She's spent her life searching for a spark.
He's ready to burn the world for her.

DOVE



PAISLEY HOPE

SOLDIERS OF BEDLAM

evermore

DOVE

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.

@authorpaisleyhope

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Your soulmate doesn't have to be a knight in shining armor. Instead, he can be covered in ink, clad in black leather, and love you from the first moment he pins you up against a wall with his hand around your throat.

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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*
Rockers: *Patches fixed to the back of a motorcycle, cut with the club's insignia*
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 or Prez: *The highest level of power, the boss, the conductor of business*
VP: *Vice president*
Enforcer: *Upholds club laws, protects patch holders, defends the 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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Dove Playlist



1. *Way Down We Go*—KALEO
2. *Fortunate Son*—Creedence Clearwater Revival
3. *Kashmir*—Led Zeppelin
4. *Dreams*—Fleetwood Mac
5. *Pour Some Sugar On Me*—Def Leppard
6. *Back Door*—KALEO
7. *Barracuda*—Heart
8. *Deuces Are Wild*—Aerosmith
9. *More Than a Feeling*—Boston
10. *Take Me To Church*—Hozier
11. *Feeling Whitney*—Post Malone
12. *Where Did You Sleep Last Night*—Nirvana
13. *Howlin' For You*—The Black Keys
14. *Hunger Strike*—Temple of the Dog

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CONTENT WARNINGS

This book is an interconnected MC romance that houses darker elements. It is intended for people 18+. Please read these trigger warnings before you continue your journey:

Violence, as expected with the life of an outlaw motorcycle club, including but not limited to: mild torture, gun violence, murder, discussion of sexual assault of a sixteen-year-old (nothing descriptive—on-page talk of past occurrence). Mild alcohol and drug use. Discussions of life in the military; traumatic combat flashbacks.

Sexual triggers are not fully listed to conceal plot points and pivotal moments but are of a darker nature. They include but are not limited to: blood, breath and knife play, anal sex, sex that feels ritualistic, consensual non-consent, degradation.

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PROLOGUE

Sean

The Altered Compass

"Today you take the first step to becoming a man, Sean." My father grips the back of my neck, giving me a pat with his bloody hand, his chest heaving. I look at the man on the floor and swallow down my own rage, because that man tried to steal from us and he hurt my mother. She's being taken away now by my aunt Theresa, a bloodstained rag to her face. Switch and Ray, my dad's VP and president, stand behind us. I shouldn't be in here, I'm only fifteen years old, but I needed to make sure my mom was okay when I heard her crying out for my dad.

"I won't be here forever. One day you'll inherit this family, and you *will* need to protect yourself and your mother. So, it's time, son." I look up at him, unsure and afraid, but I can never admit that to him.

"For what?" My voice cracks and I swallow down my fear. There's no sense in being afraid, it doesn't change the outcome.

"It's time to alter your compass." He pats me on the chest and walks me closer to the body on the floor with his arm around my shoulders. The man lying in front of me is barely breathing.

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"See, son, morality only exists in a man's mind."

"W-what do you mean?" I ask as my heart thuds in my ears.

"I mean that only you can decide what is truly moral and what isn't. If you decide the world is a better place without your enemy, then I believe you were put in his path for a reason. It's up to you to decide, no one else. In this case"—he nods to the man on the floor—"I would say it's up to you to finish him off. For your mother, for the club. But the choice is yours."

A rush of fear and excitement that I can't explain vibrates through me with his words. I know my father—when he tells me to do something there is no arguing, so I don't try to think of a way to get out of this. Instead, I sharpen my focus, trying to evaluate the most effective way to complete my task. I can't use the floor to crack this fucker's skull, and I can't break his neck. My father won't respect that. He has to die by my fists. It will show my strength.

"You use your fists," he orders, like he's reading my mind.

I take a breath and focus on the man's face, remembering the way my uncles have taught me to fight. Pressure points, where to hit him, what will kill him the fastest. I swallow my fate and drop to my knees, pushing down every ounce of fear I feel, and I go to my thinking place. The part of my brain that solves my problems. The part that makes sense to me when I have to analyze something.

I quickly calculate my body weight and the force needed for a punch directly to his temple. In his deteriorated state, I should be able to do the job in five punches or less. *If* I hit him with everything I've got.

