

Succubus in the City

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Extract

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chapter ONE

There I was on a Saturday night, dressed up in Prada and ready to go out, to our new favorite club in the Meatpacking District when the phone rang. It was my friend Sybil, very contrite, to say that she was down with a nasty cold and really could not make it out. And that I was welcome to come over and share her chicken soup and her germs but she was planning on bed before the A crowd would even arrive at the velvet ropes. So my choices were to stay home and watch reruns or hunt. I'd already seen everything in the latest Netflix order and I was already dressed. And I just didn't want to look at the stack of dishes in the kitchen sink or admit to wasting forty minutes on my makeup.

So hunt it was.

A convention is always easy hunting. Like any New Yorker, I don't like the invasion from out of state, gawkers who stand in the middle of the sidewalk staring up at the high buildings and blocking traffic, to say nothing of display windows. The out-of-towners are so wary, watching their wallets and their keys and trying to look behind their backs—but they never worry about me when I show up.

I took a taxi to a hotel near the Port Authority with

a scuzz factor to match the address. The lobby and bar were crowded with bored-looking men in Arrow polyester shirts and bad toupees. Old Spice overlaid but did not mask the scent of disinfectant and I had to resist the impulse to gag.

They turned to look at me. They always do. I am a succubus, and they can't help it. But I knew that my clothes were way over the top for this crowd. Suddenly I was tired and depressed and thought the reruns looked appealing after all. Then I spotted my prey.

I don't make the judgment calls, I just deliver the goods. That's the way I think about the job. But like everyone else, I'm trying to make the world a little nicer, a little safer, so I choose men who make it . . . less nice. There he was, sitting at the bar, hooting and leering and whistling when I entered. He did it again when another woman made the mistake of passing the doors and that decided me. I walked over to him and leaned against the faux leather edging and tried to get the bartender's attention.

I ordered a Jack Daniel's. Somehow with these guys, that seems to indicate that I'm available and not quite respectable. I always order Jack Daniel's but I never drink it, and it did the trick again. Before I could get the change from the twenty into my wallet he was all over me.

"Hey baby, come here often?" he asked.

And that clinched his fate. I hate to be called baby, hate it more than almost anything else. Then, to seal it in stone, he reached around and fondled my ass. Yes, the women of the world could definitely do without him.

I smiled. "What's your name? Where are you from?" They always talk about themselves and never notice that they hear nothing about me. They think that they fascinate me and they've thought it for thousands of years. And for nearly that long they have been my prey, my mission.

His name was Brad and he was from . . . someplace that wouldn't miss him. Suddenly I was bored and wanted it over. No use playing the game, luring the prey, making it appear that I had to be caught and seduced and that I was overwhelmed with his charm. Or charisma. Or whatever. "Shall we go upstairs?" I asked when he paused to breathe.

And then he blushed and looked at the condensation on the bar. "I, ummm, well, my friend said we could save money on our per diem if we shared a room and he's a serious Christian and friendly with the boss . . . could we go somewhere else?"

"We could go to my place." I hate taking them to my place.

He followed me out and lit a cigarette as soon as he cleared the door. Then he balked when I hailed a cab. "I don't think that's covered in my per diem," he said, fingering his wallet. Cheap to boot. I sighed. "I'll take care of it," I said. I'd hit the trifecta: called me baby, cheap, and a smoker. The only good thing about this evening was where he was going and that he was going there as fast as I could manage.

My doorman noted that I'd returned, and with someone in tow. He looked away as I dragged Brad into the elevator and then into my bedroom.

At least he'd had a shower in the last forty-eight hours, I had to give him that. Though as he peeled off

the layers of his Kmart suit I could see that his body was even flabbier than I had imagined.

They have to come before I can deliver them. That's the deal, and I was hoping he'd be a fast one. Fortunately, he was. I had him on his back and stripped carefully, teasing and not letting him touch as I hid my breasts with my mass of auburn curls or turned and slid my panties over my thighs. Oh, he was more than ready when I turned back and hovered over him. He lay looking up at me, plenty ready. It only took a few short strokes before he groaned.

He got his moment of pleasure, and then he ignited, bursting into screaming yellow flames that flared under my hands. In less than five minutes he was a few ounces of ash cooling on my sheets.

I dustbusted, changed the sheets, and then took a quick shower before settling in for season three of *Friends*.

