



Sugar & Sin

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Description: Scars are only skin deep.

Cherise Bates escaped the Silent Night Asylum one year ago, scarred and with no memory of her past—except for one burning truth: her family was murdered by The Saint, the Archdemon who twisted Christmas into a night of terror. Now, as the holiday approaches, Cherise is driven by one goal—revenge. But The Saint, marking souls for his dark harvest in the quiet town of Lockwood, is captivated by something new. A soul so sweetly wicked it intoxicates him—and its Cherises. As Christmas Eve draws near, secrets will unravel, identities will be revealed, and their deadly collision may set the stage for chaos.

Will Cherise get her revenge, or will the demon claim more than her soul this Christmas?

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Chapter one

Cherise

Three Months Until Christmas

It's only a few months until Christmas Eve, a day I've been anticipating not only this year, but for the past ten years—waiting patiently for when I will grab revenge by the reins and annihilate the demon from my past. Every year, on December 24th, the entire world shrinks in fear, turning out the lights, boarding up their homes, stocking up on essentials. I'm not talking about hoarding toilet paper and water like in preparation for a storm; I mean guns, ammunition, knives, or whatever kind of weapon necessary to fight off the demon and his evil minions from Hell. This is the new norm of our world. No more Christmas Eve. No more families excited to wake up early Christmas morning to gifts under the tree. No more celebration. Only the fear of evil and death it now brings on this day instead. But not me, not this time. The town of Lockwood will revel in the screams I tear from the sick one—I will be revered for ridding the world of his twisted existence. I'm going to light up my home like the Fourth of July, with a big fucking welcome sign to lure him in—the one they call The Saint.

I close my eyes, and I still see that fateful night ten years ago. I can never forget. The way he tore through everyone's souls. His devil imps gorging on their mutilated corpses. The souls and corpses of my family.

As usual, I hear the ringing bells that keep me up late at night. The thud of something heavy on my family's roof. The screech of his skeletal steed. The horror, the pain, the

loss that crippled me, and his laughter as he took what wasn't his to take. I was only seventeen when The Saint took everything from me.

No matter how hard I try, these memories refuse to fade, playing over and over, haunting my every waking hour of every day. And there's only one thing that can soothe me now... Well, two things—murder and candy.

My red-bottom stilettos tap softly against the pavement as I strut toward room 25 at the shitty Motel 6, with a cherry lollipop between my teeth. My heart beats quicker as I brace myself for what's to come.

I knock on the door, push the lollipop against the inside of my cheek, and adjust my blonde wig to ensure it's securely in place. I trace my fingers over the red and white masquerade mask that covers half my face, and smile serenely. I can't let him recognize me yet.

I see movement and a shift in the light through the peephole. Your escort has arrived, ready for penetration. Except it might not be the kind you like. A giggle bubbles in my throat, but I grab the stick of the candy and suck on it slowly as the door swings open. "Hi, sugar." I pull the hard candy out of my mouth with a wet popping noise and grin wide at the disgusting piece of meat before me.

"Cherise? You look different than your picture on the website." He runs a hand through his greasy brown hair, raking his dirty eyes up and down my body, assessing the woman before him.

"Well, it's me. Aren't you gonna invite me in to play, handsome?" I muse, with a cheery lilt in my tone.

With one more pass over my body, he must decide to throw his suspicions aside. He turns his body sideways to allow me access through the door. "Come on in, baby

doll.”

I snort a laugh at how easy it is. As I pass by his beer belly, I trail two fingers up his chest and skip the rest of the way inside the dingy room. What a shit hole. One double bed with crusty bedsheets that sport a large brown stain near the foot of it, a cheap TV atop a nightstand directly across, and a large painting of some ocean-front resort that looks like it was made in the ‘80s. There’s a bathroom to the left, with a polka dot tie hanging around the door knob. It’s real classy; nothing gets me wetter than this lame excuse of a room.

I turn to the predatory stare of the man biting his drying, cracked lips—as if that will turn me on. I feel a sneer forming across my face, but quickly hide it with a fierce grin. Jack Scryer, one of my tormentors from my time at Silent Night. He used to shove pills down my throat against my will. Oh, how I would scream and fight when he pushed his grubby fingers down my throat with the pills to sedate me, to “make me feel better.” I marked him for death, and it was only a matter of time until I could enact my vengeance.

I bite my lip in return, mocking his stomach-curdling gesture, then take off my coat, and toss it over the TV. Placing the cherry candy back into my mouth, I suck on it slowly and sensually, holding his lustful, bloodshot green eyes. He watches me drag it in and out of my mouth while I suck my cheeks in and hum softly.

“You sure like sucking on things, don’t you, baby?” he quips, creeping closer to me. I see his tiny hard-on outlined through his brown khaki pants, and I want to gag.

I pull the stick out, just so, to twirl my tongue around the cherry-tipped candy and laugh low. “Sure do—I love candy. You gonna come play with me?” I pop my hip and run my hands over my body, spending extra time feeling over my breasts. I’m wearing a tight, red lace corset top, paired with a white frilly skirt that barely covers my ass cheeks.

He stands before me, the stench of beer and cigarettes fuming off his body, the same smell I remember lingering on his fingers when he gagged me with them. The scent makes me shudder, as I begin to stare off into space—getting lost in the memories—until I shake myself and focus on my mission. I’m going to make him choke on those same fingers. He reaches for my breasts, his hands cupped and ready to pounce on my flesh. I skip back with a giggle and pull out my phone. “Not so fast, silly. I like music in the background, to set the mood. Do you like music?” I don’t care what his answer is. I tap on the music app and play “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” by Dean Martin. This song makes me fucking feral, and I don’t know why. It gets me in the mood—to get more intimate with him than he might have bargained for.

A menacing smile spreads across my lips as I put the lollipop between my teeth. I turn towards the bathroom door, snatch the cheap tie, and wrap it around my fingers playfully. “What are you doing with my tie, baby? And what’s with the mask? I wanna see that pretty face,” he says with a low growl, as he stalks closer to me.

“Don’t worry, sugar. I’ll take it off in due time. But first,” I hold my hand out to gesture for him to stop walking. Like a meek rat, he stops. He thinks I’m playing nice—but I only play dirty. “Lie down on the bed. I know you mentioned you like to be dominated online. I’m gonna tie you up and make you beg for me.”

A smirk tilts his lips. “Fuck, you’re gonna make me cum already talking like that. Such a bad Mommy.”

I frown. Did he seriously just call me ‘Mommy?’ “On the bed! Now!” I demand, raising my voice. He thinks I’m playing into his sick fantasy, and I’ll play the part for now. He jumps on the bed and flips on his back—I love it when my prey obeys; it makes things so much quicker.

I skip over to him and slowly climb over his body as I hum to the music playing. I snap the tie with both hands in front of his face, making a loud crack. He jumps

beneath me and lets out a whimper. How pathetic, I'm not even at the fun part yet. "Feisty, Mommy," he moans, his foul stench filling my nostrils when he opens his mouth.

I furrow my brows as I look down at him with distaste. "Put your arms above your head and cross your wrists for Mommy," I muse in a singsong voice.

He does as I command immediately, and I bind his wrists with his tie and smile wide. He winces as I yank the material tight, ensuring he's firmly restrained. I sing along with the lyrics to the song and stare down at him, unblinking. He inhales a shaky breath. "Why the Christmas music? No one listens to this anymore, not since he came and destroyed the holiday forever. Plus, it's not a very sexy song."

I run my hands over his chest, swirling the candy on my tongue as I gaze into his hungry eyes. He opens his mouth to speak again, but I snatch the white stick from my mouth and slam it inside his mouth, making him gag. "Shhh, you'll ruin the best part, Jack."

He raises his eyebrows in confusion. I laugh in his face, then push off him and the bed, and grab my coat that hangs over the TV. I dig into the deep pocket, and pull out the cable wire. I stand in front of the bed and unravel the coil. "What are you going to do with that? And, how do you know my name?" His voice trembles slightly—he's beginning to worry about who he invited into his motel room. Good.

I play stupid, tapping my finger on my chin like I'm lost in thought. "Hmm, I thought that was your name. Must have been my last client, I get the names mixed up sometimes. Silly me." He appears to relax slightly to my lie. I yank on his ankle, stretching his leg out wide and tie his ankle to the bed frame, then do the same with the other. "There, just how Mommy likes it," I cringe. But I no longer need to keep up this charade—it's time to play and collect my dues.

The song nears its end, so I go to my phone and restart it. A giggle bursts from my lips, and I reach back into my coat, pulling out my six-inch serrated blade. I hold it before my face, staring at my reflection; a wicked smile curls my lips. “What the fuck is that for?” He begins thrashing wildly on the bed, trying to escape his bindings. But, this isn’t my first time, and I know how to tie a good fucking knot. No, Mr. Scryer, you will not survive this night.

Ignoring his question, I jump back on the bed and straddle his twitching body. I run the knife tip gently across his cheek, careful not to break the skin. His body stills when I slide the steel over his flesh. A shiver surges down my spine as adrenaline rushes through my nerve endings. Now this—this makes me wet. “Look at me, Jack. Take a long, hard look. Scars are only skin deep, sugar.” A memory crashes into my brain, back in the Silent Night Asylum, when Jack repeated that same line to me when I was crying over my damaged, ugly skin—the scars covering my body. I struggle to catch my breath, shaking my head to rid myself of the thought. “Look at me, Jack!” I shriek, lowering my face closer to his.

His breaths are sharp and uneven, but he listens to my demands. I watch his eyes dart over my skin, and when he finally notices what’s been in front of his face all along, he slowly raises his glare to my gleeful smile. “It’s you! How... how is that possible?”

With an alluring laugh, I remove the wig, along with my mask that hid my true identity. “What do you mean? I’m Cherise Bates, your escort.” I tilt my head back and laugh maniacally.

“You died, bitch! This can’t be real!” he shrieks, thrusting his hips frantically beneath me to try and throw me off of him.

I grip his shirt in my hands and lean down. “Boo!” I rip the lollipop stick from his mouth and throw it on the bed. I reach for his bound hands and place the serrated

edge of my blade on his index finger.

“Say you’re sorry, Jack!” He begins to cry out, begging for help. “Shut up! You’re gonna ruin the song!” I shriek, slicing my blade with ease through his skin—I push down hard, to break the bone and sever his finger entirely. Blood pools on the bed around the wound. “Say you’re fucking sorry!”

Tears spill down his face as he shakes his head ferociously. “I-I’m sorry, okay! I’m s-s-so fucking sorry S—”

I jam his bloody finger into his mouth with a sinful smile. “You lie, Jack. You all lie. Now choke on the same fingers that you violated my throat with.” He gags, blood sputters out of his mouth as he tries to spit the finger out.

Continuing my work, I sing along to the old Christmas tune that’s been lost to a time that no longer exists—when Christmas was full of joy and love, now tainted by the shadow of The Saint. My body aches with the desire to plunge my blade into him and make him pay for the sins he’s brought upon the world—brought to me. For now, I wait. I bide my time with these low-life pieces of shit that all stole parts of me, while adding scars to my psyche that will never heal. No, I won’t recover until revenge has been delivered to me—for my family and for every poor soul who’s been mutilated every Christmas Eve by The Saint and his Hell brigade since his reign of terror began.

Jack chokes loudly, snapping me from my wandering thoughts. I peer down at his gaping mouth, now stuffed full with all ten digits. Blood coats his mouth, face, and the bed. The tears amp up and spill down his cheeks. “What a pretty sight. How do your cigarette-stained fingers taste?” Goosebumps coat my flesh as I stare down at my masterpiece.

I giggle, bringing my finger to my mouth and biting on the tip softly. Jack tries to

scream, but it's muffled by the bloody appendages in his mouth. "You're so pathetic," I quip as I slice my blade across his throat. I watch the blood spurt out over his skin, crimson coloring the already-stained bed sheets. One last gurgle chokes out, before the light is gone from his eyes. I glance over to the lollipop on the bed. I pick it up and place it atop the fingers in his mouth, then chuckle. "So beautiful."

One less tainted soul to walk on this earth. Feeling euphoric after reaping sweet vengeance, I hop off his limp body, go over to my coat, and pull out another cherry lollipop—I remove the wrapper and plop it in my mouth. I wipe the blood off the blade on Jack's pant leg and put it into the jacket pocket.

Since I left Silent Night Asylum last December, I've been hunting the ones who made me feel fragile and small. In fact, anyone who preys on the innocent and those weaker than them, I silence completely. Every sick son of a bitch whose life I claim leads me one step closer to the grand finale—it makes me stronger for him, The Saint.

With one last glance at my work of art, I throw my coat back on and leave the dirty motel behind. I'm ready for The Saint. This time, I won't run away.

Chapter two

Niklaus

Three Months Until Christmas

Humans are masters of many things—art, music, food, literature, to name a few—but what they excel at most of all is sin. While they go about their lives and try to put on a facade to the world about their good deeds, I am the one who sees through the veil of their deceit and brings their wickedness to the light. I lay claim to each tainted soul I mark throughout the year every Christmas Eve. Oh, I love how the twisted souls taste once I reap them, banishing their vile existence into the raging infernos of Hell. What a merry time Christmas is, indeed.

It was the year 1960 when I snuffed the joy out of the wretched holiday for good—a holiday built on lies from a false God and an obese man who couldn't keep his dick out of the cookie jar. The night a week before Christmas, I flew to the North Pole—to the fat fuck, Santa himself—chopped him up like a butcher, and scattered his severed limbs across the globe. That following Christmas Eve, while families prepared to wake up to presents under the tree, what they found instead was the remains of Mr. Claus, his perverted elves, and his reindeer. The humans think me a monster, but really, I'm The Saint who saved their sorry souls from his cruel acts. I may be an Archdemon, sent by the Devil himself to reap souls in order to feed the everlasting flames, but I have morals.

My one and only goal during my time spent on Earth is to claim souls, not only to empower myself but the fires in Hell. But the Devil never said what kind of souls I

had to take, so I took it upon myself to devour the sick ones, the souls that taint the Earth—the sinners. Sin tastes sweeter than innocence, believe it or not. Santa was the sweetest-tasting soul I’ve experienced during my immortal existence and not because his diet only consisted of candy and treats. No, Santa was the sickest sinner of them all, spreading tales of joy and gifts under the tree, but he and his elves were perverts and child molesters. He knew how the children loved him, how they stayed up at night, hoping to catch a glimpse of the disgusting oaf himself. He preyed on their innocence, and he knew he could get away with it. But, what no one talked about were the children that went missing during the night. Or the ones who woke their parents up with their crying and screams, with wild accusations that someone was in their room and touched them. Yeah, let’s not talk about that. And they call me the evil bastard that ruined Christmas. I fucking saved them, and I continue to do so—while they don’t deserve it.

Now, every year on the 24th of December, the world cowers in fear of an Archdemon they claim stole Christmas to kill innocents to feed the Devil himself. Yet, the only ones who need fear me are the humans who rape, kill, steal, and cheat. Each year, I feast until I’m fully gorged on their polluted essence. The humans board up their homes, turn off every light to not draw any demonic attention—and bathe the world in darkness when I descend upon them, to reign in unholy mayhem. With the help of my hellish imps, I go down a list of names of wicked souls to rip into shreds, painting the snow-covered grounds in a crimson glow. I can’t be everywhere at once, and need all the help I can get to exterminate such vileness each year.

I casually stroll down the vibrant streets of Lockwood, searching for new souls to add to my list to feast upon on my unholy day. I love this shitty little town, it’s small in size, but it’s full of some really abhorrent bastards. In this place alone, I usually mark at least two dozen souls, though a few slip through the cracks and live to tell the tale another year. Some haven’t yet committed the sins that would seal their fate, giving me fresh souls to mark each season—and the best part? No one suspects that I’m the demon haunting their nightmares. I glamor my demonic features while amongst the

humans, blending in with the vermin while I sniff out the stench of sin. I daresay, seeing a 6'6" otherworldly man with a gaping wide mouth, baring a full set of razor-sharp teeth and a forked tongue that can stretch longer than a street lamp would cause some concern. Not to mention my ethereal crimson eyes, long and wispy ivory hair accentuated by my onyx curved horns, and claws meant to shred into flesh with ease. So, to the public, I'm another ordinary man who's just trying to make it in this fucked up world, flaunting around that I'm a good man—while harboring a monstrous identity.

I pause, straining my neck to listen closely to shouting amidst the hustle and bustle of the crowded market streets. I scan my surroundings to try and find the source of the scuffle. Ah, slightly to my left are two men in a screaming match down an alley next to the local coffee shop. A sinister smile warps my lips as I catch the faint scent of foul deeds wafting to me from their general direction—another possible mark to add to my naughty list, and if I'm lucky, maybe two. I laser focus on the arguing men, resuming my stride over to them as one shoves the other in the chest, and the tension rises between them. The other man reaches into his jean pocket, brandishing a switchblade, and with a quick flick of his wrist, sets the blade free and holds it out before him. Oh, this is getting juicy.

I stand before the men with a wide grin and a calm demeanor. I don't want the one with the blade to get any funny ideas and try to slice into me, because then I'd have to go all demon on him and out myself. It's happened before, and it's a pain in the ass to cover up. So, I try to avoid situations like that if I can help it.

With their incessant shouts, each trying to dominate the other, neither turn to look at the unfamiliar man standing before them, watching the show unfold. "I fucking told you it was taken care of!" The hefty, shorter man with the blade exclaims.

"Clearly, it wasn't, you fool! They never even found a body, and the bitch is crazy as hell! Do you even know what she's capable of?" The taller, lean man with a scruffy

beard spits back.

I cross my arms and examine the men, who are incredibly blind to their surroundings—not having a care in the world about who might be listening to their little spat. I wish I had some popcorn to toss into my mouth as I watch this unfold.

“You and the rest of those idiots had one job, and you failed miserably. If she’s as dead as you say, then are you telling me a dead girl just got up and walked away?” The taller man continues, lowering his voice slightly at the mention of a dead girl. Now, this is interesting; I do believe I’ve found something tasty to gnaw on.

“I’m telling you, Will, she’s fucking dead. I used this blade on her myself to—”

Of course, right before I was going to get a confession to the supposed murder, tubby catches sight of me and stops talking, idiotically turning his blade on me. “Who the fuck are you? You wanna find out what happens to dudes that sneak up on others having a private conversation in the shadows of an alley?”

I raise my brows and flash an easy smile. “I do believe I overheard the two of you arguing, and anyone could overhear your little death dealings in the dark. You weren’t being very discreet.” I look down at his dull blade and lick my lips. “You’ve piqued my interest with this alleged dead girl. So, let’s just cut to the chase: I do love stories about dead things.”

“You’re a fucking weirdo, man. Get the fuck outta here, you didn’t hear shit.” He pokes me in the chest with the blade’s tip, not hard enough to break the skin, but he’s trying to intimidate me. I don’t break so easily—or ever, for that matter.

A low growl rumbles from deep in my chest, and my eyes darken as I stare down at the blade against my blazer. I flick my malice-laced gaze up to the worthless piece of shit before me. “I’d lower that blade if I were you. I’d just like some names.” I turn to

the other, Will, I believe he was called. “Both of your names. First and last, and then I’ll leave you to it.”

Will scoffs and glides his tongue over his yellow-stained teeth. “What do you want our names for? You a cop?”

I huff a sigh of annoyance and don a look of boredom. I’m not too fond of these kinds of dealings with humans, and my patience wears thin already. I shoot my hand to the wrist of the one holding the blade and bend it backward in one swift movement. A sharp cracking of bone echos against the cold, brick walls surrounding us, and then the clatter of metal as his blade drops to the ground. “Names. First and last. I will not repeat myself. You both reek of wickedness, potent enough to fill my reserves for almost a whole month, so I will have your names.”

The tubby man with a now fractured wrist cries out, holding his limp hand, and backs away from me. Pain is quick to break them, and they’re always so easy to submit to my demands. “Thomas Branson. You’re fucking crazy! I will find and kill you for this, mark my words!”

I smirk at his weightless threats. “I am sure we will meet again—you can count on that, Thomas Branson.” His name settles into my gray matter, sending a surge of pleasure through me. I turn to the other man with a wicked smile. “And you?”

The short weasel, with a wrist as limp as his dick, darts around us, running out of the alley to escape me, but little does he know he’s just given a demon his name. He’s marked for death, and I’m simply buzzing with a high at the thought of crossing his path again. Just as soon as the scent of his tainted soul is out of range, an overwhelming pungent smell floods my senses, protruding from the man left standing before me. This one’s soul is pitch black, and my mouth waters as I envision tearing into his flesh to claim it. He exudes power, and I will fucking have it. He looks sideways as if he’s considering following his friend, but I can’t have that. I need his

name. I grip his shirt in my fists and let a low, demonic snarl rumble from my chest. “What’s your last name, Will?”

The asshole smirks in my face. “Ashcroft.”

Lucifer fucking dammit. I release my hold on his shirt with a snarl. That name just saved his soul from eternal damnation—from me, at least. “I suggest you follow your friend before I give you a matching fracture, Will Ashcroft,” I repeat his name with acid coating my tongue.

With an overly pompous laugh, he spins on his heels, walks out of the alley, and blends in with the shoppers on the street. Ashcroft—the fucking untouchable family. They’re a cult led by Lionel Ashcroft, who puts on a show to everyone in Lockwood that they’re a loving, God-fearing family who run the local church. But what the citizens don’t know is what the family gatherings entail, late at night. Their self-righteous family is full of sick individuals who give sacrificial offerings to Lucifer once a month. Normally, this wouldn’t bother me, but these sacrificial ceremonies protect them—even against me. I’ve never been able to mark an Ashcroft. It’s like the sacrifices cleanse them of their sinful acts, but it leaves their souls the darkest, black abyss I’ve ever had the pleasure to come in contact with—and fuck, I really want to claim them all.

I feel a slight triumph after my run-in with the two men. After all, I was able to add one to my list. I make my way out of the alley and head further down the jam-packed street to see if I can find more prey. I walk past the neon signs of Twinkling Treats, blazing bright in the setting sun. It’s the grandest candy shop I’ve ever seen. Of all the things a town can be known for, Lockwood is known for this place—it brings in tourists from across the country to visit the massive candy store. My body stills when the sweetest, sugar-filled scent invades my senses, and a tingling sensation overtakes every nerve ending in my body—but it’s not from the candy. Blood rushes to my dick in a way I’ve never felt before, and I come close to shifting into my demon form to

accommodate the amount of blood that's currently engorging my very human cock. I dash into the candy shop, shoving past small children who jump up and down, trying to convince their parents to buy them whatever treats they want. I pay them no mind, even when I hear crying behind me. I must have knocked one of the little snot heads over. Oops.

I find the source of this painfully overwhelming arousal, in the form of a human woman. My breath catches as I gaze upon her. She's talking to someone, but I can't see who it is because a tall candy cabinet hides them. Rage surges through me, and I clench my fists. What is this that I'm feeling? It's strange because, throughout my entire life span, I've never experienced whatever it is I'm feeling right now. In a trance-like state, my feet carry me closer to this unknown woman who smells of candy and death. I want to taste her, claim her—I want to fucking own and possess her in every deranged way possible. But why? I've never felt drawn to any human like this before. What is it about this one that brings out unfamiliar emotions— and is about to bring out the monster in me?

I round the corner, and stand behind the woman who's still deep in conversation with... no one. I observe her, her hands waving around animatedly while she converses about her favorite candy with an invisible person. She's batshit crazy, but that doesn't deter my dick from wanting to burst through my denim jeans and fuck her in the pit of assorted candy behind us. I heave a sigh of relief at the fact that I don't need to potentially mark an innocent for speaking to her... what the fuck is wrong with me?

I tap on her shoulder, which makes her jump and squeal in shock. She turns to face me, revealing the most haunting icy blues, and I find myself wanting to get lost in them. Why does she have this effect on me? She clutches her chest and huffs a breathy laugh. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Who were you talking to?" I attempt to hide the smile that threatens to break free.

She raises her eyebrows in confusion and plops a red lollipop into her mouth. “My friend.” She turns around and sighs. “I guess she ran off to get us some more candy.” She shrugs her shoulder half-heartedly and gives me the most cock-hardening, sultry smile I’ve ever seen—all while sucking on that damn candy.

I lean closer, inhaling a large whiff of her intoxicating essence, and goosebumps coat my immortal flesh. Her soul is tainted, but yet... it’s pure, which makes absolutely no sense. A mixture of sugary sweetness and wicked sin engrosses her entire being.

She notices me smelling her, and grins wide with a soft giggle. I would expect a sane person to be thrown off by a stranger smelling them, but this woman clearly isn’t all there in the head. In fact, I think she likes it. “Do I smell good?” She giggles.

I grasp the back of my neck and purse my lips—my eyes never leaving hers. “You are intoxicating. Please, I must know your name.”

She swirls her tongue slowly over the hard candy, her eyes hooded and dripping with lust. Fuck. “I’m Cherise.”

“What’s your last name?” I will mark this one, but I plan to claim her soul for an entirely different reason this Christmas.

“You’re soooo nosey,” she quips, playfully. “It’s Bates. Like the movie Psycho.” She takes the lollipop out of her mouth and stabs the air with it, laughing hysterically. Fucking. Crazy. Woman.

Cherise Bates. Her name doesn’t send the familiar tingles across my skin when I mark a victim. I cock my head, observing her closer. Her skin is riddled with scars, with an especially jagged and deep one passing between both of her lips. Her arms and neck are covered with little purple blemishes, tenting her skin. Did she do this to herself? Or is this someone else’s doing? I find myself consumed with thoughts of

personally tracking down those that caused her harm, and if it was her marking herself like this, well... I'd have to punish her for that.

“What’s your name, sugar?” Her question snaps me from my spiraling thoughts of the alluring mystery of her presence.

I meet her stare once more with a sinister curve to my lips. “I’m Nik—Nik Saintclair.”

Her eyes blaze with lust at my admission—my false name. After this bizarre encounter, I do know one thing for certain: this girl’s fucking mine. Every fucked up part of her, I want to discover and claim as my own—but I want her to give me her soul willingly—something I’ve never done before.

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Chapter three

Cherise

Two Months Until Christmas

“M ommy took the candy away from me again. She said it rots your teeth.” I glance at the girl who lies facing me in the single bed, in a room lined with padded white walls under the bright fluorescent lights that flicker every so often. Her brown hair is in tight pigtails, and her bright blue eyes burn into my soul and portray the very image of innocence. She’s wearing a knee-length cream-colored dress with frills at the wrists and around the hem. She visits me every night while I lie here in this place, surrounded by the bad men—she’s my only friend.

“Did your Daddy catch you with the candy?” My friend wrinkles her nose at me and giggles softly—you must be quiet to not draw the bad men’s attention. Don’t let them know you’re awake.

“No, not this time. Mommy took it away before he could see. She told me before the Rite of Blessings she would give me a candy cane if I was a good girl, but I had to promise to eat it in my room where no one could see me. I promised I would be good,” she whispers as she looks down, but not before I catch the hint of sorrow reflecting in the murky waters of her tears.

I grasp her chin gently and force her to meet my stare once more. “Did your Daddy hurt you again? You are such a good girl, I’m sure he had his reasons. You’re his favorite, after all. ” Her chin trembles, and she exhales a shaky breath. “One day,

once you complete the Rite yourself, you will make your parents so proud, and I'm sure they will reward you with all of the candy in the world. He promised he wouldn't hurt you anymore when you fulfilled your duty, remember? It won't be long now." I stroke her chocolate brown hair, twirling my fingers all the way down to the end of her pigtail.

She sits up, adjusting her legs so she sits criss-cross. I mimic her actions and do the same, so we sit face to face and knee to knee. "Yeah, but I'm only eight. Daddy said that I need to be older before I can complete the Rite of Blessings."

I give her an incredulous look, raising a brow. "He's allowed others younger than you to do it. Did he say why you needed to wait?"

My friend grabs her feet and rocks back and forth. Her eyes cloud over, lost in deep thought. She does this every now and then when I talk to her about her Daddy. I lost my own parents, so I understand that it can sometimes be hard to talk about them—especially the bad things they can often do. She snaps her face to meet mine, as she blinks repeatedly—probably to make the bad thoughts go away. She explodes into a chorus of giggles and shakes her head. I love the way she laughs, her smile with her missing two front teeth. But we have to be quiet. I shush her, placing my index finger against her lips. "You have to be quiet, or else the bad men will find you and take you away from me again."

"Did you hear that, Scryer? I think our girl is awake and wants to play." My spine stiffens, and I hold my breath. The bad men are coming.

I hear their laughter from down the hall, the sound like nails on a chalkboard—making my stomach churn. I cover my mouth, to quiet my uneven breaths from becoming too loud. My friend tugs on the sleeve of my shirt, demanding that I lie down again to pretend to be asleep. I follow her lead and lie my head on the pillow, coated in red stains from my previous visits with the vile men who want to

hurt me.

“I think you’re right, Branson. What do you think, Ashcroft? Should we go teach her another lesson about disobeying the rules?” The three men’s voices are louder now, I hear their snickering outside my door.

My friend places her hand in mine to reassure me that everything will be alright. It won’t be, but I appreciate the sentiment either way. The door bursts open, and my body jerks from the loud bang. I squeeze my eyes shut to avoid their hungry eyes—they always come to take from me... always taking.

“Aw, you’re so cute, pretending to be asleep. We heard you whispering.” This time, it’s a voice I dread more than the others. Will Ashcroft, the one who wields a knife and cuts into my skin when he takes from me—he’s the most gruesome out of the three men. The footsteps stop next to the bed, their sinful presence looming large over me. I swallow hard, trying desperately to push down the acidic bile rising in my throat. “Not gonna answer me, little crazy bitch?”

A scream emerges from deep within me as rough hands grasp a handful of my hair, and yank me into a sitting position. My eyes flutter open and I’m met with the cold stare of Will, flanked by Jack Scryer and Thomas Branson—the men who haunt me during the night. I glance down, and panic settles into my core when I realize my friend is no longer next to me. They fucking took her away from me again. Tears well behind my eyes—I’m all alone again, alone with these monsters. A sharp hiss through clenched teeth emerges as Will tightens his grip on my hair, forcing my gaze to meet the malice in his eyes. “Are you gonna cry? You know I love it when you cry, crazy girl.” I shout in his face at the mention of him calling me crazy—I fucking hate being called that.

