEMPTATION

K. A. M'LADY



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BY

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*For my mom – for keeping my halo from falling off
of my horns. For being excited about my every new
book release and for believing in me.*

CHAPTER ONE

The iron door thundered closed behind me. A gust of warm heat, filled with the acrid stench of noxious river water, whooshed past. Locks of my blood red hair fanned my face and temporarily blocked the inhospitable roadway from my sight. It didn't matter. I'd been to Hell before and wasn't impressed with the scenery.

The deafening thud emanating from the doors as they sealed off the Worlds-Between sent most creatures clamoring against their thick, iron-clad fixtures with a mixture of fear, desperation and horrified fatalism. Glancing at the demon next to me who clung to his chains, I saw all of this swirl in his yellow eyes. His frantic jerk against his irons indicated his balk now that his punishment loomed before him. For me, the Lower Rungs of Hell no longer held horrific appeal.

"Ye'll never get away with this, Jax," he squelched, his voice squeezing down its fear while he pulled against his restraints.

"Seems I already have you third-class gas belching poltergeist." I wrapped the heavy chain connected to his throat around my wrist, gave it a good hard pull and jerked the demon towards me. Misfortune

stumbled him forward enough for me to spin out and plant a good kick into his solar plexus. He doubled over in an undignified heap. I couldn't help but smile.

Damn lower demons anyway. Like I had nothing better to do on my day off than roust one out of the local rectory. The stupid thing just about gave old Lady Coolidge a heart attack when she came in to clean up the church for the next morning mass.

I know what you're thinking, Demons can't go into a church. But I ask you, 'Why not?' Even God believes the Devil exists. Besides, what better soul to steal than a believer.

Father Mike has had me on speed dial since the last time I bagged a couple of the soul-sucking mongers who cruised his cemetery during a burial. They'd tried to recruit the newly dead on their way towards the light. Apparently it's just so much fun messing with the weary and grief stricken.

The week before that I tracked down a soldier. Now that was one bitch of a job, let me tell you. Those damn things don't know the meaning of quit. And fight – Lucifer did one hell of a job teaching them the most wicked of wicked. I just about got my clock cleaned. In fact, I would have if not for a little angelic intervention. But that only led me to my current state of trouble. Remind me never to bargain with an Angel when ass deep in Demon goo.

Somehow during the whole sordid mess I ended up with a date. With an Angel. Don't laugh! Ok, laugh. It is a little funny. I, Jaxon Apple, slayer of havoc and wrangler of demons have a date with an Angel. What in all that is holy was I thinking?

Well, I obviously wasn't. Ok, I was thinking save your ass Jax. That's what I was thinking. And by any means necessary. Who knew it was going to cost me so much? Now what the hell am I going to tell my demon hunter friends?

To make matter worse, the demons have already caught wind of it — though how I have no idea. Apparently some secrets between Heaven and Hell just cannot be kept. Seems that all of the demons I've run into lately made it a point to burst into gut splitting laughter followed by a lingering sulfuric haze. Happened to me right on the subway just this morning. Talk about annoying. And stink! Woo! Nothing smells more repugnant than demon glee. It just ain't right I tell you.

Oh, and let me tell you why the damn demons find this bit of information so delicious. It just happens that in some of the original translations of the bible, my name, Apple, means Evil.

And that's why they're all laughing. Because Jaxon 'Evil' has a date with an Angel. And not just any angel either. Oh no. I had to go and make a date with the top Kahuna of the Lord's Warriors. That's right. I have a date with Gabriel. What the *hell* was I thinking?

Talk about your heavenly dark fantasies come true. Or your darkest fear — sporting heavenly abs, bronzed skin and the athletic physic of a god. Not to mention that golden hair of his any true blonde would sell their soul for and eyes so blue even the sky weeps at their grandeur. And did I tell you about his smile? His smile would melt any sane woman's heart.

Don't even get me started on his wings.

I have completely lost my mind. Or come to think of it, maybe he has. What in all of Hades does Gabriel want to go on a date with me for? He's definitely lost his mind. Or maybe a bet. One thing is for certain, I sure as hell am going to find out.

Gathering my scattered wits and wayward demon I made my way to the loading dock. From there it was a five minute ride down river to the Anti-Chamber. It was there I'd log in my demon and get the hell out of well, Hell. Normally I didn't mind hanging out and catching up on some of the latest gossip, but when I was the latest news, what was the point?

