

HOT AS HELL TO PAY



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Hot as Hell to Pay

The Hell Fire Series, Prequel

By Lydia Anne Stevens

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to you Mimi. Your bandana and sunglasses pic looking like a total badass reminds me of how badass you were in life. I look to you when I need a good swift kick in the rear to keep my motivation on track. I love you and I miss you

Lydia Anne Stevens

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Lydia Anne Stevens

Additional Works

The Hell Fire Series

Highway to Hell: The Hell Fire Series, Book 1

South of Heaven, West of Hell's Bells: The Hell Fire Series, Book 2

Hell Hath no Fury Like A Mercenary Scorned: The Hell Fire Series, Book 3

The Ginger Davenport Escapades

Why Me? The Ginger Davenport Escapades, Book 1

Why Should I? The Ginger Davenport Escapades, Book 2

Why Not? The Ginger Davenport Escapades, Book 3

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Chapter 1

“Dear Ms. Clark, we are sorry to inform you that your appeal to be reinstated as a student with our university, has been denied. Due to the inactivity and incompleteness of your required courses, after a period of 90-days, it is the obligation of the school to assume that you have knowingly and willingly withdrawn from our institution.”

Blah, blah, blah. This is the most formal way anyone has ever called a person a screw-up and a failure; a college dropout, while still kicking me out on my ass and not holding themselves accountable for the fact they are kicking me out. Then again, I am the one who bailed on classes for the last three months and didn't provide an adequate excuse apart from, life-altering events. This translates to, I effed off and found out for three months.

“Zeke!” I holler through the garage door at my boyfriend. “They've kicked me out!” I bite back the tears. As much as I want to scream and shout that it's not my fault, deep down, I know I've been spiraling out of control for a while now.

“Not now, Babe! I'm in the middle of onboarding a new client.” Zeke hollers back.

That can mean anything. He's either taking a new client into the mechanic's autobody detailing shop, or he's taking on one of his, a blow-some-crap-up-their-nose-clients.

I get up from the office chair to go find out if it's the former or the latter. The former means I might have to order some supplies, find the right car part or paint color. The latter means it's none of my damn business and I should turn around, return to the bare office save for a desk, some filing cabinets, and a few dried up, half-dead plants.

One look at the man in the fine, Italian suit with gleaming shoes and the McClaren P1 sitting idling behind him suggests...well, it suggests both types of clients. Only when the customers coming in for the drugs show up, they usually try to dress more conspicuously. There are telltale signs. This guy missed the mark on subtlety about as much as the Kool-Aid Man busting through a brick wall.

The other not-so-subtle thing about this guy is his looks. Navy-blue eyes shadowed by dark lashes set in a tan face meet mine like a tidal wave hitting the beach at the ocean. I stop in my tracks, unable to move forward, and unable to tuck-tail and turn to run for the office.

This guy either has no fucks to give or he's got balls. Maybe both. Which makes him intriguing. I begin walking toward him when Zeke's voice registers from off to the side. “Babe, I told you I'm in the middle of a meeting. Why don't you take this and go grab a 5th.” Zeke comes up to me, slapping me on the ass and shoving a Benji in my back pocket. His hand squeezes my ass possessively, and I smile at him while shooting daggers into his eyes.

“She's not intruding. If I'm not mistaken, our business was concluded for now anyway.” The stranger holds out his hand. I hesitate, feeling the weight of Zeke's palm on my ass, then grin back at the customer and shake his hand. The shock and warmth of his palm licks up through my fingers and into my arm. Who is this guy? His accent is

one I can't place. Years of binge-watching bad movies with foreign titles being some of my favorites means I have about as much capacity to place an accent as a two-year-old attempting to properly stack those plastic toy rings. But my desire to travel the world aside, I like to think I have the potential to be worldly. Zeke keeps promising to take me on a vacation of my choosing, maybe to Ireland where my ancestors are from. Zeke makes a lot of promises he doesn't always keep.

I shrug him off and step towards the hot as Hell stranger, knowing there will be Hell to pay for the slight to Zeke later. "Catriona." I introduce myself.

The man brushes his lips against the back of my hand, ignoring Zeke as he clears his throat. "Damien."

Neither one of us bothers to ask for last names. In this business, it's best not to for anonymity's sake.

"Nice to meet you and nice car. It doesn't appear to be anything wrong with it though. Are we ordering custom parts?" I've never interfered in Zeke's business. But my mouth can't seem to stop running right now. Something flickers in the stranger's eyes. Something, wild and chaotic.

"I do enjoy custom work," Damien responds. His eyes give me the once over, making me feel like the most spectacular woman on the planet. Like I'm one of a kind, and no other woman has ever been their boyfriend's errand bitch, or college drop-out bordering on town drunk. In the grand scheme of my crappy life, this moment right here can be considered one of my top ten.

"She is special, my Catriona, isn't she?" Zeke muscles his way into the conversation and slips an arm around my waist. It pisses me off. He was saying yesterday when I forgot to order a carburetor on time for one of the shop's clients that I'm a nobody. I'm worthless and no one, not my dead, drunk Mum, absent father, or estranged sister Fiona, gives a damn about my life, and I should be grateful that he tolerates my laziness. He says stuff like that a lot. Then I go down to his brother Lowell's pub, The Sloshed Sloth Bar and Grill, and feel bad about myself until kindness or exasperation has Lowell packing me into a cab and sending me back to Zeke.

Zeke's dark eyes flash with anger when I glance at him. Clearly unimpressed with my peacocking in front of a stranger, the vice-like grip of his arm is as cruel as his gaze.

"Indeed. She should be treated as such." The stranger's tone is a warning, aimed at Zeke who plasters a smile on his face. It doesn't reach his eyes under the mop of shaggy brown hair.

"She's my princess, for sure."

I snort. I've never been a princess to anyone, and he knows it. I shrug out of his grasp once more and grab my beat-up leather jacket from the peg on the office door. Striding over to my cobbled together, Suzuki gz250, I turn it over and rev the engine to annoy Zeke. He shouts something, probably a demand to be back at a certain time to scan for deliveries, but I rev the engine louder grinning at him. I've always wanted a Harley, not that I'll ever be able to afford one in this lifetime. Now, with the sting of student loans to pay off, and no degree to get a better job to pay for them, the dream of

Harley madness will always remain exactly that, just a dream. Zeke pays me minimum wage, enough to get by on a week-to-week basis, and not enough that it ensures I have no other options, no other place to go.

I peel the tires out of the garage, causing smoke to rise into Zeke and Damien's faces. Kicking the Suzuki into a higher gear, I whip out onto the open road, The Devil's Highway, and make for the watering hole, the place I can drown my sorrows like my Mum did before she died of liver failure, The Sloshed Sloth Bar & Grill.

The feel of the wind whipping my face and hair, is a slap like no other, one to remind me that despite my trapped state at the moment, I'm still very much alive. The feeling of numbness at the dawn of each new day isn't as a result of my death. That counts for something, right? In theory, it should count for something. Currently, all the sting of the wind is doing is masking the streak of tears that I'd been saving since opening the college letter. The wind is a good enough excuse should anyone see me crying.

It was windy out today on the bike. I forgot my shades.

It's a likely excuse as any other for the well of frustration teeming over inside. So, I've made some mistakes. Skipped some classes. Been a bit too tipsy when I should have been studying. Everyone goes through a bad spell sometimes. But to can it all because of a couple of classes? How can they do this to me?

I consider with the five dollars and forty-three cents leftover from the twenty Zeke had given me last night to buy my daily bottle, how far that, combined with the Benji he dropped into my back pocket, would get me in gas. Across the state line maybe? Maybe to the east coast? I hear New England is nice in autumn. Having grown up in New Orleans, given over to the Anderson's when I was eleven because Mum couldn't cope with Fiona and I anymore, I've never been to the Atlantic Ocean. I bet the Suzuki could make the two-day trip. But could I ride the highway without the temptation of forgetting all of my problems at the bottom of a vodka bottle? Gas or booze? Sometimes the choices in life are a bitch when all that's left to lose is the power of one's will left to live.

The Sloshed Sloth comes into view over the haze of the horizon. Even in the Midwest, it's still hot out here for mid-October. I zip past it, the weathered wooden sign sways slightly in the wake of my tail breeze.

A mile and a half down the highway, I downshift pulling off to the side of the road and letting the bike rest between my thighs, holding it upright as I war internally with the struggle to decide to turn around or keep going.

Not everyone can be the hero of their own story. Sometimes the moral of the story is what comes after the lesson is learned the hard way. After another moment, I turn the handles of the bike, back walking along the dusty highway to get enough of an angle to jet the bike in short bursts to turn in an arc and drive back down the Highway to Hell.

Chapter 2

Pulling into the Sloshed Sloth Bar and Grill is like riding into a postcard with Route 666 leaning haphazardly in the background, and a shabby wooden building slumped in the middle of a dusty lot. The sign hanging between two posts with a sloth clinging desperately to a branch, sways again as I pass it by. Otherwise, it hangs limply in between the two posts, as lazy as the animal it depicts.

About half an hour from the city, the Sloshed Sloth sees a lot of traffic coming and going. It's a proper western watering hole with truckers, bikers, an occasional hooker, wayward tourist, and of course, yours truly, the town drunk.

I park the Suzuki and shut it down, shaking out my hair and climbing off the bike. My breath catches as Lowell, Zeke's twin brother slaps his way through the swinging doors and stands at the top of the steps, gazing down at me. The true counterpart to Zeke, his sandy hair and honey eyes are kind but concerned, the emotion I hate seeing the most.

"Catriona." His greeting stings, as the volumes behind it, scream at me that he knows something has driven me here.

"Lowell. What's on tap today?" I ask as I start to climb the steps.

"The well has run dry, Trina." He holds out his hand, touching my arm.

"Professor Dudard, my friend called and told me what happened."

Ah, so there's the other shoe. Lowell is ready for my despair today. Ready to save me from myself.

"Yeah well, boo on him for blabbing. That shouldn't mean you deprive your best customer of her misery, right?" I grin at him and pull my arm away. At another time, in another place, I might have been good enough for him. But here and now, I shudder, considering the flutter in my stomach I get around Lowell, unlike his brother.

"Trina, this won't help." Lowell persists.

"There's the pot calling the kettle. You own the place." I clap back. How hypocritical for him to say, I've got my life and my shit together selling the very stuff I don't think you should have? Dick move in my book.

If only I knew it's not just my book I'm messing around and finding out with.

A car, a nice one but not as nice as the McClaren pulls in behind me. Lowell's face darkens. I glance back at it and then at him. "Besides, looks like you have company you weren't expecting."

I push through the swinging doors, leaving him to greet whoever Zeke owes money to now. Because that's the only way Lowell's face would go a full shade of midnight. Zeke's side business is one of give and take, rob Peter to pay Paul, checks, and balances. Zeke isn't great at making the checks always balance. Then we get company.

Pushing the door to the bar open, I saunter inside and make my way to the bar where the grizzled old man I've come to know and love like a crazed uncle is waiting for me.

"Boss says your cut off." He grunts at me, getting a glass anyway.

"Boss is an ass. Hit me with a belt." I hold out my hand at the sound of the car doors slamming outside.

"Could lose my job." He slides the glass over to my waiting palm.

"Nah. Lowell is too much of a softy for you, Marty. You've been like a father figure to him and Zeke."

"Hmm. Don't know about that. Those boys do what..." His voice trails off at the sound of Lowell's harsh tone outside. "Maybe I should step in." He rubs his calloused hand across his beard which would make Santa Clause envious.

"In my opinion, it's best to keep your nose out of it. It's probably one of Zeke's screw-ups anyway." I mutter into the dark liquid in my glass before letting it scorch a path down my throat.

"That's your problem, Catriona. You always stand by and do nothing when Zeke has one of his messes to clean up." Marty retorts.

"Oh, so now it's my problem when he gets into trouble? How is that fair? I have my own problems." My whining grates on even my nerves, but Marty is preoccupied keeping half his attention on the situation outside.

"It isn't. But that's not the point. Now drink up and be on your way. I think I've got heads to bust today."

So much for the sympathetic bartender with the willing ear. I finish my drink, lamenting the fact everyone is always so concerned with whatever bind Zeke gets himself into.

It's like screaming into a void and asking people to notice me, and the void giving me the middle finger back. Everyone has pain. Everyone is suffering. We're all so busy dealing with our own, sometimes we forget to take notice of others around us. I flip off the bottle of booze Marty leaves on the counter. The proverbial void staring me back with the smirk from that damn turkey on the label pisses me off even more.

"Always a pleasure talking to you," I grunt and turn to leave. As I'm leaving, Lowell and company push through the door. Judging by Mr. Armani from head to toe, whatever problem Zeke has caused this time is one on an epic, Cosmic, lives are gonna get fucked-up scale.

"Ah, good. She's here too. Then I won't have to repeat myself."

"Hey, Marty can you put on some ominous music? I know if you kick the bottom right corner of the jukebox, it will find the perfect vibe for this asshole."

This mouth. Why did the Cosmos gift me with this mouth? It's like attitude meets boredom and booze and then boom, no filters need apply here.

"Charming, Miss Clarke. But if I were you, I'd listen to my proposition before you continue carrying on like this." Mr. Armani is all smooth talk and not heavy on delivering the whiskey I know should accompany a proposal like this. If only he'd front with the top-shelf stuff. I've had enough of Marty's rotgut bottom-shelf brews.

"My dude, if you're going to wine and dine me, at least cop to the wine. What am I here for anyway, another one of Zeke's messes?" There's something to be said for Marty's bottom-shelf brews. Like my tongue, there are apparently no filters applied when dishing up the rough stuff.

“As a matter of fact,” Mr. Armani gestures to the bar, and Lowell begrudgingly makes his way around the oak slab, all the while glaring at me. I give him my best cheeky smile, knowing he wanted to cut me off, and finding himself in a position where can’t now.