“I’m not crazy! I swear, I’m not! Just let me go, I’ll be good, I promise!” My pleas always go unanswered, and I know nothing I say or do will stop what’s about to

happen. Will shoves his blade against my throat, a murderous sneer pulling his lips back. I try to pull my head away, but his hold on me is firm. The cold bite of the blade on my flesh sends my heart rate into overdrive. “No more scars. Please...” I whisper softly. A tear escapes me—I’m no longer able to contain them as reality sinks in.

“Oh yeah? Who were you talking to then? It’s only you locked away in this room, so you must be fucking crazy if you’re in here talking to your invisible friends,” Scryer chimes in. He stands to the left of Ashcroft, and the stench of cigarettes wafts into my nostrils and makes me gag.

In my periphery, in the only dark corner of this padded, soundproof room, I see my friend. She cowers against the wall, fear etched into her beautiful features, as she stares wide-eyed at me. I cry out when I lock eyes with her. “Don’t watch,” I murmur, as the tears fall in a cascade down my pale cheeks. A fist connects with my jaw and pain rolls through my face, as I feel my facial bones shudder under the blunt force exerted in the blow. The metallic tang of blood covers my tongue and I cry out in agony. I bring my fingers to touch my aching jaw, when laughter surrounds me, and both of my wrists are held by the other two bad men. “Why? Why do you do this?”

Will’s lips warp into a repulsive smirk. He brings the blade to my cheek, making a small cut. I wince and cry out as I feel the warmth of my blood trickling down my skin. “You know why. Don’t act fucking stupid.” Will backs away and lifts his shirt to reveal the jagged scar across his abdomen. “You almost killed me that day and ruined the offering to Lucifer. You almost got us killed by The Saint because of it, and I will never let you forget that. You can keep trying to suppress your memories all you want, but I will ensure to brand your flesh the way you did mine, whenever the fuck I want.” He leans in closer to my face, brows furrowed. “Every. Fucking. Day. I will make you pay for your failures. Your parents were so disappointed.”

I search his eyes frantically. I have no recollection of any of this. “I didn’t do anything! The Saint killed my family! I would never let him hurt anyone on purpose!”

Will snorts a laugh and looks to his left, and then his right, at the others. They break out in wild laughter while they look at me. “You’re so fucking crazy. Take her clothes off.”

My heart pounds to a dangerous beat, as I try to kick and claw at them. They continue to taunt me with their laughter as they tear at my clothes, ripping my pants down my legs. Pain explodes behind my eyes and shoots down my spine as another fist connects with my face. One of the men slam my face down into the pillow, while another moves behind me and lifts my ass into the air. I scream and I cry—but no one ever saves me.

I lift my head briefly, and I look at my friend who hides in the corner. Good, at least they leave her alone. I will take this punishment so that she never has to—never again. A single tear slides down my cheek, but I no longer make a sound. I let my muscles go slack, and I let the bad men take from me. I smother my face in the pillow and cover my ears with my hands to drown out the sound of loud grunts that echo throughout the room. I draw in a deep breath—dragging my sanity along with it—and I shed the final tear that seals their fate. I vow to never let another tear fall again, not until every last one of my tormentors are exorcized from this world.

I shake my head and focus on the fingers that snap in front of my face. The sound is dull and appears distant, until it becomes clear and sharp—the sound resonating in my ears—and the thoughts dissipate like a rolling storm cloud out of my mind. My breath catches when my eyesight focuses on the handsome man sitting across from me—on Nik.

“Cherise?” he asks hesitantly, setting his hand down on the table in front of us. “Are

you alright? You just zoned out for, like, five minutes.”

I squint, dragging my eyes lazily to get a look at my surroundings. I’m in a coffee shop, sitting at a table with Nik Saintclair— my fucking shadow for the past month. I don’t know why I agreed to meet with him here, but his persistent begging made me finally cave in. This man won’t leave me the hell alone. I’ve told him countless times that I’m not interested in a relationship, but he won’t let up. He ensnares me in his piercing caramel eyes, and my breath hitches. At least he’s pretty to look at. His clean-shaven, chiseled jawline is framed in perfect harmony with his long, tousled brown hair. Sometimes I picture myself running my fingers through his hair, but then I recoil at the image. I can’t lose focus on my mission, and he’s just a fucking distraction. A very sexy distraction... my thoughts wander as I rake my eyes past his jaw, down to the perfect view of his muscular chest—visible beneath his shirt with the top few buttons undone. My mouth waters at the sight of his toned arms flexing, as they stretch the seams of his tight, satin, maroon button-up shirt.

I hear a low rumble of laughter, and catch sight of Nik’s shoulders moving up and down. “Cherise,” he muses, his tone a few pitches deeper than usual.

I dart my eyes back to his, with my bottom lip nibbled between my teeth. “Hm? Oh, yeah, I’m fine.”

“Were you just checking me out?” A devious grin emerges from his lips, accentuating his prominent cheekbones.

I pin him with a death glare. “Definitely not,” I snap.

He huffs out a laugh and leans forward. “I think you were. Were you fantasizing about all of the things I could do to you for the past five minutes?”

I scoff and cross my arms. “Nope,” I say, popping the ‘p’ sound.

A low hum rumbles in his chest. “Then what were you thinking about? Was it your friend?”

I narrow my eyes into slits, and slam my fists onto the table, hard enough to make the glassware of the coffee mugs, plates, and silverware shake. A few customers sitting around us shoot me worried glances. I ignore them and give all of my attention to the annoyingly handsome man in front of me. “I’m not crazy! My friend isn’t in my head, she’s real. I told you this already.”

He chuckles, which sets my blood on fire. I reach into my coat pocket, and grip the handle of my knife tight in my hand. I could fucking slash his throat for mocking me. “I never called you crazy, now did I?” I furrow my brows in confusion, loosening my grip on the knife. He leans in even closer, and brings his voice to a whisper. “In fact, if anyone here is crazy—it’s me.”

I lean my face closer to his, placing my elbow on the table and resting my cheek in my palm. My other hand still clutches my blade. “Why’s that, Nik?”

“Because I’m infatuated with this beautiful woman sitting in front of me, who has a knife in her pocket and is ready to cut me open at any second.” My eyes go wide, and my jaw drops at his confession. My fingers twitch against the blade. How did he know? “And you know what else?”

My heart hammers roughly inside my chest. “What?” I whisper.

“I’ve never been more turned on in my life. You fucking fascinate me.” He places both elbows on the table, grinning wide with his cheeks pressed against his palms.

My own cheeks flush, and desire pools low in my core. It would seem he is, in fact, psychotic. “How did you know I have a knife? You think I won’t use it?” I don’t even bother to lower my voice. The whole coffee shop can hear this for all I care.

“I know you’d use it, and that’s the best part about you. I’ve never been this enthralled by a hum-uh-woman, in my life.” He bites his lower lip slowly.

“And how did you know I had it?” My eyes focus on his lips, and I clench my thighs together tightly.

“You can say I’m very perceptive. I know you don’t trust me, and you probably shouldn’t hon—”

I fling my knife from my pocket and place the tip under his chin. Nik doesn’t even flinch—doesn’t even seem phased in the slightest. Instead, his grin widens like the Cheshire Cat, and his eyes darken to a ravenous, slightly crimson shade. He laughs low, pushing his neck onto the blade. I let out a sharp gasp, and for the first time, I’m in a situation that I don’t even know how to comprehend. I’m totally out of my element with this man. “Why can’t I trust you, Nik?”

A growl emits from deep in his chest. “You are so fucking sexy. Make me bleed for you, Cherise Bates.”

My hand trembles, and my core pulses at his sinful words. “You have fucking problems, sugar,” I respond, sweetly.

He opens his mouth to answer but is interrupted by a man shouting from across the shop. I flick my eyes over to see a short, heavy-set man stomping over towards our table. I glare at him. How dare he fucking interrupt this? “Excuse me! There are children in here! What do you think you’re doing flashing that around?”

Nik swiftly pushes out his chair, the legs screeching on the floor at the harsh movement. I feel pressure on my blade before he stands, and I stare blankly at my knife—noticing that I nicked him with it. Nik swipes up the blood dripping down his neck with his thumb, and gets in the angry man’s face. “I would lower your tone

when speaking to a lady, if I were you.” He places his thumb inside his mouth, laps up his blood, before slowly dragging the thumb out.

The man dons a disgusted look at Nik, his face beet red. “She held a knife to your throat in a public space where children can see! You’re both sick, I’m calling the police! That is unacc—”

Nik roughly grabs the fabric of the man’s shirt and growls. “What’s your name? First and last so I know who to address my Christmas card to.”

The man gasps, and his eyes go wide. “R-Robert Nichols,” he stammers out.

I can’t see Nik’s face, but he does something that scares the living shit out of this man because he begins squealing like a pig, with piss pooling in the crotch of his brown slacks. Nik lets out a vicious laugh, loosens his grip on the man’s shirt, and smooths out the wrinkles. “I hope you have a Merry Christmas this year, Robert Nichols. Stay safe.”

The man spins on his heels and runs out of the coffee shop, screaming. Nik turns back to me, offering his hand. “Come on, my sweet sin. Let’s get outta here.”

I’m confused, but also extremely aroused. Why was that so hot? I’ve never had someone stick up for me like that before. I put my knife in my pocket, then place my hand in his, and he pulls me up. He interlocks our fingers and leads us out of the coffee shop with a bright smile on his face. “What did you do to him, Nik?”

With his other hand, he reaches into his pocket and yanks out a cherry lollipop. He brings the wrapper to his mouth and rips it off with his teeth, spitting it onto the ground. My eyes light up, and I let out a squeal of excitement.

“I feel weirdly protective of you. I don’t know what you’ve done to me, but no one

fucks with you.” He brings the candy to my lips, and I open my mouth for him to place it in.

A giggle emerges out of me once the cherry sweetness hits my tongue. I pull the stick out slowly, taunting him with the slow pull of the lollipop out of my mouth. “You’re so sweet,” I muse in a singsong tone.

Maybe I am delusional, but Nik just scared the actual piss out of another man and then gave me candy? I’m still confused about why he hasn’t left me alone for the past month, or why he feels the need to be so possessive of me—I’ll admit that I like it. I can’t remember the last time someone cared for me, except for my friend. I think he can stick around after all.

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Chapter four

Niklaus

Two Months Until Christmas

What the fuck is it about this human that has my head spinning and my cock straining against my zipper for the past month? She has me completely enthralled, even when I know she is batshit crazy. I'd never say that to her face, though—I know Cherise hates when people call her crazy—it's a huge trigger for her that makes her detonate into a knife-wielding frenzy. Which is super hot, by the way. Lucifer, damn it all. What is she doing to me?

I've fucked humans before, sure; it's a way to kill time and let off some steam in between marking souls for the big day every December. But I have never, and I mean never, been in love or had feelings for one before. Even thinking about the word love makes me want to vomit and summon my imps to destroy me for the pathetic thought.

Cherise is changing every single rule in my handbook. She makes me fucking feral. Obsessed. Possessive. Murderous. This girl will be mine. I've already marked four innocent souls to claim on Christmas Eve, and their souls didn't give off that sweet aroma of wickedness—all because, in some way or another, they pissed off Cherise. Mind you, that's not hard to do, I've learned. I'm constantly following her around and trying to capture her attention. I offer to take her out on dates; DATES, who the hell am I? There is something deeply twisted and disturbing about this whole turn of events, and I wouldn't say I like it in the slightest. I'm a demon, for fuck's sake—I

am The Saint! If anyone found out I've gone soft for some delusional human who can be found staring off into space for copious amounts of time or speaks to friends who are invisible to the naked eye, no one would fear me any longer.

And I can't have that. No, I need to cut this shit out—and fast. I need to get this woman out of my head before she ruins everything. Maybe I'm just horny? I mean, I haven't gotten laid in the last two months. Mainly since the closer it gets to December, the more focused I become on marking the tainted ones, and now there's her—the soul-sucking succubus who's ensnared me in her thrall. I've jerked my dick hundreds of times to images of her filling my mind and making me act like a teenage human boy who's never even seen a pussy before. It doesn't help that she's drop-dead gorgeous and sparks something inside my black, demonic soul that I've never felt since my creation. Every time I come close to Cherise Bates, I want to claim her on the spot—every inch of her body I want to touch, every wacky thought that passes through her mind I want to know, every scar I want to trace, every hole I yearn to fill. I want it all, every part of her, and I will have her for eternity. She will give me her soul willingly, and I will stop at nothing to take it from her. Shit, there's something wrong with me. Demons like to possess, but not like this—not with nauseating feelings. That's it. I'm cutting all ties. I cannot see her anymore.

Like a demon lured by sweet temptation, I walk down the lifeless sidewalks of Lockwood with a clear view of my prize a few feet ahead of me. With the help of the star-filled night sky, I keep to the shadows to avoid detection. I've officially lost my mind. Maybe that's the joke—I'm obsessed with some crazy chick, so that must mean I am now the crazy one. Why is she even walking around at this time anyway? It's 11:30 pm on a Tuesday in October, and the majority of the town is asleep. Not to mention the fucking curfew placed over this cursed town, procured by none other than the king of evil himself—Lionel Ashcroft. I grind my teeth at the thought of Lionel and his sick fucking family. I've wanted to reap that entire family since I took over this gig, but alas, they're protected by Lucifer. Every innocent soul they sacrifice during their fucked up ritual buys them safety from me. My stomach churns, and

hellfire burns my tongue with longing vengeance. One day, I will find a loophole around that bullshit safety net and decapitate them all myself. I'll hang their limbs atop every inch of this town, their church, the grocery store, the bank—hell, even the fucking trees will be covered in a bloody show of ornaments consisting of a glistening sinewy delight. I'll fucking—

I quickly crouch down behind the bush beside me, just before Cherise goes still and turns around to check behind her. Damn it, I didn't think I was being that loud. I pivot on my feet to peer around the green shrub to get a look at her, and she's talking to her "friend" again. Maybe she didn't hear me after all. No matter. I definitely don't want her to catch me, but now I'm curious to get close enough to hear their conversation. Well, her conversation with herself.

My magic isn't as powerful as it will be come December, but I'm sure I can conjure up something light for the occasion. With a snap of my fingers, a Godless smile plastered across my lips and my eyes glued to my sweet sin, I cloak myself entirely in invisibility. I stare down at myself, and while I still have a corporeal form, I cannot be detected unless I make a sound or Cherise bumps into me. This is perfect. Why didn't I think of this sooner?

With careful steps, I leave the covered area behind the brush and make my way over to my candy-loving . Her voice crystallizes the closer I get—mindful of my breathing and making sure I don't step on something that would make noise and alert her—I make my way until I'm standing before Cherise. She's staring at absolutely nothing, but appears deep in thought. I gaze into her haunting, crystal blue eyes that remind me of the clearest, shallow ocean water found only on the most isolated, serene beaches across the globe—ominous and rare but exceedingly fascinating. And even though the ocean's beautiful, it's vast and dangerous—the unknown lurking beneath the depths waiting to pounce on any unsuspecting victim—that's how I feel when I'm with Cherise. As if I, a fucking demon, am the unsuspecting victim who will fall under her mysterious allure—all because I want to claim every secret beneath her

surface and dominate her sea.

“I’m going after the bad man, like I told you. I must be quick, or I’ll get caught out past curfew. I don’t have much more time to waste.” Her eyes glance around our surroundings to ensure no one is lurking about to inform the police that there’s a woman out past curfew. Who is this bad man she’s seeking? I’ll rip him apart myself if she leads the way.

She’s silent for a beat, listening to whatever her mind is replying to her, before she speaks again in a hushed whisper. “He won’t ever take you away from me again. I’m doing this for both of us. To keep us both safe—and together. We will never get hurt by bad men again, and you can stay with me—away from your da—”

She’s cut off by herself, and scoffs at whatever just skated across her mind. I cross my arms, giving her an incredulous look with a single raised brow. She’s so damn crazy, it’s somehow cute. However, this appears to be about someone who’s hurt her—and ultimately, whoever this “friend” of hers is. I’d like to know who’s hurt her too, and I have a hunch those scars scattered across her delicate, pale skin are part of it.

“Your Daddy will not be an issue. This Christmas, I’m going to end it all. First with The Saint, and then your Daddy.” What the fuck? Did I hear her correctly? I choke back a gasp that threatens to give away my location—did she just say “first with The Saint?” She can’t be delusional enough to actually think she is any match for me, and more importantly—what the hell did I even do to her? Maybe I’ve devoured someone she knows, a friend, family member, or ex-coworker? I’m itching to check my list to find anyone who could be attached to her name. Cherise Bates, you have become much more interesting, my sweet sin. It would seem there is more to our connection than meets the eye. She thinks I’ve done something to her, and I plan to figure out what.

“I’ll be ready for The Saint, don’t worry, sweet angel. After tonight, I’ll be one step closer to him—I’m going to catch him off guard when he least expects me—he won’t even see me coming. Once the beast is vanquished, the last two bad men will go next. Then we will be free.”

With a slight nod toward... the air, she swiftly turns around and continues her journey towards, I assume, this alleged bad man. I allow her to gain some distance before I continue to stalk after her. I never saw myself becoming a stalker, but here I am stalking this delicious, delusional, sugar-coated human that, without a doubt in my mind, will be mine. But first, I need to figure out why she wants me dead. That thought should make me want to kill her right here on the spot. Instead, I’m intrigued and, of course, very aroused that my sweet sin wants to take me on.

As soon as I feel she’s far enough away from me, I snap my fingers and watch my once invisible body reappear. I rub my hands together to conjure my list that contains the names of every soul I’ve claimed for myself, and every soul that is now marked for extermination. I open the scroll and place a single hand on the mystical golden parchment, imbued with the finest magics of Hell, and search for the last name Bates. I feel magic thrum through my fingertips as the parchment beams with a bright flaxen hue—and then it stops so suddenly with nothing picking up on the name. I let out a disgruntled sigh.

Not even Cherise Bates is marked on the list, which means when I attempted to claim her during our first meeting, it somehow didn’t work. She’s hiding something from me, and I’m determined to figure it out. She might just meet The Saint sooner than she thinks, but it will be I who she will not see coming. I could just... kill her. That would save me a lot of trouble and rid me of these damned emotions that are foreign to me. I shake the thought away, not taking it off the table completely.

I place one foot in front of the other, keeping a casual pace behind her, when she turns right and heads down the sidewalk of a run-down neighborhood. I sigh again,

much more annoyance laced into it, and continue to follow my human.

I pause, going still when I hear the faint chime of bells ringing like whispers carried in the wind. Lucifer, damn it, not now. The bells ring louder as my right-hand devil imp nears—and with a sharp, crackling sound, the air heats around me—reminiscent of the infernos of Hell. Swirling flames emerge from the depths, accompanied by the distant echoes of screams, layered beneath the roar of fire, as Grimble suddenly appears before me—a devilish, toothy grin showing off all of his sharp, pointed teeth. All of two feet, Grim may be tiny, but he’s the most vicious imp of them all, which is why I made him my second. If I dole out an order, he’s the one who whips the rest of the imps into shape to complete it. And there are instances where I do mean whipping in a literal sense.

“Not now,” I grind out, pushing past him and moving towards my little sin.

Grimble matches my stride, and with a snarl only emitted from the depths of Hell, he doesn’t heed my command. “Master, I sensed you use your magic on the scroll. Are you in need of my assistance to locate a delicious, tainted, succulent soul for you? Just say the word, and it shall be done.”

I glance down at him; his pale gray skin looks translucent under the dim illumination of the street lamps. He’s wearing his usual black top hat, two sizes too small to fully cover his hairless head, along with his regular apparel consisting of a dark green suit and red tie. He gazes up to meet my glare. He has no lips to hide his teeth, and with barely any skin surrounding his mouth, you can see the bone underneath—his revealed teeth give him a constant look of smiling. His nose and ears come to sharp points, with the ears slightly sagging downward. He is a thing out of a human’s worst nightmares, but he’s fucking magnificent to me. All of my imps are; they all look and dress the same, with only slight changes in each one’s facial structure. “I said not now, Grim, and yet you are still here,” I snap, with more edge in my tone than intended. It’s not his fault; he’s just doing his job, but I want to keep my sugar-

scented addiction a secret.

Almost as if he heard my thought process, his eyes shoot to my little prize walking ahead of us. He places his fingers together with a gleeful laugh. “Is this your next target, Master? I’m sure her soul smells like the sweetest, most sin-stained—”

“Enough! She is mine—and mine only.” I catch the sparkle in his pale, crimson eyes as he observes her closely. “Are you even listening to me?”

He shakes his head with a sharp intake of air. “Uh, yes, so sorry, my glorious Saint. May I ask why you do not require my assistance to mark the girl? I can smell her from here, she reeks of the most charming death and rot... but drenched in something that is also pure. How can that be?”

“I don’t know, that’s what I’m trying to figure out. Cherise Bates has become the bane of my fucking existence, from the day her scent wafted over to me inside that damned candy store.” I return my gaze to my sweet sin; she quickens her pace as she turns onto a dark driveway cast in shadows due to the house having no porch light on. Maybe whoever she’s after isn’t home.

“Are you interested in this girl, Master? Have you not fucked her yet with your—” I turn my head sharply, opening my jaw and letting my wide, pointed teeth snap in his face. I feel my claws elongating as I clench my fists at my sides. “I was going to say with your resplendent—almost as large as Lucifer’s—cock.” He winces when I let out a feral, otherworldly growl. I back away from his face slowly, eyes still trained on his terrorized appearance.

“I have no interest in this girl. Except for the fact that she maybe wants me dead and has stolen every waking thought of mine and filled them with images of her. What does it mean, Grim? I think I’m going insane.” I glance up just in time to marvel at Cherise, who is now climbing through this person’s window. I let out a huff of

annoyance that she would be so careless—she didn't even check to see if there were cameras or anyone fucking home first.

“Master . . .” Grimbale whispers, with a trembling voice.

“What?” I snap, not even bothering to acknowledge his small form next to me.

“You must tell me you do not have feelings for a mortal.”

I click my tongue and look at him. He recoils, bowing down in submission for fear of retaliation for that comment.

“Oh, gracious one. I mean no disrespect,” he whimpers.

“I do not have feelings for a mortal. That is absurd and not physically possible. She just... intrigues me. That's all,” I mumble, averting my gaze back to the quiet, dark house before us.

“Forgive me for my pathetic insolence, Master, but why else would you be following her around if you haven't graced her with your powerful, demonic cock—or marked her for soul-harvesting?” I hear him whimper beside me again.

A low, deep rumble forms in my chest. I do not have feelings for a fucking human. It's not possible. It's never been heard of before. But what the fuck is she doing to me? “Grim, I—”

A loud crash sounds from somewhere in the house. Whose house is this anyway? I quickly place my hands together and summon my scroll. I put my hand to the gilded paper with haste and immediately learn where I am.

“Why the hell is she at Thomas Branson's house?” I bellow, striding towards the

house—not giving a single fuck that she will see me. A light source illuminates the hallway through the window. I stop moving towards the front door and steal a glance inside the house.

My Cherise is vile indeed, and I find myself utterly intrigued. Now, I stand here in complete bewilderment at the sight before me. My demented, sweet sin is not so sweet after all. Found out one of your secrets, you murderous, sinfully beautiful woman.

Chapter five

Cherise

Two Months Until Christmas

“W ho’s in my fucking house!” Branson roars down the hallway. Shit. I tried to be as quiet as I could when I went through the window, but my damn boot caught on the ledge and made me lose my footing. I stumble forward, crashing into a dresser and knocking over a lamp that shatters on the floor. This really disrupts my plans of catching him off guard and knocking him out, before I tie him up to play.

I quiet my breathing and enshroud myself in a sense of calm. I can do this. I have to do this—there is no other option. If I want my friend and I to be free, the bad men and The Saint must die. I crouch down inside the bedroom’s darkness, just off to the side of the doorway. I hear Branson’s thundering footsteps pounding down the hallway towards where I am. I reach inside my jacket pocket and pull out my serrated blade, the handle firm in my grasp—holding it in front of my body—aimed and ready to strike if he storms into the room.

“I’ve got a gun, you little piece of shit! Show yourself!” His statement is confirmed with the click of the gun’s safety being released. “Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he sings mockingly. He’s getting cocky, thinking he has the upper hand with that piece of metal. I’ll shove it up his ass and pull the trigger, just to let him know what a mistake it was to bring a gun to the dance of death with my lethal blade—and I know how much he loves anal play from the amount of times he shoved his disgusting, puny cock in my ass.

I pull out my phone, unlock it to my open music app, and press play. The lulling Christmas song, “Baby, It’s Cold Outside,” blasts through the phone speakers, and I slide it across the floor into the hallway. Come play with me, motherfucker.

I fall on my ass and let out a sharp hiss at the sound of the gun firing in the direction of the phone. I guess I spooked him—Branson is trigger-happy—but that means I’m in control here. He doesn’t know where I am. He lets out a loud exhale. He’s so close now I can smell the rot emanating off his flesh from outside the doorway. I flick my eyes up when I see the outline of the gun entering the room first, held in his pathetic, shaking hands.

I feel my heart thrashing in my chest, but I stay as stiff as a board. I watch Thomas enter the room with slow, calculated steps and the gun held high in front of his body. He reaches above me and flicks on the light switch without taking his eyes off the closet in the room’s far corner. Idiot. He steadies the gun, points it at the closet, and fires off three rounds—the bang of each shot ringing inside my ears.

He stalks closer to the door. “I would show yourself right now. I’ll go easy on you and make this quick. I promise,” he sneers. Yeah, dude, that sounds real believable.

I slowly move off the wall with feline grace and get down on my hands and knees. My knee-high white socks with tiny red bows on the sides protect my bones from the painful and cold hardwood floor. Once I’m behind his trembling body, I lift my blade, and in one quick slash, I slice into his Achilles tendon. With another shot into the floor and a female-sounding shriek of pain, Branson falls forward onto the ground with a hard thud, and the pistol flies out of his hand on impact. Blood puddles onto the wood at a rapid pace from the wound.

His screams are music to my ears, a blood-curdling chorus mixed in with the old-timey Christmas song in the background. A vicious smile curves my lips upward. Without another thought, I dash onto my feet, press my combat boot onto his spine,

and crush him hard onto the floor. I sing the words to the song, straining the muscles in my leg as I push with all my might onto his back. “I ought to say ‘no, no, no, sir.’”

“Who the fuck are you!” he shouts through gasping breaths. “Just take whatever you want!”

“I will take whatever I please; don’t you worry about that, Thomas Branson. Just like you took, and took, and TOOK from me!” I scream, the raw emotions pouring out of me. “Who will be the freak now when I mutilate your body? I will make sure your family can’t even recognize your ugly, fucking face.”

He screams louder and prays to a God that never answers, between gasps of pain. “Please! God, someone help me!” He tries bucking his hips to push me off him.

A chuckle bursts out of me at his pleas for help. I adjust my grip on the handle of my knife and remove my foot while attempting to straddle his thrashing body, before he flips onto his back faster than I anticipated and pushes me back with his hands. A vicious shout of rage surges from me, and I see red.

His eyes bulge out of their sockets when he finally takes a good look at me. He knows who the fuck I am now—the ghost of his past, come back to reap his tainted existence. “I-it’s you! How did you escape?”

I laser-focus my vision onto his face, and tilt my head slightly with a wide grin. “I really can’t stay, but baby, it’s cold outside,” I sing the lyrics in a soothing, relaxed tone.

I lunge forward, and Branson turns back over and crawls to retrieve the misplaced gun. I land on him, straddle his back, and sink my blade into his flesh with both hands on the handle—crying out in pure bliss at the feel of plunging it deep into his spine. His entire body relaxes, but he’s still crying out in agony. His outstretched hand that

was reaching for the gun goes limp on the floor. “Is your body going numb, Branson? Did I sever your spinal cord?”

“P-please let me go. I’m sorry! Sab—” He lets out another blood-chilling scream when I stab him again in his side.

I lean to whisper in his ear; my voice is soft but shakes slightly. “She’s dead, remember? You killed her that day. You took everything from her. So now, I will take everything from you,” I sneer with my lips pulled back.

I stand up once I’m sure he won’t be able to move and pick up the pistol on the floor. I observe the little piece of metal in my hand, and my breath catches. I hate guns—but I made a promise to myself to fuck his ass with a bullet—I would hate to break a promise so soon. I rush back over to him and place my knife on the floor next to me. Humming along to the lyrics of the song, I grab the waistband of his gray joggers and yank down to reveal his entire hairy, bare ass to me. I swallow hard and scrunch my face in disgust. “You like anal, don’t you, Tommy? I remember—I remember it all.”

He whimpers softly, but he can’t move his body or even attempt to stop me. I get down on my knees and shove the barrel of the gun straight inside his hole. “Fuck you for everything. I’ll see you in Hell, asshole. Two down—two to go.” With a sharp inhale, I pull the trigger twice in fast succession, filling Branson with two bullets in his intestines. The harsh sound of the shots fills my ears. I let out a sigh of relief when the room goes silent, and his body no longer moves up and down to fill his lungs with air.

I remove the pistol from his gaping backside and slide it away from me. I leap onto him once more and stab him repeatedly, anywhere and everywhere. Over and over, I sink my knife into every inch of his disgusting body, while I release shouts of pent-up agony and pain. “Die, die, die! I hate you! I hate all of you!” Blood soaks into my

socks, squirts onto my pale skin, and coats me in his DNA.

After I remove my blade from his flesh for the last time, with a shuddering breath, I tilt my head back, close my eyes, and laugh the hardest I ever have since I was a child. With heaving breaths, I open my eyes and stare down at Branson's corpse, forever branded by my blade. So much blood—there's too much blood. Staring into the crimson abyss, it begins to swirl all around me; it sinks into my skin and steals the air from my lungs. Memories flash across my mind of that night ten years ago—the night I lost my family. I can never remember it the way I know I need to—it only comes in bits and pieces. Broken remnants of the past circle through my brain, and I try to focus on one part at a time, but it goes so fast. There's blood everywhere. My mother's lifeless body on the floor. Hooded figures circle me. The Saint—his black hair, twisted grin, black cloak, and cold, blue eyes.

I shake my head. "Focus! Why can't I see your face?" I shout to the dead space around me. The thoughts stop when I stare down at the body beneath me.

