



SAINT'S TEMPTATION

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Please Enjoy This Excerpt
From Saint's Temptation
By Debra Dier

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“I shall see if His Lordship is receiving callers this afternoon, My Lady.” The butler lifted one bushy eyebrow, his quiet indictment on the impropriety of the situation.

“Please tell Lord Huntingdon it is a matter of grave importance.” Marisa forced her lips into a smile, hoping to conceal the tension coiling inside of her. Did Greensley have any idea of what had transpired in this room so many years ago? If it were not a matter of life or death a team of horses hitched to her waist could not have dragged her back into this house. “I trust I can depend upon you, Greensley.”

One corner of his lips lifted ever so slightly. “I shall do my best, Lady Marisa.”

Marisa stood in the middle of Clayton Trevelyan’s library in Grosvenor Square and tried to draw a deep breath into her tight lungs. The faint scent of leather and old parchment filled her senses. It should have been a comforting aroma, but nothing could ease her tension.

It had been a very long time since she had stepped foot in this room—seven years and six months. Nothing about it had changed. Books lined every inch of every mahogany book shelf. Unlike most gentlemen she knew, Clayton Trevelyan actually read the books in his library and did not merely choose the volumes to decorate the room. It was an intensely masculine retreat all in shades of brown, cinnamon, and gold, with thickly carved furniture. A pair of brown leather wing back chairs stood near the gold

marble fireplace, creating a cozy place to sit by the fire. She tried not to look at the hearth, but her gaze was drawn there, the way an onlooker might stare at the scene of a horrible accident.

The last time she had been here, a wood fire had crackled on the hearth, and a foolish young woman had learned just how little she meant to the man she adored. Heat crept upward along her neck, infiltrating her cheeks, until her skin burned with the memory of her self-inflicted humiliation.

She walked to the windows overlooking the street, and pressed her hands to her burning cheeks. Good gracious, she was five and twenty, far too old to allow a blush to betray her. Yet the memory of her behavior that night and the incident that had followed did not allow her any relief from the shame of her actions. She only hoped the blush would fade by the time Clayton entered the room. If Clayton entered the room. He could very well send her packing, turn her away like a beggar at his door. No doubt his devotion to propriety would not approve of a single female paying a call upon a bachelor.

She stared down at her coach, which stood waiting in front of the house behind a team of matched greys. Perhaps she should have followed her Aunt Cecilia's advice. She might very well be making far too much out of nothing. It was far safer to keep her distance from Clayton Trevelyan. Her decision to come here put both her dignity and her heart at risk. Again. She moistened her lips and forced starch into her backbone. She was no longer that foolish young girl, she assured herself. She would not make the same mistakes she had made with Clayton Trevelyan. The man would never get close to her again. She had good cause to come here today. Once she relayed her message, her business with him was done.

"I was not expecting visitors this afternoon."

Marisa flinched at the sound of that deep voice. Clayton had entered the room without a sound, taking her by surprise. She hesitated a moment before turning to face him, drawing her defenses around her like a cloak. He stood near the threshold of the room, looking at her as he might a wild animal he had come across in the woods, a creature he suspected might bite. Excitement flared through her, like flame through dried kindling. It had been a lifetime

since she had been this close to him. She had hoped the attraction he held for her might only linger in her memory. Yet one look killed that hope.

“I am sorry to descend upon you unexpectedly.” Her voice did not betray her turmoil, she assured herself. It was only a bit breathless, nothing truly to catch his attention.

“I am sorry to keep you waiting.” He moved toward her in long strides filled with the easy grace born of power. “It was unavoidable, I am afraid.”

“Greensley said you were being fitted for a new coat.”

“It took a few minutes to change.”

Marisa offered him her hand, as he drew near, the gesture nothing more than polite. Even though she wore gloves, she felt it just the same, a spark of contact, as sharp and shimmering as a flash from flint. A part of her—that wounded girl who had never recovered from the disaster known as Clayton Trevelyan—had hoped the years would alter him, rob him of the devastating male beauty that could add a beat to her heart with nothing more than a glance from his stunning eyes. Yet he was even more handsome than her memories of him.

