

# A HELLISHLY HEATHEN HOLIDAY



# LYDIA ANNE STEVENS

Lydia Stevens

A Hellishly Heathen Holiday  
*The Hell Fire Series, A Christmas Novella*

*This novella takes place after the events of Highway to Hell: The Hell Fire Series Book 1*

By Lydia Anne Stevens

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Lydia Stevens

### Dedication

This book is dedicated to my Mum and Dad. All the years you spent as Santa Clause, you made the holidays magical, even if my brothers and I were a bunch of Heathens. I love you both!

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sandy Butchers, award-winning author of *The Singularian Grimoire Anthologies* and my fellow co-host of the REDink Writers Podcast. Sandy's graphic design work has been stunning, and I love all of the new rebranding she has helped me with for my social media, promo materials, and my book covers. Sandy, you've become one of my best friends through all of your support! We've got this, even if we don't know what the fuck we're doing! Much love to you!

I would like to thank Mark, my life coach. Without your support, this novella wouldn't have happened. I need someone to help me be accountable, and I really appreciate you!

Lydia Stevens

Additional Works

The Hell Fire Series

Hot As Hell to Pay: The Hell Fire Series, Prequel

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

"Happy Birthday Jesus." I read the words on the vanilla-frosted cake laid out on the table in the Dog Pound at the back of the room. Looking up, Dick and Doug stand on either side of me, grinning down at their handy work. "No."

Their faces fall, like I just kicked a puppy. Well, them – the Hellhounds, when they were Hellpuppies.

"Why not?" Dick or Doug asks. The fact a fully grown Hellhound knows how to pout is something no demon should have to deal with. Ever since becoming co-ruler of Hell, it has been one crazy antic after another with these two, always causing trouble and shenanigans. This holiday season being my first as a ruler of Hell, I'd expected something to pop up. Maybe not something this Ludacris, yet here I stand amidst black and red Happy Birthday balloons, a cake, streamers, and those little party noise-makers all laid out on the back table.

"Does Damien know you are up to this?" I glare at them both, never being able to tell which one is which. Dick and Doug being twins, wear matching silver collars of obedience they have hung with little silver bells so they can jingle all the fucking way onto my last nerve every time they walk in the door.

"No. That would defeat the point of this being a surprise part." Dick, I'm going to assume the one speaking is Dick. His dark eyes flash with humor, as he chucks his brother on the shoulder.

"Then the answer is absolutely not." I cross my arms in finite resolution, and the two squint at me, clearly accepting the task of challenging my authority.

"And if we do it anyway?" Doug dares to ask. Fire pops up in my eyes as my patience wears thin to the point of threadbare and I let all my nasty demon Hellcat threads hang out.

"You can't host a surprise birthday party, in Hell on Christmas for Damien's Uncle Jesus!" I throw my hands up. As if making that statement isn't enough, the two seem hell-bent on not understanding the ridiculousness of their actions.

"You still haven't answered us, why not?" Doug reiterates.

"Because, that's just, it's well..." I fish for a reason, any reason that might make sense because the whole thing is beyond stupid. "You just can't, ok? I haven't had time to settle into being co-ruler, I have enough demons up my ass with their demands to do this, that, and the other thing, and how the blazes do you propose we send an invitation to Uncle Jesus anyway? We can't just pop up to Heaven and say, Hey, wanna come hang? I don't think it works like that."

"Maybe not for you." Dick rubs his jaw, already thinking how to get past my veto on their party.

"Yeah, I'm starting to figure out there are certain privileges I'm not privy to at the moment, but that's going to change as soon as I get my hands around..." I trail off as said co-ruler comes sauntering through the door from the elevator leading to the rest of the levels of Hell.

“Get your hands around what?” Damien winks one of his navy-blue eyes at me as he strolls over, looks at all the decorations and the cake, then swipes the side of it and licks the frosting off his finger. He stares at me as he does and I slap his hand.

“Gross. Don’t do that.” I turn back to the cake, take a knife and try to smooth the edge of where he just marred the frosting. Thinking about what I’m doing, I chuck the butter knife at the wall so hard, it sticks into the off-white sheetrock. What do I care? The Hellhounds are going to clean this mess up anyway. “Get this taken care of you two. We don’t have time for this. Damien, I told you last week we need to have a meeting about the backup situation on level four, Greed. Your Uncle Mammon keeps sending away for Amazon packages and they are bogging down the elevators and blocking the entrance to level four so the souls can’t get in and be tortured. Does Uncle Mammon really need all of that stuff?”

Three pairs of eyes regard me as I let the question take a minute to percolate and then shrug my shoulders. Greedy or not, something still needs to be done about his online shopping habits.

The elevator pings again, and my girls, the Hellcats, Leona, Tabitha, Tora, and Faline all file into the Dog Pound. Close behind them is Phil, the fallen angel, and member of the Hellhounds, even though he’s not a hound. Marty, the newest of the Hellhounds, and a spectral dog raises his head from the corner where he’s been sleeping in a pool of his gelatinous state of being. Neither solid nor gas, sometimes petting the top of his head, my hand goes through his skull like sticking it into a bowl of pudding. The afterlife was so much easier when Marty was a human and resembled a biker Santa Clause.

“Girls, make sure the Hounds clean up this mess.” Leo, my second in charge of the Hellcats makes her way over to the table and then starts laughing. She tips her dark head back, her dual black and white hair falls away from her eyes and the peals of laughter echo throughout the dorm-like room. “It isn’t funny Leo.”

Leona’s mirth subsides after a few moments and some tee-hee’s from the rest of the Hellcats. Tora is the first to stop giggling when she sees the murderous look on my face at their insubordination. Her pale face and hair as red as a Christmas ornament shimmers under the glow of the Dog Pound’s recessed lights. How am I supposed to run a tight ship, reform the procedures of Purgatory, when I can’t get support not only from my own crew but also from my co-ruler?

I stalk toward the elevator, away from all of them, intent on going to speak with Uncle Mammon myself when the elevator pings again and the doors open.

Standing in front of me is Auntie J, Damien’s mother, and the liaison officer so to speak of both the Hellcats and the Hellhounds. Who she liaisons with is none other than Satan, Damien’s father, and provides us with the names of the souls we are all supposed to go reap, as is the case with the Hellcats. With the Hellhounds, she provides the names of the people who need to go be marked, so reapers like the Hellcats can follow their inner demon-beacon and go collect them when the time is right.

The interior of the elevator is dull and dim. Sitting next to her is a wooden crate, worn and scratched. It’s so innocuous in appearance, I only spare it a single glance,

wondering if she has taken to redecorating the Dog pound. Its current look emulates that of a college dorm with a big screen t.v. and leather couches with several refrigerators. Gaming tables like ping pong and pinball sit at the back of the room. Several doors line the walls leading to various bedrooms such as mine, and the communal bathroom. It might be nice to freshen up this place, but it isn't high on my list of priorities to do, with everything else I have to accomplish to whip Hell up into shape, err, some shape other than Hellish I guess. If she wants to decorate with this beat-up old trough, that's totes on her.

"Auntie J, any new marks to go collect?" I step past her as she bends down to pick up the box. Grabbing the other side of it, it's heavier than I anticipated. Back in the days when this thing was made, and wherever she dug up this old relic, they sure did make them to last.

We set it down just outside the door and I stand up, grabbing my clipboard and list of things to do as she also rights herself.

"Not at all, Child. This time of year is usually slow when everyone's trying to behave themselves." Auntie J also has a look of impishness in her dark eyes. Like Damien's father, she can take on the appearance of anyone she chooses at will, and most of the time she opts for a lumberjack look with a plaid flannel, jeans, boots, and darker features. Damien's father reminds me of the famous actor, Idris something or other. Which makes me suspect Damien's essence of being light and dark, chaos and calm, he too can choose what look he dons at will. Although for the most part, he opts for the navy-blue-eyed, Mediterranean-tanned look.

"Trying being the keyword." I glare back at Dick and Doug who are trying to fix the cake with another knife, opting to leave the one I threw stuck in the wall. When they glance up, it's like watching two kids on Christmas morning.

"It came!" They shout together then come racing over.

"Huh?" I kick the old box at my feet, wondering if they mean this thing. How can they be so excited about a beat-up old box?

"Bathtub gin," Dick explains. Auntie J chuckles. Damien grins, and I am on a level of confusion that can only possibly be the tenth level of Hell. "We're going to make bathtub gin for the party." He squats down, running his hand along the edge of the box. The top is open, and the insides look like bathtub gin combined with the amount of splinters one will get from mixing up that kind of swill in this thing, is akin to a medieval torture device. Hangovers are torture enough. I'm not so sure anyone's going to want to play these chances of roulette with the box.

"I told you, there's going to be no party. And who would want bathtub gin from this skanky old box, anyway?" I make to kick the box again but Doug, who has squatted next to his brother slaps my boot away.

"The only kind of demons who would want to spike the punch in this old trough, so to speak. Every year we celebrate his birthday as a baby, we thought we'd send for this and liven the party up a bit!"

"Again I say, huh? What are you going on about?" I glance from them around the room, waiting for someone to give me some answers about their schemes.

Damien finally answers me when I get to that last threadbare nerve and steam starts coming out of my ears. Maybe even literally because my temper is running so hot, it can fuel the fires of Hell at the moment. "It looks like Dick and Doug are repurposing Uncle Jesus's old cradle and using it, the manger, to make bathtub gin for his surprise birthday party on Christmas!"

Chapter 2

"You want to make bathtub gin in Jesus's manger?"

"Yes." Dick and Doug answer me at the same time.

I turn to Damien. "Fix this. I'm going to deal with Mammon."

Brushing past Auntie J and wondering what hand she had in this nonsense, I step into the elevator and close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. Did those two idiots really think they could get away with making bathtub gin in Jesus's manger?