"You did it. I'm so proud of you," my friend whispers next to me. "One step closer to freedom."

A warm smile tilts my lips as I stare at my beautiful friend. "I know. We're so close now." I stand up, my knife still in hand, and saunter over to the bed. I sit down on the edge, and think of my future. Visions surge into my head of the day I'll get to sink my blade into The Saint—when I get to hear his shrill demonic screams consume the air. I clench my thighs together at the thought of The Saint, of how I will kill him and rid the earth of his sin. My breath catches on a hitch, and the tiny hairs on my body stand up. He's so close now, I can sense it.

I look up to find my friend gone. Good. I scoot back a little further onto the bed, placing my heels on the edge, and spread my legs wide. I reach down underneath my skirt, smooth my fingers over my damp panties, and let out a soft moan. Consumed

with so much need, unlike anything I've ever experienced before, I push my thong to the side and plunge three fingers inside my entrance hard and fast. I pump them in and out while I release quick, breathy pants—but it's not enough to push me over the edge. I need more.

I turn my head to look at my outstretched arm holding my bloody knife, and the handle is quite thick. I can't... can I? I lick my lips, and Nik's face burns into my mind. I feel my core grow wetter at the thought of him and what his cock would feel like inside of me. I quickly decide that the handle will do for now.

I hold my weight with my elbow and grip the knife at the base of the handle. I bring it to my slick core and line it up at my entrance—pushing it in slowly. I moan loudly when I feel my inner muscles clamp around it as it stretches me, trying to hold in the handle's thickness. It's still warm from my tight grip on it during my slashing frenzy. I adjust to its odd shape and slide it in and out faster and deeper, careful not to let my hand slip onto the blade. My breathing quickens as I chase my release. I lay flat on my back, reach my other hand to my bundle of nerves, and rub it in tight circles. My hands work in perfect harmony the closer I get to my orgasm. I tilt my head and look at the doorway and see Nik standing there. His eyes darken a shade and glaze over with lust; his lips are slightly parted as he watches me fuck myself with the knife. I've got it so bad for this guy that my mind is bringing him to life right before my eyes—and that only makes chasing the high of release that much faster. I watch as he bites his lower lip and emits a low rumble from deep within his chest.

I look into his chocolate brown eyes and explode. My jaw drops, and I cry out along with my release, which hits me like a freight train. My entire body shakes, and I grind my hips while I thrust the handle quickly as I ride out the orgasm—never losing eye contact with my hot stalker that I can't escape from. My mind did such an excellent job on his body—he almost looks and sounds real.

I drag the blade out of me and place it down on the bed. I push myself up, and my

breath catches when Nik strides into the room. “Such a bad girl you are—my little reaper,” he says with a low growl that almost doesn’t sound human. His gaze latches onto mine, and I feel like I’m staring into the pits of Hell itself. And for some reason that I don’t understand, I want this man to drag me into the darkest pits of the Earth. I want him to ruin me and remake me. I want to burn with him in a smoldering fire, so bright that we can’t catch our breath—so consumed by him that I never want to leave his fiery embrace. He leans down and glides his fingers across my cheek.

I tense and let out a shocked gasp when I feel his skin brush against mine. What the hell? “Are you real?” I whisper gently.

He cocks his head and pulls a cherry lollipop out of his pocket. He rips off the wrapper and pushes the candy past my lips with no resistance. Once the cherry flavor hits my tongue, my eyes widen as realization washes over me. “I’m real. I’m here.” He holds the lollipop’s stick, slowly thrusting it back and forth in my mouth while I swirl my tongue, and he lets out a low groan. “What a pretty little creature you are, covered in blood while you fuck yourself with a knife handle. You are fucking fascinating, Cherise Bates. I want to possess you. Claim you. Mark you as mine for all eternity,” he says with a hellish growl.

I should be frightened that I’ve been caught in the act of murder, but as I sit here with this beautiful man pumping my mouth with one of my favorite things and saying all of the right things, all worry leaves me. I grab his wrist and pull back so he removes the sucker from my mouth. “So do it.”

He groans again and throws the candy onto the floor. He grips my arms and lifts me to stand before him. “Do you understand what I just said? Aren’t you frightened about what that might mean?” He searches my eyes wildly for any sign of doubt.

I huff with a sultry smirk. I fist his satin shirt, stand on my toes, and crash my lips onto his—giving him my answer. He kisses me back roughly, parting my lips

hungrily; it's punishing, bruising, and unforgiving. He threads both of his hands into my hair and pushes his tongue into my mouth, as we fight for dominance. I nip and suck on his lips, which makes a feral rumble emerge from deep in his chest. He pulls back slightly to observe me. "What are you doing to me?"

"What are you doing to me? You're distracting me, Nik," I retort with a breathy laugh.

"From what? What did this man do to you?" He's getting too close. As much as I want him, I can't get attached. I learned that's how you get hurt, especially by those who claim to love and care for you the most.

Without answering, I push him backward until I have him pinned against the wall. I grip the back of his head and bring his lips down onto mine once more. I run my hand down his hard abdomen, until I reach the swell in his jeans. He gasps against my lips when I grip his cock in my hand through the fabric. I pull back with a shaking inhale. "You're huge," I say with an uncontrolled whimper.

"You don't even comprehend how right you are, little reaper. Can you handle it?" He asks with an alluring smirk. I grip his bulge tighter then run my hand along the swell of denim. I nod slowly, never looking away from his dangerous gaze. His eyes darken to an almost crimson shade, but they only mirror his lust for me.

"I want to see it. I need to taste you," I say with a breathy moan. I place my hands on the button of his jeans and quickly undo it, along with unzipping him. "Let me see," I plead, my fingers hooked in the band of his pants as I kneel before him.

He lets out a nervous laugh and glances at the dead man behind me. He turns slightly to flick off the light and grabs the door handle to slam it shut, enclosing us in the dark room. "I can't get off while looking at a dead dude, so unfortunately, you won't be able to see my cock that well in the dark. But make no mistake, Cherise, you are

unleashing something feral within me. If you don't tell me to stop right now, I'm going to fuck that pretty, cherry-scented mouth like a demon from Hell. Tell me to stop, and I will—but only this once will I offer you that salvation. Because once my tip passes your lips, not even God can save you from what I will do to you, little reaper.”

I dig my nails into his jeans, and I try to pull them down myself. My breathing is uneven and trembling. My blood is on fire, and I have an overwhelming desire for this feral man and his possessing words. “Who said I needed saving from God? I'm already going to Hell, so take me there with you. Don't stop, Nik, don't ever fucking stop,” I rasp.

He lets out a vicious, possessive growl as he rushes to pull his pants down. I see the movement in front of me as his massive dick springs free, almost hitting me in the face. “Remember the rules, you asked for this. I will never stop now, Cherise.” With that, he grabs the back of my head in a vice grip, and I hiss from the sting of my hair being pulled so tight.

I place one hand on his shaft and stroke it slowly back and forth. I swear, I can feel his cock growing even larger in my palm. Is he pierced? I flatten my hand and run it along the underside of his shaft and feel every bump and ridge under his skin. I bring my other hand to touch the velvet-smooth tip that's already slick with precum, and I swirl my thumb over the head. It's shaped differently than any other man's cock I've ever felt—the tip is curved on a slant, and my mouth waters as a thrilling electric pulse shoots to my dripping core. What would this feel like inside of me? He growls and grips my hair tighter. “Do you like it?”

I swallow hard and nod. I look up to meet his fiery, otherworldly, glowing red eyes. I blink rapidly and shake my head. Is this real? “It's beautiful. You're beautiful,” I murmur as I dart out my tongue and swirl it around his curved head, lapping up the precum as I do. His cock twitches in my hand, and he growls.

“What the fuck are you doing to me?” he gasps. The sound of something sharp scraping against wood echoes above me.

I pull away to see what Nik’s doing, but he pushes my head forward, so I take him fully into my mouth. Fuck, I couldn’t even deep-throat him if I wanted to. He is that huge. I flatten my tongue and glide it against his intriguing shaft—over every ridge and bump along it—as I bob my head up and down. “Such a good girl, you’re taking my cock so well. Don’t stop, baby.”

His voice is the deepest I’ve ever heard him speak, distorted and almost with an echo that doesn’t resemble any tone a human could create. I stroke the base, and the rest of his cock that my mouth can’t reach, while I quicken my pace. I place my other hand on his thigh and dig my nails in, which I’m sure leaves little half-moon shapes on his skin. He threads both his hands into my hair and tugs, before he thrusts into my mouth, making my eyes fill with tears from how full and deep he just went down my throat. I try to breathe through my nose, but it’s becoming hard to focus on breathing with this monstrous cock in my mouth. He becomes needier with each powerful stroke, every thrust becoming more feral and out of control as he loses himself in me—and I want to give him this.

“Fuuuuuck, your mouth is perfect. You’re going to make me cum from how well you take it. I’m going to fuck every hole on your body, Cherise.” He pants breathily, each breath getting deeper with a threatening growl rolling out of him. “You are mine.” He fucks my mouth with so much force, tears stream down my face, and I try not to gag. I dig my nails harder into his flesh and let out muffled moans after each thrust. “Lucifer, oh fuck, I’m gonna cum!” he bellows right before I feel his seed coat the back of my throat. He pulls his cock out, and I suck in a sharp inhale of precious oxygen.

I swallow his cum, and it almost burns as it slides down my pipe—it’s sweet, with a hint of a fiery spice that I can’t place. I wipe my eyes and kiss the tip once more. I

stand up without saying a word and turn toward the bed to pocket my knife. I sigh, but don't turn back to look at Nik. "Are you okay," he rasps, his voice back to his usual tone.

"I'm more than okay." I turn back to face him. "I really can't stay," I sing. As visions of The Saint killing my family resurface—almost like a sign—I'm reminded again of Nik's distraction in my plans. "Don't follow me. You're gonna ruin my plans, so we have to be done for now."

I move past Nik, opening the door to leave, when I hear his raspy voice overpower me. "We will never be done, Cherise. I already gave you a chance to back out, and you didn't. I've marked you—and I will have you, all of you—and soon."

"That may be, but it can't be right now. Goodbye, Nik." I glance at the deep claw marks in the wall before I exit the bedroom. A shiver surges down my spine, but I pay it no further mind. It's just another distraction or my mind playing dirty tricks on me again. I pick up my phone off the floor and leave Thomas Branson's house. I have a mission to complete, and Nik Saintclair will no longer interfere, no matter how beautiful he is, or how monstrous his cock is.

Chapter six

Niklaus

One Month Before Christmas

I stare down into the crowded nightclub from atop the second-story balcony. The bass of the techno music vibrates through my body, and the room is dark, other than the blinding flash of strobe lights and the light shows centered around the DJ booth. Amid the overwhelming mix of scents of sweat, overpowering cologne, and liquor—the room is showered in the sweet aroma of sin, with so many vile creatures inhabiting one large space. I scan the mass of dancing bodies down below for the one with the intoxicating scent of candy and death—my little reaper.

After I caught her in the act of murdering Thomas Branson, one whom I marked for extermination this Christmas, I fully intended to storm in there and question her about the secrets she keeps. But what I saw upon entering the room—her legs spread wide, her beautiful pussy glistening and on display for me while she fucked herself with that bloody knife of hers—all earlier thoughts about questioning her went out the window. I no longer cared about her murderous tendencies. All I could think about was claiming her—branding her—as mine.

I offered her one chance to back out—the one time I would have honored her wishes for me to leave her alone for good. What did she do? The mad woman brought her cherry-flavored lips to mine and kissed me like she was the one who would steal my own soul and not the other way around. Foreign emotions exploded through me in that moment when I kissed Cherise for the first time—it was earth-shattering.

Fucking world ending. And don't even get me started on when I fed her my cock. I've never lost control like that before with a mortal, where I couldn't keep up my human glamor. I knew that when she took my cock in her hands, my resolve around her would shatter, so I lied and said I had to turn off the light because I couldn't get off with a dead man in the room. I'm not ready for her to see me yet—the real me, the demon against whom she seeks revenge. With Cherise, she brings the demon in me to the surface without even trying. My cock stirs at the memory of her wrapping her mouth around my length, as much as she could take, at least. I ask myself again for the millionth time, what the fuck have you done to me, little reaper?

For the past month, she's been dodging me entirely. She clearly believes I'm somehow putting a damper on whatever the hell her plans are, which I now know includes me. She won't let me close enough to interrogate her—at first sight of me approaching her, she hightails it in the other direction. I see the conflict in her eyes when she looks at me now, as if an internal battle rages in her mind not to run away from me. Yet, she does every time. It's fucking infuriating. So, I continue to follow her around like a sick, obsessed human man. I try to stop, try to continue finding souls to mark for Christmas, but every time my mind wanders from Cherise, I circle right back to her. I can't wrap my head around the fact that I may have very real feelings for her. It makes me want to vomit. I am an Archdemon. I am The Saint. I shouldn't give one single shit that this mortal doesn't want me around her—but I do.

Cherise Bates, you have a demon hot on your scent, and I will have you. I will learn all of your secrets hidden beneath those scars. You cannot hide from me. Not anymore.

My skin tingles, and the stench of sulfur makes my nostrils flare. “You look like you could use a drink.” I turn my head toward the short, overweight, bald man with a face resembling a rat who offers me whiskey on the rocks. I take the drink and wrinkle my nose in disgust. “You look fucking atrocious,” I retort, turning back to face the crowd below.

“Thank you, Master! Only the skins of the most disturbed souls I wear for you!” I grunt in reply to Grimble. My imps can cast glamors to hide their identity, but only of the wicked souls I’ve claimed in years past. The man standing next to me was once a man that raped and killed 14 women and children. His soul was so sweet and succulent to devour, but it’s hard to see him standing next to me now. His rot was expunged from this world, and no one should have to suffer to look upon his ugly mug another second.

“What are you doing here, Grim?” I sip the whiskey, savoring the burn as it slides down my throat. There’s nothing better than the alcohol from Hell that will leave you breathing fire, but I suppose this will do.

I rest my elbows on the railing before me, eyes glancing over the moving bodies to find my murderous little treat. I see Grim mirror my movement in my periphery, a fruity, red mixed drink in his hand with a little white umbrella floating at the top. I snort a laugh at the ridiculous sight. “If I may be so blunt, oh gracious one, but you haven’t been yourself as of late. I fear this human is changing you.” I furrow my brows, my fist around the whiskey glass tightening in frustration. I can feel the tension radiate off of Grimble. “Again, I never mean you any disrespect. I just mean... you no longer like to hunt for the sick ones with us. You’ve tasked your most loyal hellions to mark our prey for next month’s festivities, something you once enjoyed doing mostly yourself. You’ve been following this human woman around constantly—the one who reeks of death and purity. What has you so enamored with her?”

I clench my jaw, grinding my teeth as anger surges through me. I whip my head to Grimble, and he winces as if I raised my hand to beat him. I wish I could smack him, but that would draw unwanted attention. He bows his head in shame, and I almost feel sorry for him—almost. He isn’t wrong about anything he said, but what makes me consumed with rage is that he’s right. This shouldn’t even be fucking happening. “I am not enamored with her. I just... like the way she smells.” Grim gives me a

skeptical look, one eyebrow raised. I scoff. “Okay, maybe it’s more than that. I don’t fucking know. It’s like I’m drawn to her in a way I can’t even begin to fathom or explain. I can’t even mark her soul to claim. Something is off about this human, and I will figure out what.”

“You can’t mark her soul for damnation? That is... unheard of, Master. We saw her murder that man through the window—her soul is as tainted as the rest that you claim—she should be ripe for the taking.” He huffs a nervous laugh, bringing the straw in his mixed drink to his lips to take a sip. His eyes dart away from mine. “We could kill her for you, Master. Maybe that will rid you of her foulness?”

I turn my body to face Grumble, grip his shirt with ferocity, and drag his body close to mine. I sneer in his face, which makes him shake violently in my clutch. “Say that again, and I will send you back to Lucifer’s feet in pieces,” I growl, not even caring to glamor the demonic edge laced in my tone.

Grumble’s lips quiver, whimpering loud enough to draw the attention of bystanders over the blaring music in the room—his eyes bulging, staring at me unblinking. “I would never do something that would displease you, my most diabolical, unholy Master. Not a hair on the girl’s head shall be harmed.”

“Good.” I release his shirt and smooth out the wrinkles with my hand. “Now help me find her in this crowd, or get the fuck out and mark souls like I originally ordered you to do.” I face the railing again and take another sip of my whiskey before leaning over the metal rod.

Grumble heaves a sigh and looks out into the crowd. “There, in the center of the dance floor, dancing with that man.” All it took him was one second to find her. Fuck’s sake.

I laser in on her, and with a snarl, I shatter the glass in my hand, the remnants falling

into the dark room below. “How dare she!” I grab onto the railing with so much force that my knuckles turn bone-white, and the metal creaks under my grip as it bends under the amount of power I exert. Cherise is grinding her ass onto a man while his hands roam all over her body—a body that I have claimed for myself.

Without another word to Grimbale, I push off the railing and head for the stairs that lead down to the main dance area. Who the fuck does she think she is? I need to steal her away from that limp dick before I bring this entire building down. What are you becoming, Niklaus? A growl from deep in my chest rises, and I shake the thought away. Cherise, don’t you know taunting a demon is not wise?

I push the bodies on the floor without giving a single fuck. All I care about is getting to my little reaper. A majority of the crowd are grinding on each other, or jumping around to the beat. They are all so packed together, it’s like swimming through a sea of piranhas that want to fuck each other with their raging human hormones.

I spot Cherise; her back is to me. She places her arms around this fucker’s neck while she sways her hips sensually close to his body. He lowers his hands down to cup her ass. This guy is going to fucking die tonight. And, Cherise, you will also suffer the consequences for this little indiscretion. I won’t let this go so easily. She cast me aside like I was nothing after she enjoyed my cock down her throat—acting like she wasn’t seeking anything more than a hookup—yet, she moves on to some insignificant human. Does she really believe his small dick will be able to satisfy her desires? What is this strange emotion consuming me entirely? I have never felt this possessive and rage-filled in my entire existence.

I clench my fists at my sides, standing behind her while I contemplate my next move. At best, she will come to me willingly. Worst case, she runs off again to get away from me—but at least she will be away from his grimy hands. My eyes roam down her backside; she’s wearing a tight-fitting red dress that accentuates her curves, fishnets with red-bottom pumps, and, of course, the leather jacket she always has.

Why didn't she leave that at the door? Doesn't matter. My body goes tense when I see shit-face squeeze her ass in his hands.

I lunge forward, wrap an arm around her torso, and pull her roughly against my body. I stare down the man she was dancing with, he looks me up and down with a sinful smirk. With a slight nod, he heads into the crowd towards the bar.

Cherise whips her body around, and her eyes widen. I'm immediately pulled into her icy-blue eyes. Her features soften as she cups my face in her tiny hands. "Nik," she breathes. "Why do you keep following me?" Her ruby-painted lips tilt into a half smile.

I can't help myself, I lift my hand to trace my fingers over her plump bottom lip, giving extra attention to the jagged scar that runs slanted down her lips. I feel her shudder under my touch. "I told you—you're mine. And you let some dickhead run his hands all over you. I can't let that slide, Cherise."

"Are you jealous, Nik?" She gasps against my fingertips, a wild glint in her eyes. Is that what this feeling is? No. The Saint does not get fucking jealous.

I narrow my eyes. "No, I'm no—"

Cherise giggles, moving my hand from her mouth and crashing her lips onto mine. A hungry groan escapes me as I deepen the kiss. My hands move to her back, pulling her closer to my body—I need her closer. She wraps her arms around my neck and starts swaying her hips with the music. She tastes like vodka with a hint of cherries. Is my little reaper drunk?

She breaks the kiss, my bottom lip between her teeth as she roughly pulls back on it, her teeth clamping down hard enough to draw blood. I don't know if that was meant to piss me off, but my cock is now rock-solid. She releases my lip, and I slowly lick

the blood with a hungry gaze focused on her. She bites her lip while she watches me lap up my blood. "Touch me, Nik."

I raise my brows in confusion. "I am touching you."

She shakes her head and kisses me again, flicking her tongue over my bleeding lip. My demonic cock is about to burst out of the seams of my pants if she keeps this up. Without breaking our intense kiss, she grabs my shirt sleeve to force my arm in front of us. Grabbing my hand, she brings it down to the hem of her dress. She pulls back, her eyes drenched with lust. "I said, touch me."

With a glance at the bodies surrounding us, I quickly decide that I don't give a fuck. I am a demon, after all. If my sweet sin wants me to touch her right here on the dance floor and make her come, then how could I deny her?

I give her a devious smirk and reach under her dress. I run my hand along the fabric of her soaking-wet lace panties. Her jaw drops, and she sucks in a sharp gasp. I observe every movement her face makes under the flashing strobe lights while I trace my fingers back and forth over her core. "More. Make me come on your fingers, Nik. I want you," she moans.

"How bad do you want me?" I slip her panties to the side, never once looking away from her hooded eyes dripping with desire. I slip two fingers into her damp heat and slowly pinch her clit between my fingers gently. Her face scrunches, her breath catching on a hitch. "Are you just going to run away from me again when you get what you want? Or will you let me keep you now?"

She wiggles her hips, trying to create friction on her clit against my fingers. "I told you already, you can't keep me yet. I have things I need to do first." I squeeze harder, and her eyes close while she releases a strangled moan.

With my other hand, I grip her neck, making her eyes shoot open. “Let me help you. Tell me why you’re after these men, and I’ll make your little pussy come harder with my fingers than that knife handle ever could.”

She moves her hips again. She’s desperate to come, and I’m desperate for answers, so I can claim her soul and make her mine for eternity. “They hurt me. They do bad things to hurt others, too. I don’t need your help, Nik. Just make me come. Please, let me come.” I tighten my hold around her throat slightly, but not hard enough to constrict her oxygen supply. “Your eyes turn the most beautiful shade of red. Is that real or in my mind?”

Shit. I’m losing it. I guess that answer will have to do for now. I lose the delicate grasp on her clit, and begin rubbing it in slow, tight circles. Her jaw drops again, her eyes hooded as she loses herself in pure bliss. “You’re so wet, Cherise. That better be because of me and not that asshole who thought he could handle you.”

She steadily rakes her eyes up and down my face, a slow smile forming. “When I fucked myself with the knife, and you appeared in the doorway, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me because when I touch myself, I see your face. Every. Time. It’s only you that does this to me, Nik.”

My heart beats faster than I’ve ever felt the rhythm before, and some unknown feeling overwhelms me again. I wish I knew what it was—because that was the hottest thing I’ve ever heard, and it came from my little reaper’s lips. I remove my hand from her neck and thread my fingers in the hair behind her head. I pull her face back to mine, and I kiss her with as much heat as the fires that rage in the darkest pits of Hell. I plunge two fingers inside her entrance and hook them to brush rigorously against the sensitive bundle of nerves inside her. I pump my fingers in and out and bring my thumb to stroke against her clit. I wish this music weren’t so loud so I can hear every little noise she makes when I make her feel this good.

She writhes against me, grinding her hips in fast succession as if she were dancing along to the music. I quicken my pace, the demon within is treading dangerously close to bursting out of me and fucking her roughly in the middle of the dance floor. “Come for me, beautiful. Keep riding my fingers like a good girl,” I breathe against her ear.

“Fuck, Nik!” She brings her forehead to mine, her hips grinding faster as she cries out her release. I feel her muscles clamp down on my fingers the her orgasm rages through her. Her body shakes and writhes on my hand, still pumping inside her while I bring her to absolution.

She slows her hips when she starts to come down from the peak of her orgasm. I drag my fingers out of her and give her pussy a light slap, which makes her jump and let out a gasp. I smirk and pull her panties back to cover her fully. I bring my fingers to my lips, suck on my index finger only, and drag it out with a hellish groan. She watches the gesture and bites her lip.

I bring my middle finger, soaked with her cum, to her lips. “Taste yourself, little reaper.” She grabs my wrist and takes my middle finger into her mouth. Her eyes cross while she sucks on it slowly. “Come home with me.”

Her eyes lock on mine, and she takes my finger out of her mouth with a loud pop. “I have something to do here first. Get me a drink?”

“Stop playing with me, Cherise,” I say with an otherworldly, distorted growl.

She laughs. “I’m not. Just get me a drink, and I’ll meet you back at the bar in 10 minutes.”

I raise my brow and frown. “If you run away again, your punishment will last a fucking eternity.”

She pushes on my shoulders and nods towards the bar. “Just go. I’ll meet you over there, I promise.”

I rub my chin and glare at her, trying to figure out her angle. What could she still have to do here? “Fine. I’ll trust you, but if you fuck me over, I will not give away my trust again so easily. Are we clear?”

She smiles coyly, and my dick jumps against my zipper. Lucifer dammit. She runs her hand over the swell in my jeans, and I inhale a sharp breath. She places a soft kiss on my lips and backs away. “I’ll see you in a few minutes. Oh! I hope you brought candy.”

Well, of course, I did. I always have it on me now, but that’s what she’s worried about? I huff a laugh and nod. She spins on her heels and makes her way through the crowd—my eyes follow her every movement. I’ll play along with her little game, but I’m going to figure out what she originally planned to do here.

I follow her through the crowd, but far enough away so that if she turns around, I can easily duck to blend in with the swarm of people. I watch as she walks up to the asshole that she was dancing with earlier—who ran his greedy hands over my human. Rage simmers in my veins, but I gave her my trust—so let’s see what my sweet sin has planned for this pile of hell-hound shit.

He wraps his arm around her shoulders and whispers something in her ear. Her beautiful smile grows, but I sense the slight twitch in her lip that could mean she’s faking it—hopefully cringing at whatever foul shit he said to her. I clench my jaw so tight I could break it. I move closer to them and hide behind a large beam off to the side of the dance floor. I watch as he grabs a flask off his table and brings it to her lips. She better know what she’s fucking doing if she’s taking a drink from a stranger.

He nods his head towards one of the back rooms in the establishment, known to be

taken advantage of by those who wish to bump and grind off the dance floor. She jumps excitedly and starts moving towards the rooms, but he stops her. He pulls her back into him and brings the flask to her lips again. She furrows her brows but obliges to his request.

Cherise, this is how people get roofied. What the fuck are you doing?

Once he's satisfied, I guess, he takes her hand in his and drags her to the back. I think the fuck not. I follow behind them but still keep my distance. Cherise staggers slightly, and he pulls her closer to him. Fuck, did he actually have drugs in that? My eyes darken on the back of the one that I have now marked for death—but I will be cashing in on that tonight. My claws are itching to break free—my jaw expanding to accommodate my sharp teeth.

Cherise stumbles out of his arm and reaches for the door handle in front of them to steady herself. Hand on her forehead, Cherise scrunches her face, before bowing and shaking her head. Sir rapist douchebag laughs, reaches around her and opens the door, and pulls them both inside, before slamming it shut.

Nope, nope, nope. I quicken my stride, almost breaking out into a sprint to reach them. I yank on the handle, but he's locked it from the inside. I look around me to make sure no one is watching what I'm about to do next. Not a single soul is worried about me in the slightest, so I place my hand in front of the door and call upon my magic. Then I pause, Cherise shouts, and I hear signs of a struggle from behind the door. Fuck. I extend my fingers toward the lock, and the door unlocks with a flash of light from my fingertips and the flick of my wrist.

I waste no time, barging through the door and kick it shut behind me. Raw, undiluted fury courses through my veins at what I see next. An unconscious Cherise lies on the floor, and tiny dick has wasted no time hiking up her dress, his hard, four-inch, unimpressive dick in his hand. “What the fuck, dude! You can have your turn after.”

He waves me off and continues to pump his dick.

The Saint is coming out to play early this year. With a ghastly roar from the depths of Hell itself, I shake off my glamor entirely. I grow in height, my wispy ivory hair tangles down to my torso, my horns burst through my forehead, and finally, my claws emerge and come out to play. He turns to me, and his hand stops mid-stroke. His eyes go wide in horror as he gazes upon my true form. I cock my head with my widened, gaping maw full of sharp teeth. I flick my forked tongue out in front of me with a murderous laugh. Drool pools out of my mouth as the scent of his wicked soul arouses my senses.

He jumps back and bumps into the wall with a terrified yelp. “It’s not Christmas yet, asshole! You can’t kill me yet!”

So, he knows who I am. “Is that so, shrimp dick? I am The Saint, and I can do whatever the fuck I want.” I take a single step towards him, and he flinches. Sweat beads coat his forehead as he tries to push himself farther into the wall. “You’re trapped in here with me. And you placed your hands on my human. Tell me your name,” I growl.

“F-fuck tha-at!” he stammers out.

I snort a laugh. “Tell me your full name, and I’ll let you keep your life. But you will be facing punishment for touching her—that is a promise.”

He’s damn near hyperventilating now. He flicks his eyes down to Cherise and then back up to my towering form. My powers hum through me. It’s almost December now, and I’m growing in strength each day that it draws near.

The lights flicker inside the room the more impatient I become. “You swear it? I’ll live if I give you my name?”

I extend my jaw completely, allowing my full set of teeth to show on display. “Yes,” I lie.

He covers his dick, cupping it in both hands—which wasn’t necessary, since it’s so small, one would have done the job just fine. “O-okay. It’s Kyle Diaz.”

I spread my arms and let a distorted demonic laugh fill the room and echo inside the tiny space. Kyle covers his ears and shouts at me to stop as I increase the volume to a deafening pitch. “Your soul is marked, Kyle Diaz.”

I dash before him, inhaling the richly sweet scent of his foul soul. He cowers against the wall, his whole body trembles, and his breathing is quick and uneven. “You promised you wouldn’t kill me, right?”

I snap my teeth in his face, and he squeals like a pig. “I lied,” I grin, slashing my clawed hand down his lower stomach, pushing deeply into his flesh, before running them down to his small member, severing it from his body completely. His blood squirts onto me and pools down his legs rapidly. Kyle cries in agony, tears stream down his tan cheeks, and he leaves his mouth wide open for me to violate. “Your soul is mine!” He shouts louder, his hands roaming aimlessly over where his cock used to be and smearing blood around his skin.