"Mistress Jaxon," the Master drawled.

The rich baritone of his voice sounded more like logs smoldering in a long burning grate than anything human. I made my way onto the tattered old river barge with a returned acknowledgement of the River-master's nod. The barge didn't look like it could even float, let alone carry us all down stream, but the River-master had run this barge forever and he knew what he was about. So, with his dark cloak covering the deep shadows of his face I dragged the demon, Glom, close behind me and we took our place among the others.

"Master Dohln, good to see you. Are the minions keeping you busy?" I always figured it best to keep to pleasantries in a place like this. No point in pissing the River-master off. Who's to say if you did that you wouldn't end up in the drink?

"Quite busy. But the Dark One enjoys the punishments as much as the play."

I'm sure he does. Why the good Lord puts up with all of this back and forth between the minions was beyond me. Not to mention well above my pay scale. I was just a lowly Demon-Wrangler who did what she was told. Maybe someday I'd understand all the whys. Until then, I tracked the bad guys down and brought them back to Hell. If the good Lord wanted to put up with it, who was I to argue.

Master Dohln bent to the task of steering the barge down river. The length of the guide pole dipped in and out of the thick, blood red water. I watched in awe as the pole sunk below the murky water covering half of the staff as he used the bulk of his power to shove us part way down stream before he pulled it up and repeated the process.

I'm not really certain what type of creature lay beneath the heavy dark cloak, his face and bulking arms hidden from view, but with the speed and agility that he steered the large vessel I was quite certain I didn't ever want to know.

I had wrangled demons for four years, since I'd turned twenty-two. To my knowledge, Dohln had been running the barge on the River Styx since the beginning when Heaven and Hell were created. No one really knew whose side he was on and I don't recall anyone ever having the balls to ask. Here's hoping no one ever needed to know.

The barge glided softly to a stop along the docks of the Anti-Chamber. I gathered up my demon and made my way through a throng of bodies, all heading towards Lucifer's Keeper, Luach-Noln.

Today, I wanted nothing more than to dump this

demon and get out of Dodge. Ever since I'd made that date with Gabriel I felt everyone watched me. And right now, standing in the Anti-Chamber with a demon on a leash, I wanted nothing more than to go home where I could pretend to be invisible.

I was five deep in line when my eyes caught sight of the Keeper. Luach was a three headed demon of the first rank, a Royal Guardsman to the Lower Rungs and he took his job very seriously. He stood well over eight feet tall and was the most beautiful color of crimson I ever saw. His body bore the resemblance of a giant man; big, burly and abominably muscled. Even if it was all covered in scales.

One of his heads was that of a large lizard or dragon. The middle head was that of an Orc – all knotted skull, frazzled teeth and large deep set eyes. The third head seemed to be a cross between a bore and bear; all sharp teeth, tusks and gnarly looking fierceness.

Most lower demons vaporized in fear just from the mere sight of him. When Luach turned all three of those heads in my direction and they all smiled simultaneously, I knew I was in trouble.

"Well, well. Look who deemed us the honor of her presence." He stood from his table where he'd been checking in his latest rejects.

My chest tightened with worry as Luach strode around the table and approached. Whatever he was up to was not a good sign. Luach never noticed me before. To most of the Guardsman I was just another Wrangler. Another pawn in the game of our Lords. Just like them I did what I was told and, at the end of

the day, I went home. No harm, no foul. So what did Luach want with me now? Why the sudden interest?

"So, I hear our little 'Evil' made a date with an Angel?" He shuffled closer.

Cripes! Did everybody know? What the hell! I mean, I'd only just recently agreed to it. Who the hell told *him*? "How in all of Hades did you catch wind of it, Luach?" The entire situation was mind-boggling. "And why the sudden interest in my social life?" I clung to the chain of my demon as if my life depended on it. No one in the Lower Rungs ever took note of me. Least of all Luach. So why was I suddenly Suzie-Come-Hither?

"Oh, no interest."

For the first time in all the years that I Wrangled, he looked me up and down as though scoping out my soul and wondering if my packaging tasted good with ketchup. "Then why are you checking me out like I'm some lost soul ripe for the plucking?" My annoyance gathered and gave me a false sense of fortitude.

Luach laughed low and deep.

Something in my belly tightened from the after-shock. When he sauntered those next few steps towards me I knew I was in deep shit. Before I could get my next words out, a brilliant dark, red light formed a halo all around him and the closer he came the thicker and brighter the light grew until it consumed him. I had no choice but to put my hands up and close my eyes to block the burning light from my view.

