She's always craved the villain.
Will his love destroy her?

WOLF.E



PAISLEY HOPE

SOLDIERS OF BEDLAM

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Paisley Hope is an avid lover of romance, a mother, a wife and a writer. Growing up in Canada, she wrote and dreamed of one day being able to create a place, a world where readers could immerse themselves, a place they wished was real, a place they saw themselves when they envisioned it. She loves her family time, gardening, baking, yoga and a good cab sav.

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To all my good girls who know falling in love with the king of an outlaw motorcycle club doesn't mean your mission in life is to change him. Instead, it is to embrace the wicked inside you and become his badass queen.

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glossary of club lingo

MC: *Motorcycle Club*
Club business: *Illegal/non-illegal activity that benefits the club*
Cut: *Leather vest or jacket bearing the club insignia*
Sweetbutt: *A girl who hangs around the club, often offered for sex or help, hoping to become a member's ol' lady*
Ol' Lady: *Wife or serious girlfriend of a club member*
Patch over: *When one MC takes over another*
Sprite: *Good girl, fairy, princess*
Squid: *A poser rider the club looks down on, someone who lacks biker common sense*
Code: *The rules club members live by*
Chapel: *The room in which the club conducts their daily/weekly meetings*
Service: *The meeting to discuss club business*
President: *The highest level of power. The boss. The conductor of business*
VP: *Vice President*
Enforcer: *Upholds club laws, protects patch holders, defends club's reputation, assists in conflict resolution.*
Sgt at Arms: *Sergeant at Arms, protector of the president, his number one*
Prospect: *A club apprentice. Usually wears the prospect patch for one year to prove his loyalty through service, trust and a series of really shitty tasks no one else wants to do*
Rally: *A gathering of bikers, normally for fun but club business is generally conducted as well*

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wolfe & brinley's playlist



1. God's Gonna Cut You Down by Johnny Cash
2. Hummingbird by Carly Pearce
3. Enter Sandman by Metallica
4. Hotel California by The Eagles
5. Killing In The Name of by Rage Against The Machine
6. Seven Nation Army by The White Stripes
7. Sweet Child O' Mine by Guns N Roses
8. Hard Row by The Black Keys
9. Are You Satisfied by Reignwolf
10. Ghetto Cowboy by Yelawolf
11. Desperado by Upchurch
12. Vincent Black Lightning 1952 by Logan Halstead
13. Power Over Me (Acoustic) by Dermot Kennedy
14. Simple Man by Lynyrd Skynyrd

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PROLOGUE

Gabriel

THE ART OF A PRESIDENT'S WAR

In two generations, you will be completely forgotten.
The illusion that you won't be keeps you going.
The illusion that somehow you are different.
Illusions serve no one.
The illusions we have about ourselves make us feel good about what we do every day.
Grow up, get married, work, have babies, raise them, die.
For what? For most people, to simply return to the earth and be forgotten.
In turn, none of it matters.

As I stand over the battered body of the middle aged man who raped one of my men's little sisters, I don't feel sorrow over his impending doom. I don't feel remorse.

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Instead, I feel all the things they say that you shouldn't when taking a life.

Joy.

Satisfaction.

Gratification.

His bloodied, broken body gives me peace.

The illusion that killing him should torment me isn't real.

I've seen enough to know there's only here and now, there's no after. And whether I'm good or not has no bearing on my fate.

"I don't want to die... please, I didn't know she was sixteen," he whines. The drool and blood dripping from his mouth lands in a pool in front of him, where most of his teeth now sit on the tarp below.

"I'm sorry, it wasn't my call... I didn't have a choice."

"Nah... don't make excuses. You always have a choice. It's fucking weak to go out like that man," Mason, my treasurer and the older brother of the girl this sick fuck drugged, raped, and recorded to keep photographic evidence of his fucked up conquests spits out as he smacks the guy they call Gator in the back of the head. Should've known with a nickname like Gator the guy would be a sleazeball.

Mason nods to Kai, my enforcer. Kai doesn't say a word, he's a brick wall, showing zero hesitation. He moves forward and assumes his position behind Gator, bracing his forehead with one hand and holding his mouth open with the other.

Mason thinks for a minute, looking into Gator's mouth at what's left. The pickings are slim, but he chooses a back molar. He clamps down on it with his pliers and wrenches it free from Gator's mouth then drops the broken pieces to the ground amidst those peaceful garbled screams that sing to my soul.

My turn.

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I fire up the butane torch again, time to take a little more

ink off Gator's neck and left arm where he bears the *Disciples of Sin* insignia.

Their club has been our club's natural enemy for years, ever since my grandfather, Ira Wolfe, started our legacy, *The Hounds of Hell* in the sixties.

I grin as I see the horror on Gator's face while I stalk toward him, the blood—dark and syrupy— leaking from his mouth now heavier than the drool.

I run my first two fingers through the flame as I eye Gator up—or what's left of him. I don't even know how he keeps coming back to consciousness at this point.

All we want is a name, and he's holding out a lot longer than I thought he would.

"Time to take some more ink unless you're ready to talk," I tell him. In truth, we stop when the stench of burning flesh gets too strong in this small cabin.