I shove my elongated, forked tongue down his throat, all the way down his esophagus, and deep inside his internal organs. He chokes and gags on my tongue, and I continue to laugh in his face with my low, distorted cackle. His eyes widen in pure terror as he feels my tongue roam around. He lets out a sharp grunt as my tongue whips around wildly, thrashing around in the damp cesspool of his organs as I rearrange them. His body jerks at the assault, and quick pants of pain are the only sound that escapes through his gagged mouth.

I dig my claws deep into his pectorals; blood stains my hand as it rushes out of him,

and I begin extracting his soul from his body. I feel his life essence flowing inside me, and I can already notice myself growing stronger. A surge of strength flows through my hand, and I pierce his skin deeper while I claim him—every last piece of his deranged soul is now mine for eternity.

My tongue wraps around a section of his intestines—I yank it out of his throat—and I slurp my tongue back into my mouth. “What a wonderful early Christmas gift you’ve given me, Kyle Diaz.” The weight of his body goes slack—the only thing keeping him standing is my hand halfway inside his chest. Once the last drop of his soul enters my body, I remove my hand and let his mutilated body crumble to the floor—intestines pouring out of his mouth and strewn across the floor.

I hear a soft moan behind me, and I turn in a hurry to my little reaper. I heave a sigh of relief that she’s okay, unconscious still but unharmed. “What were you doing, my sweet sin? I can’t lose you so soon,” I whisper, threading my unbloodied claws through her hair, careful enough to ensure I don’t scratch her beautiful skin.

“Nik,” she murmurs.

I’m here, baby. Don’t you worry. I stand up and reapply my glamor, placing both hands at the top of my head and guiding them down. Once my human form is intact, I snap my fingers again to clean off the blood marring my skin, so I can walk out of here without looking like I just murdered someone. I lean down, scoop Cherise into my arms, and stroll out of the room.

Chapter seven

Cherise

One Month Until Christmas

My head pounds violently, my mouth dry from lack of hydration. I crack my eyes open and squint from the sun's radiant glow that fills the room through the large, arched windows. I feel a warm breath against my neck, sending an icy chill down my spine. Where the hell am I? I reach around the strange bed I lie in, my fingers trailing along the smooth satin sheets that encase me.

I tense and go still as the toned arm that I didn't notice draped around my stomach, pulls me in tighter to the warmth of their body. I'm surrounded by the fragrance of sandalwood entwined with a subtle, sweet touch of vanilla and a dash of sulfur. The mixture of this man's aroma soothes me and eradicates the onset of a panic attack that was dangerously close to transpiring—I'd recognize his scent anywhere.

"Nik?" I croak, my throat dry from whatever the hell happened last night. My mind is a hazy mess. The last thing I remember was sipping out of the flask of the bad man, the one I was hunting all night to lure him to a dance with death against my blade.

His breaths are steady and warm against my flesh, sending goosebumps cascading over my skin. I turn my head, and my mouth is assaulted with his thick, brown locks trying their very best to pass my lips. I chuckle softly against his hair. "Nik, wake up," I muse, raising my voice a pitch.

He stirs with a groan. I run my fingers over his smooth, muscular arms that tense to my touch. I trail my nails gently down his flesh and smirk when he visibly shivers. “Cherise,” he says, his voice low and gravelly.

He kisses the length of my neck, trailing up to my jawline. What is it about this man that makes me want to melt into a puddle when he touches me? And why does he care so much? No one cares about me, except for my friend. Being around Nik feels unnatural and strange, he makes me feel things I’ve never had the luxury of experiencing before. And after last night on the dance floor—when I practically begged him to touch me and make me come—he did so without question, like he would get on his knees and crawl to me if I asked him to. No one else on this earth remotely resembles Nik, and I wish I could give in to my desires for him—to give him all of me. But I can’t, not yet. He lifts his head and pins me with those luscious, caramel eyes that pull me into his allure. “How do you feel?”

“Like I got roofied.” I pout my lips playfully. I chuckle, but the motion makes my head throb, and my laugh quickly turns into a pained groan.

Nik frowns, pinching his brows together. “What you did last night was fucking reckless and foolish. What the hell were you thinking? What were you even trying to accomplish other than pissing me off?”

I sigh in annoyance and try to sit up, pushing his arm off me. Nik growls, constricting his arm around me—pinning me firm against his hard, shirtless body. I dig my nails into his arm with a shriek of rage. I fucking hate being held against my will. “Let me go, Nik!” Terror wakes inside me as memories haunt me of being helpless—defenseless against the bad men.

“Look at me, Cherise.”

I thrash around, trying to break free. I struggle to catch my uneven breaths, and my

skin crawls with the need to break free. He moves his arm and grips my chin, forcing me to face him. “Hey, you’re safe with me. You know that, right?”

His gaze locks me into his molten brown eyes, riddled with worry. I exhale slowly, and the unease settles now that he’s not holding me taut. “You can’t do that. That’s what they did to me. When they took from me, when they cut me and shed my blood, you can’t do that, Nik!”

Nik sits up on his knees, facing me. He cups my cheeks in his rough hands, his expression stumped like he doesn’t know what to do with that piece of information I just gave him. “Shit. I’m sorry, little reaper. What did the bad men do to you? What did the guy at the club do that made you seek him out?”

I suppress a shiver because of how he’s looking at me right now—like I’m the world’s biggest mystery he wants to solve. I nibble my bottom lip and look away from his harsh stare. “Don’t tell him. He can’t know. This is our mission, Cherise,” my friend whispers to me. She’s standing beside the bed with her tiny arms crossed across her chest. She wears a red party gown, and her chocolate brown hair is pulled tight in pigtails.

My eyes burn with tears that well behind my eyes. I swallow them back—I can’t cry now; it’s too soon for tears. I made a vow to myself a year ago, the last time the bad men held me down and took from me, that I wouldn’t shed a single tear again until I claim my revenge. “I know. You’re right,” I whisper reassuringly.

“Cherise.” Nik grabs my chin, pulling my focus back to him. He pulls my lower lip down, stroking it tenderly. “Don’t do that. Let me help you.” My heart swells at the sincerity in his tone. I believe he really does want to help me, but this is my mission to complete—my revenge to obtain—no one else’s. “Is he dead?”

He quirks a brow. “If you mean the shrimp dick from last night that tried to touch

what's mine, then yes. But stop deflecting and let me in, Cherise. You can trust me."

My breath hitches. "You killed him?"

He leans closer to my face, a thunderous rumble in his chest. "Yes, I exterminated his rot from this world."

I slam my thighs together as liquid desire pools in my core. My pulse quickens as I stare at the dangerous man towering over me. I wish I could have seen him in the act of murder—the thought alone awakens something primal deep within. "Good," I breathe. "How did you do it?"

Nik's lips warp into a sinful smirk. "Are you getting turned on thinking about me murdering someone, little reaper?" I nod and run my hand along his firm thigh. "Let's just say..." Nik grips my throat and squeezes, which allows an unexpected moan to roll past my lips. "His soul serves a greater purpose for Hell now. I unraveled his innards like a ball of yarn and left them sprinkled across the floor." He squeezes tighter, and a devious, toothy smile emerges. "And that was after I severed his tiny cock from his insignificant body."

I moan loudly, dragging my nails down the flesh on his upper thigh. "You're like me. But do you only kill the bad men, like I do?"

"You really are my little reaper. The name suits you. Your soul is black and stained with the sickest of sins, but I see the light that shines through the darkness. I smell the rot that lives inside you, but there's also an overwhelming aroma of sweetness to you—like cotton candy mingling with a spring meadow. I only mark the most vile men and women for death, just like you do. We have similar objectives, Cherise. So I'll offer again. Let me help you." He removes his hand from my throat, and it trails slowly down my chest over what I assume is Nik's tee shirt.

I arch my back as his hand teases me, traveling down past my breasts—down to the area where I crave his touch the most. His words are walking a fine line that makes me want to crack and spill my deepest, darkest secrets to him. Almost. “You mentioned candy? Do you have some?” I tease.

Nik tsks, shaking his head. “You are such a fascinating creature.” He cocks his head and observes me. A playful smile pulls at his lips. “Hold that thought.”

I feel the bed shift under his weight as he moves to stand.

He leaves the bedroom for a beat and then stalks toward me with his hands behind his back and a feral grin. “I hope you like this candy. It’s almost Christmas, and, well... they’re my personal favorite.”

I perk up, excitement jolting my nervous system. I sit up and make grabby hands at him. “Gimme!”

He laughs, a deep, resonant sound that fills the air. “You make me smile more than I ever have before. What the fuck have you done to me, little reaper?”

He still stands before me, hiding the goods, and I grow impatient. I leap off the bed in a flash and lunge for his arms. He playfully puts one hand on my forehead and holds me in place. “Easy now, killer.”

I whine, crossing my arms and stomping my foot. He whips his other arm from behind his back and flaunts a candy cane before me. My eyes widen, and my cheeks flush. I snatch it from his hand and inspect it closely. “I haven’t had one of these since... ”

Memories crash into me like a tsunami, which have been long lost in my mind’s deep, vast oceans. I jolt backward and slam my eyes shut. One moment, I’m staring

down at my mother's bloody while I weep. The next, I'm a child sitting in my bedroom, my mother sneaking in to give me a candy cane she stole from our family's festivities. I scream out—rough hands grip my arms and shake me, but it doesn't stop the floodgates from opening. The eerie sound of the stairs creaking while I hide under my covers, I know what's about to happen—that he's coming to show me that I'm his favorite little girl again. I'm helpless while he takes from me. He peels back the covers, lifts my nightgown, and gets into bed with me. I have to be quiet, so no one hears us. Be a good girl—good girls get rewarded.

I shake my head. Wave after wave washes over me, each memory drowning me. The Saint's face, a tall, slender man with peppered black hair, and a thick, dark mustache that reeks of corruption. Whispers flood my mind, candy canes falling from the sky, cloaked figures walking closer to me, and blood everywhere. Bile rises in my throat, and I try to swallow it down. Something still feels so wrong. Dread looms large over me. As the crash of The Saint's skeletal horse's hooves land on our roof, his vicious laughter rings inside my ears. I cover my ears and drop onto my ass. Screams tear out of my throat, but nothing will drown out the screams inside my head.

“Cherise! What's happening?” My eyes flutter open. The screams quiet around me, and my mind becomes clearer.

I'm hugging the candy cane to my chest, held tight in a vice grip. I lift it to eye level with trembling hands. “The Saint must die.”

Nik lifts me off the floor with his rough hands, and he pins me against the wall. His features are unreadable. “If you tell me nothing else, just tell me this. Why The Saint? What did he do to you?”

I lift my lashes to his punishing stare. “He killed my family. He's the reason I lost everything. This Christmas, I'm going to kill him.” I shove the candy cane in his face. “Can I keep this?”

A harsh sigh escapes him. “Are you sure The Saint killed your family? You’re absolutely sure of this?” I whine and tap the candy cane on his nose. He growls and jerks his head back. “Yes, obviously, you can keep that.”

“Yes, I’m positive.” He searches my eyes wildly like he’s exploring deep within my essence to find hidden truth. “I have to go. There is much I have to prepare for.”

I push past him and snatch my phone on the nightstand by the bed. I skip over to him, get on my tip toes, and kiss him hard and fast. “Don’t come to me until after Christmas. I’m going to rid the world of The Saint once and for all! I can’t have you getting in the way, Nik. I’m sorry.”

He purses his lips and bows his head with a defeated sigh. I ache to stay with him, but my mission is too critical. If I’m successful, then I look forward to the day when I can freely spend my days with Nik, and I will give him all of me—every dark, sinful part, along with all the good in me, too. He deserves nothing less, and so do I.

I move toward the door, my hand on the handle when Nik’s haunting voice stops me. “You can’t kill him, Cherise. I promise that this will not end well for you.”

I turn to find his back still to me. “I’m a lot stronger than you think, Nik. Next month, The Saint will die—by my hands.”

I don’t wait for his reply. I storm out of his bedroom and find my way out of his mansion of a home. My heart aches; some unknown emotion suffocates me—leaving me breathless and shaking—making me want to rush back up the stairs to him. Feet, don’t fail me now. You cannot yield. I leave Nik’s home and don’t look back.

Chapter eight

Cherise

Two Days Before Christmas Eve

I walk down the sidewalk covered in thick, white sheets of snow. My boots crunch loudly with each step, and I can see my chilled breath in front of me with each icy exhale. I'm carrying four large shopping bags that crinkle with my movement, each containing an assortment of decorations to adorn my next stop—to draw The Saint's attention right to me. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a "my soul is ripe for the taking" sign to really make sure my message gets across, but what I got should do the trick.

The streets are eerily quiet and dead. As I gaze upon the houses in this lonely neighborhood, I notice all the homes boarded up in anticipation of the big night coming in two days. Families will be huddled together in their homes this Christmas, whispering to their God to save them and protect their souls from The Saint's wrath. No one is safe because soon, Hell will be unleashed on Earth—the world will be torn asunder, consumed in hellfire, as screams of the dying and shrieks of triumph from The Saint and his devil imps mix into one loud cacophony of destruction and terror. There is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. That's why I need to end this, once and for all. Not only did The Saint destroy my life, murdering my family—an action that set the next ten years of my life into motion in that cursed asylum—but he took the innocent lives of others all across the globe. Soon though, he'll do it no more.

The wind wails, carrying an eerie melody of whispers that swirl around me. The whispers dance across my mind: listen, feel, remember. Remember. Remember.

Search within.

I try to fucking remember—something, anything—that will shed light on my past. Why was my family a target for Lucifer’s minions that night ten years ago? Why was I sent to a mental institution and tortured by vile, vicious bad men for things I can’t fucking recall ever doing? Rage surges hot in my veins as the fragmented memories of my time at The Silent Night Asylum creep into my brain. I shake my head and focus on the house up ahead—the house on the corner of Vixen Street—my new home for the week. Or, until I take my last breath—should I fail my mission. I try not to think like that, but The Saint is a demon, and he will be my greatest match to date. I cannot afford to fail.

I walk up to the door and set my bags down. Adrenaline races through me, just like it always does before the hunt. I’ve scoped this one out for the past week—Jeffrey Cooper—he spends his afternoons sitting in his car outside the nearby elementary school, finding his own prey. Christmas has arrived early for you, Jeffy; you won’t have to fear The Saint—just me. Not to mention, since killing a previous sick fuck, stealing his money, and taking up residence in his home, I’m now running low on cash. It’s time to move on. And what’s a better way to celebrate in preparation for this year’s festivities than with decorations for my new home, and one less evil bastard roaming the earth? I’d say it’s a win-win.

I bring my numb hand to the wooden door and bang on it in desperation. The windows are all boarded up, so I can’t tell if any lights are on inside, but I know he’s in there. I continue my mindless rapping on the door until it swings open, and I’m met with my new dead landlord—who will so kindly allow me to squat here until I’m through with my lease.

“Who the fuck are you? What do you want?” Jeffrey pushes his thick, white-rimmed glasses up his nose. They look like the kind that were popular in the '70's. His dirty-blond hair is unkempt, acne scars marring a face scrunched in fury.

I flash a coy smile and chuckle sweetly, twirling a lock of my hair between my fingers. “Hi, I’m sorry to bother you. My name is Cherise. I hate to trouble you sir, but I had nowhere else to go. You know, Christmas is fast approaching, and I need a safe place to be. Do you think I could stay with you to wait it out? I swear I won’t be any trouble.”

His hungry eyes rake over my figure from top to bottom. When his gaze fixes on my face, I glide my tongue over my front teeth, undoing the top buttons of my red winter jacket. “I can pay you if you want? Make it worth your while.”

He crosses his arms, his once furious features softening with cruel intent. He cocks his head with a smirk as he assesses his options. “And how will you pay me for allowing you to stay in my home, Cherise?”

Fuck. I’m a bit old for his taste. This may not work out as I planned. “I’m sure we can come to some kind of agreement, mister...”

He worries his bottom lip between his teeth and leans against the door frame. “Oh, won’t you please come in and stay with me? I wouldn’t want you to stay out here in the cold this Christmas. And you can call me Jeff.”

My lips warp into a sinful smile. I pick up my bags and walk past Jeff into my new home. “Would you like something to drink while we discuss our arrangement? You look parched.”

I set my bags down against the worn, brown couch that’s straight out of the '70’s in the living room. A slow smile pulls at my lips when I notice the small tree next to the entertainment center—I’m glad I picked up those ornaments now. I turn to Jeff, a bead of sweat dripping down the side of his forehead. “Sure, I’d love a drink.”

He claps his hands together with a breathy laugh. “Perfect. Make yourself at home.

I'll be right back."

I will gladly make myself at home, Jeffy. But I won't be drinking the roofied drink that I'm sure you're going to make me—I already learned my lesson from my previous encounter taking a drink from a stranger. A pang of hurt aches inside my chest as I briefly remember the events of that night—of Nik. I haven't seen him since I left his home a month ago, and although I sometimes hoped to see him following me around like he used to—I'm glad he finally understands the severity of what I must do. It's better this way, and it will be safer for him. I just hope that he hasn't forgotten about me once Christmas is over.

The sound of glasses clinking together in the kitchen jolts me from my downward-spiraling thoughts of Nik. I pull the cable wire out of my coat pocket, unwind it, and twirl the ends around my hands. I left my favorite fucking blade at Nik's house, and I'm still pissed about that. I couldn't go back to retrieve it because, well... that would mean I'd have to face him again—and I don't think it would have been so easy to leave him behind a second time.

I creep quietly into the kitchen, where Jeff has his back turned to me—I see him opening a cabinet, grabbing a medicine bottle, and plopping a pill into one of the drinks. Knew it. I lunge behind him with the wire held high, tossing it over his head and hugging it tight against his throat. I yank on the wire with all of my strength, and Jeffy chokes out a shocked gasp while I drag his ass to the floor. He's sputtering and unable to breathe. His hands fly to his neck where the wire is, trying to loosen my hold on him, but it's useless. I drag him into the living room, his body thrashing as he gasps for air while I giggle maniacally. Once in front of the Christmas tree, I move closer, tightening the cord around his neck, ready to finish the job. But then Jeffy, in a desperate burst of courage, tries to stand. He jerks backward, stumbling, and I leap onto his back, wrapping my legs around his waist, refusing to loosen the wire strangling him.

Jeff slams me against the wall, knocking the wind out of me and forcing me to loosen my grip. I let out a shout of frustration as he gasps for air, sputtering, “Crazy... fucking... bitch!”

I laugh like a psycho, leaping off his back while yanking the cord, causing Jeff to choke on his breath. Without hesitation, I kick him hard in the spine, sending him crashing to his knees. I don’t waste a second, wrapping the wire around his neck three more times, pulling the ends savagely tight. My laughter drowns out his desperate, choking gasps as he struggles for air. As blood beads at his neck from the wire digging in, a wondrous idea sparks in my mind.

With all my might, I grit my teeth and strain my biceps as the cord slices through his flesh, blood pouring down his shoulders, chest, and back. Jeff’s desperate attempts to make me stop are useless; his hands slap weakly at mine, growing feebler with every breath that escapes his lungs—with every drop of blood that flows from his shredded skin.

I press my boot against his spine, using his body as my anchor to pull harder. One final, garbled sigh escapes his lips, and I know he’s gone when the cord hits the resistance of his vertebrae. His head slumps back, barely held in place by mutilated skin, torn sinews, and splintered bone. Frustration surges through me, a growl of aggravation escaping as I realize the wire won’t let me finish him the way I intended.

I release the wire and shove his limp body forward onto the carpet. Standing over him, a devious smile curls my lips. I raise my foot and slam it down onto the back of his neck, the sickening crunch of bone and tendons echoing in the room. Blood pulses from the wound with each stomp as I drive my foot deeper into his flesh. The bone cracks under my weight—again, and again, I kick—until his vertebrae splits clean in two, his skin turning to a bloody pulp, mixing into the carpet.

I press my hands together with satisfaction, chest heaving from the effort. That was

like a damn workout. With one final, brutal kick to the side of his head, it fully separates from his body, rolling across the floor and into the kitchen. I leap into the air, clapping my hands, and squealing with joy. “I did it! Yay!”

I skip over to his severed, bloody head and grab it by the hair, bringing it close to my face with a smirk. “Consider our arrangement paid in full, Jeffy. Thanks for letting me stay!” A bubble of laughter escapes me as I stroll over to the Christmas tree, setting his head down beneath it—my first present to myself this Christmas.

I spent the rest of the night and most of the next day stringing up Christmas lights—which were a bitch to find since no one uses them this time of year—removing the wooden planks from the windows, and adorning the tree with red and white ornaments and candy canes. My special friend helped me, her childish giggles filling the room as we danced around, decorating together. Since I no longer have my knife, I know I have to be creative when it comes to killing The Saint, and cable wire won’t cut it. During my shopping spree, I picked up a few packs of candy canes since they’ve been swarming my mind since the day Nik gave one to me. It felt like a calling, so I spent hours shaving the ends down to sharp points to stab into The Saint’s flesh as makeshift peppermint knives—assuming they don’t break. There’s also sharp cutlery in the kitchen... thanks, Jeffy! They aren’t my beautiful, serrated blade, but they will have to suffice.

Now that the house is ready to light up the entire neighborhood, since everyone else’s will naturally be off to avoid unwanted attention, anxiety and excitement ripple through me. All that’s left to do now is wait. Tomorrow night, this will all be over. I will finally be free, even if I die trying. No longer will I be haunted by these incomplete memories of the past.

I step out of the shower and wrap my damp skin in a towel. I wipe the condensation off the mirror and breathe deeply, inspecting my new look. Candy canes are now my whole identity, and I can’t stop thinking about them, sucking on them any chance I

can get. There is something about them. I just have to figure out what. I dyed the sides of my hair that frame my face with red and white streaks to emphasize my new infatuation. I've always loved those colors, and damn, I look good.

I catch myself smiling in the mirror, and dread sinks deep into my stomach. I don't look at my reflection often; it's hard to see my scar-infested skin, which is a stark reminder of the horrors of my past. I trace my fingers slowly over the crooked scar that runs down my lips, and it's thick and hideous. I'm bewildered that someone as beautiful as Nik even wanted to kiss me. There's that peculiar feeling again just at the thought of him.

I flick my eyes over the rest of my exposed skin. Small scars are scattered around my face, neck, arms, and legs. But the one on my stomach that runs from my navel down to my pubic area is still a mystery to me. I don't remember how I received that one, but by the discoloration of it and how thick the scar tissue is, that cut was severe—deep enough to kill if left untreated. I hold my breath as my fingers glide down the scar and blow out a shaking breath once I reach the bottom. These scars mean something; I believe they serve as a key to the dark pits of my psyche that are locked away from me. I only need to figure out how to access them.

But first, I prepare for tomorrow night. The Saint will die, along with Will Ashcroft after him. Their wicked sins will be cleansed from this world and purged from me. I will fight the demons that plague me deep within, and I will win.

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Chapter nine

Niklaus

Christmas Eve

The chill of the winter air flows through my long, ivory locks as I ride my loyal skeletal horse, Sorrow, as the sun's glow dims on the horizon. The world is silent, save for the demonic wails from Sorrow as he carries me across the sky. His onyx wings, mangled with tears from past battles, are open wide and glide us toward our first destination.

Eerie silence encases the town of Lockwood down below. Their homes locked tight, their windows boarded and sealed, smoke fumes from the chimneys rising high into the sky—as if that would stop us. Oh, but the fun is just about to begin. I'm consumed with anticipation and adrenaline. My hellions await my signal below and across the globe to tear into the marked ones—every tainted soul marked that dies tonight, their soul will rush to me, empowering me with their vile essence.

I look forward to this day every year, when I will be at my most powerful. I usually travel across the seas to hit more of my marks alone, but this year... Lockwood calls to me for a completely different reason. There is one soul in particular I hunger for the most, my little reaper, who thinks she can evade me—evade what's to come. Cherise Bates, you will be mine. Tonight. Her soul calls to me, her sin's aroma too sweet, and I will bathe this entire town in blood until I find her and claim her, wicked or innocent. Nothing will get in my way.

Cherise thinks tonight will end with my death. When she left my home a month ago, I was fucking furious. The most pissed off I can recall myself being. But then I remembered something: I've never killed anyone with the last name Bates. My little reaper is either lying to me, or she is not clued in on the whole story that she's spewing. I gave her the precious fucking space that she said she needed from me. It drove me absolutely mad not following my intuition to chase her around like the spineless bitch she's turning me into, but now I'm done playing her game. She will face me—The Saint—tonight. I will make her fucking see that she is mine, or I will force her soul from her stunning body and kill her before she kills me. That way, she won't ever be able to escape me in Hell.

This will end in one of two ways, my little reaper: offer me your soul, or I will take it.

It's almost time. The last glimmers of light fade, and darkness begins to envelop the world. My demonic laughter rings out around me and travels to the town below as I lean back, my arms spread wide, black claws twirling into the harsh wind surrounding me. It feels fantastic to be in my proper, marvelous form again.

Sorrow whinnies, a screeching, haunting melody as tension fills the atmosphere—he's ready to reign terror upon the town of Lockwood. I grab a hold of his reins and pull them back. "Heed me, Sorrow! Circle the skies. Tonight, we shall devour every wicked soul to cross our paths. But I need you to help me sniff out the real prize of the night." His answering screech is all I get before he takes off at full speed, descending until we are hovering atop the homes of the humans, and circling around with his resounding otherworldly shrieks. I clasp my hands together and summon my golden scroll, containing every name of the damned souls I will devour tonight. I open it enough to place one hand upon the gleaming parchment, imbuing my magic into it, which notifies my imps to begin their assault on the world. I bellow a vicious laugh that echoes throughout Lockwood. "Claim the souls marked for your master. Feast on their delicious sins and send them to Hell!"

It doesn't take long before the immaculate screams course through the town. I look down and watch as my imps chase around a woman—Diana Williams, who poisoned her 82-year-old husband to claim his life insurance—time to burn in Hell, Dirty Diana. The hellions pounce on her back, pinning her forcefully into the ground as they rip and tear into her flesh. Her cries for help fill me with absolute joy. The growls and snarling mix with the screams of fear, overwhelming me with the holiday spirit. I breathe deep, closing my eyes and tilting my head back, letting the wind wash over me as I bathe in the ecstasy of the sounds below. From Lockwood and beyond, I feel their black-stained souls transfer to me, empowering me, pure fucking euphoria surging within. I groan loudly, a broad grin spreading across my lips the stronger I become.

A loud explosion in the distance, followed by cheers from my imps, makes my head snap up while I watch the fire burn brightly and swallow an entire house whole. Good job, my little grotesque hellions. “Roast their corpses over the open fires and pick your teeth with their bones once you're through,” I shout down at the imps, and their shrieks of glee rebound back up to me in response. I extend my arm and rain Hellfire upon a home beneath me that houses one of my damned. I can smell their taint wafting up to me from their termite-infested roof. A vicious cackle bursts past my lips, as the screams crescendo around me. Hell on earth, what a magnificent sight to behold.

The full moon hangs high in the sky, casting its alluring glow upon the terror down below. I grow antsy as the night continues and I become more powerful, but nothing will sate the burning hole in my chest that can only be sufficed by one soul. Where are you, little reaper?

“Find her, Sorrow! Find the one who smells of a sin so sweet that it rots your teeth!” His neigh ricochets as he tucks his wings to his sides and dives lower into the chaos. My hair whips around my face, tangling with my curved horns as Sorrow spins in the opposite direction. “Have you caught her scent?” He shakes his head and blares an

ear-piercing screech.

I glimpse a house on the corner of the neighborhood we're soaring over, a house lit up like a Lucifer damned Christmas tree. Decked out with colorful lights that blaze as bright as the sun. As we draw near, I inspect the run-down home with a keen eye and notice that this particular home has no wooden boards covering its windows. This one was expecting me—or someone—to come and find them. A wicked smile warps my lips, my razor-sharp teeth bathing in the moonlight.

Hello, little reaper.

He dives to the street; I lurch forward when his skeletal hooves connect with the snowy pavement. He gallops at high speed, his bony nose in the air, sniffing for my delectable present. But I already know she resides in this house adorned with dangling lights. I can fucking sense her, taste her sins on my forked tongue. I can't wait to fucking taste her—devour her. My cock already stirs at the thought. "Faster, Sorrow!" My mouth salivates as my steed quickens his pace, his hooves pounding against the pavement. We're so fucking close now.

Sorrow dashes up the slick driveway with ease and comes to a halt in front of the illuminated porch. With a huff of triumph, I jump off my loyal steed and race up to the front door. The rich, metallic scent of blood fills my nostrils as I near the door.

Finish what you started ten years ago.

The words are unmistakably written in blood—if there were no other indications that my sweet sin was behind this door, this would have been the dead giveaway. Christmas music, from a time when people once celebrated, booms loudly behind the walls. Let's dance, baby.

I know she believes I've killed her family and now wants me dead for this

transgression. But I've done nothing of the fucking sort. I'm not innocent by any means, and I will kill without hesitation, especially to claim a delicious soul. I would happily admit to the crime—if only I had committed it. Tonight, my sweet Cherise, all of your secrets, along with mine, will be laid bare. I'm done playing.

I lift my onyx-clawed hand toward the door and emit my magic into the air. It circles around me, waiting for my command. With a flick of my wrist toward the door, it flies off its hinges and crashes inside what looks to be a living room. I walk directly to the threshold and peer inside, seeing no movement. “Ho, ho, ho! The Saint has come to claim your soul!” I bellow into the desolate space before me. Okay, it's a little cheesy... but I think it's fitting for the occasion.

I catch a faint glint of something shiny above the doorway, and a half-smirk tilts my lips. I reach into my crimson jacket pocket, the hem swaying in the wind around my knees, and procure the blade I watched my little reaper fuck her perfect little pussy with. I know she'll be delighted to be reunited with it.

Why do I care if that makes her happy? With an annoyed sigh, I drop the knife onto the small rectangular gray rug beyond the threshold. As I suspected, a throng of knives—clinging to the ceiling by some contraption—slam into the floor in a rapid sequence of dull thuds; the pointy ends digging into the tattered rug. “Too obvious, Cherise,” I drawl lazily. I bet she's sweating, now that I've addressed her by name.

I step over the death trap clearly laid out for me, duck my head to avoid my horns from smashing into the door frame, and strut with a cocky gait into the living room. I look around the home, and from all I can see in my surroundings, I don't spot a ravenous little human with a thirst for my blood anywhere.

