



Barker

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Category: Romance

Description: Annistyn Tarantino is used to doing everything on her own. There are two people that she knows she can rely on, her father and best friend, Talon. Her father's failing health has her barely managing financially. Between nursing school, medical bill co-pays, and everyday life she's struggling. Her only saving grace is the local drag racing scene. When she gets an inside invite to the most exclusive race, she knows she can't refuse. Barker Tobin moved to Los Angeles as the new president of the Sons of Sin MC. Taking on the unreputable Los Angeles chapter and reforming it into a respectable group has been no easy task. Knowing reputations have the tendency to be exaggerated helps him take a chance on the chapter. Barker's own has him pegged as a ladies' man and he's fine with that because one heartbreak was enough. Barker isn't prepared for Annistyn and his cocky, undefeated attitude catches up to him. Losing the race is the last thing on his mind once he lays eyes on her but she has a secret. One that could completely tear them apart just as things get interesting.

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Prologue

Barker

Change. Change is a funny thing. It's inevitable in life. You can't hide from it; you can't outrun it, even if you're flying at ninety to nothing. Trust me, I would know, I've tried. It can come from every direction and in all kinds of forms. In my life, I've been subjected to two forms of change.

The first comes softly and quietly. It sneaks up on you and wraps around you like a warm blanket on a cold winter's night, only to surprise you when you least expect it. If you weren't really paying attention when it showed up, then you didn't see it coming. It's the kind of change that reminds me of autumn when the grass slowly loses its color and begins to dry up. The leaves change from deep green to various shades of browns, yellows, and oranges before falling to the ground and leaving the trees bare. The temperature slowly drops and the days get shorter. It's a slow change, an easy transition.

The other change comes out of nowhere and hits you head-on like a semi with a driver asleep at the wheel. You are forced to accept the change in your life, because you know there's nothing you can do about it. Don't get me wrong, you'll probably fight it in the beginning because it wasn't soft and easy. It didn't give you the time to adjust, but your fight is useless. It's the kind of change that reminds me of that unexpected and sudden rainstorm on a scorching summer afternoon.

You can't move forward in life without change, so I guess in some ways, it's a good thing. I guess it's also a good thing that it's inevitable, because humans are creatures

of habit, or at least that's what I think. Most of us like the familiar and comfortable, so if it were up to us, there would be no change. No change might seem like a good thing, but when you think about it, I mean, really think about it, you'd always be stuck in the same place. You'd never learn anything new, never discover something special, always stay the same.

I didn't used to think change was a good thing. I fought it, attempted to outrun it, hide from it; you name it, I tried it. Then something happened and made me realize just how important change is in life. Life has a way of throwing you some wicked curveballs. Having to uproot my whole life in small-town USA and relocate to Los Angeles, California was one of the things my nightmares were made of. Huge, crowded, traffic for days, and impersonal people—everything I didn't want to be around. But when you get laid off from your job and the only company willing to hire you at the time is there... you suck it up and go.

I had no idea that Los Angeles was where I'd find the place to call home. It gave me a family in the form of a Motorcycle Club, Sons of Sin. Brothers for a kid who had no one but his grandpa growing up and had been left alone for years. Los Angeles also gave me the one thing I was convinced I'd never have... someone to share my life with. But somehow Annistyn managed to worm her way into my heart and soul.

One

Annistyn

I hear the sound of pans in the kitchen and smell the bacon in the air, causing my stomach to rumble in hunger, but there's no way it's that time already. I swear, I just got to sleep. I pull my comforter up over my head in an attempt to drown out the sound, my eyes still heavy with sleep. Just as I'm about to drift back off I hear, "Damn it, Annistyn!" I groan, at the sound of Talon's voice. "Every time I come in here, I nearly die."

“Then stay out of my room,” I mumble. He’s being dramatic, well kind of. I won’t lie, my room is a mess, a total disaster area. It seriously looks like a Tasmanian devil ran through it. It’s not my fault really. I just never have time to clean it. I can manage with it, but for Talon, who I swear has OCD, well let’s just say it drives him nuts.

“I’d love to stay out of this pig pin, but if I don’t wake you up then you’ll be late.”

“Not possible,” I whine, as I burrow farther into my pillow.

“I’m afraid so sleeping beauty,” Talon tells me, as he takes a seat on my bed. The smell of bacon and cheese sneaks through my comforter. My mouth waters. “You have class at eleven, right?”

“Yes,” I all but growl out, as I throw my comforter off me. I’m so close to being done with nursing school, literally, this is my last year, so I can’t start slacking now. It doesn’t matter how tired I am.

Talon hands me a plate with a bacon and cheese sandwich on toasted white bread with no crust and a cold Mountain Dew, my favorite. I give him a small smile because he knows me well. Then again, I guess he should since we’ve been best friends since we were kids. Back then though, it was Talon, Jerick, and me: the three amigos. We were inseparable. Then my dad got sick, Jerick went down a bad path and left me to deal with it all, but Talon stayed. I know everyone in this part of town gossips about us. They all think we have something going on, but we really don’t, he’s just my best friend. “Long night?” he asks, as his brows pull together in concern.

I shrug like it’s no big deal and take a big bite of my sandwich. He watches me, waiting for a reply, but I need the time to figure out what to say. Long night doesn’t even begin to cover it. Between nursing school, my everyday life, and my dad’s medical expenses, I have to work at Vixens, which is a strip club on the seedy side of Los Angeles, not too far from here. I’m just a waitress, but the tips are amazing and

they are currently keeping me afloat. Well, those and my race winnings. “Yeah, we were busy,” I finally tell him.

I hold out my hand for the soda and that’s when I notice the handprint bruise lacing my forearm. Talon’s eyes, of course, follow mine and in an instant his calm demeanor is angry. “What the hell?”

I grab the soda and take a long drink. Apparently, I’m taking too long, because Talon yanks it back out of my hand. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

“You’ve got a damn bruise the shape of a hand on your arm. I’d say that’s a pretty big deal, Annistyn!”

“Look, I had a table get a little drunk and unruly. Dillan swooped in and saved me just as I was about to knee the dude,” I tell him. It’s a lie, but he doesn’t need to know that. Truth is, Jerick showed up with some of his biker friends and started causing trouble. He made some comments which eventually got a rise out of me, along with a smartass remark, and when I turned to leave he grabbed my arm a little too hard. I can’t tell Talon the truth though, because he’ll go ballistic.

Talon stands up and begins pacing the floor while running a hand through his black hair. “I wish you would just quit that job.”

“You know I can’t. Look, it’s not my favorite place to have to work either, but I need the money. After this year, I should never have to step foot into a strip club again,” I tell him, as I finish my breakfast.

“I know, I know, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it,” he replies, with a scowl on his face.

I climb out of bed and make my way to my closet to get ready for class. Talon heads

out of the room only to return right after snapping his fingers. “I can’t believe I almost forgot!” I pop my head around the closet door and give him a questioning look. “I got some inside details about a race, if you’re interested.” Talon wags his eyebrows up and down.

“You know I am. So spill it.”

“Tonight, behind the Sons of Sin's clubhouse,” he says, like this isn’t big news when in reality it’s the biggest news. The drag races that Barker Tobin likes to host behind their clubhouse are kind of epic.

“Did someone actually tell you or did you just overhear it?” I ask. Talon started hanging around the clubhouse last year and is now a prospect to join the motorcycle club as well. Normally, I’m completely against MCs, but the Sons of Sin are different. They actually give back to the community and they seem to stay clear of any bad crimes. As far as I know, Barker’s drag races are the most illegal endeavor they are involved in.

“Barker told me. Actually, he asked me if I knew anyone to fill a spot. Apparently, John got in a car accident and can’t participate now, so it’s a last-minute deal, but it could mean big bucks for you.”

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It would most definitely be big bucks, but there's a slight chance it'd be a huge loss. Barker is a legend at the drag races. I think he's only lost like a handful of times since he got his license, so if I got stuck racing him there's a good chance I could lose more money than I can afford to. I shake my head and step back behind the safety of the door so Talon can't see how badly I want to say yes. "I can't."

"What? You're kidding right?"

"No, I have class then I need to check on dad before work. I can't squeeze a race in there."

Talon laughs. "Yes, you can, so why don't you quit bullshitting and tell me what's really going on?"

I sigh, because I'm going to have to come clean. Talon won't let it go unless I do. "Okay, fine. Here it is. As much as I would love to race tonight, I can't race against Barker. It's a big win if I win, but there's a chance I could lose. Barker is basically undefeated."

Talon smirks. "So are you. Look, I believe you can beat him. I'll cover half the buy-in."

"Talon..." I start to say, but he cuts me off. "No Annistyn. You're racing. Have a great day in class. Tell your dad hi from me and that I'll see him on Sunday for poker, and I'll see you tonight at ten." With that, he turns around and heads out the door. I hate to take Talon's money for a race I might not win. I mean, he does more than enough already, but I know if I were to argue this point it'd be a losing battle, so

there's only one thing I can do. Show up at the Sons of Sin's clubhouse tonight and beat Barker Tobin in his own drag race. Yeah, no pressure, no pressure at all.

Two

Barker

The pounding in my head is the only reminder that I need to know that I pushed my limits too hard last night. I roll over and stare at the ceiling and let the air from the ceiling fan above cool down my overheated body. Every time I end up with a hangover, I end up sweating like a pig. It's not attractive, and since I have a reputation to uphold, I usually avoid drinking this heavily. I should have last night, but it had been a shit day that led to a shit night, and I needed the escape that the bottle full of amber liquid allowed.

Yesterday was the anniversary of my grandpa's death. It always seems to be extremely hard on me and I never handle it well. I don't know if it's because our time was cut short and suddenly I was left alone in the world with no one to turn to or what, but it sucks. I had driven my bike out to the cemetery to visit him... well his ashes at least. He was my whole family so it's hard to go there sometimes. It's a scary-ass thought when you have to face that reality. It's one of those things I try not to think about. I try to run away or hide from it, but on days like that, I can't.

Afterward, I had to be at work. Ever since the Sons of Sin's Clubhouse and bar, Sinner's Den, was rebuilt and reopened, it has been booming. The Sons of Sin wasn't always a positive staple in the city. Especially with the old president ruling, but I've changed things with the help of Zayde, Drake, and the rest of the brothers. Our club is good and well respected now which makes us all happier. We often ride for military funerals, help the police in large dangerous crowd situations, and are always available to help truckers or others when driving. However, after the clubhouse and bar were nearly burnt to the ground by Chuck, the leader of one of the other motorcycle clubs

here in Los Angeles, which led us to also find out about his illegal drug trafficking that landed him behind bars—the community has been even more supportive. So supportive, that Drake was actually talking about hiring some extra help because we, the brothers of Sons of Sin and I, just don't seem to be enough anymore.

It's not that I mind the extra help because, to be honest, spending more time at Sinner's Den means less time for me to race. It's just that Sinner's Den is a motorcycle club thing. It's always had a Sons of Sin member behind it, so to allow outsiders in just seems wrong.

A wave of nausea hits me and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to fight it off. I need to get myself together. I have to help one of the brothers, Wilder, build something for his girlfriend, Bryar. Girlfriend, there's a foreign concept for the Sons of Sin brothers, or at least it was until they started pairing off. First Drake and Zoey, then Wilder and Bryar, I'm just waiting for the day when Stryker and Arbor realize they are meant to be together. Hell, even Brayzen is a one-woman man since meeting Isla. It's kind of ridiculous. They all keep telling me how I'll meet the right one someday, like I'm missing something out of life, but they don't get it. I like my life. I have the life I want. I don't want just one girl.

My phone starts to ring from the nightstand. It's already pretty late in the day, but between work, alcohol, and Kelly—I was dead tired last night. I slowly sit up in the bed before getting up and heading for the shower. I need to get to Wilder, but I definitely need to shower first. It's going to be a busy day and then tonight I have the races. It's the best night of the week so far. Talon, the new Sons of Sin prospect, is saving my ass. I was so thankful when he said he knew someone who could take John's place. I mean, I'm going to win no matter what because I don't lose, but at least it's kind of a race as long as there is another car beside me. I mean, that's what the crowd wants. They hold onto the hope that the poor fool next to me might actually beat me. I guess they like the disappointment.

I grab the keys to my bike and head out the door. I'm just putting my helmet on when my phone starts ringing again. I grab it and see it's Wilder. "Damn, dude, don't get your panties in a bunch, I'm on my damn way."

"Have you left yet?" he asks, but his tone sounds worried. Instantly, I'm on alert.

"No, why?"

"There's a situation down at Daughters of Darkness strip club. Brayzen could use some backup. I'm heading that way, but you're still closer."

"I'm on my way," I tell him, as I throw my helmet on and start my bike, the engine roaring to life. I didn't even think or care to ask what kind of situation. If Brayzen needs backup then I'm there, because that's what we do. We stick by one another through thick and thin. The club is like a family.

The Daughters of Darkness strip club is one of the nicest strip clubs, well as nice as a strip club can be in Los Angeles, and usually takes about twenty minutes to reach it from the Sons of Sin clubhouse, but I made it in half the time today. It's a good thing speed doesn't scare me. I come to a grinding halt in a parking space facing the front door. Taking off my helmet, it doesn't take long to recognize the other bikes parked to the left of me. Jerick.

Jerick started running around with Chuck's club when he was just a teen. I remember him vaguely. Back then, he had seemed like a naïve nice kid looking for something to belong to. Within a year, he was their newest prospect, then a full-fledged member. There was no time to try and save him. For whatever reason, he felt a loyalty to Chuck that couldn't be swayed. Now, he's taken over the club from what I've heard and it looks like he's out to give Brayzen a hard time.

I stomp up to the front door. When I enter, I'm not shocked to find it mostly empty.

Most people, even the regulars, don't hit a bar or strip club this early. The room is still dimly lit and the bartender looks like he's ready to bolt. A couple of girls are dancing on the stage, but they aren't really into it. There are a few stragglers perched around the stage, but none of them are paying attention to the girls. All eyes are fixed on the scene in the middle of the room. Brayzen and Jerick, standing toe-to-toe. Two of Jerick's trusted followers flanking either side of him. Even from here, I can tell words are being said.

My blood boils. Jerick and his low lives have their side of town. They have their territory that we all stay off of. They need to remember the lines, because right now they are on neutral ground but it's pretty damn close to Sons of Sin land. I march over to where they are standing. "What seems to be the problem here?" I ask. Jerick glares at me.

"Stay out of it, Sons of Sin."

I laugh, but it's a sarcastic one. "No can do."

"This is between me and Brayzen," he says, pointing to my cousin.

"Then it involves me. Brayzen and Sons of Sin are one and the same, you know that. Brayzen is family, so it involves me now," I tell him, as I meet his glare with one of my own.

The front door opens and Talon, who doesn't hesitate to jump in the middle, marches over with a pissed-off look on his face. His hands are balled into fists. "Well, well, well, what do we have here?"

"Go home, Jerick," Talon spits out.

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“Ha! I’m just getting started. I didn’t know you were wanting to join a club. I would have opened my arms to ya so you wouldn’t have to slum it with these guys,” Jerick says, pointing between Brayzen and me.

Talon shakes his head before stepping between Brayzen and Jerick. Once Talon is in his face, he pushes Jerick back. “Cut your shit, Jerick. Instead of running around being a jackass, why don’t you go help your sister out and take care of your dad? Why don’t you go do something useful instead of hanging around, being the lowlife you are being right now?” Jerick’s jaw clenches. “Your dad would be so damn ashamed if he knew the truth.” That was the last straw for Jerick, I guess. He pulls his arm back and sends his fist flying forward, but Talon is quick. He dodges him and manages to grab Jerick’s arm, twisting it behind him. “You wanna hit me, baby boy, you just keep swinging.” He shoves him forward causing Jerick to stumble. “This is Sons of Sin territory; you best stay out of it.”

Jerick staggers to his feet and starts to head for the door with his friends following. “Screw you,” Jerick mumbles.

Talon scoffs. “You wanna turn around like a real man and say that to my face?” Jerick turns around and flips us off. “Real cute, Jerick.”

One of Jerick’s friends spits on the carpet and that’s when my anger flares. I start to stalk forward when Brayzen pulls me back. “You do that again, and I’ll rub your damn nose in it like the dog you are,” I bite out.

They all turn to leave when Talon steps forward and says, “Oh and, Jerick—” Jerick looks over his shoulder, his blonde hair falling into his eyes. “The next time your

sister has a bruise on her, I don't care if it's from her running into something or what, I'm coming after you, no questions asked." Jerick turns and leaves with a scowl on his face.

Talon's hands are still balled into fists and the veins in his neck strain against his skin. He's pissed, but somehow, he managed to keep it in check. If he had swung at me, I would have laid him out on the ground and then been carted off to jail. I got to give the new kid props. I turn to him. "You friends with Jerick?" From the way they talked to one another, I'd say they were friends and that could be an issue for the club.

Talon shakes his head. "Not anymore. Once upon a time, yes, but he's changed. I'm still friends with his sister, but she's nothing like him. She's a good person. I don't know what happened to Jerick, but I can't stomach to be around him," he explains, with a look of disgust on his face.

The door opens again and Wilder followed by Stryker comes rushing in. "Did I miss it?" Wilder asks, slightly out of breath.

I nod, deciding to give credit where it's due, and not calling out the fact that Talon has a history that could be a conflict for the club, because I think he just proved his loyalty. "Yep, Talon here put an end to it real quick and without any bloodshed." I pat Talon's shoulder as we make our way over to Sinner's Den.

Three

Annistyn

I get to class just in time to slide into a seat next to Vienna. She's my other best friend, well, my only other friend really. Vienna and I met when she and Talon dated a few years ago. They didn't work out, but luckily, they ended on mutual terms

because we've maintained a friendship since then. I may be a bit of a tomboy. I mean, I'm totally into cars, motorcycles, and sports, but I'm also a girl and there are some things you just can't discuss or do with a guy best friend. I give Talon major props though, because he has been amazing my entire life. I can't even begin to tell you how many times he's gone shoe shopping with me and held my purse without complaining or picked up things only girls need one time a month. He's a trooper and I'm lucky to have him, but sometimes a girl just needs some girl talk.

Vienna is a petite little thing. She's only four feet eleven inches and she's all hair. She's got a head full of long black curls. Her hair reminds me of the girl that used to play on that show, *Felicity*. I remember my babysitter watching it and I was always in awe of her hair. Well, Vienna has that same hair. She pulls it off with all of her Italian features. She looks over at me. "Hey, girl! I was beginning to worry you weren't going to make it."

I nod my head. "That makes two of us. I hit traffic coming in from my side of town, plus I was late getting out of the house. Talon apparently left out in a hurry, and you know me, I'm used to him knocking on the bathroom door to get me out of the shower on time."

Vienna laughs. "Girl, you're a mess."

I shrug and our teacher walks in. For the next two hours, I listen to him go on and on about diseases and the effects they have on our body and how to treat them. My eyelids are heavy but I fight it. After class, I gather my things along with Vienna and we head out the door. "So, you'll never guess what Talon got me."

"What?" she asks.

"An invite to Barker Tobin's drag races tonight."

“What?” she exclaims loudly. People around us actually stop walking and look at us like we're about to catfight or something. I shush her and pick up my pace in walking. “Well, I’m sorry, but that’s huge news and you should have told me the minute you sat your ass down beside me in class.”

I shake my head at her because she’s definitely overreacting about this news. I mean, yes, I guess it’s kind of big in the way of money, or at least that’s how I see it, but I know Vienna. She thinks the Sons of Sin are hot and that’s what she’s thinking about right now. I can’t even begin to consider the idea of a hot boy or possibly a boyfriend. There’s no way I could balance anything like that on top of everything else that I have going on in my life. I’m barely juggling as is.

“Maybe because I barely managed to get to class before it started and it’s not exactly a class that you can ignore. So, I’m telling you now,” I tell her.

Vienna is beaming at me. “Girl! We have to go and find you something to wear; this is so epic.”

“Vienna, I’m wearing my work uniform because I have to try and squeeze the race in before my shift. I’m going to throw on some leggings underneath it and call it a night. Besides, no one is going to care what I’m wearing. They’re there to watch the race.”

Vienna gives me a look like I’m crazy. “Okay, Annistyn, I know you don’t really care, but you’re hot! Everyone will notice what you wear, especially Barker.”

I roll my eyes. “Doubtful, very doubtful.”

I watch as she shakes her head at me and laughs. “You want to grab lunch?” I just nod my head in agreement.

I rush into the apartment with a bag of Funyuns and a large Mountain Dew that I picked up at the local convenience store on the way home from college and visiting my dad. It's my dinner. Yes, I know I'm so healthy, but let's face it, I don't have time to cook. At this rate, I'll barely have time to scarf these down and get ready for work before heading to the race.

I rush around getting ready. I slip on a pair of black leggings to go under the ridiculously short black leather dress I have to wear as part of my uniform for work. I can just take the leggings off when I get to the club. I grab my red, Mary Jane heels and red leather jacket before I head out to my car. Just as I'm about to head out the door, I check my reflection in the mirror, trying to make sure I'm work ready. My long, blonde hair is curled and resting just past my shoulders, my fake eyelashes and red lipstick are in place. I shake my head because the makeup requirements at the club are dumb, but we have to do them or Jeff, the owner, will kick me to the curb and I can't afford that right now.

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Once I'm in my car, I plug in my phone and turn up my favorite band New Years Day to get me ready for this race. As I make my way to the Sons of Sin Clubhouse, I have to steady the nerves attempting to take over my body. I pull into the alley behind the clubhouse and spot Talon waiting for me. He smiles and comes over to me. I roll down the window and pause the music. "I was getting worried."

"Sorry, got a late start after seeing dad. So, what do I do?" I ask.

He points ahead of me. "You're in the last race. Get behind the black Challenger and just wait. When they move forward you move forward." I scan the cars, but I don't see Barker's Camaro anywhere. I turn back and look at Talon and as if he can read my mind. "Barker should be here any minute now. Go line up. I'll hang out here."

I roll my window up and drive forward. As I'm sitting in the line waiting for my turn, I take in my surroundings. The alleyway doesn't have a lot of light, which is both a good and bad thing. People are lined up against the walls of the buildings. I notice money being passed back and forth and that's when I remember I didn't give my buy-in to Talon. I send him a quick text. His reply is instant and infuriating. "Don't worry about it. You've got this in the bag." I hope he's right.

By the time we get down to only one car in front of me with no sign of Barker, I really start to worry. What if he doesn't make it? What happens then? The cars in front of me take off once they are signaled and now I'm at the starting line. I'm staring down the alley, but there's still not a car beside me. Seriously, how can you host a race and not show up for it?

Rolling down my window, I holler for Talon. He appears and I can tell he's worried

my bad side is about to come out. “Where the hell is he?”

“He must be running late,” he replies with a shrug.

“Ya think?!”

He holds his hands up in a calming gesture. “Just give him a few minutes. He’ll be here.”

“I’m going to be late and you know I can’t be.”

“You won’t. I promise.” Just as the words leave my body, the sound of heavy metal fills the night air. The bass thumps down the alley just as the Camaro comes up beside me. The passenger side door opens and a leggy redhead with pumped-up lips and boobs steps out of the car with a smirk plastered on her face. I make a noise of disgust in the back of my throat and roll my eyes.

“It’s about damn time,” I mutter, as I roll my window back up. Turning the music loud enough to drown out the beating of my heart. I take a deep breath, gripping the wheel I stare down the alley, visualizing the win. I don’t look to the side, but I already know that he can’t see me, thanks to my extremely darkened windows. I watch as Zoey, Drake’s fiancé, steps between the two cars. She raises the flag and then drops it to the ground and we’re off.

I fly down the alley, the speed vibrates through the car and courses through my body. The sweat forms at the back of my neck and even the music fades away. The sidelines of people and buildings are nothing but a blur. When I reach the end of the alley, otherwise known as the finish line, I take a deep breath trying to calm down the slamming of my heart. I watch as Barker’s Camaro pulls up alongside mine. Oh crap! I just beat Barker. At first, I’m shocked, then I think of something.