Lowell pours Mr. Armani in the white suit, himself, myself, and Marty each a glass, and we all down the shot like a set of shotguns ready to go off at any moment as we look each other in the eyes over the rim of the glasses. Collective sighs issue over the smooth liquid, and my grunt which is as feral and unsophisticated as this dive disturbs the collective peace. I’m not necessarily a whisky gal. I prefer a back-alley brew of beer or ale any day. It’s an acquired taste. One in which I am slowly, and have, as-of-yet to acquire.

Progress is slow but forthcoming, and at least progress isn’t on my dime today.

“Okay. Hit me with it. What’s my BF done now?” I hold out the glass to Lowell, bright-eyed and hopeful in my newfound passion for perfection in a bottle.

Lowell gives me the stink-eye, but I’m a persistent woman when I want to be. I shake the glass at him. Better that than knock it off the counter in annoyance like the stray cat I took in a few weeks ago. I’d named it Captain Asshole since it believes it runs the ship at the shop. We’re in a battle of the wills at the moment. It reminds me of a rabid raccoon if it had a genetic birth defect with two tails protruding from the ass-end. The colors are similar too, if not a bit more in the murky grey department. Captain Asshole and I are getting along splendidly, or so I like to think, much to Zeke’s chagrin.

I take a note from CA’s book and shake the glass at Lowell once more. He obliges, albeit begrudgingly. I love it when I win battles of the will.

“As it so happens,” Mr. Armani observes my interaction with Lowell with as much enthusiasm as a snail shitting on a rock, “Your, BF, as you say, is in a spot of trouble. I believe said BF is also your brother, am I correct?” He holds his glass out to Lowell who fills it on the dime of his take-home pay, and I feel a twinge of guilt for skewing the books for the day.

“What has he done now?” Lowell’s trepidation rings from the tightness in his voice, and Mr. Armani jumps on it like a bear on a donut.

Devouring the vulnerability, he continues, “The specifics of what he has done are irrelevant. It is pertinent for you to be aware, that he owes me a considerable sum of money.”

“Yeah, what else is new?” I mutter into my glass. Zeke and one of his many schemes. Why am I not surprised?

“What’s new, is it involves a particularly nasty inquiry with the IRS, should this money not be repaid in time.” Mr. Armani makes the statement with as much gusto as one would expect a tornado to hit a 100-year-old farmhouse. It flattens the room into stillness and complete silence. We all know what’s coming next, we’ve seen this movie.

“How long does he have to repay it?” Lowell grits out through his teeth. He’s as aware as I am of Zeke’s schemes. The difference between him and me is, he loves his twin brother, Zeke. I don’t.

I've known this for a while. So, one might ask, why stay with him? I ask myself that question every damn day. And the answer is simple. Because he's convenient. It's easy to be quick to judge this fact. Just leave. Get out while the getting's good. What most people who have never been traumatized by a broken family, an abusive relationship, or self-inflicting mental and emotional trauma is, those people, the victims, don't know how to survive anything else.

Simple concept, I know. Yet, people act so surprised to find out something is wrong, and quick to make a snap judgment. Sure, I was surprised the first time a fist came at my face. And I picked myself up and carried on. I was surprised the first time I was told I was worthless, and whether it registered if I took that to heart or not, is not the big picture. The big picture is, for those who have seen some shit, lived through it, they know they can survive it once. So, they can do it again. What's truly horrible, is not knowing what to do when someone hugs them or tells them they are worth a grain of salt. That's sad and a bit pathetic, but unfortunately true. Everyone goes through shit. That's life. Sympathy and empathy for the fact some people's lives aren't rainbow sprinkles on top of the sundae shouldn't be hard to dish up. But sometimes people forget that the master of their universe is themselves, and someone else's master isn't in their control.

I stay with Zeke because he is familiar. He's convenient. I know my rock bottom can't get much rockier, so I've learned how to go spelunking. Long story simplified, don't poke at other people's pain. We've each got our own and wouldn't want anyone to throw rocks at it, so don't do it to other people.

My policy is to keep my head down and my nose out of it. It has worked so far. How I'm going to weasel my way out of this one, who knows. But I always find a way because that's my way.

"He has twenty-four hours to repay me the five-hundred-thousand dollars in cocaine he lost last month."

Chapter 3

"Five-hundred-thousand dollars?" I whisper. The liquid in my gut turns to cement and a wallop of fear starts in my scalp, traces down to my ass and my boots, rooting me to the stool.

"That's correct. I've given Zeke ample opportunity to make good on the supply I fronted him, but his excuse is vague, hardly acceptable. He claims he had to ditch the product when a cop suspected him of dealing, and he didn't want questions being asked at his shop. Now, normally I might afford him more time. However, this was also a test to see if he could handle more product than he usually acquires. He's been late in payment in the past but assured me he would handle this better. He has not. If I can't account for that money in one of my other enterprises, then I will have questions being asked, which I'd prefer don't get asked." Mr. Armani explains this so calmly, rationally, like running a drug business is completely normal. I'd turned the other cheek when Zeke had washed money through the car detailing business. But it was in the sum of like, 10k. Street peddler and back door alley stuff. But five-hundred-thousand?

I set my glass down on the counter and Lowell slides it away. The color in his face is gone, as he too, recognizes the gravity of the situation.

"What will happen if..." He begins.

"Is it necessary for me to spell it out?" It's the first time Mr. Suits because he can afford even better than Armani threads like that exist, doesn't have a smile plastered to his face. His eyes are cold. Gunmetal grey set to go off when one of us says the wrong thing and sets off the firing trigger.

"You know we don't have that kind of money. How are we supposed to come up with that? I don't want anything to happen to my brother but this..." Lowell gazes around the bar, scheming, already trying to bail Zeke out for this epic screw-up. There's no way the Sloshed Sloth is close to being worth 500k, even if he could sell it by tomorrow.

"That's why I am here to tell you, to give you a grace period so to speak. There's a shipment coming in tomorrow, it will be under the custody of a local biker gang I hear resides in the area. If somehow you could get your hands on that shipment, and move it quickly, it would account for my losses." Mr. Suits walks over to the bar and sets his glass on the counter. Lowell makes to refill the glass, buying himself some time to think.

"We've never involved ourselves in Zeke's dealings. We knew he was into, we knew he dabbled in... This is beyond the scope of anything we've dealt with before." Lowell tries to keep his tone from pleading, but I can see it already etched in the lines of his face. If I gave a damn what happened to Zeke, I'd be as upset. My heart is breaking for Lowell though. As the more responsible of the two, he has constantly been the one to clean up after Zeke. Having lost their Gigi, a woman so reminiscent of the plump Grandma from the Little Red Riding Hood, one can't help but adore her, Lowell and Zeke didn't have anyone else growing up. She raised them from the time they were small. Something about their parents and an accident, I never really paid much

attention to what happened. My parents were such colossal screw-ups, we all have parental issues.

I'd met Gigi once. She was everything I wish I'd had growing up in the cold, aloof house of the Anderson's after Child Services took Fiona and me away from Mum. Gigi was warm, loving, the epitome of a hug, and something I never dared to allow myself to wish for until I met her. But Zeke made sure that was a one and only situation. I hadn't seen hide nor hair of Gigi since I met her at her camp in Eden, Utah. It was akin to as close to Heaven as I'll ever get. He didn't even bring me to her funeral when she passed away.

"I don't care how you do it, but as long as that shipment is settled and I obtain the money that is owed me, it's of no concern of mine how you handle the situation." Mr. Suits inclines his head at Lowell. He has yet to address me, but I've got questions. Big ones.

"So what happens if we don't? What if we just stand by, and let Zeke shoot himself in the ass all by himself? At some point he has to own his shit, right?" I mean, every adult has to do the whole adulting thing sometime, am I right?

"Miss Clarke," Well crap, Suits knows my last name. Better run. "The saying it takes a village applies to this situation in its entirety. Your boyfriend Zeke may have orchestrated this situation on his own, but you've reaped the benefits with a quick buck here, a few Benji's there. As long as you didn't have to look too closely at where the money was coming from, you were as content to accept the handouts as he was to give them to you to get you off his back. Am I right?"

Well eff me but he's got a point. Hell, even my tab here at the Sloshed Sloth is settled between Zeke and Lowell, and my liver can take a one, two punch given the chaching dollar amount of what the tab is currently sitting at.

"Fair point." I begrudgingly admit. I still don't know what I'm going to do to make it my problem, but that's a question best answered when he leaves.

"Then it's settled. I will return tomorrow to collect what is owed to me. That will provide me ample time to deposit the funds, and settle up with the IRS." Mr. Armani-Suits smiles pleasantly at us, like the conversation we just had isn't a crap-your-pants type of situation for either party involved.

Without another word, he pushes his way through the swinging doors of the Sloshed Sloth. I always liked them, because they remind me of one of those old Western movies with Clint Eastwood or John Wayne when they'd bust-up in a joint and shoot some shit up and then ride off into the sunset. It doesn't seem as cinematic and poetic as one of the old movies when Suits does it. The creak of the double doors is more a testament to the complaint against my boyfriend deep within the marrow of my bones and my soul. How the Hell did he get us into this mess? More importantly, how the Hell am I going to get us out of it?

As if on cue, before I can even say anything to Lowell and postulate how we might make a run for the Mexican border, the creak of the double doors indicates my Clint Eastwood has just pushed through into the bar. Except, my hero isn't at all who I expect it to be. It isn't the Andersons, or my Mum having dried out and risen from the

grave after liver failure due to alcoholic induced psoriasis, it isn't the college admin board coming to tell me they made a mistake.

It's the alluring, mystifying, too-hot-for-his-own-damn-good, Damien. Zeke's newest acquaintance at the mechanic shop. And probably the very person to screw us all over at first chance. But when he opens his mouth and says, "I know how to get ahold of the shipment you need tomorrow." I can't help but think, the Devil himself may have just walked through the bar's doors, but I am willing to sell my soul to Satan if it means getting out of this mess. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, and if I knew now what I would be keen to know in the future, I'd scream at my drunk ass to fall off the goddamn bar stool, and run as far and as fast as I can from the Devil-may-care grin looking at me right now.

Chapter 4

“What do you mean? How do you know about this?” Lowell’s questions are the voice of reason. Which is good, because I’m caught between a good stare and a good lady-boner at the moment. I shake my head, remembering I am an unhappily-in-a-relationship woman, and there are some lines even I won’t cross. I like lines in the sand. I like to watch when the winds of Fate pick up and blow that shit to smithereens. But occasionally, like now, I know enough to not tempt Fate. When Fate made Damien whatever his face is, it threw together some molecules and shouted to Hell with it, do your worst. And that’s probably what he has done in his lifetime. His absolute worst.

Damien is the walking, talking, oozing masculine confidence to kick my ass all the way back to the ’90s and gag me with a spoon, but there are some people’s auras, their presence which makes people, not just bitches like me, stop and think, well damn.

“Zeke is an acquaintance, and he has disclosed his troubles to me. I can help.” Damien explains. Well, what do you know? The saints really do come marching in. I wave my glass at Marty who frowns at me. I hop off my stool, sway a little, then round the corner to the backside of the bar and pour my own damn drink.

“Speaking of, where is my brother?” The grit in Lowell’s teeth is as bad as going to the beach and getting sand down the ass crack. It’s an unpleasant feeling.

“Suffice it to say...”

Who the Hell says suffice it to say anymore?” I interject. Well, he answered my question, but sometimes the gear shifter between my brain and this mouth doesn’t register.

“I do. Suffice it to say, I told Zeke to lay low for the next couple of days.” Damien finishes. I think about it for a minute, sway some more, do the hokey pokey, and turn my ass around to grab another glass. We offered Suits a drink, why not our savior, who art in what the Hell he just walked into?

“Figures.” I slide the glass across the bar at him and he accepts it with a killer smile. Not like one of those smiles which makes the ladies swoon. Because for real, he totally rocks one of those. I mean the killer smile where he has cut a bitch or two before. His eyes do this weird thing, almost like they flicker from the navy blue and light up when he accepts the glass. It makes me feel downright stalker met stalkeree. Here we are in an epic standoff and battle of hair-raising wills not to break eye contact unless one of us draws a weapon and goes full postal on the other.

Something crashes in the back room and I think I catch a glimpse of a furry tail or two. What the Hell is Captain Asshole doing here? Seeing a whip of C.A. enables me to finally put a finger on what Damien reminds me of. He’s the hound gnawing on an old bone and refusing to give it up. The bone is something he deems as his business. He’ll go one-hundred-percent vicious if anyone screws with him, including a back-alley cat who comes slinking around, cunningly planning how to meddle in his affairs. I can’t tell if I’m the cat or if Zeke and Mr. Suits are the cat. That’s the problem with age-old feuds. People tend to forget whose side they are on after a while. I’ve never been a take-charge-and-dive-in kind of woman. I think if forced to pick a side right now, because I

don't know him well, but he is vibing at a level of dangerous I don't want to tangle with, I'm going to have to say, meow kitty-kitty, meow.

I turn my attention back to Damien, not willing to be distracted in his presence again until I can securely land my butt out of his and Zeke's business. "Why should we care about this problem? It isn't our mess to clean up." The bottle is almost empty and I think it will be pushing it to get Lowell to open another one. I glance at Lowell whose face hasn't changed from, there's-going-to-be-Hell-to-pay when he gets his hands on his twin. But a flicker of worry cuts through the anger and I know he will do whatever he can to make sure Zeke remains safe. Even if it means sacrificing himself.

"Have you ever been involved in an issue where, despite not wanting to be there, you were still a part of it?" Damien sets his glass on the table next to him, kicks out a creaky old chair, and sits, legs splayed, hands on his knees as he watches me from across the bar.