This house reeks of decay and blood. I tilt my head toward the foul scent and spot the source of the fragrance. I turn to face a little tree, the green branches adorned with twinkling red and white lights, ornaments, and candy canes. I smirk at the sight of my

favorite peppermint treat lining the tree; she was thinking of me. Propped up in a sitting position next to the tree is a man's body that's missing its head. His body is wrapped in, you guessed it, more lights that flicker on and off. I rake my eyes down his mutilated body, and there in his lap is his severed head; his mouth is crooked and hangs open—with two candy canes jammed through his eyes. Blood that looks like tears are smeared down his cheeks.

“Someone's been a naughty girl,” I drawl. With one last look at Cherise's... decoration, I clear my throat and turn back to the center of the room to investigate further.

I stalk towards the very suspicious open door, that appears to lead into a bedroom. “Cher—”

Shrieks of rage are my only warning before pain sears into my neck and the side of my stomach as rogue legs wrap around my waist, making me stumble forward with a grunt of pain. She actually caught me off guard—well done, little reaper. Wetness pools down my neck, as my hot and sticky blood drenches my expensive button-up. Add that to the long list of things I will punish this girl for.

She tightens her legs around my waist in a vice grip, shouting into my very delicate ears, and repeatedly stabbing me with something small... yet very sharp. A feral laugh rips out of me, making her determination to hurt me that much more aggressive.

“Die, motherfucker! Die!” A snap sounds, and I finally look over to see her weapon of choice is... a fucking candy cane?

“Now, now. That won't do the trick, my dear,” I muse, gripping her red-bottomed stilettos and bouncing her up and down on my back as if we were just playing around—and she didn't just try to stab me to death with peppermint candy.

I pause my playfulness with her; when she brandishes her favorite blade against my throat, she presses it roughly against my flesh. Fuck, why did I choose to give this back to her again? “You took everything from me. You ruined my LIFE! I’m going to save the world from ever suffering your disgusting existence again. They will revere me as The Saint, the one who saved Christmas.” Her tone is laced with malice, pure disdain for me and what she believes I have done to her. “I’ll see you in Hell, asshole.”

Before she can slice open my throat and ruin my clothes even further, I save her the trouble. With a snap of my fingers, her flashing lights shoot off the walls and lock tight around her arms, flinging her off me. I turn sharply on my heels and tower over her. Confusion riddles her beautiful features. Wait... did she dye her hair? I tsk, looking down at her sitting on that pretty ass, her wrists held out to her sides and attached to the lights. “You have been very naughty this Christmas, Cherise. Tell me, since you no longer had your blade, what did you fuck your cunt with after you brutally decapitated this guy?” I flick out my tongue, and it hangs out in front of me as I devour her with my hungry stare.

“You’re not The Saint! Where is the real one, you damn imposter!” Her thought process never ceases to amaze me. It’s what I lo... like so much about her. What the fuck am I thinking?

I furrow my brows and scoff. I extend my arms and twirl around slowly for her. Once facing her feral glare, I stare her up and down, raising my brows to my hairline. “I can assure you, I am the one and only.”

“NO! You’re not how I remember you! The real demon had black hair... and a mustache... and...” Her eyes glaze over as she stares into space.

“Fuck’s sake, not this again.” With a wave of my hands, more lights shoot off various furniture in the home and wrap around her ankles, snaking up her bare legs. I flick my

hand, and Cherise slams against the wall, strung up like my very own beautiful decoration. Her tight, red dress rides up her thighs, dangerously close to showing me the other part of her I'm here to claim.

My eyes darken as I glare at my little reaper, up against the wall, her chest heaving as she struggles for oxygen. Her limbs are spread wide, and she looks like she's in the middle of making a snow angel on the wall. How cute. "Who the fuck are you!" she screams at me from the top of her lungs. "Why did you murder my family? Why did you take everything from me and send me off to the fucking place that ruined me!"

I cock my head, my fingers twitching at my sides. I dart forward with inhuman speed and dig my claws into the wall—you can feel the house shake with the force of impact. She inhales a quick gasp when I inch closer to her face; my claws drag down the wall, making a horrible sound next to her head. "I told you. I'm The Saint, and I didn't kill your family. You got the wrong demon." I flick out my tongue and brush it against her neck, tasting her sweet flesh. She turns her head, panting through her clenched teeth. I let out a soft groan, pulling my tongue back through my teeth while she whips her head back to face me with a furious snarl. "Love your hair, by the way. The colors suit you, little reaper."

Her eyes search mine immensely. Her chin trembles, and her voice quivers. "Your eyes... Nik?" she whispers.

With the back of my hand, I caress her cheek and release a shaking breath. "You finally see me as I am. Are you afraid?"

"No," she breathes. "But I'm still going to kill you for what you've done."

Chapter ten

Cherise

Christmas Eve

Nik's eyes darken a shade, and he gives me a devious smirk. "Is that so, little reaper? You still want to kill me after I told you that I have nothing to do with the horrors of your past?"

I yank on these damned lights around my wrists to no avail. He's got me spread wide for him, against this wall at his mercy. "You're a liar! You said you were like me—that you only kill the bad ones! You're just a parasite that feeds on innocent hosts every Christmas. You ruined a holiday that spread joy and kindness all over the world! For what? For your sick, demonic rituals for the Devil?" I snarl, extending my neck to get as close to his face as possible.

He takes a slight step back and looks fucking offended. He furrows his brows with a scoff. "I am many things, Cherise—yes, I lie, but never to you." I inhale a sharp gasp and turn my face when he dashes forward again with a low, otherworldly growl. He grips my cheeks; his claws dig into my skin but not hard enough to draw blood, and turns me back to his dangerous glare. "Would you still call it ruining your precious holiday if I told you that dear old Saint Nick, the original, was a fucked up, perverted and sick old man that preyed on the innocent? That he and his elves molested children, even going as far as stealing some from their homes for their twisted pleasures? Would you still think me so evil when I tore him apart, limb from limb, and spread his mangled body across the globe? I saved your pathetic race from his

perversions, the ones hidden under the guise of a happy, jolly man whose only goal was to spread joy to children. And yet, you all call me cruel—the destroyer of Christmas.” He grips tighter, and a distorted rumble echoes from his maw. My breath catches on a hitch at his rough touch, but I am not afraid. “I am just like you, Cherise Bates. The only souls I mark for harvesting are the so-called ‘bad men’ that hurt people, people like you.”

I flash him a sultry smile. “Has the almighty, righteous one, called The Saint, come to claim my soul shrouded in darkness? Are you here to kill me, Nik?”

He roughly removes his grip on my cheeks and laughs. “Kill you? No, little reaper, you’ve got me all wrong. I’ve come to fucking dominate you. To fucking own and possess you in every deranged way imaginable.” He flicks his black, elongated claw underneath my dress strap and shreds the material in two. “I didn’t lie about being protective over you or about you being mine. Just like I’m not lying about anything else I’ve told you tonight. As for your soul. That.” He rips my other dress strap. “Is.” He places the tip of one claw against the fabric between my breasts, slowly shreds the dress down the middle, and tears the destroyed material all the way off—exposing me to him in just my bra and underwear. “Fucking mine,” he growls. His red eyes burn hotter as he rakes his ravenous gaze over my scar-ridden skin.

I inhale a shaking breath, not out of fear, but from his possessive tone that’s doing things to my body. Finally, the demon I’ve sought to kill for a decade stands before me and claims that he is nothing that I believed him to be. He says he’s not the one who killed my family, which later led me to be locked up in that fucking asylum—raped and tortured for years. Nik swears that he’s just like me and rids the rot from the world. How can any of this be true? “Prove to me you’re not lying, Nik. I need the truth... I couldn’t take it if you lied to me, too,” I murmur, my voice breaking towards the end.

His crimson eyes burn into my own. He places a hand on my head and sighs. “I’m

only showing you this because I know you can handle it. But I need you to know you can trust me, Cherise. Because once I show you my truth, you'll spill your own while I claim you." His growl is dark and laced with promise.

A single nod is all I can muster, before I'm looking through eyes that are not my own. Flashes of Nik's memories race through my mind, Nik brutalizing Santa and getting him to admit to the horrifying truth of what he'd done to those poor children. Of Nik, torturing and dismembering the screaming, fat bastard. His devil imps ripping the elves to shreds—it was a beautiful masterpiece I wish I could have been present for.

The memories shift to Nik following me around the night before Branson met his rightful death—and when he realized that I was going to kill him. He was confused as he checked his golden parchment but did not find my family's names on the list. I heave a sigh as a weight is lifted from my chest. He's not lying.

Another flicker of his memory crashes into me, the day I was in the candy shop with my young friend. The day he found me, how he smelled me and became instantly aroused by me. All of his emotions flood into me: his lust, confusion, fascination, and something else I can't name. I feel them all as if they were my own, and I let out a breathy moan.

"Your panties are soaking wet, little reaper. Was that proof enough for you?" Nik removes his hand from my head and glides one claw gently down my slit, over the lace fabric of my thong.

I shudder, and my hips buck without any thought of my own. I'm fucking drenched for a demon. I stare down at his exquisite form, his true form. He is truly a sight to behold, and everything I never could have envisioned him to be. "You're beautiful," I whisper, slowly grinding my hips to gain more friction against his claw. "I believe you."

Nik grins, showing off his razor-sharp teeth. “I remember the way your little pussy strangled my fingers when I made you come in that club. Now I wonder, will your pussy strangle my cock the same way? What about your ass?” I widen my eyes in disbelief. His dick is fucking massive, but I am tempted to know what it would feel like to stretch me and fill me so fully. He slides his forked tongue across his lips, his tone husky. “I told you I would fuck all your holes, but what will it be today?” He continues slow strokes over my core, which makes me suck in a sharp breath. “I’ve already fucked that beautiful mouth,” he drawls, placing his other hand on my mouth to trace my lips.

I pull at my bindings again, eager to run my hands across his magnificent body. “Let me down so I can touch you. I’ve dreamed of the day when you would finally fuck me. Over and over, I’ve pictured it.”

Nik inhales sharply right before he crashes his lips onto mine, his teeth scraping against my lips, his forked tongue snaking into my mouth. He groans against my lips and pulls away. I whimper from the loss of his touch. “Take me, Nik—I’m yours. I need to feel you.”

He smirks and turns to the side. With two fingers, he motions out in front of him and sends me flying into the center of the room. The lights jerk my wrists behind my back. My knees slam against my chest, putting me in the fetal position mid-air, the lights wrapping around my throat. I raggedly suck in oxygen to try to catch my breath, the jerking movements making my stomach churn. The lights constrict tighter, but I’m still able to breathe. “Did you think it would be so easy? That I wouldn’t punish you first? You’ve done something to me, Cherise; I feel things that shouldn’t even be possible for a demon to experience. And you kept fucking pushing me away.”

In one swift movement, I’m flipped upside down. My candy cane-highlighted hair hangs loosely above the floor. “What are you gonna do?” I say breathily.

A sharp smack to my ass cheek is my response, making me jump and gasp while the sting settles into my nerves. “Do you need a safe word, Cherise? Because I’m not going to hold back otherwise. You’ve taunted a demon, and I’ve come to taunt you right back.”

“What’s a fucking safe word? Just let me come! I need you, Nik,” I cry as he slaps my other ass cheek with enough force to jolt my entire body.

Nik chuckles. “I’ll take that as a no, you greedy little reaper. You’ll come when I decide you get to.” He runs his finger over my soaking wet slit then tears my panties from my body in one fell swoop. He snaps his fingers, and my knees spread wider to expose my core to him fully. “So beautiful,” he groans.

A shiver surges down my spine when I feel his tongue glide over my throbbing clit, flicking vigorously, while the other fork of his tongue slides into my entrance—causing a strangled moan to rip out of me. “Fuck yes, just like that,” I moan.

With a demonic laugh that seems to echo throughout the room, his tongue leaves my aching pussy, and the emptiness is met with a swift slap on my clit. I cry out in pain, but Nik slowly rubs tight circles over my stinging bundle of nerves to soothe the sting. “I didn’t say you could come yet, did I?” My body thrusts upward so that I’m face to face with him, my head still upside down. “This is how this is gonna go, little reaper. I’m going to ask you questions. If you answer them truthfully, I’ll reward you. If you lie to me, I’ll take great pleasure in your punishment. Understand?”

“Why do you want to know about me so bad? Can’t you just fuck me already? Please!” I’ve never wanted a cock inside me so bad in my life. The emotions that Nik brings to the surface within me are so strange, but now that I truly know who he is, I welcome them in as the floodgates open. I want everything this man—this demon—has to offer me. It’s like I’m an addict. Addicted to his huge demon dick...

but I know it's so much more than that.

Nik grabs my hair roughly, which elicits a giggle to burst forth from my lips. "You love it when I'm rough, don't you?" I nod, a wide grin still plastered to my face. "I want to know you because you will be mine for an eternity. You're the only human to make me feel this way, and I don't know how to describe it. So, will you be nice or naughty for The Saint tonight?"

"I'll be good! Just please fucking touch me already, Nik!" I whine, wiggling my ass in the air.

He smiles like the Cheshire Cat and tugs harder on my hair. "I am touching you." I open my mouth to backtalk when he shoves the end of a candy cane past my lips. "Suck it, Cherise."

He thrusts the peppermint candy slowly in and out of my mouth, his hungry eyes fixated on my lips. I do as I'm told, savoring the flavor on my tongue, as I hum and suck in my cheeks. He pulls it out of my mouth, and my stomach flies into my ass when I drop lower to the floor again. I yelp from the sudden movement. "I know you like to fuck yourself with inanimate objects, baby. Let's make your pussy taste like my favorite candy."

I scrunch my face in astonishment. "Wh—" The skinny length of the candy cane slides past my entrance, the rough edges now smooth from my sucking on it. He slides it in and out, fucking me with a damn candy cane. I let out a low moan, but it doesn't even come close to what I really need. "I need more. It's not enough to get me off," I grumble.

Nik clicks his tongue. "This is just to garnish my feast, Cherise. Don't be silly." I sigh when he removes the candy cane, but jump when he circles the wet tip of it around my back hole, nudging the entrance. "Let's get you ready for me. Then the fun can

begin,” he growls.

I scoff. “News flash, if it’s too small for my pussy to clamp down on, the same goes for my ass!”

The candy cane slowly skates into my hole, and I go still as a memory floods through me of my time back in the Silent Night Asylum when my tormentors abused me. “You need to relax, or else this will hurt.”

“I can’t do this, Nik. I can’t!” I cry out.

“Tell me why, and maybe I’ll reconsider it,” he says commandingly.

“The bad men,” I whisper so softly, I’m not sure he even heard me. My mind drifts back to the days that haunt me. When Branson, Scryer, and Ashcroft raped me, tortured me... brutalized me.

A slap to my clit knocks me from my daze, and I lash out. “The bad men! They hurt me when... when I was back at that place—the Silent Night. Every night they shoved their disgusting fucking cocks inside me anywhere they could! Jack Scryer, Thomas Branson, and Will Ashcroft. They took, and they took! I just can’t fucking do it.” My voice breaks during those last words; my heart squeezes in my chest.

I’m met with silence for far too long that I begin to wonder if any of this is even real. Am I hanging upside down with a candy cane in my ass in part of my demented mind, or is this real? “Nik? Where did you go?”

A phantom touch glides over a scar on my right upper thigh, below where my cheek meets my leg. “Let me see.”

I try to lift my head; I want to see his face, but all I can see are his fucking legs in

front of me. “What do you mean ‘let you see’?”

His claw scrapes over my scar, and I flinch at his touch. “Every scar on your body is beautiful to me, Cherise. Everything about you fucking fascinates and excites me. I want to claim every inch of your body and know it intimately. While your scars are a thing of beauty, they were given to you against your will during a time of pure terror. Let me help you retake that pain back and turn it into pleasure—and by doing so, reclaim your mind, little reaper. Your scars will be torn anew by my hand. Your ass will be claimed by my cock. So that anytime in the future, when you look at yourself in the mirror, instead of your body haunting you, you will be reminded of me. Do you want that?”

I blink rapidly to push back the tears that threaten to break free. There’s a fluttering in my stomach that I don’t know the meaning of, and my heart feels like it will explode out of my chest. What is this demon doing to me? I don’t know how, or if, this will even work. But I want to try. With him, I want to try. “Yes. I only want to see you,” I whisper.

I hear the sharp intake of breath above me as I feel my flesh spread apart where Nik’s claw digs into the scar on my thigh. I kick my head back as a gate deep into my psyche is unlocked. Blinding white light with a crimson glow dominates my vision. I blink a few times, and then I’m standing face to face with Will Ashcroft.

“Aw, don’t look so scared. You’ve always loved the feel of my cock.” Will is dressed in a black robe, his features shadowed by the hood. His usual blade is held firm in his hand as he stalks closer to me.

I back against the padded white wall, my hands clutched together over my chest. My breathing is erratic. “Just leave me alone, please! What did I even do to you?”

He stalks closer, blade outstretched toward me. “You gonna deny it, bitch? You used

to beg for me when your Daddy wasn't looking. I felt on top of the world playing with his favorite toy. And then you fucking ruined everything and got your ass sent here and almost killed me in the process. I'm going to fuck that sweet pussy of yours. One. Last. Time. Then tonight, your sacrifice will finally be complete. You are going to finish the Rite—Christmas is almost upon us. And the Devil craves your soul the most, you evil, little cunt!"

I scream and try to run past him, but he's too fast. Always too fast. He grabs my arm and slams me onto the bed, face first. I kick and buck my hips as he pounces on top of me. His blade rips into the fabric of my pants against my thigh, cutting me open in the process. He uses the blade to cut farther, to be able to open the fabric further, exposing my bare ass to him. "Such a good little slut. Your Daddy would be so proud of the whore I've turned you into," Will sneers against my ear as he thrusts into my dry pussy raw.

I don't even realize I'm still screaming until Nik yanks my head up by my hair and brings my face to his. His crimson eyes look like they blaze from the depths of Hell itself, a sneer pulling back his lips. "Fuck the Ashcrofts. They were going to sacrifice you to Lucifer, why, Cherise? And how did you escape?"

I stare away from his vengeful eyes. Scars are only skin deep. Listen. Feel. Remember. Look within. "The scars, Nik. They hold the answers," I whisper.

Nik's chest heaves, and he brings his lips to mine. The kiss isn't rough; it's gentle, so careful not to scrape his sharp teeth against my lips. He pulls back and runs a claw down the scar marring my lips. "This one is my favorite. It makes you look brave and strong—because that's what you are, little reaper."

I inhale a ragged breath when he presses his claw harder against my skin and then drags it across the lip scar. Both of our heads jolt back as we descend into another memory.

I'm back in my old bedroom, the one I vaguely remember from when I was a child. I sit on my bed, rocking back and forth with my hands grasping my toes. I'm humming "Baby, It's Cold Outside," Mother's favorite song. It's the song she always sings to me when it's close to Christmas time. But we have to be quiet; no one can know we sing it together, or Daddy will be mad. All the fun things Mommy does with me, Daddy gets mad at. I never understood why, and when I asked Mommy, she said that we are women of God, and we must act as such.

That's stupid. I want to sing, dance, and eat all the candy I want!

My head snaps up; I gasp and pause my movements when I hear my door creak open. "What are you doing, sweet pea?"

I jump up and run to her, wrapping my arms tightly around her waist. She's always the brightest part of my day. "Come in!" I take a step back and skip back to my bed. "Let's sing together, Mommy!"

She smiles, and her cheery laughter fills the air around us. She sits on the bed next to me and grabs my hands. "What shall we sing, baby?"

"Your favorite Christmas song. Since it's your favorite, it's mine too!" I say with a grin.

Mother pushes the loose hairs that escaped my pigtails out of my face and chuckles. "Okay, but not too loud. We don't want to upset your father."

I almost jump up and down with glee, covering my mouth to quiet the squeal about to rip free.

Mother and I are halfway through the song when we hear footsteps pounding down the hallway. My door crashes open, and Daddy storms into the room with his hands

on his hips. Mommy lets my hands go and stands up to face him.

“Did I hear singing in here, Cherise?” Dad glares at me in a threatening manner.

“Now, honey, it wasn’t—” Daddy smacks Mom across the face, so hard that she spins around and falls on the bed. She begins to weep, her hand clutching her red cheek as she turns back to face him.

Daddy lunges on top of her and starts punching her over and over in the face. I scream at the top of my lungs, and with all of my strength in my frail arms, I jump on his back and pull his hair—digging my nails into his skin and scratching at his face. “Stop it! Leave her alone!” I shriek.

“You stupid girl!” Dad backs up, crushing my body between him and the wall, and all of the air leaves my lungs from the force. My muscles slack, and I slide onto the floor when he pushes forward.

He spins around, grabs me by the arm, and slings me into my dresser. When I finally catch my breath, a shrill cry is all I can manage before Daddy is on me again. He grabs the back of my head and slams my face into the corner of the dresser. I’m sobbing uncontrollably, and the pain is unbearable. Why is he so mean to us? I want to run away.

“Your punishment for singing that trash under my roof will be paid in blood. That is the way of God, my child,” he snarls in my face. He pushes me against the wall and pulls the switchblade from his pocket. He flicks the blade free and presses it against my lips.

“She’s just a child! Stop it!” My mother cries from behind us.

He presses on my forehead with his free hand, cutting above my lip with the other

hand while laughing. “Such a bad girl you’ve been, baby. I hate having to teach you these lessons and ruin this pretty face. But you just don’t listen. Now, you will learn to listen.”

I try to shake my head, uncontrollable sobs the only sound I can make. I’m crying so hard I can hardly breathe. “Stay still, or it’s really gonna make you ugly.”

“Daddy, p-please s-stop,” I wail.

He clicks his tongue, and his cold blue eyes bore into me. With a snarl, he presses the blade into my flesh again. I can’t stop moving, and the pain is overtaking all rational thought. The blade slices from my top lip down to above my chin.

“I told you not to move; now it’s all zig-zagged, baby.” Daddy chuckles, low and vicious. He pats me on the head before walking to the door and stopping. “Clean yourself up; be ready for Daddy when you get tucked into bed.”

My arms and legs are free from my bindings, and I’m mid-air, falling, when rough hands grab me. “Cherise?” Nik’s voice is wrecked, a sound I’ve never heard him make before.

My eyes flutter open, and I look up at my handsome demon. I brush my hand over his cheek, and I can feel him shudder beneath my touch. “I can finally touch you,” I murmur softly.

He sets me down, and holds me steady as I stand on my two feet again for the first time, finally out of that position he had me in for who knows how long. “What is your father’s name? You said he’s dead, that you thought I killed him. But give me the fucking name, and I will torture him endlessly in Hell, little reaper.”

I brush my lips against his, tenderly yet eager. “I don’t know, Nik. We can find out

later; I still need you,” I whisper against his lips.

“I never thought I’d say this, but you’re sure you don’t want me to stop? We can pick up later, cause—”

I bring a finger to his lips to quiet his rambling. That memory was groundbreaking, but that was the past. “I want to live here, in the present, with you. We can focus on the past later.”

“Fuck,” he groans, before somehow making his sharp teeth disappear, normal human canines occupying his mouth. I help him shove off his jacket and shirt, and he basically rips his pants off. That glorious, Hellish, monster cock is rock solid and ready for me. It’s much bigger than I pictured in my head, now that I can see it in the light. I can’t help myself; I shoot my hand out to grab his shaft, stroking it up and down. His tip is dripping precum, and I smooth it around with my thumb. He moans and drags my head toward his, kissing me fiercely. It’s bruising, damaging, and filled with so much passion. He grabs my ass into his hands and lifts me into the air, my legs instantly wrapping around his waist like it’s second nature.

My back hits the wall, and I wrap my arms around his neck, never breaking our breath-stealing kiss of death and sin. I feel him reach down to grasp his shaft, and he aligns it with my soaked entrance. “I take it I’m done being punished?” I ask throatily.

“For now; I can’t wait any longer. I need to feel you. I’m going to stretch and fill your little pussy, and finish with my real punishment.” He smirks against my lips, pushing the tip inside. The last part of his sentence is lost on me as he slowly pushes inside. I gasp, throwing my head back. He’s barely past my entrance, and I can hardly breathe. “You’re going to take all of my cock, Cherise. Your pussy is mine, every beautiful inch of you is mine, and I will stretch you to adjust to me. I’ll fucking make sure of it.”

“Then fucking claim me already; stop holding back. I want to feel you, every damn inch of you. Your cock is mine, so act like it, demon.” He tilts his head and smirks, a sinful, cruel smile that should frighten me, but I’m never afraid when it comes to him.

“Hearing you claim me is the most delicious thing I’ve ever heard. Exhale, now.” He waits for me to listen to his command.

I inhale unevenly; the anticipation of what’s to come fills my core with desire. When I begin to exhale, he slams into me to the hilt. My jaw drops, and I arch my back. I’ve never felt this full and stretched in my entire life—it’s fucking euphoric. It’s painful, but I’ve never felt so alive. He brings his forehead to mine, a silent question as he stares into my eyes, and I nod for him to continue once I catch my breath.

He pulls out almost entirely and then forcefully slams back into me. A strangled moan passes my lips. My pussy is already clamping around him, even with the pain. Every ridge and bump along his shaft that resemble cock rings and studded piercings, rub along my inner walls, increasing the intensity of the pleasure that’s beginning to overtake the pain as he thrusts in and out at a steady, damning pace.

“Fuck, little reaper. Your little pussy takes my cock so well, you’re soaking wet for me. I can feel your muscles clamping around me, trying to milk every last drop of sin from my body.” He quickens his pace, his thrusts so forceful that my body bangs against the wall, and the hanging picture frames shake with every movement of his hips. His remarkably long forked tongue stretches from his mouth and flicks vigorously against my swollen clit while he fucks me.

I’m moaning so loud that I’m sure the whole neighborhood outside can hear me over the chaos that I’m sure is still brewing outside. I tightly grasp my hands into his long and smooth ivory locks. Nik groans, his blood-red eyes feral. He looks down at the destruction he’s inflicting on my pussy and moans along with me.

Pleasure pools rapidly in my lower stomach, my muscles clamping around his thick length as my orgasm simmers, on the verge of an explosion. My breath catches, and my entire body shakes from the intensity of the oncoming orgasm.

Nik senses that I'm about to come and laughs. He yanks his dick out of me and slurps his tongue back into his mouth. "Did I say you could come yet, Cherise?"

"Nik, what the fuck! I was so close," I whimper as he sets me down; my knees wobble from how badly my body is shaking.

He holds me steady, and with a demonic laugh, he spins me around to face the wall. He brushes my hair off one shoulder, his breath hot in my ear. "We were having so much fun, you forgot about the candy cane lodged in your ass. I've been magically growing it in size as soon as I put it in you; your other hole is ready for me now, baby." The sensation filling my back hole overwhelms me as he slowly slides it out, the thickness of it evident now that I can focus on it. Was that why I was going to come so hard? That was going to be the most intense orgasm I've ever experienced, and he stole it away. "Your pussy drenched my cock, little reaper, and you've been stretched wide enough." I feel his tip slip past my entrance, and I tense. "Relax, baby, the worst is over. Now you get to come; you want that, right?"

I take a deep breath, bracing my hands against the wall. His promise of an orgasm rekindles my desire, and I exhale while my muscles relax. "Yes, I want that. Please." My voice is raw and breaking from my earlier cries of pleasure.

He pushes in a little deeper, and his husky voice rasps in my ear. "Your pussy tasted like that candy cane—you're delicious. I never want to stop devouring you."

"Devour me. Consume me. Fucking take me, Nik."

He growls ferociously, his grip on my hips tightening to a bruising hold. He thrusts

in, inch by inch, my jaw locked open with each stretch of my walls until he's all the way inside me. Thanks to the help of that mystical candy cane, and the adrenaline rush from him inside my pussy, this isn't so bad. All restraint seems lost on him when he pulls out and slams back into me, over and over again, at the same brutal pace he set earlier. Skin smacking against skin rings loud, and mixes in with the melody of the Christmas tunes playing in the background. His distorted voice breaks through, and demonic growls emit from him with every thrust of his hips. He wraps one arm around my midsection and reaches his other hand down to my aching clit, rubbing it at a rapid pace.

"Come for me, Cherise," he growls against my ear.

My orgasm shatters through me, his voice tipping me over the edge, letting me finally land in a sweet release. If he weren't holding on to me, my legs would give out completely, and I would sink onto the floor. I cry out again and again; his harsh thrusts never cease while he wrings out every last drop of pleasure from my body. He sinks two fingers inside my wet cunt, his thumb resting on my clit, and an unforeseen second release rips out of me. I almost slam my head against the wall, the release too overwhelming, my hips grinding to meet every movement of his hips and fingers. Now, that was the most intense orgasm I've ever had in my life.

With a shout, warmth fills me as Nik finds his release and loads me with his spend. "Fuck, you drive me wild. You're incredible, Cherise." He pulls out of me and spins me around to face him; I stumble as I turn. I wrap my arms around him, and he lifts me into his arms. "You're everything to me. Please don't ever leave me," I whisper against his shoulder.

He pulls me taut against him. "Never. You're mine forever."

My eyes quiver closed, and exhaustion overtakes me. Darkness claims me, and I fall fast asleep.

Chapter eleven

Niklaus

One Hour Before Christmas

It would appear that I care about this little devil of a human, her back against my chest while she sleeps soundly in the bathtub. Her breaths are even and slow. I've taken it upon myself to clean the dried blood off her skin from where my claws tore her silky flesh, lazily dragging a soapy washcloth over her skin while she slumbers. My candy-cane slinging little reaper, do you not realize you are domesticating a demon? She better feel fucking honored when she wakes to find me doing this. I have never gone out of my way to take care of anything.

I scoff, gliding the cloth over her pebbled nipple. Her body is stunning, and she's a fucking Goddess among men that could bring an Archdemon to his knees. Lucifer, fucking damn this entire world to Hell because nothing is as it should be.