I get out of the car and make my way over to his. He rolls his window down and I have to bite back a laugh at the stunned look on his face. Apparently, Talon didn't tell him I was a girl. I smirk. "That's right, Barker Tobin, you just got beat by a girl." I lean forward but for a moment, I forget what I was about to say because those dark eyes hypnotize me. "Maybe next time you could do us all the courtesy of actually showing up on time, Romeo," I say, as I stand up and make my way over to my car where Talon is now standing. "I have to get to work. Collect my winnings. See you at home," I tell him, as he opens the door for me.

The whole way to the club I'm high on winning and haunted by those eyes.

Four

Barker

I had been keeping an eye on the clock, but then Amy was doing things that distracted me. Before I knew it, I was late and not just a little late, but really late. I rushed toward my Camaro with Amy wobbling after me. Damn, I was going to have to race in order to make it to the actual race on time. I should have been there over an hour ago. Getting caught at the red light, I glance at the clock. Damn it! I should be at the starting line right now and I'm still fifteen minutes away.

I turn down the alley and see the black Honda Civic already sitting at the line. Talon is standing next to the car. This must be his friend. Got to admit, this dude has a nice car, but it's going to be an easy win I'm sure. As I come to a stop at the start line, I turn to Amy. "Time to go babe." She tosses her fake hair over her shoulder and gets out of the car.

Zoey steps between both cars with the flag in her hand. I glance at the car next to me, but the windows are so tinted that I can't even make out the guy inside. I shrug and turn back to the alley. My posture is relaxed as I wait for Zoey to drop the flag. I

notice some of my Sons of Sin brothers and nod in their direction. They kind of shake their heads at me. I should have known they'd be pissed that I was late. Gunner is standing in the crowd too. He looks unsure, but he's here, that's a step in the right direction. The guy is my friend, but he's got to get his shit together. Maybe, with the motivation of joining the club, he can.

I'm lost in thought when Zoey drops the flag. It isn't until I see the Civic lunges forward, away from the start line, down the alley, and toward the finish line, taking my win with him. I curse out loud as I come to a stop beside the Civic. I hate losing, but I'm not afraid to admit when I've lost. I see Talon approaching as the driver-side door opens. I know how to fix this. I'll just double the stakes if we race again. He'll be cocky enough after beating me now to think he can have the same luck twice. He'll think he's got this in the bag.

However, my entire train of thought comes to a screeching halt when I see the red heels step out of the car. The most beautiful girl I've ever seen gets out and makes her way towards me. I take her in. She is all curves and walks with a quiet confidence, but you can tell she doesn't notice the attention thrown her way. She has blonde hair and I can't tell if it's bleach blonde or naturally blonde with the poor lighting. I can tell she has high cheekbones and a set of amazingly full lips. The red lipstick she's wearing doesn't really look like her, but it does amazing things for those lips. Once she's close enough, she leans down and the floral scent she's wearing invades my space and her sage green eyes render me speechless.

This girl smirks. "That's right, Barker Tobin, you just got beat by a girl." She pauses, almost hesitates on her next line for just a moment. A moment where I hope she's as affected by me as I am by her. "Maybe next time you could do us all the courtesy of actually showing up on time, Romeo." Then she stands and walks away. I'm just sitting there like a dumbass. I didn't even reply to her. I watch as she says something to Talon then gets in her Civic and takes off again.

I take my first deep breath once her taillights are gone. What the hell was that? I get out of the car and listen as people laugh or give me an apology for my loss. I just shake it off as I approach Talon. “Doesn’t she want to collect her winnings?”

“She had to get to work,” he says, but I can see the worry in his eyes. John comes over and hands me a wad of cash.

“Are you taking the winnings for her?” I ask. Talon nods and I hand the money to him.

Talon scratches at the stubble coating his jawline. “I’m sorry about you losing.”

I wave him off. “You win some, you lose some, but you know you could have told me Annistyn was a girl.”

Talon looks at me suspiciously. “Would it have made a difference?”

I want to say no, but that’d probably be a lie. I probably would have laughed, because I’ve never met a girl who knew anything more about a car besides how to start it. To think of one racing seems outrageous to me. I give him the only answer I can. “I don’t know.” We stand there in silence for a moment. “Come on, let’s go get a drink,” I tell him, in hopes of learning more about Annistyn.

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It's Sunday. It's been a hectic couple of days since the races. Sinner's Den has been overrun with customers. I've been working a lot of extra hours to make up for the loss of the race the other night. Just the thought of the race has my mind wandering back to Annistyn. She was different from any girl I had ever met before, that much was obvious. I hadn't learned much about her from Talon. The only thing I got out of him was that she's his roommate, best friend, and currently attending nursing school. For whatever reason, that wasn't enough to satisfy my curiosity.

Drake comes out of the bar's office and he looks stressed to hell. "What's up?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Not much, just trying to find us a couple of waitresses to help out around here. I don't know how we're going to keep up with everything. This place is booming."

"Well, that's good, but I get what you mean. Listen, I'll be happy to work every night that I can until we can get it figured out," I tell him.

"What are we trying to get figured out?" Wilder asks, as he comes up and takes a seat at the bar's counter.

"The booming business," I reply.

"I've got an idea." Wilder turns around and hollers, "Hey prospect!" Talon turns around and nods his head. "You have a job?"

“I work from home creating web pages and whatnot for companies. Why?” he asks.

“Well, we need some more waitresses, but I’m thinking you will have to do for now,” Wilder says, slapping his hand against his back.

“I can handle that. I’ll try to get the word out, too, that you’re looking for some help,” Talon tells us before he heads to the storage room.

I can handle this. Working with Talon will be cool and hopefully, Annistyn might show up at the bar every now and then to see her friend.

Five

Annistyn

I love heels, but my feet are screaming at me as I leave the Vixens club. Tonight was nonstop as soon as I walked through the doors. I can’t complain because I made killer tips and we all know I need them. As I step outside, I notice that it’s sprinkling. Hopefully, any major storms will hold off until I make it back to my part of Los Angeles. I hear a small whimpering sound coming from the side of the building. I grab the pepper spray out of my bag before I toss it in the car. Slowly, I make my way and peek around the building. I don’t see anything but the dumpsters. Just as I turn to walk away, I hear it again. I walk toward the dumpster. When I look down, I see a small white and gray puppy cowering in the corner. My heart breaks for him.

I kneel down and hold my hand out. “Hey buddy, come here,” I coo at him. He gives me a fearful look, but I stay right where I am. I know I need to give him time to come to me. Thunder roars above us and the puppy comes dashing toward me. I scoop him up in my arms and rush toward my car. We make it inside the car just as the sky opens up and rain pours down. “Just in time little dude,” I tell him, as I pet his soft fur. I think he might have some husky in him. He lies down in the passenger seat next

to my bag and I turn on the heater to keep us warm as we make our way home.

When I get home, Talon is nowhere to be found. Luckily, the storm hasn't hit this part of town yet, so I rush into the bathroom and take a quick shower to get the stench of the club off my skin—then the puppy so he isn't dirty. Once I'm done, I throw on some sweats, my old 'book nerd' t-shirt (that has definitely seen better days), and a pair of socks. I climb into bed next to the puppy who I'm going to call Augustus after one of my favorite book characters. With the TV playing to try and drown out the sound of the storm that's starting to brew outside, I lay down with the puppy in my arms. Before I know it, we are both sound asleep.

"Annistyn, why does this place smell like a wet dog?" Talon's voice breaks through my sleep. I growl sounding like a dog myself as I roll out of bed. Talon knows I hate being woken up.

I open my door fully and make my way out into the living room. "Seriously dude! Like what the hell? You couldn't wait until the morning to ask that question?"

Talon laughs. "I forgot how scary you are when you first wake up. It's like the dragon guarding Sleeping Beauty is fixing to attack me." I glare at him. "Okay, in my defense, I didn't think it was this late. I figured you would have just gotten off from the club and still be awake. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I mumble.

Talon smiles. "You hungry?" Damn it, why does he even ask that question? He knows I'm always hungry. I just nod my head as I sink down onto the couch. "I'll fix us something," he says, as he heads into the kitchen.

He returns with a plate of reheated pizza and a bottle of water. "Thank you," I tell him, as he takes a seat next to me. We eat in silence until a tiny bark fills the room.

My eyes go wide as Talon gives me an accusatory look. I jump up and make my way to the room, where I find Augustus staring down at the floor from the bed. I rush over and pick him up. “I’m so sorry little dude,” I tell him. When I turn around, Talon is standing in the doorway with a shocked look on his face.

“What the hell, Annistyn?”

I shrug with Augustus in my arms. “What?”

He gives me a look of disbelief. “I asked you why it smelled like a wet dog and you said you didn’t know.”

I hold up my finger to stop him. “Actually, I never answered that question.”

“Damn it, Annistyn, why do you have a dog?”

I sit down with him in my lap. “Because I found him and it was fixing to storm and he was scared.”

“He was scared?” Talon asks me in a deadpan tone. I nod my head. “Annistyn, we can’t keep the dog.”

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“Why not? I mean, look at this face,” I tell him, holding Augustus up in his face while I pout.

He drops his head back and curses. “Okay, okay we’ll try it.”

I knew I’d win. I mean, honestly, how can you not love Augustus? “So how was your day?” I ask, now that Talon’s playing with him.

“Good, but super busy. Hey, I found an interesting fact today that you might be interested in.”

“What’s that?” I ask him.

“Sinner’s Den, the Sons of Sin bar, is looking for waitresses. You could apply,” he tells me.

I shake my head. “I think us working that close together and sharing an apartment would be too much.”

Talon looks disappointed. “Okay, I won’t push it, but please know that it’s a possibility and you should consider it. It’ll get you out of that sleazy club.”

“I’ll think about it.” I go to bed thinking about it. I do my homework thinking about it, and I go to visit my dad the next day, thinking about it with every intention of applying for the job. Sinner’s Den is so busy, I’m sure I’d make great tips. I could request to work any weeknight and any time on the weekends so it’d still work with my classes and visiting dad. This is going to be great.

Six

Barker

There's no way I've been asleep for more than an hour, shit, that's barely a nap. Work was crazy busy, but Talon mentioned that Annistyn was interested in applying for a waitress position and asked if I'd be okay with it. Inside I was way too excited, but I kept my body and response calm. However, the rest of the night I had messed up more than I should have because my mind was elsewhere. She was distracting and I needed to get my shit together, because if I didn't, I'd end up closing the bar with all my little mistakes. I'd end up costing us more money than we were making because of my distraction. If I was this distracted by just hearing she was interested in working here, then how was I going to stay focused on my job if she's working beside me?

I'm wide awake now and my stomach grumbles in hunger. There's one little truck stop diner heading out of town that is open twenty-four seven, and it looks like that's where I'm going. I don't pay much attention to what I grab before heading out to my bike. For some reason, it's calling to me tonight. The idea of the open road, the wind whipping past me, the freedom that the bike allows me. I start to climb on when the sky rumbles above me.

Of course, there's a storm trying to move in. I place my helmet back and walk over to my car. I should see if Gunner is awake and wants to grab some food. I sit there, my phone in my hand, and debate on whether or not I want company. In the end, I toss my phone aside and start my car and make my way through town.

I'm halfway to the diner when I spot her. Half her hair is pinned back, her face clean of all makeup, and she's dressed in sweats and a large t-shirt with a pair of flip flops. I scan the area trying to figure out what in the world she's doing out here by herself this time of night.

I pull up beside her and she goes into high alert and I notice her gripping something in her hand. When she recognizes the car, her entire demeanor changes; her shoulders relax and she smirks. I roll my window down. “Well, well, if it isn’t the speed princess.”

“Romeo,” she says, with a roll of her eyes.

I chuckle. “What are you doing out here so late at night?”

She squares her shoulders. “I could ask you the same thing. Looking for your next harlot?” Now, it’s my turn to smirk. Clearly, she knows my reputation, but I can tell she doesn’t like it. Right now, I don’t like it. “I suggest you look somewhere else.”

“Harlot?” I ask. I hadn’t heard that term since my granddaddy passed away.

She raises her eyebrows. “It’s another term for hooker.”

I laugh. “Well, I certainly didn’t think you were trying to be a harlot dressed like that.” She scoffs, and for a moment I think I’ve offended her. She’s one tough cookie to figure out. A bark comes from the darkness followed by a puppy. I put the car in park while Annistyn bends down to grab the dog. As I get out, I say, “Who is this cutie?” I reach out and pet his head.

“This is Augustus.” She watches as I stroke the dog. “I didn’t know you were a dog person.”

“Oh Annistyn, there’s a lot you don’t know about me,” I tell her with a wink.

“Ugh! You just had to go and ruin the moment, didn’t you?” she teases me, and I like it. No girl ever teases me, they all just fall to my beck and call but this... it’s different.

I shrug while I tuck my hands inside my front pockets. “What can I say, I have a talent for it.”

“I’d say,” she snips back.

“So, you never answered my question.”

Annistyn laughs and I watch as her eyes crinkle. “I thought that’d be obvious,” she says, holding up Augustus. “What about you, Romeo? Or are you, in fact, looking for a harlot?”

“Hell no,” I laugh. “Woke up, couldn’t get back to sleep, so I decided to go grab some food.”

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“I doubt there is anything open.”

“I know a place. It’s always open,” I tell her with a smile.

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “I bet you do.”

I watch as she turns around and starts to head back for the front door. “I’ll see you around Speed Princess.”

Annistyn looks over her shoulder, a slight smile on her face. “At the finish line, you can bet on it.”

I watch her sashay up to the steps. Damn, this girl is a spitfire and I love it. No wonder I can’t seem to shake her. I’m not sure I’d want to even if I could. I climb back into the car and head toward the diner. As I drive, I try to list all the reasons why harboring these thoughts for Annistyn is a bad idea. I try to talk myself away from everything, but I realize I can’t. I’m screwed.

Seven

Annistyn

I place Augustus inside the bathroom and put the baby gate in front of the door. Talon and I didn’t want him making a mess all over the house, so we came up with this solution. Once Augustus is settled in, I sit on my bed and slip on my wedges. Talon and I are headed to visit with my dad. I stop by every day I’m on that side of the city for class, which is at least four days a week. Then on Sundays, Talon and I go

together for the afternoon normally. Vienna and Talon also stop by throughout the week to check in on him and visit. I'm so thankful for their help.

I head out into the living room. Talon is standing by the door quickly typing away at his phone. When I enter, he looks up. "You ready?"

"Yep," I tell him, as we head outside. Talon is still texting away. He slides behind the wheel of the car and I eye him. I don't want him driving if he's preoccupied, and he definitely seems that way right now. "You okay?"

"Yeah, why?" he asks, as he glances at me.

I shrug. "You just seemed preoccupied with whatever is going on with your phone."

"No, I'm good." He starts the car, and we head toward the home where my dad is a current resident. Talon actually seems too good, so maybe I'm just worrying over nothing. He's just not one to be crazy over his phone. You get lucky if he answers it most of the time, so to see him so immersed in texting was a little bit of a shock. Halfway to our destination Talon asks, "So, have you considered the job at Sinner's Den anymore?"

"Actually, I have. I was thinking that since they are so busy, I'd still make some great tips, so I might be able to manage it. It'd definitely be a step up from working at Vixens. I actually think I'll try it if you think it'll be okay between us," I tell him. I won't lie, I still worry that we'll end up spending too much time together, or I'll be invading his space, or stepping on his toes. Talon is my best friend, always has been, and the last thing I want to do is to put extra stress on him that causes me to lose his friendship.

Talon laughs. "It'll be fine, Annistyn. You worry too much. I love ya, but you need to chill. Hell, it'd be easier for me if you did work there. At least then I wouldn't be

worried about Jerick and his losers coming in and harassing you.”

“And you say I worry too much,” I look at him, giving him a pointed look.

“Yes, you do. You worry about things that will never happen. I worry about Jerick being his normal self.” As we pull into the parking lot, I take a deep breath. I have a love-hate relationship with this place. I’m thankful that they are able to take care of my dad and his failing health. I’m thankful that he is well taken care of and that the nurses here seem to truly care, but then I hate it. I hate that he has to be in this place. I hate that I can’t just take care of him myself, but I’m not able to and he wouldn’t allow it anyways. This was his idea and what he wanted and I have to respect that decision, I have to remember that. Talon pats my knee. “You ready?” I take a deep breath and nod. Talon grabs the food as I get out of the car and we head inside.

The assisted living home, or nursing home, always has an overwhelming smell of sanitizer, but at least the place is clean. As we make our way down the hall, we say hi to some of the other residents until we reach my dad’s room. He’s sitting in his recliner watching some sporting event on his TV with the paper in his lap. “Hi Daddy,” I say to him.

“Annistyn,” he says, holding his arms out to me. There’s nothing like my daddy’s hugs. “Talon,” he says, once he notices him. I step out of the way so they can talk. I notice Cora, one of my dad’s nurses, standing in the doorway—she waves me over.

“Hey Cora, everything okay?” I ask, once I’m close enough.

She has a grim look on her face. “Yeah, but I just wanted to let you know that the dialysis rates have gone up, which means the twenty percent co-pay on your father’s insurance has gone up as well.”

My heart sinks into my stomach. Dad has insurance and you would think just because

he's covered that everything would be okay, but it's not. You don't consider that twenty percent co-pay that you have to cover out of pocket. Let me tell you, that twenty percent may not seem like a lot, but it adds up quickly. "Do you know how much the increase is?"

"Probably about fifty dollars a treatment," she says apologetically. I give her the best smile I can muster. That's one hundred and fifty dollars a week I need to come up with. "Dolores can give the exact number if you need it. I'm so sorry, Annistyn."

I wave off her sympathy. "It's okay. I'm just glad he has y'all to help take care of him." As I head back to my dad and Talon, there is a sick knot of dread in my stomach. There goes changing jobs. There is no way I'll be able to afford the change now. I'm going to need to try and pick up an extra shift at Vixens now too. I hate to break this news to Talon, but at least he'll understand.

We spent the afternoon with my dad watching sports, playing poker, talking cars, and eating junk. It's our Sunday ritual and I'm definitely going to miss Talon once he's an actual member of the motorcycle club, because Sunday is their day. My eyes burn with unshed tears as I hug my dad and we say goodbye. I don't know why I'm so emotional right now.

On the way back home, I break the news to Talon that, unfortunately, I'll be staying at Vixens Strip Club. He tries to smile and play it off like the news isn't a big deal, but I can see the disappointment in his eyes. I just hope the disappointment is in the situation and not me. I'm really trying my best and I don't want him to think I'm giving up.

When we get home, Talon makes dinner while I play with Augustus, and then before I call it a night, Talon looks over at me on the couch. "It'll work out. We'll get you

out of that club and manage the money for your dad's treatment."

"It's okay, Talon. I mean, it's not like I'm having to dance at the club," I tell him, and that is true... for now. I've never told him how many times I've been asked to dance there and I certainly don't tell him that if my dad's medical expenses keep rising, I may just end up there. I cringe at the idea, but my dad sacrificed everything to raise me, and I'll do the same for him—even if it means me and a pole.

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Eight

Barker

I've restocked the bar and mopped the floor. Now, I'm wiping down the counters when Talon, who looks worried or distracted, comes in. I actually forgot he was on the schedule tonight. "Hey man," I greet him as he comes in. He nods his head, but doesn't say anything which is odd. I don't push him though, because maybe he's had a bad day. If he's anything like me, he probably wants to be left alone.

We're halfway through our shift and on Talon's fifth mistake of the night, when I finally have to ask. "Man, are you okay? You seem distracted as hell."

Talon sighs and tosses the rag he had tucked into his back pocket onto the counter. "I'm sorry. I'm just stressed." He runs a hand roughly through his dark hair.

"Well, if you want to talk about it, I'll listen," I offer, because I'm not sure what else I can do about it.

He nods. "It's just Annistyn." Of course, at the drop of her name my interest is piqued. Problem is, over the last few days, I've tried to ask around and see if Annistyn and Talon are an actual thing or not. I mean, maybe they are just friends, but it'd be odd. Most girls that look like Annistyn don't have just friends of the male gender. No one really had an answer for me, which was disappointing. Most assumed they were just friends but none could actually confirm that. "She was going to come and apply to work here, but then something came up, and now she's not going to. I just wish I could do more to help her out, you know?"

I see an opening and I'm going to take it. "Maybe she did a good thing by not taking this job. I mean, from what I've heard, working with your girlfriend is like relationship suicide for most."

Talon's dark brown eyes get large. "Annistyn isn't my girlfriend."

"She's not?" I ask, sounding surprised.

I listen to him laugh. "No, she's my best friend. Just my friend, always has been, always will be."

"Gotcha," I tell him, and for whatever reason his answer makes my heart sing with joy. The moment I realize that, I try to kill it out. There's no way my heart should be that happy over hearing they aren't a couple. Get yourself together, Barker.

When Talon's phone starts singing. I notice the look on his face change instantly. A moment ago he was laughing and flirting with a redhead. His earlier look of concern had passed but now... he looks worried again. His brows are pulled together as he pulls his phone from his pocket. I watch as he answers it and see the concern and then anger fill his stance. I walk over to find out what's wrong. "I'm sorry, I need to go. That was Annistyn. Her dad had an issue and was rushed to the hospital, and her jackass of a boss won't let her leave."

I hold up my hand and grab my phone dialing Zayde. Zayde hasn't been around much but I know he'll cover. His dad used to run Sons of Sin but it was completely different back then from what it is now. He has a twin sister, Zoey, that is engaged to Drake. "Hey, can you or Wilder or Stryker get to the bar? Talon has a problem he needs to take care of, and I'd like to ride with him. It's kind of an emergency."

“Yeah, give me ten and I’ll be there and I’ll get someone to back me up,” Zayde says into the phone.

After I hang up, Talon looks at me. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know, but that’s the thing about the club. We have each other’s backs. If you have a problem, it’s technically all of our problem. So, I’m going. I’ve got your back.” Eight minutes later Zayde, Drake, and Wilder all come rushing through the door to hold down the fort. “Thanks, guys,” I tell them, as Talon and I rush out to our bikes. I follow Talon’s lead until we pull in front of the hospital. He rushes to the desk and asks about Gabe Tarantino, whom I’m guessing is Annistyn’s father. The lady at the front asks his relation and when he falters for a second, she catches it.

“Only immediate family can get back to see him or find out his condition,” she says, in a no-nonsense tone.

Talon turns around and runs his hands through his hair while letting out a string of curses. “Look, we’ll just go get Annistyn.”

“We can’t. Jeff won’t let her go. He’ll fire her and she can’t afford to lose the job; that’s why she didn’t come to work at Sinner’s Den,” he says.

At the name Jeff, my mind starts to possibly connect some dots. “Wait, Jeff Folsom? As in Vixens Strip Club?” I couldn’t believe my ears. Annistyn was a stripper? I mean, yeah, she had the body for it, but I just couldn’t picture her on a pole. It was clear she needed the money or otherwise, she wouldn’t be working there. The idea of her working at that place made my skin crawl, and before I could think anything through, I was rushing out to my bike with Talon on my heels. Annistyn wasn’t going to be working there anymore. She could come work at the clubhouse or hell go to work for one of the Sons of Sin brothers, Brayzen, down at Daughters of Darkness. At least his strip joint had some class. I hear Talon’s bike roaring behind me as I

navigate to the outskirts of Los Angeles.

Just seeing the black and red sign announcing Vixens Strip Club makes my stomach churn. Annistyn doesn't belong in a place like this. I throw my kickstand down and toss my helmet on the seat before rushing inside. I stomp past the bouncer and scan the area looking for Annistyn. I spot her at a table, tray in hand, serving drinks. She looks as amazing as she did the last time I saw her, but she's all dolled up like the night at the races. I let out a sigh of relief because I had it all wrong, she's not a stripper.