He held her with gentle strength, long elegantly tapered fingers embracing her hand with polite pressure. A clean scent of citrus and herbs warmed by his skin drifted across the distance, tempting her to draw closer to him. She resisted that temptation this time. She was grateful for the glove. It disguised the dampness of her palm.

Although she could conjure his face in her mind at will, she realized looking up at him the differences in the man he was now and the boy who had stolen her heart. Gray and green blended in his eyes, the color of spring leaves viewed through a silvery mist. Those beautiful eyes regarded her with a cool detachment that was somehow worse than anything she could have imagined. There was none of their history in that look. None of the secrets they had shared in their youth. It was as if he had wiped her from his past, as though she were nothing more than an acquaintance he had known long ago.

He studied her face a moment, as though he too were comparing his memories to the reality standing before him. “You are looking well.”

“I can say the same of you.” She hadn’t caught more than a few glimpses of him since she had arrived in London for the Season. Being this close to him again, she caught herself looking for the boy she had known in this man. His thick black hair had always fallen in disheveled waves over his brow, tempting her to smooth the wayward tresses. Today they were brushed neatly back from his brow, tamed and disciplined. A master had carved his face, wielding a chisel with bold strokes, molding sharply defined cheekbones, a fine straight nose, and a strong jaw that hinted at a stubborn streak. He had always seemed a little distracted, shy, unsure of himself. Now he looked as though he could command a legion with the snap of his fingers. “You are completely recovered from your wounds?”

“Yes.” He released her hand. “I am completely recovered. Thank you.”

“I read about you in the *Times* after the battle. They called you one of the heroes of Waterloo.”

“I did no more than many others.”

Marisa knew better. Since he had purchased his commission seven years ago, she had gleaned every detail about him from every source she could safely employ—papers, his grandmother Sophia, the Dowager Duchess of Marlow, his friends, including the husband of one of her closest friends. Simon St. James, Marquess Blackthorne, had served with Clayton in the Army. They had shared missions in Paris as agents in their service for the Crown. They had fought beside each other on the battlefield. Countless tales of Clayton’s reckless bravery had reached her through the years and with each one she had felt a chill. Every day she had expected to hear of his death. Every year since he had left, she had suffered in silence, her life suspended until the day he had marched home, safe from war. Still, even though the distance of miles had faded, the distance between them could never be breached.

She looked up at him, her smile faltering as polite conversation dwindled. Silence stretched between them, in a space where only memories

dared tread. "I suppose you are wondering why I have come here this afternoon."

"I will admit, I am curious." Clayton glanced around the room and frowned as he looked back at her. "You did not actually come here unattended?"

"Of course not. I came with my Aunt Cecilia."

"Apparently your aunt has added invisibility to her list of accomplishments." Clayton glanced up at the brass balustrade encircling the second-floor gallery. "Or perhaps she is hiding in the gallery."

His sarcasm plucked at nerves already stretched taut. It took all of her control to keep her voice composed. "She is waiting in the carriage. I am afraid Aunt Cecilia did not approve of my visit. But I felt it important to speak with you."

"A chaperon who refuses to accompany you. Yet you still pay the call, on a bachelor. Alone. Quite an interesting choice you have made." Although his voice remained light, his eyes betrayed his disapproval. "Most ladies tend to be very protective of their reputations."

"I am well aware of the danger of coming here. My parents are spending a few weeks with my sister in the country. My brother and his wife are also spending time with Eleanor. I had no one else to accompany me this afternoon, aside from my niece. Propriety is quite ridiculous when a lady cannot pay a call to an acquaintance without peril for her reputation. Particularly when the lady is all of five and twenty."

"You are hardly on the shelf, Marisa."

She tilted her chin. "I apologize if I have offended your sense of propriety. As I recall it is an ancient flaw, one of many I believe you observed long ago."

"I am not a self-righteous prig, as you seem to imply. But we do not live in an ideal world. And a lady's reputation can be ruined quite easily." He

drew in his breath, as though needing to calm the anger she sensed simmering beneath his calm surface. He gestured toward a nearby sofa. "I do not mean to keep you standing."