"This is your last chance to do the right thing," I say, preying on the human instinct that salvation is real.

He hovers on the edge of consciousness as my flame meets his skin. That's when he jolts awake, his bloodshot eyes wide as he screams. It's a pathetic scream really, barely more than a whisper.

"Stop... please. It was Foxx. He said he wanted me to hit you guys where it hurts. I was just doing my job, man." he whimpers.

"Fucking finally," Kai says lighting a cigarette.

It's what we assumed but we needed the confirmation before we plot to kill their club president.

I assess Gator. Men tend to tell the truth in the last seconds of their lives so I'm sure he's being honest.

"And our clinics?" I ask. "Who ordered the theft of our product?"

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"Foxx," he answers with the same soon-to-be dead presi-

dent's name, looking up at me through one barely open eye, the other swollen shut.

"Please, Wolfe. I wanna die." His voice is a whine. "Please... kill me," Gator begs.

I stop my flames and set down the torch. Moving towards him again, I grab a handful of his hair in my gloved hand, lifting his pathetic face up to view the last soul he'll ever see.

"It's fucking pathetic that you beg me for death now," I bite out.

"I've heard enough," Mason says from the other side of the room.

I promised him. It was his sister, so it's his call.

Gator lets out a sigh, his fate settling with him.

"*Please*," he whispers.

I draw my gun and take aim at his forehead. Just as I'm about to shoot, Kai says my name and nods toward the other side of the room in my periphery.

I follow his gaze to the cabin door, and I'm met with horror. The rawest form of fear lines every plane of her perfect face through the screen. Her long onyx hair blows in the ocean breeze around her moonlit shoulders.

I may be a killer but I'm not a savage. I would never want her to see this if I had a choice, but now she's made her own bed.

I have no idea how or why she's here but there's no turning back. My eyes hold hers as the innocence drains from those beautiful blue eyes, the same color as her dress. She's on her knees outside the cabin door.

Every single hope she had about me, about my club, shatters around her and falls to the earth.

I never lied about who I am. The hopes she had were her own.

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I don't pretend.

I am the villain she sees now, but that's not all I am.

She will learn to understand. She has no choice but to.

I find her eyes again, mouthing to her the only escape I can give, then press my gun to the spot between my prisoner's eyes and pull the fucking trigger.

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CHAPTER 1

Brinley

"Bankrupt?" I ask, sinking into the chair behind me. I generally try not to stay long enough in my boss's office to sit, but at this moment I have no choice.

The roll of thunder, the steady seep of rain against the glass this morning, and my sandal clad foot stepping right in a puddle as I crossed Briarwood Avenue on my way into the office should've been my first indications that today was going to suck.

"Yep. Chapter 11 came out of nowhere," my boss, Paul, grunts as he leans back in his chair, taking a break from packing up his office. It's the scene I walked into when he called me in here to break this news.

I cross one leg over the other, pulling my skirt down so he doesn't try to sneak a glance up it. I've had men look at me appreciatively since I was fourteen years old. It's why my mother cut my hair into a bob when I started middle school. She said its naturally black color and long length brought the wandering eyes of the wrong kind of man. I hated that haircut and always asked myself why *I* had to change to stop a man

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from looking at me. I've rarely cut it since, to her dismay. Even when I told her I wanted it long because I liked it that way, she didn't agree. My friend Layla said it wasn't my hair, but my body that made men look and I can't do much about that. My boss is always looking at something he enjoys about me. I catch him almost every day.

Three years I've put up with late nights, not really having a social life, early mornings, inappropriate looks and comments from this man, and a job that most of the time bores me to tears. All because the possibility of becoming design director at the end of the year when my supervisor was to retire was dangled like a carrot over my head. I've been waiting for that to feel settled, to show my boyfriend, Evan, and his family that this is a serious career, one I can go somewhere with.

"I don't know what to tell you, doll. The news came from corporate late last night. People just aren't buying home décor magazines anymore, not with everything available online and apps to design your space."

My eyes snap back to my greasy superior. His combover is extra mussy today and his polyester shirt—covered in cat hair—is more wrinkled than usual. I've always been taught not to judge someone on appearance, but his is accurate. He works like he dresses—messy and unorganized.

"Brinley," I say, reminding Paul that *doll* is not my name.

Keep quiet and be polite, would be what my mother would say. She'd tell me not to burn any bridges, but that doesn't really matter now. What difference does it make if I let him know how disgusting I think he is? I'm officially unemployed, effective today at noon.

"Right, sorry I forgot how touchy you are," he raises his hands in truce.

I'm not touchy, you prick. I just don't enjoy you looking at me like I'm dessert every damn day.

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"You'll get a severance, six weeks' pay in full, from corporate, and the four weeks' vacation you haven't taken." He pushes his glasses up on his nose. "Look, I've always been fond of you, *Brinley*."

I don't miss the way he emphasizes my name just to prove he thinks I'm touchy. My eyes meet his and I feel like I might vomit. A sixth sense tells me he thinks of me in very inappropriate ways.

