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The Demon Trappers: Foretold

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Jana Oliver

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JANA OLIVER

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Chapter One



2018
Atlanta, Georgia

'What could go wrong?' Riley Blackthorne muttered under her breath. That wasn't the kind of question she should ask while on a demon trapping run in one of Atlanta's train stations.

What could go wrong? Everything.

She and two other trappers were stalking a Pyro-Fiend, a Grade Two demon whose Hellish job was to set fires. So far, it'd been having a grand time dropping fireballs in front of the MARTA trains, setting alight trash containers and, in one case, firing up a train car.

Usually Riley was all about capturing demons. Her late father, Paul Blackthorne, had been a legendary master trapper so it was in her blood. She should have been jazzed about this trapping run.

Not so much. Not when she was working with two guys who didn't want to be anywhere near her.

They were both in their early twenties, blond and handsome, but there the similarities ended. The one to her

right, her blue-eyed ex-boyfriend, wasn't quite as hostile as he'd once been. In fact, Simon Adler hadn't tried to splash her with Holy Water or accuse her of working for Hell during the twenty minutes they'd been on site.

Simon's battle with a ravenous demon had left him mortally wounded, and if it hadn't been for the deal Riley had cut with Heaven he'd be in his grave. Then one of Hell's most deceptive archangels had played hockey with his mind and his deep Catholic faith. When he'd finally found out who'd been pulling his strings and about her deal with Heaven, Riley's ex had gone into free fall. The result was one confused guy who didn't know what to believe or who to trust.

At least you're not yelling at me anymore.

That privilege belonged to the guy on her left: Denver Beck, the muscled ex-military South Georgia dude who had served as trapping partner to Riley's father until her dad's death. Beck was usually a cool guy to work with. Today he was opting for total butthead.

He glowered over at them. 'So what are we waitin' for?' he snarled. 'Think the demon's just gonna come up and introduce itself to y'all?'

'It'll show up soon enough. They always do,' Riley replied, trying not to lose her temper. Then Beck would win.

'Why would you think that?'

'Because I'm here,' she said. 'Demons can't resist trying to kill me.'

That earned her a sidelong glance from Simon.

'Hey, it's true. It's not because I work for Hell, OK?' *Well, not entirely.*

'I didn't say a word,' he murmured.

'You were thinking it.'

'You two done?' Beck demanded.

Riley shot the senior trapper a scathing glare and it came right back at her. Beck had been this way ever since he'd tossed her out of his house in a fit of self-martyrdom. Just when they'd grown so close, something in his past had caused him to push her away. This time Riley wasn't going quietly, not when she knew she loved the guy.

Pushing ahead of the others, she worked her way through the crowd. It was a good time to be down here – in a few days the trains would be packed with people headed to or from the basketball games, all dressed in their favourite team's colours. Or in the case of Clemson University, orange and black tiger tails.

Folks waiting for the next train gave her a concerned look. That wasn't surprising since her face had been all over CNN and the newspapers in the last few weeks. It also might have had something to do with the small white sphere she was carrying.

'You guys trappers?' someone called out.

'Sure are,' Beck replied.

'Time for me to take the bus,' the guy said, turning on his heel and heading for an exit.

Riley sighed. Maybe it would have been better to evacuate the train station, but if this turned out to be a false

alarm there'd be hell to pay at City Hall. As she continued down the platform, a train pulled in and passengers exited, including one man carrying a giant stuffed panda wearing a football helmet.

Sometimes it was best not to know the real story.

A thin plume of white smoke curled out of a nearby trash container, catching Riley's notice. Could it be the Pyro-Fiend? She shot a glance towards Beck and he shrugged in response.

The trappers positioned themselves on either side of the container.

'Ready?' Beck asked. When they nodded, he kicked the can over and trash tumbled out, along with a pile of burning napkins. Apparently someone had tossed a lit cigarette inside and now they had a mess to clean up. Plus MARTA passengers laughing at them.

Riley stomped out the fire, then kicked the junk back into the can. As she worked, Beck bitched under his breath about how this whole run had been a screw-up. As she bent over to nudge an empty doughnut box into the container, she felt the prickle of something touching her mind. Something demonic.

Blackthorne's daughter, the voice called.