"Yeah, it's called life, asshole." I down the rest of my drink. Empty bottle be damned. The room does the Tilt-a-Whirl ride thing like at a fair. Marty comes up behind me and guides me back around the bar to sit in a chair opposite Damien. I don't like being this close to that much murderous intent, but every now and then I enjoy a good romp on the wild side.

Damien tilts his head back and laughs. I wish he wouldn't. This much tilting of everything is going to make me play toss the cookies, and since I haven't had any cookies, that wouldn't be fair.

"I thought as much." When he finishes laughing, he leans forward on his knees. I stay right where I am because if I lean forward I'm going to barf on his shoes which are black, shiny, and even nicer than Mr. Suit's were.

"You don't know anything about me," I whisper; Lowell, Marty, and whoever else has been listening to our conversation forgotten.

"You'd be surprised at what I know." He murmurs back.

"That's not comforting for a potential murder victim to hear if you're trying to kidnap her and force her to do shit she doesn't want to." I counter. I thought I was maybe saying that in my head. But with my gear shift broken, he grins at me and I realize I said it out loud. Oh well. When dealing with a man as hot as Hell, he probably has no qualms with brutal honesty, given that he's one of those arrogant, dripping with confidence types. Although, he hasn't been arrogant overmuch thus far. Who the Hell am I kidding with the overmuch, thus fars? I'm being the arrogant one calling him out on his archaic use of vocabulary, and here I am rocking the mimicking routine.

"You, are most certainly a victim, Catriona. But not in this instance. I'm not going to kidnap you or force you to do anything you don't want to do. You're going to decide to make the right choice and help Zeke on your own." Damien stands up and turns away from me to speak to Lowell. Was I just dismissed like a friggin, Victorian housemaid? Here to do his bidding but now that he's done, he does not need to hear my thoughts on the matter?

Mad as hell, I jump up from my seat which is a stupendously bad idea. I stagger toward the bar and grab it, just before I assplant on the floor and glare up at him. "You don't know shit about me and the decisions I make. Why should I help him?"

"Catriona, please?" It isn't Damien who asks, it's Lowell. His honey-colored eyes are so broken, so full of pain and pity when he looks at me, it pisses me off even more. It's the same look he gives Zeke when he knows he is hopeless, but he loves him anyway. I don't need that kind of pity. I am worth something. I can be something. I don't want his sympathy and I don't need it.

"Fine. But only because you need me to." I grab the edge of the bar and pull myself up. My ire is burning through my buzz pretty quickly, but not fast enough that the edges of my vision aren't still swimming. It damn well better not be tears of frustration that Lowell's pity was supposed to be his love. At the very least, a mutual attraction. I can't stand the fact he is too humble to ever indicate that he is too good for me, and I'm with the right brother, the bad one. It's my inner turmoil that reminds me of it every day. "And you aren't coming."

I take a few unsteady steps towards the door, like a toddler on their first foray with walking to their parent's outstretched arms. The freedom I'm craving is the far reach of the highway outside, which can take me away from here.

"Now just a minute," Lowell interjects.

"She's right." Damien finally pipes up. Great. My savior speaks again. "We need you here to intercede on behalf of this biker gang with the package. We're going to infiltrate their gang, but should they slip by us, if they come to the bar, we need you to communicate any information you obtain."

His plan is reasonable. But why is he so damn loud? I look at the two crusty, old men sitting in the corner, drooping over their beers. Are they spies for the gang? Will they run back and tell them our plan? My suspicion and paranoia growing, I feel the hair rise on the back of my neck as I turn to look at Lowell and Damien. It might be a trick of the light. It might be the booze, but in addition to catching a glimpse of Captain Asshole earlier, I swear I just saw the shadow of a hound on the wall behind Damien.

I catch him in another deadlock stare, neither of us willing to relinquish control of the moment. Who is this guy?

My cellphone buzzes in my pocket, distracting me, and once again I look away first. It won't happen a third time. I fish the phone from my jeans and glance at the screen.

"Zeke, do you have any idea how much Hell to pay you've caught yourself in?" I answer.

"Get your ass home. We need to talk." No kiss, kiss noises goodbye. No, love you too's are exchanged. I glare between Lowell and Damien, and give Marty a noncommittal nod before turning around, too drunk to drive but on the warpath towards home, if it can be called that, anyway. "Meet me at the shop in an hour," I grunt at Damien and walk out the door.

Kicking my Suzuki into gear, I pull out of the driveway and head towards the shop. Glancing at the McLaren sitting parked to the side, I envy the potential this day

had before I opened that damn letter from the college. It seems lately, life keeps reminding me of all the potential I have, or had, and then ripping it away from me. Five-hundred-thousand dollars. When I'm done this fix-it mission for Zeke, I'm going to dump his ass and move on. Maybe move away from this state altogether. I'm struggling to motivate and keep myself going on a day-to-day basis, at a crossroads in my life, and not sure what direction to take. I've been parked at a four-corners for so long, I've forgotten what path I was on to begin with. It's screwed up thinking I'm walking in a straight line towards something, then getting hopelessly lost in my head, to the point where on the inside looking out, nothing seems familiar anymore, not even my reflection in the mirror.

The wind from the drive kills the rest of my buzz, so I'm clearheaded when I pull back into the shop. I'm going to give Zeke a piece of my mind, then go fix this situation, and then decide where I'm going to go after. I'm done. We're through. Maybe I'll go back to New Orleans, find my sister Fiona, and beg her to forgive me for the awful shit I said the last time I saw her.

I shove that memory deep into the abyss of my memories where I don't have to think about it right now. It's one of those thoughts when churned up, it distracts me from everything else.

I flip the kickstand of the bike out with my foot, swinging my leg up and over the seat as I kill the engine. Walking toward the back office, I call out to Zeke. "Zeke? Where the Hell are you? Do you have any idea the shit that..."

I don't get the last words out before I see the fist come flying at me from the dim light of the office. It connects with my right eye, and I crumple to the floor.

"Stupid bitch. You could have ruined everything." Zeke's snarl is the last thing I hear before the swimming in my head goes lights out with the buzz from the booze I thought I had gotten rid of on the ride over here. There's a first for everything, I suppose. The last clear thought I have before taking a nap is that my mouth and my attitude were always going to catch up to me. With Zeke's verbal and emotional abuse, it was always going to escalate to this point of physical abuse. I guess if having a good nap is the price I'm paying for my snark, I can survive this too.

Captain Asshole slinks back into the office as my eyes flutter closed and Zeke's rage sees filing cabinet drawers ripped from the cabinet and tossed across the room. My eye is throbbing and swelling, and before it closes and the rest of my psyche shuts down with it, I watch Captain Asshole sit under a table in the corner. Its glowing yellow eyes flicker with flames. Kind of like Damien's did. Or am I seeing things and Zeke hit me so hard, he knocked my imagination into next Tuesday?

The last thing I see before the final lights out is Captain Asshat's unblinking stare, and the swish of two tails arcing around its body, curving to protect itself as it watches me hit the big unconscious.

Chapter 5

When I come to, it's in a chair in the office which looks like it has been destroyed by a hurricane. We don't get many hurricanes out this way, but papers, cabinet drawers, my stapler-the one with the little flaming cat head painted on the back, everything is strewn around the office in disarray from Zeke's temper.

I pop open my one eye which isn't swollen shut, and glare around the room. When I get ahold of the little prick, I'm going to kill him. Then he'll buy me a present, we'll have makeup sex, and carry on with...

Wait. No. That wasn't the plan when I walked in here however long ago.

"Here. Put ice on that eye." Damien hands me an ice pack. Where the Hell did he come from?

"How long was I out?" I slap the thing against my eye and it stings. Good. It means I'm alive and this isn't some bizarre dream and Zeke didn't actually kill me. I peer around the room, fixating under the table where I saw Captain Asshole. He, it, isn't there anymore. It's never gotten close enough for me to pick up. It begs for food and me being a big softy, obliges. I think only a male could be that big of a pain-in-the-ass, but I'm being biased at the moment.

"Long enough for me to ensure Zeke was gone before you came to." Damien turns one of the chairs the right way and sits in front of me. My blood pressure comes to volcanic eruption level pressure.

"Why? I'm going to strangle him. No, I'm going to beat him to within an inch of his life, and then run him over with a truck. Nope, not that either. I'm going to..."

"You're going to get that eye to where you can open it, and then come help me deliver the package to his employer to square up on the five-hundred-thousand dollars." Damien cuts me off. With his hands on his thighs, leaning back so casually, he's got a lot of confidence for a woman on the warpath and he just declared neutral territory between the one side I'm raging against.

"As if I was already not on board with fixing this mess. What part about this," I shake the ice pack at him before gingerly placing it back over my eye. It's starting to throb now, "Would give me any incentive to help him now?"

Damien leans forward, propping himself on his elbows. "The part where it isn't about him at all."

"Huh?" He's such a conundrum that walked into my life approximately three hours ago. One I'm not sure I have the motivation of figuring out either.

"You said it yourself, after this is done, you're out of here. Gone. Off to bigger things, right? Now come on. The black eye will help sell the cover to get into the club. We need to suit you up with a better ensemble though." Damien stands and walks to the door.

What the Hell is he going on about? "Wait, what club? There's nothing wrong with what I'm wearing? Where are we going?" I chase after him before my brain has a chance to catch up to whatever speed he's running at.

When I enter the garage, two Harley Davidson motorcycles sit, parked on the floor. The first is a monstrous black Fatboy with custom-painted flames and what looks like the skull of a wolfhound in the middle of the flames. The second, a Harley Davidson FXR3, a smaller bike with similar flames but no skull, sits next to it.

"What's going on?" I sum up to reiterate my previous questions.

"We need to infiltrate the local gang in order to intercept the package," Damien explains.

"Are you a cop?" I counter with my suspicions, given the way he talks about intercepting packages.

"Far from it. But you can't ride into the club on a Suzuki, they'll shoot you on sight. I'd shoot you on sight for riding that thing if this wasn't so important." Damien splay his hands on his hips and I resist the overwhelming urge to kick him in the balls.

"Who are you?" I press. I'm not infiltrating any clubs until he gives me some answers.

"The person who's going to save your ass, despite being forewarned not to get involved." Damien glances around the garage, looking for something. Whatever it is, he doesn't find it because he sighs, rips off his jacket, and then begins rolling up his sleeves. His forearms flex and it takes me one salty-ass minute to remember I'm going to kill my current boyfriend, even though I'm done with him before I wipe my chin to check for drool. Nope. All good for the win of the sop mop.

"Forewarned about what? I'm not going anywhere with you until you tell me what's going on." I toss the icepack on the counter with Zeke's tools. Maybe it will melt and they'll rust. That'll fix him.

"It's too complicated to explain now, but you need to do this, um, mission. I can explain it later, but you have to help me if, if you..." Damien unbuttons the top two buttons of his pristine white shirt and swings his leg over the side of the Fatboy. I eye, with my one good eye, the FXR3 and my fingers curl. I've always wanted to get my hands on a decent bike. It's got green flames that seem to dance under the fluorescent lights. I'm tempted to ride off with Damien for the sake of it, just to ride a dream-like what's sitting before me.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket and without needing to look, I know who it is already.

"I'm so sorry, Baby. I'm sorry. I was stressing because of the deal, and then when you rode off, and I was trying to square up with Damien..." And on, and on, the text rambles. Disgusted I send him a quick response, two words, simple and easy to remember, and pocket the phone.

Damien remains still on the Fatboy, watching me as I wrestle with plucking the phone back out of my pocket, screaming down Zeke for what he did until I'm too hoarse to yell anymore, and then accepting whatever gifts he gives me for the next week; or riding off into the sunset with a complete stranger, on a mission to infiltrate the local biker gang, and throwing chance to the wind and tempting Fate with however it turns out.

I've remained stagnant for a while. Content to ride out the days in noncommittal bliss. I walk over to the Harley and pet her smooth, silky leather seat. I trace my fingers up the chrome handlebars and feel the diamond pattern etched into the grips beneath my palm.

"Are you going to make love to it or climb on and ride?" Damien's grumbles cause me to look up and I snort. His irritation, plain as day on his face has drawn his eyebrows together and his jaw is clenched so tightly not even a crowbar could pry it apart.

"What's the matter? Been a while since a woman has looked at you the same way?" I swing my leg over the seat and settle into the bike, finding my balance to handle it. I swing the kickstand up with the heel of my boot, and start the engine, revving it up to a seductive purr as I grin at him.

Someday I'm going to learn when Death is staring me in the face, not to grin at it. Today is not that day. I motor out of the garage, letting the feel for the vibrations run through me, and definitely comparing them to the sex with Zeke lately and deciding it is considerably better and I'm okay with this. I glance over my shoulder, laughing at the enraged look on Damien's face as he too, pulls out of the garage. I don't know where the local gang's clubhouse is, so I wait for him to pull off onto the road. If Damien has a plan, he isn't keen on sharing it, because without another word he takes off. I kick the bike into gear, laughing again as we pull out on the highway. My swollen eye has lessened with the icepack, but the sting of the wind serves as a reminder of why I'm doing whatever this crazy mission is. I want this level of freedom, in my life, in my home, from my boyfriend. I want the freedom to ride out onto the highway, Route 666, the Devil's Highway, and flip my life the bird as I drive away.

I might be able to do that with my newly found Devil-may-care attitude. The drive is a pretty boring one, given the monotony of the plains. It gives me time to think and wonder how Damien procured the bikes. Who the Hell he is, to begin with? Why is he so vested in making sure I'm a part of this nonsense, and what is his ante in the game? With nothing but thoughts bouncing around in my head, and a whole lot of fuck it, I come to the conclusion that I'm only going to drive myself crazy if I continue this train of thought.

After an hour of driving, well out past the Sloshed Sloth, Damien veers off on the side of the road. I drive in next to him, downshifting and then settling back, feet planted on the ground and resting the weight of the bike between my thighs.