Before the door closes, someone sidles into the elevator and it takes all of my willpower not to turn around, claws and fangs out, and spread some Christmas cheer, as in the bright red of their insides, all over the elevator. "What?"

The word comes out more of a growl than a question.

"It might not kill you to make peace with the fact that you are leading a group of demons, not saints." Damien is the one who managed to make it onto the elevator. It had to be him. Anyone but him I might not snap and completely lose my shit. But he has been a pain in my ass from day one when I woke up in Hell with the offer for redemption.

"It might not kill you to remember that we're supposed to be in this together. We're supposed to be working together to convince Heaven that some of the souls down here aren't so bad, and deserve a place inside the pearly gates. Or have you forgotten the overcrowding issues we've been facing?" I can't help but lob the gripes right back at him. "What do you think is going to happen when Uncle Jesus discovers one of the holiest of his relics has gone missing? Not exactly the kind of rapport we want to be building with the upstairs if we're going to change this place, is it?"

"You know what your problem is, Catriona?" Damien leans back against the elevator wall as it ambles its way up to level four. Halfway there, he throws the emergency switch to stop it, and I reach past him, not in the mood to be given a list of all my faults right now.

Damien steps in front of the control panel, cementing his own demise in about thirty seconds if he doesn't move.

"My problem is you getting in the way of me doing my job." I gesture to the panel behind him. "Move."

"Your problem is you've been granted this afterlife, and you've forgotten how to have fun." He counters.

"What's there to have fun with? We're demons. We collect marks, we deliver the marks, repeat ad nauseum. Add on top of that whatever duties are required to run Hell while your Dad is on hiatus. It doesn't leave much time for the extracurricular demon delights of the afterlife." He's not only on my last nerve, he's grinding it into the floor of the elevator with the heel of his boot.

"That's the point, Catriona. You're a demon. You already broke the rules once, now you have the liberty to go horns out every now and then and have a little fun at the expense of others because you already did the big baddy bad. But you're so uptight about duty, redemption, atonement, it's no wonder you don't know how to cut loose

and party hard a little bit during a time of celebrating.” Damien slaps the panel behind him and the elevator starts moving again.

I reach around him and slap it again, halting the elevator. “You know, that’s rich coming from the nephew of Jesus, who died for sins and all that. We are sin. Yet you want to sit here and preach about reasons to celebrate? They haven’t paid us much attention that I’ve seen since we came down here, but go ahead, lecture me about hypocrisy because I take my mission seriously. What about you? What’s your big old purpose in the afterlife?”

Damien remains silent, but his navy-blue eyes swirl black and white, the epitome of his essence, chaos, and control, peace and turmoil. There’s something in them, something I haven’t been privy to learning yet. We’re supposed to be in this together. He promised we would work together. It occurs to me, thinking about Christmas traditions, maybe Damien’s really are this outlandish. My own growing up were never a picnic. When Mum did remember to decorate or celebrate Christmas, we’d put up a fake tree because one year she got drunk and fell asleep on the couch, leaving the lights on. They got so hot they caught the tree on fire and almost burnt down the trailer. I came in from playing out all afternoon and evening with Fiona, not needing to go home since we knew she’d be most likely passed out anyway. I’d doused the flames as fast as I could and a year later, Mum had the forethought to buy some paint to paint over the scorch marks, and she even bought a fake tree.

The little baby Jesus doll she had handed down from her mother, which was swaddled in cloth was also scorched, and part of the neck had melted. Mum didn’t want to get rid of the keepsake, so she duct-taped his neck together, re-swaddled it, and placed it back under the tree. Fiona and I dubbed the doll Franken-Jesus and that is about the extent of fond Christmas memories that I have. Christmas with my foster family, the Andersons, when we were finally taken away from Mum, was spent in silence and reverie in honor of Jesus. There were no toys, no presents, no commercialism of a sacred day, as the Andersons explained.

Damien coming from the very family the tradition began with, may have had even more screwed up memories of supposed celebrations on the day, which happens to be tomorrow. “Christmas must be screwy for you and your Dad.”

I make the statement and shuffle my feet, not expecting him to answer but he rubs his nose with his forefinger, ducking his head. “Have you ever wondered how my Dad might have become the way he did?”

“What do you mean?” Of course, I’ve wondered why Satan does what he does. What demon hasn’t? It’s obvious though, isn’t it? He was just a bad dude who pissed off his Daddy one too many times, and Bob’s your uncle, here he is playing keeper of the underworldly kingdom.

“You know when you would go to some kid’s birthday party, and you and the other kids would sit there and watch the one kid get all the attention, and the parents never sprang for party favors or even a piece of candy, but at your birthday party, your parents made sure your friends went home loaded and feeling just as special as the

birthday brat?" Damien too shuffles his feet, neither one of us comfortable with the big share fest.

"No. My Mum was too drunk to give me a birthday party." It sounds flat when I say it, but the fact I can imagine the hurt and disappointment on the kid's faces when they'd put all the effort into picking out the perfect toy for the birthday kid, only to walk away empty-handed is pretty sad. Birthday celebrations are supposed to be just that, to celebrate. And by definition, a celebration is supposed to include all guests, so why not spring for a fifty-cent piece of candy for the guests? His analogy makes sense to me, even if I have no personal reference to understand it. "You're telling me, your Dad is all bent out of shape because his brother, Jesus, got the special birthday treatment and he didn't?"

"No parent is perfect, right? And my grandfather, despite what the Bible says, has some parenting skills that aren't copacetic with the modern parenting guides."

Huh. A few months ago, I realized the whole reason I was waging war against the inner domain belonging to Satan was because he has a big old beef with his Daddy. Come to find out, it's an entire family affair.

"Welp, if throwing Uncle Jesus a hellishly heathen holiday birthday party is in the cards to make things right, I still say no." I was about to go along with this madness, but common sense tells me this is really a bad idea. As in, the worst of all bad ideas in the history of bad ideas.

"Aww come on, Kitty-cat." Damien winks at me, glad to be rid of the vulnerable moment and back to our usual verbal sparring.

"Absolutely not. Tell Dick and Doug to send the manger back to wherever they got it from. I'm not screwing up the chances of redemption for my girls, just because you can't keep control of your hounds during the holidays." I slap the elevator button back on and it rumbles on up. When the lift stops, and the doors ping open, I step off the elevator and into a mountain of Amazon packages. The ones at the top teeter and begin to topple over onto the other side, where the souls of those who were greedy in their lifetime, both those who were hoarders and those who wasted their money and resources on lavish gifts, scramble to keep the heavy weight of the parcels from crushing them all. "Aw shit, sorry!"

I don't know why I'm apologizing to my...subjects? If they can be called that. Or maybe I should call them my wards of Hell? Either way, it doesn't make sense to apologize for making their eternal torture more torturous. That's why they're here.

The souls groan under the weight of their burdens and start restacking the boxes. I tumble over them, trying to wade through solid cardboard to get to the inner sanctum of Level 4. It's an exercise in futility.

"Can you maybe text Uncle Mammon and have him, I don't know, meet us out here?" I glance over my shoulder at Damien who is eyeing a particularly Leaning Tower-looking stack of boxes. With a grin, he shoulder bumps it, sending the tower cascading down in a rain of boxes containing electronics, clothing, jewelry, toys, and everything else imaginable. "Seriously? They're already being tortured and pressed to death under these boxes. Do you have to cause more destruction?"

“Demon, remember? Also, as a co-ruler of Hell, you should be aware it’s our job to ensure the proper amount of misery when it’s called for. And yes, I will call Uncle Mammon on one condition.” Damien holds out his hand as I struggle to climb back through the melee. I glare at it and hoist myself back up the mountain and into the elevator.

“I’m not sleeping with you.” Okay. So don’t get me wrong. Damien is tall, dark, and gorgeous with a side of damn it why does he have to be so stereotypical? It’s eternally annoying. What’s worse, since coming to Hell, I’ve discovered he has an affinity for womanizing anything with two legs and female anatomy. Well, almost anything. I think he has standards, even if they are so subpar of what might be considered morally and ethically acceptable.

“Tempting as that may be, I was simply going to ask you for a cease-fire on the holiday party and let Dick and Doug blow off some steam.” Damien steps back as I hoist myself up. “Let it go, Catriona. Play nice with the boys, it might go a long way for your working relations with them.”

The son of Satan giving me a lesson in work ethic. Huh. This holiday season is going to be full of surprises I guess.

“Damien, this could screw up the chances I have at getting redemption for my girls.” I don’t see how many different ways I can argue this with him.

“Did it ever occur to you that they need to be responsible for their own redemption?” With these words, Damien steps back into the elevator and shuts the doors in my face, leaving me standing here open-mouthed and infuriated. I’m their leader, it’s my responsibility to ensure that they be given their due when the time is right, especially if they put the work in. How can he be so nonchalant about this? How do his Hellhounds feel about not getting their work benefits in a timely manner? Surely, they must have signed on for the perks of the job too?

I scramble for the elevator and have to wait a few minutes for it to rumble back to level 4, from wherever Damien went. It’s his M.O., he comes in, argues with every executive decision I make these past few weeks, then wanders off to only Satan knows where leaving me with the crap-pile of things to do to keep this Hell-hole running. Well, this is one executive decision he doesn’t get to veto. No holiday hootenannies. Period.

I make my way back to the Dog Pound, which isn’t exactly on one of the nine levels of Hell. It’s more like a tenth level which is for staff only, or in our case, the closest thing to a penthouse any of us will get around here. While waiting in the elevator, I text Uncle Mammon, *You need to have your hordes stack some of those boxes elsewhere. They are jamming up the elevator when they topple over.*

K.

If patience were a virtue, I should be in Heaven by now, which probably explains why I don’t have many angelic qualities, because I have none.