I close the distance between us, before I grab the tray, toss it on the bar, and slip my hand around her forearm. "What the hell?" she asks angrily, as she whips around toward me. When her eyes land on me, she looks stunned and then quickly moves to scan the rest of the area. The minute she sees Talon, she starts to tremble all over. "Is he...?" she asks, unable to finish the question.

"We don't know. They won't let me back because I'm not immediate family," Talon says apologetically.

I watch as tears spring into Annistyn's eyes. She takes a deep breath to try and control her emotions and that small gesture pisses me off. "We're going there now. You're coming with us," I tell her, as I start to pull her with me. For a moment, she follows behind me but then she stops.

"I can't," she says sternly.

I turn around to face her, but I notice Jeff approaching us—his greasy slicked-back hair, protruding beer belly, and beady eyes. Everything about him disgusts me. "A Sons of Sin boy in my strip club. You're crossing enemy lines, aren't ya?"

I shrug. "Not the way I see it. I'm coming to help a friend out who you should be

allowed to leave to check on her dad.”

“She’ll be off in a few hours and free to go then,” he says coldly.

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I step forward. “You listen here, you scummy son of a bitch. She’s going now, and you know what, she’s not coming back. Annistyn is too damn classy for this nasty-ass place you call a business. Give her the check you owe her and we will get out of here,” I tell him. Jeff glares at me, but eventually pulls out his wallet and hands me a wad of one-hundred-dollar bills. I take it, then grab Annistyn’s hand and pull her outside with me.

When I turn around, she’s crying. Mascara runs down her beautiful face and a part of me just wants to pull her into my arms. I hold out the wad of money Jeff gave me. “If this doesn’t cover what he owes you, then I’ll give you the rest,” I tell her.

Annistyn slaps my hand away. “What have you done?” she cries out. “I needed that job. I had to have that job!” Annistyn turns around and takes off toward the building, but Talon drops her belongings on the ground and wraps his arms around her waist. “Let me go!” she bellows, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t confused right now.

“Annistyn, calm down. Barker is right. Your dad needs you right now. Let’s worry about the damn job later.” Annistyn calms down and walks to the other side of the parking lot. I’m guessing she’s collecting herself.

I walk toward Talon and hand him the money. He nods and zips the money up in her bag. “I was honestly just trying to help. She can have the job at the clubhouse. I’ll make sure she’s making what she makes here. Why does she need so much money anyway?”

Talon sighs as he watches Annistyn pacing the asphalt. “She’s paying her way through nursing school. She’s on her last year. Her dad has health insurance, but it

only covers eighty percent of the costs. That twenty percent adds up like crazy. She was barely making it with this job. We just found out the other day that they raised his dialysis treatments by almost fifty dollars a treatment, and he has to go three times a week.”

Damn, I had no idea Annistyn’s life was like this. I couldn’t have even guessed it. “I can get her more money. Listen, I’ll make sure that whatever tips I get on the nights that she’s working go to her. I’ll sneak them in somehow. I’ll also make sure she’s got a spot for every race I hold, but I’ll make sure she’s against the one most likely to lose. If she needs more than that, I can talk to Brayzen. I’m sure he could use another waitress. I’ll make sure she has the money.”

Talon nods. “I’ll sneak my tips in too.” We are both scheming when Annistyn walks back over and points to Talon’s bike. I really wanted her to ride with me, but she’s comfortable with Talon, so I grab her bag and strap it onto my bike behind me. I’m not sure what I just did or why I did it. I don’t do girlfriends or any of that knight in shining armor stuff, but damn if I didn’t feel the need to rush in and save Annistyn. It’s just she can never know it, because she’ll get the wrong idea.

Nine

Annistyn

I’m still fuming as I wrap my arms around Talon and he drives us to the hospital with Barker right behind us. I’m grateful that I get to see my dad and check on him, but I’m angry that I don’t have my much-needed job now. I’m going to have to grovel to get that back now, and Jeff is going to eat that up. That’s if he’s even willing to let me in the door after how Barker talked to him. Once we got outside, I had to get away to keep from punching him. It had been the next thing on my list, but levelheaded Talon knew exactly where my mind was heading, so he had whispered for me to cool off. Looking back, he was right, but at that moment I kind of wanted to punch him

too for that comment.

The panic starts to weave into my mind and I have to remind myself that right now, as important as my job is... my dad is more important. I need to be there for him because I know Jerick isn't about to show up. So, I guess in a way, I owe Barker my gratitude.

Talon parks us and I'm immediately off the bike and racing toward the front doors as fast as I can, when I hear Barker call my name from behind. I spin around and he's jogging toward me. When he reaches me, he shrugs out of his leather MC coat and hands it to me. "Hospitals are always so damn cold, plus I'm sure you don't want everyone staring."

I look down and see I'm still in my work uniform, which actually looks pretty slutty. For a moment I hesitate. My mind runs through the number of times a guy has offered me his coat when I'm cold... zero! Barker seems so different right now from the man I assumed he was at the race. Maybe, my first impression was wrong. I grab his coat and slip it on. "Thank you," I tell him. Then realize how cold it is outside and the fact that he's got a long ride before he gets home. "Aren't you going to get cold heading back?"

"I'm not leaving. I'm going to be in the waiting room and if I can't handle that cold, then I definitely don't need my ass on a bike," he says with a chuckle.

I nod and before I think twice about it, I say, "I'm sorry too about how I acted back there. That job... I hate it but it's a necessary evil right now."

"I get that." There's something about the look in his stormy gray eyes that makes me think he really does get it. I nod and then turn around to head inside the hospital. "Annistyn," Barker calls. I turn back around. "I hope he's okay."

I give him a smile and rush inside. The lady at the front recognizes me and buzzes me in. Once I reach the curtain to his section, I take a deep breath to prepare myself. I'm not sure what he'll look like or how bad anything is yet, but he needs me to put on my brave face right now. When I pull back the curtain, I see my dad lying there and the heart monitor is showing a steady rhythm. He opens his eyes at the sound of my heels. "My Annistyn girl, what are you doing here?" My father has always been a big man, tall, stalky, nothing but muscle from working in construction all of his life. His midnight black hair has started to turn silver over the last few years. Lines are etched into his Italian olive skin but dark circles encompass his bright hazel eyes.

"They called and told me you were rushed here by the ambulance. What happened? Are you okay?" I ask him while taking my first deep breath, because at least he's alert. My eyes dart back and forth between him and the heart monitor and I wonder just how crazy mine would be if you put that monitor on me.

"I told them not to call and worry you," he grumbles.

I take a seat beside his bed. "Well, that's just tough. They know to call me regardless." My dad finally explains that he was having chest pains, so the nurse called the ambulance for him. The doctor came in later and said that everything looked as normal as it could be for someone in his condition, but he did change some of his medicines. Once we were discharged, I had a small panic attack when I remembered I didn't have my car to get my dad back to his place. Luckily, Talon thought ahead and when I walk out, Vienna is sitting with Talon and Barker.

Vienna stands up and walks over to my dad. "Looking good, Mr. Tarantino."

"You know it," my dad jokes with her.

Vienna smirks at him. "So, was all this just a ploy to make me jealous with all these nurses in here?"

My dad taps his finger to his chin like he's thinking. "Well, it might have started out that way, but after I got here, I realized that none of them could hold a candle to you."

"Oh, well in that case," she says, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She heads out to get her car while Talon pushes my dad's wheelchair out to the front.

While we're standing there Barker leans over. The smell of the mint gum on his breath hits my nose. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay." He gives me a questioning look. "I am really." Once we get Dad back to his place and settled, we head back out. "Well, thank you guys for coming to help out."

"Girl, you know I'll always be there!" Vienna rushes over and hugs me before telling everyone good night and heading for her car to leave. That's when I notice my car parked in a spot a few down from hers.

"My car?"

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“Yeah, Vienna drove Barker to pick it up for you, and then they came back to the hospital to wait,” Talon explains.

I’m shocked for a minute. I didn’t expect any of tonight to go like this, but the thing I least expected was Barker Tobin helping me out the way he did. “Thank you,” I tell him, and Barker just shrugs, like it’s no big deal—but it is. For the first time, I take Barker in, truly take him in. His brown hair has a reddish tint to it under the parking lot lights overhead. It’s thick, cut close to the side, and longer on the top, and currently moving in every direction thanks to the light breeze in the air. His skin is slightly tanned. He’s tall and lean but there are still a lot of clearly, well-defined muscles as well. Barker’s stormy gray eyes are some of the most intense eyes I’ve ever seen framed by dark eyelashes and a square jaw always coated in a dark five o’clock shadow. I can see why so many of the girls that are part of the MC world have been taken by him. However, for me it’s different. I see his looks, and yes they are incredibly nice to look at, but it’s the man behind those looks that has started to catch my attention now.

When we all finally manage to get home, I’m dead tired and in so much need of sleep that I shower quickly and crawl into bed. The next morning, Augustus and the smell of food wake me up. I sit up in the bed and stretch before scooping up Augustus and placing him in the restroom where the puppy pads have been placed. I head out into the kitchen while trying to figure out how I’m going to ask Mr. Folsom for my job back today. I don’t even consider someone else being in the kitchen with Talon as I round the corner. It isn’t until the other voice hits my ears that I see him.

Barker is sitting at the kitchen island with a coffee mug in his hand. His gray eyes meet mine and a slow, sexy smile lifts the corners of his mouth. The simple white t-shirt he has on hugs every muscle in his arms and makes his skin look tanner. A startled gasp falls from my mouth and Talon looks over his shoulder to smile at me. “Good morning, sleeping beauty.”

“Morning,” I mumble, as I head for the fridge.

Barker chuckles and I shoot him a glare. “I can see someone isn’t a morning person. You want some coffee?” he offers.

I turn around and hold up the bottle of Mountain Dew and shake it for him to see. “This is what I need. What are you doing here anyway?”

Barker bites down on his full bottom lip and it takes everything I have not to stare at that one simple gesture. “Is that any way to talk to your boss?”

Ten

Barker

I can’t help the smirk that appears at the look of shock that comes over Annistyn’s face. It’s pretty damn adorable actually, but it’s gone too quick. I take the silent moment to drink her in. I know for a fact she just rolled out of bed, but she already looks amazing. Her short shorts show off her legs which aren’t normally long, but the shorts give them the illusion of being super long. Her t-shirt has definitely seen better days. It has various holes and the neckline is so stretched out that it actually hangs off one shoulder. Her hair is all over the place and her face is clear of makeup, but she still looks stunning.

Annistyn’s shock fades and she gives me a look like I’m crazy. “What?”

Oh, this is going to be fun. “I am,” I tell her, as I point to myself. “Going to be your,” I tell her, pointing to her. “New boss.”

She scoffs. “Very funny. I mean, I know last night you cost me my job and I got over it, but I have some major begging to do today which I am not looking forward to.”

I stand up and walk to stand in front of her. She barely comes to the middle of my chest. Damn, I never realized how tiny she actually is. I guess it’s because she’s always in heels. “No begging necessary. It’s not my thing, well at least not when I’m at work,” I tell her with a wink.

Annistyn’s mouth falls open and I turn around to refill my coffee mug. It’s my attempt to hide the laughter threatening to come from me thanks to her reaction. Talon just shakes his head at me and I shrug in response. “What the hell are you talking about?” Annistyn asks. Her voice sounds irritated yet slightly hopeful and I like that I was the one that could give her hope.

“Okay, is it because you just rolled out of bed and haven’t injected your body with that green sugary liquid in your hand or are you always this confused when you first wake up?” I tease her.

Annistyn glares at me. “Barker Tobin, I swear if you don’t just spit it out!”

I chuckle and lean back against the counter, crossing one of my ankles over the other. I watch as Annistyn admires the way my t-shirt hugs my muscles and I may or may not have picked this shirt for that exact reason. It’s something I’d like to give her hell about but then again I do the same thing to her. Annistyn is just so easy to banter with because she can give it back as well as she can take it. “Easy. Drink some of that shit so you’re nice, or well, the Annistyn version of nice.” I take another sip of my coffee to keep myself from laughing. “Look, I cost you your job last night, but I have a solution for you that doesn’t require you begging that scumbag for anything.”

Annistyn studies me for a moment before she takes a seat, which I take as my cue to tell her my idea. I fill her in without telling her about Talon and me sneaking our tips in with hers. She actually seems to be on board with it.

“Foods ready,” Talon says, as he begins making plates and handing them out to each of us.

As we eat in silence, I study Annistyn every chance I get. I’ve never been so curious about a girl in all of my life, but there is something different about Annistyn and I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. I can’t seem to stay away from her despite the fact that I hate the way my body reacts to her. “So, is there a dress code for the Sinner’s Den?”

I shake my head. “Not really, just don’t come dressed like a grandma. I’m pretty sure you won’t make good tips that way.”

Annistyn smirks. “Little do you know, the whole cougar thing is really taking off.” Annistyn winks at me and her sage green eyes sparkle with humor.

My head falls back and I don’t even try to stop the laughter that comes out of me this time.

There’s no use, because Annistyn has a mouth on her and I like it.

I’m notorious for being right on time or late for work—but tonight I’m early. Almost two hours early, so it shouldn’t have shocked me when Wilder started giving me hell the minute I walked through the door. “Wow! Did hell freeze over?”

“Shut the hell up,” I tell him.

A low whistle escapes him as I strip out of my cut and run a hand through my freshly cut hair. “You trying to impress somebody?” he asks, with a shit-eating grin on his face. I throw him the finger and he busts out laughing. “Damn, someone is touchy.” Wilder is shorter than me but he’s got a good thirty pounds of muscle on me. The guy looks like he should be a model and not a mechanic and member of Sons of Sin. His face is square and always clean cut. His sky blue eyes are always bright with mischief. Girls in Sinner’s Den often talk about his lips. The dude has some major lips but somehow he pulls them off and the girls really do love them. Wilder’s dirty-blond hair is always styled to perfection, slicked back on the sides, longer on top, and swooped over to the left.

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I roll my eyes while I pull the sleeves of my black, long-sleeved shirt up to my elbows. The breeze had turned pretty chilly since this morning. Tonight was Annistyn's first night on shift and I couldn't wait to see her in action. I knew she'd be a great fit for Sinner's Den. She is quick-witted and sarcastic. She is also great at dishing out crap as well as taking it, which will go over great in here with these guys. I start to take the inventory and wipe down the counters, all under the watchful eye of Wilder. "Don't you have something else you could be doing?"

"You mean, besides watching Barker Tobin outside of his natural habitat?" he asks, and I glare at him in response. "Nope, can't think of anything. This right here is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I really should be documenting this or something. Oh, wait! I should call Drake, Zayde, and Stryker!" Wilder grabs his phone and I just roll my eyes. I'm not being that different from my normal, or at least I didn't think I was.

Then again, I did shower before work instead of after tonight. I did get a haircut this afternoon and trimmed back my growing beard. I might have even put more thought into my clothing choices than normal. Also, I did show up here way earlier than usual. I don't know why, except I wanted to impress Annistyn or at least some part of me did, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out why. I mean, ever since I had learned about some of how her life was last night, I felt this need to prove I'm not the guy she first met at the races. I'm not always late and irresponsible, but I still didn't know why I felt like I needed to prove something to her.

Once things slowed down, Wilder finally left the clubhouse, laughing the whole way out. I waited for Talon and Annistyn to come in on the night rush that we were sure to have in about another hour.

The sound of a motorcycle pulling into the parking lot alerts me that Talon is probably here, at least, which is good since a few people are already starting to show up. When the door opens, however, it isn't Talon... it's Annistyn, which was the last thing I was expecting. Half of her blonde hair is pulled away from her face, allowing you to easily get lost in the sage green eyes of hers. She's ditched the red lipstick for a more natural tint. She has on a red, long-sleeved lace shirt with a black tank top underneath, dark denim skinny jeans, and a pair of black wedges. Heat starts to flow throughout my body as I stare at her. There's no way for her to get hotter.

She walks over to me. "Hey boss," she says with a smirk.

"Annistyn," I look behind her before asking, "Where's Talon?"

"He's running a few minutes late. I'm not sure what happened, but he said he would catch up."

I shake my head in confusion. "I thought I heard his bike outside."

Annistyn gives me a curious look. "Oh, you heard a bike, just not his." My brows furrow. "It was my bike, Barker."

"You ride?" I ask, but can't hide the shock that laces my voice.

Annistyn smirks while rolling her eyes and shaking her head. "Yes, I ride. I have for years. You know, bikes aren't just for boys." I stand there stunned. I didn't think she could get any hotter, but I was wrong, so wrong. I think I just fell in love.

Eleven

Annistyn

Talon walks in before Barker can even come up with a comeback for my bike comment. He looks visibly angry. In all our years of being friends, I rarely see him looking like this. His raven hair isn't slicked back and in place like normal, some of it has dirt caked into it while other parts are standing in every direction. His clothes look dirty as well. His milk chocolate brown eyes have anger simmering beneath them. His jaw is locked and his lips pursed in fury. Even through his inked skin, I can see his muscles rippling underneath. The bruise forming on his left cheek and eye is enough to have me rushing over to him. "What in the world happened?" I ask once I'm close enough. I take his face in my hands and check him out. Blood is running down his face from a cut above his eyebrow.

"I had a situation," he replies through clenched teeth, and as I glance down at his hands that are fisted at his sides, I see the scrapes and bruises marring his knuckles.

I sigh heavily and I hear heavy footsteps behind me. "Damn dude, I hope the other guy looks worse."

"Trust me, they do." Talon's entire body is wound up right now.

Barker seems to sense the anger radiating off Talon. "You want me to call Vienna to come and stitch that up for you?"

"I can do it if you guys have a first-aid kit around here," I offer.

Barker laughs. "With us... we probably have about twenty first-aid kits. I just don't promise they're fully stocked. Let me go grab one. Talon can show you to the back bathroom where you can stitch him up."

I watch as Barker rushes through a side door and Talon steps around me and starts to stomp toward another door along the back wall. I follow him and it seems like it's a storage room. Shelves of beverages and canned food are here. When we reach the

wall, he flips a switch and I see the clean, all-white bathroom. “Sit,” I tell him, as I point to the toilet. “You want to tell me what happened now, or am I going to have to black your other eye to get some damn answers?”

Talon goes to raise his eyebrows, but winces in pain. “You know what happened.”

My heart drops to my stomach because I had a sickening feeling that Jerick or one of his goons was responsible for this. I shake my head and I’m about to speak when Barker comes jogging behind me. “Here you go. This one seems pretty stocked up. I think it’ll have everything you need, but if not just holler. I’ll hold down the fort out there until you guys finish up.”

I take the white and red plastic box labeled ‘first-aid kit’. “Thank you, Barker.” He gives me a warming smile in return and it’s the first time I notice that ridiculously sexy dimple on his right cheek. Seriously Annistyn? When did dimples become sexy? I shake my head as I slip on some plastic gloves and get to work on doctoring and stitching the cut on Talon’s forehead. Once I’m finished, I step back from him. “I’m sorry, Talon. I don’t know why Jerick keeps doing these things. I mean, I get he’s mad at me for whatever reason, but you never did anything.”

Talon scoffs. “Neither did you, Annistyn. The only thing we tried to do was protect him from his own damn self and dumbass decisions.” I nod because I have no words. “Get out there and get to work. I’ll be there in a few. Thank you for this,” Talon says, as he points to his new stitches.

I turn around and walk out into a room that has suddenly become full of customers. Wow! Before I went back there were only a few stragglers sitting here and there, and now there are only a couple of empty tables and bar stools. I rush over to Barker. “We good?” I nod and he hands me a waist apron with a pen and paper pad. “Good. Start over there,” he says, pointing to a table. “And just work your way around. If anyone gets out of hand you just let me know. I’ll take care of it. Otherwise, good

luck.” Barker gives me a salute and I can’t help but smile at him. I rush over to the table he pointed out and start taking their order.

Once I started taking orders, the night flew by. I wouldn’t have even noticed if it wasn’t for the ache in my feet. Vixens strip club was packed most nights, but it was never a constant go like it was at Sinner’s Den. My feet were really feeling it.

Throughout the night, I had worked closely with Barker. We had bumped into each other in passing more than a few times and it was hard to ignore the tingle in my stomach that it caused. It was also hard to ignore the way Barker was watching me. I could feel his eyes lingering on me throughout the shift. I wasn’t sure if it was because he thought I was going to mess up or because he felt a tingle too. Even I had to admit my eyes wandered in his direction more times than I’d care to admit. Barker looked so good in the muted lights of the bar. The easy smile on his face as he talked and joked with the customers causes my heart to stutter in my chest. The black shirt he had on clung to his body and caused my mind to wander even more. He looked too good to be behind the counter of a bar. Barker should be gracing magazines given his looks.

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I shake my head at how ridiculous I'm being. There is absolutely no room in my life for a boyfriend or anything even remotely close to a significant other. It just isn't possible. My plate is overloaded already. Plus, Barker didn't need me when he had more than enough girls willing to jump when he said so. I had witnessed and heard more than my fair share of Barker love tonight. The girls dressed in their barely-there clothes with faces done up just for him, begging for his attention, showed me that I'd never hold a candle to them. I'd never have the attention of Barker Tobin... at least not like they would.

Talon wipes down one of the last tables for the night as I approach him. "Hey, if Barker doesn't care, why don't you call it a night?" He looks around the place and sees there are still two tables with people at them. "I can get those two. You really should rest a little."

Talon nods. "Okay, if you're sure, but please be safe on your way home. Let me know when you're leaving so I can be on the lookout for you."

"Yeah, yeah, I will," I reply, as I wave him away. I watch as Talon goes over and talks to Barker for a minute before he heads out the door. I collect my tray and the rag that Talon was using, before heading to the bar where I start to line up the stools.

"I can do that," Barker tells me.

"I know, but I like to keep busy."

Barker nods his head slowly. "I noticed."

I laugh. “Stalk much?”

“Just a little. I just wanted to make sure no one gave you a hard time.”

His words make my heart jump slightly, which is stupid because I can take care of myself, but it is nice to know he at least thought about protecting me. “Thank you, but I can handle myself.”

Barker bites down on his bottom lip. “Oh, I don’t doubt that, darlin’.” I hand my tray to Barker as I finish arranging the stools. I try to ignore the pet name that creates a flurry in my stomach, because normally I’m against pet names. I think they are silly and unoriginal and sometimes insulting, but something about the way Barker says darlin’ has me almost in a puddle on the floor. Darlin’ isn’t something you hear often in Los Angeles but from what I gathered from Talon, Barker is originally from Kentucky. A true southern gentleman it seems. “So, did you do okay tonight, with the tips I mean?”

I look over at him and nod. I hadn’t checked, but from what I could tell, I actually did really well. I hadn’t been expecting it to be better than Vixens, but so far, I was pretty sure it was. “I think I did. Do you mind if I run to the restroom?” I ask.

“Nope, not at all,” Barker replies, as he takes my apron as I pass it to him. I don’t think anything about leaving my tips in it, because for whatever odd reason, I trust Barker.

When I come back out, one of the tables was gone and Barker was leaning across wiping the table down, which gives me a great view of his broad, muscled back and his toned butt, and how his clothes hug every inch of him. I’m so busy checking him out, that I don’t even realize he’s turning around until I’ve been caught. Quickly, I avert my eyes, but I can’t stop the flush as it fills my cheeks. Barker chuckles and heads my way. “Like what you see darlin’?” he asks, as he hands me the tip from the

table.

I clear my throat and take the money as I step around him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Barker’s laughter fills the room. “Sure you don’t.” He comes around me and heads toward the last table. “Okay, guys, closing time.” The guys mumble, but throw a tip on the table as they eventually say goodnight and head out the door. Barker clears and cleans the table before heading back toward the bar. “Don’t forget to grab the tip.”