"What gives?" I ask. I flip my hair back from my face. A strand of auburn has caught on my lip, and Damien watches as I use a finger to scrape it back.

He shakes himself a moment, and then blinks, looking down the road. "We'll be there in about ten minutes. I think you know the game, or at least, somewhat."

"Um, not really. Do you mean finding what we're after?" I ask.

"No. I mean, when we ride up, there's a level of interaction between men and women they expect." Damien points between the two of us.

"Oh. Yeah, I get it. But I'm not your bitch." There's no way I'm ever riding bitch to a man. I drive myself.

"No. I don't think even if you tried you could come across as a man's bitch. But you do have to pretend to like me. It won't sell if they don't think we're together." Damien's lips twitch and I rub my bad eye. It's at that halfway point between being open and shut, and it's annoying because it distorts his face which gives me ample reason to be irritated with him.

"Yeah, whatever. I'm sure the black eye is indication enough that you and I have beef from time to time. It might help if I knew more about you, like, what you do for work? Your last name? You know, simple shit like are you going to murder me when this is all done?" I drop my hand, not wanting to irritate my eye further.

Damien's laugh is like a death toll. Melodic, like bells on a graveyard wind. "No, I'm not going to kill you."

The way he stresses the "I'm" sends a shiver down my spine like he knows some shit's about to go down but he can't tell me.

"Then who is?" I ask.

"Beats me. Do any of us ever know what our Fate is?" He doesn't look at me when he says it, which cements the feeling of dread I've been riding since he walked in the door. Who is this man?

"Fine. Don't tell me. I'll figure out who's trying to bust my ass on my own. It isn't like I can depend on a man anyway." I try to keep the hurt from my voice as I recall the fist coming at my face. There are some things that escalate a situation beyond the norm, and Zeke being an asshole mentally and emotionally is one thing. Physically takes it to a whole new level. I couldn't depend on my absent dad, I couldn't depend on the religious zealot of a man, Mr. Anderson, my foster dad, and now clearly Zeke. As enigmatic as Damien is being, it's clear I won't be able to depend on him either. Regret at the thought of what could have been with Lowell stabs me deep in my secret wistful place, but I counter it by shutting down the pangs as fast as they pop up.

"Catriona..." Damien starts, thinks twice of it, then shuts his mouth. It takes him a long moment before he speaks again. "I've been thinking about the front we are going to present. Clearly, you will fit in just fine, jeans, a t-shirt, busted eye. I on the other hand..."

"Look like you've seen the softer side of Sears?" I offer.

Damien rubs his nose and behind his hand, he suppresses another smile. "Is there anything about me which screams, soft to you?" He gives me the look. The blazing one. The one that would melt a woman into a puddle in her panties.

Damn the bad luck, if it weren't for the fact I've turned into a frigid bitch in the last three hours. Okay, so lying to myself aside, and not sucking in that breath which would be a dead giveaway, I kick it with the only response I can think of. I laugh.

"Good point, Mount Rushmore. You're hard as stone. A badass. Totally rocking the designer vibe instead of grunge. Definitely going to fit in with, who are these guys anyway?" I've heard of a local gang, and Lowell has dealt with them a few times, but I haven't met them myself.

Damien's smile is arctic-like he knows and has beef with them personally. "They call themselves, Hell's Fury."

I wait for the ominous, "Duh, duh, duuuun" music. Nothing happens.

"Um..." I glance around, expecting pitchforks and pistols or something. It's not like the Son's of Anarchy are going to ride around the bend up in the road and come bust my ass, right? Okay, maybe Hell's Fury is like SOA and they are about to knock me down, but without any context, I'm floating on a cloud of I've got nothing when it comes to comparing them to anything on my inner fear scale.

"Ah, an explanation. Hell's Fury is one of the vilest gangs in existence. They're responsible for an untold number of deaths. They will smuggle anything they can get their hands on, and their mantra is, well, you'll see." Damien looks over his shoulder, just as the light rumble of engines comes from the distance behind us.

"Is that them?" The weight in my stomach is making it hard to maintain the balance of the bike. I'm not feeling this mission so much anymore. If one of the most dangerous men I've ever met isn't keen on tangling with Hell's Fury, and I can tell by his vibe alone, being alone with him is disconcerting so it's a good thing I can make him laugh, I'm not so sure I want to roll up into this place and piss the HF off.

"No. That's my crew." Damien smiles again and rubs his jaw.

"And who the Hell are they?" Everybody's got a crew now. How's a woman supposed to be alone enough in her thoughts to figure her shit out?

"The Hellhounds." His response makes me stop and consider how much Hell to pay I'm setting myself up for if we piss this local gang off.

"Great. Everyone's going to Hell. Isn't that nice? We can all picnic together sometime. It'll be fun they said..." I trail off my tangent as the three bikers pull closer. All three are big guys. Two of them are rocking the grunge really well, with the leather jackets, the flaming hound skull sigil, and the leather pants and boots with chains. The other guy is dressed more like Damien in a suit and shirt with leather shoes. He looks like he walked off of Wall Street.

When they pull up and kick their engines down to low purrs, Damien makes his introductions while I sit there, slack-jawed like an idiot.

He gestures to the two grunges, "Dick and Doug." They are twins and barely discernible between the two. They wear matching, silver choker collars and when they look at me, I swear it's like looking at rabid dogs. They give a barely, imperceptible nod and I choke out a, "Hey."

The third guy is more cordial when Damien introduces him as, "Charles."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." He responds and I take the D&D route and just nod at him.

"You named your Hellhounds Dick, Doug, and Charles?" I whisper to Damien. It gets a chuckle out of all of them and his response has me kicking myself in my own stupidity.

"Well, they came to me pre-named like most people do Catriona. What were you expecting their mothers to call them, Death Face, Skull Basher, and Throat Punch?"

"It might have helped with the whole persona," I grumble. "Can we just get this over with? If I'm going to die today I'd rather do it before Jeopardy comes on tonight. I

figure if I ask nicely enough, Satan might give me the Wi-Fi password and let me watch cable on my phone while I'm being tortured."

The look which passes between the four men sets my teeth on edge, and I want to tuck tail and run. I don't think now that I've met the posse, there's any backing out of this. Not that there was a chance of that before, but I am occasionally a dreamer. "Is there anything else I need to know about Hell's Fury before we roll up in there?" I press. I so want to get this over with, my own demise jokes aside. The bad feeling I can't shake from my stomach is the kind that is settling into my paranoia, and the more I get into this, the more I know I'm not coming out of it unscathed somehow.

"Yes, just one more thing." Damien revs the Fatboy and gives the turn in the bend up the highway a wicked grin.

"What's that?"

"They know we're coming." He responds.

"Great, so we are riding into our deaths?" I knew I was going to die today.

"No. But just know, Hell's Fury really doesn't like us."

I follow after the man who is hot as Hell. I should turn the bike around and race as fast as I can in the other direction. But with the Hellhounds flanking behind us, there is no turning back. It turns out, the reason Hell's Fury really doesn't like the Hellhounds is because when we roll up into the Cathedral in the middle of the Devil's Highway, Hell's Fury turns out to be a biker gang of really pissed off Nuns, who are awaiting our arrival with pistols, switchblades, and holy crosses.

Chapter 6

"Demon's, be gone with you!" The lead Hell's Fury Nun shrieks at us as we all pull into a line in the Cathedral parking lot. Not having been down this way much, the Cathedral sits well off the highway, behind two rocky Craigs which have begun cropping up the closer we get to the mountains, so its gothic spires have been kept well-hidden and are the reason I never noticed it before. That, and the fact the Andersons were such religious zealots, since being kicked out of their house, I hadn't so much as stepped foot in a church let alone look at one.

I like architecture though. I can appreciate the craftsmanship that went into the construction of the building. It soars into the sky, and I must squint up at it to see the gargoyles resting on top of the highest towers. I blink when I look back at the group of twenty or so women in their habits carrying their weapons. My brain goes full-on confused at the sight of them. Isn't there an oath or something they take about violence, murder and sin, and all that? Also, if what they say is true, calling Damien and the others demons, how bad could they be that a man like Damien thinks they are the worst sort of gang in existence? Is this a euphemism for the church? My Mum was Irish Catholic, although not a practicing one for sure. But growing up, "Christian" so to speak, invokes a certain inherent belief deep within, no matter how much I reject the faith as an adult. Have I joined the Hellhounds, a Satanist group against a convent of Nuns?

This situation couldn't get any weirder.

Except, yes, yes it can. Especially when one of the Nuns, a middle-aged woman takes a bottle of what I presume is holy water and throws it at me.

"Whore!" She shrieks. The bottle bursts at my feet, soaking my boot but not causing any damage save for the water on leather issue. But they are just boots so I'm not too bothered by it.

"Rude!" I shake my foot.

"Sister, did you see that?" My assailant says to the oldest of the Nuns, presumably the one in charge. "She didn't..."

"So, you've collected another one, have you, Damien?" The old woman says. Her green eyes stare back at us, unwavering and unafraid of any of the Hellhounds.

"Not yet." Damien counters. The Nun lowers her pistol.

"Is she worth saving?" She asks.

"Damien, what is she talking about?" I look between the two, but neither is looking at me.

"She means, is your soul worth saving, and does she think she has a chance to recruit you for her little cult." Damien kills the engine on his bike, as well as the rest of the Hellhounds. I haven't decided if I'm sticking around yet to follow suit.

"We aren't a cult. We're doing the Lord's work here!" The woman who threw the holy water at me screams.

"My grandfather might say otherwise, and you know it." Damien counters.

Great. Not only is he insane enough to take on the Catholic church, but he's also now gone full, screwed-up in the head and actually adopted the persona that he is somehow, involved in the Devil's work. I knew I shouldn't have ridden off into the sunset with the crazy man, and instead taken my chances with another round of fist from Zeke.

"Look, I get that you have this whole, Hell thing going on and everything but..."

"We've come to get the next shipment, Sister." Damien cuts me off and directs his statement at the older Nun.

"You'll not be taking this one off our hands. We're close, so close to redemption. These ones need saving. You can't have them, not this time, demon." She spits on the ground at his feet as he climbs off his bike, and he laughs.

"You can't stop me, Sister. According to you, this is my grandfather's house." He walks past her as she brandishes her cross and gun. With a dozen other pistols leveled on him, he walks past them, but none of the Nuns pull the trigger. The other Hellhounds follow him, which spurs my ass into gear to chase after them because I don't want to be left holding the bag of what the Hell? While they're all rolling up into the Cathedral not getting shot, and I'm out here with the potential to get blasted away.

"Damien, wait. Would you hold on a minute?" I run after him. "What is going on? If these crazy old ladies want to get high on Sunday after a bit of prayer and self-castigation, so what? Let's leave it alone. We can find some other drugs to knock off someone and pay the rich guy back."

I tug on his arm, the first time I've touched him since shaking his hand, and the resulting shock that runs up my fingertips is like getting a contact jolt from static electricity. It usually happens when someone is wearing a sweater. This is from his bare arm. I snatch my fingers away and stare up at him.

"Come on, let's get out of here. This has gotten too weird." I whisper. The Cathedral is massive in the foyer, and this is before we even step into the rectory, the Sanctuary. The wooden beams jetting across the ceiling crisscross and the stained-glass windows with depictions of passages from the bible cast gemstone colors across the stone floors.

"It's always been weird, Catriona. You've been too content to stand by and do nothing while stuff like this goes on under your nose." Damien murmurs. Somehow, even disrespecting the wishes of the Nuns doesn't equate to disrespecting the reverie and silence of the church.

"That's beside the point. I didn't sign up to piss off the Catholic Church." I hiss. It sounds as lethal as the women outside who are now screaming about the devil and demons inside the walls. Yet, I notice, they haven't dared follow us in here. What the Hell is going on?

"You already did." Damien holds my gaze. I would laugh if it weren't for the dead-serious expression on his face and the slight hint of, worry? That's odd, given we've only just met. How could he possibly be worried about me?

"You aren't making any sense. Let's go score somewhere else and leave these women alone." I turn around to go back outside but am blocked by the Hellhounds

guarding the door. I spin back around to Damien, ready to demand answers but he's opening the double doors into the inner sanctum of the church. The gold, silver, and ornate artwork and decorations lining the walls and interior of the Sanctuary are enough to feed a small country. How the Hell did a small fortune end up in the middle of the desert in Utah of all places? How did these Nuns come by it?

Damien looks around the inner room, then nods to the left and right to Dick, Doug, and Charles. They slink off into the bowels of the cathedral, down to the basement and probably the convent's private rooms below the church.

He then sits in a pew, and I stand behind his right shoulder, waiting for him to speak.

"Are they going to kill us?" I ask.

"They are going to try." He admits it so casually, the nausea that accompanies his statement barely has time to settle before he continues. "This, all this, is a farce. It's a ruse to cover up the fact they are trying to save their own asses." He holds up his hand in disgust at the splendor in front of us. Gold and silver crosses line the walls. Golden chalices stand on plinths. A silver basin for communion rests in the center aisle.

"Isn't that the point of being a Nun? Saving oneself and devoting to God and all that, and in the process, saving others too?" I walk to the pew in front of him, my eyes starting to hurt from all the shiny. One of those golden goblets could take care of Zeke's debt I bet.

"In a manner of speaking, if they weren't deluded and trying to fool themselves and everyone else in the process." His reply is confusing. Is he so dead set against the church he thinks all religious types are corrupt and blinded by faith? Or is this his own come-to-Jesus moment he's having a hard time grasping?

"What do you mean? Cut to the chase, Damien. Whatever is going on, I can handle it." I spin in the pew to look at him.