On Sunday morning the alarm got me out of bed before noon. I turned on NY 1 for weather and news, and started some Costa Rican shade-grown dark roast in the French press. There was still some housekeeping to do. The dirty sheets that I'd tossed into the corner belonged in the laundry pickup bag. Brad's clothes, which also still littered my carpet, went into another bag to be dropped off at the Salvation Army on Fourth Avenue. Imitation Gucci shoes and bad knockoff of last season's jacket and tie, pants, a polyester-blend shirt, and underwear. Yuck. Bad clothes. But someone would buy them for three dollars and be glad and no one would trace them back to me.

After removing the cash from his wallet I set the driver's license and credit cards aside to be left on a

subway bench later. All organized and cleaned up from the night before, I poured my first cup of coffee just as Wolf Blitzler started on the latest Washington scandal.

Vincent the doorman rang for the ashes.

Well, he's Vincent this week. Next week it'll be Jose or Michael or Vitale. Likely Vitale. Satan seems to like names that start with V, at least for doormen. Anyway, this was his first day so he came up to introduce himself and pick up the bag himself.

"And if you need anything, Miss, remember that my number one priority is to look after you."

Ack! Had this guy been in advertising or retail? Where does She find them?

And I know his number one priority is to look after me. Literally. Watch my movements, see who I bring home, take out the ashes in the morning, and send the sheets to the cleaners and drop off the clothing donations and wallets in anonymous locations. I mean, I can't complain about the service and it does improve my quality of life. After all these centuries I should be used to it by now, but there are just some aspects of the job that I've just never become really comfortable with, and having a doorman who knows way too much about me is one of them.

At least he's cute. They're always cute. This one had chestnut curls cropped short, and sherry-dark eyes. I do have to bow to Satan's class—She has never given me a dud doorman yet.

He stood there, smiling. "My name is Vincent."

"You said that already." I was late. Was he waiting for a tip?

“Will you be wanting a cab this morning? In fifteen minutes, perhaps?”

I was running late and Sybil would kill me, because there wouldn't be a table open at our usual restaurant and they won't even take us in line until the entire party is there. I'd made a real effort this morning, actually got up with the alarm and had even picked out my Seven jeans and the rose-colored lace camisole the night before.

“Thank you, Vincent. Fifteen minutes would be perfect.” He smiled as broadly as any of the gentlemen, excuse me, creeps, I picked up for the delivery service.

I was in the lovely white marble lobby of my building in thirteen minutes flat and Vincent already had a cab waiting. Efficient and useful. I hoped he would stay around for a while, but if he discharged all of his duties so well he would be promoted by the end of the week. Well, I'd enjoy it while it lasted. So I sailed out the door and relished the sight of the young man running from the building to get the door to the cab as well.

“I knew you'd be late.” Sybil sighed as I ran up to her on the sidewalk. She stood in front of the steps leading up to the restaurant and shivered slightly in her thin spring jacket. She should have worn a coat, but it was one of those perfect almost-spring days that New York has in the late winter, just to tease the natives who should know that there are at least six more weeks of slush to go. But when the sky is a clear, perfect blue and it's warm enough to wear a jacket instead of a coat it's easy to pretend that spring is just a few weeks away.

Of course, Sybil looked disappointed at my late arrival. Her large blue eyes were almost brimming with tears at my delay. Guilt, guilt, who could help but feel horrible at making this lovely, sweet-looking woman so miserably dejected by the ultimate sin of Being Late.

“Wait a minute,” I said, looking at her. “What about your cold? You were too sick last night to go out and—Sybil, we’re demons. We don’t get sick.”

She shrugged. “I really felt awful. If you’d come over you would have seen it. I’m not like the rest of you. I’m not a sex demon, I’m just a greed demon. So I do catch colds.”

Sybil always seems to feel left out because she’s the only one of us whose duty is not sex. Maybe she did have a cold. Or maybe she had just been feeling sorry for herself, which happened at times.

“What about Desi and Eros?” I asked, trying to distract her.

“Already inside, trying to pretend that we’re all here so that we can keep our place in line. They lied and said that we were just outside having a cigarette.” She shuddered delicately, and I agreed. Tobacco, ugh! I couldn’t abide the smell. It was all I could do to swallow my revulsion if one of my deliveries was a smoker. I cannot understand why anyone smokes anymore. It’s such a social liability.