I make my way over, grab the tip, and head back toward the bar. Barker reappears from the door that leads to the kitchen. He hands me my apron where I grab the rest of my tips before passing it back to him so he can stash it. I try to do a quick check, but it looks like I made close to the five hundred dollars tonight. I wobble a little at that thought so I take a seat on one of the stools. When Barker turns back around, he hands me an ice-cold bottled Mountain Dew. “Thanks. I didn’t know you had this on the menu.”

“We don’t, but I bought a six-pack and stashed them in the fridge for you,” Barker replies with a shrug, and there’s that dumb flutter again.

“Why?” I ask, before I can stop myself.

Barker raises his eyebrows. “I’ve seen you before you’ve had one. It’s kind of scary, so I thought I should be prepared.” I can’t help but laugh, because he’s not wrong. Barker has a serious look on his face once my laugh dies down. “Your laugh is contagious.”

“Well, you could have fooled me, Mr. Serious.”

Barker holds his hands up in surrender. “What? I was admiring the beauty of it.” I roll

my eyes at that cheesy comeback, but it still made my heart jump. Barker was causing all kinds of weird reactions from my body tonight. “So, what are you doing after this?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Probably, go home, shower, and cuddle with Augustus. Why, you have some hot date?” I tease him.

He shakes his head. “I was going to see since you rode your bike if you wanted to go for a ride.”

“Right now?” I ask, and Barker nods his head yes. “But it’s late and it kind of smells like rain out there.”

“Oh come on, darlin’. Live a little. There’s nothing better than riding right now. Middle of the night, open road with basically no traffic, and just the stars and moon to guide you. The smell of the rain and wind filling your nose as you whip around the streets. It’s a form of magic, a special kind of freedom.”

I study him for a moment to see if he was making a joke or if he was actually serious, but he never cracks a smile. I didn’t know Barker Tobin could be so passionate about anything, but the way he just described that makes me wonder how much I really know about him. “Well, after you describe it like that, how can I say no?”

Twelve

Barker

I had been ruthless tonight. I had watched Annistyn like a hawk and I knew she knew, but I didn’t care. I had even told some preppy jocks that she was taken when they started talking about how hot she was while sitting at the bar. There was no explanation for what I felt towards Annistyn. It’s like I wanted to lay some kind of

weird claim on her, yet she wasn't mine to claim. Hell, I hadn't even kissed her.

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I swear, she had some kind of magical power because no matter what I tried to do behind the bar, I couldn't keep my eyes from finding her out on the floor. She was making really good tips too. The customers loved her. She was a natural people person. She laughed at their jokes, blushed at their compliments, and even gave a few of the regulars a hard time. She fit in just fine. I tried to tell myself I was just watching her because I wanted to make sure she could handle the crowd, but even as I kept telling myself that, I knew it was a lie and a bad one at that. I didn't doubt Annistyn, not for a moment.

All night I had been trying to figure out how I was going to sneak her the tips that Talon and I had accumulated. Luckily, she trusted me with her apron full of her tips for the night when she went to the restroom, so I could easily slip the extra cash in with hers. I just hope it's always that easy.

After ushering the last two stragglers out, I headed into the kitchen to drop off the last few dishes. Stopping at the fridge, I grabbed a bottle of Mountain Dew that I had bought and stored in there for Annistyn. Luckily, Wilder hadn't seen them, but Carl, the cook, had and he just laughed to himself. I was glad no one asked about them because to be honest, I didn't have an answer as to why I purchased them. I mean, I knew it was her favorite and that we didn't serve it here, but it wasn't like she couldn't drink something else. I had just felt this need to get her Mountain Dew. I was starting to sound like Drake when it came to Zoey.

When I had handed Annistyn the bottle, she seemed shocked and the softening of her eyes made my heart react funny. I was just being ridiculous now. This wasn't like me at all, but as I stared into those sage green eyes, I found myself acting more and more unlike my normal self and I couldn't stop it. Hell, I wasn't sure I'd even want to if I

could.

As we sat there, I ended up asking her to come for a ride with me. I didn't normally like to ride with anyone except my brothers from the Sons of Sin, and my buddy, Gunner. The only time I had ridden with a girl is when she's been on the back of my bike. This was going to be a different experience. I lock the door behind us as we head for our bikes.

Annistyn makes her way over to the red and silver Yamaha R6 parked next to mine. I was impressed, to say the least, and I watch as Annistyn swings a leg over the seat. When she looks back at me, there is a slight smirk on her face. "Enjoying the view?" she teases.

I wink at her. "You bet your fine ass I am." I make my way over to my bike. My royal blue Kawasaki Z900RS sits there just calling my name. I'm glad I rode this one tonight instead of my Harley. We slip on helmets and Annistyn revs the engine of her bike. She leans forward and then before I know it, we are off. The streets are quiet and deserted, just the way I like them. Annistyn and I race each other at times before I finally take the lead. She follows me without hesitation. Once we hit the highway, I turn down a side road. I'm not even sure why I'm bringing her here—but I am.

We make our way down the road, slower than I'd like. I take the time to think about things. I'm still on the adrenaline high from riding, the same high I get every time I take a seat behind the wheel of my car or on a motorcycle. However, there is an unusual flutter of nerves gnawing at the pit of my stomach right now. The closer we get to our destination, the more the feeling grows. I've never brought anyone here, not even my brothers. So, why am I bringing Annistyn?

The grass gets a little taller and greener and before I know it, I pull along the side and stop the bike. Annistyn pulls in behind me. I watch as she pulls her helmet off and she takes in our surroundings. "For a minute there, I thought you were trying to lure

me to my death.”

I shake my head. “I’m pretty sure it’s the other way around.” Annistyn gives me a confused and curious look, but she has no idea how unusual all of this is. She doesn’t know how she makes me feel. Hell, I don’t even know how she makes me feel. It’s foreign to me, all of it is. She does something to me and it’s freaking terrifying, yet I can’t stay away. So, if anyone is luring the other to their death it’s her luring me. “You good to walk in the grass in those?” I ask as I look down at her wedges.

She laughs. “Honey, I was born in heels.” With a wave of dismissal, she heads off through the tall grass. For a moment, I just watch her as she moves toward the water. She comes to a stop under a huge tree, the same tree that I always sit under. This is my spot. It’s a hidden piece of tranquility away from everything and everyone. It’s been my secret since I first discovered it, right after I moved to Los Angeles. There’s a small lake lined with trees and wildflowers.

“This is the place I come to when I need to escape. When I need a break. When I need to think. This is my little slice of Heaven on Earth,” I admit quietly.

“It’s gorgeous,” she says, but for the first time, my eyes aren’t on the water. They’re drawn to her and the way the moon above casts a halo of light around part of her. The other part still hidden in the shadows of the night and trees.

“It is,” I say, and when she looks at me, she knows I’m referring to her and not the scene in front of us.

She laughs and shakes her head, before turning to face me, her arms crossed over her chest as she leans back against the tree trunk. “Does that actually work?” I raise my eyebrows in question. “This,” she replies, waving her hands around. “Bringing a girl out here, the moonlight, the water, the cheesy line while you stare at her. Is this your game, Barker?”

She has no idea what she's talking about. I step forward, eliminating the space between us, and notice the small hitch in her breathing. "This isn't a game. I don't play games," I tell her in a husky whisper, as the floral scent she wears hits my nose. Annistyn rolls her eyes like she doesn't believe me, but the blush on her cheeks tells me otherwise. Another step toward her. "You don't believe me? I'm a grown man. Games are for boys looking for reassurance. I don't need that."

"Barker, I grew up with the boys. I know how you all work. I'm not some dumb girl that falls for sweet words whispered under the moonlight."

One step and I'm directly in front of her. "I never thought you were that girl, but again you grew up with boys. I'm no boy, Annistyn." Shaking my head I tell her, "You're different from every girl I've ever met, Annistyn. That's why I brought you here. I've never brought anyone here... not even my brothers. I don't play games because I don't need to. I see no sense in them and let's be honest, we both know my reputation and that I don't need to play games to get what I want—but you're different." I reach out and trace her jawbone and notice another hitch of breath. "I know what I want. What do you want, Annistyn?"

She bites down on her bottom lip for a moment, but that moment feels like forever. The crickets sing in the background along with the thunder rolling in the distance. The breeze dances in the air. It's just like the movies where everything is in slow motion and it's exciting and torturous, all at the same time. I'm waiting for her to make a move and finally, ever so slowly, she reaches her hands out and fists them into my shirt, pulling me into her. I lean down and hover just above her lips, my entire body humming with anticipation. Just when I think she's not going to make a move and I'm about to give in, she closes the space between us.

Her lips on mine, the slight citrus taste of Mountain Dew lingers on her tongue, her hands moving up my chest to wrap around my neck; all of it is intoxicating and addicting and completely terrifying.

Thirteen

Annistyn

I've been kissed before, but you wouldn't know it by the way my body reacts to Barker. Every nerve is on high alert. Everything feels like so much more. The intensity and sensitivity to everything around and within me. I can smell his scent and the bite of mint that lingers on his tongue from the gum he likes to chew on. His lips are rough, yet gentle. I can feel the calluses on his fingers from where he works on his car and bike. The way they scrape along the small of my back. The small little growl at the back of his throat sends a vibration through my entire body. The breeze is now cold against my heated skin.

Somewhere in the distance, I can hear the roaring of the thunder, but it doesn't register. Not now, not at this moment. All I can hear is the pounding of my heart. All I can feel is Barker. I dig my fingers into his thick, dark hair in an attempt to get more. The bark of the tree trunk bites into my shoulder blades, but I ignore it because moving could possibly break this feeling and I can't let that happen.

That thought scares me, makes me falter for a moment, and Barker moves his mouth to my neck. I know he can feel my pulse racing in my neck. I never need anyone. I haven't let myself need someone aside from my dad and Talon. Needing people leads to heartbreak and I can't survive that again. I've lost too much from needing people. I take a deep breath as Barker nips at my collarbone.

I place my hands flat on his chest and lightly push him back. Instantly, he takes a step back, but the confusion written on his face knocks the wind out of me. It makes me want to pull him back toward me and claim his mouth as my own again, but I can't. There's too much to risk here. I take a deep breath and I give him the best smile I can muster. "That was..."

He shakes his head. “Yeah it was, but I’ve got the sinking feeling in my stomach now that you’re about to slam the brakes on me.”

I sigh, shaking my head. “Barker...”

Barker holds up his hand. “No explanation needed.” The thunder roars in the distance and Barker stares off across the grass back toward where we parked our bikes. “We should go before that storm hits. This road will be no good once that happens.” I watch him as he starts to make his way back. My heart sinks and I don’t know why. I shake my head in an attempt to remove this feeling. I shouldn’t have let myself be this girl. It was one damn kiss. I need to get myself back together. I know I can only rely on myself.

I walk about ten steps behind Barker the entire time. It’s a conscious decision. When we reach our bikes, we say nothing. The silence between us feels like rolling around in a garden of nothing but thorns. We each climb back on our bikes and I follow behind Barker as he leads us back to town. The fun banter and racing from earlier are gone and I bite down on my lip to keep the ridiculous tears at bay. When I reach my street, I turn to head home, but I’m shocked when Barker follows behind me.

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I pull under the parking cover and make my way to the front door of my apartment. Before I enter, I look back to the street where I see Barker still sitting there. Even with his helmet on, I can tell he's watching me. I can feel it. Opening the door, I slip inside quietly and head for my bed. Exhaustion doesn't even begin to cover how I feel right now.

Barker

I drive around the deserted streets of Hollows Cove with the rain beating against me. Kissing Annistyn was inevitable. I knew it was coming and even though I knew it was a bad idea, I didn't stop it. I don't think I could have even if I tried. Now, I've been riding the bike for hours with my mind moving faster than the tires across the asphalt. It's replaying every second leading up to the kiss itself, and of course, the aftermath.

That kiss had been so much more than anything else I had ever experienced. It's no secret I've kissed my fair share of girls in my lifetime, but nothing even came close to what I felt when my lips met Annistyn's. It was overwhelming and it scared the hell out of me, but at the same time, I can't shake this feeling. The entire ride back to her place and even now, hours later, all I want to do is pull her back into me, claim that mouth of hers, and face this fear I feel.

Stupidly, I had thought that once I kissed Annistyn all the thoughts I'd been having about her would just go away. I was wrong because it only made them stronger, and now... now I don't know what to do.

Annistyn's scared. I can see it in her eyes. If I ask her, I know her well enough at this point to know she'll deny it. Talon knows everything about her, but he's loyal to her and wouldn't tell me what has her so scared. I wish I knew because right now, I'd give anything to have her back in my arms.

Eventually, I pull into the garage and head inside, going straight for my room. I'm exhausted, yet fully awake at the same time. I strip out of my wet clothes and climb into bed, but before I drift off to sleep, Annistyn is what I see, what I feel. Her and that damn all-consuming kiss.

Fourteen

Barker

My sleep wasn't restful; actually, it was far from it. The memory of my kiss with Annistyn refused to let me find peaceful sleep. Instead, her scent still clung to parts of my skin and invaded my senses. The memory of her body pressed against mine, the way her lips were soft and sweet like the cotton candy lip gloss she wears, and her taste of Mountain Dew lingering on her tongue. It all kept me restless because even when sleep did find me, all I could do was dream about what could have happened had she not stopped and got that scared look in her eyes.

My phone pings from somewhere in my room. It's probably still stuffed in the pocket of my jeans or my cut, which are both lying on the floor in a pile. I groan because I want nothing more than to get some sleep, but it's not happening. I check the time and see I've been in bed for five hours. I guess it's as good a time as any to get the day started. I crawl out of bed and head straight for the restroom, where I splash some cold water on my face to help wake me up. When I look in the mirror, I'm not all that shocked to see I look like shit. The dark circles under my eyes aren't all that surprising.

I head back into my room and search for my phone before throwing some of my clothes from last night in the laundry, which is overflowing. Another thing I need to do. Checking the phone, I see a text from Gunner.

Gunner is one of my best friends, aside from my brothers, he's the only person I'm really close to. I guess in some ways, I see him as a little brother since he's just a senior in high school. Overall, he's a great guy with a good heart, but he's made some bad decisions and his reputation in this town isn't the greatest. He's working to redeem himself now which is good, especially if he wants to be part of our club. Gunner is desperate to join, but it's going to take some time for him to prove to everyone that he's changed his ways and that he's worthy of wearing our cut.

I had totally forgotten that I had asked Gunner about changing the color of my car and adding some racing stripes. Gunner works in a garage that paints and details cars as well as creates logos for them. I'd been wanting to change my Camaro to royal blue with white racing stripes to match my bike.

I shoot him a quick text that lets him know I'll be there in a few. I slip on a pair of jeans, my sneakers, a baby blue t-shirt, and my aviators and head out to my car. On my way to see Gunner, I stop at the local diner and grab us each a coffee and muffin to go. Within fifteen minutes, I'm walking through the door of the garage. Gunner rolls out from underneath a car. "Hey man," he says.

"Morning," I tell him, as I make my way over to him. I hand him the breakfast I brought for him and he gives me his reluctant smile.

"Thanks," he mumbles, as he takes a bite out of the muffin.

I look around the shop and see it's empty, but then again, it is Saturday so I think a lot of people are either at the beach for the day or sleeping in. "You started early today," I comment.

Gunner shrugs. “Yeah, trying to stay out of trouble.”

“That’s good. Keep it up. I’m really proud of you for making the changes you have been and I’m sure the club will recognize it too.” I try to give the kid as much encouragement as I can.

He holds his head down and points toward the office. “We’ve got the samples back here if you want to see them.” I follow him back to the office where the sample of paints lay on the desk. I can feel my excitement growing. I may not control what happens with Annistyn, but I can control this.

Over the next hour, I just hang out with Gunner while we work on cars. He’s always willing to learn something new, especially when it comes to cars. It is something I really respect about him. After we finish up, I head back home to do some laundry before finally heading out to work. Then I get an idea, but the question is should I do it? If I don’t, working next to Annistyn is going to be so hard to do now that I know what it feels like to have her in my arms.

Annistyn

By the time I got home, there was only a chance of getting a couple of hours of sleep. I had a study group in the morning, which meant driving into the heart of Los Angeles to get to the campus of UCLA. And then afterward, I always go by and visit with my daddy for a little while before heading back home to go to work for the night.

Once I drag myself out of bed on what little sleep I managed to get, which might as well be none, I grab Augustus and take him outside. It isn’t until we’re back in the apartment that I realize Talon isn’t home. I notice a piece of paper stuck to the fridge

with one of his many motorcycle magnets. Apparently, he's already on his way to downtown Los Angeles to bid on a job to create a new website for a company there.

Opening the fridge, I drag out some Chinese leftovers and eat them out of the carton. My phone rings and my heart stops. I don't know the number, which means it could be about my dad. I swallow and answer it with a sick feeling in my stomach. "Hello."

"Good morning, darlin'." That husky rasp wraps around me suddenly and calms the sickness I was feeling.

"Barker."

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“Have you had a Mountain Dew yet?” he asks.

I look at the counter in front of me where the leftovers are scattered. Somehow, I didn’t get one out along with the food. “No, why?”

“Oh good. Open the door then.”

“Why would I open my door?” I ask, just as a loud thud hits it. It sounds like a foot hitting against the bottom of the door. I make my way over and look through the peephole. Sure enough, there’s Barker standing with his arms loaded down with something. I open the door and give him a curious look while disconnecting the phone call.

“I was in the area and figured you could use some breakfast.” He shrugs and walks past me and into the kitchen.

“Come on in,” I tell him.

“Thanks,” he calls back to me with a laugh. When I reach the kitchen, I see him setting up the food on the island. “So, I know you love bacon, so I got you a double bacon and cheese biscuit from the diner, and of course,” he rummages into the sack to produce a bottle of Mountain Dew.

I study him and despite wanting to keep my distance, I feel a softening toward him.

“You didn’t have to do this.”

“I know, but Talon mentioned he had to go into the city today and I figured you could use breakfast. Aren’t you hungry?”

“I won’t lie. I’m starving.”

Barker breaks out into a huge grin, one large enough to make that dimple appear. “Then get over here.”

We sit in silence while we eat. I get a text from Vienna who was checking to make sure I was awake. Once I’ve finished eating, I tell Barker, “Thank you.”

“Any time. So, you got big plans today?”

His question quickly has my defenses up. After what happened last night, I can’t let him get the wrong idea. He may be insanely handsome and give me feelings I don’t understand, but there’s no way I can let him think this is more than what it is. I don’t have time or energy for anything else in my life, and I can’t need anyone. “Yeah, study group then visit with my dad before work tonight.” My tone is flat and cold; which Barker catches instantly.

Barker clears his throat and stands up while stuffing the trash in the bag. “Well, then I guess I should get going.” I stand up, following him to the door and letting him out. Barker turns around and his stormy gray eyes meet mine before he leans in. His mouth is just inches from mine and a part of me is praying he’ll kiss me again, even though I know he shouldn’t. “I’ll see you tonight, darlin’.” He’s gone before I can even catch my breath.

I’m in so much trouble.

Fifteen

Annistyn

The entire drive and my favorite band, Counterfeit, couldn't make me forget Barker and his damn lips. I was trying my best not to think about him, but my mind didn't seem to want to listen. I knew it was a mistake. I knew that wanting him would do no good and if I let myself give in to the temptation, then I was definitely in for trouble.

By the time I reached campus, I was completely frazzled and didn't have a brain to really concentrate with. I was being ridiculous and I knew it. I mean, Barker Tobin wasn't a relationship type of guy, so why was I so worried about the details? I mean, I was an adult who could ultimately do what I wanted, and if that included Barker for just one night, then so be it. I didn't need to worry about the details because he wouldn't. The problem is I'm a detail girl. Hooking up for just one night has never really been my thing. Give me a relationship over that any day but that's where the trust issues come in. I run a hand through my blonde hair and think to myself, 'I'm a mess'.

I crossed campus until I reached the library. I could have parked in this lot, but the fresh air and walking seemed like a good idea. Vienna was standing on the stairs waiting for me when I arrived. "There you are. I was getting worried," she says.

I shrug. "Long night."

"Was work rough? I mean, I didn't think it could be any worse than what you endured at Vixens, but maybe I was wrong. I thought for sure Talon and even Barker would help you out if things got too crazy."

I give her a confused look before I ask, "Why Barker?"

Vienna laughs before she stops walking and turns around to face me. "You're kidding me, right?" I raise my eyebrows in question, because I know there's no way she

knows about the thoughts I've had about Barker. I've become a pro at hiding my actual thoughts and feelings. There are only two people who know me well enough to know exactly what I'm thinking when I'm lying and when I'm putting my fake smile on, and that's my daddy and Talon. "Annistyn, that boy has it so bad for you!"

A wave of relief rolls through me before I laugh, dismissing Vienna's comment. "Barker doesn't have it bad for anyone. He's got a line of willing tributes to volunteer for his games."

Vienna laughs and shakes her head. "Watching Hunger Games again?"

I shrug. "What can I say? I'm a sucker for it? Every time it comes on I have to watch it. You know I love me some Peeta."

"I know, girl. Look, I'm not saying Barker can't get whatever he wants when he wants it from pretty much every girl in town. What I'm saying is, that he wants you," Vienna tells me, as she crosses her arms over her chest which means that she's about to get down to business with me. I roll my eyes. "Don't roll your eyes at me. You can believe what you want, but I saw him that night at the emergency room. He could have easily left. He had his motorcycle. He wasn't stranded. Talon and I both told him he could leave, and he didn't because he didn't want to. He wanted to make sure you were okay, which means that he cares in some way."

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I start walking again, but looking over my shoulder at her I say, “I don’t think Barker knows how to care about a girl.”

“He may not even know he cares. I’m sure it’s uncharted territory for him, but he does,” she says in a tone that makes it sound like it’s a fact. “I’m just saying you are both into each other, so you should at least kiss the boy.”

I shake my head as I open the door to the library. If she only knew what had kept me up last night.

After the study group, I head over to visit with Daddy for a bit. We watch an old western movie with John Wayne in it and play a couple of card games. When I leave, he is heading down to have dinner and flirt with the ladies. Forever the ladies’ man, I think to myself.

On my way home Barker calls me, but I just let it go to voicemail. I already have to work in close quarters with him tonight anyway. I don’t need to talk on the phone with him before too. Everything Vienna said had been running through my head. I don’t think she is right about him caring. I think Barker just enjoys the chase and right now, I am a chase and I am keeping him on his toes.

I pull into the lot and head upstairs. Once I am inside, I rush to take a shower. I am feeling off tonight, so I put on my sexiest bra and panty set and then sit down at my vanity to put my makeup on and do my hair for work.

As I pull the curling iron from the last piece of my hair, a banging comes from the front door. Startled, I sit in the chair for a moment until it comes again. Augustus starts barking like crazy and I grab my floral silk robe my daddy bought me as a birthday present years ago. It's seen better days, but I love it.

As I slip the robe on the banging comes again and I rush into the living room with Augustus on my heels. As I reach the door, I look out the peephole to see Barker standing there. His dark hair is rumpled like he's run his hands through it a thousand times. I crack the door because I'm aware I'm not really dressed. "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? What the hell, Annistyn? I've been trying to call you for the last couple of hours. I've been worried sick," he tells me, as he manages to make his way through the door. I shut the door and turn to face him. Without my heels or wedges on, he towers over me, yet he doesn't scare me. Barker starts pacing. "Why didn't you answer?"

"I was driving and I guess I left my phone in my car when I got back," I tell him defensively. "What's the big damn deal?"

He spins around and glares at me. "The deal is that you were driving alone. Anything could have happened to you and when you don't pick up the phone, I instantly start to worry. I didn't know if you'd been in a wreck or stranded on the side of the road," he tells me, throwing his arms out beside him.

His words wrap around my heart and squeeze even though I know they shouldn't. Barker's chest heaves as he tries to calm himself. As I watch him, I notice as his eyes darken and when the air conditioner kicks in, I feel the cool air dance across my skin. I glance down and realize I never tied the robe in my hurry to get to the door. I quickly gather the material and pull it closed. "Sorry," I mumble.