"I mean, those women out there, they're the wanna-be's. The ones who couldn't get into a convent and failed in their vows. They're the ex-communicated, the ones who don't get to go to Heaven but they're such zealots thinking they can reverse the damage from the things they've done, murder, extortion, trafficking, all in the name of my grandfather. They're the rejects, the outcasts biding their time until their souls are collected as those marked as one of the damned, but they are too insane with the notion that they are going to Hell, they will stop at nothing to try and reverse their fate." Damien's words make sense in theory, but the insanity of what he is saying makes it hard to grasp.

"Damien, religious types like them, apparently like you, all have some notion of how things are going to go when you die. It doesn't make either one of you right or wrong, even if you do believe you're what – the son of Satan if what you say checks out? You can't bust in here, all self-righteous and..." Before I can finish my sentence, Damien holds up his hand as Dick, Doug, and Charles all come marching into the Sanctuary with a line of dirty, homeless-looking children behind them.

"It makes me right when I say, ex-communicated Nuns who stop at nothing to avoid Hell's Fury, as they like to call themselves too, include the kidnapping, child

trafficking, and if what they've done in the past holds true with this lot, baptizing them and performing exorcist's on the kid's demons so they can then be sold into child trafficking rings, to quote, "save their souls," I beg to differ on your narrow-minded views." Damien stands up, surveying the children, about a dozen of them, as the Nuns draw closer to the doors of the church.

"What the fu-" I don't get the words out as I pop up from my seat like a Jack-in-the-Box. The Nun who threw holy water at me lobbs a torch into the foyer of the church. The kids scream and scatter into the pews as all Hell breaks loose. The carpet under the torch begins to smolder, and I run to try and stamp it out, but not before Damien grabs my arm to hold me back. When I look into his eyes, maybe it's the stress, maybe it's the swollen eye, but one thing is for certain, his eyes can't be lit up internally with fire, can they? I blink and look at him again, navy-blue eyes stare back at me.

"It was always going to come to this moment, Catriona. You need to choose."

"What are you talking about? These kids are..."

"That's the point!" He roars in my face. I shrink back and he lets go of my arm. "Damn it, Catriona, that's the point. You need to choose. Them, or us?" He nods to the Nuns who apparently will burn down their own Cathedral in the name of the Lord if they think it is the right thing to do. Kids inside be damned.

"Chose what? This insanity versus an abusive boyfriend?" I duck as another torch comes whizzing past my head and smacks the pew beside me. Where did they get torches from? Not really important, but probably one of the many talents they have hidden in their habits. I'll have to think about that statement in full later...

"Are you going to stand by and let these kids burn or are you going to choose to act, help, maybe save your own soul?" Damien asks. Why does he care about my soul so much?

I don't have time to ask before we hit the deck when the bullets start spraying into the Sanctuary. The screaming kids begin crawling further back in the church, as the flames also race towards us. The smoke billowing in the room makes my eyes water, and I start coughing, putting my arm over my nose as we all belly-crawl away from the onslaught coming through the door.

Trying to think fast, I spot a door to the side of the Sanctuary, back behind the pulpit. "That way!" I point at it and holler, and the kids start scurrying, like ants away from the fire. Dick, Doug, and Charles, all too big to fit under the pews, make the mad dash for the door, and begin ushering kids through it, into what I can only presume are the head Nun's private quarters, which means a private entrance to the Cathedral and subsequent way out of here. Damien crouches beside me, in between two pews and eyeing me, the burning doorway behind us where bullets continue to whiz through the flames, and the group ahead of us.

"On three." He shouts over the roar of the din around us.

"I don't want to die." I blurt the words and he pauses, reaching up to touch my face.

"We all die someday, Catriona. It's what we do with our lives which makes where we go in the afterlife a worthy place to be or not." His words are not as

reassuring as the caress of his fingers, but I'm quickly learning that Damien is not a conventional man. Whether that's relevant in the current situation is debatable, but it's something to take note of, the fact he cares enough to attempt to comfort me. No one has ever done that before. No one except my sister, Fiona. And I pushed her away as much as I could because of it.

"Come on." Damien grabs my hand and tugs me along as he stands and begins to run. I pump my legs, wondering if I can outrun a bullet, and find I can, but somehow, he can't. He takes one in the shoulder and bellows when it pierces his flesh. I scream as we dive for the side door, and tumble through it. Barely managing to squeeze through the threshold, we fall into a small, dark hallway with a single oak door opposite us. I grab at his shoulder, trying to hoist him up and he hollers out in pain.

"You just touched my bullet hole!"

"That would sound a lot kinkier if we weren't in our present situation. Also, you need to move your ass too!"

All innuendo aside, the situation I am currently in is on a level of screwed that I haven't been in a very long time. I grab for the door, praying whatever is on the other side of it isn't about to bust our butts. I tug on the doorknob. It doesn't budge.

"Holy Hell woman, push, don't pull." Damien is clutching his shoulder which has bloomed blood on the pristine white shirt and there isn't a moment worse in the history of all stupidity I can think of, than this one right now. I am a college dropout. This means, I have somewhat of an education if I am being optimistic, and I rarely ever am, so why is this moment one of my not-so-finest? Maybe because I have a gang of screaming, ex-communicated biker gang Nuns shooting at me and that would shed a pale light on anyone in their finest hour.

Finally getting the door open, I shove through to the other side to see Dick, Doug, Charles, and the dozen scared-looking, malnourished, neglected kids staring back at me.

"Why are you still here?" I ask Dick, or Doug, I can't remember or discern which. Their silver collars glint in the low light of the Tiffany lamp shining on the desk of what I can only presume is the old Nun's office of this fine establishment. What is it with those collars?

"Do you see anywhere else to go?" Dick or Doug answers me. I glance around the room, spotting a rug that I have no idea whether it is expensive or not. I mean, who of us really can tell when we're around expensive old antiques or knock-offs? It's easy to say we appreciate the finer things in life, but as common folk, we have no friggin' clue what we're talking about.

I claw at the rug on the floor like a desperate murder victim in a horror movie. There's no secret, trap door like in the movies. Life is rarely ever so accommodating.

There are no windows and no other doors that I can see, and the room is max capacity with the horde of Hellishly pissed-off sisters coming for us, judging by the shrieking from the other side of the door. The kids whimper, some of them are sobbing and clutching onto one another. I've never been the maternal type, so when one of the

kid's noses blows the little snot bubble and it pops on his upper lip, I know we need to get the Hell out of here before I toss my cookies.

Something thunks against the other side of the door, and I can only guess it is more bullets. The door is a two to a three-inch-thick solid oak panel, but it won't take but a few rounds before bullets will disintegrate it. I do the only thing I can think of and grab the heavy, bronze, Victorian-style Tiffany lamp and rip it from the wall. Using the base of the lamp, I aim for the nearest wall and expanse of sheetrock and begin swinging like Jackie Robinson, or Babe Ruth. I can't remember which one was the pitcher and which one went all batter-up in the game. The glass of the lampshade and bulb shatter, sending shards everywhere in the room, and the sheetrock barely has an indent in it, but I swing again, this time puncturing the wall.

"What the Hell are you doing?" Damien growls behind me. I look back, he's no longer holding his shoulder and the rose bloom of blood on his shirt is no longer growing. How? What? Nope. I'm going to nope right the heck out of these questions because we don't have time.

"Making an exit, unless you have a better idea?" I grunt back at him as I swing again. I've always wanted to go demolition-derby on a wall like in the HGTV shows. Everyone turns these cool old homes into modern works of art, but I always thought, demo-day was the funnest part of the renovations. Who wants clean lines and sterile surfaces anyway? Give me an old house with a lot of character and maybe a ghost or two and I'm happy. Not that I can afford an old house anyway, or a house at all. I haven't given much thought to how I'm going to sort those details out after I leave Zeke when this is over. Which will be as soon as we get out of here, because I didn't sign up for crazy Nuns.

Damien walks up beside me and starts grabbing at sheetrock and pulling it down, clearly resigned to the fact my idea is the best we've got. Dick and Doug help too, and Charles glares at the kids to keep them in place. There are no warm and fuzzies emulating from him, so if the kids thought they were going to get it from any of us, well I feel bad they have probably survived worse, but I don't want to think about it too hard.

Feeling triumphant, I drop the remnants of the Tiffany lamp, with a moment of feeling super bad because it was a nice lamp. And then glare at what's in our path now. The thunks on the door haven't subsided, or the unholy shrieking coming from the group of sisters.

A stone wall sits on the other side of the sheetrock. I should have guessed given the Gothic style of the Cathedral itself we'd hit stone at some point. There's no beating that hard-on no matter how durable a lamp I find to rub the right way.

I think I need to get laid. Or maybe it's Damien's presence and my attraction to him I have been avoiding admitting to.

Damn it.

"Well, that was..."

"Shut up." I cut Damien off before he can finish his statement. "I tried. Now what?"

“Now we do it my way.” Damien shudders, then like he is having a fit, his body starts to contort. More kids scream. I remain frozen in place as I watch as he shifts into a hound. A flaming, snarling, Hellhound to be precise.

He growls at me and I stumble back, too stunned to do something reasonable like scream.

Chapter 7

As my brain tries to process what the fuck I've just witnessed, Damien the Hellhound blasts into the stone wall with his shoulder, supposedly the one that has been shot. His brindle-colored coat gleams in the now, low-light of the computer monitor which has been sitting on the desk, and the torchlight of his fiery coat. He slams into the wall again, making a crack in the stone, his brute strength greater than that of the architecture of a stone building. If Dick, Doug, and Charles think this is odd in any way, they don't let on, because they press back, out of his way and out of the way of the bullets now piercing the oak door, and hitting the opposite wall. It won't be long before the Nuns can do like we did and start grabbing chunks of wood and splintering it away from the door frame. The smoke billowing in through the holes suggests the interior of the church has caught fire so much so that, it won't be salvageable even if a fire department makes it out here in a reasonable amount of time. If those Nuns don't bust through the door soon, and they are very likely going to, then they will go up like tinder along with the cathedral.

Damien slams into the stone wall one more time, and light peers through a crack in the stone and mortar. Without considering what I'm about to hop alongside and play, "here Fido" with, I grab at the crack and start pulling stones in and dropping them.

It takes a matter of seconds once the Hellhounds, I do not want to think of that fact right now, start helping.

I shove the first kid I can grab through the small opening we've made like he's an alien pod being squelched back into the hoo-hah of his mother. I think it's the snot bubble kid too, so if he's our test subject to see if any of the Nuns made it outside before the fire drove them back toward the office, I'm only a little bit sorry about it.

Peering out, I see the snot-gremlin sitting on the dusty ground crying, but otherwise intact, so I snatch the next kid up and feed them through the hole, as the Hounds make the opening bigger. Dust and mortar cloud the air, combined with the smoke now pouring from under the door. The crazy eyes of the Nuns peer through at us as we escape. I squeeze through after the last kid, followed by Damien, then the other Hounds, and we land on the ground around the kids.

I start ushering the little imps up, looking for some way to make a dash for it if the Nuns get wiser and make a beeline for the front door. With the smoke billowing out the windows and some of the stained glass shattered from the heat, I don't think they will back-track, but if asked half an hour ago if a group of ex-communicated biker Nuns existed, I would have said no then too. There's no telling what they'll do.

I point to a garage behind the Cathedral, tucked out of sight from the church's parking lot. I consider the FXR3 I'm leaving behind in favor of cramming as many kids as I can in whatever church van, Save-the-Lord service vehicle might be parked back there. I pry open the barn-like doors only to be greeted by a slew of bikes ranging from Harley's to Hondas, and with a variety of custom paint jobs. It was one thing to jump to

the conclusion that the Nuns are biker Nuns, it's another to see their actual rides here in the garage.

I spot the decrepit old bus sitting behind the bikes and start scooting screaming kids toward it.

"Come on you little Heathens, into the bus, get on the bus! Scoot! Shoo!" I swat at little backsides which isn't necessary since they are already scrambling over to the bus anyway.

"Any of you know how to hotwire a bus?" I holler at the Hounds. Damien has transformed back into a human, and that's about as much thought as I'm giving the supernatural shakedown at the moment until we get to safety. Or safety from the Nuns, not him anyway. His magical-ass self has conjured some clothing for decency's sake, but I'll have time to think about the logistics of how he did it later. So not important in the grand scheme of things right now.

"Would you like to try the key?" He holds it out to me from a wall of keys hanging on a pegboard.

"How...never mind. Gimme." I grab at it, not knowing what I'm doing. Once everyone is on the bus and tripping over one another, I slam the doors shut and jam the key into the ignition. Then I freeze.

There's something to be said for Sandra Bullock knowing what the Hell she was doing in that high-speed, bus chase movie. It's another to actually know how the heck to drive a bus. Which I don't.

"Um..."

"Get out of the way." Dick or Doug grunts at me and pries me from the seat. Off-kilter, I trip and land almost in the lap of Damien who is sitting opposite the driver's seat in the first row. His arms wrap around me and steady me, and for a moment time stops and all that exists is the electric...Nah. "Get the Hell off me!" I swipe at him, bullet wound be damned.

"I wasn't the klutz who landed in my lap!" He shoves at me and I pitch forward, almost catching the seat in front of me.

"Asshole." I don't dare look at him, wondering what trick of the light will play with his eyes, or make me hallucinate that he turns into a hound. Except who am I kidding? He definitely shifted into a Hellhound and I am not drunk, high, or shroomed out of it, and somehow I'm going to have to come to terms with it.

But I for real need a good, stiff drink to accept the fact the supernatural exists. The natural world is a botched-up enough place as it is. Now we're adding Hellhounds to the lot?

Dick or Doug blasts through the row of bikes and I want to cry as metal scrapes along the cement. The wave of motorcycles toppling over is enough to make my soul bleed, but one of the twins blasts through the wooden garage doors, sending the Nuns who are peppering bullets at the bus in every direction. I hear a thunk, and I'm pretty sure the bus flattened one of the Nuns, and I suppress the overwhelming urge to scream at him to stop so we can check to make sure she's all right. But at approximately the speed of oh shit, there's no way she survived a smack upside the head by a bus.