"Go ahead, Sean," my father encourages from behind me. I roll my sleeves up to my elbows, twice evenly on each side, and take a deep breath. I picture my mother after he bounced her face off the concrete wall. I can't let my father down. I close my eyes, still mentally calculating, and I swing. I think I cry out but I still keep swinging. Again, and again. I swing through nine punches, until my knuckles are busted up and bloody.

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Then rage mixed with a need I can't push down suddenly bubbles up and I keep striking him. I don't know for how long, but I know I don't stop until my father pulls me off him. I fight back against my father's hold, thrashing. I *need* to make sure I've done my job and my task is completed.

"He's dead, son," my dad says, pulling me from my haze. I relax and blink back tears so he doesn't see me cry as he lets me go. What kind of a pussy cries? I'm fifteen, for fuck's sake.

When I look down at my bloody hands then back to the man's face, I know my dad is right. I check the imaginary box in my head and breathe a little deeper when he says, "Atta boy," and wraps his strong arm around me. "Your moral compass will be different now. It's still intact, but altered."

"How?" I sniff, resisting the urge to look back at the man I just killed.

"Well, it'll still help you navigate, but it'll never point true north again. From now on your path will be different from that of a man who hasn't handed out death. This will be your truth, and that's okay as long as you know why you took his life. As long as you know it was justified, and it *was*."

I nod, feeling proud of myself, stronger. Feeling like *him*. My father squeezes my shoulder and kisses me on the top of my head.

"You did good. The kill doesn't have to be perfect your first time, son. There's room to improve . . . Now, let's get you cleaned up . . ."



The altered compass is a piece of my father I've remembered every single day, in the desert and in the streets.

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The things I've seen and done would horrify most men, but there isn't a single thing I regret. I don't think about my choices after I've made them, or look back, because time can't be changed, and it never stops. At the end of my time on this earth, the only man who has to live my truth is me. A truth that runs through my head repeatedly because I never, ever stop thinking.

I was dubbed a prodigy, a genius, at a young age. I suppose I could have been an epidemiologist, or I could have gone to MIT and become an astrophysicist, developing technology NASA hasn't even dreamed up yet. But that was never my future for two reasons: One, I don't follow the rules of any other man well. And two, by my twenty-fifth birthday I'd killed so many men that I knew I would never fit inside the box that is the norm of society. And I carry on my back the memory of every single man I've killed. I remember the way each man's pupils grew as they filled with fear while the last glimmer of life drained from them.

Those memories and a compiled stack of double standards are one part of my truth, because when in combat, death is justified by fighting for my country. For those deaths, society tells me I should be proud and they call me a hero. They give me medals for those deaths, for Chrissake.

But the lives I take on the streets, in a different kind of war—those earn me a different title.

Outlaw. Criminal. Monster.

The double standard is that death is only allowed when you're granted permission from a rich man behind a desk who can't wait to measure his dick against those of his enemies.

Death because some scumbag thought he could hurt the woman who would surely be my wife? Illegal. Unfortunately for the scumbag, death for my country and death in the streets is all the same to me, and I'm not ashamed to admit that.

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Killing this man will just be adding another body to the pile

and another clip to the never-ending reel in my head. One I won't lose a minute of sleep over.

As I ride as fast as possible through the streets between my clubhouse and her home, I imagine all the ways I'll torture him to make him pay for thinking he could go anywhere near her. I think of the way her voice sounded when I answered the call . . . muffled, distant and afraid. I didn't know what was going on until I heard a man's voice and then that was *all* I needed to know.

I get from my bike to her door in seconds, then enter the house on silent feet. I can hear him before I see him, and my blood boils as I pull my gun from my hip and take aim at the unknown, ready for anything and laser-focused.

"You have her eyes . . ." he bites out, his voice shaky and low. "It's like seeing a fucking ghost . . ."

I hear her whimper softly and plead for all of one second—"Why? How did you find me?"—before I figure out where they are in her century-old house.

The stealth training ingrained in me doesn't allow him to hear me coming. Even if he could, the adrenaline rushing through my veins at the sight of her pinned against the living room wall gives me the strength of ten men. The man holding her is a waste of breath, and he's wearing a cut I can't wait to burn. "Please, just listen to me . . ." His tall, lanky body is pressed to hers, which makes me want to rip him to shreds. He's already taken so much from her.