My arm jerks as another soul invades my body, their essence devoured by me—mine forever. My imps are still working hard out there, and I would almost succumb to the woes of not joining in on the fun, but how can I when I spent the last hour inside my little reaper possessing her like I declared I would? I'm still in awe at how well her body adjusted to my length; the sheer size of my cock alone should have annihilated her fragile human pussy, but she took it like a professional succubus would. My cock hardens at the thought of it. I know she isn't prone to getting fucked down like that, so I know it made her body exhausted from the best fuck of her life—if I do say so myself.

If we hadn't learned that little trick with her scars, I would have dragged her punishment out way longer than how it all went down. But when I sunk my claws into her flesh to reopen the old wounds, I was allowed a front-row seat into her mind and to view her memories unfold. What I saw... made my blood boil beneath my skin, to the point where if I weren't a demon, I would have scorched myself alive. I just... couldn't keep up with the planned punishments. 'Cause I apparently have feelings for this woman. I felt sorry for her and all of the shit she's been through. Now, her little space-out sessions and talking to an imaginary friend don't seem all that far-fetched, if you look at the whole picture.

Her dad is on my shit list. All I need is a name, which she will procure for me one way or another. I will ensure he feels the full wrath that Hell has to offer on a never-ending loop, not one second of reprieve from misery and torture for how he treated her. And Ashcroft? I rub the cloth a little too roughly against Cherise's chest, which causes her to stir and breathe deeply. I pause, watching to see if she'll wake up or not. With a low moan, she turns her head and snores softly. My abdomen pulses with a hint of laughter—sorry, little reaper.

Anyways, back to Ashcroft. I need to find a way around this Lucifer-forsaken curse that allows them to evade their souls being marked. Undoubtedly, their whole family is cooped up at their little estate now, sacrificing some unsuspecting innocent to Lucifer to enhance that protection. Why does Lucifer even allow such a thing? It pisses me off. There must be some loophole—but what?

I wring out the washcloth, letting the warm water splash onto her perky breasts. I'm lost in a trance as I stare at the rivulets of water that slide down her peaked nipples. I lick my lips; my dick pushing into her spine will surely wake her up, right? How long do humans need to sleep to recover from getting brutally fucked? I want to delve into her mind again, and I don't think we've even scratched the surface of what lies underneath those battle scars of hers. And, well... I wouldn't mind thrusting my dick inside her again and blowing my load inside her soaking wet cunt this time—then I

would have successfully claimed all of my little reaper's holes. The excitement of it all makes my length jerk against Cherise's back.

I let the cloth go and skim my nails over her soft chest, her chest rising and falling so softly under my claws. "It's time to wake up," I drawl into her ear.

I pout like a fucking child when she doesn't even flinch. Fine, we'll try something else. I grip both of her hard nipples in the pads of my fingers and tug on them gently. Still nothing. I palm her breasts, massaging and groping them. Fuck they feel so good in my hands.

"Still need more coaxing, baby? Shall we find out if your pussy still tastes like peppermint?" I dart my tongue out, snaking it down her immaculate flesh and sink it under the water. I smooth it out, gliding over her swollen clit. She slightly arches her back and pants softly. Now, we're getting somewhere.

I vigorously flick my tongue against her bundle of nerves, still palming her gorgeous tits. Cherise shifts her body, turning her head back and forth, and she pants harder. "You gonna come for me again, baby?" I purr against her candy cane curls.

Quick pants part her lips, and I slide my tongue farther down her slit, entering her tight little hole and thrusting my tongue in and out. Yup, I can still taste peppermint. I drool as I taste her sweet juices—I ache to bury my cock deep inside of her. Cherise stirs, running her hand across her forehead and arching her back further. Her muscles squeeze my tongue, desperately trying to keep me inside of her with each pulse of friction.

"Nik," she moans, louder this time. She cups her hands over mine that grip her breasts. I grunt in response—I can't talk while her hole strangles my tongue. She sits up and twists her body to burn those icy blue eyes laced with lust on me.

I suck my tongue back in my mouth, lift her by her hips and turn her around to straddle me. She wastes no time; she grabs my face and parts her lips for mine. I recede my monstrous teeth to kiss her back without fear of mutilating her plump lips. I bite her bottom lip and tug on it, and she lifts her lashes to peer at me with hooded eyes. I suck her lip into my mouth and groan—I will never not love the feeling of her lips against mine. It's like her taste is the finest delicacy the world has to offer, something priceless that can't be bought or obtained anywhere else. "My full name is Niklaus, by the way. Whatever you want to call me is fine, just thought you should know."

She smiles against my lips. "Then I will just call you mine, Niklaus."

Oh my Devil, I'm about to fucking explode. My heart flutters inside my chest, beating to a rocky rhythm I've never felt before. Why won't it slow down? "You better sit on my cock, Cherise, or I'm going to force you on it. I can't hold back much longer."

With a sultry smile, she huffs a laugh. She grabs my horns and strokes them. "Do you know how beautiful you are? You're like an angel but sent from Hell." She sucks on her bottom lip, reaches down to grab my shaft, and shifts forward to align the tip with her entrance. She takes her rightful seat on her new throne and slowly takes me. We both moan as I stretch her, her greedy pussy already clamping around me the deeper she goes.

"You feel so fucking good, little reaper. Show me how you take this dick like the naughty slut you are," I growl, firmly gripping her hips. She places one hand around my throat and squeezes her tiny fingers once she has my full length inside of her. I grin wide. "Hurt me, baby."

She presses her other hand around the width of my neck, squeezing them both and cutting off my air, but little does she know that means fucking nothing to me. I'll get

a head rush, but that's about it. She grinds her hips over me; her jaw drops as quick pants and muffled moans pour out of her the faster she rides me. I trace a line down the middle of her chest, between her breasts, and surprisingly, the skin is free of scar tissue. Time to claim you entirely, Cherise Bates.

I elongate a claw on my index finger and press into her skin. Blood rushes from the wound. She gasps, moving her hips faster to chase the pain away with pleasure. Good girl. I carve my symbol into her delicate flesh, the symbol that represents each demon separately. Your soul will be mine, little reaper. Blood gushes between her bouncing tits, and a strangled moan passes my air-thirsty lips.

“What did you do, Nik?” she moans, never once slowing her pace; her chase for release is adamant. She loosens her grip around my neck and slides her hands along my jaw and up to press against my cheeks. “You feel so good; I’m gonna come. Oh, fuck, Nik!”

I swallow her moans when I smash her mouth to mine, drinking every last drop of her voice as her pussy clamps down around me. Her body writhes against mine, my balls tighten, and I shoot my cum deep inside her, my cock pulsing out every last drop.

She pulls away, the high of her orgasm fading. She traces her fingers over my bottom lip and smiles. “What is this mark?”

“It’s my symbol—my mark that claims your soul and binds you to me for all eternity. Do you want that?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “I’m done running from you, Nik. My body, my mind, my heart, and now my soul—are yours. So, bind me to you... or whatever you wanna call it,” she insists.

I smirk, and my damn heart flutters inside my chest again. “Repeat after me.” She

cocks her head, gesturing for me to continue. I chuckle at how impatient she is. I didn't even have to force her; she willingly offered this to me. I will protect her with my life. "I, Cherise Bates, offer my soul to Niklaus, the Archdemon to Lucifer, until the end of time."

She sucks in a shaking breath. "I, Cherise Bates, offer my soul to Niklaus, the Archdemon to Lucifer, until the end of time."

I place my hand over the symbol that marks her skin and feel... nothing. I narrow my eyes and inspect it, to make sure I somehow didn't draw it incorrectly. Nope, perfectly fine. "Was that it? Is it done?" she asks, looking down at her wounded chest. "I don't feel any different."

She lifts her head to give me a puzzled stare. "It didn't work. That should have fucking worked." But, as my memory serves me, my phantom mark didn't stick when I first heard her name spill past her lips. Realization dawns on me and crashes over me like a tidal wave. "Your name isn't Cherise Bates."

She crosses her arms and scoffs. "I'm pretty sure it is. Why would I lie about my own name?"

Everything makes perfect sense now. This is why I could never claim my little reaper, and she truly has no idea what her real name is. "I don't think you're doing it on purpose. I think the truth lies beneath one of those scars of yours. Shall we find out?" My fingers twitch in anticipation of learning a new piece of her past and hopefully discovering her true name.

She gasps, and looks down to the scar that stands out amongst the rest. The long, deep one that runs from her navel down to her sweet spot. I glide my claw over it, and she tenses. "Don't." She turns her head—I think her invisible friend has made their grand entrance. "Okay, which one?" She squints and brushes her fingertips over the

side of her neck, below her ear. “Here?” She nods with affirmation and turns to face me again. “She says it’s not time for the big one yet. But some of the answers we seek are here.” She points to the one she just reached for.

I tilt my head. “Your friend said that?” She hums and nods slowly. “Let’s see if she’s right. Are you ready?”

“Do it,” she confirms, a slight tremble in her voice.

Without hesitation, I reach for the tiny scar under her ear and slash my claw along its length. White explodes in my vision, crimson clouding the periphery—and we sail away into Cherise’s past.

Cherise

I walk beside Daddy to my left, Will to my right—down the snow-covered aisle towards the flaming inferno in the center of the field, off to the left of our estate home. Snowflakes drift slowly through the winter air, and my nose won’t stop running from the freezing temperature. Cloaked figures circle the massive bonfire that looks like a gateway into Hell itself. Chants in a language I don’t comprehend fill the air, carried with the wind.

I wear a white nightgown, my bare feet numb and stinging with each step into the freezing snow. My seventeenth birthday passed two weeks ago, and I’ve been preparing for this day ever since. I ate, slept, and breathed the Rite of Blessings. It is my duty to the family and Daddy. He says we’ll be protected from The Saint once I fulfill my destiny.

A chill rakes down my spine as I stand before the platform in the circle’s center. The chanting grows louder and more erratic, each member performing weird movements with their hands, all directed towards me. Fear spikes into my every fiber and takes

root in my heart. This doesn't seem right. I have a feeling that this is going to go terribly wrong.

“Oh, holy Lucifer! We give you this offering in exchange for your protection and unwavering loyalty. That our humble sacrifice will not be made in vain. Please bless our family with your unholy support, and allow us another year free of your servant's wrath this coming Christmas day. All hail the King of sin!” “All hail the King of sin!” The gathered members repeat in unison, bowing their heads.

The fire burns brighter behind me. The flames heat my cold skin, and sparks and embers shoot out and land around us like a meteor shower. The tiny hairs covering my body stand alert, and my heart rate spikes.

“With our combined bloodshed, we offer this sacrifice to allow our unholy union to be bred anew.” With raised hands, everyone grabs a blade and cuts deeply into their palms, blood dripping into the earth around them. “Now, for the final offering.” Daddy turns to me and gestures for me to sit atop the stone platform before the fire.

“I don't like this; I'm scared,” I whimper.

Will leans close to my ear. “Looks like you don't have a choice, psycho bitch. You made your bed when you started talking to imaginary friends. Can't have a freak of nature like you amongst our ranks, Daddy's favorite or not.”

I shoot daggers in his direction. Then I flick my eyes to the still chanting members surrounding us—where is my Mommy? “Daddy?” I cry, a tear sliding down my cheek.

“Get on the platform and fulfill your sacred duty to this family...” He speaks my name, but it's distorted and censored. “Don't make me ask again.”

Tears fall faster now, and I try to run—but they catch me by my arms and drag me onto the cold stone slab—pinning my body down. “I’ll be a good girl, I promise! Don’t hurt me, Daddy, please!” My pleas go unanswered, just like they always do.

Will jabs his blade against my throat and nicks the skin right below my ear. I cry out, break a hand free, and dig my nails into his wrist. He shouts and drops the knife to his feet. With one last ditch effort to escape, I jump off the platform and pick up the knife. I hold it in front of me, my hand shaking fiercely. I slash the blade in the air, crying out with each swipe. “Where is Mom?”

A laugh laced with murderous intent emerges from Will. “She’s dead, little flower. Cut her up real good. She was crazy, just like you!”

I lunge forward, seeing only red with hatred for the man before me coursing thick in my veins. The blade finally connects, and I push forward—slicing the knife down Will’s abdomen. I make sure the cut is deep; I have every intention of spilling blood before I’m removed from this earth tonight—for Mommy and for the little girl who had everything taken from her—a little girl who lived a joyless life. Happiness and love were never in the cards for me, and I will die tonight without ever experiencing it.

Will’s bloody screams taint the smoke-filled air. I don’t even look behind me as I break into a sprint towards the house. I crash through the door and slam it shut behind me, ensuring the deadbolt is locked. “Mommy? Where are you?” I shout into the empty house; no sound other than my footsteps pounding on the wooden floors can be heard.

I dash up the stairs and sprint down the hall to my bedroom. As I place my hand on the handle, whispering enters my mind. Your soul is marked. You’ll remember when the time comes. Death will not claim you today, my child. Your memories will be lost, but there is always light amidst the dark to lead the way.

A shudder wracks down my spine, and my fate is sealed, although I don't yet know its meaning. I turn the doorknob, and time stills. I rush to my mother, who lies on the floor with her back to me, her white nightgown stained in blood. I drop to my knees and shake her arm. "Mom? Mom!" I roughly shake her, but she remains still. "Mommy?" I whisper. A tear falls, and my heart shatters into millions of pieces.

The door is kicked in behind me, and my censored name is shouted behind me. I pay it no mind; I have nothing to live for anyway. The only person I think loved me is gone. Rough hands grab my arms and lift me off the floor. Panic overtakes me. "No! I can't leave her; she'll be all alone! Please!"

"You stupid bitch! Do you know what you've done? You've got us all killed! The Saint is upon us, you idiot girl. Now your mother's death is in vain. Do you feel proud?" A harsh smack from my father's hand snaps my head to the side.

"No... I didn't mean it," I whisper. I have nothing to fight for.

"Now, you'll spend the rest of your days locked away like the crazy bitch you are." He palms my breast and squeezes tight. Bile rises in my throat, and I try desperately to force it back. "I'll sure miss these, though, and your tight little cunt. You were always Daddy's favorite girl. Remember this day, you killed us all. The Saint is here."

Still in the bathtub, straddling Nik, my pruned fingers tremble against his shoulder. My fingers dig into his flesh. He cups my cheeks and searches my eyes frantically. "They lied to you. Your father betrayed you and your mother."

My eyes darken, and my mind whispers of death and vengeance. "We need to go to the Ashcroft estate tonight. We have to kill them all, Nik."

"I—" He purses his lips, deep in thought. He slams his fist against the porcelain tub, a

crack sounding from his strength. “Cherise, I can’t touch them. They’re protected against me, remember? That’s what the Rite of Blessings is for. I won’t be able to help you.” His features are absolutely destroyed.

“Just be there for me. I can’t do this without you by my side—but I have to do this.” I stand and step out of the tub.

Nik is behind me, spinning me back to him. He raises his palm and extends it toward the bathroom door. Within seconds, my serrated blade flies into his hand. “Let me at least give you this, my little reaper.” He waves his hand over the blade, which doubles in size, the hilt now a red and white pattern—resembling a candy cane. “I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

I take the blade from him and tears well behind my eyes. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.” I lean forward and kiss Nik slowly. My breathing is erratic and intense. “When I’m with you, I feel strong. Don’t ever leave my side. I need you.”

“I’ll be right behind you every step of the way, my little reaper. I look forward to watching you destroy the Ashcrofts.”

Chapter twelve

Cherise

Early Morning Christmas Day

I lift my new blade with the candy cane handle to eye level and inspect it, turning it from side to side. I see my reflection, my eyes—once a deep abyss of secrets and lies—now brimming with life and a vow to seek revenge on those who took everything from me. I would never have uncovered the truths within my very essence if it weren't for the demon by my side. The Saint, an Archdemon sent from Hell who used to torment my nightmares, a living shadow cast over my brain with its claws buried deep in my psyche—now replaced by a demon who has become my savior. I've discovered that everything I thought I knew about my past was a lie, including my name. Did I construct this version of my history myself, or was it deliberately implanted to weave a web of deceit and lead me astray?

Nik's deep voice shatters my inevitable downward spiral of thoughts. "Once this is all over, I can think of a few ways to put the handle of that blade to good use."

I flick my eyes over to his hooded crimson eyes, burning hot with lust. "Yeah, me too. I think it's your turn to get your ass stretched with a candy cane," I reply sweetly, my lips warping into a devious smirk.

Nik huffs a laugh. "I'm not opposed to the idea, little reaper. A demon will try anything once."

I place the tip of the blade against his toned, pale chest and glide it down his rock-hard abs. "My demon is such a good boy." Nik cracks a wide grin. I shake my head and bite my lip. "We need to go; I'm eager to wield my new gift."

Nik's eyes burn as hot as the sun as he rakes them down my naked form. "You definitely won't be leaving the house like that."

I place my free hand on my hip and tap the blade's edge on his chest. "You ruined my pretty dress with your claws. I have other clothes, but they're not right for the occasion."

"Allow me to make it up to you." Nik waves his hand through the air. With a simple flick of his wrist, a gust of wind rushes past me. He steps back to take in my form, a soft gasp escaping his lips as his eyes fill with wonder. "You're a Goddess of death, my little reaper. You look stunning," he murmurs.

I hurry to the mirror above the bathroom sink, my jaw dropping at the sight before me. My candy cane highlights, perfectly curled and flowing around my shoulders, catch my eye. I run my hands over the wine-colored dress that hugs my upper body, the corset accentuating my curves. The skirt flares out into a high-low design that swirls around me as I move. As I examine the fabric closely, I notice how the bottom of the skirt sparkles in the soft bathroom light, glinting like diamonds embedded in the tulle that drapes around my legs.

I twirl in my black lace heels, my eyes wide as I lock onto my demon, whose gaze is fixed on me with an insatiable hunger. "Thank you," I breathe. I swallow hard as I try to push away the tears in my eyes. I will not cry yet. But everything about Nik makes my heart quiver inside my chest. His magic and mystery drag me into his sinful allure, every single time.

Nik's already dressed in the clothes he wore when he entered my supposed death trap

of a house. His long coat matches my dress; we look like a pair ready to take over the world and bring it to its knees. “Anything you desire shall be yours. All you need to do is ask, and it will be done.” He sucks in a sharp breath and holds his hand out towards me. “Let’s go get your revenge, little reaper. I want to watch you bathe in Will Ashcroft’s blood.”

My cheeks heat, and I walk over to place his hand in mine. He guides me outside in the winter chill, the night sky filled with swirls of smoke plumes from the chaos overtaking the town of Lockwood. I stumble back as a wailing shriek, reminiscent of a horse whinnying, echoes in the distance. Charging down the snow-covered road, a skeletal steed pursues a man, screaming at the top of his lungs. With a triumphant neigh, the horse leaps onto the man’s back, crashing him into the ground with a loud crunch in the snow. The horse snorts, smoke radiates from his bony nostrils, and he snaps his teeth around the man’s throat, silencing the cries entirely.

I feel Nik shudder beside me; his hand vibrates in mine as he lets out a low groan. The steed of death lifts his maw, gore dripping from his mouth. He locks onto us and lifts his front legs in the air, kicking them wildly in front of him in excitement. His beautiful, tattered onyx wings flare out beside him, and he races over to Nik and me.

I squeeze Nik’s hand, every muscle in my body tenses, and my eyes widen in panic as this dangerously beautiful creature nears us. “Don’t be afraid, little reaper. This is Sorrow.” I relax, and huff out a sigh of relief.

“He won’t try to eat me?” Sorrow slows as he approaches us, my dress billowing in the wind around my legs.

Smoke streams from his nostrils, and his lifeless, bone-white eyes lock on me. He observes me for a brief moment and bows his head in silence. My lips part as I gasp in shock. “No, he knows you’re mine. He’s offering you respect. You can pet him now.”

With my free hand, I reach out, place my hand on Sorrow's snout, and rub up and down slowly. I giggle as he leans into my touch and nods in approval. "So this is The Saint's alleged death steed. He's beautiful, just like you."

Nik gestures with his free hand to Sorrow with a glint in his eyes, a smirk accentuating his devilishly handsome features. "Your chariot awaits, little reaper." He shifts on his feet and tsks, quickly running his hands down my arms. The biting winter air retreats as warmth floods my veins, like a furnace igniting inside me. "I nearly forgot that my human's body can't handle the cold in that outfit, and you look too delicious in that dress to make you change."

I lean in and brush my lips against his, my heart hammering in my chest like the Energizer Bunny. I've never felt this way about anyone before, let alone a demon. A demon who warms my shattered heart, reigniting it to a vibrant rhythm—a melody intertwined with sweet sin that ignites my very being. "You're sweet... for a demon." I half-shrug with a sultry smile.

Nik chuckles, grips my hips, and hoists me in the air, plopping me down with my legs dangling over the side of Sorrow like a true damsel. He hops on behind me, and I swing one leg over Sorrow's back and firmly grasp the saddle handle. "Are you ready?" he asks, grabbing hold of the reins.

My eyes darken, vengeance settling in my bones, I can already taste revenge on my tongue. This ends today. My new blade rests against my thigh, in the red and white garter that Nik conjured for me, ready to shed blood with it for the first time. "I've never been more ready for anything in my life."

Nik jerks the reins with a shout, and Sorrow breaks into a sprint, his torn wings spread wide, flapping to gain momentum. My stomach drops as we take our first dip into the air. Sorrow's wings flap rapidly at his sides as we soar high over the town of Lockwood. I gasp softly as I behold the town shrinking away below us, my hair

swirling in the air. “I’m riding The Saint’s demonic horse high into the sky!” I extend my arms, tilt my head back, and laugh hard. “I never imagined this is how my night would play out.”

Nik wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me closer to his solid chest. “I didn’t expect it to unfold like this either, but hearing your laughter and riding into the night sky on Sorrow’s back with you has been the perfect scenario. You deserve everything this world has to offer, Cherise.”

I cling to his arm around me and lean into him. My laughter quiets as I gaze at the town rushing by below. “I’ll figure out my name, Nik. I want to be with you forever. You make me feel things I’ve never felt before, and I’d die if I couldn’t see you again.”

Nik grabs the front of my dress, his hand trembling slightly as he wraps both arms around me. He lets out a shaky breath, holding me close for the remainder of the ride to the Ashcroft estate.

“You should really let me open that scar on your belly, Cherise. If that memory gives me your name, I can bind your soul to me, and I wouldn’t be actually scared that something might happen to you.” We stand enveloped in the shadows, hidden by the trees a few feet from the front door of the estate.

A child-like whisper turns my attention to the left. My friend looks up at me, desperation in her beautiful eyes, her caramel pigtails swaying in the wind. “It’s not time yet. Don’t let him.”

“Why not?” I whisper back, raising a brow.

She shrugs, cracking a smile that shows her missing two front teeth. “You’ll know when the time is right. Listen. Feel. Remember. He always provides.”

“Who always provides?” I step closer to her, sensing that I’m missing the larger meaning hidden within her cryptic words.

“Look within, Cherise. The answers have been there all along.” She giggles low, an almost contorted sound I’ve never heard from her before, and runs off in the opposite direction.

“Wait!” I whisper shout after her. Nik grabs my hand and pulls me into his firm chest.

“Let me guess, your friend told you I can’t, right?” I nod and start to turn my head when his clawed fingers wrap around my chin and lock my eyes onto the raging fires within his glare. “What if I told you that I don’t care what your friend says? Why is that stopping us from learning the truth, Cherise?”

I narrow my eyes at him and wrinkle my nose. “She knows something that we don’t, and we have to trust her.”

A low rumble forms in his chest, a frown marring his perfect face. “Maybe you do, but I certainly don’t. Lift your dress.”

I sneer and push against his chest. “The answer is no, Nik! I’m trusting my gut on this.”

“Do not make me ask you again, little reaper,” he growls, laced with a dangerous lilt.

He reaches for the hem of my dress, and I stumble away from him with a shout. “Nik!”

“Who’s out there?” Nik’s hands pause on my dress, and our heads snap toward the hooded figure bounding towards us.

“Look what you’ve done!” I whisper, scowling at him. “Go hide; your towering demon form is going to expose us!”

Nik scoffs with an offended look on his face. Without another word, he glides a hand down my body, and my body vanishes in thin air. “What the fuck?”

“Shush, get ready to ambush him.” Nik dons his human glamor and leans against a tree with his hands in his pockets.

“You there! This is private property, so you better get the hell out of here before I alert Mr. Ashcroft of your disturbance.” The dark hood half obscures the man’s face. He holds a small dagger outstretched toward Nik.

Nik cracks a friendly smile and pushes off the tree with a cocky swagger. “Where is dear old Will? I have a meeting with him, actually.”

“Do you know what day it is, idiot? We don’t allow visitors to the estate on Christmas; this is a holy time for our family. So scram before I gut you like a pig,” the hooded man snarls.

Nik looks at the man’s knife and lazily waves him off. “Aren’t you afraid The Saint might catch you out here tonight? You are out here, all alone with a stranger.”

The man spits on the ground at Nik’s feet. “We don’t fear that demon, and we have protection. I’m gonna give you one more chance to—” He stumbles over his words, and a thin, horizontal line beaded with blood appears on his Adam’s apple.

Nik waves his hand toward me with a pleased smirk, and my body materializes. I stand before the cloaked man, my new favorite blade pressed into his flesh. “Tell us where Will is. I won’t ask twice, asshole.” He hisses sharply when I push harder over the bob in his throat.

“He’s in the house, but you’ll both regret—” I slash my blade across his pathetic neck, and blood floods down his chest like a waterfall. He clutches his neck and drops to his knees, gagging on his blood.

“Thanks for the tip,” I tease, cocking my head and pinching the tip of my crimson-stained blade with a giggle. His eyes bulge out of his head, and malice and fear radiate off him. I lift my foot and kick him hard in the chest. He topples onto the snowy earth, and with one last struggling gasp, he dies.

I feel Nik’s hand snake around my waist as he turns me to steal my lips into a drugging kiss. “I want to bury my cock inside your sinful pussy right now. I’m going to watch the light leave Will’s eyes by your hand and fuck you over his dying corpse, little reaper.”

I slide my palm over the swell in his pants, and I moan against his lips. “Then let’s hurry up and end this so you can make good on that promise,” I tease in a sultry tone.

He emits a low, ravenous growl. He grips both of my ass cheeks and squeezes tight. “Since you won’t let me bleed that damn scar, promise me you will be careful. I can’t fucking help you if things go wrong. Promise me,” he commands, his grip tightening to a bruising possession.

“I promise I’ll be careful, Nik. I trust my friend, and she’s never led me astray. So, trust my judgment on this.” I trace my fingers over his lips, which are turned into a frown.

With a heaving sigh, he releases me. “I’m going to glamor us to conceal our entry. They won’t be able to see us. We find Will, you get to reap justice, and then we fuck like we’re rocking around the Christmas tree—in that order. Got it?” He holds his hand up, counting with three fingers as he spouts off our to-do list.

I hum softly with my hands crossed behind my back, twisting side to side with a giddy smile. “Yes, my demon. Let’s go.”

My hand is intertwined with Nik’s so we don’t lose track of where the other is in our invisible forms, as we ascend the stairs of the Ashcroft estate—the former place I called home. We already searched the lower level, with no sight of Will, or anyone else for that matter. The house is eerily silent, save for the chanting heard from outside around the bonfire. If these assholes are performing another sick ritual like the one they tried to sacrifice me to, then they will all be dealt with once Will’s heart beats in my hand. If I go for the cult members first, I risk Will catching wind of my arrival, and I can’t lose the element of surprise.

The stairs creak under the weight of my foot, and we pause. Straining our ears, we don’t hear any movement, so we continue onward. When we reach the top of the stairs, I turn and stare down the hallway at my old bedroom door. I wonder if it looks the same? Will Mommy’s blood be left stained on the hardwood? Images of my mother’s lifeless body flash through my mind. My heart races, and my chin quivers as that familiar wave of terror washes over me. This house of horrors has scarred not just my skin, but my mind as well. My breathing quickens, but I start to relax when I feel Nik squeeze my trembling hand.

My friend rushes past us with a high-pitched giggle and waves for us to go through my bedroom door. I tug on Nik’s hand; I’m laser-focused on my small friend, who’s still urging me toward the room. I drag him behind me, moving faster, until my hand lands on the knob.

“This door leads to salvation. The answer is inside you and will come to the surface soon enough,” my friend whispers in a haunting, childish voice. Then flames engulf her, and in an instant, the fire disappears, along with her.

I swallow a cry that almost spills out of me at the horrific sight; she’s never left me

like that before. But I can't let her down now. I slowly push the door open and drag Nik inside with me. I tug on Nik's hand, but he grunts and stops moving. I glance behind me, and our glamor disappears at the same moment. "Cherise, run!"

I whip my head into the dark room and remove my blade from my thigh. "What's wrong, Nik?" I whisper.

"He knew we were coming—you need to leave. I'm trapped in a sigil they drew on the floor. Run!" he growls, but I notice the fear laced behind his ferocity.

The low click of a lamp cord in the room's far corner gains my attention. The room illuminates, and there, Will Ashcroft is sitting on my bed with a feral smile.

He rises, spinning his knife between his fingers. He tsks three times, shaking his head mockingly. "The demon's right; you shouldn't have come here, crazy bitch. I've been expecting you."

Chapter thirteen

Cherise

Early Morning Christmas Day

I hold my blade high, ready to strike at a moment's notice if Will's bold enough to try anything. "What have you done to Nik?" I snarl, never once taking my eyes off of the bad man before me—my tormentor at not only the Silent Night Asylum, but from my childhood.

With the blade in his hand, Will gestures toward Nik, holding his hand outstretched with a wide, toothy grin. "Oh, that sigil on the floor? It traps demons. Renders them powerless while inside the circle."

"I didn't know you were expecting guests from Hell, Ashcroft. If I had, I would have brought a gift," Nik interjects, his tone dripping with arrogance.

Will runs a hand through his wavy, shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair, his blue eyes locking onto Nik. "Don't you realize you've brought us the greatest gift this Christmas?" he says with a low, rasping laugh, angling the blade toward me before turning it back to Nik. "Not only did you return my psychotic niece to me, you unknowingly gave us something far greater—you."

I stumble back slightly at his confession, and a shaky gasp passes my lips. "You're my uncle?"

“You’re an Ashcroft?” Nik yells out behind me at the same time.

I half-shrug and scoff. “Clearly, I had no idea, Nik. You saw that memory just like I did—the one where they were planning to sacrifice me. I guess this just confirms it.”