Arriving back at the Dog Pound, I find the party in full swing, the day before it’s supposed to even kick-off. Auntie J has disappeared, but Dick, Doug, and my girls are well into making the bathtub gin with various bottles of alcohol everyone has

scrounged up in their rooms. Seeing me enter, everyone freezes and the laughter dies down to uncomfortable silence. Am I really the buzz kill? It once was I was the highlight of the party, the town drunk, that girl everyone knew when she walked in the bar...yeah, ok. I was just a drunk. But still, am I that bad?

"Carry on. There's no stopping this no...oot a damn chance Phil!" I reach over and grab the plastic Dixie cup of whatever swill he's about to ingest.

"Aw come on, seriously? I'm a fallen angel for fuck's sake." Phil grabs at the cup but I hold it out of his reach.

"With that attitude and language, you're going to be fallen forever. I might not be able to stop these idiots, but I sure as Hell am not going to sit by and let you, an underaged kid drink bathtub gin from Jesus's manger." I walk to the sink by the refrigerator and dump the cup down the drain.

"Hello, this is Hell and I'm going to live forever in the afterlife, remember?" Phil's teenage attitude stems from the fact he's not a day older than sixteen if that. I've never asked how he died, but I do know he fell from Heaven when he hacked the wifi thus preventing Heaven and Hell from communicating which has potential apocalyptic consequences. I'm guessing his hacking abilities have something to do with his untimely death, but there are certain things one doesn't ask around here.

"You might live forever, as a 16-year-old, and I'll be damned twice if I'm going to stand by and let you drink, demon or not. My co-house, my co-rules." I chuck the cup in the trash. I wait for him to argue about being 16 forever so there will never be the opportunity for joining any drinking games, but Phil is too clever for that. "And don't you dare ask Damien, or one of them once I've left the room. There will be no provision of alcohol to minors, whether this is Hell or not." Phil's face falls

Yep, definite party-pooper laughing all the way, ha, ha, ha.

I stomp to my room off the side of the Dog Pound and slam the door, equal parts loathing my own stick in the mud self, and wishing I could join the festivities. But if someone has to be in charge around here, and make the hard decisions, I guess it's going to be me. I slump onto my bed and stare at my cream-colored walls with green ivy painted up to the ceiling. I'd done the paint job not long after I became a reaper demon and met Leona. She'd encouraged me to make myself more comfortable in my own room, given that being a reaper demon was about as good as it gets down here and it beats being tortured any day. The ivy reminds me of New Orleans, where I'd grown up with my sister Fiona. Time moves differently in Hell. It doesn't make missing my sister any less longer than eternity. I wonder what she's doing this holiday. I often forget, even with tomorrow being Christmas, today is Christmas Eve. Is she at a party? Does she have a boyfriend who will take her out shopping? I'd checked up on her a couple of times when I first arrived and the first time, Auntie J gave me Hell for it and said it was too risky. I'd snuck through a portal and checked a while after that, but it made me so sad. So I vowed not to check on her again for my own sanity.

If I could have anything for this holiday, it would be to know she is ok. I think about what the rest of my crew has, and what they might want. In Hell, is it even reasonable to want something? I consider that Phil, the fallen angel just wants a cup of

bathtub gin, then decide, Nah, I'm still not standing by and letting him drink himself stupid. That was my vice in my human life, doing nothing when I should have stepped in. That's the whole point of taking over the ruling of Hell, to do something about the problem.

I settle for having a quick nap before I get up and raise holy Hell about the whole party. I'm sure by now Phil has gone against what I've told him, so negotiating with an underaged fallen angel while he's puking his guts out isn't going to do me any good.

When I wake up, the noise from the Dog Pound is eerily quiet. I'm having a hard time believing they threw in the towel that easily. It's more like, I threw in the towel on the workday with too much to do and needed this hell-catnap.

The Dog Pound is dark, with only a light on in the back of the room. I glance around at the used plastic cups strewn all over the floor, the yep, little piles of puke in the corner where Phil was sitting on the couch next to the wall. He'd really gone overboard from the looks of things. Ah, some afterlife lessons are learned the hard way. In any event, it looks like they partied hard for the pre-party, and now are sleeping it off. Glancing at my phone, I can guess as to why. According to afterlife time, it's 2 am here in Hell with a side of infernally warm this Christmas. No dreaming of a white Christmas, unless one counts the amount of bleach it's going to take to clean this place up in the morning. That level of sterile will strip the chrome of Sugar, my Harley Davidson FXR3 motorcycle.

Considering how trashed the place is, it's a wonder they will have any energy left later on when Uncle Jesus comes to call or collect his manger.

What one frigging minute...

Looking around, the one question I have from all this madness is, where's Jesus's manger?

Chapter 3

Waking up 2 highly deadly and drunk Hellhounds is not on my list of fun shit to do today. That, coupled with the fact that these two sleep in the buff, makes for an interesting conversation after rousing them from their separate rooms.

“Put some fucking pants on Dick I don’t need to see your...your, uh, you know, flopping around.”

“It’s not floppy.” Why he has to point out the obvious is beyond me, but then drunk people do have a tendency to be brutally honest and say the shit they normally wouldn’t when sober. Except Dick would proudly tell me he has a boner even when he wasn’t drunk.

“Damn it would you put some clothes on?” I can’t concentrate like this. Surely Hell has a code of ethics policy or at the very least a code of ethics policy that outlines which ethics are the easiest for a demon to break. Then at least they know there are some standards somewhere.

Doug grabs a nearby Santa Claus hat lying on top of the ping pong table and crams it onto his head. It lists sadly to the right, as it’s drenched in booze from the bathtub gin pong they were obviously playing.

“Hey, I was going to wear that.” Dick looks around for other clothing and comes up with a birthday party hat and a sprig of mistletoe which he and Doug had hung around the Dog Pound last week. He and Doug have been trying to corner various members of my crew for sinful smoochies, but since Leo and Tora are an item, and Faline always has her nose stuck in a book, the only one playing has been Tabby who I’ve had to pull from between the two of them a time or two. They tried it with me once and I punched Doug so hard in the nose, his nosebleed lasted at least a good ten minutes.

Dick places the party hat on his head and the sprig of mistletoe over his holly and berries. I hold up a hand before he can ask for any kind of a kiss and carry on, knowing damn well this is the most I am going to get them to comply with my request.

“Would either of you two care to tell me where the manger is?” I point to the corner where they had been mixing the various bottles of booze the night before when I came in.

Both Dick and Doug look in the corner, expecting the manger to be lying there, cradling the remnants of their swill, and both look around the rest of the Dog Pound, scratching their heads.

“Dunno but I hope it comes back before later. Uncle Jesus is going to love it. We added coconut rum to take the edge off the whiskey.”

“You mixed rum and whis...never mind, not important. How do you expect a holy relic to just come sauntering back into the Dog Pound all on its own?” I point out the obvious, but again, lack of sleep, inebriation, or just plain stupidity makes this one a stumper for them.

“Isn’t holy stuff supposed to appear and materialize all majestic and shit?” Doug has the fucking audacity to ask this question out loud, and I can feel the headache coming back which had been threatening to crack my skull open last night.

“Majestic and shit? Where do you get this crap from?” I start shaking my head, wondering how we’re going to get from the weirdly absurd, back on track to the problem at hand.

“The best fantasy book of all time.” He glances at his brother and I’m still reeling on the fact that these two knuckleheads read. “The Bible.” They say in unison.

Lord, God, Uncle Jesus, anyone help me. Hell, even Satan would be a good sidekick right now. Okay, I’m going in. “You think the bible is fantasy fiction?”

“Course it is,” Dick responds. He grabs a half-drunk cup of rot-gut and chugs it down, belching when he finishes. His collar of obedience glints in the low light of the room.

“How do you know?” I parry, wondering if those collars only work when Satan gives them a command, or if the ruler or co-ruler of Hell gives them an order.

“Cause we were there when it was written.” Doug offers. He snatches the cup from Dick and growls, having missed out on his chance for another swig of the swill.

“You were there?” I think of the apostles sitting around writing the damn thing and can’t imagine these two being tame enough to behave at the table long enough for anything to be accomplished.

“Yeah, it was a bunch of dudes sitting around for some drinks, yakking and hyping their boy up in his autobiography.” Doug grabs for another cup, then tosses it when he realizes the contents are the contents of someone’s stomach, and not from the swill.

“I have no words.” How these two have deduced the construction of the bible down to there was a dude and another dude hyping each other up, I will never understand.

“Total fantasy bullshit back in the day.” Dick reiterates his brother’s statement.

“And you two know Uncle Jesus personally, enough to know what’s in the bible is...” I trail off. It can’t all be bullshit now, can it?

“Uncle Jesus is a cool cat. He’d never be so vain as some of the shit they have him doing.” Doug bounces a ping pong into a cup on the far end of the table and I can’t get past the cool cat phrase. It takes me a minute, watching the ball bounce across the room.

“Welp, Uncle Jesus, cool cat or not, is gonna be hella pissed when he finds out you two stole his crib right? And then on top of that, you’ve now done gone and lost the damn thing. Gonna be Hell to pay.” I point to the corner where the offensive missing cradle is still missing.

“I have no idea what could have happened.” Doug shrugs his shoulders.

“Me either, but Phil promised us he could get it back upstairs before...”

“Phil?” I blow out some steam. “Fucking little fallen angel, 16-year-old Phil? How did he get involved in this?” I cross my arms, keeping my claws from coming out. They dig into my biceps.

"We sort of told him if he went up and nabbed it for us, we'd make sure we kept the drinks coming without you throwing a hissy fit about it, and also we'd help him upgrade his ride and custom it out." Dick and Doug have the audacity to look sheepish if that's even possible wearing nothing but a Santa hat and a birthday party hat and some mistletoe.