We veer onto the highway and I glance out the windows at the Cathedral which is now ablaze in fire and smoke. There's going to be Hell to pay when the Nuns catch up to us. A few have rescued bikes from the melee of upturned motorcycles, and the head Nun who looks like my late Nan wearing a bandana and sporting sunglasses along with her habit has confiscated my bike, the FXR3, the one I have secretly dubbed, my Sugar.

The Nuns chase after us, and there's no way we're going to outrun them.

"What do we do?" I ask Damien who has collapsed back in the seat. His eyes are closed and he is massaging his shoulder. When he moves his hand away, I catch a glimpse of puckered skin through the shirt. The bullet wound is already healed. "I have so many questions."

"I'm sure you do. But not ones you want the answers to right now." Damien's eyes pop open and he doesn't mask the fire flickering there. Normally navy-blue, orange, and yellow flames dance in the irises, and I'm quick to look away.

"Is it going to hurt?" I ask.

"What?" His voice is soft, right in my ear and I try not to shiver. Dick or Doug glances at us from the rearview mirror, and then quickly looks away when Damien gives him an almost imperceptible nod. I focus on learning how to shift the gears of the bus when I ask him my next question.

"When I die, is it going to hurt?" I ask Death. I turn in my seat so I can look him right in the face. He smiles at me and shakes his head, unable, or not willing to answer me. "Are you going to be the one to do it?" I press. There are some things a person can sense. I think now, in the face of my death, I know without a shadow of a doubt, that is what is coming for me.

"No. I don't take lives. I just reap souls when it's their time." Damien's voice is almost a whisper, and my Grim Reaper waits for my reaction. I thought I'd shout, scream, beg, cry. I don't want to die. At least, I think I don't want to die. There are things I'm supposed to accomplish in my life, right? That's what we tell ourselves, that we lived our best lives, and we gave it our all, so we are supposed to be okay when the big dirt nap comes.

Except, what if we didn't give it our all and we still have things to do? What then? Do we get a second chance in the afterlife when all is said and done? If death is the next greatest adventure, what comes next for the people who didn't accomplish everything they needed to in this lifetime?

So many questions pop into my mind and are subsequently drowned out by the whirl of the tires of the bus, and the hysterical sobs of the kids. It's funny how one moment, a person can be content with floating along in life, dreaming of what is and what may be, and then something happens to completely ground them in their immediate existence. Isn't that the point of the existential quote about being present in the moment and all that bullshit? I've never been great with championing for the internet memes, and yet here I am, all present and shit.

I stand up, not knowing what the Hell I'm doing, and turn to the kids. "All right you little shi-uh, kiddos, we're going to figure this out and get you safe and sound

home to your family-um..." I trail off when Damien tugs on my arm and shakes his head. "We're going to get you to safety. Then we'll figure out where to go from there."

None of the little imps look assured, which is crap considering we just rescued them from being tortured by a gang of Nuns, who by the way, are now riding adjacent to the bus and attempting to level pistols and guns at the windows.

"Everyone get down!" I shout. The kids hit the deck when the first volley of fire reigns down on us. It's going to be difficult for the Nuns to maintain their bikes, and continue firing at us without causing an accident. But there's no saying what will happen when we finally pull over, and what deadly force they can bring down on us. Well, some of us. I glance at Damien whose arm is now fully healed. He's going to be a hard one to kill. I refuse to consider calling him a Hellhound. There's no need for an existential crisis and questioning everything I have ever known to be real and true at the present moment.

"Dick!" I shout over the screams of the kids.

"I'm Doug, damn it!" He hollers back. Well, that answers one question.

"Aim for the Nuns!" I can't believe I just told someone to purposefully hit and run over a gang of biker Nuns.

Doug swerves, clipping the bike of one of the Nuns, who does an end over end, thus ensuring her ghastly death and I cling to the back of the seat as he aims for another one.

It's inevitable. Doug takes out the head Nun on my beautiful FXR3 Harley Davidson. I watch in the back windows as it explodes on the highway, and I want to weep for my glimpse into the life of freedom, even if it was for one moment.

Doug continues driving and slowly thins out the onslaught, but not all of them. The woman who threw holy water at me remains elusive. I don't register where we are until Doug pulls into the Sloshed Sloth Bar & Grill and Lowell comes running out of the wooden doors. Seeing the remaining Nuns, about five of them still shooting at us and screaming, he ducks and takes cover behind a beat-up old Chevy Camero sitting in the driveway.

Doug brakes and the bus lurches in the driveway, almost hitting the steps leading up to the bar as the remaining Nuns come to a screeching halt next to us. Most of them are out of ammunition but circling in the parking lot.

"Stay here!" I shout at the kids, not that they are going to make a run for it. I motion for Doug to open the doors, and I creep down the steps, using the glass doors as cover to take stock of our situation. Sister Sarah as I've dubbed her in my head, because if someone is trying to kill me they need a name, the nasty one with the holy water parks her bike, and the remaining Nuns follow suit, parking alongside her.

"Give us the kids." She calls to the bus.

"Or what? You'll kill us all? Seriously get a new villain line. This one is tired!" I shout back at her.

The response I receive is a bullet to the glass in the bus's door, and it rains down on my head. I'm such a smartass sometimes. Too much for my own good, I think.

I motion for Lowell to stay where he is. He's giving me the look, the one which says he's about to do some heroic bullshit or something. If we can outlast the Nuns, then we can outlast the remaining bullets.

It only takes a few more moments for the Nuns to retreat, given the fact they are out of bullets. I have no doubt they will be back. Now that their numbers are depleted, with the majority of them are splattered across the highway, I'm not sure with what reinforcements they will come back with, but the funny thing about fanatics is they always have a backup plan which is crazier than their first plan. Not only have we taken out their leader, although I am beginning to suspect Sister Sarah called most of the shots, we've also seriously jeopardized their ticket to Heaven, and burnt down their home.

If I had a proper home I'd be pretty mad about it too. Shoot up a bus full of kids mad? Maybe not. But there's no banking on what these psychos are capable of. In any event, it definitely means we need to relocate and fast before they return. An added bonus to this insane game of live or die is the drug dealer coming back tomorrow, expecting us to have sold these kids on the black market to turn a profit and repay him.

How did my life come to this? If someone had asked me yesterday if I'd be riding with a bunch of demonic devil dogs to stop a group of insane biker Nuns and outrun a drug lord, well, I'd probably have thought I was passed out drunk and dreaming, but even then I wouldn't have believed myself either.

What am I going to do about my Grim Reaper, demon dude? As if sensing my inner turmoil, Damien, or whoever he is, because I'm struggling with associating him as the son of the Devil, reaches out to touch my arm, thinks better of it, and drops his hand. The noticeable look he's giving me, the one which screams, "look at me," I catch from my peripheral vision. I make it a point to purposefully not look him in the eye. Can the Grim Reaper kill you with one look? I'd enjoyed the mythology courses in college. Those I'd miss the most, but it's one thing to read about mythology and magic. It's another for it to actually exist. If Satan is real, and his son is riding shotgun on a school bus with me, how many other myths and legends are real? Does it all add up? If the rest of them are real too, that's a level of math in my head on a scale of one to nope, I'm not sure I can cope with.

"We need to get out of here," I call to Lowell from the other side of the door. "Make a run for it before they come back, then we can figure out where to go from here." I peer around the door to be sure the Nuns are gone and beckon him over with my arm. He glances up the road and I can see the wheels turning in his head as he calculates how long it will take him to run across the wide expanse of the parking lot. But even those few seconds will leave him a wide-open target, even though the Nuns drove off down the highway. There's no saying how long of a shot they can pop off if they see him.

Lowell sprints, and I race up the steps of the bus to give him room to dive in and hit the deck.

"Are you hit? Did they fire?" It's difficult to tell with the screaming children on the bus. Not that I blame them. I'm screaming too, even if it is on the inside.

"No, I'm good." Lowell glances up at the kids and his mouth drops. Which is gross because who knows what has gone down on this bus and what sticky substance my right palm is currently mashed in. "I thought the plan was to steal drugs not..."

"Yeah, there's some explaining to do." I give Damien a look this time. He gives one jerk of his head to the side and I opt to not press the matter in front of Lowell. I'm not about to piss off a demon when I'm still having qualms about inviting Lowell onto the bus for a joy ride with Death. I kind of wish we could drive to the nearest police station, drop the little kidlets off, and then say screw it when it comes to repaying Mr. Suits. I signed up for powder pilfering, not babysitting destitute tots. The problem with the local police station is, how will we explain them? We can't. Not if we're going to save our butts from not just angry Nuns, but drug kingpins too.

"The camp." Lowell makes the suggestion and I nod. It's our best shot right now to regroup and figure out a plan. Lowell instructs Doug where to drive, and then kneels, taking his first good look around the bus at Dick, Charles, Damien, and the kids. "Are any of them hurt?"

"I have no idea. I didn't get close enough to them to find out. One of them had a snot bubble." I explain as best as I can, but it still doesn't seem adequate for him because the angry slash of his mouth tells me I maybe should have at least checked. I babysit his brother. That's enough for me. I don't know what to do with this lot.

"Camp is only a couple of hours away. We can stop at a rest stop so they can go to the bathroom if we need to." Lowell begins making the rounds with the kids, and I assplant myself back in the seat while Doug drives. I don't have the energy or the wherewithal to help him check out the little niblets.

Thinking of niblets, it makes me wonder what kind of doggy treats Hellhounds snack on. Are these kids even safe with Damien, Dick, Doug, and Charles around? Probably not, but I have to surmise they wouldn't have taken the time to bust them out of the Cathedral, only to go canine crunchy on the kiddos. They have to have an ulterior motive for wanting to get involved in all this. Somehow, it involves my death, of that I'm sure of. I consider asking Damien, but he whispers so only I can hear, and Doug as he glances in the rearview mirror at us, "Not here and now."

I give him a nod and fall silent as we drive along. There aren't any rest stops that are suitable along the way, and given how scared the kids are, by the time we get to the camp, it's baths for all, due to some pretty stinky, wet accidents.

There aren't enough clothes for the kids to change into, so I do my part when Lowell instructs me to hit the laundry room. The camp itself is small. It is one main room downstairs with a kitchen, living room area, and a single dining room table against the window. Off to the side is a tiny bathroom so at most it is Lowell and one to two kids at a time occupying it. He has some of the older girls help the younger girls get cleaned up, and the rest of the kids take turns climbing like squirrels up into the loft where there are a couple of beds. The one-bedroom downstairs is small, Gigi's bedroom, and the unmistakable smell of baked cookies full of love, permeates the air. It has been a long time since anyone has been up here to the camp, but some places retain that atmosphere, even after the person who created it is long gone. It's the kind of place

I used to dream about as a child, a home for Fiona and me, with a Mum and Nan who loved us.

This is as close as I've ever gotten to that dream. The laundry room consists of washing clothes down by the river. Damien joins me as I bend over and scrub clothes, using the only soap I could find.

There's going to be some red, itchy bums from the use of the Borax soap I have to work with. I grin at the idea of squirming little kids, then I give the clothes an extra rinse because I might not like kids, but I'm not a huge, ginormous, vindictive asshole.

"When am I going to die?" I cut right to the chase. Damien makes no move to help me with the laundry, not that I expect him to. A Hellhound doing laundry? Unlikely in this reality or the next.

He remains silent, and I expect him to give me some line about not being allowed to tamper with Fate or something like that. "Your name was drawn from the well. That typically means within a week."

I consider this. A whole week. That's a lot of time to get some shit done. But what? My Mum is dead, the Andersons aren't a blip on the radar anymore. No use crying about the college dropout letter either. Zeke is a lost cause, and yet Lowell... I consider the potential of what could have been, and take a cold hard look at what is. I was never good enough for Lowell, and I think we both know it. The only thing that remains is Fiona. Is a week enough time to make amends? I could call her I guess. I could make the drive down to New Orleans, knock on her door, and, what? Hope she doesn't slam it in my face? Hope she doesn't slam me in the face? That's the worst that could happen. Could I make it through an apology knowing it would be some of the last things I ever say to her?

"What well?" Of all the things I could ask, cry about, scream, and rage about, the logistics of how a Grim Reaper gets a name seems to be the one thing that is stuck in my craw.

"It's not important. A well of names, so to speak." I wring out the current, crappy pair of pants and start on the next one. It's funny how even in the last hour, a person will cling to a reason to stay. They might not have done fuck-all during their lifetime, nothing of worth, but when the countdown commences, it's all about getting the last items on the to-do list of life done before one kicks it. I haven't given a damn about my life or anyone else's in a few years. Now, all of a sudden, here I am trying to do right by these kids, kids I don't even know or like. And dare I say, maybe Zeke, by the way of making sure Lowell doesn't have to clean up this mess?

"Fair enough." I don't let my voice crack. I don't know if that's like whatever the equivalent of catnip would be for a dog to a Hellhound. Fear. Sadness. Regret. All of these things are something one thinks about in the face of their death. Don't let the dying bullshit. They don't have time. But the feelings don't fully matter in the end. It's what they choose to do with them in the end, to help reassure their loved ones left behind are going to be okay. I think maybe that's an act of selflessness. It's okay to feel. It's expected, useful, encouraged. But so is considering the feelings of others.

Damien touches my arm as I continue working. "Catriona."

I try and hide the emotions warring on my face from a furrowed brow of frustration, to a small smile of satisfaction at some of the stupid shit I've done in my life. Contentment for the fact I had at least been accepted to college eases the creases and lines around my eyes. And a slack-jawed moment of wistfulness passes through me as I remember the stunning sight of this cabin here on the river when Zeke first brought me to meet his Gigi.