"I'd be happy to write you a good reference. We could go for drinks and talk about what you'd like me to put in the letter?" He continues opening his remaining mail like the way he's speaking to me isn't highly unprofessional.

My position of assistant design director paid me peanuts. So, what I'm hearing is, if I play my cards right, and let this man openly stare at my breasts and split a dinner bill at some shitty diner, I'll get the reference I already deserve?

I smile sweetly and fold my hands in my lap, resisting the urge to stab him with his letter opener, and be courteous, the way I've always been taught.

"Oh, Paul, I'm not going out for anything with you, but I'll take the reference anyway because you owe me that after putting up with you leering at me for three years. I know Brenda wouldn't want to hear how often I catch you doing that." I mention his wife as I stand and hope he doesn't notice I'm shaking like a leaf.

"Thank you for the opportunity, can't say it's been enjoyable," I hold in my need to tell him what a disgusting pig he is. I cock my head and smile bigger, my mother Wendy Beaumont's type of smile that says he's less than. "I'll expect that reference letter before I leave, or my first stop tomorrow morning will be HR."

My former boss doesn't speak, only leans forward, like he's

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trying to decide if I'm bluffing. The buttons on his shirt strain under the pressure of his beer gut.

"Good luck to you, Brinley. I'll have the letter to you by noon," he says meekly.

Wow, acting like my mother really works.

I nod and turn, feeling proud of myself for standing up to Paul as I round the corner to my tiny office down the hall. Normally, I wouldn't even correct my Starbucks order if it were wrong, I'd just smile and say thank you before dumping it in the trash. A side effect from years of being told that it's proper to be seen and not heard.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I shut the door behind me.

EV

Stopping for a haircut after work, I'll meet you at home by six. Can't wait to share tonight with you, make sure you're ready babe, I have reservations.

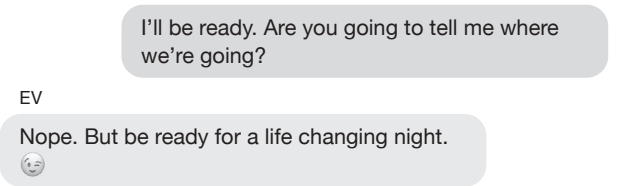
Evan has had this night with me planned for a week and he's being so secretive about it. It leads me to believe he might *finally* be proposing. After two years together, I feel like it's the next step and I've been hinting at it for six months. I've tried not to push him but ever since my mother died, I have been feeling a little disjointed, like I just don't really belong anywhere or to anyone. Having a husband like Evan, maybe starting a family, exactly what my mother always wanted, will help me feel like maybe I'm on the right path, one she and my father would've been proud of.

Thing is, I know he's been struggling to get through his final year of law school and all he wants to do is get it done and please his own parents.

I sigh, wanting to be honest and tell him I just lost my job,

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but instead I make the instant decision to wait. After the day I'm having, I seriously need something good to come from today.



I lean back against my office door and stare out my window at the brick wall of the building next door. Taking a deep breath, I try to stay calm.

This morning sucks, but it's only the morning.

Maybe tonight will make up for it.

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CHAPTER 2

Brinley

Evan squeezes my hand in the back of the limo, the same familiar comfort he always offers washes over me.

"You look lovely," he says, taking in the way I have my long black hair sculpted into a high twist. I left some pieces out and curled them into loose waves just the way he likes and I'm wearing his favorite dress. It's not mine but he likes the structured, navy A-line that falls slightly off the shoulders and accentuates my pale skin. He says it's pretty but leaves something to the imagination.

I smile up at him, always wishing for more. More words, more touching, more passion. I squeeze his hand back, forcing myself to be positive. We need this night. For the last year he's been so busy with school, he's been more distant than normal. Do I wish he hugged me or kissed me when he came in the door tonight? Sure. Pinned me up against the wall and made love to me with some semblance of hunger or need before his shoes even came off? Absolutely. But that is not Evan's style. For as long as I can remember, I've had cravings for a man who wants me so much he finds it impossible to keep his hands to himself.

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When my friends craved the good guy in the movies we watched growing up, I secretly always wanted the villain with his hand around the main character's throat. I want a man to look at me like he can't wait to touch me at any given time of the day.

When I was young, I was told that sex was a sin unless it was with the man I was married to, so I knew my desires would never be met, therefore there was no harm in fantasizing about a man like that.

Reality has shown me that men like that don't seem to exist in the real world anyway. At least not in my world.

Lovely is as close to a compliment as Evan ever gives me but I know he means it. After two years, the niceties come a little less, but Evan is always kind. I should be grateful to have someone like him in my life. He's always steady and reliable and we get along very well. We always have.

Just thinking about him wanting me at all has me clenching my thighs together. I try to remember how long it's been for us and I'm sad to say I think it was his birthday a couple months ago.

"You okay?" he asks when I sigh.

I look up at him in the dark. "Perfect," I lie before turning my glance back out to downtown Atlanta passing by my window.

When I get frustrated with the lack of time we spend together, he reminds me he's just trying to secure our future. I secretly hope an engagement is just what we need to rekindle a spark between us. Visions of a white dress and all our friends surrounding us fill my head, followed by visions of him burying his face under it.