I don't even respond to this. I go full fury and fangs and start ripping into them. Letting my inner demon out doesn't happen often, but when it does, watch out because the bitch bites, and I'm fucking fuming.

Ripping out throats when I've been pushed to my final straw is one thing. Dick and Doug will rejuvenate within the next hour or so, being immortal in the afterlife comes with that benefit. They were probably pushing to find out where my snapping point was, but the mess that comes with tearing out throats is a whole other bag of tricks to deal with.

Hearing the commotion, my girls come out to inspect what's going on. Damien is nowhere to be found, but I don't think his bedroom is anywhere near the Dog Pound anyway. Being a Mommy and Daddy's boy, he's got a suite of rooms I'm sure.

"Catriona, what's going on?" Leona looks around at the gore amidst the mess of the party. I stand in the middle of it, having just changed back to my human form, and splattered with blood.

"I said no party." I spin and like a messy banana peel, slip on Doug's esophagus, or maybe that's Dick's throat. I'm not sure.

"We were just having a bit of fun, blowing off steam Trina." Leo's voice is hard. She above all the others will call me on my bullshit when needs be.

"Yeah? And look what's happened?" I gesture to the corner where the missing manger is still missing.

"The mess? We'll clean it up and it's not like with these two you haven't added to the..." Faline's protest is cut off by the ping of the elevator. Damien steps out and glances at the scene.

"Where is Uncle Jesus's manger?" Thank fuck someone is quick on the draw.

"My thoughts exactly. When asked, these two idiots decided sarcasm was the better response." I gesture vaguely at the bodies at my feet. Dick's left eye has been punctured, and Doug's windpipe is still gurgling. He's dead for all intents and purposes but taking forever to die officially. Or stop breathing, rejuvenate, and then start breathing again. Death when dealing with the eternally dead is hard to explain and sometimes it gives me a worse headache trying to wrap my brain around it.

"Anyone?" I ask my girls, who are not only in the Dog Pound but now officially in the dog house, Damien's dog house given he is the leader of the Hellhounds.

Phil comes stumbling out of his bedroom in nothing but Christmas skull pajama bottoms, some drool on his chin, and the stench of hangover going so hard, it's going to take an entire orange juice factory to hit the reset button on his blood-alcohol level.

"S'going on?" He yawns, burps then sees Dick and Doug on the floor and vomits. Again.

“You’ve got some explaining to do. What’s missing from this scene?” I cross my arms and wait. Normally, I’ve got a huge soft spot for the kid, but the fact he willingly participated in a bit of hazing last night after being told to lay off, and then on top of that he had a hand in the heist of the Heavenly, holy hay-trough.

“Dick and Doug’s throats.” His answer doesn’t offer much confidence that I’m going to get far with the kid with subtle questioning. I point to the corner of the room.

“Did you move the manger?” My girls have been looking under the ping pong table and next to the fridge like the damn thing is going to miraculously re-appear on its own.

“I didn’t touch it, I swear!” Phil holds up his hands and his wings pop out like an awkward teenage boy moment requiring a notebook to be carried in front of his pants. Apparently, wings have a mind of their own too and raise to half-mast on a whim.

“Put your junk away, kid,” Damien growls and Phil’s wings sag like a puppy’s tail who has just been scolded.

The urge to step in on his behalf is overwhelming, but he’s really stepped in it this time. Stealing, one of the top sins on the big 10 Commandments list, is not going to earn him his ticket to redemption anytime soon. That, coupled with losing Uncle Jesus’s possession, is really going to cement his position in the clink down here in Hell. Hacking the wifi between Heaven and Hell was bad enough. Now, as an anxy teen, he’s crossed a line I’m not sure he can come back from unless we find the manger.

“Does anyone remember anything from last night?” My girls have the decency to look properly chagrined as they shake their heads. I had been willing to let it go, because in addition to being exhausted, some small part of me had decided maybe Damien was right, and I needed to loosen up the reigns on this party a little bit. Who was it going to hurt? Phil with his spectacular hangover maybe, but I hadn’t expected something like this to go down.

“Great. Now what?” I turn around to Damien, still covered in blood, and step over Dick and Doug who have slowly begun to rejuvenate. They’ll be able to join us in the hunt for the relic in no time. And they damn well better find it before this afternoon.

I have not had enough blood and guts with my coffee this morning, to deal with this crap. In fact, it’s a wonder I don’t shred the lot of them, given that I haven’t had any coffee yet.

I eye the single-cup maker, considering my options and what to do next. This hunt has now turned into a top-list priority item. And I had so much other fun crap to do like explain to the Drudes, the nightmare demons, why flushing the hearts of the souls of the wretched down the toilets is a bad idea.

There’s a piece of Dick or Doug flesh clinging to the side of the coffee maker.

I nix the desire for a cup of coffee and start looking around to see if any of the mess might indicate who was here apart from the obvious and give me an idea of where to start looking for an antique fucking baby crib.

There’s just trash and then more trash. Cups, food, ping pong balls. I do not want to leave this Dog Pound without some idea of where the manger went. Searching all

nine levels of Hell is going to take an eternity, and not the kind of torture I had in mind for myself when it came due for my punishment.

I toss up my hands, resigned to coming up with a plan to split everyone up to begin searching when I stick my right hand in cold pudding as I bring it back down to my side.

“Gah! Marty, gross.” So it isn’t cold pudding, it’s Marty’s well, head. More like his brain. He sits next to my side staring up at me from a shaggy, mutt face, and patiently waits while I wipe ectoplasm, or whatever he’s made of when he’s in a state of being partway between the states of solid, liquid, and gas.

He snuffles at me, nudging my hand once it’s clean with a more solid part of his skull, and I give him a scratch behind the ears, careful not to stick my hand back into his brain. Although, I don’t know that he’s fully solid because my hand does feel a bit greasy. Or maybe he just needs a doggy bath because he’s been playing fetch in the River Styx again with Cerberus, and the river consists of the sludge of the souls traveling throughout Hell to their respective levels.

Taking the elevator is easier for me, but to each their own misery I suppose.

“What is it?” I’m careful not to call him buddy or boy, because he was human before he became a ghost dog, and he understands us perfectly, even if he can’t respond to us. I think dogs, actual dogs are the same way, but I’ll have to remember to ask Faline if there has ever been a study about doggy language and speech. As the resident, ex-doctor, I’m sure she’s aware of the scientific bullcrap that goes on in the world. At least, I like to think my girl does.

Marty’s tail wags and he snuffles again, this time a clear indication he wants me to follow him. He heads for the door and I trudge past my crew, Phil, Damien, and the bodies of Dick and Doug. At least now there’s a lead. I have to admit, I’m not the best at remembering that Marty skulks around. Usually, he hauls his old ass to the dog bed we got for him a couple of months ago and parks it on the floor waiting for someone to crack a cold one and pour him a brewski into his doggy bowl. When Doug wanted to get him a dog collar with little silver bells on it, I threatened to let Marty tear his head off and take his collar of obedience. Someday, somehow, I’ll figure out how to turn Marty human again, at least in spirit so he can rejoin his wife in Heaven.

The list of souls I’m becoming increasingly responsible for to help achieve their redemption is growing as long as Santa’s naughty or nice list.

I step onto the elevator next to Marty, wondering what the old boy has seen or heard, and he jumps up, slapping the button to close the elevator doors and begin our ascent upwards. He reminds me of a stray dog in my neighborhood when I was a kid. It used to come around to all the houses, jump up and hit the doorbell, and wait for the owners to come to the door. Eventually, people grew wise and started leaving a box of treats by the door. Why no one ever took in a dog that clever, I will never know, but I am beginning to suspect it was another human soul trapped in the body of a savvy pup.

Once the doors ping and open onto level four, I was really hoping Marty would have hit any other level besides this one. I glance around for Uncle Mammon. His large, bulky frame covered in riches is nowhere to be seen, and Marty gazes at the mountains

of packages tumbling everywhere. "Being turned into a dog for eternity must be bad enough, but not being able to speak to tell me what we are doing here, is even worse," I mutter the words, and Marty nudges my hand again. Behind me, the elevator pings again, and I'm about ready to rip the damn bell out of the lift if I hear it one more time. Damien, my crew, and Phil tumble out of the overcrowded elevator. Phil has had the forethought to put a t-shirt on and some boots with his skull Santa pajama bottoms. His t-shirt is a picture advertising burgers. Christmas reindeer roadkill burgers to be exact. This kid is never getting back into Heaven.

Not having the tradition of exchanging holiday gifts and traditions here in Hell, at least it's good one of us is embracing the holiday spirit. "Phil, do you remember coming up here last night?"

Phil shakes his head and I look at Marty. He's sort of adopted scampering after the kid when he can to keep an eye on him. If Marty is up here, there's a reason why. If Phil didn't come up here, who did then?

"Damien," I squint past a hill of boxes, looking around to see if we are being eavesdropped upon.

"Hm?"

"Is it possible Uncle Mammon would have coveted the manger and uh..." I trail off, letting the implication speak for itself in the silence. Mammon, the demon of greed, could very well be the culprit behind the theft. But why he would want a beat-up old animal trough turned holy relic, yeah ok. People have been coveting holy relics since the dawn of time. Most of them end up in museums, but the rich and powerful who can afford them, often sequester them away in private collections. It's always interesting to see those souls down here, on Level 4 once they've passed away. Now they struggle under the weight of their greed as their punishment.

"I don't think Uncle Mammon would be that foolish." Damien shakes his head. "But it is possible there is someone here who might be."

"Yeah, but who would have known about it? Dick and Doug don't exactly go around making friends with the masses, and Phil..." I turn to Phil.