The warmth and strength in the hand that cupped

mine as it pulled my arm down brought my eyes open in a tingling shock. The man attached to that hand was nothing I expected to see this side of Hell.

"There. Is this a more comely image to gaze upon?"

All those dark places inside me clenched with both fear and delight. It was still Luach's deep baritone, but the being standing in front of me was not the beast from a moment ago. Now holding my hand was a man six feet six. Long dark illustrious hair hung freely to his waist. Deep black eyes seemed to go on forever. A strong firm jaw with a bit of a chin cleft gave him intense charm and character. He had a sturdy nose and perfectly chiseled cheek bones. And his wings. His rich full wings were the thickest, darkest shade of obsidian I ever saw. In a word, the man was stunning.

Luach smiled.

Motionless, I simply gawked at the remarkable changes he wrought before me. When I finally gathered enough of my voice I asked the only logical question I could think of. "Why?"

"I thought it only fitting that if you were to have a date an Angel of Light" — the words *Angel of Light* came out through perfectly white clenched teeth — "you should at least be sensible enough to sample the pleasures that the Darkness has to offer as well."

"So you would be my, what? Dark Angel?"

He smiled the most sinful of smiles.

My toes curled within my boots. The offer had possibilities. *What the hell are you thinking, Jax?* My brain started an argument that the rest of me didn't

want to finish. I mean, he did cut a rather imposing figure before me; all dark and delectable with his long dark hair, deep seeing eyes, and those amazing dark wings. It was on the tip of my tongue to agree. I mean, why the hell not. I'd already gone and made one colossal mistake of a date with Gabriel. I was about to say, *What was one more*, when an incredibly thunderous roar cracked through the air around us like a thunder bolt splitting the world in two.

All around me lower demons went sprawling, some sucked dirt, others sought cover behind the check-in table, the barge docks, and even their Demon-Wranglers as an incredible blinding white light bore down on us like the coming of the Messiah himself.

"Really Gabriel. Must you be so overly dramatic?" Luach drawled, obviously bored by the theatrics of his Heavenly enemy.

I stood between the two in shocked silence as their magnificence filled me with wonder.

"I'll not stand for this, Luach!" Gabriel seethed, filling with light and beautiful anger. He turned towards Luach and pointed his large finger at the Dark Angel – err Demon.

"Whatever do you mean?" Luach pretended innocence.

"I'll not have you interloping on my date. Do you hear me? I'll not allow it!"

"*Allow!* Since when did you start commanding me, Gabriel? You hold no power over me. Or my social life for that matter. If I choose to take Ms. Apple on a date, who the hell are you to stop me?"

"And I say I asked her first," Gabriel growled, his great white wings fanned out behind him. "The way I see it, she is mine to take and leave as I see fit. I refuse to be second to the likes of you!"

Gabriel was now nose-to-nose with Luach. They yelled in each others face as they stood toe-to-toe before me like I wasn't even there. It was all very odd really. They argued over who was going to take me on a date first. What was my world coming to? And when did I become the thing with which to tempt two angels? Hmmm. The thought had merit.

"Boys." I stepped between them and ran the palms of my hands and the tips of my fingers down the length of their bare, bronzed flesh. As soon as my fingertips met muscle, a delicious chilled heat swept through me. A thrilled gasp escaped my lips.

Two pairs of eyes filled with their own heavy amounts of heat, anger and want turned towards me as one.

I was now pressed between them. The deep red of my long, curly hair mingled with the light and dark of their wings spanning the space behind me. My Angel of Light stood to my right and my Angel of Darkness to my left, leaving me, the Apple of delight, in the middle. *Such possibilities.* Apparently my name truly was 'Evil'.

"I think the only way around this is for the three of us to go on a date together." Wicked, sumptuous thoughts ran rampant through my head. If this was someone's twisted idea of a game, I was about to change the rules.

Gabriel opened his mouth to argue.

Luach crossed his arms, tilted his chin and smiled. "Afraid she'll choose me at the end of the night?"

"And I hold land in Hell if you think that will happen." Calm, he crossed his thick arms over the span of his wide, bronzed chest. The distinct gleam of competition burned in his beautiful blue eyes.