“It would seem so. What was your niece’s first name, Willy Boy? Would you be a dear and remind her, she’s been dying to claim it.” I tsk at Nik’s blatant lie; he’s way more adamant about learning my true name than I am.

Will steps closer, and I instinctively take a step back. He tilts his head, a smirk playing on his lips. “Oh, my poor niece is still struggling with her memories? I suppose I must have hit her a little too hard over the years—especially on the night she was meant to die. I heard you were left a bloody mess on the cold, hard floor before your miraculous escape. A true fucking miracle that was, indeed.”

I raise an eyebrow. That little piece of information feels like the final piece of the puzzle, resonating in every fiber of my being. The scar on my abdomen tingles, and I trace my fingers over it, feeling its presence through the fabric of my dress.

“Those two idiots Branson and Scryer left you alone for five minutes as you bled out from fatal wounds, and when they came back for your corpse—all that remained was a pool of blood staining the tile. Tell me, niece, how does one on the brink of death get up and walk away?” Will sneers, his voice low and murderous.

I nervously bite my bottom lip, trying to recall that night. But like so many of my erased memories, they’re buried deep beneath my scars, just out of reach. I shouldn’t have listened to my small friend. “I... I don’t know,” I whisper. “What did I do to all of you? Why do you and Daddy want me dead?”

With a shout, Will takes two steps forward. His eyes are wild, shimmering with a chilling intensity like a stormy sea that’s ready to devour and drown its unsuspecting

victim.

I am a victim of Will Ashcroft no longer.

“You and your cunt of a mother were supposed to be long dead, ten years in the fucking making. You, just like the rest of my brother’s children that had a few too many screws loose, were to be sacrificed to the Devil. It was your duty to protect this family. You are an abomination in the eyes of God!” he screams with enough force that his face turns red, spittle flying from his mouth. “You ruined our sacrifice that night, and your father couldn’t bear to look upon your failures any longer. So, instead, he shipped you both away to that asylum where I could enact my everlasting revenge upon you until you started fighting back. You were no longer any fun to play with, and you didn’t shed those pretty tears for me that I used to love. So, your father gave me the okay to end you. I sent those two goons after you, and they fucked up royally.” He laughs maniacally, flicking his tongue over his yellow-stained canines. “I knew you would be coming for me; it was painfully obvious after we found the way you mutilated Jack Scryer. All we had to do was follow your trail of bodies to find you, and when we found what was following you... well. It made you so much more interesting, little niece.”

I can’t breathe. My heart pounds loudly in my ears, rendering me unable to speak. My outstretched hand that holds my new blade trembles slightly, and I exhale a shaking breath. “Are you saying my mother is alive? Whose body did I find that day? And what the hell does Nik have to do with anything?” I shriek.

Will paces back and forth, his eyes trained steadily on my trembling hand. “I told you that you’re a lunatic. When your father found you in your bedroom after you ruined the Rite, you were sobbing over the dead housemaid—referring to her as your mother. It was always so fun to play on your delusions—you’re so easy to manipulate.” He stops pacing, darting a glance at Nik with a feral grin. “As for The Saint, you’ve brought us the very thing we feared most. We knew he’d follow you

here; his sick obsession with you led him right into our clutches. So, not only do we finally get to end your miserable existence—we now have a demon to do our bidding. The world will not only cower in fear of The Saint, but the Ashcrofts. We will control everything with his help. And he will have no choice but to obey. For delivering what we truly seek, I will make your death quick.”

Nik growls behind me, a chilling sound that seems to rise from the depths of Hell, reverberating inside this tiny room. “I will never obey you. And Cherise is going to fucking rip you apart. The Ashcroft’s power over Lockwood will all come tumbling down by my little reaper’s hands.”

Will snorts a laugh. “It’s hilarious that’s the name you chose to call yourself.” His eyes darken a shade, burning right through me. “The binding ritual is already in process, Nik. Once I deal with this little nuisance, we’ll have some real fun with you and your little army of devil imps.”

An uncontrolled giggle bubbles up from my chest, starting softly and rising in pitch. Hearing him threaten Nik makes my blood boil. Everything about this family reeks of pure evil. I cock my head and bring my blade to my mouth, licking the length of the metal with a high-pitched, almost musical, laugh. Will gives me an incredulous look, shaking his head. Without saying another word, I lunge for him.

Adrenaline ignites the fury coursing through my veins. The pain I’ve endured on my journey for revenge surges into a powerful crescendo of determination. I cannot fail. With every swing of my blade in his direction, he accurately dodges while stepping back. I continue my advance on him, and the only thing on my mind is sinking my blade deep into his disgusting flesh. I will show him what crazy really looks like, and then I will burn this entire fucking estate to the ground. The only Ashcroft that will be leaving this house tonight is me.

For my mother. For all the lives sacrificed in the name of “duty.” For Nik. For me... I

will have my revenge. The horrific legacy of the Ashcroft name will wither and perish at my hands and the edge of my candy cane blade.

Will slashes his blade through the air with lethal precision. I drop low, narrowly avoiding the sharp whistle of the knife as it slices just above me. Seizing the moment, I spring up, driving my foot hard into his groin. Will buckles over with a pained grunt. With a guttural shout, I slam him against the wall and drive the blade into his chest. My body jerks at the force of the strike, but I ignore the sharp sting radiating from my abdomen. Leaning in close, my sneer deepens as I whisper through gritted teeth, “I’ll see you in Hell, asshole.”

Will’s lips warp into a wicked smile. “I plan on it. If you think killing me will save your cunt of a mother or your precious demon, you are gravely mistaken, little niece. The beginning of the end has just begun.”

I yank the knife from his chest, and Will hisses through clenched teeth. Warm blood seeps over my hand, still pressed against him. His hand twists, and the burning in my abdomen flares, scorching through me like wildfire. But I press on. I won’t stop—not until I see the light fade from his eyes. “Good thing you won’t be alive to see it,” I sneer.

Blinding white light blurs the edges of my vision, and I blink frantically, trying to clear it. With a throaty scream, I stab him again and again, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. Fuck him. Fuck them all. I drive the blade into each eye, and blood sprays across my face. His lips part, blood gurgling from his throat, but I don’t stop. My knife keeps plunging—relentless, until there’s nothing left but silence.

With one last scream, I drag the blade across his throat, watching his tainted essence spill down his chest, soaking his clothes. My breaths come in ragged heaves, and I stand there, staring at his lifeless body marred with stab wounds.

“Cherise?” I hear Nik croak out. “You did it, little reaper. I knew you could.”

I stumble back, and Will’s body crumples to the floor in a bloody heap. As the adrenaline begins to fade, the pain in my stomach rips me apart. I turn to face Nik, his beautiful smile beaming with pride, slowly fading as his eyes land on the source of my pain.

“No, no, no! Cherise, baby, look at me.” I flick my eyes to him, and dizziness wracks through me—my balance fumbles. “You need to get me out of this sigil. You have to break it. I can heal you; just focus on me, okay?” His voice is desperate and fearful, and a slight tremble echoes in his words.

I nod my head and drop to my knees. Pain sears my skin, and my insides feel like they’re churning. My stomach feels bloated and raw. I stare down with raspy breathing and reach out to grab the handle of Will’s blade that’s nestled deep into my abdomen, directly on my scar. I yank on the blade, ripping it free from my body as blood shoots out along with it. The taste of blood coats my tongue, and the more I stare at the blood racing out of the wound, the more lightheaded I become.

“I need your name—your first name. Please! Fuck!” Nik’s frantically trying to escape the sigil that binds him within the circle’s border, his full demon form on display, his muscles straining his clothes with each heavy breath he takes. “You can’t die! Not without giving me your name, baby. Stay with me. Take the knife and stab the circle; that’s all you gotta do.”

My face drains of color as I collapse to the floor, my hand reaching out toward him. My demon. My savior. My everything. A desperate ache pulses through me—I long to touch him one last time, to feel his lips against mine. He was supposed to be mine forever, but my revenge came at a price. “Thank you for staying with me, Nik. I’m sorry... I don’t remember my name,” I whisper, as blinding white floods my vision, the edges bleeding crimson.

Nik's shouts of rage and terror fade, swallowed by the rising tide of white noise. Sinister whispers, dripping with wicked intent, invade my mind. Among them, one voice cuts through the chaos, clear and commanding. "You're ready."

Niklaus

Lucifer fucking damn it. Not like this. She is fucking MINE. Lucifer, you cannot claim her yet! I need her soul, I need her name, I need her to fucking live. I've never in all of my existence felt this deep-rooted fear consuming every ounce of my mind as I watch Cherise lie there, blood pooling around her on the floor, her eyes rolling in the back of her head. Her breathing is slow and uneven. Soon, she will take her last breath, and there's nothing I can do to stop that from happening.

I drop to my knees, defeated and hopeless while I'm stuck in this fucking binding circle. "Please, hold on. Stay with me. Come back to me!" I scream at her. I clench my fists so tight that my claws dig into the palms of my hands. The pain searing my flesh keeps me focused.

I try desperately to reach Grimbale in my mind, but every link has been severed, blocked by this damned sigil. Frustration gnaws at me—if I could just summon my hellions, they could free me. But how? My thoughts race, searching for any crack in this magical prison.

The thoughts spiraling in my head are interrupted by the sound of slow, sharp claps outside the bedroom door. I twist my body, my heart bleeding from the loss of Cherise in my direct line of sight, and see a tall, slender man standing in the doorway, who closely resembles Will Ashcroft.

He flashes a toothy grin in my direction as he claps mockingly. "Ah, you must be The Saint. Pleasure to finally meet you in the flesh. I see you've taken a liking to my daughter, a pity it had to end this way for both of you." He glances over at his

daughter who's dying on the floor. "She really was my favorite girl."

The simmering rage upon seeing this man standing there nonchalantly, not fucking helping my little reaper, turns the simmer to a rolling boil. "If she's your favorite, then fucking help her! She's dying, and she doesn't understand how you all could do this to her! I will do anything; just let me free, and I swear I'll take her off your hands for good. I will honor your sacrifices, and continue to leave your family alone. Just... give her to me." I will absolutely rip his heart out and feed it to him if he sets me free, and I know it's a long shot—but for her, I will do whatever it takes.

The man chuckles. "You think Lionel Ashcroft is a fool, demon?" He scoffs and walks over to his daughter.

This is Lionel? The leader of this whole damn cult is her father?

Lionel kneels and strokes his offensive fingers through Cherise's hair. Her eyes are twitching in the back of her head, her irises are no longer visible, and all you can see is bone white in its place. "You have no right to touch her," I growl, low and distorted.

Lionel clicks his tongue. "I thought sacrificing her all those years ago would serve our family a greater purpose. Her mind is an abomination, you see. It would have been better for her to spend the rest of her time with the dark lord in Hell instead of plaguing the earth with her tainted thoughts and delusions. But after she escaped, a vision came to me, one of me wielding great power. Her blood is the key," he whispers almost to himself, stroking her soft, candy-cane colored hair.

"The key to what?" I snarl.

He plucks Cherise's knife from the floor, the one that I gifted to her, with her candy cane accent. He shifts the blade in his hand and studies it. Without returning his gaze

to mine, he continues with an eerie lilt to his tone. “Our bloodline holds great power, its purity throughout generations has made it so. Her blood will aid in the binding ritual, one that ties you to me. You will obey me, beast.”

I shout from the pits of Hell, loud enough for Lucifer himself and even the Heavens to hear me. “Don’t you dare touch her, you sick fuck!”

He presses the blade against her throat, and her eyes snap open. Her icy blue gaze locks onto mine, a mix of terror and something deeper shimmering in her eyes. “Sable,” she breathes.

Her name. “Sable Ashcroft, I mark your soul to be in my possession for eternity!” I shout in a panic just as Lionel slits her throat.

Chapter fourteen

Niklaus

Early Morning Christmas Day

I sink back onto my heels; my jaw drops as I gaze at my beautiful little reaper, now lifeless and drenched in crimson. I felt that familiar tingle in my skin when I marked her, but it faded as soon as she drew her last breath. How could I let this happen to her? I vowed to protect her, to keep her by my side forever, but I couldn't fulfill that promise. Yes, I could find her soul in Hell, but it wouldn't be the same as if she were bound to me. My playfully murderous, candy-loving human is gone—the only human I've ever truly felt something for, something deep and real. I never even had the chance to tell her how I felt.

A whisper coils through my mind, a voice unmistakably belonging to one entity in all the realms.

The Devil always provides for his favored children.

What the Hell does that cryptic bullshit mean? Provide me with what, Lucifer—caged at the hands of Lionel Ashcroft and losing my human? Thanks for the gracious offer, but I'd rather impale myself on a thousand spikes and let my imps feast on my flesh.

I know it's probably foolish to anger the Devil himself, but I've never known what feeling happy was like—genuine, unfiltered happiness—until I met Cherise... Sable. Her name is Sable Ashcroft. This can't be the end of us, we were only just beginning.

“Are you ready to bow to your new master, beast?” Lionel sneers, rising to face me. He lifts the bloodstained knife, watching her blood slowly trickle down to the hilt.

“Step into my playpen and find out,” I growl, my clawed fingers twitching at my sides. All I need is for Lionel to so much as let his pinky toe cross the edge of this sigil, and I’ll tear him to shreds.

Lionel tilts his head, smirking. His stupid, weasel face makes my vision blur with rage. I want to paint the town crimson with his guts. “Luke, the preparations are complete. You may enter,” he calls out.

Three figures draped in a sea of black robes stride into the room. The leader clutches an ancient tome, its binding crumbling with age, a testament to the history it holds. Behind him, the two others chant in low, guttural tones, their voices weaving an infernal language that has been forgotten by mankind for centuries.

“Aww, how cute—the pathetic little humans found an ancient demonic text with spells you can’t even begin to comprehend. And you think you’ll control me with it? Not likely,” I taunt, my demonic laughter echoing through the room as I bare a grin full of razor-sharp teeth, my forked tongue flicking at the air in front of me.

“Isn’t it poetic?” Lionel muses, his voice dripping with contempt. “My deranged daughter was nothing but a burden to this world, and I was furious when I found out she escaped that damned asylum. But when I realized a demon was trailing her, I knew she’d bring you right to me. Life truly is beautiful. Every piece of my plan fell into place,” Lionel continues, his grin widening. “And it was all too easy once I found out The Saint had fallen in love with her wicked soul. How tragically perfect. Now, I have Sable’s blood—the key to your downfall—within reach, and you, trapped and ready to surrender,” Lionel gloats, his eyes gleaming with triumph.

“I will never bow to a peasant like you,” I snarl. “I will have your soul, Lionel

Ashcroft. Every fucked member of your family is marked, and once I'm free, I'll find a way to break your contract with Lucifer and devour you all."

Lionel snickers, a low and vile sound that grates on my nerves. The chants of the cult members grow louder, more frantic, filling the air with an unsettling rhythm. I shift my gaze to Sable, and an unfamiliar emotion floods through me as I stare at her beautiful, lifeless body sprawled on the floor. My heart feels like it's being incinerated from the inside out by Hellfire, a blaze that will never cease. I want to reduce this entire earth to ash for taking her away from me so soon. I don't understand why I feel this way; a demon shouldn't care if a human dies. I can't comprehend it, but with her, everything is different. It always has been.

I notice her fingers twitch, but it's so subtle that it could be a trick of my imagination. She's dead, Niklaus. She isn't coming back. My eyes widen in shock when they twitch again. I stare, gaping at her still form as the chants around me swell to an incredulous crescendo. My body stiffens, and my head jerks back. I inhale a sharp breath, feeling the ancient magic surge through me like a powerful storm.

Fuck. Maybe they do know what they're doing.

Sable

Christmas Day: One Year Ago

My entire body goes numb as the pain that consumes every nerve ending fades. Blood shoots from my mouth, the result of the final blow that slams my face into the tile with a loud crack. I'm shaking, clutching my shirt as I writhe on the floor, my breath shallow and ragged. Any desire to get back up and fight slips away—I'm powerless against my abusers. I turn to my side and curl my knees to my chest, instinctively protecting myself in the fetal position. It's my only defense, but I know how this ends—it's inevitable. Jack Scryer and Thomas Branson are going to kill me.

“This is what happens to bad girls who wanna fight back!” Jack snarls, his voice dripping with malice. “You had it made here. All you had to do was shut your damn mouth and let us fill your holes with our cocks. You’re nothing! Just a crazy bitch who doesn’t know when to quit. And now, even your own family wants you dead for it.” He spits on my face, the thick mucous sliding down my cheek, adding insult to the torment.

I hear movement near my head and instinctively reach to cover my face with my hands. With a stomach-churning laugh, Branson drops to his knees and grabs a fistful of my hair, yanking it cruelly. Scryer flips me onto my back, straddling my body and pinning my arms down at my sides, trapping me beneath his weight.

“Please... stop,” I rasp, the taste of blood thick on my tongue, weighing down my words and making them feel almost useless.

My eyes widen in horror as Scryer brandishes a knife, its cold steel gleaming in the dim light. He trails the tip slowly from the edge of my nose, down my neck, between my breasts, and along my abdomen. Each inch feels like a warning of what’s to come, my pulse racing with dread.

“Stop? We’ve barely just begun, baby.” Jack sneers, lifting the hem of my shirt abruptly, exposing my stomach to the cold air. He drags the knife around my navel, tracing slow, torturous circles. My breath catches in my throat as the blade presses a little harder against my skin, the threat of pain hanging just beneath the surface.

“Such a pretty girl gone to waste,” Jack says with a twisted grin. “I sure will miss playing with you. Say hello to the Devil for us. Your sacrifice will finally fulfill the path you were always meant to walk.” His voice drips with cruel satisfaction; my death is just another step in their sick game.

Listen, Sable.

The whisper sounds like it came from a child, and I strain to focus on it, trying to latch onto anything other than the nightmare unfolding around me. Where is my friend? I can't leave her all alone in this cruel world filled with people who only want to hurt her. I hope she's okay. My heart aches with worry, desperate for her safety even as I face my impending doom.

Branson yanks my hair tighter, forcing a yelp of pain from my lips. "Watch him fill you up, baby. This is the last time this pretty body of yours is going to get penetrated. Unless we get bored afterward, your body might still have some use."

I scream, a desperate, unending cry for help that goes unanswered as the blade slices through my flesh. Murderous laughter fills the room, and Jack drives the knife deeper, sawing and shredding my skin all the way down to my pubic bone. My skin feels like it's on fire, the pain unlike anything I've ever experienced. Warmth pools in my lap, and for a fleeting moment, I wonder if I've pissed myself, but then I realize it's my blood seeping out from the fresh wound.

"Yeah, baby, yeah! Scream for us!" Branson shouts in my ear.

LISTEN.

The shredding of my internal organs halts, and the laughter falls silent. The only sounds echoing in this cold, torturous room are my whimpers of pain and the unsettling giggle of a child.

"Who the fuck let a kid in here?" Branson shouts as both the men snap their heads in the direction of the laughter.

The giggling increases in pitch, and I slowly turn my head to look at it, too. I know I will feel death's sweet embrace soon enough, but that sound is too familiar. My chest rattles when I try to speak, but no words come out. What is my friend doing here?

“Who let you in here, sweet thing? We’re just being silly and playing around here; nothing to be afraid of.” Jack says sweetly as if he wasn’t in the middle of murdering me. But since when can they see my friend? They’ve never been able to see her before.

“You’re gonna regret it,” my innocent friend sing-songs, twirling around in her red and white formal dress.

“What are we gonna regret, sweetheart? We’re just teaching this bad girl a lesson. Are you being a bad girl, too?” Scryer taunts back to a fucking child.

I muster the last ounce of strength I have left and lift my trembling hands to Jack’s, which lingers on the handle of the blade. I sink my nails into his skin, feeling one last rush of defiance. He shifts his attention back to me, a sharp hiss escaping his lips. “You stupid bitch!” he shouts, his eyes blazing with fury. He grips my cheeks in a vice-like hold, forcing my lips to pucker against my will. The overwhelming stench of stale cigarettes and beer wafts into my nostrils as he leans closer, preparing to shout more obscenities at me. But he halts when my friend giggles again, the sound coming out almost distorted, cutting through the tension in the room.

“You’re gonna regret it,” she repeats, shaking her head with a wide smile despite the gap where her two front teeth should be. “Come and catch me!” With that, she spins on her heels and dashes out of the room, knocking every item off the counters and walls, creating a cacophony of crashing sounds behind her.

“We gotta put a stop to that. You’ll probably be dead by the time we get back. Your skin is as white as a ghost, pretty girl. I hope the Devil goes easy on you in Hell,” Branson coos in my ear. Jack releases his punishing grip on my cheeks, and with one last smack, the evil men stand up and chase after my friend.

I lie alone in the empty room, the darkness closing in around me. It becomes harder to

keep my eyes open as I breathe slowly, each rattling exhale taking more effort. I succumb to the pain, letting my eyes flutter and close. I can only hope she escaped; she's too pure for this world.

I hear the door creak open, and I silently plead, dear God, just let me die before they hurt me anymore. I long for the sweet release of death, a chance to find peace in this nightmare.

I feel soft hands on my skin, a phantom touch that lingers over my fatal wound. I gasp as fingers slither up and down the length of the cut, sending shivers through my body. A feminine voice fills the room, whispering so softly that I can barely understand her words. My eyes drift open, my vision blurring as I struggle to focus on the woman kneeling over me. Dressed in white, she rocks back and forth, her head hanging low, lost in the haunting chorus she chants over and over while pressing against my wound.

As her chanting grows louder, my vision begins to clear, and my skin tingles beneath her touch. I strain to understand her words, but they all blend together into a jumbled mess. She presses harder against my skin, and I inhale deeply—gasping for oxygen as if I'm resurfacing after drowning. Strength floods back into my body, and I finally manage to move my limbs. I shoot up into a sitting position, staring in confusion at the woman before me. "Mommy?" I whisper.

She flicks her gaze to me, and the same blue eyes—resembling a summer sky—lock onto mine. Stepping back with a shuddering breath, she cups my cheeks in her bloodstained hands. "He always provides for his favored children," she whispers, a weak smile spreading across her face as she gently strokes my hair. Tears begin to stream down her pale cheeks, each drop a testament to the relief and sorrow etched into her features.

I reach down to feel my stomach, and to my astonishment, the remnants of the gaping

chasm in my flesh are gone. I trace my fingers over the new scar tissue, a shiver surging up my spine. “What does this mean? What did you do, Mommy? I thought you were dead?” A shrill cry lodges in my throat as I bombard the woman I believed to be lost to this world with rapid-fire questions. I saw her dead body in my bedroom—how can this be? I was mere seconds away from passing to the other side, and yet... she saved me.

“In death, you will find your way. But you will not die today; you aren’t ready yet. When the time comes, he will find you and set you down the right path. Listen to yourself. You must let yourself feel. And remember who you are. Search within for the festering death to bloom inside you, and let your rage reign upon your enemies. Death will be your gift, child.” She pulls away from me, and I reach out to touch her, already feeling pangs of loss from her touch.

I shake my head, my hands still outstretched, desperate to pull her closer. Panic takes root in every fiber of my being. “Mommy, what does any of that mean? I don’t understand!” I shriek in utter confusion, my voice filled with desperation. “Why is death my gift? How did you save me? Please!”

My body jerks suddenly as an image of the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen flashes in my mind. His long ivory hair sways in the wind, highlighted by exquisite horns atop his head. His eyes, the most stunning shade of red—my favorite color—draw me in as he beckons me closer with claws as black as night. The image jolts away, and I stare at a pair of keys dangling in front of my face. “Who was that man?” I inquire softly, my eyes pleading with my mother.

“Not a man. A demon,” she snaps, still dangling the keys in front of me. I reach for them, and once they rest in my palm, she covers my closed fist with her hands. “Let him guide you. He can be trusted because He wills it so. You must help each other.”

Mom tugs my arms, pulling me into a tight embrace. I open my mouth to ask her

again what the hell she's talking about, but she shushes me gently. I don't understand any of this. "Death will be your gift. I love you, baby, but I can't stay. I have to go now, but find me when it's over. They're coming back, and you must hurry, Sable. These keys will get you out the back exit—be quick."

She shoves me out of her arms, and with one last look, my mother nods her head. I take off, sprinting for my escape from the Silent Night Asylum. I never once look back.

Chapter fifteen

Sable

Early Morning Christmas Day

L isten. Feel. Remember. The answers you seek are within.

Death is your gift.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

My eyes fly open to an unfamiliar world. I turn slowly and take in the sights surrounding me. The horizon blazes with fire, distant screams piercing the air like twisted carols. Horrifying screeches from creatures that can't be human, blend in with the screams. The leaves on the trees glow a ghostly green, illuminated by an orange light that flickers like embers, forever smoldering but never bursting into flame—like the glowing tip of a cigarette. Beneath my bare feet, the ground radiates an intense heat that sears my skin, yet no sweat forms. Candy canes, soaked in blood, hang from the branches like grotesque ornaments. I wish I could decorate my home with them. This place is horrifying—and the most beautiful place I've ever seen.

“Here.”

I whip my head toward the sound of a voice just feet away and find myself face-to-face with my small friend. Her hand is outstretched, offering a cherry lollipop. My mouth waters as I fixate on the candy, all hesitation dissolving in a heartbeat. Without

a second thought, I reach out and take the sucker from her. “Thanks. Where are we?” My voice echoes on the dry, crackling wind, the words hollow and distant, as if carried away by something otherworldly.

“We’re in Hell, silly. Merry Christmas, Sable. I decorated the place with your favorite treats. Do you like it?” The familiar sweetness of her voice remains, yet something about it feels warped, as though this place has tainted even the sound of her words.

I suck in a shaky breath. If I’m in Hell, then that means... I’m dead. The realization hits hard, and with a sharp yelp, I grab my forehead as memories flood back in a relentless wave—every twisted, nightmarish detail of my childhood. My parents. The cult. My almost-sacrifice. The abuse. My mother—the woman dressed in white that saved me. Will stabbing me, and—Nik. Oh god, where is he? The thought of him hits me like a sledgehammer, knocking the breath from my lungs, my heart pounding as I scan the burning horizon for any trace of him.

“He’s not here, child.” I nervously place the lollipop in my mouth and stare at my friend.

I pull the candy out with a loud pop, as anxiety spikes in my heart. I can’t be here alone, he said he wouldn’t ever leave me. “We need to save him! Will stabbed me... and then so did Daddy. He’s trapped in some kind of demonic sigil. Please, we must hurry!”

I lift my foot to begin walking toward the girl when she flicks her wrist, causing me to stand in place, still as a statue. She holds her wrist behind her back, and begins pacing around me. “Do you not wonder how your mother was able to save you the day she aided in your escape?”

As I open my mouth to speak, my hand moves of its own accord, shoving the candy

back between my lips. A frustrated hum escapes me, but despite the annoyance, I can't help but savor the sweetness of the lollipop.

Still pacing around me, my friend giggles. "I've been observing you for some time, Sable Ashcroft. Ever since your family began meddling in The Saint's affairs and found a way to escape his wrath, I watched them closely. I accepted their humble sacrifices, of course. How could I refuse such an offering—a soul so pure, destined for the height of the Heavens, only to fall so low into my grasp? Their light, meant to bask in eternal peace, now condemned to an eternity of torment."

I clench my fist at my side, my teeth grinding on the lollipop's stick. The small child walks behind me, out of view, and what walks back in front of me makes me scream in fury. I ache to lunge forward and shove this hard candy down their throat—my father, Lionel Ashcroft, now standing before me.

"Your father, oh, what a wicked thing he is." This thing uses my father's voice, deep and laced with venom. "His soul is so far beyond redemption. If he weren't human, I'd have guessed he never had a soul to begin with. But you all have souls—delectable, sweet things they are. His sacrifices were once my favorite offerings... until the day I learned of his betrayal."

I tilt my head, ensuring I don't miss a single word spilling from this creature's mouth.

"Lionel thought he could outsmart the Devil. Ha! Humans are not very bright." The man wearing my father's skin laughs mockingly. "Your dear father thinks he can force a demon into submission and force the world to submit to him. Bow to him. Obey him. Earth is the Devil's playground, my child, not some meek humans', even though they like to believe otherwise." He steps forward so close I can feel his warm breath on my face, the scent of sulfur thick in the air. "No one fucks with me or my children and gets away with it. Niklaus is my demon, my subordinate, who brings me souls to populate the realm. A demon is not meant for a leash, and your father will

soon learn the repercussions of thinking he can do so.”

The man’s figure shifts again, shrinking lower in height, until I stare at my own reflection before me. I admire her candy cane curls—damn, I did a good job with my hair. A smile warps my lips as she pulls the candy from my lips and then places it in her mouth, sucking on it slowly and taking it back out to continue speaking. “The day your father failed to complete your sacrifice to me, I knew you were special. Just one glance into your tainted mind, one whiff of your twisted soul, and I understood what your new purpose would be. Your mother is just like you, you know. I spoke to her. Called to her. Just as I’ve been doing with you. On the day you were to be executed by your rapists, Jack and Thomas, I whispered to her, instructing her on how to save you. She placed an incantation over your wounds, sealing it with an omen. That omen is your gift—death. On the day of your permanent death, you will rise again as something new, something to be feared among the masses—death itself.”

I search her eyes, my own eyes, frantically. Fire lights behind the glacial blue irises when she begins cackling. She flicks her wrist, and I stumble slightly on my feet as my movement is regained. “I don’t understand what that means. I didn’t get it when my Mom said it, and I still don’t get it when you say it now. Also, who the hell even are you?” I rasp out, my throat dry from being unable to swallow.

“The Devil always provides for his favored children.” She recites those same damning words that I’ve heard before.

Realization crashes over me like the weight of a million pieces of candy toppling over my head. “You’re... the Devil?” I take a step back. Although He has done nothing to prove that he’s going to harm me, it’s still the fucking King of Hell. “Are you referring to me as your child? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure I already have a Dad, and honestly, between the two of you, I’m not sure which one is worse.”

My mirror self claps her hands together, a shout of glee escaping her lips. “Niklaus is

my favored child, and you are his prize—his reaper. That is what you are, Sable, what you will become with just the snap of my fingers. Do you want it?” She leans in as she asks the last question, her voice a serpent’s whisper that slithers into my mind, overwhelming my senses with its seductive promise.