"I'm assuming, since you are a Hellhound, I didn't do enough." I make the statement, and it takes all I can, knowing I'm going to accept whatever feelings pop up now that I know the end is near. Had I not stood by and watched my life pass before me with little to no regard for it, I might not be faced with a Reaper from Hell. We as humans rarely consider whether it will be Heaven or Hell when we punch the ticket. Brought up as religious folks, most of us assume Heaven because we accepted the faith and all that. So what happens when we don't put our money where our mouth is, and we're all talk and no walk in the line-up for the Jesus parade? We end up facing the consequences of those actions. Not many people have a front-row seat on the highway to Hell with a preemptive glimpse at what's coming down the road.

"There's a way to fix it." Damien let's go of my arm. This makes me pause and lookup. His eyes, navy-blue with sparks of flames in the pupils are staring steadily at me.

"Why would you want me to fix it? Why would you help me?" I don't want to die. I don't want to die and suffer for an eternity. Yet here I am with this mouth, questioning the very tether which could save me from all that because my salty-suspicious ass can't accept the gift from the horse's mouth. Damn it, me. Damn me all to Hell in a handbasket.

"There are things coming, things which I can't..." Damien squats down next to me and grabs a pair of soiled pants.

Huh. Will wonders never cease? Hellhounds do help do laundry.

"It's cool. Cosmic stuff probably isn't okay to talk about in the featured program, right?" I shrug it off, and Damien drops the pants.

"It isn't funny, Catriona." His voice is low, and when I look again, his eyes are completely ablaze. "You need to take this seriously."

"I am." My voice is soft, cushioning the emotions from cracking through. "A week isn't a lot of time to process, you know?" I finish with the pair of pants I'm working on, finally the last one. I wash my own wrinkled hands and wonder if my eternal torture will be the back-breaking task of rinsing out poopy pants forever.

I guess there could be worse punishments. There could be better ones too.

I stand and crack my back by leaning as far over as I can.

"Your jokes say otherwise."

"My jokes mask the fact that I'm trying not to run away from all of this nonsense screaming and crying. You're a Reaper, I'm sure you've seen all kinds of reactions to your presence. Would it be easier for you if I did do that?" I pause. He doesn't move or say anything. "That's what I thought. Now come on, whatever happens after I die, I'll deal with it then. I guess I finally have too much shit to do, to worry about until then.

Like, getting these kids to safety." I pause and glare when I see a slight twitch of Damien's lips. If he dares smile at me now, knowing all the secrets he knows and not sharing with the class, I'm likely to punch him. "Go ahead and say something stupid like, "that's the spirit" because so help me by whatever Gods do exist, I'll knock your teeth out."

I grab a bundle of wet clothes and squelch my way away from him in wet boots towards the cabin. His laughter chases me and grates on my nerves as much as my now damp clothes.

The kids are grateful for clean clothes, but whimper about them being wet once I hand them back. Lowell has the quick reaction to shove me outside before I implode. There's no way I can tell him the depths of my emotions. But he's a perceptive guy, able to tell something is up. He is assuming it is our current situation, and he couldn't be farther from the truth, but I let him prattle on before I do something ridiculous like cry.

"We're going to figure this out, Catriona. There has to be a way to get these kids to the authorities without..." His words are lost on deaf ears as I watch the river flow by. Here in Eden, Utah, it is as much a utopia as I suspect the actual Eden from the Bible is. The lush, green river banks are swollen almost full by the crystal blue water. It isn't like most rivers which are a muddy brown. The sun reflects off the surface making the water look like it is topped with diamonds floating along. This next bit, the part about leaving, doing what I am going to do, to do the right thing for once, is going to be so hard.

"Hmm? Yeah, we can get in touch with the authorities tomorrow, Lowell. There's no use trying to move all these kids tonight." I look up and smile at him. His eyes are warm and reassured. The crow's feet and fatigue around his eyes relax a little.

"You don't think the rest of those Nuns will come after us?"

"Nah. It's too dark. Besides, their numbers are shot to Hell and they need to regroup. Even if they knew where to find us, it would be risky trying to ambush us on unfamiliar turf." Well, look at me all tactical girl?

"You are something else, Catriona." Lowell moves in slowly, giving me every opportunity to push him away. I wait, ready for what's coming, tilting my head up. Can this be happening? Something I've fantasized about for a few years, the one kiss which should be perfect in every woman's lifetime?

"We probably ought to get inside in case the Nuns are waiting for us in the dark." Damien's voice cuts through my moment of euphoria. It is dangerous, with a hint of menace as Lowell's hand drops quickly to his side. He'd been reaching up to cup my cheek, a gentle caress I've been dying to experience with him. That's the keyword, dying. I have been all along, from the moment I was born, like every other human. Only now, I am keenly aware of the fact that hope dies with me sometime this week, of ever receiving that perfect kiss. Humans hold onto hope. The lucky ones believe in the magic of it. Then there are the assholes like me who don't give it much thought because it isn't realistic or practical, and are now faced with having to own the fact that hope is as dead as I am when Hell comes calling this week.

Lowell retreats inside as Damien stomps up the steps. The bitterness in my voice is unmasked and pitches my tone low as I chew the inside of my cheek as I speak to him. "You couldn't give me that one moment?"

"There will be plenty of moments if you just..."

"Yeah, sure. Give me the line of living life to the fullest now. I'm sure it's going to be a lot of help over the next week." I swallow hard, forcing the lump of bitterness down my throat, along with the tears. I push past Damien and his hand reaches out and snakes around my waist, spinning me around to face him.

Cupping my cheek like Lowell would have is one experience, both hands going up to tilt my head back by the nape of my neck, and one resting half on my chin, half on my throat as he backs me up against the wall of the cabin is an experience which is hotter than Hell. Damien's mouth is on mine before I can spit out something cruel and venomous, and I'd like to say I resist temptation, but our Father who art in Heaven, your grandson has got some game...

I simmer in the kiss as Damien's tongue darts out and my lips part, accepting the experience. It's a war of life versus death in this kiss. It's the kind of kiss that makes a woman question the fabric of existence. Where does he begin and I end? Where do I begin and he ends? His hard body is pressed against mine, pinning me to the wall, and I'm okay with it on a scale of there's going to be Hell to pay when someone catches us out here like this.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, his hands drop to cup my ass when I hop up and wrap my legs around his waist. I moan when he does that swirly thing with his tongue against my lips, unable to move, trapped between him and the cabin.

Cabin. Kids. Crazy Nun people.

The thoughts kick me in the mental petutie and I begin clawing at his shoulders. I want the chaos of Damien to stop and continue at the same time. But what X-rated crap are we about to pull off in public?

"Damifrmphhhh," I mumble into his lips as the kiss continues. I smack his shoulders, trying to get Death's attention as he continues to lavish his on me.

"Hmph." He mumbles into my mouth.

"We have to stop before this is taken to an illegal place. Not just a Hellbound place." Okay, so judging which would be worse is not really in the cards right now, given the state of arousal I'm in. My jeans are uncomfortable. "Letgoerfme."

Damien drops me. I slide on my ass down the cabin wall and bruise my tailbone, kind of drops me. There's something to be said for Hellhound chivalry. Either it sucks because he could have set me down easy, or it's bang...nope, I will not use the word bang for the foreseeable future given the state of both our arousals, currently which his is eye level, rather it's spot on because I said stop and he immediately did. I'm sure there's some grey area in this somewhere where both parties can be comfortable and not with a broken tailbone and a bruised ego like his.

"You're the kind of woman who doesn't need to be kissed like she's breakable. You aren't breakable, Catriona. You never were. You just forgot that." Damien's

breathing is heavy as he stands with his hands on his hips, regaining control of his libido.

“What kind of woman am I then? Given my death is impending which means I’m about to kick it on the lid of life this week? That seems pretty breakable to me.” I make no move to get up. Either because I have no energy or my butt really is broken. I haven’t decided which is the case yet.

“You’re the kind of woman who should be kissed stupid.” His words come out as a growl and it makes me wonder if I just kissed Cujo, or the man standing in front of me.

“Didn’t take much then, did it?” Mic drop on roasting myself. It does the trick though. I have this annoying toxic trait of pissing off the people around me so they leave. Damien stomps away into the cabin and leaves me sitting on the ground, massaging my backside and my remaining shreds of pride.

Two, yellow eyes stare at me from the bushes. “Are you a Hellcat, or something else, Captain Asshole? You might as well fess up too. Everyone’s got skin in the weirdness game today.” I call out to my adopted cat who has been following me around everywhere. I wonder if C. A. is like an omen or something, a portent of my death. I expected crows or ravens, something poetic. It makes sense it is a God-sent demonic entity from Hell who loves no one but expects loyal subjects to worship its standoffish ass, and occasionally deliver a head rub before being bitten into rabies-induced insanity.

I haven’t met very nice kitties in my lifetime of trailer parks and foster homes. Captain Asshole is no different. I think it is a Cosmic screw-up because it is a cross between a cat and a raccoon, which shouldn’t happen given genetics or species cross-breeding or whatever. A few hours ago I would have said Hellhounds can’t exist, in my last week of life I’m learning to be an accepting bitch.

I get up and try to coax C.A. along for what I’ve decided I’m about to do. I glance at the cabin and the low lights flicker in the windows as they are dimmed for the kids to go to bed. C.A. remains staring at me from the bushes, so I wave it off with the middle finger and creep my way to the bus.

Doug left the keys in it for a quick escape, and it isn’t long before I’m trundling down the highway, the sight of the Hellhounds and Lowell in the rearview mirror shouting after me. I know I have a limited window to get this crap over with before they figure out a means to chase after me, but I dial-up Zeke as I drive down the Devil’s Highway.

“Hey Jackass, call Mr. Suits and tell him I have his money and to meet me at the Sloshed Sloth Bar & Grill.”

The next call I make is to the local police department. “Hi Officer, I have two crimes to report. You need to send a crap-ton of police to...” I spout off the location of the cabin. “There are a bunch of men with some kids who have been kidnapped. The kids are in trouble and need some help.”

The dispatcher begins squawking in my ear but I cut her off. “The second crime to go down is at the Sloshed Sloth Bar and Grill. There’s a drug deal going down and I need you to come and arrest me.”

Before the dispatcher can ask me stupid questions like my name and all that crap, I hang up the phone. I'm well aware kidnapped kids take precedence over a drug deal, but I'm banking on having enough time to bullshit my way through this in order for the police to show up and nab us all. Lowell will manage to talk his way out of my erratic scheme. He doesn't have a record, so I'm sure he can come up with a likely reason for harboring the kids. The Hellhounds, not so much. I'm sure there are rap sheets as long as my arm, but being all magic and shit, I'm sure there's a Red Rover trick up their sleeves where they can send bullshit on over to the cop's superiors.

My plan has gone smoothly so far, unlike the screech of the gears as it takes me a while to learn the shifting. It was one thing to watch Doug drive the bus, it's another to put it into practice myself. It's also too bad by the time I pull into the bar, the remaining five Nuns are waiting for me in the parking lot.

But I have a plan for them too. One I've been considering for a while as I drive in silence. Peace is overrated. It's a joy to have, and then it is shattered by the screams of the biker Nuns, as I ram the bus into the remaining lineup of five parked motorcycles, and come to a short, sudden stop when I hit the railing of The Sloshed Sloth Bar & Grill.

There's blood, guts, Nun parts, and motorcycle parts everywhere, thus securing my one-way ticket to Hell when Damien comes knocking again. There will be Hell to pay for sure, and it's a glorious nightmare when I exit the bus to survey my murderous handiwork.

Chapter 8

It's one thing to plan to ambush a bunch of Nuns. It is another to run them all down and leave their corpses in the parking lot. But here I am, in all my vindictive, murdering glory. I take note of the fact when I walk through the chaos, surveying the destruction I've caused, these ex-communicated biker Nuns came packed with semi-automatic assault rifles, grenades, and acid too, based on the corrosion the busted bottles cause from being run over. I throw up a few times. Roadkill is one thing to look at, hit and run victims another. I've secured my one-stop to the big house downtown Hell for sure based on what I've done here. No redemption required based on my actions. I do pause for a moment and wonder if I've managed to save all those kids though. These Nuns wouldn't have distinguished them from us, kids or adults, and the kids would have been hurt or killed in the process of gunning us down.

I don't know if it makes what I've done here acceptable or not. I'm not the judge of that, I guess. I expect Damien to pop out of the darkness now that full night has fallen. When there's nothing but the sound of crickets, I make my way to the side of the porch, stomach still heaving, and hop up on the rail and climb over it since the bus is currently blocking the steps.

I kick in the door like in the movies, which is unnecessary because it is unlocked. Drink glasses remain on the counter and tables, and it looks like Marty made tracks to get out of here when the Nuns came calling the first time. I have a brief moment when I wonder if their rhetoric is more substantial than my, survival-of-the-fittest persona when I arrived. Does their push for atonement and redemption make my current circumstances any less relevant, or vice versa? That's the problem with the human condition and religion. Everyone claims to know the answer, to have the existential questions figured out, but none of us get to know what plays out in the afterlife until we begin living that afterlife. It falls in line with the chicken and egg question, but in this case, who was right and who was wrong is the order of the day.

Speaking of, I order myself up another bottle of whiskey and wait out Zeke's drug lord employer to show up. For every time I consider who will show up first, the Hellhounds with Hell to pay for leaving them, or Mr. Suits and company, decides whether I take a sip of whiskey from the glass I poured or the bottle.

Neither matters because I know it's a can of a crap storm I've opened up, but if I'm going to die, it's going to at least be going out doing some stupid shit in the name of living my best life.

I raise the glass and toast my one regret. Fiona. I fish out my cellphone and hit dial before my buzz can whisper in my ear that it is a colossally bad idea.

"Catriona? Is that you? Are you okay? Where are you? I'll come get you." I hit end on the screen and shove the phone back in my pocket on mute and turn the vibrate feature off because I know she will call back.