"Good. Then you can both pick me up at eight." I handed the almost forgotten leash that was still connected to my pathetic lower demon, Glom, to Luach as I turned to leave. I paused at the fourth step and turned back to find that both of them watched my departure. "And boys, make sure you're not late."

With that parting shot I did that quick hair flip for effect that we woman have a perfect knack at doing and sauntered my way back towards the waiting barge. Something about the whole situation left a bad taste in my mouth. There was no way this side of Heaven or Hell that I'd get either one of them to date me. *Whoever put these two up to this little test is about to get a rude awakening.* I am, after all, a descendant of Eve. *So, let the games begin.*

Seven fifteen and I finally made my way to the shower. I spent the past few hours attempting to find the inside of my apartment, which was not an easy task considering I don't clean. Then, when I discovered my floor, I located my phone and called one of those last minute cleaning services to high-tail it over to do a quick fix of all the other shit I just don't do.

Within the span of another hour the poor team of six had my apartment spit-shined and sparkling. In fact, when I stepped out of my bathroom and into the

hall, I almost thought I was in the wrong house. Once I got them paid and out the door I had about twenty minutes to dry my hair and play dress up for my Angels. It's just too bad hot, studly dudes with wings don't particularly know how to tell time.

With about the eighth ring of the buzzer I figured door bell war started. Given little choice and no time to grab a robe, I stomped to my front door to end it before my neighbors stormed my walls. I jerked the front door open. "If you two are done?" Mid-wrestling maneuver for the buzzer, Gabriel and Luach froze, their arms and legs entangled and each with a single finger poised in a struggle for the doorbell. Their gaze raked my body. I'm sure I cut a rather interesting picture with long red hair hanging wet to my waist and my body wrapped up like a package in a little red towel.

"Is that what you're wearing out?" Luach grinned, delight filled his eyes and not a dark wing to be found.

"Do not change on my account." Gabriel shoved Luach out of the way and stepped through the doorway. Without warning, he took me into his arms and pressed the soft full weight of his lips against mine. My gasp of surprise all the invitation he needed, the wet heat of his tongue swept into my mouth and stole my reply with the weight of his kiss.

Clinging to my wits and towel I leaned into him. *If this is how he wants to start the night then he best be prepared to play by my rules.* I rose up on my toes, turned the kiss around and took the lead. I ran my tongue across his bottom lip and he tensed as if

unsure. I kissed him deeper, tasted the full heat of his mouth and relished the moan that escaped. I knew I unsettled him. I nipped his upper lip and he pulled away, dark eyes lost and blinking. For now, I won the first round.

"Well, that was fun." Luach rubbed his hands together. "I don't suppose my greeting will be just as wicked?"

I turned my gaze in his direction with my best saucy look. "You didn't seek to play, Luach. But don't worry," I said knowing a wicked gleam filled my eyes. "The night's still young." The arch of his brow over his endless dark eyes as he took my measure let me know he wondered what I was up to. Let him. If these two thought they played some game of tempt the novice, they involved the wrong girl. I didn't know who the hell pulled their strings and set them up to this date, but I had ways to find out. "Now, if you two think you can manage to sit here without killing each other while I finish getting ready, I'll be right back."

It took me all of five minutes to slip into a little something red, silk and strapless. All it required was a matching thong and sling back heels. I left my hair to finish air drying. Besides, it was half way there. I don't normally do make-up so I added a touch of red to my lips, a swipe of coal mascara to my eyes and called it done. When you looked good with what God gave you – why mess with it?

I made my way back to the living room and froze at the sight of my two Angels five levels deep in a battle of wills, which showed in the shambles that

had once again become my living room. Six shades of pissed, I stepped into the room. The flux of unseen power washed over me like an electrical field. My living room was totally trashed with chairs overturned, pictures knocked off the walls and, strewn about the floor, were nick-knacks busted everywhere. How they kept me from hearing any of it was completely beyond me.

"What in all that is holy and otherwise do the two of you think you are doing?" I roared. The sonic boom that erupted in my ears as the backlash of power spilled over me from their interrupted concentration just about knocked me off of my three inch heels.

"He started it!" Gabriel stepped away from Luach and immediately pointed blame in his direction.

"I don't care who started it." Anger filled me in waves. "Do you have any idea what it took to *find* my living room?" They both looked at me with the same blank stare of perplexity. I crossed my arms and planted my feet firmly on the floor. Rage burned inside me as I glared at their mess. "I want this fixed right this instant."