I cross my arms with a pout and scoff. “What if I refuse? What does any of this even mean? It’s like you’re speaking in hieroglyphics.”

Lucifer raises their mirage eyebrow with a smirk. “If you refuse, you will remain here, never allowed to return to Earth or see Niklaus again. Accept, and all shall be revealed soon enough.” Her smile twists, warping into something monstrous. Razor-sharp teeth replace her once-human canines, and her jaw stretches unnaturally wide to accommodate the grotesque fangs. Her face starts to melt, skin dripping like wax under a flame, as though she were being incinerated before my eyes. The sight is both horrifying and mesmerizing, but I avert my eyes away from the horror before me because I need to make a deal with the Devil.

I have to get back to Nik—my demon. I can’t leave him behind, he wouldn’t have left me behind. And mother... she’s still trapped at the asylum. But I don’t fucking understand what death being my gift really means. Oh well, the things you do for the ones you love. It’s time to discover what this all leads to, the Devil’s grand design. I take a deep breath, steeling myself. “I accept death as my gift.”

His laughter grows into a deep, booming baritone that fills the skies, shaking the very ground beneath us. The earth trembles violently as his feminine fingers eerily similar to my own—rise before my face. “Bring me souls, reaper,” he commands. With a snap of those delicate fingers, my body is hurled into the sky at jet-like speed. The world around me blurs as I soar past the fiery skyline, and just before I’m pulled away, I cast one final look at Hell. Then, I slam into my physical body on Earth.

My body feels like it’s been dragged up from the icy depths of a frozen-over lake as a

cold shock vibrates through my veins, kick-starting my heart. My lungs heave like I've been suffocating on my own blood and are now full of precious oxygen. I feel my body lift off the floor by a phantom touch, hoisting my limp body mid-air as something new—something ancient—courses through my body. It's reshaping me, remaking me into something untouched, as every cell in my body is reconstructed.

My chest tightens, and my eyes shoot open. It's not pain I feel—it's power. My soul thrums with a new purpose, a new morbid harmony, directing me down my correct path. I feel the dark energy swirling around inside me, cold yet alive, as my body becomes something greater and darker—death incarnate. My vision sharpens, and every muscle hums with unimaginable strength.

I am no longer human. I am a servant of the Devil—I am a reaper, and my gift is death.

My fingers tingle, aching for something—an object meant only for me. Slowly, I lift my hands to my face, and in my palms, a shimmering glow crackles from the air itself. The solid shaft of my new, prized possession materializes before my eyes. My feet touch the ground, light as a feather, as I gaze upon the weapon in awe. My scythe. Its shaft stretches taller than my entire body, wrapped in swirling red and white stripes, the colors of a twisted candy cane. The half-moon blade gleams, large and wickedly sharp—designed to cut through multiple bodies in a single, effortless sweep. What a beautiful sight to behold.

A giggle escapes my lips, unbidden, as I feel the raw power thrumming beneath my skin, electrifying me. Hellfire ignites within, setting my entire being ablaze with energy. My focus sharpens, zeroing in on my surroundings. I'm still in my old bedroom, but I was too absorbed in my transformation to notice the booming chorus reverberating through the room. Three hooded figures stand side by side, their heads tilted toward the ceiling as they chant, their voices thick with a cryptic, ancient verse. Shouts and demonic growls rumble from the space before them, filling the air with a

sense of dread. My heart seizes, a cold chill rushing through me, as if it's stopped beating once again.

As I raise my scythe high, the air grows cold, thick with the weight of impending death. An icy chill slithers down my spine, and I know—death has entered the room. I hear Nik's shouts just a few steps away, but the hooded fools are blocking my view. My grip tightens around the shaft of my scythe, and a dark smile curls my lips. I guess I'll have to make them move. With fucking pleasure.

I begin singing the lyrics to "Baby, It's Cold Outside," thinking it might grab the attention of the cult freaks, but they just keep chanting away, ignoring me like I'm just a bothersome gnat. With clenched teeth, I keep singing my favorite childhood song—it is Christmas, after all. If my gift is to be death, then I'll be glad to deliver it to the people who ruined my entire life and wanted me dead. With one swift swing, my scythe slices through the air as effortlessly as a blade through butter.

The chanting cuts off, instantly replaced by choking and sputtering as they try to continue spewing their bullshit spell—whatever the hell that was. Nik's heavy breathing and grunts of pain become sharper, but I wait—I'm not going to reveal myself to the real soul I yearn to claim for Lucifer tonight.

"Why'd you stop? It was almost fucking complete!" Lionel's voice is laced with malice as he shouts at his men. Silence passes for a beat. "What the hell is wrong with all of you idiots?"

I keep singing the Christmas tune, now a haunting lullaby, as I put my victims to sleep. "What's with the damn song?" Lionel pushes the shoulder of one hooded man, and the top half of his body slides from his bottom half slowly, landing on the floor with a sickening splat—intestines sprawling out on the floor. The other two follow suit, their severed torsos falling to the floor, painting it in beautiful crimson.

Three souls to Satan. One more to go, and his rot smells so damn sweet, I can taste it on my tongue.

Lionel meets my darkened gaze, my smile radiating the presence of death. “H-h-how? I killed you! No! This is all f-fucking wrong!” He harshly pushes his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair while he stammers over his words—a dumbfounded look plastered on his face.

“Hi, Daddy,” I purr, my voice dripping with a sickly sweetness. Without hesitation, I lunge at him, scythe drawn back, my movements fluid and swift. In one brutal motion, I drive the blade forward, slamming it into his groin. Lionel’s scream pierces the air, his eyes bulging with horror and pain, fixated on me with pure terror. The sight is delicious, his fear fueling my power. “Lionel Ashcroft, you are marked for death. Your soul is bound to burn in Hell for eternity,” I declare, my voice steady and filled with venom. “I look forward to playing with you some more when I visit. Fuck you for everything.” With a vicious grin, I slice upward, my scythe cutting cleanly through flesh and bone, stopping just below his collarbones. Lionel wheezes, his mouth agape, eyes wide in disbelief. “Oh, and Merry Christmas!” I add with a cheerful lilt before bringing the blade up in one final strike. My scythe cuts effortlessly through his body, splitting him in two from groin to skull. The sound of bone snapping and muscle tearing fills the room, and then there’s nothing but my heavy breathing as I gaze down at my beautiful demon’s red eyes, blazing with raw emotion.

The freshly cut halves split away from each other and fall to the floor as blood splatters over me and Nik. He stares at me in awe. “Cherise,” he rasps.

I pop my hip and smirk. “Sable,” I correct. I lift my scythe, slam the blade’s tip into the floor, and shred the wood containing the sigil that binds him.

With a choked gasp, he drops to kneel before me with his head bowed. “Reaper.” I

scoff at his over-the-top gesture, place two fingers under his chin, and lift his eyes back to mine.

He startles me when he suddenly jumps up and crashes his lips against mine. The kiss begins softly, like he's afraid he might break me. I let my scythe clatter to the floor, the sound fading into the background, and I bring my hands to his face, pulling him closer. I deepen the kiss, pouring every ounce of need and longing into it—I need to feel him everywhere. The warmth of his body envelops me, grounding me in this moment, and I lose myself in him.

He presses his forehead to mine and releases a trembling breath like he's going to cry. Do demons cry? I cup his cheeks, gliding my thumbs across his bloodstained skin. "I thought I—" Another drawn-out breath, "I thought I lost you," he whispers.

"You'll never lose me. Not now, not ever, Nik." I kiss him again, and he groans against my lips. He kisses me hungrily, greedily, like he would die if he ever stopped kissing me.

But then he does stop... again. "There's so much I thought I couldn't tell you. There's still so much I need to say to you." He begins rambling on and acting as if I was just going to drop dead for no reason. Silly demon. "I guess I could have found you in Hell but—"

"Nik!" I cut him off with a laugh because if I didn't, I fear he'd never get to the point. "What do—"

"I love you!" he blurts out, the words spilling from his lips in a rush. He gasps at his sudden admission, his eyes wide with shock as if he can't quite believe what he's just said. "And don't you ever fucking die on me like that again," he grumbles, his gaze flicking away, embarrassment creeping into his features. There's a fierce protectiveness in his voice, a raw intensity that pulls at my heartstrings, and emotions

flood into me that I haven't felt in so long—emotions that I now only feel when I'm with Nik. My demon.

A lump forms in my throat, and finally, the dam breaks. For the first time in over a year, tears pour down my cheeks. It starts with one tear then cascades into a torrential downpour—each drop a release of the pain that's built up over ten years of torture, abuse, and pure fucking loneliness. I drop to my knees, sobbing with all my might, the weight of my past crashing down around me.

In this moment, I'm finally free. The man who's haunted my dreams, masquerading as The Saint in my mind for all those years, is now dead. I did that. It's finally over. Yet here I am, with Nik confessing his love to me, and I find myself lost in how to process it all. I'm sure the feeling is mutual, but the sensation is foreign to me—an emotion I've never fully understood. I have a funny feeling he might be just as lost.

What I do know is this: wherever this road to Hell leads us, I want to walk it by his side for all of eternity—the reaper and her demon.

Nik kneels on the floor with me and wipes the tears from my soaked skin. "I'll admit this was not the reaction I was expecting after admitting that," he says with a breathy laugh.

"I love you, too," I whisper.

I feel something wet against my cheek, something that isn't my tears. Nik's forked tongue flicks out again, dragging along my flesh, lapping up my salty blubbing. "No more tears, little reaper," he murmurs, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Although they taste delicious, I need to devour you another way." His gaze darkens, sending a shiver down my spine.

"My," he growls, slamming his lips onto mine with a fierce intensity, bruising yet

electrifying. His tongue slithers into my mouth, dancing with mine, igniting a fire that consumes us both. He fists my hair, pulling my head back forcefully, and the mix of pain and pleasure sends my heart racing. “Fucking.” He swiftly slashes his claws down the front of my dress, and I jump at the sudden action. “Reaper.” In one fluid motion, he rips the remaining material from my body, leaving me exposed. He grabs my hips, lifting me effortlessly into the air as he lies back, then sets me down so I’m straddling his head.

“Nik,” I say with a sultry moan. “In front of my father?” I giggle maniacally.

“Fuck that piece of shit,” he growls, his voice low and fierce as he tears away my lace underwear. I look down at him, my breath catching as I see the desire blazing in his eyes, filled with a primal lust. It’s all for me, only for me. “I’m going to worship this pussy like I’m in Heaven,” he declares, flicking out his tongue and licking slowly along the full length of my slit. My jaw drops, and I moan softly while I run my fingers through my hair. “I will make you scream for me while we’re on Earth, and I’m going to fuck you until every last fire is extinguished from Hell.” His promise hangs in the air, thick with heat and anticipation. My muscles spasm from his words alone, and my core drips with liquid desire.

He pulls my clit between his lips, sucking fiercely and flicking his tongue out so fast I can hardly catch my breath. “Fuck!” I cry out; the overwhelming sensation feels euphoric. I grind my hips, fucking his mouth and chasing the release that’s building rapidly in my core.

He growls against my sensitive flesh, gripping my thighs with bruising possession. My orgasm is already reaching its peak, and I grind my hips faster. I stare around the massacre surrounding us with a dark laugh, then look down at my monster, his eyes trained on me as he devours my pussy. The sight alone almost makes me tip over the edge, before he pushes forward and flips me on my back.

“I was so close, Nik!” I cry out.

He unbuckles his pants and jerks out his monstrous cock, rock solid and ready for me, with precum glistening on the tip. “If I don’t bury myself inside of your soaking wet cunt right now, I’m going to explode, little reaper.”

He crawls on top of me in a rush, his urgency palpable as he grabs the back of my head, pulling my lips to his. With a heated intensity, Nik reaches down, lining his tip with my entrance before slowly pushing inside me. We both moan against each other’s lips, the sound escalating as he sinks deeper. “I love you, reaper. Always,” he whispers, a smile playing against my lips, but then his expression shifts. “But this might hurt.” In a swift, powerful motion, he slams to the hilt, and the sensation overwhelms me—an intoxicating mix of pleasure and pain that sends shockwaves through my body. My breath catches, and the world around us fades, leaving only the two of us lost in this moment.

My eyes roll back as a strangled moan escapes my lips. His cock pounds into me, each thrust powerful and desperate as if he’s ravenous for every inch of me. Desire builds quickly, eclipsing the initial pain and transforming it into pure ecstasy. Nik’s clawed fingers wrap around my neck, a fierce grip that feels almost possessive, creating the perfect necklace to accentuate my lack of clothes. Our two bodies intertwined into one sinfully beautiful masterpiece.

“Make me come, demon,” I choke out, a smile warping my lips.

Nik never ceases his relentless thrusts, and with a devilish smirk, his tongue spills from his mouth, slithering toward my stimulated bundle of nerves. Fuck, I love that he can do that. His tongue glides over my clit with perfect precision, each flick synchronized with the way he fills me completely every time he grinds into me.

My muscles clamp down around his length, the intensity of our connection

overwhelming, and I cry out as my release crashes over me like a volcanic eruption, explosive and all-consuming. My body becomes a sweaty mess, legs shaking uncontrollably from the force of the orgasm ripping through me. Not long after, he joins me, a deep growl emanating from the depths of Hell as he spills his seed deep inside me—sealing our connection with one final, powerful thrust of his hips.

He sits back on his heels, a cocky grin spreading across his face. “Let’s go, baby. There’s someone I want you to meet. Christmas is nearly over, so let’s get out of this room filled with misery, and go start our lives.” He extends his hand toward me, offering it with an inviting gesture.

I place my hand in his with a sultry smile. “Maybe we can find more souls to harvest!”

“Oh, we definitely will be doing plenty of that, little reaper.”

Chapter sixteen

Niklaus

Christmas Day: Love Born of Sugar and Sin

After using my powers to give my reaper a new outfit—another replacement for the second dress I tore apart while ravaging her—she stands before me, as beautiful and lethal as ever. The glint in her eyes is different now, no longer shadowed by the ghosts of her past. Instead, they shine with her rebirth from the ashes into the very essence of death itself, and radiate with newfound love—something we both never thought we were capable of experiencing. Yet, here I stand before Sable, once a human who was broken by those around her, now an agent of the Devil himself, who has conquered the rot from this town and slain those very demons that sought her demise. She was able to claim the souls of those I never could, and she stands victorious among their putrid remains. She’s a fucking Goddess walking among men—or any being from any realm—and no one can break her ever again. I won’t allow it, but neither will she.

She turns to gaze at the remains of her father’s severed corpse, falling silent. I squeeze her hand that’s still intertwined with mine. Sable looks back at me with a coy smirk, a wicked gleam in her icy blue eyes. “We did it,” she says, her voice laced with triumph.

I scoff, shaking my head. “You did it, little reaper. If it weren’t for you, I’d be an Ashcroft puppet by now. You saved me. You saved this town.” I give her hand a sharp tug, pulling her into my chest as she lets out a surprised gasp. “And you will be

rewarded,” I murmur, stroking her jaw.

She rolls her eyes and clicks her tongue. “But I like this new dress! Don’t go shredding this one to pieces, too.”

I chuckle softly. “I can always conjure you a new one. Anything you want is yours.” She melts into my chest at those words, relaxing against me. “Now, we wouldn’t want to be rude and keep our guests waiting. Let’s go take back Christmas, my sweet sin.”

“Who are you taking me to meet?” she asks, raising an eyebrow with her usual sass.

I pull her hand and gesture toward the door, guiding her towards it. But she halts at the threshold, her eyes locking onto mine with a fierce, pleading intensity. “Burn it,” she demands, her voice cold and unyielding. “Burn it all the fuck down, Nik. I want nothing left of their vile legacy. And as far as anyone else is concerned, Sable Ashcroft died today, too. Now, she’s returned from the grave, scythe stained red—a warning to anyone who dares cross me again.”

Well, my cock is rock hard again and threatening to explode through my zipper. Her murderous tendencies really turn me on, it seems. I’ll never get enough of this—or of her.

I pull her back against my chest, wrapping one arm around her neck. Leaning in close to her ear, a low growl vibrates in my chest. “I’d burn the world for you.”

Sable gasps softly, pressing her ass harder against the growing swell in my pants. I lift my hand, flames swirling into a small, furious inferno in my palm, ready to incinerate the Ashcroft estate. With a flick of my wrist, I hurl a bolt of fire across the room, and the bedroom is quickly engulfed, illuminated by the scorching glow of embers—the fire dances across the room, the bodies, and all of her childhood horrors. A burning waltz amidst the carnage left in her wake.

We step out into the crisp, chilling air as the house is swallowed in flames, the crackle of the fire behind us drowned out by the cacophony of screams and demonic howls. Sable inches closer to me as she takes in the horrifically stunning scene outside her home. My hellions are unleashing bloody terror upon the remaining cult members; their blood-curdling screams pierce the air as their bodies are torn to shreds. The scent of blood and sulfur mixes in the atmosphere, creating the perfect concoction of chaos.

“Don’t tell me my reaper is afraid?” I tease with a growing smirk.

She turns away from the carnage to face me with an incredulous look. “I fear nothing, Nik. I’m just shocked to see them in person. And they’re tearing into the Ashcrofts; I thought that wasn’t possible for you and your imps to do?”

I think about that for a moment. While yes, it’s true we were once unable to harm them because of their sacrifices to Lucifer. With Sable rising from the grave as death itself, reaping the very souls of those who were once intangible, she has rewritten the rules. And not for the first time. This deranged little human has re-circuited so much for me, making my heart swell with emotions that should never even be possible for a demon.

“You’ve changed the game, little reaper.”

“Oh, I love games!” she squeals, a wide grin lighting up her face. “After we take their souls, can we get some candy?” She clutches my shirt, bouncing up and down with excitement.

“Why wait?” I ask, her lips forming an ‘O’ as I conjure a peppermint candy cane from thin air, perfectly matching the colors of her hair.

She snatches the hooked candy from my fingers and licks the entire length slowly... agonizingly slow, causing my mind to wander to her licking the whole length of

my—

“Merry Christmas, Nik!” she giggles.

And there goes my heart again, racing to a dangerous beat from the heat swirling in her eyes as she looks at me, her smile capable of turning Hell into a Heavenly place.

“Merry Christmas, my love.” I place a kiss on her forehead as she breathes out a laugh, blissfully licking her candy cane.

The sound of someone clearing their throat behind us morphs into a soft whimper as I whirl around to face Grimbale. His grotesque, clawed fingers tap together anxiously. When I pierce his paled crimson eyes with my own, he quickly bends low in a bow before me, placing a hand to hold his too-small top hat from falling off his head. “I heard you call, Master. I brought your finest imps for this wondrous feast you provided us.” He straightens after a beat when he feels sure I won’t threaten him in any way. I’m in a cheery mood, after all. “Is this—”

His eyes widen in terror as he rakes Sable up and down. She’s still licking her candy cane with a confused look when Grimbale gets down on his knees to bow before her. “Um, what’s it doing, Nik?”

“Grim, what the fuck are you doing?” I cross my arms as I stare down at my imp.

He lifts his head with a yelp. “A reaper! You didn’t tell me the one you were following is death herself!” he exclaims, a feral grin revealing his jagged teeth.

Sable cocks her head at me. “How long have you been following me around, demon?” She turns to Grimbale. “Oh, and you can just call me Sable.”

Grimbale stands up, cackling. “It is most gracious to meet you. You may call me Grimbale—the strongest, most vicious imp of them all. Master would agree,” he adds,

cowering slightly. “Wouldn’t you?” he asks nervously.

“You are... adequate.” Grimbles nods his head nauseatingly fast. “And to answer your question, reaper, I’ve followed your scent like a demon in heat since the day I first laid eyes on you. Your scent was too... enticing,” I say, my voice dripping with seduction.

Sable traps the hook of the candy cane between her teeth as she stares at me with lust-filled eyes. “Will you show me again how enticing you find me, demon?”

Grimble chokes violently, completely obliterating the tension between Sable and me and softening my boner. “Will you be joining us in Hell, Sable? Oh, how I’ve always wanted to meet a reaper! And to think my Master has given you his well-endowed, most enormous member—”

“Enough, Grim,” I growl, my voice sharp. He cowers instantly, raising his hands in surrender. I glance at Sable, who’s watching me with a curious gleam in her eyes. Would she even want to join me in Hell?

Sable watches the exchange, a smirk playing on her lips. “It is quite large,” she agrees with a nod. “Plus, I go wherever Nik goes. Right?” She looks up at me with those ocean-deep eyes, the ones that pull me down into their depths and make me want to dive straight back to Hell, tearing her family apart all over again for the abandonment and pain they caused her.

“You’re never leaving my sight, little reaper. You’re mine forever.”

Her smile returns as her scythe materializes, summoned by her death magic and resting in her hand. “Good, because I wasn’t going to take no for an answer anyway. Let’s have some fun here. Then, I want to rescue my Mom from the Silent Night Asylum.”

Grimble jumps with glee, clearly thrilled by Sable's bloodthirsty attitude. I suppose they'll get along perfectly. "Shall we play a game, m'lady?"

Sable perks up at the mention of a game. "A game? I love playing games!"

I playfully roll my eyes at the two of them, but deep down, I'm completely enamored with this woman—my perfect match, crafted by Lucifer himself.

Grimble leans closer to her with mischief in his eyes. "Whoever claims the most souls for themselves wins. Loser must endure the Circle of Benevolence." He shudders after he says those damned words.

A low, demonic rumble forms in my chest. "She will not—"

"What's that? Doesn't sound all that bad," Sable deadpans while cutting me off.

"Oh, it's terrible! It's a form of punishment for the demons in Hell, you must sit through the torture of watching others perform acts of kindness to others for ten days straight! Sometimes longer, depending on the degree of the crime committed." Grimble shakes his head in disgust at the idea. I've heard it's fucking dreadful, but it's not something I've had to withstand, and neither will she.

Sable lifts her scythe in front of her, a devious smirk playing on her lips. "You're on, Grim!" She casts one playful glance my way before spinning on her heels and diving into the massacre surrounding us.

Grim eyes me wearily before I sigh and nod for him to play this silly little game. He runs off after her, intent on winning the bet. He doesn't know that no matter the outcome, she will not lose—but I'll let them have their fun.

I watch her from a distance, captivated. The way she swings her weapon, a radiant smile plastered across her beautiful face, with blood splattering against her pale

skin—I am filled with awe. My human-turned-death incarnate has stolen the heart of a demon. I don't know how or why this happened, but I am profoundly grateful. I will love her until the end of time, ensuring she never knows loneliness, pain, or suffering again—as long as I have anything to do with it.

Sable

After I quite obviously won the bet against Grimble in his game—thanks to my newly acquired strength and speed—Nik scooped me into his arms and kissed me with such passion that I never wanted him to pull his lips away from mine. But I suppose I'll have an eternity with his mouth, his tongue, and his monster dick, so I came to terms with the temporary loss of his breath-stealing, mind-altering, heat-inducing kiss.

We left the Ashcroft estate on Sorrow's back, soaring through the smoky air filled with the acrid aroma of burning bodies, heading toward our final destination this Christmas. My time spent at the Silent Night Asylum is a memory I'll never forget. The brutal suffering I endured at the hands of the bad men is now a thing of the past—a distant, haunting echo that I've silenced with my own hands. Their deaths ripple through my mind, a constant reminder of who emerged victorious in the end. They broke a damaged girl, but I've risen as a woman made of steel, fueled by pure sadistic intent to snuff out their evil taint once and for all. I allowed the pain to transform me into what I've become, and looking back, I wouldn't change a thing. It all led up to this grand finale, to Nik, and this has been my favorite Christmas yet.

Being with Nik, I've never felt so free. Not just physically, but emotionally and mentally fucking free. He's never once judged me or called me crazy for anything he's witnessed me do, which only deepens my love for him. I can simply be me—Sable Ashcroft—ready to deliver my abundant gift of death to those who prey on the weak and innocent. With my demon at my side, I know we can conquer anything.

Love is a strange word, one I've rarely used in my vocabulary. I never truly

understood what it felt like to be loved unconditionally by someone. But now, it's the only word that comes to mind when I think of Nik. The only other person who even compares is my mother. Damaged as she may be, she's the only other person on this Earth who has shown me kindness in the darkest times.

I laugh sadistically as my scythe disembowels the nurse standing in my way at Silent Night. He was guarding my mother's door and didn't once think to run from a woman wielding a weapon taller than he was. I mean, how foolish can someone be?

I swipe the keys from his mangled body, quickly unlock the door, and swing it open in a rush. I dissolve my scythe into the universe, knowing it will return to my side the moment I need it again. A gasp escapes my lips as my eyes land on my mother sitting on the edge of her bed, a bright smile illuminating her face. Her long caramel hair is disheveled, and she looks like she hasn't seen sunlight in months, but I've never seen her look happier.

Nik bounds in after me, keeping his promise never to leave my side. I rush to my mother and pull her into a crushing embrace. She strokes my hair as we gush and squeal over our reunion. Tears prick the corners of my eyes, and I can't hold them back once my mother pulls me tighter, sobbing against my hair.

"It's over, Mommy. I killed them all."

She shudders against me, and lets out a sigh of relief. "I knew you could do it. I smell death all over you, girl. He really did provide for us in the end."

I pull back, cupping her cheeks with a sniffle. "You know that's the Devil you're talking about, right?"

She nods with a knowing smile. "Of course I knew that, Sable. He kept His word." She wipes the tears from my wet cheeks. "You are so beautiful, surrounded by death. And that demon behind you isn't too bad on the eyes either."

Almost forgetting that Nik was standing behind us, I lift my hand toward him, and he promptly takes it, stepping beside us. “Mommy, this is Nik. Or I guess you’d know him as The Saint.”

She looks down at my hand laced with his, her lips curving into the biggest smile. “Hello, Nik. Thank you for taking care of my baby when I could not. I know I haven’t been the best mother; I didn’t protect her when she needed me the most.” She meets my gaze, grief clouding her eyes.

Nik lifts my mother’s hand and kisses the back of it. “The pleasure is all mine. I don’t believe I caught your name?”

My mother blushes and brings her free hand to her chest. “Cherise,” she admits.

I gasp as it finally dawns on me. She’s the reason I chose that name after escaping the asylum and adopting my false identity. In some fucked up way, after I lost my memories, giving myself her name was my mind urging me to look within—to remember. All this time, she’s been here, lost and broken, but she waited for me to return for her, just as she always knew I would.

Nik quirks a brow at me but doesn’t say anything. He understands; he always gets me. “Cherise, will you allow me to mark you with my insignia? I want to offer you this, not to possess you, but to grant you eternal peace under my protection. I’m going to assume you’ve gathered this already, but if not, let me make it very clear: I’m in love with your daughter. The darkness that resides within both of us intertwines with the brightest light only we can bring out in each other—like a radiant Christmas tree glowing amidst the shadows, decorated with sweet candy canes and twinkling lights, that have more uses than you’d think.” He winks at me slyly, making my cheeks flush as I recall exactly what other uses he’s hinting at with those candy canes and lights.

“Can she come to Hell with us if you mark her?” I turn to her amused stare and cringe, since we did just burn down her old home. “She won’t have anywhere to go.

And I'm obviously not going to leave her stranded here."

"If she wants to, yes. My mark will protect her. No demon will lay a claw on her. I have a beautiful home there, large enough to accommodate you and a hundred of my imps. It offers a lovely view of the never-ending fires on the horizon." Nik shrugs, and I beam at him.

I wait for my mother's answer expectantly. She nibbles her lower lip while she ponders her options. "I suppose I can give it a try. I want to make up for lost time with my baby girl." She grips onto the sleeve of Nik's jacket urgently. "Is there music there?"

"Well, of course. Anything you could ever desire awaits you there. It's Hell—the realm of tormented souls and exquisitely tempting sins," Nik deadpans with a smirk.

My mother and I exchange excited glances before jumping up and down with joy. "What are you waiting for, demon? Mark me! I'm ready to get the hell out of here!"

He huffs out a laugh as he draws her extended wrist closer to him. With a swift motion, he pierces her flesh with his claws, branding her with his demonic symbol—her soul forever claimed by Nik. She will be with us now for eternity.

"Let's go start over, sweet Sable." She strokes her fingers through my hair, pushing it behind my ear. Her eyes are glossy with tears, and her chin trembles. "I love you."

I mimic her sentiment, but the time for tears is behind us. The day isn't over yet! "I love you too, Mommy." I grab both of their hands, pulling them toward the door. "Let's light this bitch up!" I shout, my eyes darkening with intensity, flames igniting within them as I eagerly anticipate watching this wretched building engulfed in fire.

A loud explosion erupts from somewhere in the heart of the asylum, but I don't even flinch as the heat grazes my skin from outside the Silent Night. Nik had his imps

round up the remaining patients who didn't carry the stench of a rotten soul and get them out before we set this place ablaze. Anyone still breathing inside was never meant to see the light of day again.

"You ready to go home, little reaper?" Nik asks.

"Yes. Home is wherever you are, anyway. But when will we come back to harvest the wicked souls?"

He pulls me against his chest, a fierce need burning in his eyes. "I usually return to Earth six months before December to start marking souls to collect on Christmas Eve, though we can make the trip sooner if you desire."

I grab the back of his neck and bring his lips to mine. "I'd like that," I breathe against his lips.

Nik turns toward the open field surrounding us and waves his hand. The acrid scent of sulfur fills my nostrils, overwhelming me as a fiery gate materializes in the atmosphere—our doorway to Hell and new beginnings.

Grimble strides up to my Mom, bowing low before gesturing for her to follow him through the portal. With a quick glance back at me, she winks with a smile and steps into the blazing doorway.

Nik picks me up, and I yelp at the unexpected movement, before he places me on Sorrow's saddle. He jumps up behind me, tugging me close to his hard chest. "This was the best Christmas ever!" I exclaim.

The sound of a wrapper crinkling behind me catches my attention, and before I know it, a cherry lollipop is pressed against my lips. I open my mouth without hesitation, ready to savor the sweet treat. I greedily take the candy out of his hands to enjoy it.

Nik yanks on Sorrow's reins, the horse's terrifying screech echoing through the air.
"Next Christmas will be even better, little reaper. Let's go home."

Sorrow dashes toward the portal, the flames warming my blood as we pass through.
Finally, I'm exactly where I was always meant to be.