We raced inside and joined our friends in the crush at the trendy poured-concrete hostess station that was separated from the entrance by a glass wall. Desi waved us over. She had snagged one of the dark wooden seats in the waiting area that was artfully reminiscent of a cross between a Victorian

gentlemen's club and a Victorian train station. Though the press of bodies obscured the antique brass lockers and the deep mahogany desk, I could see the hostess shaking her head and studying the seating book that lay open in front of her. "Probably twenty minutes," Desi said, "Did you have a hard night?" That last was directed to me, and was genuinely sympathetic. I love Desi for that kindness more than anything. The others all think that I've got the easy gig, but Desi understands that the ashes-to-ashes business has gotten very old.

"At least this one had taken a bath," I said, and watched with some satisfaction as my friends winced a little. "I think he was with some convention. He wore a polyester-blend shirt and Drakkar Noir."

"You are so strong," Desi said, patting me gently on the shoulder. "I couldn't have managed that. I'm allergic to Drakkar Noir."

"We're all allergic to Drakkar Noir," Eros announced. "And I'm starving. Pancakes and French toast and Bellinis, everybody."

There are advantages to being an immortal succubus. To make up for the miseries of vigilant doormen (named Vincent or otherwise) and being required to take home men who wear drugstore perfumes and polyester, I can eat all the cake and chocolate and steak and French fries I want. The body is a requirement of the job so Satan has given me a permanent size four. At least until the style changes. One hundred years ago I weighed two hundred pounds and was considered exquisite. And I had a collection of Worth gowns that were the envy of more than one duchess. Well, some things don't change.

We were seated in ten minutes and had our order in less than five minutes after that. For a few minutes I simply savored the glory of fluffy blueberry pancakes swimming in sweet wine sauce and relished my poached quince, a crisp counterpoint to all that gooey goodness.

"So how many this week, Lily?" Desi asked me.

"Three," I answered. "What about you?"

Desi smiled. "Oh, for me it's not numbers, it's all the little provisions of the contract I get them to sign. I have to bring them along, you know, before they're ready to sign up for eternity in Hell. So I'm still working on Peter."

"The one from last week?" Eros asked. "The investment banker with the mole on his hand?"

Desi rolled her eyes. "Yes. That's the only Peter at the moment."

"Well, I certainly hope that's not the only peter," Eros replied tartly.

We all laughed. Maybe the Bellinis made it funnier or maybe just being in the company of friends made us laugh at the lame joke. Knowing them for hundreds of years and knowing that they wouldn't abandon me no matter what was about the only thing that had kept me sane.

I know, I know, no one has any sympathy for the immortal sex demon. Especially if she doesn't have to diet and gets to wear Jimmy Choos all the time. Which is why we all need each other, because my girlfriends know that my life is not all Prada. There are the polyester guys. And there is the fact that no man acceptable to Satan has loved me, not since I was mortal. And I don't think I want to tell you how long

ago that was. Suffice it to say that She was known as Ashtoreth back in those days.

Satan is like our den mother and we are Her Chosen. No one can help but admire Her—everything about Her is so perfect. Her clothes, Her apartment, the hors d'oeuvres at Her parties, everything is just half a second before the fashionistas pick up on a new trend. When She's in feminine form She's really one of us, only better, more pulled together, more in charge. Kind of like what I imagine a big sister is when you're a sorority pledge. So when She's being the supergirlfriend and ultimate fashionista we call Her Martha. This decade, anyway. Once upon a time we called Her "Jackie," and before that "Peggy."

"I'm just flattered you like my taste," Martha said once, chuckling softly, when we were ooohing and aaaahing over her latest place, a penthouse on Lexington in the East Seventies. "I sometimes wonder if I'm a little, you know, too classic."

There's no such thing as too classic, and I told Her so. I wish I looked that sophisticated and elegant in Chanel. Martha can wear a Chanel suit like no one else. And She is the only woman I've ever seen who makes an Hermès scarf look like a scarf and not an advertisement for the size of her bank account.

We all have our own styles and best looks, and while we all envied Satan's perfect polish, I, at least, have learned that I do best sticking to what suits me. Which tends to be *au courant*, mostly Italian, and not tailored. I have vaguely messy hair and lots of it, very dark auburn with natural copper streaks from the sun. I look silly in a suit, but great in jeans or a little slip dress.

And while I adore cutting-edge fashion, I can't pull off Comme des Garçons or Issey Miyake the way Eros can. But then, she's got the very willowy, dare I say almost spiky, figure that is perfect for the avant-garde designers. Of course, that four-hundred-dollar haircut that looks so elegantly hacked and bleached that it could be on the cover of *Vogue* does help. Her pointed face and pointed hair are *très moderne*; no one would believe that she hasn't been a goddess for two thousand years. Well, demigoddess, but who's counting?