I finish my glass of whiskey knowing that my sister, despite all the evil, horrible shit I said to her, still loves me enough to care. It makes the regret burn even hotter in my chest, but there's no going back from this plan now. It will be worth it, knowing I'm

doing this for something. I feel like I could cop to the fact that it's noble and for the kids, but that would be a lie. This is for Fiona. So when Mr. Suits doesn't get his money, even if Zeke weasels his way out of it, they don't come for her. She somehow managed to make something of herself, given the crapshoot of life we were dealt. She's a nurse, or aide, or something helping other people. I've never helped anyone in my life that is substantial enough to be weighed on the judgment scale. This is my last hurrah.

Lights flash in the parking lot and I remain seated at the bar as the car doors slam. One, two, three, four. Mr. Suits only had two henchmen, so why four?

The answer is revealed soon enough when Zeke is shoved in through the door a few moments later. I catch his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. He's pale, scared, and every bit as much of a coward out to save his own ass as I expect. It doesn't surprise me that Suits found him and kidnapped him, thinking he'd make good leverage.

"Where's my money, bitch?" Mr. Suits comes in after Zeke. His dudes hold a gun on Zeke as they stand around looking all bad-cinema movie, bad guy vibes.

"I got a Benji right here." I fish the one-hundred-dollar bill from my pocket and slap it on the bar. Mr. Suits remains silent for a moment.

"You think this is a game?" His voice is cruel. The kind of cruel-filled menace one hears when the person is about to kick a puppy that piddled on the floor. The puppy doesn't know any better. The abuser doesn't care.

"No. But do you think we were ever going to get that money to you in time? Drugs, maybe. Kids, what were you thinking?" I spin on the barstool to face him. I wonder how often this man has ever been called on his bullshit. Probably never. "You were never going to let us live, even if we did sell those kids into trafficking?"

"What happened outside?" Mr. Suits, clearly buying himself a moment to think of something suave, parries my question.

"More bad people getting in line to tell me what a shit human being I have been." The answer is simple enough. He doesn't need to know the details. I don't need to know the details behind the motivations of radical, religious fanatics. I've never understood it, and I don't intend to. I have had less important, other stuff to not focus on in my life to avoid the nastiness of this world. I've lived it enough.

"Catriona shut the Hell up." Zeke's first attempt at making a play in this game is as weak as his constitution. I ignore him, along with Suits.

"Answer me. You were never going to let us win, so why the game? Why send us to get those kids when you knew we couldn't sell them in twenty-four hours to make a profit enough to pay you back?" I don't know why I'm stuck on the motivation when it doesn't matter. But if I'm going to be dealing with an eternity of bad people in Hell, might as well start learning their habits now.

"Because I could." Mr. Suits honesty, although terrifying and elitist in nature, isn't completely unexpected.

"The cops are on their way to the cabin to rescue the kids. I didn't expect you until morning to be fair. I figured you were nearby. I didn't count on Zeke still being around and stupid enough to put himself in a position of being kidnapped and used as leverage, but the cops will be here as soon as the kids are safe. So what now? Killing us

doesn't solve your IRS problems, and puts a target on your back for murder. So, unless you have a reasonable plan to pay back Zeke's debts..." I trail off, letting him add up the math.

His math and mine are two different processes because he gives me that killer-cold smile, like a viper ready to strike, and in that instant, Zeke takes the opportunity to rat out of this maze of death by kicking

his captor in the gonads and making tracks for the door. The other brute shoots wildly at him and misses. It's when we hear the bus start-up and back over a few Nun parts and motorcycle parts that we know he's made it safe and sound.

Mr. Suits advances on me, and I remain where I'm seated.

I'd like to think in my final hour I don't cry or plead, but that just isn't the case. Like snot bubble kid, I can't keep the tears held back any longer, which kicks off the sinuses in a big streaming way. I was supposed to have up to a week. I'd be lying if I told myself I'd actually get that amount of time. I wait for Damien to burst through the door and save the day, but he doesn't.

I do the only thing I know how at this moment. I beg for a life that hasn't been worth living up until this point. My one saving grace is that I refuse to get down on my knees. I'm a petty bitch that way mucking up the stereotypical bad guy scene. "Please, I'll figure it out. I'll find a way other than kids, anything but kids." Their innocence means more to me than my own life. It's protecting the innocence of childhood I was supposed to have, but never did. These kids will be screwed up for a long time, but at least now they have a chance to turn it all around. Hindsight is twenty-twenty in the fact that I had every opportunity too, and I didn't take it until now.

I smile through my tears. "Please. I'll work for you. I'll make it right. Please don't kill me" I don't know who I am begging, him or the man who appears in the corner by the bar just as Mr. Suits takes the gun from one of his henchmen and levels it at my head. Two yellow eyes, my sins, Satan, both stare at me, waiting for me to die. "For Fiona." That is my last thought when the gun blasts in my face.

When the bullet comes I don't feel it at first. No words of reassurance accompany it, only the faint shouting of what I think is Damien's voice and that of the man at the bar. He stands over me, and the splitting headache begins, the one I fear I will suffer with for an eternity.

His eyes are no longer yellow like Captain Asshole, but navy-blue like his son. His skin is dark, but his smile is warm. Not the blazing-in-the-fires-of-Hell warm, but like a cat who just got the cream.

"Despite warning my son not to interfere, here you are, Catriona." Satan smiles down at me. He reminds me of an actor, Idris something.

"Interfere?" I croak the words, not daring to move because my brain is splattered on the floor around me in a halo of gore, and I'm not sure if I try to sit up, it won't smear my thoughts in the grooves of the wooden planks. There are so precious few of them right now.

Mr. Suits and his goons make haste to the door, as the sounds of sirens approach in the distance.

"Indeed, he did. You won't remember the last twenty-four hours, only that you tried to save your ex-boyfriend from the drug dealers, and it went horribly wrong. That is Damien's punishment for interfering." Satan informs me.

"Not remember, but..." I can't finish the sentence, I feel so tired, so weak. Light swims around the peripheral of my eyes, growing dimmer and I know it isn't long now.

"He meant well by giving you this second chance, Catriona. One day you will remember that. You will remember the things we do for love." Satan reaches out and his fingers give me that light caress I so desperately craved before I died. He closes my eyes and I let my mind rest where my body does on the floor of the Sloshed Sloth Bar & Grill. Is my mortal sin that of Sloth, always standing by and doing nothing when I could step in and interfere as I did tonight, for the greater good? If Satan says anything else, I don't hear it as my soul finally finds the rest it has been looking for my whole life. It's a rest a nap would never fix, and I welcome it and the darkness after blinking away two yellow eyes in front of my vision.

Dying is easy. It's waking up which is tedious. I'm not sure I want to disturb this peace of nothingness. When I do finally wake, it is to a woman standing over me. She reminds me of a lumberjack in her plaid shirt, denim jacket, and blue jeans.

"Welcome my little Hellion. By now I'm sure you are aware of what option Satan has given you?" Her voice is as jacked as her muscles under her shirt are, and it booms out in the cavernous space around me. This time, I do sit up and look around. I'm in a vast, garage with alleys and lanes filled with parked vehicles. A MacLaren rests a few rows down, and the remnants of an FXR3 Harley Davidson. Aww, Sugar, if only someone would fix you up!

On the far end of the garage, a huge stone wall towers up farther than I can see. I'm grateful my brain doesn't fall out of the back of my skull. When I find Zeke, I'm going to kill him.

"Options?" I push myself up to stand and she smiles at me.

"Aren't you a clever kitty, kitty? Yes, I think a nice Hellcat would do for you." The woman reaches out like I remember Satan doing, but instead, she gives my head the rub all cats love and loathe. It tingles for a moment before I jerk away, much like a cat, an asshole cat I distinctly remember adopting, would do. "I'm Auntie J, by the way. I'll be your handler here in Hell should you choose to work for your redemption and atone for your sins rather than suffer. You've been given a rare opportunity not many are offered."

That word, opportunity reminds me of something recently. Someone else said I had an opportunity, the potential to do something, or someone did something for me. I rub my forehead where Auntie J touched it. I can't remember.

"Atone for my sins?" I parrot her statement.

"Yes, if you accept your job working for my husband, Satan, you can atone for your sins and redeem your soul so you can go to Heaven." Auntie J explains. I don't get into the whole, Satan is her husband schtick. My headache is too much full throb fest for that added tidbit.

“Mm’k,” I mumble, still looking around at Hell which seems to be a giant garage. As if reading my thoughts, Auntie J chuckles.

“Oh no, sweetness. This is just the garage. For your assignment, you can choose any number of vehicles here. If you want to fix that bike up even, have at it and use it. I think you’ll like that bit if you choose to use Sugar for your assignment. As for Hell itself, there are nine levels to Hell. I’ll show you each one in time, but for now, the logistics of the job include, riding out to collect the marked souls of the damned when I tell you to, and returning them here to Hell. You will be a Grim Reaper of sorts.” Auntie J moves to a far door, and I follow her blindly. “I’ll get you introduced to those you will interact with the most, and then your first assignment will be to go and collect, Leona. She has potential and opportunity too.”

Leona? Who the Hell is she? I guess it doesn’t matter right now. I am figuring out this job comes with some perks I guess, so I’m not going to knock them. I’m also too stunned to argue with anything Auntie J is saying. It doesn’t fully make sense yet. The highway to Hell is a winding road, and I have a lot to learn about the twists and turns which led me here.

We traverse through the overcrowded Level of Limbo where people are waiting in line for their punishment. They remain stuck for eternity, belonging neither here nor wherever else souls get the opportunity to go. It’s funny that my opportunity is so vastly different. A group of screaming Nuns is herded by, and the guards ushering them out of the rest of the crowd remind me of wraiths in raggedy bathrobes. It’s what’s inside the hood which makes me shudder and look away, not sure I want to ask what they are. One of the Nuns recognizes me, but I have no idea who she is. She’s screaming about redemption and ruining her chance at Heaven. I figure, if a Nun can’t make it to Heaven on her own, given her vocation, banking on my assistance probably wasn’t in her best interest. So why do I not remember Cosmically screwing up a Nun’s chance to get into Heaven?

With more questions than answers, and a splitting headache throbbing with every step I take, we climb into an elevator set between two stone pillars and ping our way down through the levels. I try hard not to look out the side panels at the torture going on at each level. When the elevator finally stops, I swallow hard, wondering what sort of torture I’m about to face, but we step off the elevator into what appears to be a frat house, a dorm room by the looks of it. Three men, two with silver collars on their necks, another a sophisticated-looking butler, all sit around on leather couches in front of the t.v. Playing tables for pool, pong, and cards are scattered around the room. It reminds me of a prison of sorts, and the obvious twins with collars make me feel like I’ve walked into a Dog Pound, where I’m the stray cat, the treat, and they are the salivating mutts ready to take a chunk out of me.

Auntie J doesn’t bother with pleasantries to introduce them first. When a door opens on the far side of the Dog Pound, a man, tall and muscular, with navy-blue eyes with flames for pupils exits the door. He pauses for a moment, then gives me a devastating smile full of sympathy, mirth, arrogance, and a touch of pity? I don’t need anyone’s pity. I never did, and I don’t know. I instantly dislike him.

“This is my son, Damien.” Auntie J makes the introduction, but I could care less. I’m torn by the chaotic feelings raging in me. In one instant, I hate him. In another, he seems so familiar, like in another life we met somewhere. But whoever this man is, he’s hot as Hell and he knows it. Which drives me crazy. I spent a lifetime standing by and letting my ex-boyfriend Zeke, screw with my destiny until I ended up here, having to atone for my sins in the first place. I feel claws begin to pierce my knuckles. Cat claws. When I look up at his smiling face, I see it through a haze of fire in my own eyes. My demon side is a screaming banshee of a pussycat, raging to get out and fight dirty in the Dog Pound. It’s every Hellhound and Hellcat for themselves. If Damien gets in my way in the afterlife of redeeming my soul, hot as Hell or not, there’s going to be Hell to Pay.”

The End

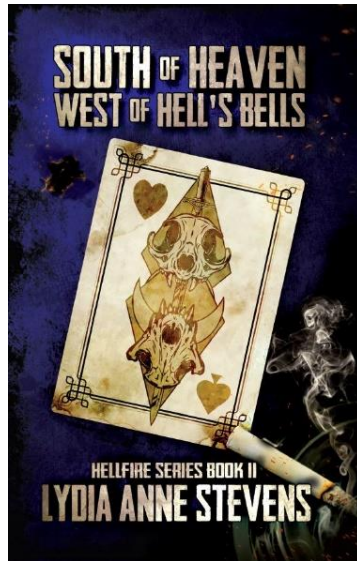
Lydia Anne Stevens

Be sure to check out:

[Highway to Hell: The Hell Fire Series, Book 1](#)

[South of Heaven, West of Hell's Bells: The Hell Fire Series, Book 2](#)

[Hell Hath No Fury Like A Mercenary Scorned: The Hell Fire Series, Book 3](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lydia Stevens is a full-time freelance Developmental Editor and Author. Having completed her Bachelor and Master's Degrees in Creative Writing and English, she then pursued an internship with a literary agency, Creative Media Agency and Anthem Press, an academic press based in London. Lydia has a passion for genre fiction—specifically fantasy and paranormal but enjoys working with a broad array of genres including romance, mystery, horror, science fiction, thriller, children's books, YA, and speculative fiction. For nonfiction, she enjoys working on memoirs and inspirational novels. She is a co-host of the newly founded podcast, REDinkwriters, where she brings her expertise in developmental editing and creative writing. When Lydia is not working on projects in the publishing industry, she enjoys spending time in her home taking care of her two “children,” her nine-year-old son, and her 86-year-old grandmother; along with her two cats, Sherlock Holmes and Sirius Black, and the newest addition to her family, her border collie mix, Savior.

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