"Never apologize for being distracting. You can't help that you're beautiful," he says,

his voice dropping into a husky whisper. I feel the blush. I drop my chin to my chest and attempt to hide behind my hair. Barker takes slow steps as he stalks toward me is the only noise in the living room. When he reaches me, he slips a finger under my chin and tilts my head up. His eyes meet mine. “Never hide from me,” he says before he leans down. I rise to my tiptoes to meet him halfway before he presses his lips against mine.

He pushes me back up against the door before his hands slip inside my robe. I should stop him, but I won’t. I want him just as much and for whatever reason, I feel safe with him. The hint of mint clings to his mouth and it sends thrills through my body. I dig my nails into his shoulders and let my guard down with them. Barker is addicting; his hands, his mouth, that little growl in the back of his throat. I’m addicted to Barker Tobin.

Sixteen

Barker

Annistyn rolls over and sits up. “Well, there goes my makeup and hair.” She looks over her shoulder at me. “I’m going to be late now.”

I shrug and give her a smug smile. “I know the boss and I’m pretty sure he’ll let it slide.” She shakes her head at me while standing up and making her way to the vanity. I can’t wipe this ridiculous smile off my face now. You’d think I was a damn teenager again by how happy I am to be in bed with Annistyn right now. I sit up and study her as she straightens up her makeup.

“So, was there a reason why you were trying to get a hold of me in the first place?” she asks, as she starts to curl her hair again. There was a reason, but right now I’m enjoying watching her. So, I sit back against the headboard of her bed with my hands behind my head. Annistyn finally turns around and looks at me. “Stop staring.” She

scolds me but her own eyes roam over my bare chest. I watch as she takes in every muscle and every inked part of my skin.

I shake my head. "I can't," I tell her with a wink. She rolls her eyes at me. "Okay, I called to see if you wanted to race tonight. I had a driver drop out and need a replacement."

She bites down on her bottom lip and I've learned that is something she does when she's thinking about something. I can see the answer in her eyes, and I can't wait to see her race again and hand someone, who isn't me, their ass at that finish line. "I can't."

Wait, what? That stops every motion I was just making. Her eyes were saying yes. I study her and she turns back around and faces the mirror, but the dip in her shoulders wasn't there before. "Why?"

Annistyn shrugs like it's no big deal. "I work tonight, silly. You know that."

I nod and I can tell by her breathy voice that statement was a lie. There's something more she's just not telling me. "Well, that's not a problem. I work too, but I'm still racing. Talon will watch it while we are out back. Besides, most of the people inside head outside during the races anyway, so he should be able to handle it by himself." Annistyn just shakes her head slightly. It's such a small movement that if I hadn't been studying her so hard, I would have missed it. "Annistyn." I wait for her to turn around, but she doesn't. She just stands up and walks over to her closet. "What aren't you saying?"

She sighs heavily. "I can't race tonight, Barker."

"Why not?"

Annistyn spins around suddenly and crosses her arms over her chest and glares at me. “Because I don’t have the damn money, Barker. Not all of us have the money for the buy-in at the drop of a hat. So, no I can’t race.” I watch as her cheeks paint themselves the prettiest shade of pink. If I had caused that blush in any other way I’d love the look, but knowing it’s because she’s embarrassed makes me feel like an ass. Her sage green eyes shine with unshed moisture.

Quickly, I stand up and make my way over to her. “I’m not worried about the buy-in.”

“Oh my god! See this is why I knew kissing you would be a bad idea.”

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I feel my eyebrows shoot up into my hairline. “Excuse me?”

“Now you want to give me special treatment. Every racer pays the buy-in so they can race. I’m no different. I will be no different. I don’t need some special treatment or your damn charity. I’m not racing tonight and we aren’t doing this anymore either. I’m not some whore you can buy off,” she says, as she grabs some clothes and storms off into the bathroom. The slamming of the door is the final note that echoes and reverberates through every fiber of my being.

I stand there for a moment in complete shock. I have no clue how we went from being in her bed, kissing, and roaming over each other, to her being angry at me over trying to get her to race. I wasn’t skipping her buy-in because she kissed me, but if that’s how little she thinks of me, then so be it. My eyes roam around the room which is a disaster. You would think a girl as put together as Annistyn appears would have a clean room. Nope! Clothes are scattered everywhere. Makeup products cover the top of the vanity despite an organizer sitting to the side of the tabletop. Her school books are somewhat stacked in the corner of the floor with her backpack next to them. I’m surprised Augustus hasn’t destroyed them yet. It takes a moment but eventually I manage to grab my shirt and cut off her floor as well as the rest of my clothes before slipping them and my shoes back on. I leave, slamming the door for good measure and, head back down to my bike.

That right there was the cold water I needed. I knew there was a reason I didn’t do relationships, and that was just what I needed to knock my head back on straight. Girls, like Annistyn, seem different but in the end, they are all the same—too damn moody and dramatic. I rev the engine of my bike before peeling out of her parking lot and onto the street. In the moment of frustration and the need to escape, I don’t even

bother looking for oncoming traffic. My mistake. I narrowly miss getting ran over and it would have been my fault because I was foolishly distracted. Distracted by the woman I told not even two hours ago it was fine to be distracting. I mutter a string of curses as I head home, determined to ignore the feelings I have for Annistyn at all costs.

I wait until the last minute to walk through the doors of Sinner's Den for my shift tonight. I didn't want to see Annistyn walk through the door looking as good as she normally did. I didn't want to stare at her, but that was a foolish thought because it doesn't matter who gets here first.

The minute I walk through the door, my eyes land on Annistyn. She's at a table taking an order. Her hair is down and curled, makeup applied to perfection, and her outfit hugs her body in all the right places. I thought if she beat me here, I could somehow avoid the pull I have toward her—but I can't.

She glances up and our eyes meet. I see the indecision in her eyes and as much as I want to walk over there, drag her to the back and make that look go away... I won't. Annistyn is going to have to come to me this time. This has to be her decision. I kept thinking I could change her mind. That I could wash away that scared look in her eyes, but I can't. So, instead of doing the one thing I want to, I break my stare by looking down before I cross the bar and take my place behind it.

The night crawls along. Despite the constant flow of customers and the races fixing to start, I can't seem to make this night end. Being this close to Annistyn and not being able to have her is some new form of torture. It shouldn't be. I did it before, but now knowing what it's like to have her... the closest I've gotten to her is when she has to come to me to get drinks for her tables, and even that is beyond awkward. She barely meets my eyes while she waits for me. The minute she gets the drinks, she turns

around and struts back out to the floor.

Talon taps the counter to pull my attention from my jumbled thoughts. “Shouldn’t you be outside? The races start in like ten minutes.”

“Shit! I lost track of time.”

Talon nods his head in that direction. “Go, I got this.”

“Thanks, man,” I tell him, as I rush around the bar and through the back door and into the alley. The cars are already lined up. Once I get into my Camaro, I get in the last position. Gunner waves at me from the sidelines. I spot my brothers and some of their girlfriends. I’m scanning the crowd the entire time I wait for my turn to race. I’ve been looking for Annistyn, but I know she’s not out here, but some silly part of me still held out hope that I’d spot her sultry green eyes and blonde hair on the sideline at least.

I move my car to the start line. Gripping the wheel, I look over at the car next to me and I know I’ll have no problem beating him. I rarely lose a race. The first race I lost in almost two years was to Annistyn. Apparently, I lose everything when it comes to Annistyn. Zoey walks out between the cars with the flag in her hand. She smirks before she raises the flag. I rev my engine, ready for the flag to drop, and as soon as it does, I’m gone. I don’t even bother to glance in the direction of the other car, because I’m going to win this. I have to win this. I need some kind of control back in my life.

Within the next moment, I’ve got all the control I could want. I’m in control of the wheel and how I maneuver my car. I’m in control of the amount of pressure placed on the accelerator. I accept the speed, the blur it creates, and the vibration as it runs through my body. My back becoming one with my seat all because of the speed I need to regain control in my life.

I cross the finish line with ease. Releasing the air I had been holding in my lungs, I step out of the car to become engulfed by people. Most of them are congratulating me. Once I've collected my money and made sure the rest has been given to the winners, I head back inside. I'm walking through the door with Drake and Zayde behind me when I stop dead in my tracks.

There, sitting at the bar, looking like sex on a stick is the last person I expected to ever see in my bar again. The whole reason I don't do relationships anymore. The only reason Annistyn and what I feel for her scares the hell out of me. It's because of this girl that I know how one-sided love can be. I know how tricky it is and I know that you never know what the other person is thinking. My ex, Giselle, is sitting there as if she belongs here, but we both know she doesn't. "What the...?" I hear Drake ask behind me.

"My exact thought."

Seventeen

Annistyn

This night sucked! That's all I can think. When I arrived and Barker wasn't already behind the bar at Sinner's Den, I thought I might get by without having to deal with him. Without having to deal with these indescribable feelings I have for him and the guilt that has settled in my gut since earlier. I had snapped when I really shouldn't have earlier. I mean, I really didn't want special treatment from him because we had been kissing each other, but I probably could have handled the situation better. The thing is... it's not easy to admit you don't have the money to do something. I don't expect someone like Barker to understand where I'm coming from financially, and I hate admitting my issues to other people; so when he kept pushing, I snapped. The other problem is, I owe him an apology, but I'm not very good at those either, so I'd rather just avoid him but that's impossible.

My body doesn't seem to understand that I don't need a complication like Barker Tobin. Every time he's around it's like my body becomes hypersensitive to everything. Like tonight, the moment he walked through the door, I knew without even looking up. Every hair on my body stood up. Every nerve lit up like a firecracker on the fourth of July. So, even though I told myself not to look at him... I did.

Worst decision ever. The moment I met his eyes my heart slammed around inside my chest and emotion clogged my throat. It didn't help that his eyes were unreadable. Barker turned away first and made his way to the bar, and that alone was enough to make my confident play waver. He had never looked away first before. Inside my chest, my heart lurched before tumbling down into the abyss and my lungs constricted almost to a painful level.

Working with Barker was only getting harder as the night went on. We only spoke when I needed drinks for a table. I could still feel his eyes on me from time to time, but it was different now. When he finally left me and Talon to look after the bar while he hosted and raced in the drag races in the alley, I took a deep breath of relief. I needed a break from him.

Barker had been outside dealing with the races for about half an hour when a girl walked through the door. She looked like a porn star with her raven black hair that was fake and too teased out for her own good, and her bust was blown up to her chin. Her clothes screamed 'look at me'. Everything was skintight, too short, and too low with sky-high heels. Makeup coated every centimeter of her skin, and I was pretty sure her lips were as fake as her breasts. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and made her way to the bar stools. Most of the tables had fallen quiet, which made me think that they knew this girl. I hadn't seen her, but there was definitely something that caused tension to fill the air.

Barker appeared a little later with Drake and Zayde right behind him, but the moment

he saw the girl sitting at the bar's counter, he stopped. I watched as his carefree face fell to one of anger and confusion and maybe even hurt. His eyes didn't leave her once he finally decided to approach her. I watched shamelessly as she stood up and tried to hug him, but he stepped away. The glare in his eyes and the set of his jaw told me he wasn't excited to see her. The girl looked up and batted her eyelashes at him while pouting her lips. It was a ridiculous move that I never understood why women did it. Finally, Barker shook his head and grabbed the girl by the elbow, not forcefully but just enough to get his point across, before walking her out of Sinner's Den. Once he left, I finally made my way over to Talon, Zayde, and Drake. "Everything okay?" Talon asked.

Drake shook his head while he rubbed his beard he was attempting to grow and released a heavy sigh. "Doubt it. That's Giselle. She's Barker's one and only girlfriend. She did a number on him and changed his entire outlook on relationships. I can't believe she even had the audacity to show her face in here."

Zayde shakes his head in disgust while digging out a cigarette from an almost empty pack. "She did nothing but use him. They moved here from Kentucky and the first look she got from some supposed Hollywood big-shot she was gone."

"Damn," Talon mutters. I look back at the door and can't help but wonder what he ever saw in her. Then again, I guess it makes sense for a bad boy biker and racer to go for the porn star look alike. It was me that was the odd one for him to be into.

Zayde ended up finishing Barker's shift. Barker never came back, but apparently he did call, and Zayde told Barker it was fine, not that I cared. Okay, so that's bullshit. I totally cared even though I shouldn't, and despite the fact that I didn't want to. I tried to tell myself it didn't matter what he was doing or who he was doing it with, but the gnawing at the pit of my stomach wouldn't stop. The idea of his lips on hers or his hands on her skin made me fill with jealousy. The crazy thing is, I'm not a jealous person, so why did I care so damn much?

It'd been five days since I saw Barker. Apparently, he had left town to clear his head, or at least that's what Stryker said the other night while we were working and one of the customers asked about him. I keep telling myself I am being ridiculous, but it doesn't seem to matter.

It's Thursday night, but it's Vienna's birthday so we are going out along with a few of her other friends. Talon is working at Sinner's Den, so we agreed to celebrate there so he could keep an eye on us. He didn't like the idea of us being somewhere unprotected. I'm not sure why, but I had a feeling it had to do with Jerick. Talon still hadn't told me what happened the night I gave him stitches and I didn't push him. I knew better than to push Talon. He's always chill and laid back until you push him too far. It's never a side of him that I had caused personally, but I had witnessed it a few times. It wasn't something on my list of things to do.

So here I am with Vienna in my room letting her pick out my outfit for the night. I shake my head at the idea, because I already know it's going to be a bad idea, but it is her birthday, so I'm trying to humor her. Vienna turns around with the one thing in my closet I have never worn. To this day, I still don't even know why I bought it. The off the shoulder, long-sleeve black mini dress was a splurge that I had no need for. It's probably hung in my closet for the past two years until now. Leave it to Vienna to find it. She waves it around. "This!"

I shake my head and Vienna instantly starts to pout. "Don't start that."

"Don't start what?" she asks innocently.

I point at her. “That! Don’t start that pouting and playing innocent with me. Your next step is puppy dog eyes.”

“My next step?” she asks, her free hand on her hip.

I roll my eyes. “Your next step to get what you want.”

Vienna dramatically huffs before she crosses the room and tosses the overly-priced dress on my unmade bed. “Fine, don’t wear it. Even though it’s my celebration tonight and that dress is hot, and I know for a fact you’ve never worn it, which is a damn shame considering it fits you like a glove.”

I scoff. “You’ve never even seen me in it.”

She shrugs. “Don’t have to. You’re my best friend. You’re hot with a killer body, even though you refuse to see it and that dress is perfect for you.” I stand there debating over the dress. I mean, I want to make her happy, but I’m not much of a dress girl unless I have to be. “Besides, Barker Tobin won’t know what hit him when you walk through the door in that.”

My head falls back as I groan. I made the mistake of telling Vienna everything that had happened with Barker. She, of course, told me she knew it, but other than that, she hadn’t given me a hard time until now. “Barker isn’t even in town, so he won’t be there.”

“Well then,” Vienna says, tossing her curls over her shoulder. “His loss. Every other guy is going to fall out of their seats when you walk in looking like that.”

“I think you’re being dramatic,” I tell her, as I make my way over to the dress.

Vienna smirks. “And I think you’re being humble.” I pick up the dress and step into

the bathroom to slip it on. Vienna was right, it does fit me like a glove, but I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing. Vienna has already curled my hair and done my makeup, and as much as I hate to admit it, I actually feel like I look pretty good. I might even stand a chance against Giselle. Ugh! Really? Like that would ever happen and it shouldn't even matter. It doesn't matter. 'Get yourself together, Annistyn'. I pep talk myself before stepping out of the bathroom. Vienna is on her feet in no time at all. She lets out a low whistle. "Now, you just need these." She holds out my over-the-knee black boots and wags her eyebrows.

"You're crazy, and making me look like a stripper," I comment, as I take a seat on the bed and slip on the boots.

"Strippers look cheap and trashy. You look beautifully classy and sexy." I look up and see Vienna rummaging through my limited jewelry supply. She turns around with a smile on her face. In her hand is the silver, three-chain choker Talon got me for my birthday last year, and a pair of large silver geometric shape earrings. I put them on, because I mean, what the hell? It's not like I have anything left to lose at this point. Vienna jumps up and down while clapping and squealing. "You look so good. Tonight is going to be epic." Vienna's phone goes off letting us know her birthday limo is here. We rush down to a limo with three other girls already inside. I've met all of them before, but none of them are my friends. I sit back and watch them all interact until we reach Sinner's Den.

Vienna links her arm through mine as we make our way to the front door. The sky above is clear and full of stars. I almost wish I could just stay out here or go to Barker's little secret spot. I shake my head to shake thoughts of Barker away. Vienna makes a joke as we walk through the door, but as soon as my eyes adjust to the lighting, it's impossible to miss Barker's stormy gray and brooding eyes from behind the bar. They are on me and the heat in them makes me want to squirm. "I thought you said he was gone," Vienna leans and whispers to me.

I glance down breaking eye contact. “He was,” I hiss.

She laughs. “Well, not anymore.” She starts to walk off toward the table the girls are sitting at before she looks back over her shoulder and smiles. “You can thank me later.”

“For what?” I ask her, as my brows pull together in confusion.

She laughs. “For making you wear that and the way he’s staring.” Vienna winks before turning back around. I take a deep breath and make a conscious effort to not look Barker’s way as I make my way to the table, but it’s hard when I can still feel his eyes on me, and god have I missed them.

Eighteen

Barker

It’s funny how you can forget people and move on, but you can never forget the pain they caused. The insecurities they created that stay tucked away in the back of your brain, just waiting to wrap around you in its suffocating form; like a raging bull waiting for the red flag to dance.

That’s how it felt to see Giselle sitting at the bar counter like nothing had ever happened. As if she hadn’t used me and thrown me away once she was done. As if I wasn’t just a stepping-stone for her when I had been crazy in love with her. Literally, I would have done anything for her.

It’s taken me five days away from my life in Los Angeles and the hurt that Giselle reminded me of. She had come into my life when I was much younger and dumber, right after my grandpa had passed away. I was in a dark place and walking an incredibly thin line with the law. At the time, I was feeling lost and angry about my

life and Giselle showed up like a saving grace. I fell quick and hard. She was everything I could have ever asked for, but then things changed. Giselle convinced me to take the job that would move us out to Los Angeles. I had no idea that she had ulterior motives.

We graduated high school and while I thought we'd start our life together, she had a different idea. It started out with her wanting to be a stripper. I had fought against it. I understood some people loved it either for the money or attention, but Giselle didn't need those things. We had enough money to live comfortably and I gave her every ounce of attention I had. Eventually, she got what she wanted and started working at Vixens Strip Club. I had begged her to go to work for Daughters of Darkness, Brayzen's strip club, but she refused and said I was trying to control her. I wasn't, I just hated the thought of every other guy seeing what only I was supposed to see.

Things continued to change after that. She got where she'd come home later and later. Her clothes got shorter, tighter, more provocative as time went along and things between us became rocky at best. Then one night, she came home announcing she had caught her big break. I was a bit tipsy and angry, so I made a smart-ass comment. Apparently, her big break was posing nude.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:57 am

Talk about seeing red. Red was the only color to have ever existed at that moment. I remember a yelling match between us, something I'm definitely not proud of, before Giselle finally packed a bag and stormed out. She stayed gone a week; no texts, no calls, nothing; and I was a miserable ass during that time. When she showed up on our doorstep looking even faker than before and that sneer on her face, I was stunned.

I remember pulling her into my arms but she's as stiff as a board and pushes me away. "I'm only here to pick up my things," she tells me. The shock and hurt feels like a knife slicing into my skin over and over. She tosses her hair extensions over her shoulder. "Oh, don't give me that look. You knew this was coming. This relationship was never meant to last; it was just my way to get what I needed."

"What you needed?"

Giselle smirks. "Yes, Barker. Sometimes, I swear you are so naïve. You think with that heart of yours all the damn time. Look, ultimately, I wanted to be a porn star and now I will be. I needed you and the reputation of an MC to get me a little recognition. To obtain that reputation."

"The Sons of Sin aren't like that," I said through clenched teeth.

Giselle laughs. "Yeah, I know that but they don't. Look, I knew what I needed and I saw a way in so I took it. Now, I'm done."

She stepped past me and into the house. I stood in the doorway looking out into the street. This had been our little dream house, the start of our new life. I thought this was forever because I love her. Tears threaten my eyes, but I shake them off, turn

around, and storm into what was our bedroom. She's walking between the bed and closet, packing her things, and it's another tear in my heart. "Giselle, I know things haven't been good recently, but you can't just walk away."

"Oh, I can and I am. Honestly, can you not see what I'm doing? Can you not hear what I'm saying?" she asks, while shaking her head at me.

I see and hear it, but I don't want to believe it. It had all felt so real to me. What I felt was love and I knew it, but how had she been so good at pretending? "But I love you, Giselle."

Giselle stops, sighs, and turns to face me while rolling her eyes. "Of course you do. Everyone will, so you aren't alone, but I don't want love, Barker. I want the spotlight. I want to be desired."

"But you are!" I bellowed, and she didn't even flinch. Her face just looked annoyed.

"What? By you, one measly guy. That doesn't count. You don't matter," she says with finality, and turns to toss the last item in the suitcase before picking it up and leaving. I stand in the bedroom doorway unable to process it all. This wasn't happening. She was my forever, my saving grace, but now it was all a lie. It was all just some sick game for her. I turn around and put my fist through the wall before I sink to the floor.

Seeing Giselle had my body wound up so tight. It had me questioning everything and everyone, especially Annistyn and this ridiculous pull I have toward her. My mind became flooded with memories from the day she left and I hadn't been able to stop myself as I stalked toward her. Once she saw me, she stood up from the stool and tried to hug me, but I didn't want her touching me. I didn't want her fake affection, because that's exactly what it was. A pity hug. Are you kidding me? I'm freakin' Barker Tobin—I don't need anyone's pity. Giselle looked up and batted her eyelashes

at me. Man, she was good, I'd give her that. She'd have most guys eating out of the palm of her hand.

"Barker," she says breathlessly, yet she had just barely moved, so I knew that was a put-on. It's meant to turn a guy on and before it would have worked, but not now. "It's so good to see you." I scoff and wrap my hand around her arm as I lead her out of my bar. Once we're outside, she turns around on me. "Well, I didn't think you'd be so mean."

"Really? What'd you think? That I'd be happy to see you?" I ask her harshly.

She crosses her arms and pushes her breasts up higher. I roll my eyes and rub my hand over my stubble. "Well, most people are happy to see me."

"Yeah, well most people don't know you as well as I do either. They fall for this little act you put on."

"Barker," she whines. "Don't be like this."

"Don't be like what, myself?" I ask her.

She steps toward me and looks up at me through her lashes. "I've missed you."

My head falls back and I laugh sarcastically at that comment. "Doubtful."

"You don't believe me," she states quietly, trying to sound hurt.

"Nope," I reply. "I mean, I'd think it'd be pretty hard to miss someone who doesn't matter. I mean, I am just one measly guy so I don't count," I tell her, throwing her words back at her.

Giselle pouts. “Barker...”

I hold up my hand. “No, just go. You don’t belong here. There is no fame here, Giselle. This isn’t what you wanted and I highly doubt that’s changed.” I turn around and head back for the door.

“I’ve changed,” she comments from behind me.

I look over my shoulder. “I’d laugh, but even if you have changed, I’m not that guy anymore. I don’t love you anymore, Giselle. You no longer mean anything to me. You’re just another porn star having sex for money. You’re a high-end hooker.” Instead of heading inside, I go over to my bike and take off.

I didn’t think when I left—I just drove. I let the highway do the healing, pound the hurt back down into the crevasses of my mind where it had been for so long now. I let the open space and wind wrap around me and comfort me as I moved over the asphalt below. The vibration from the engine moved through my body. I was on autopilot and the road is what I needed.