I think I hear him muttering something like, "You're looking for answers and I'm gonna fucking give them to you . . ."

Then the familiar haze lines my vision and the monster in me takes over.

I replace my gun at my hip and yank his head back while allowing my fist to come down on his face with a deafening crack, breaking his nose instantly. My arms wrap around his

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thick neck in a sleeper hold before he gets another word out or has the chance to lay a finger on her pretty head. I drag him out the back door, not wanting one drop of blood to spill on her floor.

The sun is starting to sink behind the trees surrounding her property. It's private and quiet out here, and I toss him to the ground behind a bush while garbled words do their best to spill from his blood-filled mouth.

"Motherfuck—"

I commit fully, straddling him as my fist comes down again. The sound of his jaw cracking is like music to my fucking ears. The thrill of the capture is subsiding, but the satisfaction of his demise is on the horizon. And judging by the fear-soaked smell and this fucker bleeding all over his shitty, good-for-nothing cut, he knows it. I keep hitting him as blood leaks from my busted knuckles. Time passes, I don't know how long, but it's in this moment, with blood covering me, that I feel clearer than in any other.

At peace.

This is the other part to my truth.

I simply don't give a fuck. Feeling this way isn't barbaric, it's cathartic.

It's not just an eye for an eye. It's a loose end that I *need* to tie up. A mental itch that must be scratched at all costs.

"Sean . . ." Her voice is shaky and soft, calling my name from somewhere behind me. Even after such a short time, it's the only voice that can stop my raised fist from crashing down on him again. I blink, coming out of my haze and looking down. Her attacker is out cold, but for now, he's still breathing.

I let go of his blood-soaked shirt and turn to face her.

"That's enough," she commands softly. I take one look at her and grimace as I stand and make my way across her yard. Relief that she's unharmed and pure admiration for her ability to make it until I got here washes over me for the first time, and I feel like I

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no longer have my legs beneath me. I take her into my arms and crush myself to her, muttering her name as she grips me tight. I have no idea how long we stay like that before I finally move to the side of the house to turn on the spigot connected to a coiled hose. I give my hands a rinse before ripping off a small length of fabric from the bottom of my t-shirt and running it under the water, then return to wipe her tear-stained face, removing his splattered blood from her soft neck and shoulders. I can't bear the thought of this worthless piece of shit's blood anywhere near her.

"H-he says he has answers . . . could he?" she stammers, as I run my hands over her bare arms, warming her.

"I'm gonna figure that out." I swipe her soft, fiery hair from her forehead and gently kiss her there before pulling her close. She takes a deep breath, and I feel her body start to relax.

"That's better," I whisper, inhaling her sweet scent. Another detail I can't forget. Even now, everything about her calls to me. When I should be focusing on how to get this cocksucker back to my clubhouse, all I can think about is the taste of her skin. I pull my phone out and send a message to Kai and Jake, my club's enforcer and vice president, knowing they'll be here inside of ten minutes.

"What do we do now?" Her voice is muffled by my chest.

"I do what I do, and you decide how deep into my world you wanna be."

Her sultry brown eyes look up at me expectantly.

"I was hunting him. I wasn't planning to kill him, but now . . ." I flex my aching fist. The one that just pummeled that motherfucker's face into the ground. "You know exactly who I am . . ." I stroke her cheek with my thumb.

"Yes," she answers, reaching her warm hand up, placing it over mine.

"But knowing that reality and *seeing* it are two totally different things, understand?"

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She swallows down the fear I know she's feeling and nods, side-eyeing him. "Of course," she whispers softly.

I move into her sightline to bring her eyes back to mine.

"Don't look at him. He's lying there like that because he took from you, and I will never tolerate that. No one will ever harm a single hair on your head, or anyone you love, ever again."

"I don't have many of those . . . people that I love. But . . . do you think he does?" Her pretty face knots in confusion as she comes to terms with the fact that this man will likely die simply because he hurt her.

This is a "right from wrong" she's never had to contemplate. I tilt her chin up to me. "Don't do that. Look at me. He isn't worth an ounce of regret. He made his choices in life . . . the wrong ones. This is his fate."

I remind myself as I watch her struggle with this new reality that my brain works differently than hers—that she won't find it easy to separate emotion from business when it comes to ending a human life, even one that took from her so viciously.