She remained standing by the desk. "I shall not be here long. I assure you, I would not have come here if it were not urgent."

He frowned. "What has happened?"

She studied him a moment, wondering how best to approach the subject. "Can you think of anyone who might want to murder you?"

He lifted his brows, the only indication of his surprise. "Murder me?"

"Yes. Can you think of anyone?"

"Not offhand."

"No one at all?"

"You sound disappointed?"

Marisa released her breath in a long sigh. "I am."

"You are disappointed that I know of no one who would like to murder me?"

"Yes. I was hoping you might be able to identify someone, a man who would like to eliminate you. It would make things easier."

"I fail to see how that knowledge could make anything easier. I suppose you have a reason for hoping I might know someone who would like to murder me."

"I suppose you did not notice, but I was at the Blackthorne ball last night. It was a bit of a crush. Emily is sponsoring her sisters this year and everyone on her list attended. I suspect more than the guest list came." She pressed her hand to the base of her neck, hoping he might say something to assure her he had indeed noticed her in the crowded ballroom. "So I

understand if you did not even know I was there.”

Clayton refrained from addressing her finely veiled inquiry. “What happened to make you think someone wanted to murder me?”

She crushed her irritation with the man. She had not come here to address their past or the infuriating fact she had never recovered from their connection. “I overheard two men talking. One of them said you were a threat and must be eliminated.”

Clayton held her gaze. “Who were these men?”

“I did not see them.”

“You overheard two men discussing my murder in a crowded ballroom?”

“No. I noticed Hanley leading my niece into the gardens, so I followed. You know Hanley. He has a tendency to be a bit forward.”

“You followed? Where was her chaperon?”

“Actually, I am helping to chaperon Beatrice this Season. My sister Eleanor has recently given birth. My brother Anthony and his wife Lily detest Town life, and they wanted very much to be with Eleanor, but they did not want to prevent Beatrice from enjoying the Season. They asked if I would help Aunt Cecilia chaperon her this Season.”

He stared at her, as though she had just stated her belief that fairies were indeed real. “You are acting as chaperon?”

“You need not sound so astonished. I am five and twenty. I should not think it so extraordinary for me to act as chaperon.”

He shook his head slightly. “Since you were acting as chaperon, you took it upon yourself to follow your niece and Hanley.”

“As I said, Hanley is on the prowl for a wife this Season, and he has always had the propensity for becoming a bit too warm, a bit too quickly.”

He smiled, his eyes remaining cool and appraising. “I suppose you learned this from experience.”

“I once kicked him quite briskly in the shin. We were near the fountain in the Summerfield’s garden, just off the terrace in full view of everyone on the terrace, so you need not get that disapproving look in your eyes. He lost his balance and ended up falling back into the arms of Poseidon. I believe the shower he received from the mouth of the statue cooled his interest.”

“He is quite fortunate you did not have a poker at the time.”

She smiled thinking of the first time they had met. “Pokers are quite inconvenient to carry in one’s reticule. I prefer to carry a pistol instead.”

“An old habit, as is your habit of finding yourself in difficult situations.”

“I only did what was reasonable. I am her chaperon after all.”

“One might argue how reasonable it is to put a child in charge of the nursery.”

“I am not a child.” She clutched the silk cords of her reticule, bristling at the sardonic lift of his left eyebrow. The quicker she got this over with, the better it would be for her composure. “I entered the maze looking for Beatrice and Hanley. At the time I did not realize Beatrice had stepped onto the terrace and given Hanley a proper set-down. She returned to the party by another door. I should have realized she would not tolerate Hanley’s nonsense. Beatrice is a most practical young woman.”

“It is refreshing to hear your niece does not share your propensity for wandering about unattended. I suppose it never occurred to you the danger you might encounter if any of your legion of admirers decided to follow you into the gardens? The Blackthorn maze is very private. There are more than a few fortune hunters in London who would not hesitate to compromise you against your will.”

She fought to keep her composure under the glare of his disapproval. “I

am not a green girl. I have managed to survive seven Seasons without being compromised.”