She shot up into a standing position. 'It's close. It name-checked me.' There was the crackle of paper at her feet and a red demon crawled out of the trash. It was about eight or so inches tall, with forked tail and sharp teeth. A flame flickered on its right palm.

'Trapper!' it cried, and lobbed a fireball directly at Simon. He dropped and kissed the dirty concrete as the roaring flames shot over the top of his head.

'Hey, dumbass!' Beck shouted, but the demon ignored him. It generated another flame to toss at Simon.

Riley stepped in its way, heaved a white sphere heavenward and waited for the snow to fall. Instead there was a cracking sound and then a shower of sleet: the magic inside the sphere had misfired. Cold rain pelted down on them and it set the demon to howling. Distracted, the fiend dropped its ball of flame and it rolled across the platform like a fiery tennis ball, past a wooden bench and two startled onlookers.

Demon or flame? Riley ran after the fire, fearing it would spread throughout the station if she didn't contain it. Above her another snow globe cracked open and its contents swirled down like a North Dakota blizzard. The falling snow made the concrete slippery and she slid, cracking her knee. The flame ball kept rolling towards a train car and its open door.

Oh crap.

Panicking, she stripped off her jacket and threw herself on the ball of flames. Riley pounded at it with her hands as the fabric began to smoulder from the intense heat. The flames faltered and finally died.

Despite all the drama, people walked around her, one clipping her elbow as they hurried past to wherever they were headed. One couple laughed as she knelt there in the

snow, her hair a mess and her jacket smoking. Someone began lobbing snowballs. After the train doors had closed, a small kid pressed his nose up against the window, eyes wide, watching her intently. She winked at him and to her surprise he shyly waved back as the train departed.

Maybe life doesn't suck after all.

When she regained her feet, she found Simon holding a bait box containing the Pyro-Fiend and enough dry ice to keep it from playing firebug until they sold it to a demon trafficker. True to form, the thing was painting the station blue with its curse words.

A quick check around proved the train platform was devoid of gawkers except for a lone fellow with a cellphone busily recording their run. He'd probably have uploaded the video to the Internet before they left the station.

'That was sloppy,' Beck complained, hands on his hips. It was his 'I'm gettin' in yer face and you'd best listen' pose. 'What's up with y'all?'

Riley would love to tell him exactly what was wrong if the guy with the cellphone hadn't been nearby.

Simon managed a weak 'Sorry.'

When Beck glared over at her, expecting her to apologize, Riley shook her head. She jammed her roasted jacket into his hands and whispered, 'Bite me.'

Once they were on street level and away from the phone dude, Riley flipped over her hands to check for burns.

Next to her, Simon took a sharp intake of breath. 'Where

did those come from?' he asked, eyes wide.

Oops. She'd forgot about the dark inscriptions on both her palms. At this point she didn't care if the other trappers knew what they meant. Riley raised her left palm and pointed to the black crown. 'This one's from Heaven.' She switched hands. 'And the flaming sword is from Hell,' she explained. 'Yeah, I know, it's wacked to have both.'

When Simon frowned, she braced herself for another torrent of accusations about her being Lucifer's Minion of the Month.

Instead, his frown deepened. 'Won't they ever leave us alone?' he asked, his voice trembling.

'Maybe someday,' she lied.

Riley really wasn't paying attention as she walked to her car, eager to get away from Beck and his attitude before they got into a shouting match in front of her ex-boyfriend. That would be the ultimate humiliation.

She'd just reached her car when someone called out to her. When Riley turned, two girls approached her. They were about her age, wearing modest dresses and coats in deference to the February chill. Their hair was primly tucked into tight buns. Even more telling, they were loaded down with a Bible, a big bottle of Holy Water and a cross.

This wasn't the first time she'd been confronted by someone keen to save her soul.

Though the Vatican and their Demon Hunters had tried to keep the cemetery battle off everyone's radar, in particular

the whole Hell vs. Heaven part, Atlanta's citizens knew something major had happened. Some citizens claimed to have seen angels, which was probably the case. You couldn't have a near miss with Armageddon without a few well-armed Divines flying around. Coupled with the recent demon attacks at the Tabernacle and the Terminus Market, all the blame seemed to stick to the trappers for some reason. Since Riley was always in the news for something or other, she'd become the focus of that wrath.