"Who have you talked to about the manger?" Phil is shuffling his feet, probably starting to wonder once we find the damn thing, what will happen next. It's possible if Uncle Jesus finds out his relic is missing, Phil won't even be given a shot at remaining in the Hellhounds, but sent off to whatever level he is meant to have finished his eternal torture in. Although, there are rules on kids and the keeping of them down here. I'm just not sure about the specifics. It is becoming blatantly clear with Drudes clogging the toilets with hearts, Hellhounds stealing holy relics, and bathtub gin being made in family heirlooms, that there needs to be some sort of regulations and training of the staff down here. Maybe an HR department that has so far consisted of an ax-wielding gorgon demon. Perhaps, considering how Hella-pissed Uncle Jesus is going to be when he finds out about all of this, a sensitivity manual on how to properly treat and torture others down here. I should get started on it right away. Faline, my scholar can help me sort it all out, I'm sure.

“No one. Dick and Doug told me to keep quiet, so I did.” I’m usually pretty good at telling when someone is lying, and Phil is one of those kids who might not think in the heat of the moment, but apart from almost setting off the apocalypse, I’d say he’s a good kid all around. He’s all up in his feels with the guilt right now and I’m positive he’s telling the truth. Which means, the culprit can only be someone with some modicum of power or control.

It wouldn’t have been Auntie J, the so-called HR department. That, and I really don’t want to get up in her face and accuse her of the deed because I’ve seen her ax before. I don’t need to be cut from the company directory that severely. It’s such a shame we lot don’t celebrate the holidays as we used to when we were human. If we did have regularly scheduled vacations, shit like this would probably still happen, but maybe it would be a little funnier. I make a mental note to add potential vacation incentives to my budding Satan’s Sensitivity Training Manual and propose it to Damien and the other Princes of Hell at the next monthly supervisory meeting.

“Ok, lead on Marty.” There seems to be some more context needed with this little side quest before I can understand the full mission. There isn’t a day that goes by here in the afterlife that I don’t feel like the side quest chick, and Damien is holding all the player cards and knows the rules. I miss gaming from the human world. I’ll have to see if I can order a gaming console with the company credit card I was given. It’s got a little red, sigil of a devil with horns on top of the black card. Does Satan have a credit limit? I suppose I can comp the purchase and explain it as miscellaneous office supplies. Everyone needs an employee appreciation incentive.

Jumping down into the piles of boxes behind Marty, has me elbowing the ones he leaves his ectoplasm on as we muscle our way through. I haven’t had much incentive to come to Level 4, I’d say it has changed a bit from what Dante Alighieri once described in his Divine Comedy. I found him a few months ago selling hot dogs on the Coney Island pier, and he helped us out a bit when the soul of an innocent was incorrectly marked. He’s a nice dude, currently kicking it in Heaven with my ex-boyfriend’s grandmother, Gigi.

From what I can remember from the signed copy he gave me of The Divine Comedy, it used to be the souls of the greedy were pressed under the weight of stone representing the material items they had to possess in their human lives. Now it’s just the refuse of their online shopping habits. The further we wade into the boxes, the more crushed the boxes become, until eventually they don’t even resemble boxes anymore, but they are covered in blood and gore because the weight of their sins have crushed them down and smeared them all over the place. The souls that squelch under my feet are still alive in the afterlife but damaged beyond the ability to rush around like the new souls and try to restack the mounds of boxes from toppling and crushing them even more. Those souls, mixed with the saggy, shredded cardboard, create a sludge that drains off into the River Styx on the far side of the room and explains a few things about the composition of the river which I haven’t considered before.

Marty is having an easier time navigating the terrain, and he brings us closer and closer to an ornate home with glittering windows adorned in gold and silver. This must

be Uncle Mammon's dwelling. The windows are polished and when we get to the door, the welcome mat outside the door is also gold threads, and the curtains hanging in the windows appear to be gold with jeweled studs. I expected him to live in a castle of some sort, but the mansion presented here is so elaborate, it far surpasses anything I could imagine for a Prince of Hell.

As the rest of my crew pushes through the path behind me, and we all stand at the base of the mansion, I tilt my head up, peering into the windows to see if any lights are on. Not that I need an invitation from Uncle Mammon, being the co-ruler of Hell I can pretty much go where I damn well please, but being so new to the role, I also haven't tried pushing my luck or my welcome too much.

As I move forward to open the door, a staccato whizzing of projectiles fly past my ear, striking Dick and Doug who finally caught up to us in the chest. As the bullet holes begin blooming blood on the t-shirts they finally put on, they drop to their knees as they clutch their chests. Dick looks at Doug who looks back at him and for the second time today, they die for however long it takes them to rejuvenate, but more bullets fly, as we all hit the deck and Dick grumbles, "Damn it." Before he keels over alongside Doug.

I clutch my hands over my head and scoot as close as I can to the doorframe of the mansion, all the while my girls and Phil bail into the mountains of boxes. Marty hunkers down next to the left windowsill and slinks around the side of the building. His job here is done. But as I scoot closer, pressing into Damien, the heat from his body and his eyes is a blast against me. I crane my neck up as the bullets continue to fly, missing my back and ass by inches. Whoever is shooting at us is unable to aim the gun into the alcove of the door. The firing ceases for a moment and I stare into Damien's eyes, my own burning with fire and the intensity of my ire at being shot at. If Uncle Mammon is making a statement here about his displeasure at the new regime, it's a pretty fucking intense statement.

Damien shakes his head when I slowly lower my hands to the ground and brace myself. If I'm going to find out what the Hell is going on down here on Level 4, I'm going to start with finding out what Uncle Mammon wants to call a cease-fire and talk terms and conditions by way of our new order. I grin at Damien, then push back quickly, looking up into the second story window to shout, "Ceasefire and we'll talk about moving the boxes together Mammon."

The problem is, it isn't Uncle Mammon in the second-story window. Santa Claus is leaning out the window, dressed in a blood-splattered white suit, staining it a splotchy red, with what appears to be human scalps lining the collars instead of fluffy white, faux fur. He's holding two, Colt M 1911 nickel-plated pistols and he has them aimed directly at my face.

Chapter 4

“Santa! What the fuck!” I roll back towards Damien as Santa begins firing away again. Having stopped to reload his clips, the pistols flash in the low-light of the cavernous space and glint against the gilded frames of the window panes. Damien presses his body against mine, flattening me as much as possible as he reaches up and turns the knob of the mansion. The door swings open and we scramble inside, falling over one another. Landing in a heap at the bottom of a grand staircase, carpeted in the finest Oriental rugs on the black market one could find, Damien lands on top of me, pinning me to the floor.

Now, I’m not saying I might be taking a moment to appreciate the finer things in the afterlife, all hard, strong, deadly...wait, deadly. That’s right. Santa, that mad fuck was shooting at us outside. What’s his beef? More importantly, why is Santa here in the Underworld and not at the North Pole, preparing for all the kiddos to get presents, cheer, and all that bullshit?

I shove at Damien, hard lines and lean muscle and all, attempting to push him off of me before Santa comes rolling down the red carpet and attempts to make Swiss cheese out of us again. Damn bro, someone must have forgotten his freaking cookie last year or something, because he’s gone full-on postal.

“Getoferme!” I push at Damien again and he rolls to the side. Hearing footsteps upstairs, I’m quick to spring to my feet and begin sprinting up the steps. Apparently, I skipped cardio day at some point, because there’s a lot of them and I’m winded by the time I make it to the landing which splits off down two long corridors to the left and right.

Damien is right next to me, and I nod to the left, trying to regain control of my breathing so Santa doesn’t hear us coming. Heading to the left, I unwind the one weapon I have on me, a barbed whip that I use when I ride out to collect souls. It latches onto them, as souls are corporeal in the afterlife and in between the human dimension and the Underworld. Some call that in-between the Veil, I call it where I handle the business side of things. But the whip is lethal in that it ensures I can ensnare anyone who might try and escape their fate of being delivered to Hell. If I can at least get the guns away from Santa, seeing how deadly the semi-automatic pistols can be given the number the bullets did on Dick and Doug outside, I’m glad my heightened eye-sight as a demon can pinpoint exactly what I am up against once I do find serial-killer Santa.

I ready the whip in my hand and glance back at Damien, who is quietly opening doors and peering inside. The décor of the house is one I would gladly stop and appreciate in-depth if it weren’t for the fact I’d rather save my own ass first. It’s as opulent as the outside of the house and gold, silver, gems, art, and antiquities line the rooms and walls. As the Prince of Greed, Mammon has spared no expense at decorating his home, only settling for the best of the best.

I test the first door and open it as quietly as I can. That means fuck-all to demons because of our advanced hearing, but the knob being well-oiled doesn’t squeak, and the door itself glides seamlessly open as I push it in. No Santa in here.

I move on to the next door, the sound of footsteps has stopped. He's clearly waiting for us, so there's no element of surprise. I walk past the next door, down the corridor to the last door on the left, and begin checking doors in a random pattern, hoping that by throwing off what he would expect me to do, and searching each room meticulously, it will give me a slight advantage.

It's behind the first door I passed to go down the hall the first shots are fired after our encounter outside. I duck back into the hall as Damien comes running, and Santa empties his clips into the art hanging on the opposite wall in the hallway.

"Saint Nick, why the Hell aren't you so jolly right now?" I shout at him. Damien gives me the look, the one which says I'm straight up cray-cray, but I don't need his permission to meet insanity head-on at its own level. If Santa wants to go full-stupid, so can I.

"I can't stand any more of these fucking kids!" He screams as he shoots out a bust on a plinth in the hall. Stone showers into the air as the bullets shatter the statue and in addition to ducking behind the door, I shield my face from the debris of the statue.