Clayton studied her a moment and she wondered if he was thinking of the many times she had tried to tempt him into compromising her. Fortunately he refrained from reciting ancient history. “You entered the maze looking for your niece and you encountered two men planning to murder me?”

“I reached the center of the maze when I heard a man mention your name. Something in his tone caught my attention. He and another man were just on the other side of the shrubbery, so I had no trouble at all hearing them. One of the men said, ‘We shall have to get rid of Huntingdon, he could spoil it all.’ The other man hesitated. He sounded nervous. He didn’t want to go along with his friend, but finally he agreed. The first man said they would have to be careful, that one wrong move could expose them. But he would arrange to have the threat eliminated. I heard them moving away, so I hurried through the maze, hoping to get a look at them.”

“You followed two men you thought might be plotting a murder? And you did not stop to think it might be dangerous?”

“I wanted to see who they were. Unfortunately, by the time I found my way out of the maze, they were gone. But I am certain I would recognize the one man if I ever heard him again, the one who seemed intent on eliminating you. His voice was very distinctive.”

“Why the devil did your chaperon allow you to roam all over the gardens last night? No wait, let me guess. Your Aunt Cecilia was *your* chaperon last night.”

Marisa did not need a lecture from this man of all men. “I did not come here to discuss my need for a chaperon. I came here to warn you about a threat to your life.”

He inclined his head in a slight bow. “I appreciate your concern.”

She kept her voice low when she dearly wanted to shout at the man.

“You are not taking this seriously, are you?”

“I see little reason to take it seriously.”

“I know what I heard.” She gestured with her hand as she spoke. Her reticule bumped a brass figure of a unicorn on the desk, toppling it over the edge. She snatched for the figure. It slipped past her fingers.

Brass glinted in the sunlight slanting through the windows as the unicorn tumbled. It landed with a thud—on the tip of Clayton’s black boot. Marisa cringed at the sound of his soft gasp. She glanced from the scuff mark on the finely-buffed black leather to his face. His eyes were closed, his lips pursed, as though he had just had a tooth extracted against his will.

“I am very sorry.”

He drew in his breath before he opened his eyes. “It is all right. I think only one toe is broken.”

In spite of her embarrassment, his light tone made her smile. “I suppose we should be glad for small miracles.”

He smiled. “I suppose.”

She bent to retrieve the unicorn as he did the same. They collided, her brow whacking his jaw. The impact tossed her backward. She hit the floor, her bottom thumping hard against the carpet. Her head snapped back and slammed into the mahogany desk. A sharp stab of pain ripped through her skull followed by a slow flow of darkness at the edges of her vision.

“Marisa.” Clayton’s voice drifted to her, as though he stood on the other side of a thick velvet curtain. He knelt beside her and gripped her arm. “Are you all right?”

She tried to respond, to assure him she was fine. Yet the words she intended to speak escaped in nothing more than a low moan.

“Good God, Marisa. Have you cracked open your head?” He brushed his fingers over her cheek and then slid his fingers over the back of her head.

She groaned when his questing fingers found a tender spot. “Thank heaven, there is no blood.”

“I’m fine,” she murmured, pushing her hat back from where it had slid over her brow. “Perfectly fine.”

He slipped one arm around her back, the other under her knees and lifted her. She rested her head on his shoulder and surrendered to his powerful embrace. It had been such a long time since she had felt his arms around her. Although she would not admit it to anyone, it was worth a solid rap to the head to feel his arms around her again.

Powerful muscles shifted against her as he carried her. The crisp clean scent of his skin teased her senses. The warmth of him surrounded her. She blinked trying to focus her eyes—the curve of his jaw, the slant of his sideburn, a thick black wave just above his ear. A horrible ache thrummed deep in her chest, a longing so deep and wide it filled her. Lord how she had missed him—his shy smile, his soft voice, the touch of his hand, the taste of his lips. She missed discussing novels with him, playing chess with him, racing horses with him, simply sitting in his company. She missed him, everything about him. No matter how hard she had tried, she had never pried him from her heart. She had a horrible feeling she never would.

Clayton laid her upon the sofa, soft cinnamon colored velvet cushioning her. He placed a pillow behind her head and touched her cheek. “Marisa, are you all right?”