God, I need to make sure we have sex tonight.

Evan and I may not have a ton of passion right now but we're going to create a nice life together and that should be all I

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want. I can see it all now—the white picket fence, him running a law practice and me maybe having my own shop or consulting with a design firm. Hopefully, we'll have two or three kids because I'm sure after Evan is over the stress of taking the Bar he'll change his mind on that too.

"You seem quiet," he says.

I glance at him. "Just curious to see what you have up your sleeve tonight." I grin but feel a little guilty for not telling him about losing my job. I quickly shoo it away and forgive myself. I want this night to be memorable. I don't want to make him worry or ruin the experience or stress him out causing him to change his mind.

I'll tell him tomorrow.

I have talked myself off the ledge all afternoon. I have three years' experience and a design degree under my belt now as well as a surprisingly glowing letter of reference from my slimy ex boss. I'm sure I can find something else in no time, even if it's outside my field.

I reach over in the dark and wonder how much longer of a drive we have. I slide my hand from Evans suit clad knee, up the inside of his strong thigh, maybe we can have a little limo fun—

"Babe," Evan grabs my hand before it reaches anywhere near his cock. "We're almost there."

He places my hand back in my lap and my heart sinks.

"Of course," I say. "I just miss you." I hate how pathetic that sounds.

"Aww, Brinley. I miss you too."

Not *I can't wait to get my hands on you*, or any kind of touch at all. *Be grateful*, I remind myself.

Sixteen minutes later—more than enough time to get some back-of-the-limo sex in, especially when it's been so long—we pull up to Evan's favorite restaurant. I should've known this is

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where we'd come. Evan was bred to throw money around and this place is expensive. His family has always been well-off, and he came into a substantial trust fund when he turned twenty-five last year. My favorite place, on the other hand, is a little bistro on Virginia Avenue, a lot more reasonably priced, quiet, and rustic. The food is authentic Italian and incredible.

"Come on, babe, I got us a special table." He smiles down at me with all his boyish charm, and I can't help but smile back. He bends down and kisses my cheek. I remind myself of all the effort he's gone to tonight—renting the limo, the flowers he brought me, the suit he's wearing.

We turn some heads as we enter. I'm often told Evan resembles a young Brad Pitt. He's the quintessential dream man every woman wants to end up with—rich, kind, handsome, going places.

We're seated at the nicest table at *Le Cadran Solaire*. With a three hundred and sixty-degree view of the Atlanta skyline from the top floor, the picture outside the floor-to-ceiling window is stunning, I'll admit that.

We chat casually as we drink wine and order appetizers. The meal is pleasant, but I can't help the sinking feeling that Evan doesn't seem appropriately nervous for someone who is about to propose. He talks about all the changes happening around his office, our friends, and random gossip. Again, it isn't exactly proposal worthy as the night wears on.

By the end of our dinner, Evan orders dessert with the sweetest smile on his face. Cheesecake—my favorite—and champagne.

"Brinley, you know how much I appreciate you," he starts as he grabs my hands across the table.

My heart rate accelerates. *This is it.* How will he do it? Glass with a diamond ring in it? Hell, I wouldn't care if he gave me a ring made of twine.

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I'm about to get engaged to the kind of man my parents always wanted for me. I just wish they were here to see it.

"I'm sorry if I've been distant lately. I've been under so much pressure with the Bar coming up."

I place my hand on top of his and smile. "I know, and it's okay."

"No, it's not. I promise once I pass and this next chapter is closed, we'll have more time to spend together. I need to know if you want to move onto the next step with me, and if you do it's going to require us to be open and honest and willing to sacrifice a little."

I smile. "I mean, I've always envisioned moving forward with you," I trail off, slightly confused by his lead up.

"It won't be easy, but if you stick with me through this, we can talk about taking the next step after that. If by the time I'm all settled you've sorted out your career and got your promotion, maybe at that point you'll have even moved out of that magazine and into something a little more prominent."

I flinch but smile through it. Evan has always considered my career choice to be more of a hobby. Those were his words. I hate that he looks at it like it's less because it's a creative job. In the spirit of not ruining this night, I let it go.

He smiles wide, looking gorgeous.

"Okay, sweetheart, here it goes." He takes a deep breath. "I've been offered a position with Foster Grant and Spire in New York. It's a year-long contract and may be extended after that," he says, beaming with excitement as he mentions a very prominent firm.

Wait, what?

"I-I'm sorry?" I ask in shock as our dessert and champagne arrives, no diamond in sight.

He smiles even wider, oblivious that a thousand imaginary hearts just broke into pieces and shattered at my feet.

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"Yes, I told you this was life changing. It's a huge opportunity for me," he says.

Not for us, for *him*.

I pull my hand away and take a sip of—okay, I chug—half the glass of champagne as I listen to him tell me how prestigious this is and once his year-long contract is up, he'll be able to come back here and have any job in Atlanta he wants.

"You've already accepted this?" I ask, my voice cracking.

His smile drops. "Of course, I thought you'd be happy for me, this is a big step. Like I said, life changing."