For me, this is *only* business. I don't worry about this man's family, or anyone who might care when he doesn't come home tonight.

I only worry about two things. My club, and now . . . *her.*

I wait with bated breath as her fingers slide over mine, removing my hands from her face. She straightens her shoulders and smooths her thick copper hair but doesn't speak as she tucks the bottom of her shirt back into her cutoff jean shorts. As if putting herself back together on the outside will hold her emotions together on the inside too.

I let her push past me and move to stand over her attacker's unconscious body. Her chest rises and falls evenly. She doesn't look afraid now. She looks bold and in control. She looks powerful. Her long hair blows loose and wild in the late evening's summer breeze as she focuses.

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I wait for questions that never come, for a more prominent fear or shock that never rises. Instead, she shocks *me* by simply embracing the calamity.

"I'm stronger than you think, Sean," she whispers before dropping to her knees. Her small fist comes up and slams down onto his face as she cries out, and I watch in sheer fascination as she picks up a heavy, jagged rock from her garden, and her fist rises again.

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CHAPTER ONE

Layla

Days Earlier . . .

"It's so nice to see you dear. It's been a long time. You're looking . . . different."

I nod and force a smile onto my face as I place menus down in front of the elders from my parents' church, Judy Pryor and her husband Roy. I ready my mini tablet to take their order and resist the urge to tell her to take her judgmental eyes elsewhere and go fuck herself.

"It has been a long time," I respond, ignoring her comment about my looks as she eyes the floral and vine tattoos that run down the length of my bare arm. "You're doing well?" I ask politely. My voice is sickly sweet, and from another life.

"I am. Always so busy with the church, you remember how that is?"

"Of course," I answer quickly. What she really means is: *You know, when you used to come to church?* Her eyes continue their judgment as I rattle off the specials. When I'm done, she looks up at me with mock care.

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"Are you okay, Layla? You haven't been around since . . . well, you know . . ." Her voice trails off as she takes in my much longer, now more auburn hair. It used to be a very dull shade of brown in my younger years—a lifetime ago, when I checked all of her boxes.

She didn't know me then any more than she does now, but she didn't need to. I was *there*. I could've been murdering squirrels in my spare time, but if I was in that building on Sunday, I was "a little dear" and "a real sweetheart."

"I'm perfectly well, thank you for your concern." I fight the sarcasm in my tone. Giving her nothing but saying everything all at once. *Fuck right off, Judy.*

I take their order and click "submit" on the tablet to send it to the kitchen.

"It's good to see you both," I say politely. Before I can turn away Judy reaches out and touches my arm, invading my personal space.

"I have to ask, do you have a new church family? A fellowship group to pray over you?"

I remind myself that I desperately need the tip from their bill and gently pull my arm away. "It's been a long while since I've had time for a fellowship family," I answer. It's true, and it's also the understatement of the year. Not that she could know, but being in school, in a fast-track program for massage therapy, takes up most of my free time. Not to mention I work thirty hours a week just to keep myself fed and housed. Plus, I'm still grieving the death of my best friend in the whole world, so making the church a priority isn't really on my radar right now.

"Well, if you ever feel called to come back to the church, we're all here for you. And we're all praying."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pryor," I say through my fake smile. "That's very kind of you. Your drinks will be out soon."

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I turn and blow out a breath. Simmering anger courses through

me. Not one of them was actually "there for me" when my mother was stolen from me. None of them knows she died on the very night that she was finally going to set herself free. No one but me knew she was leaving, because on the outside, my parents' marriage was a thing to be admired. But on the inside my father was controlling, misogynistic and abusive. Sometimes, when he drank too much, he would hit my mother, and then spend the next week apologizing and gaslighting her into believing she'd deserved it. All the while he was having affairs and gambling their life savings away. But all that mattered was that they were there front and center every Sunday morning, so they were a real blessing to the community.

They portrayed that false image better than anyone could have imagined. But none of that matters, because they're gone now—and one thing my mother's death has taught me is that a public image is complete bullshit.

I can't go back, but I can promise myself I will never end up like my mother, in a loveless marriage taking shit from a man in the name of his church.

I will be myself and be happy, however that looks.

I haven't lost my faith, and I don't need to draw closer to God. God and I have an understanding. We're good. I most definitely don't need people like Roy and Judy to tell *me* how to live in order to please God when they're holding onto countless sins of their own.