"Hey, I'm not too thrilled on company policy around here either, but isn't that kind of your job?" Why the blazes did no one tell me Santa is on the eternal naughty list, and catering to every snot-nosed brat around the globe is his eternal punishment? I can put two and two together and surmise that this level of pissed-off employee is one even the Employee Protection Act is going to have a hard time coping with. There's no level of counseling, even with Auntie J's ax, the head of the HR department is going to cut through this amount of rage.

I'm the boss though, so I have to try right?

"Put down the guns, Santa. We can talk about this. What do you want, a raise? Some more cookies? Everyone likes cookies, am I right?" I'm answered with another volley of bullets. Damien rolls his eyes so hard he checks out his own ass. I could tell him it's tight and mighty fine, but one level of corporate complaints at a time. No need to go down the route of sexual harassment.

"They all want things, and the little shits sit on my lap every year at the mall, and tell me all the crap they want to unwrap on Christmas day. And the parents know full-well what they've already bought the little fuc...."

"Hey, hey, hey! Watch your language!" I can't believe I just cut Santa Clause off. Not that I was never on the nice list, that was Fiona, but even some demons need to have scruples when it comes to kids. "Come on now, I'm sure we can figure this out."

I wait, wondering if Santa is going to open fire again. I don't hear any clicks of the magazines being changed, so maybe he's run out of bullets. But if Santa can pull that many toys out of his sack every year, I'm sure supernatural abilities means he has a neat little trick and way of reloading his pistols without having to expend much time and energy on such a menial task. How else does he go trigger happy on a lump of coal in every kid's stocking when they've hit the naughty list for the year?

I slowly peer around the doorframe, hoping I don't take a face full of bite-the-bullet and get this encounter over with on a nice and dead scale. Santa is shuffling

around in his pockets, presumably for more bullets. I take the opportunity to lash out with my barbed whip and sink a barb into the hand holding the pistols.

Shrieking with rage, Santa drops his pistols and yanks his hand free from my whip, flesh and all. His glove rips away, revealing a skeletal hand. Had I been closer, I would have noticed before the state of his soul. Skin hangs from his cheekbones and eye sockets. One of his eyes is myopic like something stabbed him and it healed, but he's lost sight in that eye. His lips are dried, cracked, and peeling, and his teeth have partially decayed out of his mouth, probably from all of the cookies he's eaten, or possibly because there's no telling exactly how old his soul is and how long he's been down here.

I cringe as Santa begins to run. It ends up being not towards me, but towards the open window, he was shooting out of. Like a piece of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of his shoe, his list of naughty and nice kids trails after him, flapping with each thump of his weathered boots. I manage to stomp on it, but all it does is pull away from his boot, unraveling first the rubber threads from the soles of his boot, traveling up to his laces. Somehow, the whole ensemble is connected because his pant legs start next and continue traveling up. Just as Santa gets one leg over the window sill, stuffing what I thought was his fat-ass out the window, the rest of his pants, or naughty and nice list which is apparently his whole damn suit, finishes unraveling and starts on his jacket.

Let me express what was not on my list of fun shit to do today. Stand here next to Damien, stupefied while rotten-corpse Santa jumps out a two-story window with his naughty-list bits hanging out all over the place. And when I mean naughty bits, I mean the whole, rotten sack of them flopping around up in everyone's business, because how could one not look.

Santa isn't a fat, jolly old elf. If parents knew what kind of a lap their kids were sitting on at the mall, they'd come tearing down the gates of Hell with a pitchfork and bonfire materials because friggin' Hell, I did not need to see that either.

"Ewww!" I watch as Santa jumps, quickly stepping off the list, or suit as it were, and watching it roll back up covering Santa once more like a scroll of parchment paper, or a slinky, or I don't know. I'm still stuck on seeing a crusty sack, and not one filled with toys and games galore. No one wants that broken-down old toy. Damien is likewise as dumbfounded as we watch Santa fall. My girls are below us, finally having extracted themselves from under the cover of the many boxes and parcels. What really takes the cake is when the boxes begin shifting, and instead of forming mountains as they normally do, Santa is caught in mid-air, by a sleigh made of Level-4 Hell boxes. They've formed in the shape of the sleigh, and sure as shit eight freaking box reindeer have formed in the sky, catching the re-formed fat, old bastard, and hauling his ass off in a blaze of disbelief and glory. He circles around the mansion, shooting at the open window causing Damien and I to duck once more.

Whoever said Santa calls people a Ho, Ho, Ho is also dead wrong because that isn't his favorite word. I'm down for the name bitch because I totally can be. But it takes a special kind of occasion for me to go full-on C-word, and that's just not nice.

As Santa blasts through the doorway of Level 4, opposite the elevator entrance and into the stairwell we use when the elevator is broken, he, along with the box sleigh and reindeer, shrink to a miniature toy-sized version of himself, and fly away. I'd say it's off into the sunset, but it's more likely the fires of Hell.

"What the Hell was that all about? What did this place do to Santa?" I smack Damien in the middle of the chest with both palms. I knew Damien and his Daddy were ten shades of asshole sometimes, but somehow they've ruined every image and impression I ever had of Christmas. Not that there was much of a Christmas with my alcoholic Mum and religious zealots the Anderson, but this is a new level of WTF.

"We didn't do anything he didn't have coming to him." Damien rubs his chest as my girls make their way into the mansion, along with Dick and Doug.

"You have some serious explaining to do. I just watched Santa's naughty bits make streak marks across the naughty and nice list which should have been saved for a pair of white tights or something." I go full hands on hips as everyone turns to Damien, waiting for an explanation of this new level of madness.

"You didn't know Santa was one of the damned?" Damien rubs a hand on the back of his neck, clearly trying to find some way to weasel his way out of this.

"No. Explain. You've not only ruined my childhood, what little good there was in it, but you're also slowly ruining my afterlife." I wait, none-to, patiently.

"Uh, right. Have you heard the legend of Krampus?" Dick is the one to answer me.

"Well, sure. Isn't that like some bad version of Santa who beats the shit out of kids in a sack with a reed if they misbehave? Scares the bejesus out of the locals I bet." I glance out the window, looking at the souls in the sea of boxes and misshaped packages.

"The problem with humans is their imagination is so limited, they don't understand he is one and the same." Damien supplies. "Santa is both. He was a piece of work when he was alive, hoarding nice things, beating kids who came looking for handouts or for a turn and to share with his nice things, and eventually he found himself down here. He was supposed to go full Miss Agatha from the musical Annie, and share the wealth sent to him with the kids in the orphanage under his care, but he greedily hoarded it. For his superiors, he painted himself as this picture of jovial perfection, giving kids gifts, goodies, and stuff, but then when the bigwigs left, he'd beat the crap out of the kids and keep everything for himself."

"No way." Me, my girls, and even Phil pipe in all at once.

"Way. So his punishment is once a year, he has to circle the globe and do exactly as he was supposed to be doing, and said he was doing as a human. The rest of the year, he has to endure shopping malls, parades, and Christmas shops and candy stores to amp the human kids up for the coming holiday." Doug adds.

"Get the eff outta here." I glance between Damien, Dick, and Doug who are as serious as ever. Santa was a bad boy and now his eternal penance is to be the good sport he was supposed to be all along?

"He hates kids. He hates carols, he hates candy, cookies, and the whole bit."

Doug flashes me a grin.

"And the elves?" Tora asks. As the newest member of the Hellcats, she's about as sweet as pie and looks like someone kicked a puppy. I feel her pain, or I would if I had ever had any experience with a fun Christmas.

"Satyrs, demons, disguised to keep him in line throughout the year so he doesn't do exactly as he just did and go postal and try to ruin Christmas," Damien answers her.

"Great, so this is just one more problem to add to my list." Grumbling isn't going to make dealing with it any easier, but it makes me feel better to do it.

"That, and I believe as Marty led us here, he is the one who capered with Uncle Jesus's crib." Dick looks at the wet stain marks on a nearby table. There's no getting the bathtub gin stains out of this one. He bends over and sniffs it, and I don't need to approach to know the manger was once sitting on the table. Where it is now, it looks like we'll be chasing after Santa to not only ensure he doesn't ruin Christmas for all the little kiddos but to get back the stolen item before Uncle Jesus gets back at us.

"Ok, there's only one thing to do," I mumble, heading towards the door. I stop and pick up the pistols he dropped where his suit unraveled. Inspecting the guns, I can see the nickel-plated sides have the inscriptions, Saint Nick carved into the metal and the bullets are in fact, made out of coal. How apropos. Saint Nick, toting the nickel-plated pistols to shoot a bunch of naughty kids stockings with lumps of coal.

I tuck them in the waistband of my jeans and turn to the group.

"What are you thinking, Catriona?" Damien's eyes light up with fire.

"Hellcats, mount up on your motorcycles, use the sidecar, use the saddlebags and start grabbing some boxes and use the portals from the garage here in Hell and make sure the friggin' kids don't have a ruined Christmas because of that fat, bastard. Hellhounds, grab as many satyrs, Drudes, and whatever other demons you can wrangle into helping deliver packages. They're labeled. I'd noticed them on the way in and thought they were addressed to the souls of the Level and their greed, but with Santa's little display and how his sleigh forms to get around the world in a single night, it's apparent now where the packages are supposed to go.

"What are you going to do?" Damien asks.

"You and I are going to get your Uncle's crib back, then help save Christmas by going Santa hunting and making him do his fucking job like the rest of us."

"Yippee-ki-yay?" Damien questions, looking at me like I've got more heads than Cerberus.

"I don't care what anyone says, that movie was a Christmas movie." I cock one of Santa's pistols all John McClane style, cutting off the MF part of that quote, and head for the garage.