"Evan, you didn't think to consult me before you committed us to moving across the country?"

Evan begins to shake his head, something that almost resembles shock lines his face.

"I thought... Babe, I thought you'd just stay here; I know you're up for that promotion and I could fly back every other weekend."

WHAT?

"Evan... I..." I have no words. How stupid of me to assume this night was about us, a proposal. Our future. Something to look forward to. Evan is the type of man my parents always hoped I'd marry. To hear he isn't even thinking about it is... well, devastating.

"Plus, Brinley, I'll really need to focus when I'm there. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather you stayed here. We're both adults, we can handle a little long distance," he adds.

I recoil, leaning back in my chair.

I can't stop my eyes from filling up, and no matter how hard I try to stop the words from bubbling up, they come anyway.

"I thought you were going to propose to me tonight." I laugh like a lunatic through my tears, knowing just how pathetic and needy I sound, also knowing how much Evan hates when I cry. He dubs that kind of emotion dramatic.

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Evan stares at me, and I feel the distance between us like someone just dropped a thousand-pound weight onto the table. We're on two completely different planets here and I have no idea how I didn't see it before now.

"Brinley, I—You're beautiful and sweet, but marriage just... it isn't on my radar right now. My career has to come first, and you'd have to... establish yourself more before my family would accept... that."

Ouch.

"By *that*, you mean *me*," I say quietly, using my napkin to dab at my tears. "I'm not good enough for you, you mean," I guffaw before sucking back the rest of my champagne and refilling it to the brim.

"Babe, you're making a bit of a spectacle in front of the entire restaurant," he leans in, speaking quietly. I barely notice because I'm spiraling.

What am I doing with this man? How did I not see this? Everything comes crashing down on me all at once. We don't have a relationship. We're... roommates. Really good roommates.

I down the other half of the glass and that's when it fully hits me. I'm sick of all of it. Sick of bosses who think they can push me around for three years, a selfish boyfriend who thinks I'm going to just wait around while he lives his dream and I get better at 'being better' for him. Because who Brinley Rose Beaumont is, apparently isn't good enough for Evan Radcliffe the second.

I stand and look down at him, every fiber of my being telling me to be strong and that this isn't absolutely crazy. For once in my life, I don't take the time to overthink. I follow my gut.

"I'm not willing to wait around while you decide if I'm good enough for you or not." I shrug, saying the words barely

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above a whisper. "So, I guess what I'm saying is... good luck in New York..." One fat tear slides down my cheek as I watch the years between us evaporate.

"Come on, Brinley, babe," Evan says, leaning back in his chair, but there's no real fight in him. He doesn't even stand.

I turn on my heel using every bit of confidence I have to keep walking. I hope he'll follow, I hope he'll tell me he's ready to give me a future, but by the time I've made it to the lobby and onto Atlanta's streets, it's obvious he isn't. I pull my phone out to get myself an Uber.

While I wait, fighting back more tears, I realize four things. I have no job, I'm about to have no place to live, I wasted a completely good piece of cheesecake, and this *entire* day officially sucks.

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CHAPTER 3

Brinley

Two Weeks Later

I use the tiny umbrella in my drink to stir the sugary liquid around in slow circles, while I stifle back my tears. I cried the whole way here. I'm the blubbery mess in the corner even though the air in this club is happy. My mother would be appalled I'm even out in public looking like I just rolled out of bed. The night is alive in Savannah. It's only 9:30 p.m. and I needed to take a break from driving, plus I really had to pee. It was then I realized I'm in no hurry, I don't owe anything to anyone, and a drink after the two weeks I've had sure sounded good.

The rooftop patio at The Crystal Cave is bustling for a Thursday night—music plays, and twinkle lights mixed with greenery dance against the rustic wood pergolas overhead. Lanterns and flameless candles give the outdoor deck a moody ambience as they flicker throughout the space. It's dark and the beat of the song playing courses through my chest as I contemplate my next steps.

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I still have a thirty-minute drive ahead of me to my hometown of Harmony, Georgia, the small-ish ,southern town I grew up in. Population 9,000, until today. After today it will be 9,001.

My parents vacant house is the only place on Earth I have left to go after I spent the last two weeks packing up my life and all my belongings that were in Evan's apartment in Atlanta. Almost everything was his. I was just an add on. Our life wasn't unpleasant, so I guess I stayed because it was expected... easy. I realize now that easy isn't always right, and that hit me when I hugged him goodbye and we promised to remain friends. I wasn't even sad, just a little angry that I didn't see it sooner.

I swallow down my piña colada. I wish I could have another but anymore and I'll be too tipsy to drive because, truthfully, I don't ever drink more than one.

I log into my banking app to view my dismal savings and severance, calculating how long that will last me. I'll need to get a job right away. And if design jobs aren't available, I could always pick up some shifts at the diner, if Mrs. Palmer still owns it—

"Jelly!?"

My childhood nickname is called from behind me. Yelled rather, with a squeal at a deafening level even over the thump of the music. I turn to meet the owner and my eyes instantly start to tear up. I stand, because she's coming toward me, fast.