It took that open road and me needing an escape to realize that Annistyn was different. She wasn’t like Giselle or any other girl I had spent time with. She didn’t want to be seen with me because it boosted her reputation. She didn’t want me to help her out financially, because she wasn’t one to take handouts from anyone. She didn’t need me, but she wanted me. I knew she did, but I could tell by the look in her eyes that she didn’t trust people easily. I recognized that look because I’d had it in my eyes for a long time, at least until Annistyn showed up.

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I'd spent five days away from Annistyn and Los Angeles trying to get my shit together, and to be honest, it was five days too many. It's odd how someone can come into your life and without you even realizing, they've somehow become important, part of your daily routine. I didn't realize how important Annistyn had become to me until I was away from her.

As I pulled back into my part of Los Angeles, I slowed down to take in my surroundings. This was home and it was damn good to be back. I made my way through the streets back to the place I called home. Once I showered and got dressed, I went out to my Camaro, as much as I loved my bike, I just spent five days on it... I needed a break. I called Drake and Zayde on my way over to Wilder's.

By the time I pulled along the curb of Wilder's house that he shared with Bryar, the rest of the Sons of Sin were there. I got out and made my way over to them. We hugged and slapped each other on the backs. "Sure is good to have you home," Drake said, as he squeezed my shoulder.

I nod. "It's good to be back. Thank you for covering my shifts at the bar while I was gone. I just needed to clear my head."

"We've all been there man, but you're good now?" Wilder asks as he raises his eyebrows in question. I just nod in response.

"You know what my pops used to say, ain't nothing the open road and a bike can't heal," Zayde added. We all smiled at that because that was his life motto and he wasn't wrong. Zayde's father was a lot of things, and a good man wasn't one of them, but that saying was.

The screen door opens and Bryar pops her head out the door. “Y’all want some sweet tea?” We all look at each other because there’s one thing you don’t turn down and it’s Bryar’s sweet tea.

I leave Wilder’s house and head to Sinner’s Den. Since I’d cut out without notice, they’d picked up my slack around the bar, so it was my turn to pick it up. As I headed inside, Talon looked up from the stool he was sitting on. “You’re back,” he comments.

“Yep, I was running from a ghost that doesn’t matter anymore, so it was time to get home and deal with the present and a certain sarcastic, independent girl.”

Talon gives me a curious look. “Annistyn?”

I nod slowly. “Yeah, look I know she’s like family to you, so if you aren’t okay with this just let me know.”

Talon stands up and for a moment I’m worried he’s going to hit me. He’s not an overly large guy but something tells me he would try to take me to protect her. His dark eyes watch me, weighing his options before saying, “Don’t hurt her.”

“I would never want to,” I tell him and I mean it.

He nods before extending his hand out to me which I accept, and we shake on it. “Take care of her. She deserves the best.”

“I completely agree,” I tell him.

Talon turns around and starts to get ready for the rush that will hit soon. “By the way, she’ll be here tonight,” he tells me, as he walks away.

That's not right. She wasn't scheduled to work when I left. "Why is she working?"

Talon turns around and smirks. "I never said she was working. She's coming in to celebrate Vienna's birthday so be prepared. Those two together are the definition of a handful." His head falls back in laughter as he walks away towards the other end of the bar.

Nineteen

Barker

Foolishly, when Talon had told me to be prepared for Annistyn, I thought he was kidding. Then she walked through the door and everything in my body reacted. My eyes became glued to her and everyone knew it. I was barely paying attention to the customers ordering at the bar. I watched her as she took a seat at the table with Vienna and some other girls. She looks too good to be legal. A sweat breaks out across the back of my neck. Sinner's Den suddenly feels too hot to even breathe. I'm constantly pulling my shirt away from my chest and attempting to fan myself.

Annistyn hasn't looked my way, she broke eye contact earlier and it's driving me insane. I just need to know she still wants me. Talon comes over and gives me a strange look. "What?" I bite out.

"The table of preps over there want to order a round for the girls," he says.

I raise my eyebrows. "The girls?" Talon just nods. "Fine," I say through clenched teeth. I start to make the drinks, slamming things down too hard. What the hell is wrong with me?

"You okay?" Carl asks as he pokes his head around the door that leads to the kitchen. I look up and glare at him. "Jealous much?" he asks, with a chuckle as he ducks back

into the kitchen. I'm tempted to chunk the glass tumbler in my hand at his head.

Once I get the drinks fixed, I grab a tray and take them around the counter. Talon gives me a funny look. "I'm delivering them."

"I caught that," Talon replies. Laughter follows me as I march my way towards the girls' table.

I'll be damned if Annistyn is going to sit just feet away from me looking better than any other girl I've ever seen before in my life and ignore me. Especially, with how we left things. She was pissed last time and I didn't fight for her, but I'm fighting now and she's not getting away so easily.

I step up to the table and the girls fall silent. I'm standing next to Annistyn, but she purposefully ignores my presence and it drives me wild. "We didn't order those," Vienna says sweetly, while giving Annistyn an evil eye.

"Those guys over there did," I tell them, with a nod of my head in the direction of the table where the group of preppy-looking guys sit.

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“Oh well then, by all means,” Vienna replies. I start to place the drinks in front of the girls, but I never move from Annistyn’s side. When I lean over her to pass a drink, I brush against Annistyn. The slight intake of breath doesn’t go unnoticed by me. All I can do is think to myself, ‘Yes, just what I needed. There’s still a chance.’

After I leave the table, I can hear the girls whispering and I know I hear my name. I smirk to myself, but it’s short-lived. When I step back behind the bar, my eyes fall on the table and I see the preppy guys now standing around the table. That little green monster starts to rear its ugly head. You’ve got to be kidding me?

My mood has plummeted throughout the night. The guys have taken up seats at the table with the girls. I’ve watched them from the corner of my eye, and every time Annistyn laughs, it carries to me and makes my heart squeeze a little tighter. Halfway through the shift, Talon plays a song on the jukebox, Jealousy by Nick Jonas. I glare at him and he chuckles and says, “Seemed to fit.” He shrugs his shoulders as he chuckles to himself. Mentally, I make a note that maybe the prospect doesn’t deserve a patch, then I shake it off. That’s not true or fair. Talon will be one of us soon enough.

I roll my eyes and continue making drinks. All the girls except Annistyn have been up and dancing, even though Sinner’s Den doesn’t really have a dance floor, but for whatever reason, she just sits in her chair and watches them with a smile on her face. God, she’s gorgeous. I’d give anything to walk over there right now and pull her into my arms and claim those lips. The music changes and the girls on the makeshift dance floor all clap with glee. I have to laugh at them. Sweet Little Somethin’ by Jason Aldean starts up and I watch as Vienna rushes over and drags Annistyn with her to the middle of the floor.

I watch as all the girls line up and start to line dance. Now, I'll admit I used to live in the country basically, I like country music, but never once have I thought line dancing was sexy. But watching Annistyn. Damn! I think it just became my new favorite dance. By the middle of the song, she's let loose and is really enjoying herself. Her cheeks are flushed from the dancing, her smile is wide and genuine. I can't take my eyes off her. My mind wanders to where she learned to do that in Los Angeles?

After the line dance, I watch as Annistyn slips away to the restroom. I give it some time before I call for a short break. I'm standing in the hallway when Annistyn opens the door. She clutches her chest. "Goodness, you scared the hell out of me, Barker."

I step toward her, eliminating the space between us. "Did I?" She just nods. "Well, I'm sorry, darlin' it wasn't my intention. I just wanted a moment alone with you."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she says quietly.

I slip my fingers under her chin and tilt her chin up so that her eyes have to meet mine. "Why is that?" Her chest rises and falls a little faster than a moment before. Heat fills her cheeks and her eyes search mine but I'm not sure what they're searching for.

"Because of the wannabe porn star that you left with five days ago," she lashes out. I see the jealousy dancing in her eyes. She squares her shoulders and stands a little taller. Those walls she keeps around herself in a form of protection are fully in place now.

"You should really get the facts before you assume something, darlin'."

Annistyn rolls her eyes. "Oh really? Well, you left with her... five days ago, so what was I supposed to think?"

“Fact one, she is a porn star. Fact two, I escorted her out of my bar, but I didn’t leave with her,” I tell her.

“Okay, yeah, sure. I totally believe that Barker Tobin, bad boyextraordinaire, left out of a bar with a porn star, but he didn’t leave with her. What do you think I am? Dumb?” she says sarcastically. Her head slightly shakes in disgust.

Each sarcastic word is like a punch to the gut. I mean, I know that my reputation isn’t the best. I know most people would think the exact same thing that she is saying, but to hear her tell me that—I step back. “No, I never thought you were dumb, but I did think you wouldn’t be so quick to judge. I thought you’d be different.” I turn away and walk away from her.

“Barker,” Annistyn calls after me.

I shake my head but I stop. I can hear the guilt in her voice. “Don’t worry about it. See you later.” I return to the bar, but I don’t have a hard time keeping my eyes to myself anymore. My reputation will precede me regardless, and I was stupid to think I could have a girl like Annistyn.

Annistyn

I stand in the hallway much longer than I had intended, but the hurt that flashed through Barker’s eyes and the way his words were laced with regret and disappointment, made me question things. Maybe, Barker wasn’t always the bad boy I believed. Maybe, it was an act to keep people away or to keep him from getting hurt. I’m still standing there when Vienna heads down the hall toward me. “Hey, is everything okay? I saw Barker come down this way and he came back out, but you didn’t.”

I shrug. “I’m fine.”

Vienna cocks her head to the side and glares at me. “Don’t lie to me.”

“It’s your birthday. Let’s just go have some fun.”

I turn to walk away, but she grabs my arm. “Nope, not happening. It is my birthday and what I want is for you to talk to me. Besides, we’ve had fun all night long.”

“Vienna...” I whine.

She holds her hand up to silence me. “Talk or we can’t leave.” I give in, like I always do, and explain what happened between Barker and me. “Well, that explains why he looks like a sad puppy right now.”

“What?” I ask.

“Look, I know Barker has a reputation, but that doesn’t mean he is his reputation. Lots of people have reputations for other reasons. Here’s the thing, you two have mad chemistry and I know y’all are into each other, but one of y’all are always fighting it. I know your past, but you can’t judge Barker based on what’s happened with other people. From the way he was acting tonight, I’m thinking he is probably ready to give this a try, but the question is—are you?” Vienna gives me a questioning look. Was I ready to give Barker a chance?

Twenty

Annistyn

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Once Talon and Barker announce the last call, the girls and I pack up and head outside to the limo waiting for us. I haven't had anything to drink besides water since my encounter with Barker in the hallway. His words and Vienna's question keep running through my head. My stomach rolls with nerves and emotions that I don't really want to deal with. When the humid air from outside hits me, I take a deep breath.

Most people hate humidity and I don't blame them. A lot of the time it can be miserable, but I love the comfort of it. It's something I'm used to and I like the familiar. I love the smells that come along with living in Los Angeles. The salty sea smell that hangs in the air is my favorite thing in the world. I walk out into the parking lot in front of Sinner's Den. Sinner's Den sits on a lot just off the highway. Next to it is a two-story, industrial-looking building that the Sons of Sin call their clubhouse. It's where they all hang out and sometimes live. Sinner's Den has always been on this lot, but in the beginning, it was just for members of the motorcycle club and after the fire, it closed. No one was sure if they'd reopen it because the Sons of Sin had a new leader... Barker. He seemed to want to take the Sons of Sin in a better direction than the previous leader. A few months after he took over, Sinner's Den was under construction. Drake's construction company got it rebuilt in no time. When it reopened everyone was welcome to come in. It's so peaceful this time of night. In the distance, you can hear the thunder as another storm rolls in.

I wrap my arms around myself and just try to be in the moment. Vienna comes up behind me. She wraps her arms around my waist and rests her chin on my shoulder. "You okay, bestie?" I just nod, because I'm afraid I can't get the lie out and I'm not sure if I am okay or not. "Talk to me, Annistyn."

I sigh and stare up at the starry night sky. “You’re not wrong. I like Barker... a lot. More than I ever should.”

“Says who?” she asks.

“My history. I don’t exactly have a good history with biker guys,” I admit quietly.

Vienna sighs. “You can’t base every biker guy on Jerick and Cam. They suck as people in general.”

I turn around and look at her. “Jerick didn’t used to suck. The motorcycle club changed him.”

“Only because he allowed himself to be changed. Look, I can’t tell you what to do, but I can tell you this... you’ll never know if you don’t try. The thing is that not every biker guy is bad. Talon isn’t bad at all. You love him and trust him, so why not give Barker a chance?” she asks. We stand there and I let her words sink in. As much as I hate to admit it, she’s right. She must read my face before I even make a decision. “Are you riding with us?” I shake my head no, and Vienna’s smile gets cheek achingly huge. “Good. I’ll see you later.”

I watch Vienna walk away, but call after her. “Vienna.” She turns around and I rush toward her. I grab her and hug her. “Thank you. I love you and happy birthday.”

She smiles as she pulls away. “I love you too and you just gave me the best birthday present ever.”

Talon steps up with his helmet in hand. “Everything good?”

“Yeah,” Vienna and I reply as she turns around and heads to the limo. Talon makes his way to the motorcycle. He doesn’t say anything else, but I can see it in his eyes.

It's his good luck look.

I stand outside the front door. Now that my cheering section has left, I'm not sure that I can do this. Barker was so mad and hurt when he turned away from me earlier. What if he doesn't want to see or talk to me now? I pace back and forth for a minute. I contemplate just walking home, but when I look up the sky has darkened, and the thunder is rolling. Besides, what I want is just beyond that door. It's time for me to face this fear.

I take a deep breath and square my shoulders before opening the door and stepping through. Sinner's Den is different; empty. The music blares through the space now that there's no chatter to drown it out. I stand there for a second before my eyes fall on Barker as he sweeps the wood floor. For the crowd that was in Sinner's Den tonight, it's pretty clean. The tables filling the area and the bar along the left side wall are all cleaned. The pool tables and dartboards in the back of the bar have all been neatly arranged. It's the wood floor now and that's nearly spotless. I watch as his back muscles contract with the movement. "Sorry, we're closed," he calls over the music, before turning around and seeing it's me. His eyes hold mine. I can't decipher the emotion I see within them and that makes me nervous. "Did you forget something?" he asks coldly. I hate it. I hate his tone and the disconnect I feel right now.

I nod my head as I start to walk his way. "I did," I finally manage to say. Once I'm close enough, I reach out and pull him toward me and wrap my arms around his neck before rising to my tiptoes to meet his lips. At first, his body is stiff, but his mouth is surprised and I use it to my advantage. Soon enough, his body relaxes into mine and his hands begin to explore my body. Girl Like You by Jason Aldean comes on and fills the room.

Barker pulls back and smirks. "I thought you forgot something."

I roll my eyes. “I did... you.”

Barker bites down on his bottom lip before shaking his head and stepping away from me. He leans back against the table and crosses his arms over his chest, creating space between us. “I don’t know what you want, Annistyn. You’re hot and cold. I don’t like games, which is why I don’t do relationships.”

As I watch him right now, I realize that he’s been hurt. He’s got that scared look in his eyes, that I never noticed before. I guess I was so busy running from my own fears I never stopped to realize he had the same ones. “Relationships aren’t meant to be games.”

He shrugs. “Maybe not, but a lot of the time they turn into one.”

“I don’t disagree with you, but I’m honestly not trying to play a game. I have... trust issues. So, I try to ignore or fight whatever I’m feeling, but then you just get under my skin and I get lost in you,” I admit. I didn’t even realize I was walking toward him until I’m standing in front of him and he reaches out and rests his hands on my hips.

“Now that I can understand. There’s not another girl like you,” he says with a wink before he pulls me into him and captures my mouth in a kiss that would make any girl senseless.

Twenty-One

Barker

My ego was bruised, but it was quickly forgotten when she stepped back into Sinner’s Den. I had assumed that it was just some straggler that I’d have to make sure got home. So, when I saw Annistyn standing there, to say I was shocked would be an understatement. I tried to stay mad and be distant for a few minutes, but I should have

known I'd fail. There's something about her I can't deny. It was the way her sage green eyes pleaded with me. Her lips slightly pouting, not in a way to get what she wanted but because she was genuinely disappointed and sorry for earlier. I couldn't deny her. I didn't want to.

As she closed the distance between us, my heart thundered in my chest. I was too afraid to let myself think that maybe she was finally going to give us a chance. It had taken me five days to figure out I was willing to give us one, so I could wait while she decided. I just didn't want to play the games in the meantime. However, I don't think I expected her to decide this quickly. Especially with our earlier conversation running through my head.

When she reached out and pulled me into her, I had wanted to resist for a moment, but of course, that didn't last either. She knows I can't resist her and I don't even want to try anymore. Or at least, that's what I was telling myself until I remembered that we had been here before. Everything between us was hot and cold. One moment she wanted me and the next she wanted me as far away as possible. It was like a game and I didn't want to play it anymore. I just wanted her.

When she admitted that she had feelings for me, and that I got under her skin, I understood that completely. She did the same things to me, and I was fighting it before, but now... now I didn't want to. So, I pulled her back into me and claimed that smart mouth of hers, and kissed her until neither of us could breathe normally.

At some point, we had switched spots and she was sitting on the table with me standing between her legs. My hands were tangled into her hair. When we break away from one another, she releases an airy laugh and rests her head against my chest. "Now, that is how a kiss should be."

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“I won’t argue with that,” she says, with another laugh.

I look around the area. “I got to finish up here. You want to wait and I’ll give you a ride home?”

“Well, you kind of have to because I sent everyone else home,” Annistyn tells me looking bashful.

I laugh. “And what if I had been an ass and turned you away?” Annistyn shrugs and I laugh. “Just thought this was a sure thing, huh?”

“Well...” she replies coyly.

I chuckle before leaning forward and kissing her one more time. “Let me finish up then I’ll get you home.”

On the ride to Annistyn’s place, I savor the way her body fits against mine and her hands wrapped around my waist. I park my bike and help her off the back, then walk her to the front door. “Well, tonight was...”

“Good,” she finishes my sentence.

My head falls back in laughter, because the last word I would have used was good. “Well I was thinking along the lines of freaking amazing, but we can go with good.”

Annistyn shakes her head. “I like freaking amazing better.”

I lean toward her and whisper in her ear. “Me too, but it’s just like you.” Annistyn slaps at my chest while laughing. I wrap my hand around her wrist and pull her mouth to mine. I allow myself to get lost in her for a bit, before I finally pull away. “You better get inside now.”

“Goodnight, Barker,” she tells me before she kisses my cheek and disappears behind the door. I’m on freakin’ cloud nine the whole drive home. That sweet scent of hers still lingers on my clothes and I can smell her all around me. It’s almost like she’s on the bike with me.

The next morning I wake up early. My body feels like it does when I sit behind the wheel of my car right before I break away at a race. The excitement is racing through my veins, pumping my blood harder, and it’s all because of Annistyn. Instead of trying to get back to sleep, I get up and get ready for the day.

Once I’m dressed, I head out to check in with Gunner and see how he’s doing. It’s been a few weeks since I’ve heard from him and I know the kid has a lot on his plate. I pull into the garage and I’m not shocked to see Gunner’s bike parked along the side. However, I am shocked to see the big smile on his face as I enter. “Hey Barker,” he calls out. If the smile threw me off then the happy-go-lucky tone of his voice definitely has my eyebrows rising in question.

“What happened to Gunner?” I ask, looking around like he’s been abducted by aliens.

Gunner rolls his eyes. “What? Can’t a guy be happy?”

I laugh. “Yes, a guy can but you... not really. What’s up?” Gunner shrugs. “Man, come on. I know you and I know everything on your plate right now, so I get why you were being so moody before, but this smile I don’t.”

Gunner laughs. "A lot has changed since the last time we spoke. Paris and I are back together and she even says she loves me."

"No shit," I tell him shaking my head. I mean, I'm happy for him because I knew he really cared about Paris and she seemed to be good for him, but I'm wondering how honest he's being with her. "What about Brit?" Gunner lost one of his brothers a few months ago and his wife, Brit, has been giving the family hell ever since.

"It all worked out. Come on, let's go have a seat and I'll fill you in," Gunner says, as he tosses his rag on top of the engine he's working on. Once we are seated, Gunner fills me in on all the craziness I missed while playing this game with Annistyn and running from Giselle. "So, everything worked out really well."

"Sounds like it. I'm happy for you man. Are you still walking a straight line?" I ask. Gunner got into some trouble a few months ago for putting graffiti on a building, but for the club, any kind of trouble is a no-go for us. I need Gunner to stay on the right side of the law in order for him to join the club.

"Hell yeah, I am. I have even more of a reason to now. Paris would kick my ass if I didn't."

"Good, I like her already," I tell him with a laugh. I have to admit, it is good to see this kid with a smile on his face. I was beginning to wonder if he'd ever catch a break. "So, let's talk about some new designs."

Gunner and I spend time going over some new designs for my car when he asks, "Can Paris and I come to one of the races some weekend? I'd really like to show her my best work and that's always on your car."

"Of course you can. You know you're always welcome."

Gunner smiles. “Thanks. So, are we going to talk about what’s going on with you?”

“What do you mean?”

Gunner gives me a curious look. “That big ass smile on your face.”

I roll my eyes, but instantly my mind wanders back to Annistyn and the night before. “You remember that girl, Annistyn?” Gunner nods his head yes. “Well, I think we may have both taken a step in the right direction.”

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“Really? So, you’re like a couple?” Gunner asks.

I shrug. A part of me wants to laugh because labeling something can be very high school. Every guy wants to call a girl ‘his’ at Gunner’s age. As you get older, it becomes less about that and more about the connection, but I also wouldn’t mind calling Annistyn, ‘my girl’. “I wouldn’t say that yet, but I will say we aren’t fighting our feelings anymore and it seems like we could be heading in that direction.”

Gunner reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. “Well, good for you. I’m happy for you.”

Twenty-Two

Annistyn

This morning was hectic. I woke up super late and had to rush around to make it to my study group on time. Vienna got off lucky since her study group for this class didn’t meet until the afternoon. I came rushing into the room with just a few minutes to spare. Once we finished up the study group, my body was sore and achy from sitting in the uncomfortable chairs with my head in a book for so long. I stood up and stretched. I had been so busy with my school work, I didn’t even think to text Barker. Then again, he hadn’t texted me either. Maybe he was already regretting everything that happened last night. At that one simple thought, my heart plummeted into my stomach. I really hoped that wasn’t the case. Taking a deep breath, I remind myself not to go down an Alice in Wonderland spiral. It wasn’t necessary.

As I pack up my things, I grab my cell phone from my back pocket and see a few

notifications on my phone. 'That's odd' I think to myself, I never heard anything come in. One quick check and I saw I had somehow managed to silence my phone completely. I ran through the notifications and sure enough, there was Barker's name.

Barker: Good morning, darlin'

I can't help but smile at those words. It's ridiculous how three simple words can make you so happy and create a wave of butterflies in your stomach. I may have received that text three hours ago, but I'm still going to text him back now.

Annistyn: Hey there handsome

Barker: Man, you sure know how to make a guy feel worried.

Annistyn: I'm sorry.

Annistyn: Wait!

Annistyn: Was the great Barker Tobin worried???

Barker: Watch it.

Barker: But I will have you know that he was in fact worried.

Annistyn: Haha! I'm sorry though. I guess I silenced my phone by accident and I didn't even realize until now.

Barker: No problem. We've all been there.

Annistyn: So what's your plan for today?

Barker: Well, I was thinking of grabbing this beautiful girl and then some food and maybe go out to a certain spot. Maybe take a dip in the water.

Annistyn: Beautiful girl? Well, lucky her.

Barker: I meant you.

Annistyn: Yeah, nope. I only go grab food at a certain spot and take dips in a pond for guys that call me smoking hot!

Barker: Is that so?