As demons, our job is to tempt humans into giving their souls to Hell. We cannot tempt those truly obedient to God, but most people have their iffy moments and we are there to exploit them. We can offer what our prey want, so long as they're willing to sign over their immortal souls (in blood). Except for me. I don't have to get willing consent with a contract and a signature. I tempt men with sex they can't resist, and deliver them when they come.

Once upon a time Christians thought that succubi preyed only on good, devout husbands, back when the definition of a good Christian husband was elastic on issues like wife beating. Now any man who responds to my pheromones is valid prey, so I don't have to select for religion and public approbation. My prey were always sleazebags, don't get me wrong, and one of my great faves is still to hit up a convention of gospel-quoting hypocrites and deliver a few. But there aren't a lot of them in NYC, so I tend to target drunks and the kind of men who treat women badly.

Eros used to be a demigoddess and looks it. She's

nearly six feet tall and is always just a little ahead of the curve on everything. Her temptation is eroticism of all kinds, including porn and fetishism. Desi, Desire, is—you guessed it—a demon of desire. She personifies and tempts by a more complex set of desires; sex is certainly part of it, but so are class and social status and sometimes even respectability. Desi is the most versatile of us, but it takes her a bit longer to bring her prey to where they are ready to sign. Sybil's specialty is greed. She was once an Oracle of Delphi with a true gift from Apollo himself, which makes her the wonder worker of Wall Street, where she is a very highly placed account manager. Which does not mean that she isn't beautiful—she is—but she doesn't have to have sex with anyone she doesn't actually want to date. And, unlike the rest of us, Sybil has been married. Something like fifteen times.

So these are my friends. Being Satan's Chosen is something like being a lady-in-waiting. We're Her friends, Her companions when She wants someone to gossip with or to sit with Her during a manicure. We shop with Her, drink with Her, and enjoy Her company. She has favorites all over the world and from every specialty in Hell, of course, but when She's in New York She enjoys relaxing with us. Why us? Maybe because we're congenial and adore Her taste and admire Her for who She is personally. We don't just love Her because She's Satan, we love Her because She likes Bellinis and clothes and art shows and the Hamptons as much as we do.

"Is Martha coming today?" Sybil asked.

"I don't know. You know how busy She is. If She drops by, it'll be later."

That's the advantage of being Satan. She never has to wait for a table.

"I want Her advice because I hate my wallpaper," Sybil moaned. "I sat all morning looking at it and I wanted to throw my coffee all over it just to make it different."

"Coffee is a very hot color now," Eros said in that knowing tone she uses when it comes to anything artistic. "But I'd rather talk about guys. Who cares about apartments?"

We all turned to glare at her. Everyone cares about apartments. Especially in New York, where they're just about impossible to find. A decent building where the pipes don't make thumping noises and you can't hear the people upstairs, one with a nice view of the park or the river maybe, or a fireplace, can take decades of careful searching.

The problem is that Eros has the perfect apartment. She found it during the Depression, when no one could afford an Upper East Side co-op with four bedrooms and a separate suite for the maid. The building was built at the turn of the century, and has fourteen-foot ceilings on the main floor with elaborate crown moldings and a fireplace with an Italian marble mantel carved in the Deco style. We all envy her apartment, even if she does invite us up to roast marshmallows and make s'mores on nights when we're just feeling a little down.

"So tell us about Peter," I said to Desi. Des is such a romantic, and besides, it would get the conversation off real-estate envy.

Desi sighed. "I don't know, I think that this one may like me. Maybe," she said. "He's an investment

banker and has an apartment on East Seventy-seventh Street and a dog. A chocolate lab named Jazz. And he does tai chi."

"How does he dress?" I prompted, to get away from any description of an apartment in the perfect location.

"He's a banker. Probably Brooks Brothers," Eros said dismissively.

"No, Ralph Lauren," Desi defended her new beau. "Do you want to meet him? I can bring him on Friday."

Friday was the opening of the Michelos show at the Martindale Gallery. We were going because Eros adores Michelos and promised on the death of her immortal soul that there would be interesting and attractive men there (the fact that she no longer has an immortal soul notwithstanding). If Desi brought her latest it would be counterproductive, but it was her call, not mine.

"Oh, Lily, don't look so sad." Desi interrupted my thoughts. "You'll find someone lovely, I know it. You've got the hardest job of all of us and I couldn't manage it in ten zillion years."