## Chapter 5

It's one thing to deliver toys on Christmas Eve when all the little kiddos are asleep. It's another to do it without the tiny heathens waking up and catching an intruder, not dressed as Santa, but rather a bad bitch with an attitude problem and a whole host of negative energy. Christmas Eve is supposed to be one of my off nights, as in, everyone is trying desperately hard for six friggin hours to behave themselves, so I don't have to go out and play tag-a-bitch I've got your soul. It turns out we don't have to wake any kids up, but we do come across a very inebriated security guard I'm hoping will forget the whole encounter.

We start in the most logical place I can think of to search for Santa. The North Pole. Okay, so the North Pole isn't exactly like lore says it is. It's the break room of a well-known toy store for R'us, so to speak. I've come to the realization that Santa doesn't make all of the toys, and his little elves have far better shit to do than hammer away at Barbies fake plastic boobs to make sure they stay upright and perky before heading off into packaging. Nope, our boy Nick is totes in the supply and demand gig. Commercialism. A kid wishes it, he makes the bada-bing, bada-boom transaction with Mommy and Daddy's credit card, so by the time the bill comes at the end of the month, they don't have a clue what they purchased in the name of presents. Hell, toothpaste could be on the bill and they'd assume they bought it as a stocking stuffer. The transaction goes through to the store and Jesus is your uncle, the toy is being shipped across the world to its intended destination.

Why might one ask, does Santa need to be involved then? Because he is the naughty and nice list. If a kid punches her brother on Christmas Eve, the big man is keeping track and maybe one of those packages accidentally gets lost in the mail and goes wherever the lost items go. Or maybe Santa confiscates a few items, and the parents are left scratching their heads the next morning, to jacked on coffee but thinking, "I swear I had one more gift for little Susie. I'll check the back of the closet one more time."

Most kids don't get totally shysted because then the humans would figure out the system is rigged. But the look of disappointment when little Tommy gets his complete set of premium trading cards with the fancy sleeves and everything and all little Susie gets is a knock off of a Mr. Potato Head where the cheapo brand comes with half a mustache and a crazy eye instead of all parts accounted for, is enough to send a pretty clear message of buck up kiddos, or it's the slammer for you when you're older. This of course can sometimes backfire, as is my case, according to Damien who explains all of this to me on my way up to the garage when I ask for the rundown on Santa and where he might go.

Corporate complaint, we head to the corporate office. I reflect on whether not having Christmases as a kid made me do the stupid crap I did as an adult, and I come up with a big, fat Nah. I've always needed to own my bullshit. Being a crappy adult because of a crappy potato head is just an excuse.

Deciding that we will try the supply and demand shop, the corporate office of the toy store, we blast through the wall of the garage, a portal designed by Satan to take us anywhere in the world in order to go collect a mark. All of the portals are either named after Satan and the many variations of his name, or after Hell or the Underworld. We end up in Hell's Kitchen in New York, a 55-minute drive to Wayne, New Jersey where the corporate office is. It's pushing early morning, around 4 am and the city is just waking up. The drive is cold and crisp, enough for me to make a running list of all the things I have to add to my to-do list now. I never thought finding a babysitter for Santa would be one of them. Maybe he just needs a long vacation too.

Climbing off of Sugar, my Harley Davidson FXR3, and walking around the back of the store to the loading dock, Damien and I break in the back door with relative ease. Given our strength, busting in a toy store door is child's play, pun intended. A quick search of the store proves fruitless, however. We end up in a back room amidst returned items that are broken, opened, unwanted, and downright creepy. If the doll in the dented-up box continues to stare at me the way she is, I'm going to throw her into the fires of Hell just to avoid having nightmares for the rest of eternity.

In the back security office, a.k.a. breakroom with a security monitor, we meet a rather unfortunate-looking man named Earl, judging by his name tag. He's three-sheets to the wind based on the bottle of JD being half-drunk, the copious amounts of pit stains under his arms on his white t-shirt, and the glazed, bloodshot look in his eyes which tells us Earl has seen some shit in his day, and two demons come looking for a deranged Santa isn't the worst of it. No wonder Santa hates kids. Does everyone who works with children eventually end up the way of Santa and Earl?

"My man, have you seen Santa this morning? Kind of skeletal looking, been around the block a few times." I ask, scanning the rest of the room, but pretty sure it's going to prove fruitless being here altogether.

Earl shakes his head and slumps back over onto his arm, snoring softly with a line of drool running from the corner of his mouth.

"Now what?" I turn to Damien who closes his eyes, thinking.

"We go to the source of it all." He opens his eyes again and they are navy blue as he's regained his composure from being shot at.

"Which is what?" I press. Time is of the essence here, and the kiddos are expecting their toys in an hour or two. Not that they won't wake up to anything, the parents will ensure that doesn't happen, but the extra special toy, the one extra package they are supposed to tear into, they need to get those toys.

"Where Santa gets all his fan mail, the post office." Damien's statement makes me stop a moment and contemplate what he is saying. I'd never written a letter to Santa before because I knew it was pointless to hope for such a thing. I suppose, putting myself in his shoes, those letters are the version of corporate complaints. They're a demand for all the things the kids didn't get last year, or on their birthday, or because they simply think what they have received is not enough. No wonder Old Saint Nick has gone straight up bonkers.

“Okay, the post office, the root of all evil, where there isn’t a single soul who doesn’t have a love-hate relationship with their postman; even though given the amount of crap they deal with, there isn’t a single mailman who doesn’t end up going to Heaven, that I am aware of. I view the postal service as the epitome of society. It’s where information is born and dies. It’s where hopes and dreams are conveyed in letters. Where the despair of overwhelming debt makes one succumb to their depression in a mountain of bills. It’s where junk mail threatens to overtake the landfills in all its waste in the next ploy and plea for the next best thing. The postal service is the system the world was originally built on for communication, quickly becoming obsolete with the invention of the internet, but still relevant given there are a few people out there, still getting it right, sending letters to Santa. At least, until today’s events have just now unfolded.

“How do we know which post office to go to?” I query.

“That’s easy, the one that services Hell.” Damien begins walking back to the door.

“Where is that?” I race to keep up with him, climbing once more onto Sugar and starting the engine.

“Bethlehem, where the first complaint came in.” Damien takes off down the highway, back to the portal. We make it in record time, switching between the portal from the human dimension, to Hell, then back to the human dimension, in Bethlehem, Jerusalem. When we pull up to the post office, we find what we are looking for; Santa is outside hollering at the top of his lungs at anyone who will listen. Of course, he no longer looks like a rotten, skeletal version of his soul, but the plump, bearded man from the lore and stories children grow up on. It’s possible he is also drunk, maybe Earl shared some of the Jackie D’s with him. Or he finished off what was left of the bathtub gin in Uncle Jesus’s manger. Either way, he’s so far gone a raving lunatic looks positively mild compared to him. Definitely, a vacation is due on the books. Maybe even a spa day given how frequently he keeps scratching his ass.

I unwind my whip which I’d secured on the elevator ride up to the garage, waiting for Damien’s cue on how he wants to handle the situation.

Getting off his bike and telling Santa, “Screw you old man, you have a job to do tonight and we don’t have time for this crap!” Wasn’t the approach I was going to go with, but it seems to be the only one to get Santa to stop itching his balls.

“Did someone put itching powder in his suit as a prank?” We live in Hell for Pete’s sake, I totes wouldn’t put it past a demon or two.

“No, that was my special brand of torture for the old coot. The names on the naughty and nice list crawl through the suit, like living ants. They itch and burn like hell, reminding him to do his fucking job every year.” Damien holds out his hand and I place the whip in it. Santa gives us the stink eye, before shrieking like a banshee and charging at us.

“You’re level of evil knows no bounds.” I sidestep deranged Santa easily enough, as Damien uncoils the whip and flicks it with his wrist. It cracks in the air, winding around Santa’s gullet, and sinking the barbs deep into his fleshy, human skin. Santa

bellows again, and winds around, now coming into a series of steps and sidesteps, like a dance with Damien. I almost feel sorry for him. Almost. Then I remember what he called me when he jumped out the window, and I sidestep one more time, tripping over a box. It is an oblong shape, lumpy, and reminiscent of an antler. It serves to remind me to look around and see that Santa's sleigh and reindeer are a series of boxes scattered down the street. I begin picking them up and stacking them, as Damien has Santa just about subdued.

I call Faline whose motorcycle is equipped with a sidecar and tell her to make tracks fast, and to call the others in so we can clean up the boxes. When she and the rest of the crew arrive through the portal and take a look at the scene before them with Santa bound and trussed and me stacking boxes, the amount of dumbfounded reaches a level the likes of which I have never seen.

"Anyone mind helping me?" I gripe under an armload of boxes.

Dick and Doug arrive next and take a load off my arms, helping arrange the boxes so they can reform into the sleigh and reindeer.

"Whose going to drive that thing?" I point to the sleigh which has yet to spring to life and take off.

"Oh, Santa will do it. But he'll have company this year to make sure it gets done." Doug grins at me. At least he's wearing pants this time, but assless chaps with a sprig of holly at the buckle belt loop. Thank God he doesn't know holly from mistletoe and I don't have to explain to him his amount of stupidity.

"What do you mean? He's gone completely bonkers. There's no way he's fit to deliver..." Dick cuts me off, wearing nothing but an ugly Christmas sweater which is green and red with yellow and purple ball ornaments, and cowboy boots. Giddy up MF's I guess. Maybe they took the John McClane movie to heart too much.

"He does this once every few millennia, then he has someone babysit him on his big debut night once a year, and he's all good for the next year," Doug answers, setting the last box of the sleigh's runners in place. The reindeer look like they are going to teeter over with one good gust of the wind.

"Does this every few...did no one think maybe this is the kind of thing I'd need to know about?" I turn an accusing look on Damien, but Dick and Doug laugh it off.

"Yeah, the last time was during the depression when he went full-on strike and no child received any toys for a while," Dick explains. Leo, Faline, Tora, and Tabby all rest against their bikes, watching the scene unfold.