For example, Judy is a shit disturber who loves to gossip about anyone and anything at the church. I bet she goes to her women's meeting this week and tells everyone there how she saw poor Layla Monroe . . . *"And she's got so many tattoos now and she's colored her hair. She's lost her faith. Everyone pray for her."* Then she'll talk about how I'm working as a server when I was supposed to be a teacher.

I see through her sad existence though. Her false goodness. Because if her faith was truly her cornerstone, it wouldn't matter to

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her where I work, how many tattoos I have or that I've drifted away from the church. It would only matter that I was a good person, which I am, and she would truly care about me, which she doesn't.

And it's not like where I work is a dive bar. The Palm Club is the most upscale boutique restaurant in Harmony, Georgia. It's the place people come to eat on a first date, or an anniversary. Its cozy atmosphere boasts warm brick interior walls, wrought iron tables with live edge wood tops, and accent lighting. Greenery and twinkle lights cover the ceiling, and the whole place bleeds hip and rustic local hangout.

They also don't know that teaching was my mother's dream for me, and that when she died, I figured at that point there was no reason to follow her dreams and instead began to follow my own. Even if that means exhausting myself just to afford this semester's tuition, and putting up with the judgy glares from people like Judy and the roaming, hungry eyes of her husband.

I bring them their drinks and force another fake smile as the restaurant becomes busier and the sky outside darkens with clouds. It's a typical evening for Harmony in July. Our town is close to Savannah and the water, which means we don't go many days without a thunderstorm to cut the humidity in the summer. Today is certainly no exception. It's a scorching 103 degrees outside, so I barely even flinch when the loud crack of thunder rocks the large pane-glass windows just after six.

"You need to take that break," my friend and coworker Chantel reminds me. Her full pouty red lips turn up in a grin. She's got this job down pat after two years here. She's teaching me all about choosing clothes that are just revealing enough, yet still classy. Chantel calls the look "classy fuckable." And she's a master at it, with her long blonde tresses hanging down her back in waves, her black pencil skirt, and the white sleeveless blouse that shows just the right amount of cleavage.

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It's a style I've tried to emulate tonight, in my black leather

skirt and off-the-shoulder white bodysuit with a more open and revealing back. My thick, wavy hair is a soft shade of copper. It's piled into a high ponytail with face-framing bangs and some wisps left out to accentuate my brown eyes, which everyone always tells me are my prettiest feature. My lips are the perfect shade of crimson and my nails are manicured to match, painted by my own hand to save money I just don't have. A fleeting memory of paying upward of a hundred dollars to get my nails done flashes through my mind, but those days are gone. Now I thrift my looks, and thankfully, Chantel has an incredible collection of heels she lets me borrow to make my legs seem longer than my five-foot-four frame allows.

"I'll take my break soon. It's a packed one tonight. I'm alright for now," I tell her as my drinks order comes up and I grab them with ease.

"Uh-huh," she mumbles. "You never learn," she says with a laugh. I've only been here since March, when I left the retail job that was making me half the amount in a week as I earn in two shifts here.

"Well, babe, if you aren't taking yours yet, I'm taking mine. Cover me for a few?" she asks.

I nod, and am just getting ready to deliver table two's Long Island iced teas when the glass double doors bearing The Palm Club's logo fly open. The humidity from outside rushes in—warm air and the smell of rain—but a shiver runs through me as three very wet, very ominous-looking bikers take up the entire entrance.

They're completely out of place among all the after-work businesspeople and the town's upper crust, and they wear the colors anyone living in Harmony would recognize: the Hounds of Hell Motorcycle Club. Anyone here will see dangerous outlaws, but the moment I glimpse their leather and the ink on their skin, all I can think of is my mother's face the last time I saw her—and the police sketch that's lived in my head for almost two years.

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CHAPTER TWO

Layla

Chatter slows around me and the music playing through the sound system becomes more prominent. A chill ripples down my spine as I watch the man who is front and center stalking toward me, wearing a black t-shirt under his cut, black jeans and black motorcycle boots. His face is partially covered by a black bandana. The look of him sends my pulse into an unexplainable rush. I swallow, trying to calm it down and ask myself *why?* All I should feel when I look at him is anger and trauma.