"Oh my *god,* PB!" I don't even get the words out before I'm pulled into a crushing hug with my childhood best friend, Layla, the peanut butter to my jelly.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asks as I take in her appearance. Layla looks different than the last time I was in town two years ago, and vastly different from our senior year in high school, but she's stunning.

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Layla and I were inseparable when we were young, best

friends since we were eight. Now, she's ultra sexy, her long, naturally dark hair is almost fire engine red, and her entire arm is covered in tattoos. On top of her head is a makeshift sparkly wedding veil. She wears a sash across her chest that says *Property of Ax* and a massive pear-shaped diamond on her ring finger.

We look strikingly different, I imagine. Layla is small, only five-foot-two and tiny all around. I have a good four or five inches on her and my body is curvy—I could never fit my ass in her jeans. I'm not complaining, I'm proud of my curves and work hard to maintain them with daily yoga.

Where Layla is shiny and nightclub ready, I'm rocking my tights and my oversized Nirvana t shirt, no makeup, my long, dark hair in a big messy bun.

"I'm not sure why I'm here, prolonging going to an empty house maybe," I answer as three other women come to join us, chattering away.

They all look the same as Layla does, for the most part, and are all strikingly beautiful.

"I don't understand. You're going home?" she asks as I glance past her to the three ominous men behind Layla's shoulder. My stomach drops into my feet when I realize they're all together. It's impossible *not* to notice them. They're all leather-clad, tall, muscular, and they're gruff, with beards of various growth. One has a bandana covering his head and they all wear leather vests that tell me which motorcycle club they belong to —*Hounds of Hell.* They're a good fifteen feet away from me but I can smell their leather and smoke. As if on cue, one of them pulls a cigarette out of the pack with his teeth and lights it.

"Only you could be out in glorified pajamas and still look this beautiful," she observes, pulling me from my stare as she takes in my outfit.

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I half listen to Layla as I eye the men behind her again and look back to her in question, *why are they here?*

She giggles. "Ignore them, they're harmless, just making sure we stay safe. This is my bachelorette party! My wedding is in nine days!" She smiles wide.

It's like a sucker punch to the gut to remember this after the couple weeks I've just had. I think of her wedding invite I turned down two months ago because Evan and I were supposed to be away with friends.

"Layla, what have you gotten yourself into?" I whisper with wide eyes so the other girls can't hear. They're talking to each other and have no concern for the dangerous men behind them either.

Layla can say whatever she wants but these men? Harmless? *My ass*.

"Brin, you know me, I wouldn't give my life to a man I didn't feel safe with, you're doing the thing the whole town does. Don't judge," she scolds me.

I shake my head, knowing exactly who the Hounds of Hell are. At least, I know everything I've always been told.

"You could say congratulations," Layla adds, looking a little hurt. I instantly feel bad for judging her. The thing is, Layla is usually a good judge of character so I can't wrap my head around any of this. I realize maybe I don't really know her that well anymore. I was so wrapped up in my life with Evan, wanting forever with him, wanting the life I thought I should have. Through all that, Layla and I just drifted apart. Partly because I stopped coming home after my mom died. It's hard to stay in touch the same way when you live hours away. Even though time has passed, Layla still picks right back up with me the moment I come home. I make a silent promise to spend as much time with her as I can.

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"Right. Congratulations, I'm sorry," I say. Her friends stop

chattering so she turns to introduce me to them. There's a super fit Asian girl with blunt bangs, full lips, and as many tattoos as Layla, named Amber, a blonde bombshell, Chantel, who seems like every man's fantasy with cherry red, glossy full lips and a diamond stud nose ring. Another blonde with wild, curly hair, who seems a bit older is named Maria.

I make small talk with them but can't stop eyeing the men at the same time. The sight of them this close to us makes me extremely uneasy. The men of the Hounds of Hell were a staple in town everyone avoided.

We've always been told they're extremely bad news, especially by our parents and people in our church growing up. I remember Sunday sermons laced with prayers for our town, we even prayed for club members, their wives, and local businesses. Some of the church elders even had rallies with signs that said, "*Keep the Harmony in Harmony*" outside the businesses the club had their hands in. Their presence casted a shadow over our otherwise safe and friendly town.

What scares me the most is that I'm gathering by their presence that Layla is Ax's property and Ax must be their property. I've never even met him, but if I remember correctly, I think this wedding came fast, and Layla has always been a bit of a rebel. But she's never been up to anything dangerous like this before—this is the first. I know I need to get my friend alone and make sure she's okay, not involved in anything that could get her into real trouble.

"Come sit with us, let's catch up!" she says, pointing to an entire corner of the rooftop that's sectioned off, there are decorations and food laid out, a few other girls dancing. It's like a little VIP area.

I try hard not to be afraid but I'm definitely hesitant because of her crew and Layla can tell. She leans into me. She smells like the perfume she's always worn. It's

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comforting and makes me feel like she's still the same girl I always knew.

"Trust me, you're safe. The MC isn't cut and dry. It's not what we were told," she says low enough for only me to hear. Her brown eyes meet mine.

I nod. I might not know this new life she's got but I know Layla, and I at least know she would never put me in harm's way. "For a few minutes," I agree.