"I can't believe you assholes knew he might do something like this and didn't tell me." I kick at one of the reindeer's hooves but it springs to life, steps out of my way, then sideswipes me in the shin. I hop up and down, clutching the goose egg forming, and curse up a hurricane of cuss words.

"Serves you right. Animal abuse gets you on the naughty list." Doug's admonishment is as solid as they come and I wish I could permanently murder him.

"Did you know he was likely behind the theft of the manger? For that matter, where is the manger?" I turn to Santa who glares at me. Damien has taken to gagging

him with his own, greasy hat. At least the locals are moving along at a brisk pace, clearly not wanting any part of this.

"We didn't know. But makes sense he's gone off the rails. Pretty sure there was motor oil in the last batch of moonshine." I don't turn back around to see if it is Dick or Doug who answers me. Instead, I make a mental note of how to incorporate drinking on the job in my sensitivity manual, and how it will not be tolerated.

"Why do you think he wanted the manger?" I pose the question to Damien, who begins hoisting Santa towards the sleigh.

"Easy, leverage to bribe Uncle Jesus to reduce his sentence and get him off yearly kid duty." It always comes back to the main objective, penance, and redemption for our sins. I should have known.

"Well, now he's in a pickle because unless we find it, his sentence is prolonged indefinitely when Uncle Jesus finds out." Santa glares up at me and I know I'm permanently on the naughty list, but I can live my afterlife with that.

Damien tosses him into the sleigh and Dick and Doug climb in next to him, trussed up and thrown over the seat of the sleigh like a sack of potatoes.

Giving him a slap on the ass, Dick calls out, "On Dasher, on Dancer, On Prancer you fucking Vixen, On Comet, on Cupid, I've got a Boner, on Blitzen, to the top of the porch, to the window and the wall, now fuck off, fuck off, once and for all!"

The sleigh springs to life as the Hellhounds and Santa take off down the street. If the humans think to question what is going on, I really hope they spike their eggnog later, because I've got nothing.

Damien and my crew get on their bikes and I follow suit, having no other explanation or rationale for what I just saw. Before we can take off for the portal back to Hell, Damien hops off his bike and runs down the street, picking up one more large package. It didn't belong on the sleigh, then I realize what Santa did.

He mailed the friggin' manger to himself here in Bethlehem so as to hold it hostage over Uncle Jesus. I look around, half expecting to see a decrepit old barn where a manger would have fit in nicely. Of course, there's no such barn or inn like in the stories. Even if there was, it would have been long gone by now so I don't know if the locals made a shrine somewhere. I'll have to make a point and come back to check it out. Maybe. I have so much crap to do, I'll at least make a point to ask Uncle Jesus if I ever bump into him at a family gathering.

Damien tosses the package in Faline's sidecar and shaking my head, we follow him back down the street before the local law enforcement can be called on us. Not that they would catch us, but still, it's not a headache I want right now.

Punching back through the portal and into Hell leaves us parking our bikes in the huge, cavernous space. I kick out Sugar's kickstand, and together with Damien, we hoist the manger out of the sidecar and make our way to the elevator. It pisses me off that Dick, Doug, and a very inebriated yet subdued Santa are already waiting for us in the Dog Pound, along with a middle-aged, Middle-eastern man with an easy smile and the jovial countenance I expected on Saint Nick's face instead. I look around for Auntie J

and Damien's Dad, but they're nowhere to be seen. It's probably for the best given the amount of dysfunction running through that family.

"Uncle Jesus, Happy Birthday!" Damien cries, setting his side of the manger down.

Jesus, Uncle Jesus beams at his nephew, and the Hellcats and myself are left standing around the pilfered item, staring star-struck at the man.

He's not at all what the Western cultures make him out to be. Dark-skinned and dark-eyed, he's also short and not blond-haired and blue-eyed. I don't know why but I thought he'd be taller. Standing a foot over him, I feel slightly less intimidated, until he turns his dark eyes on me.

"This must be your co-ruler, Catriona Clarke." He murmurs to his nephew, and suddenly I find myself not only star-struck but speechless.

"Nicetermeetyou." Thank Uncle Jesus's Daddy Leona kicks me. "Nice to meet you." I enunciate each word like Jesus of Nazareth, the man who died for all our sins, is a simpleton. My God, I'm going to remain in Hell forever at the rate I'm going. Do not pass go, do not collect redemption for two hundred.

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Catriona." Uncle Jesus doesn't hold out a hand, but the familiarity and cordiality extended is more than I could have ever expected. Christmas miracles come in strange ways, and I never thought an intro to the almighty man on high would be one of those.

"Isnickermeetyoutoo." It's like I can't help myself. Faline kicks me this time. When Tora and Tabby line up to take a shot, I give them the stink-eye. My shins can't handle being kicked by a cardboard reindeer, and all my girls. "I have your crib."

Someday, and today is not this day, I am going to stop blurting out the most random crap. Like calling attention to the purloined piece is going to help our case.

"Ah yes," I was wondering where it had wandered off to. I'm glad Dick and Doug have taken good care of it." Uncle Jesus tears into the package, and we discover the dregs of the bathtub gin remain in the bottom of the manger. Uncle Jesus grabs a plastic cup from a nearby table, and I cringe as he scoops out some of the offensive liquid and takes a swig. "Ah, perfect. Do you have any idea how intolerable harking heralds and angels singing gets old year after year? If I understand my nephew's friends, Dick and Doug, there's even a birthday cake in my honor this year." Uncle Jesus looks around, and I spot the cake on the table with what appears to be a suspicious indent in the frosting which looks like Dick or Doug may have tea bagged the pastry before we all left on this little venture.

Santa remains trussed up in the corner, and thankfully Marty slinks back into the room and sits next to him, ass-end in his face with a major case of the green gas farts. Someone takes pity on the old coot and removes his gag to give him a swill of the good stuff. It seems to calm him down, and the fact he managed to pull off Christmas with Dick and Doug in like, half an hour, I guess he earned it. Next year though, he's getting a full posse of babysitters to make sure he doesn't pull this crap again. I also decide to keep the two pistols I confiscated from his shenanigans. Penance for making me work on Christmas Eve.

Who knew a Christmas miracle for a bunch of demons in Hell would be yakking it up with Uncle Jesus, the most iconic Christmas idol, in a hootenanny to end all hootenanny's with teabag, birthday cake, baby manger bathtub gin, and a game of ping pong ball which even the Saints in Heaven would have had a hard time refereeing fairly; but here I am, standing next to my co-ruler Damien, laughing as Uncle Jesus stumbles over a drunken Hellcat curled into a ball and batting a demonic furball back and forth between her paws and trying to bite the mistletoe hanging below Dick's navel under his ugly Christmas sweater every time he walks by.

But in the words, if Uncle Jesus, "This is the best birthday blowout bash I've seen in an age, and thank fuck there's no donkey's involved this year, because seeing an angel flirt with a barnyard animal because their saintly ways have been tested for so long, isn't on my list of fun shit to do this year," it reminds me that although I was feeling down about not seeing Fiona, or having a lot to do to run Hell so celebrating in the usual manner isn't going to happen, the Christmas spirit comes in many ways, and that's to end the day with Uncle Jesus's hangover from bathtub gin in his holy manger relic all over my shoes, and as a demon reaper from Hell, I'm cool with the shenanigans.

"Merry Christmas you crazy fuck." I tell Uncle Jesus. When he claps my shoulder with his palm, I feel the imprint of destiny on my shoulder when he responds.

"You're going places, big places my child. This has been the most Hellishly Heathen Holiday, but I haven't had this much fun since I've been born and sacrificed at the stake and risen again, and that's all thanks to knowing you, Catriona Clarke, know how to throw the best holiday hootenanny this side of the human and Hell dimension. And it has been the most Heavenly of birthday bashes I have ever seen."

I raise a glass of bathtub gin and toast the drunken lout. I'll take this level of praise from Uncle Jesus because Heavenly wannabe with my redemption or Hell's co-ruler, at least I know I can throw office Christmas birthday party to end all parties. And that's what the company parties are all about doing it right in a Hellishly Heathen Holiday.

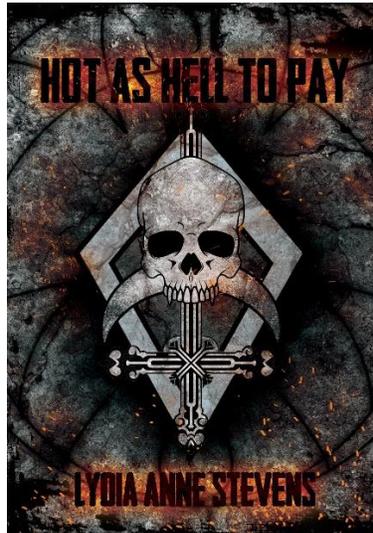
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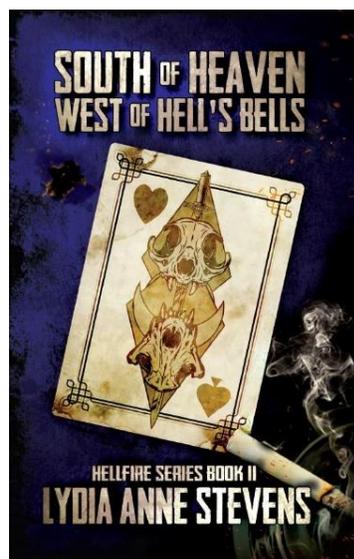
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Lydia Stevens is the Acquisitions Editor of Urano Publishing, the USA imprint of Ediciones Urano in Barcelona, Spain. Additionally, she works as a freelance Developmental Editor and Author. Having completed her Bachelor and Master's Degrees in Creative 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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