Annistyn: Yes sir. But you have fun now!

I send the last text before heading out the door and back across campus. I'm almost to my car when I hear a whistle. Turning around, I see Barker standing beside his bike. He closes the distance between us, pulling me into him, and just before he claims my mouth he says, "You're smoking hot." He winks. Before I can even laugh, his mouth is on mine and once again, I'm lost in the haze of Barker Tobin.

When Barker and I break away from one another, I take a deep breath, but I'm just met with the smell of leather and his cologne and it drives me a little crazy. I almost want to pull him back into me and kiss him until I just can't anymore. Instead, I try to calm my raging hormones. "I'd love to, but I always go see my dad today."

Barker smiles and it's not forced, which shocks me. I expected him to come at me with a smart-ass comment or just force a smile on his face so I wouldn't feel bad, but he honestly looks okay with this news. "That's okay. I understand." I'm still stunned by his reaction and words. I immediately pull my bottom lip between my teeth. Barker chuckles causing chills to race up and down my spine. He reaches out and caresses my cheek.

“What is it?” he asks.

I shake my head slightly, not wanting to break our connection and the skin-to-skin contact I have with him right now. There’s something incredibly soothing in his presence and touch. “I’m just shocked,” I admit to him.

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“Why?” he asks, with confusion written on his face. He makes confused look so good. It’s almost adorable on him.

“Because you aren’t mad. Most people, especially a guy, would be upset that I blew him off for my dad,” I explain.

He nods, but steps toward me, eliminating what little space we had barely put between us. “First of all, he’s your dad and he’s sick. I’d have to be a world-class douchebag in order to get upset about that. Second of all, you aren’t blowing me off. We didn’t have plans. This was a spur-of-the-moment idea, but I will totally take a raincheck on it,” he tells me with a wink. One more step toward me and we are chest to chest. “Lastly, if we ever do have plans and you have to cancel, and I don’t care how last minute it is, if it’s for you dad, I’ll understand.”

I shake my head in shock and raise up on my tiptoes to press a kiss to his mouth. “You’re kind of awesome.”

Barker smirks. “I’ll take that.” I scan the parking lot, but I don’t see Talon anywhere. Barker, of course, notices my eyes surveying the parking lot. “What are you looking for? Some hot date you don’t want me to know about?” he teases.

“No, Talon usually meets me, then we head over and visit with my dad for the afternoon. We usually play poker and then watch an old western movie, and have lunch with him, but I don’t see him anywhere.”

Barker turns around, leaving one hand resting on my hip while scanning the parking lot. “Yeah, I don’t see him. I mean, I’m sure he’s fine. Didn’t you see him before

class?”

I shake my head as worry starts to feel me. “No, I was running late and I just jumped out of bed, dealt with Augustus, and ran out to make it to my study group. His bedroom door was still shut, so I just assumed he was asleep.” My eyes scan the area for his familiar motorcycle, prospect cut, or his dark, slicked-back hair but I’m still not spotting him anywhere.

Barker runs his hands up and down my arms. “Look, try not to worry too much. I’m sure he’s fine. He’s probably still asleep. He’s been working really hard at the bar and his website designer job. He’s got to be tired.”

I nod my head because he’s right. I’m sure Talon is fine and I’m just overreacting. “I’m sure you’re right.” Even though I’ve convinced myself that Barker is right, I can’t shake the feeling in my gut that something is wrong. “Barker.”

“Yeah darlin’,” he says, with a question in his eye.

I take a deep breath and before I can chicken out, I blurt out, “Do you want to come with me?” The minute I say it out loud, I want to turn around and run away. What the hell was I thinking? Of course he doesn’t want to come to a nursing home and hang out with me and my dad for the afternoon. Besides, we just barely got to a good spot last night and now I want to throw meeting my dad at him... really? Talk about awkward moment. This is one of those times that you want to put your face to your palm in a duh moment.

Barker smiles and his dimples shine. “I’d love to.” I must give him a shocked look, because he chuckles and asks, “What?”

“I just didn’t think you’d be okay with it. I mean, hanging out there today and meeting my dad.”

“Well, I did kind of already meet your dad. I mean, not officially, but he saw me when he was at the hospital. I don’t think it’s a big deal. Besides, I love poker and old western movies,” he says with a wink, and I swear in that moment I didn’t think it was possible for me to fall for Barker Tobin more than I already had, but I was wrong. This is a whole new level and my heart knows it. It’s beating like a hummingbird.

Twenty-Three

Barker

I follow behind Annistyn on the way to the nursing home to see her dad. I keep waiting for myself to freak out, but it hasn’t happened yet, which is kind of funny. I mean, meeting or spending time with a girl’s father is a big deal, yet I’m super calm. Normally, I would have been running in the other direction. I would have already come up with over a hundred different excuses as to why I couldn’t make it. Hell, I probably would have wrecked my damn bike just to avoid the situation, but this is different. This is Annistyn, so it makes everything better. Another part of me feels special that she even invited me to come along. I know how much her father means to her. It was evident the night at the hospital. So, the fact that she’s allowing me into this part of her world means more than she knows. It’s a sign that she’s starting to trust me. Stepping into Talon’s shoes for the day feels odd but I’m so damn glad he’s overslept. It’s selfish but true. He’s like a brother to Annistyn so I know she’s worried about his absence but I’m thankful for this chance with her.

I watch as her Civic pulls into a parking spot and I pull in beside her. She gets out slowly and I can tell she’s nervous. She’s fidgeting and that damn bottom lip is in between her teeth again. I swear, she has no idea what she does to me. I take a moment to look her over. Her distressed denim capris and cranberry and white floral tank top give her a different look than normal, or at least different than what I’m used to. When I look down, I realize why everything seems so different. A pair of white

sandals are on her feet. It hadn't really registered how short she was earlier, but now it does. "Did Cinderella lose her slipper?"

Annistyn shakes her head. "Hush it. I don't wear heels all the time." I raise my eyebrows and give her a skeptical look. "Really, I don't. I mean, I love them, but when I'm running around like a madwoman trying to make it to my study group on time, I don't think heels are the best choice."

I laugh. "Well, me and heels don't get along."

"I could see that. You don't really have the legs for them," she fires back with a smirk.

I laugh and throw my arm around her shoulders. "Come on, let's go play some poker."

As we enter the nursing home, I have to admit that this one feels different from others I've been inside of. This one feels inviting and homey. Annistyn leads us down the hallway. She stops outside a door and takes a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. I can tell she's preparing herself for whatever she is going to encounter on the other side of the door. I place my hands on her shoulders and give her a little squeeze, just so she knows that she's not alone. Annistyn glances over her shoulder and gives me a small smile. I lean forward and press a light kiss to her temple and she sighs.

Annistyn heads into the room. "Hey Daddy," she says happily.

"There's my Annistyn girl," he tells her, with a smile on his face. He notices me. "And you brought someone with you. Now, I remember you, but not your name." His slender finger points at me.

I step forward and extend my hand to him. "Barker Tobin, sir."

Her dad takes my hand and nods his head. “That’s right! I remember that. Nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you too.” I look around the room and notice the cards already laying on the table. “Annistyn told me there would be some poker today.”

“Well, is the sun hot?”

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I had never heard that term before, but I had to admit it made me laugh. “Yes, sir. It is. “

“Okay, I like that you got some manners, but enough with the sir stuff. You’re making me feel old, kid,” he says with a laugh. “Call me Gabe.”

“You got it, Gabe,” I tell him. Calling him by his name feels kind of wrong and my grandpa would be rolling over in his grave if he heard me refer to him by that, but he did request it.

He beams at me then claps a couple of times before rubbing his hands together. “Okay, how about that poker game. Are you any good?”

“I win some. I lose some,” I reply.

“Well, do some losing today, okay?” he teases. Gabe gets out of bed and slowly makes his way to the table by the window in his room. Annistyn stays right by his side. Once he’s seated, he turns to me and says, “She’s always fussing over me. I try to get her not to worry about me, but she still does.”

“Daddy...” Annistyn says with a sigh while her hand rubs at her forehead. Worry is etched in her eyes.

He looks up at her. “Well, I ain’t dead yet, so ain’t no reason to be so damn worried about me all the time.” Gabe turns to look at me. “So, Barker, what do you do?”

I clear my throat because I should have expected I’d get the third degree and twenty

questions. “Well, I’m the president of the Sons of Sin and I run Sinner’s Den most of the time. I also work with Drake James at his construction company.”

Gabe sits back then slaps his knee. “Well, I’ll be. I knew that name of yours tickled my brain. You’re the group Talon is trying to join. He’s a prospect right now. I have to admit I didn’t like the idea at first. But I’ve seen how the Sons of Sin have changed over the last couple of years and I have to say I’m impressed. You must be one hell of a leader. Talon is like a son to me so I always try to look out for him. I sure am proud though of how far the Sons of Sin have come.”

“Thank you for saying that.”

“It’s a damn shame. I know y’all probably get all kinds of judgments and hell thrown at y’all because of the bikes, but just know if you try to do the right thing even if it’s technically the wrong thing, but you have a good heart with good intentions, then you did succeed. That’s the secret to life,” Gabe tells us tapping his slender finger against his temple. His eyes, like Annistyn’s, are so expressive.

When I look up, I see the moisture pooling in Annistyn’s eyes and I want to comfort her but I think if I get up and hug her it could make it worse, so I sit there and watch her just in case. Gabe clears his throat. Maybe he senses the tension too. “Shuffle those cards, Annistyn girl. She’s the best card shuffler you’ll ever see. She’s full of all kinds of surprises.”

I watch as Annistyn’s tears disappear with the task. I notice Gabe watching her out of the corner of his eye and that’s when it clicks. He knew she was about to break, so he distracted her. I can’t help but admire that. Once the cards are shuffled, Annistyn begins to pass out the cards. We play a whole game with Gabe winning before lunch is brought in. Tomato soup and grilled cheese with steamed vegetables and sweet tea. “Did you want the tray? Normally, we just always bring three because Talon is here,” the nurse tells me.

I nod my head. “Yes, it looks delicious. Thank you so much.” We sit at the table and eat in silence.

Annistyn looks up toward the door. “I’ll be right back.” Then she’s out of her seat. When I turn around, I see her stepping into the hallway with a different nurse.

“That girl of mine is going to worry herself to death,” Gabe mumbles.

I give him a tight smile. “She just loves you.” I’m trying to keep an eye on Gabe and Annistyn but she’s out of earshot.

“Yes, she does,” he says with a sigh. “And I’m one lucky man because of it. She’s the one great thing I did in this world, but I worry about her. Aside from Talon, she doesn’t let anyone in easily. You have to fight for every inch. I don’t think it’s her fault. After her mother and brother, I think she just thought it was easier to keep the world at a distance, but she’s worth the fight. That I can promise.”

Brother? I didn’t know Annistyn had a brother. Then again, I guess there’s a lot that I don’t know about Annistyn. I want to ask more about him. I’d like to know what happened, but it’s not my place and when Annistyn wants me to know, she’ll tell me.

“You take good care of my girl, ya hear?” Gabe gives me a stern look.

“Yes, sir. That’s a promise,” I tell him. It’s a promise that I will keep because every moment I’m around Annistyn I find myself falling farther and farther for her.

“You like John Wayne?” Gabe asks. I nod my head. “Good deal. Let’s go watch a movie.”

We get up and I head towards the couch. I have to fight the instinct to stay by his side, because if he doesn’t want Annistyn there, then I’m pretty sure he won’t want

me either. I watch him carefully out of the corner of my eye and hold my breath until he takes a seat on the worn brown sofa with mismatched throw pillows on it. A blanket is lying across the back, and from what I can make of it, the pattern is horses on an open range. “Damn it, they didn’t bring me any pudding, did they?”

“With your lunch?” I ask him. Gabe nods in response. “No, I didn’t see any. You want me to go ask a nurse for some?”

“Do you mind?”

I stand up shaking my head. “Not at all. Any preference?”

“Chocolate!” His smile is large like a kid in a candy store. The smile is so familiar it makes my heart squeeze. There’s so much of Annistyn in it.

I chuckle. “I’ll be right back.” I head down the hallway to where I can see a nurse’s station. I’m almost there when I hear Annistyn’s voice.

“It went up, again? I mean, is that common for the prices to keep climbing like this?” I can hear worry laced in her tone.

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Whoever she is talking to sighs. “I’m afraid it can be. It shouldn’t be allowed, but it is. I just wanted to give you a heads up. Also, thank you for the payment you dropped off the other day. I received it and your dad’s bill is up to date now.”

“Thank you. That’s one worry off me.”

“I’m so sorry things are so hard on you. I wish I could do more,” the lady tells her.

“You do so much more than you have to as is. I’ll figure it out. I know he had tests run the other day and he told me they were fine, but were they?” Annistyn asks quietly.

There is a long pause. “He doesn’t want to worry you, but things continue to decline as we expected. I’m really sorry, Annistyn.”

I hear the lady leave and I wait for a few seconds before I step up to the nurse’s station to ask for the pudding. No nurse is there right now, but Annistyn notices me. I can see her wipe under her eyes before heading over to me. “Hey, you. Did you survive lunch with my daddy?” She tries to make it sound like she’s teasing me, but I know her well enough now to know she’s not. She’s barely holding it together. She won’t meet my eyes.

“Yeah, I like him. He’s a good man.”

“The best,” she says quietly, and I notice she looks over her shoulder back toward a window. I don’t question her because she doesn’t need that right now. I think she needs a hug and more money; both of which I can help with, but I’ll take care of them

later. Right now, she's fighting to stay strong and I won't take that away from her. "So, why are you out here?"

"They forgot his pudding," I tell her.

She gives me half a laugh. "Of course they did, and he can't live without that chocolate pudding. I'll go grab it. You can head back."

I want to go with her, but it's clear she needs some more time to herself so I nod. "Okay, see you in a few." I head back down the hall formulating a plan on how to get Annistyn into the races without causing a fight like last time. She's good behind the wheel and she could make more than enough money to keep up with her dad's medical bills. I may have to enlist Talon's help on this one. He seems to be the only one who can get through that beautifully, stubborn head of hers.

Twenty-Four

Annistyn

The minute that Penny, one of the nurses at my dad's nursing home, told me the cost for dialysis was rising again my stomach sank. I was making it, but barely. The cost of living, school, and medical bills were going through the roof and no matter how much I could manage to make at Sinner's Den, it just never really felt like enough.

When I turned around and saw Barker standing at the desk, I swear my heart stopped. Had he heard our discussion? How had I not noticed him before now? A part of me wanted to curl up and cry in embarrassment for the fact that he might know my financial issues. The other part of me, which is the part that always wins, squared her shoulders, held her head high, and plastered on that fake smile to make him think everything was okay.

I wasn't totally sure if he believed me, but he didn't push it, which I appreciated. Once I got my dad's chocolate pudding, I went back to his room to find him and Barker on the couch watching an old western. I stood in the doorway to memorize the scene. I liked the way it looked and felt. I never would have thought Barker to be like this. I obviously had him all wrong. Barker was something I could get used to; which was both exciting and scary.

Right before Barker and I leave the nursing home, my phone vibrates and I see Talon's name on the screen. I'd been worried about him all day and the gnawing feeling hadn't left until just now. His text was short but to the point. He was sorry and he'd explain when I got home. I was just glad that he was okay. I hug my dad bye and head out into the hallway to meet Barker. He holds his hand out to me when I step out of the room, and I gladly take it. I like the feel of my hand in his. There's an unusual sense of comfort in it.

My hands are always cold, but his are warm. Where my skin is soft, his is well used with roughness, just like they should be. I study him out of the corner of my eye, and I can't help but think it should be illegal to be as good-looking as the Sons of Sin are, all tall, dark and handsome. They are just about every girl's dream.

Once we reach my car, Barker spins me around before pushing me against the car. He runs his hands up my body, starting at my hips. My skin lights on fire from his touch and the humid air clings to my exposed skin as my breath hitches. Suddenly, he buries his hands in my hair and pulls my mouth to his. The kiss is so much more. It's roughly passionate and the little growl at the back of his throat makes my body vibrate. I dig my nails into his shoulder blades, trying to pull him closer to me.

Barker breaks away and draws in a deep breath. I watch as he drops his head back to stare at the sky above. The sun is setting behind him, and I wish I had a photographic memory for this moment right here. I watch his chest rise and fall with his breath and the flush on his skin. Drawing in a deep breath, I try to calm my nerves that are

humming right now. When Barker's eyes fall back on mine, they are unreadable.

"God, what do you do to me?" I shrug because I don't have an answer to that. Barker steps back into me. "I can't get enough of you. It's like I could get lost in you, in just your kiss, for hours." His thumb lightly traces over my bottom lip. Slowly, he leans his head back down, but the kiss is so different this time. It's soft and tender and ends way too quickly. "You better get in that car before I do something that could land us both in jail."

My mouth falls open, but Barker just laughs and winks before reaching around and opening my car door for me. I slide behind the wheel and start the engine. I watch as Barker walks back to his bike. I don't know what it is, but there is something undeniably sexy about a man on a bike.

Barker stays behind me until we reach my neighborhood. When we reach the red light that leads to my place, he pulls up beside me and raises the visor of his helmet. Barker winks before turning in the opposite direction, heading home or to work. I watch him for a moment before I turn and head for the apartment.

I'm on cloud nine as I make my way up to my apartment, but the minute I enter the door, a smell I've become all too familiar with hits my nose. Blood. I look around and see little drops of blood on the floor. "Talon!" I scream out, as worry floods me.

A petite girl steps out of his bedroom door. Her medium-length red hair is a mess and she has mascara running down her face. "He just fell asleep, but I don't think he should be sleeping. I heard that's bad if they have a concussion." Her voice is soft and sweet with a slight shyness to it. Landrey Collins. Everyone in town knows who she is, because she is the preacher's daughter. Los Angeles has a ton of churches but only a few in this area of town. Her father is the most well-known in this area. Now the question is: what is Landrey doing in my apartment coming out of Talon's room?

“I’m sorry, what?”

Landrey wrings her hands. I notice a slight tear at the bottom of the hem of her sundress. “Talon saved me from these guys and he was doing okay, but then a third one showed up and they just beat him. I tried to stop them, but they wouldn’t. He was unconscious for a moment, but he woke up. I managed to get him to my car and I tried to take him to the emergency room, but he kept insisting not to,” her voice breaks, and she sobs.

I rush forward without thinking and pull her into my arms. Hugging her just seems like the right thing to do, despite not being an overly affectionate person with strangers. It will calm her down, but then my mind registers that she’s talking about Talon so I step aside and rush into his room. Landrey is on my heels. I stop in my tracks when I see him. He’s lying on his back in the bed. His face is swollen and bruised. His left eye is completely swollen shut. “Who did this?” I manage to ask.

Landrey shakes her head. “I only know two of their names, but they are from one of the other biker gangs, Jerick and Cam.”

My stomach rolls with nausea and anger. I take a deep breath, because I know I need to take care of Talon right now. I turn to Landrey. “Okay, go into my room. It’s a mess, so listen closely. In the corner, you will see a bunch of college books. Mixed in those stacks are a couple of first aid kits. Grab those.” Landrey nods before she disappears. I rush into the bathroom across the hall and grab some rags and towels.

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Once I have the first aid kits, I climb onto the bed with Talon. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

I nod. “Yes, for the most part. I’m in my last year of nursing school and I’ve passed every class with an A so far. If I notice anything abnormal, we’re taking him to the emergency room.” She nods and steps aside so I can work.

It takes me a while to get him cleaned up, but thank goodness for Landrey. She runs back and forth to the bathroom to wet rags for me. Then we had to wrap Talon’s ribs because they were so bruised. I could almost bet money a few are broken, but the only thing I can do is wrap them so maybe he won’t be in too much pain. Talon is in and out of it throughout the entire process, but I just continue to work. Once I’ve finished cleaning and doctoring everything I can find, I sit the first aid kits on the nightstand and leave out of the room with Landrey behind me. She’s kind of like a puppy.

Once we reach the kitchen, I grab a well-earned Mountain Dew. “Would you like something to drink?” I ask her.

“Some water would be great, thank you.”

I grab a bottle of water and hand it to her. I notice the distraught look in her eyes. “Do you need to see a doctor?” I ask her. She mentioned that Talon saved her from Jerick, Cam, and another one of Jerick’s goonies, but I don’t know what exactly he saved her from. She shakes her head. “Are you sure? I mean, I don’t know what happened, but with those guys I can imagine, and you know it’s important to be tested if something... did happen.”

“Nothing happened. I mean, I think it was going to, but Talon showed up and he stopped it from happening. Is he going to be okay?” she asks quickly.

I nod. “He should be. He’s going to be really sore and it’ll take time for him to heal obviously, but nothing seems broken except for maybe a few ribs.” Landrey stands there and the awkward silence falls between us. She looks at the time on the clock behind me and I watch her eyes widen. “Do you need to get home?”

“Well,” she hesitates.

“I can call a friend of mine and Talon’s and he can follow you, if that will make you feel better,” I offer.

“Okay,” she says quietly. I dial Barker and explain what happened. I can hear the anger in his voice, but he doesn’t hesitate to make sure that Landrey makes it home safely. When I walk back into the kitchen, Landrey is trying to pat her hair back down. “I must look like such a pig’s pen right now.”

“Not at all, but you can go into the bathroom and clean up before Barker gets here.” Landrey nods before she disappears into the bathroom. Shortly after, there’s a knock on the door and when I open it up, I’m shocked to see Barker, Wilder, and a younger looking kid.

“Is Talon okay?” Wilder asks.

“What about Landrey?” the kid asks.

I nod my head. “Yes, they’re both okay. Talon is just pretty beaten up and probably has a few broken ribs. Landrey is shaken up I’m sure, but otherwise she seems okay.”

Barker runs his hands through his hair. “Those son of a bitches. They can’t keep

doing shit like this and getting away with it.”

“I know, but we’ll talk to Drake, Zayde, and Stryker and come up with something together,” Wilder says, as he pats Barker’s shoulder.

Landrey comes into the living room. “Landrey, this is Barker and Wilder, they’re with Sons of Sin and...” I turn to the younger kid whose name I don’t know.

“Gunner,” Landrey adds for me.

“Oh good, you know each other. They are going to make sure you get home safely,” I tell her.

“Thank you,” she says, as she grabs her purse off the chair. As they head out the door Barker hangs back.

“I’m glad you called. I’ll be back here as soon as we get her home,” Barker tells me, as he pulls me into him.

“Barker, I’m fine.”

“No, I’m not taking any chances. Who knows what Jerick is capable of,” he says, before pressing a kiss to the top of my head. I watch as he leaves with the thought running through my head. I used to know what he was capable of because he’s my brother, but you don’t know that. What happens when Barker finds out that Jerick is my brother? I shut the door and lock it, then get busy cleaning the blood off the floor while praying that Barker and I can survive my connection to Jerick.

Twenty-Five

Barker

I had been with Wilder and Gunner when Annistyn called. When I saw her name on my screen, I can't describe the feeling or even why, but it's like I knew something was wrong before I ever answered it. I'd never had that type of connection with anyone before. Annistyn gave me a quick rundown of what had happened and instantly my blood began to boil. I couldn't even see straight as we got on our bikes and headed to her place.

Chuck, the former leader of Deviant Devils, was horrible, but Jerick is worse. He is younger, egotistical, and cocky. He acts like he has something to prove or a reputation to live up to or outdo, and he is hell-bent on getting there. The fact that Jerick and his goons had gone after Landrey Collins, the damn preacher's daughter, proved he didn't care about anything. He was heartless. Landrey had always been the sweetest person and she always minded her own business, so why you would mess with her is beyond me. Why you would mess with any woman is beyond me. I mean, seriously you have to be a low-life in order to mess with any woman like that.

Landrey didn't go into the details, but no matter what they did, it wasn't okay in my book and I intended to make them pay in one way or another. As much as I hated that happened to someone as sweet as Landrey, I couldn't help but think 'what if it had been Annistyn?' That thought alone sends my heart into a frantic state.