For no other reason than I feel like grasping onto something familiar and comforting, I blow out a breath and follow the intimidating Hounds of Hell bikers and these women into the VIP area.

This is not at all what I thought I'd be doing when I woke up this morning.



"Babe, honestly, that sucks, but you know I always say it like it is. You would've been like a Stepford wife, so I feel like you were saved. You deserve better than that. Did you know a man knows if he wants to marry you in six months? He was making you wait... stringing you along," Layla says matter-of-factly almost an hour after I've told her all about the day that feels like an eternity ago, not mere weeks. "So, what, you're coming back to Harmony to start fresh?" she asks, sipping her drink.

"Something like that, more like because I don't really have a choice," I say, nursing my water, my drink long gone, while swiping the tears from my cheeks.

"Sorry, I don't want to rain on your parade with how depressing this is on your special night," I say as the other girls

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return after dancing up a storm. They gave up on my downer of a story thirty minutes ago.

At least I know for certain now why these men are here. Layla's fiancé is a member in the MC and I wonder, as she tells me all about him, how she could fall in love with a man like that and not worry for her safety. As wonderful as he may be, she has to know he is involved with the wrong kind of people. She's willingly giving herself over to a life of crime and danger.

"Pfft. I'm just glad I could be here. Fate for the win." She blows out a raspberry, takes a big sip and then her eyes light up. "This is perfect!" She smiles.

"What is?" I ask cautiously.

"You *need* a distraction! You're home. You have to come now!" she says.

I look at her, not understanding.

"My wedding, the one you declined!" she says, her pretty mouth turning into a frown. "You're coming. We'll dance, we'll have some fun, it's on Tybee Island, it's beautiful. We have Lighthouse Landing all to ourselves."

My eyebrows perk up. Lighthouse Landing is one of the nicest resorts on Tybee Island, right on the ocean. For some reason, I pictured this wedding to be anything but traditional. Maybe in one of the club members' backyards while people smoked various kinds of drugs and got black out drunk, some women dancing in barely there clothing.

Come to think of it, that's pretty much what I picture when I think of them—seedy, dark, sexual, ruthless. I know enough to know if you don't look too long and keep your distance, they'll leave you alone. If I go to this wedding, not looking is just impossible.

"Do you ever worry about what will happen if they get... into trouble while you're with them?" I ask, not understanding my own curiosity.

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"Look, I'm not saying my soon-to-be husband and his crew are always innocent men. *Some* things are true. Like, if you get on their bad side, hiding wouldn't help you."

My stomach drops with the nonchalance she says these words

"But these things aren't so black and white, Brin. Our parents... they were assumptive and judgemental. They didn't know the truth. Don't you ever question *them?*" Layla asks, with a surety that makes me go over everything I think I know.

We all heard the rumors growing up. Dragging men who defy them behind their bikes down Main Street. Breaking limbs and branding body parts. I also think of what I witnessed. When I was eight, we stopped at the bakery for a cake for a dinner party and I remember seeing police and caution tape around the local diner across the street. When my mom got back in the car, she told my dad as quietly as she could that a fight had broken out and a club member threw someone through their front window and he almost bled to death. That's when my father said this town was being taken over by heathens. My parents used to talk about them like they were lowlifes, but I do have a few different memories. One in particular includes a giant, gray-haired man holding the door for me and Mom once when we went into the bank. My mom had never looked so scared ushering me by him, but I remember how he smiled down at me as we walked by. He seemed almost like a gentleman.

"So... your future husband, aside from this life"—I glance nervously to the men joking and talking behind her, paying me no mind—"what does he do?" I cross my legs at my ankles and place my palms on my knees. It's hard to help but when I'm nervous I go full princess etiquette.

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Layla looks at me like she knows I'm judging her and I hate

that I am, that's something Evan used to do that I always disliked.

"He's in the... importing and exporting business. It pays well." Layla shrugs, taking a shot. "His interests are spread all over Georgia."

She says it like he's any local businessman. I'm sure he is a man of business, but something tells me it isn't of the legal kind. She puts her hand over mine.

"Look, I've missed you, Brin. It hasn't been the same since you left. God, six years is a long time. Come on, you need a weekend to not think about your own problems. We'll have so much fun and maybe you'll see. They may be a little scary but they're not who you think. Say yes," she chides, her long fiery hair falling over her shoulders. She's still one of the prettiest girls I've ever seen.

"I should work on opening up the house. God knows what's waiting for me. Since Mom died and my aunt left a year ago, no one's been checking in on it."

I'm definitely grasping for excuses. Layla knows it.

"Brin." She gives me the look I know well from my youth. "Stop being so fucking responsible and proper for once and come have some fun. The rehearsal dinner is next Friday night at the club and then we're all heading to Tybee Island on Saturday morning."

I look up. "At the club? The Hounds of Hell *clubhouse*?" I repeat, eyeing one of the men behind her smacking another in the back of the head playfully. It's obvious to anyone they are essentially the bodyguards of these girls because no one has come to speak to us. A ripple of fear snakes up my spine. Even though I know it's wrong, something about the idea of seeing their world from the inside piques my interest a little more than it should.