"Not until you kiss me." Luach folded his own arms and mimicked me like a petulant child.

"What?"

"Not until you kiss me."

"You can't be serious."

"I'm afraid I am deadly serious. You walked out of this room in nothing more than a skimpy towel after planting one on him like he is a gift from on high and I had the displeasure of spending the last five minutes

listening to him gloat.

"Is he freaking serious?" I looked at Gabriel. At least he had enough sense to stare at the ground.

"I'm afraid so," he mumbled. He looked up and caught the blaze of fury burning in my eyes.

"Oh for cripes sake!" I threw my hands up in the air. Cautiously I made my way over the debris field of my living room. This was getting us nowhere. Leastwise to the answers I sought. If the damn Angel wanted a kiss — fine. I'd give him a kiss alright. I reached Luach's side.

Luach pulled me into his arms, wound his fingers through my hair and pulled me against the heat of his waiting lips.

Patience flew out the window, right along with my frazzled nerves. My anger however, fueled the heat of his kiss when he parted my lips. The moistness of his tongue plundered my mouth with the same urgency. His hand swept down the line of my back, his palm cupped my backside and delicious need washed through me. Soon I wasn't sure where anger ended and lust ignited.

His burning need pressed against me. My resolve and fury melted into the fire of his kiss. Desire spiked through me in a fevered pitch. When another set of hands smoothed down the length of my dress and snaked their way along the expanse of my hip to grip the roundness of my buttocks, I knew Gabriel was done watching. I shifted in their arms and Luach released me from his kiss only to pass me on to the warmth of Gabriel's waiting lips.

His touch, though gentler, was just as demanding.

As the zipper to my dress released and the fabric slithered down my body, the caress was followed by the eager touch of roaming fingers. My body came alive with sparks of need so intense I thought I would die from want. Flames of lust and need wreaked havoc on my body and senses. Warm lips and greedy hands wandered and touched. Tasted and yearned.

Burning alive with a cavalcade of desire, my knees weakened when roaming fingers became tasting lips. The whisper of a voice echoed weakly in my mind. I silenced it as one hand cupped a breast and another found the other, each hard, full and waiting. When the seductive caress of teeth and tongue brushed the firmness of my fully aroused flesh, I wanted to die. Strong arms held me as warm mouths tasted, licked and nipped. My body imploded with lust and need. I rode the desire, heat, and overwhelming longing.

Bits of my mind reformed and I remembered who and what I was. And what I was doing. Slowly opening my eyes, the world swam back into focus, bits and pieces at a time. Strange — I didn't remember closing my eyes. And I didn't recall when Gabriel joined my little tet'e te'. But one thing was for certain when I looked down at both Luach and Gabriel curled around my semi-naked body while they suckled the hard sinful peaks of my traitorous breasts. There was no way this little game was going to continue.

I ran my hands through their hair and pulled them to me while I made the appropriate moaning sounds of a delighted lover. "Who put you two up to this?"

The pleasure simply continued. My body burned

with delight while I fought to maintain my sanity. Hands and fingers continued their wandering onslaught on my flesh until I thought I would go mad with desire. When the first set of fingers wound their way towards my thong I knew this game was over. My voice, thick with annoyance, assured the breathlessness of lust and need no longer resonated in its tones, "Who?"

Luach pulled away and looked up at me. The bright blue of Gabriel's innocent gaze followed.

"This isn't a game," Gabriel beseeched, palms reaching towards me.

He was so full of shit I could have stuffed him in a trash can. I looked at Luach and knew by the smug smirk on his face I was right. "So you've nothing to say for yourself?" The mere shrug of his shoulders was followed by the not-so-innocent smirk I was growing accustomed to seeing on his face. "Can I have a kiss goodnight?"

Nine fifteen. The shortest date in history. Even for me. I guess it's just not in the cards for a demon-wrangler to have a date with an angel. Any angel this side of Heaven or Hell. However, Luach did say that if I ever wanted to play on the dark side again to give him a call. The offer is tempting. Very tempting. Still, it makes me wonder who sent them and why the games. And if it was a test — did I pass?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.A. M'Lady lives in disturbia with her amazing husband and family. She has always been interested in the world of Other and has often wondered who keeps all of those creatures in check. She believes God really does have a plan for all of us and quite possibly He and the evil one have sat for coffee and debated it — Anything is possible! To find where else her stories might take you, you can visit her on the web at www.geocities.com/mladyfair12.