This duo was probably part of the team of girl exorcists who had arrived in Atlanta a couple days earlier. From what Riley had heard, they'd been trying to cast out demons 24/7, including one supposed exorcism in the middle of a bowling alley.

'You are consorting with Hell and your soul is peril,' one of the girls said solemnly, a petite brunette.

Riley's soul was already the property of a certain Fallen angel, at least if Ori was still alive. She decided it was best not to mention that.

When she didn't reply, the girl tried again. 'We have come to save you. We will exorcise your devil and free you this very night.'

'Look,' Riley began, 'I appreciate what you're doing, but I trapped four demons today. People who work for Hell don't do that, OK?' *Well, actually they can but . . .*

'The Enemy is keeping you from God's grace,' the girl replied, raising her cross.

Riley's enemy was currently in Hell, Lucifer's prisoner,

but these girls weren't going to buy that. She didn't begrudge them their job, but she didn't want to get caught up in it.

'Sorry, gotta go,' she said.

The chilly Holy Water hit her a moment later, drenching her. The cross was in her face next, along with some words that made little sense. It certain wasn't Latin.

These aren't real exorcists.

When Riley wiped the water out of her eyes, someone grabbed her left hand, the one with Heaven's mark and the cross was pressed against it. There was no reaction. She didn't want to find out what would have happen if they tried it on Hell's brand.

Riley wrenched herself free and backed away. 'Will you stop that!'

The girls seemed bewildered. Apparently they'd figured the combo of Holy Water and cross application would have caused her to cast out her devil like in some late-night horror movie.

Definitely wannabes.

'Riley?' Beck called out as he and Simon hustled up to the scene. 'What's goin' on?'

When one of the girls tried to explain, Simon cut her off. 'Just leave her alone. You worry about your own souls.'

'You're working for the devil. Don't you know that?' one of the girls called out.

'No more than you are,' Beck replied. 'Now get out of here.'

Her tormentors retreated, noticeably disappointed that they'd failed in their mission.

Riley slumped against her car, wiping her face free of mascara. If this kept happening, she'd have to buy the waterproof kind.

'Thanks, guys.'

'Sorry,' Simon replied, as if he'd been responsible for the fray.

'Part of the job, I guess,' she replied.

Beck's cellphone rang and he stepped away to take the call. As he listened, his expression darkened. 'Understood. I'll see she gets home safe.'

Before Riley could ask what that was all about, he offered Simon his keys. 'Follow us to Stewart's house, will you?'

'Wait, you don't have to—' Riley began.

'Yeah, I do,' Beck retorted. 'Just get in yer car and don't bother to argue.'

Simon took the keys and retreated.

Wish I could.

Beck drove, mostly because her eyes were still stinging and watering.

'Ya gonna be OK?' he asked.

'Yeah. I'm getting really tired of this crap.'

'Ya were the one who put herself in the middle of it.'

When his 'you's' became 'ya's' he was upset. But then so was she.

Riley glowered at him. 'Why are you being a jerk?'

'I'm drivin' you to Stewart's, aren't I?' Then he fell silent and glowered at the traffic.

Here we go again. Riley knew exactly where their problem lay and it wasn't her: it was his ex-girlfriend, the reporter chick, and whatever dirt she'd uncovered about his past.

'I don't see Justine backing off,' she retorted. 'You know, if you hadn't slept with her, you wouldn't be in this situation.'

She knew it was a mistake the second after she let her jealousy off its leash. Beck reacted instantly, his foot jamming hard on the brakes as they reached a stop sign. Only the seatbelt kept her from launching into the dash.

'Yer just like her, always tryin' to screw with my head,' he said, the veins sticking out on his neck. 'I'm startin' to regret the day I met ya.'

That stung after all they'd been through. 'You. Are. Lying. Tell me what Justine knows that has you so scared. Come on, spill it.'

'It's none of yer damned business,' he said, surging through the intersection, narrowly missing a slow-moving station wagon. 'Give it a rest, will ya?'

Riley stared out of the side window, surprised the glass didn't melt from her fury.

One of these days I'll know the truth.