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"And your excuses are bullshit. You have all week to work

on the house and make connections for a job; plus, even if you don't get it done, all that work will be there for you after the wedding."

Layla hugs me again happily.

"Please say you'll come?" she squeals. "This is so exciting. We are going to be able to hang out all the time now that you're home."

I look to the men behind her. The idea of actually being sucked into this world of hers? *That's what scares me.*

She pulls back, and I force a smile. I've done the right thing for twenty-four years and where has that gotten me? Alone, jobless, and questioning everything. For the first time in a long time, I find myself feeling free and spontaneous.

"Okay. I'll come." I nod, which only makes her smile grow and she lets out another little squeal.

A rush of excitement runs through my blood.

"Yay! Can you believe I'm getting married?" Layla chirps. "And let's have lunch during the week." She turns her head. "Chris?" she calls to one of the men behind her. He's leaning on the small private bar in the VIP area, he has a patch labeled prospect. I recall that means he's not a member yet, just hopes to be. He comes over to her with few short strides. "Call the Lighthouse Landing and book my bestie here a room—one with an ocean view." She winks.

"Oh, I can't afford... fancy. I'll just do a basic—" I start to say.

"Nonsense, we're paying for our guests and that includes you." Layla looks back to the guy she called Chris. "Like I said, please," she says sweetly to him.

He nods and pulls his phone out of his pocket, making me wonder again just what kind of life my friend is living having these men at her disposal.

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Visions of *Beyond The Law* or *The Gauntlet*, those old

biker movies my dad used to watch fill my head. But this isn't the movies, it's real life.

Hopefully, my friend telling me I'll be safe is true because unless I come up with a really good excuse, it looks like I'll be spending next weekend with Harmony's most notorious outlaws.

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CHAPTER 4

Brinley

The sound of cicadas buzzing and birds chirping wake me from my sleep, which tells me it is no longer early morning. I pull my mom's comforter up over my face. Thankfully, when I got to my family home last night, I found it still in one piece and critter free. My parents' old house is massive. It sits on over an acre of land and is stately. It hasn't changed décor-wise since I was a kid, and it was definitely an eerie homecoming. The once warm halls, which used to echo with Mom's favorites—Reba McIntyre or worship music—were silent and sterile with everything covered in sheets. It felt more like the typical haunted houses you see in old movies. All my mother's clothing was donated, and her fancy dishes were packed in bins on raised shelves.

My aunt did a good job of hiring a preservation company to seal this place up before she moved away with her new husband last year. All the pillows and bedding were still vacuum sealed in the linen closet and almost still smelled fresh when I pulled them out and made the bed.

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I did fear for my foot going right through the rotted boards

of my wraparound front porch when I made my way up the old creaky steps last night. But aside from that, everything seems to be okay, which is a relief.

I rub my eyes and glance at the time. 10:30 a.m. I check my phone out of habit for any calls from Evan. There are none.

"Day one of a new life," I say as I blow out a deep breath and stand, pulling on my slippers. I plan to spend my day both unpacking and getting the house feeling like a home again. But first, I have to head to town, get some sort of coffee and grab a few things, including a dress for Layla's wedding because that is definitely not something I brought with me.

My phone buzzes with two texts from Layla before I even get out the door.

PB

I'm so glad you're here!

Let's do lunch Wednesday, you looked so nervous last night.

I did not

PB

Yes, you did. I'm thinking I should mentally prepare you for the scene you're walking into and the men, a little different than you're used to. Not bad, just different.

We had all that etiquette training growing up, but in this world it's useless. You need a whole new set of etiquette rules with the club.

Excellent. can't wait for class. These men sound like just what I've been missing.

PB

Maybe they are… I mean did that ex of yours ever even give you an orgasm?

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I sigh.

Occasionally. Truthfully… not with out my help

PB

Exactly what I thought. Happy shopping today! Blue is always a hot color on you, and show off those tits. I'll expect photos of your choice.

Yes slutty mom

I picture the men with her last night. I can still recall the smell of leather and smoke. *No way.* Not my type whatsoever.

After my shower, I toss on a white tank top and tie a black and white flannel around my waist. I add a pair of worn in cut off jean shorts and my Birkenstocks. My hair is tossed in a clip before heading out the door. I almost put my foot through the front porch again.

"*Son of a—*" I start to say to myself.

"Probably termites," a vaguely familiar voice says to me from next door. My eyes snap to the direction of the voice and I recognize its owner almost instantly.

"Hi, Mr. Kennedy. It's been a long time," I say.

He looks older. I think he's close to eighty by now.

"Yep, but I'm still kicking." His white mustache wiggles and his weathered face is in a broad smile as he holds a trusty pair of clipping shears, working on his hedges bordering twenty feet from my driveway. "Are you back for good? Nice to see some life over there, honey."

He was always such a sweet man. His wife cooked for us for two weeks when my dad died.

"Not sure yet," I say honestly, yet I have no idea where else I would go.

"Well, I can give you the number of a local contractor to look at that porch, it's gonna cost you a pretty penny, though.

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