He keeps coming my way and I do nothing but shift from one foot to the other, frozen by his dark and rugged beauty. His head is shaved close, and his vibrant green eyes are fixed ahead—the windows to a demon's soul—as he walks with an air of authority and his men follow behind. I watch carefully as he pulls his bandana down and the rest of his features come into view. His beard is a deep brown, covering his wide jaw, and his features are straight and masculine. His furrowed brow makes him appear almost angry and stern. I can't explain the way my knees weaken as he quickly closes the space between us. Those emerald orbs snap unexpectedly to mine, I have no time to look away, and my

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stomach drops with their violent, deep hold. He reminds me of a fierce gladiator as his jaw flexes and his thick neck pulses. I look away from his stare to take a breath and let my eyes trail over the rest of him. There are dog tags hanging around his neck and, of course, there's the telltale sign of the life he belongs to.

That fucking cut.

The Hounds of Hell, the biker gang that my small town has been wary of my whole life. We all know their ways, and I remember my mother telling me not to look at them when we heard the deafening sound of their Harleys as they rolled in a solidified group down Main. I was warned not to look at them in town, not to get in their way. We know of the bodies that have turned up outside town that belong to rival clubs. We know how our law enforcement sweeps every illegal thing they do under the proverbial rug. "It's not in the township's interest to pursue" is often the statement. We know what that means: they work for the club too.

The Hounds of Hell are the dark underside of Harmony, so I should be afraid of this gladiator and what he's capable of. His scent washes over me as he gets closer, pulling me from my memories, but instead of the fear or anger I expect, an unstoppable want rocks me to my core. He smells of cedarwood, leather and smoke, and it speaks to my senses, drawing me in . . . I'm completely entranced.

The biker pauses and looks down at me intentionally, like I warrant his scrutiny simply because I'm standing in his way. I swear I stop breathing as his surprisingly beautiful eyes linger on mine and then trail the planes of my face. My lips, my neck. My heartbeat thunders, and it feels like time pauses before he finally looks away, uninterested. I blink, trying to clear my senses, and eye the patch over his heart: *Sergeant at Arms.*

The three of them don't wait to be seated, heading right into Chantel's section. The one I'm covering while she's on break.

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Snapping out of my stupor, I move quickly to table two, placing their drinks down, telling them their meal won't be long, and I think about the gladiator's patch, trying to remember what the rank means. The other two wear *Enforcer* and *Treasurer* patches. I have no idea what those mean either, but it's obvious the Sergeant is the leader of the three just by the way he walked in front of them. I give my head a shake and ask myself why the hell I'm even still thinking about him as I take another table's drink order and pray for Chantel to hurry the hell up so she can take the biker table. The storm outside rages on.

I head toward the bar to wait on my next round of drinks. Another hour and I'll be behind it for the rest of my shift, when the drinking crowd pours in and the restaurant transforms into more of a pub. The music gets louder, the row of pool tables in the back gets busier, and the bar becomes packed. I don't mind working the bar though—in fact, I prefer it. The later it gets, the more cash I make.

I look up when I've finished delivering the drinks, knowing the club members are my next table, but Chantel is still not back yet. I give in and glance over at them. The Sergeant is leaning back in the padded leather booth, deep in conversation. His legs are relaxed, his inked forearm rests on the table, and his sculpted hand is covered with more ink and rings. He uses his thumb to spin the ring on his first finger methodically as he looks over. It's almost as if he can sense my eyes on him, and then he beckons me with his first two fingers and an upward nod of his chin.

As I grab their menus and silverware, I feel the heat creep up my throat. His bold demeanor and the way he slowly looks me over from my cherry red heels to the hair on my head unnerves me. It's not subtle, but it's not degrading either. I can't put my finger on the way it makes me feel. Somehow it has me wanting to cover up, and at the same time tear every shred of clothing from my body so his gaze can make a permanent home on my

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naked flesh. Then his eyes leave me to go back to the men sitting across from him.

I lift my chin in fake confidence as I approach, and something in me takes over. I don't know if it was my encounter with the elders from my church—or the way this man just looked me up and down as if it was his right, and then dismissed me just as quickly with his eyes.

The need to let someone, *anyone*, know I'm not who they think I am overwhelms me as I set down the three menus on their table.

"Next time, you need to wait until someone seats you," I say as confidently as I can. "Will you all be eating tonight?" I ask, looking from one to the other.

The handsome blond one, the enforcer, laughs and scrubs his scruffy jaw with his hand; his smile is megawatt. He looks sort of like Heath Ledger and I wonder how he didn't win at life just on his looks alone.

"Depends on what you're serving up, beautiful." That all-American smile widens with his words.

I narrow my eyes at him. "Drinks and food," I enunciate in a *don't fuck with me* tone as I set down their silverware tucked into napkins.

"We don't take this one out much," the man beside him says in a low voice, hiking his thumb over his shoulder. I look at him pointedly for the first time. The treasurer. He's all sharp edges with messy brown hair and piercing blue eyes that house the look of past torture.

The two men chuckle, and it only serves to make me more pissed and uncomfortable.

"Forgive these fuckin' idiots." The deep, smoky voice of the sergeant stops their laughter immediately. It's smooth like thick honey, as if he has all the time in the world to speak because no one would dare interrupt him.

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I let my eyes move to him, willing myself to stand strong and not appear fazed by the grace he carries himself with. He leans forward, straightening out his knife and fork on the napkin with perfect precision, before folding his hands together as he props his elbows on the table.

He's muscular in a way that says he's strong as hell, like he works out seven days a week. His corded forearms flex with rigid veins and I notice that even his knuckles have symbols and words on them. I'm a sucker for tattoos on a man, but I haven't known any personally who have this many, so I shamelessly take them in. My eyes settle on his right hand and what I can catalog quickly. A cross made from detailed-looking daggers covers his finger. It's on the end of an ornate chain that winds down his hand, connecting to a cracked compass, on top of which sits a peaceful dove. It's not unlike the one I have inked on my own shoulder that I put there in memory of my mother, only mine is in flight. I like to think that when she passed, she escaped her cage. I wonder briefly why he would choose a cross, and the dove. Then I blink and scold myself for even noticing. He clears his throat, taking in my stare. I bring my eyes back to the depth of those dark, emerald pools, and I swear I see a hint of amusement in them as he cocks his head and speaks to me again.

"We'll take three bourbons—Hellbender. And . . ." He pauses for a moment. "Yeah, we'll all be eating tonight." His voice is strong and poignant, sending another current up my spine with the flash of an unexpected vision, one where his face is buried deep between my thighs.

I suck in a breath, needing to get out of his sight. I don't know what the hell has gotten into me, but instead of feeling the disgust I should toward him, he sends my blood racing as I try to push the image from my head.

"I'll give you a few minutes," I say, heading for the bar.

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My back is turned while I put their drinks order in, but I can

feel the heavy weight of his stare on me. I'm certain he's watching me. The feeling is eerie and exhilarating all at once.

"Thanks babe," Chantel says as she breezes up to me, looking around.

"Perfect timing." I exhale a long breath.

"You okay? You're shaking." Chantel's face is lined with concern.

"Yeah, just . . ." I nod at the table of men I just left and Chantel's eyes flit toward them.

"Oooh shit, some bad-boy Hounds of Hell members? Mama likey," she says, eyeing them all up. I shake my head with a scoff, keeping my eyes away from that deep gaze.

"They're all yours," I tell her, heading to pick up table four's appetizers. I should be glad I'm free of the sergeant's stare, but moments later, I can't help myself. I decide to glance up at his table, feeling the pull of his gaze—and when I do, I find those dark eyes still unapologetically fixed on me like he can't look away any more than I can.

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Chapter Three

Layla

The rush of the bar never stops as the dinner crowd transforms into the drinking crowd. Our dance floor opens up at eight and fills right away under the soft glow of the string lights.

I head to work behind the bar as two more servers come in to take over the late shift. I get on with Tyson, who's the manager and weekend bartender. He's funny and kind. He sort of reminds me of my older brother Dell, and we've gotten into a flow. He takes care of his end, I take care of mine, and sometimes we meet in the middle. We manage the hectic bar with ease most weekends.

People come and go as the night continues, but the one nagging constant is the three Hounds of Hell members sitting in the corner. Aside from their periodic laughter and the consumption of an absolute feast, you'd never know they were there. Unless you were me and could physically feel the eyes of their leader on you.

I duck down and grab a Corona from the cooler beside the overstock. I crack it open and pass it over the bar to a regular and take another order from a man beside him.

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