I pull up into the parking lot and park next to Annistyn's car. I can't go home and I can't drive around because I'll end up pulling a Zayde. Months ago, when Chuck and his gang had burned down Sinner's Den, he had only seen red. He ran to Chuck's bar and started a fight that ended him up in jail. If I drive around, I'll end up in the same boat. So, I do the only thing I can. I go to Annistyn.

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I knock on the door and when she opens it up, she takes my breath away. She's dressed for bed in her red shorts and a black tank top with red polka dots on it. Her hair is pulled up with a few loose strands hanging here and there. Her face is clear of makeup, but her eyes are red. I know she's been crying. She's had an emotional day. I can imagine seeing her dad in his shape isn't easy. The rising cost of his medical bills has to be weighing on her and now Talon. They are like family to one another, so I'm sure seeing him in this condition on top of everything else is overwhelming.

I step inside and pull her into my chest. Kicking my foot behind me, I shut the door. Annistyn sobs and it breaks my heart. I tighten my arms around her, trying to let her know she's not alone. We stand like that for a while until she finally stops crying. I feel her shake her head against my chest. "I'm sorry."

I pull away slightly and use a finger to tip her head back so she can see into my eyes. "Don't ever apologize for taking a moment to collect yourself or emotions. Today has been rough I'm sure. I'm here for you. You aren't alone."

She nods her head and bites down on her bottom lip. I have to bite back the groan as my body reacts to that. She drives me insane with that one simple gesture, and I don't even know why. Before I realize it, she's pulling my mouth to hers and I happily oblige. The kiss changes quickly and we become a mess of heated passion and roaming hands. I fall back against the door, pulling her with me. My hands slip down to the back of her thighs. I lift her so that she wraps her legs around my waist and I carry her to the bedroom.

I wake up in the middle of the night. Annistyn's head is lying on my chest. I trace lazy circles around her bare back and shoulders. A feeling of contentment washes over me. I've never felt like this before. I've never felt the need to be with someone, to protect them, to love them.

That word causes me to untangle myself from Annistyn. I stand up and slip on my boxer briefs before I make my way to her window. The moon is full and bright and the stars are shining brightly. I take a deep breath. All of this is so foreign to me. I don't know what to make of it. I sigh and turn around to look at her as she sleeps. I may not understand any of this, but I love her. What I have with Annistyn is so much more than what I ever had with Giselle.

Giselle was a mixture of like and lust, but with Annistyn it's love. I get it now. I get what Drake has with Zoey. I understand what Wilder feels for Bryar. I know that pull that Stryker feels toward Arbor. I understand it all now because it's what I have with Annistyn. I stretch my muscles and climb back into bed. Wrapping my arm around Annistyn's waist, I pull her back into me. Having her in my arms is like coming home and I never want to leave.

The next morning, I wake up to Annistyn leaving a trail of kisses across my shoulder. I chuckle. "Good morning, darlin'."

She smirks. "Good morning sleepy head." She leans up and presses her lips against mine, but we get interrupted by both Talon and Augustus. "Talon sounds awake."

"I'll get Augustus," I tell her, as I press a quick kiss to her lips. As soon as we get dressed, I grab Augustus and head outside to let him take care of his business. As I'm walking around waiting on Augustus, I notice something on the side of Annistyn's car. "Slut" is carved into the paint on the passenger side door. My rage is all-

consuming. I grab my phone and dial Gunner. He can fix this so Annistyn doesn't know.

"Hey, man," Gunner answers.

"Gunner, I need you at Annistyn's place. Jerick and his goons tagged her car. I don't want her to know. I'm going to get her keys. You take it to the shop and repaint the whole damn thing. I'll make it a surprise for her. Add it to my bill. I'll pay for it," I tell him.

"Shit! I'm on my way." I rush back upstairs with Augustus in my arms. I slip Annistyn's key off her ring then rush back down in time to toss it at Gunner. Jerick has gone too damn far in the last twenty-four hours. It's time to teach him a lesson.

Twenty-Six

Annistyn

I head into Talon's room. He's trying to sit up, but he's in pain and can barely move. I rush forward and help him sit. He grimaces, which doesn't really help considering the condition of his face. "How do you feel?" As soon as I say it I realize just how dumb it sounds. He can't feel good.

"You can't tell, but I totally rolled my eyes at you," he mumbles sarcastically.

I laugh. "Well, if you didn't look like a human version of a punching bag, I'd totally hit you right now."

"I'm pretty sure if you did I wouldn't know the difference. I'm sorry I missed time with your dad yesterday."

I wave my hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about that. It worked out okay on that end of things. He and Barker really hit it off.”

“He likes Barker?” Talon asks.

I nod. “It seems like it.”

“That’s good. I’m happy for you, Annistyn.”

I study him, but it’s hard to read someone’s expression when their face is bruised and swollen. “Thanks. So, you want to tell me what happened?”

“Sure, but first I need to go to the bathroom and I’m starving,” Talon says, as he tries to stand. His balance is off and he’s still weak. Luckily, Barker enters just in time.

“Hey, you’re alive!” Barker rushes over and takes Talon’s arm over his shoulders. “I’ve got him.” I nod and let Barker help Talon to the bathroom. I head into the kitchen and try to figure out what to make for breakfast. I decide that all we really have is bacon and eggs, so I’ll make that work. Barker and Talon slowly make their way to the kitchen island. “I didn’t know you could cook,” Barker says behind me, sounding shocked.

I laugh. “Well, I can. I mean, I’m not going to run off and be a chef or anything, but I can manage on most days.”

Once I serve up the plates, we sit in silence while we eat. The only sound is the forks hitting the plates. Barker is the first to break the silence. “So, Talon, man, you want to tell me what happened?”

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Talon sighs and sits back. He studies me for a moment and I know he's trying to gauge my reaction since Jerick is involved. I slightly nod my head letting him know it's okay, but luckily Barker doesn't notice. "I was heading to the convenience store a few blocks from here to grab a pack of cigarettes. I was getting off my bike when I heard a muffled scream, so of course I went rushing around the side of the building in the alleyway and I saw Jerick and the other one that's always with him, I think his name is Patrick. Jerick had his hand over Landrey's mouth and I couldn't see where Patrick's hands were, but it's not hard to imagine. Without thinking, I just rushed forward and started beating the hell out of them. I told her to run and she did and managed to get back to her car, but then Cam showed up and three against one is a hard fight to win. He did most of this," he said, motioning to himself.

Barker lets out a string of curses. "I'm glad you were there for Landrey though," I tell Talon.

"Me too. I can't even imagine what would have happened if I hadn't shown up," Talon says, shaking his head slightly.

"Jerick and his club are getting braver. I mean, to go out in the daylight and do something like that," Barker says, raking his hands through his hair.

"Well, it was actually really early. The sun hadn't even risen yet. I don't even know what Landrey was doing out so early," Talon says.

I shake my head as I start to process the information. "Wait, you weren't home when I left this morning?"

“No, when I left you were still asleep.” Everyone falls silent for a moment then Talon says, “Shit!”

“What?” I ask.

“My bike is still at the store. They’ll tow the damn thing,” he says, trying to stand up.

Barker pushes him back down in his seat. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.” Barker walks over to me and presses a kiss to the top of my head. “I’ll see you later. Be careful and if you have to go anywhere, call me first. I’ll send someone to follow you. I don’t trust Jerick and those goons of his.”

“I’ll stay here until work tonight. Please, be safe, okay?” I tell him. Barker nods then heads out the door. I sigh heavily.

Talon looks at me. “He doesn’t know that Jerick is your brother?”

I shake my head. “No, it hasn’t come up yet.”

“What about Cam?” Talon asks.

“Well, we just barely started this, so we haven’t had the ex’s talk yet, so no.”

“Annistyn...” Talon says with a sigh.

I stand up and start collecting the dishes. “I know, I know. I’m totally screwed. He’s never going to be okay with all of it, but I can’t change the past or the fact that Jerick is my twin brother.”

“I know, but maybe we should have said something before now,” Talon replies.

I nod. “Yeah, but you’re not related to him. So, they shouldn’t be upset with you over Jerick.”

“Maybe not, but it’s going to be a conflict of interest I’m sure. They might think I’m trying to spy on their club for him or something. I should have been honest from the beginning.”

I sigh. “We both should have, but all we can do now is hope for the best.” Talon starts to stand up and I rush over, but he waves me off. I watch as he hobbles back to his bedroom. I stand at the sink and try to figure out what I’m going to do about this situation.

Jerick wasn’t always bad. He used to be one of the best people in the world. Then Dad started to get sick when we were fifteen and he started hanging with Cam instead of Talon. Then slowly, he became more and more involved with Chuck and the Deviant Devils. Jerick got to where he didn’t come home for days at a time, but my dad’s health kept him from being fully aware of Jerick’s actions. He rarely showed up at school and he quit the job at the local grocery store as a cart boy. Everything changed with him.

By the time Talon and I were graduating high school, Jerick was in so deep with Chuck and the Deviant Devils, he had quit school and was a full-time criminal with them. After graduation, dad asked to be moved into a nursing home, so Talon and his mother helped me get him situated. I was scared. I was barely eighteen and had no clue what I was going to do. I went running to Jerick for help.

Jerick helped, but I noticed quickly I didn’t like his lifestyle or friends. Well, there was one friend who seemed different... Cam. I fell for him hard. He promised me the world and I believed him, but it didn’t last long. Cam wasn’t a one-woman type of guy and it became clear with the multiple girls he brought to our bed. I was disgusted, but felt like I had nowhere else to go.

Then Talon showed up and saved me. He had gotten an apartment and told me to move in. He came back to Cam's place, where I was living, and helped me pack up my stuff. Once I was settled into the apartment, he handed me the college applications. Talon knew I dreamed of being a nurse and he was going to do everything he could to make sure I got that dream. I knew I couldn't afford college on my own, but thanks to a few small scholarships and student loans, I managed the first couple of years. After that, I knew I'd never be able to afford to pay back on the student loans, so I started working at Vixens Strip Club. Even with that money, things were tight because school and medical bills add up quickly.

Now, here I am. I have a great job that doesn't require me to look like a stripper, a boyfriend who I might be in love with, and I'm fixing to graduate from college. But now, Jerick and Cam are back. I just have this sinking feeling that everything is about to go south for me, and I can't shake that feeling.

Twenty-Seven

Annistyn

It's been a week and Talon is healing well. Luckily, he didn't get any unwanted infections from the beating he took. However, I've noticed he's been acting differently and I'm not sure why. I'm worried he might be plotting some kind of revenge because he's coming and going at odd times. The most I ever see him is at Sinner's Den, which is strange, but maybe it's just because I've been occupied with Barker and the rest of my life. However, feeling this huge disconnect from Talon is more than a little unsettling.

We had our first fight as a couple the day after Talon got in the fight. That evening, I had finally left the house to go to work and found my car was missing. I had called Barker in a panic and instantly I thought Jerick was to blame. Come to find out, Barker had sent it with the younger kid, Gunner, to get a new paint job, since I was

going to be a regular in his races.

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I grab my phone from my back pocket and dial Barker's number. When he answers, I don't even give him time to say anything. "My car is missing! Like it's completely gone."

"Annistyn, calm down. I had Gunner take your car," he replies calmly.

His words stop my mind from running the marathon it was currently in. "What?" My tone goes from panic to deadly with a side of angry in a flash.

"Yeah, I figured since you're going to be participating in my drag races, your car could use a makeover. I mean, nothing bad, I'm just having him update the red on it and add some black racing stripes."

"Who said I was going to be racing with you?" I ask. I don't do well with being told what to do. Barker and I may be together now but that doesn't give him the right to tell me what to do. If he thinks this shit is going to fly with me he has another thing coming.

Barker sighs. "Annistyn, come on. We're together now and you are one of the best racers I've ever seen. You should be racing and you know you want to, so why not just be excited over this?"

"Excited? You want me to be excited that you are telling me what to do? You know that's not my style." If he thinks this is my style then he doesn't know me at all.

"I'm not telling you what to do, or at least I didn't mean it that way. I just know you belong in those races and I wish you wouldn't be so damn stubborn. I was trying to

do something nice for you,” Barker says, frustration lacing his voice.

I scoff. “Well, what’s nice to you may not be nice to me. You don’t own me, so don’t expect to be able to tell me what to do,” I tell him before I disconnect the call and head for my bike so I can get to work on time. He might have meant well but you should never take someone’s vehicle without them knowing, especially with everything else going on right now. I’m not sure what he was thinking or if he was at all.

So, the gesture was nice, but I don’t like him doing things behind my back. I already have trust issues and the last thing I needed was him sending my car away without my knowing of it. The other thing that irritated me was the fact that he didn’t ask me if I wanted to be part of the races, he just told me I was going to be. I didn’t like being told what to do. We ended up having an argument and work had been miserable all night. Once we closed, we finally made up and things had been good since. Better than good actually, they’d been great.

Sadly, things being great made me nervous, because I was constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop. I still hadn’t told Barker about Jerick being my brother, or that Cam was my ex-boyfriend. I was worried about what it would cause between us, but at the same time, every day that I didn’t tell him I knew I was causing a bigger issue.

Tonight though, I couldn’t worry about it. Barker was taking me on our first official date, and I was so excited, I swear my body was humming its own tune at this point. I had no clue what we were doing, but he told me to dress comfortably, so I had decided to dress differently than what was considered my normal. I slipped on a red corset tank top with a pair of black denim skinny jeans and a pair of red Converse. Normally, Converse aren’t my thing, but since I don’t know what I am going to be doing, it seems like the best idea.

I’m pacing my room because my energy won’t let me sit down. There’s a knock on

the door and I rush across the apartment and open the door. Barker is standing there looking better than ever before. His black t-shirt hugs his muscles perfectly; the light denim jeans rest low on his hips and end with his black combat boots. “Damn darlin’, you’re killing me,” he says, as he steps forward and pulls me into his chest and brings his mouth down on mine. The electricity that passes between us the moment our lips meet causes my head to spin. I can’t help the moan that escapes from my mouth. Barker pulls away suddenly and I pout. He reaches out and caresses my cheek. “Don’t do that. I had to stop us otherwise we’ll never make it to this date and I want to show this town who you belong to.”

I smirk and cross my arms over my chest. “Is that so?”

Barker steps forward and I inhale the familiar scent of his cologne and aftershave. “Darlin’ that’s a promise. I like people to know what’s mine, that way if they mess with it, they know what they have coming. You’re mine, darlin’. End of story.”

My breathing hitches at his words. I’ve never wanted to be someone’s so badly. I used to hate the idea actually. I wasn’t something to be owned. I was a human being and I did what I wanted, when I wanted, but right now, I want to be owned by Barker. I want to be his completely. “And if they mess with me?” I whisper the question between us.

“Then they mess with me.” Barker’s tone leaves no room for argument. He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead. “Now, let’s get going.” I grab my jacket and take Barker’s hand as we head out of my apartment. He leads us downstairs to his Camaro. After he opens the passenger side door, I just stand there for a moment. The last time I’d seen this car, there was some oversexed blonde tramp getting out of it. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to be in it.

“You know, I’m not sure I want to ride in here.”

Barker chuckles. “Don’t worry, I had it detailed and sterilized. From now on, it’s just you and me, darlin’.”

The look in his dark eyes is sincere and I can’t fight the feeling that I have to pull him into me, so I don’t. I place my mouth on his. “I like when you call me darlin’.”

Barker smiles against my lips. “Well damn, if I had known it would get that reaction, I’d do it every damn time I speak to you.” I laugh and slide into the passenger seat. I watch as Barker walks around the car. I can’t help but notice his swagger when he moves. I call it swagger, because I’m not sure what else you are supposed to call it, but I know one thing... it’s hot. Once he starts the car, Metallica comes over the speakers. He reaches over to turn it down and I grab his hand to stop him. “You like them?”

“Don’t look so shocked, Barker.”

“You never fail to shock me, darlin’,” he says with a wink. I roll my eyes and laugh; something tells me I might end up regretting my darlin’ confession. I sit back in the seat and let Barker take us on this date. When we pull in front of Go-Kart Lanes, I squeal with excitement.

“Are we seriously going go-karting?” I ask.

Barker chuckles. “Yeah, why else would I bring you here?”

I jump out of the car and jog around to meet him, wrapping my arms around his waist. “I love go-karts.”

“I can tell,” he says with a laugh before throwing his arm over my shoulders and leading us to the booth where you rent the cars. Barker rents our cars then turns and hands me a candy apple red helmet. “Here ya go, darlin’.”

I put the helmet on and we make our way to the go-karts. His is number four and royal blue. Mine is number six and candy apple red. Once we are situated, we pull up to the starting line. “Are you ready to go down again, Barker Tobin?”

A devilish smirk comes over his face. “I’m more than ready,” he replies, with that signature wink.

I roll my eyes and stare forward. He’s trying to distract me and I can’t let him do that. I’m going to win. This is just like the first night we met, only now Barker owns my heart and before he just frustrated it.

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We've become quite the duo in his drag races. This past week alone I had been part of three of them and I had won. I think Barker makes sure to put me against someone he knows I can beat though. I don't know if it's because he knows I can't afford to lose the money, or because I'm his girlfriend; but either way the extra income is a huge help. This week I managed to pre-pay for my dad's dialysis treatments for the next month. It was such a huge relief to be able to do that.

"Hey, you okay?" Barker hollers out over the noise of the track.

I'd gotten lost in my thoughts. "Yeah, Sorry, just zoned out."

Barker nods and we both face forward and wait for our light to turn green.

Barker and I went for the best two out of three and he won. I got distracted by him during one of the races and ran my go-kart up onto one of the tires on the side. I got stuck and one of the workers had to come to rescue me. It was embarrassing, to say the least.

Afterward, he takes me for burgers, fries, and shakes at the local drive-in diner. It's one of the best places in Los Angeles. We sat in the car jamming to Metallica and eating our food. A rumble from a motorcycle catches our attention, and to my surprise, it's Gunner with a girl on the back of his bike. Barker waves and then leans over and asks, "You want to go say hi with me? You can meet his girlfriend, Paris." I nod and we head over to where Gunner and Paris are parked.

Barker officially introduces me to Gunner and then Paris. However, hearing Barker introduce me as his girlfriend sent a new wave of excitement and butterflies throughout my body. I was smiling like an idiot and I knew it, but I didn't care. I was happy, so incredibly happy. Happy almost seems foreign to me. These last few years have been incredibly hard but right now with Barker... it feels like I'm finally catching a break. We stand and chat with them for a bit before heading back toward Barker's car. As we're making our way back When I Fall in Love by Michael Bublé comes over the speakers of the drive-in. This has always been one of my favorite songs. I remember my dad listening to this all the time when I was a kid but by a different singer. "Ohhh, I love this song," I say dreamingly.

Barker looks over at me and smiles, then before I know it, he's not walking anymore. I stop and he yanks me back toward him by the hand. I collide with his chest. We're standing in the middle of the drive-in where there are a few tables to sit and eat at if you don't want to sit in your car. They are under the canopy to protect you from the weather. Barker reaches up with his free hand and caresses my cheek.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

His eyes are unreadable. "Dance with me."

I look around, slightly confused. "Here?"

Barker nods. "Yes, right here, right now."

"Barker." Before I can say anything else, one hand is on my hip and the other in his hand and he's moving us slowly, well swaying really. I can't help but feel all eyes on us. I'm pretty sure that no one has ever danced here at the drive-in or seen Barker Tobin dance with someone at all. "Everyone is staring."

Barker shrugs. "Let them."

“I think they are trying to figure out what you did with the Barker Tobin that Los Angeles has come to know.”

“I wasn’t really him. I just didn’t know it until you showed up. You reminded me of who I really am,” Barker says. With those words, I forget everything and everyone else around us. It’s hard to be concerned about the outside world when someone says things like that. Words that complete your soul and mend your tattered heart. Barker Tobin is making me fall in love with him and I don’t want to stop it.

Twenty-Eight

Barker

Everything had changed in my life since the moment my path had crossed with Annistyn’s. She had shown up as a hurricane in my life. I wasn’t expecting her. I sure as hell wasn’t looking for anyone. I thought my life was good. I thought I was happy, but I had been lying to myself. Annistyn made me see that.

Ever since our date where we had danced under the canopy, between the tables, in the middle of the drive-in, everything had changed. I was in love with Annistyn. I hadn’t told her yet, because I was still trying to come to terms with the fact myself, but I knew I was. She was everything I needed but didn’t know I was missing. She completed me in a way I didn’t even know was possible.

I spent my nights with her sleeping softly beside me. I watched as her face relaxed and became peaceful in her sleep. She was unguarded during that time. I’d wake up to her lightly pressing her lips to mine in the mornings. The sun streaming in from the windows behind her, creating a halo around her blonde hair. It gave her a halo that I was sure she had anyways because someone this good had to be an angel and nothing I deserved.

For the first time in my life, I had a sense of home, a sense of contentment and belonging. It was peaceful and I was enjoying it. I knew Annistyn would be mine forever. I knew every time I saw her, every time she crossed my mind, she was my home now.

It was a little after two in the morning, and I was just about to doze off when I heard Annistyn's phone ringing. She had just drifted off to sleep herself. Work had been packed the first few hours tonight and then it had slacked off, so that the last couple of hours felt like forever. I reached over and grabbed her phone trying not to wake her, but when I saw the name on the phone I froze. The nursing home was calling Annistyn and at this time of night that couldn't be good. I sigh and wake up Annistyn. "Annistyn, the phone."

She sits up instantly and grabs the phone from my hand. The waver in her voice as she answers breaks my heart for her. The room may be dark, but I can make out the moisture forming in her eyes easily enough. I get out of bed and start getting dressed. I rush out of her bedroom and knock on Talon's door. He opens it while rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Annistyn's dad," is all I say, before rushing back into Annistyn's room. She is sitting on the side of the bed, the cell phone lying beside her on the bed, and her head in her hands. I kneel down in front of her. "Annistyn, darlin', talk to me."

Annistyn snuffles and shakes her head. "He's been taken to the hospital. He's had a massive heart attack. They don't think he'll make it," she sobs. I pull her into my arms and just hold her while she cries. Finally, she calms down and gets dressed. All three of us pile into her Civic with me behind the wheel and make it to the hospital in record time. The fact that I didn't get a speeding ticket is pure luck because I broke every traffic law in existence.

I go up to the registration desk and let them know Annistyn is here. When I return, I notice her whispering to Talon about something. I don't butt in because it's not my

place. Talon is like family to her. When a nurse steps out to get Annistyn, Talon follows her. Before she heads back, Annistyn looks over her shoulder.

“I’ll be right here darlin’.” She gives me a small nod and then disappears through the door.

I scrub my hands over my face. I want to do more than just sit here, but right now there is nothing else I can do. I’m sitting in the lobby when I hear a rumble from motorcycles filling the area. When I look out, I expect to see my brothers from Sons of Sin since I had texted Drake and Zayde to tell them what was going on, but it’s not the Sons of Sin. It’s Jerick and his goons from Deviant Devils. What the hell are they doing here? I think to myself.

I start to stand up when Talon comes barreling through the door. He doesn’t even speak to me he just dashes outside, and of course, I won’t let him face Jerick and them alone again. He had to do that last time and it would be the only time. I’m on his heels. Jerick, Cam, and Patrick and heading toward us. “Not here, Jerick,” Talon calls out to him, his tone serious and threatening.

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Jerick glares at him. “Don’t tell me what to do, Talon.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Talon taunts him.

Jerick closes in on Talon. He pushes his finger into his chest. “That’s my family, not yours, so stay the hell out of it. Why are you even here?”

Cam laughs. “Isn’t it obvious? Poor pathetic Talon is still sniffing around because he wants your sister, but she’s never going to see him that way.” Cam makes a pouty face.

“Some of us can have friends that we don’t sleep with. Not that you’d understand that concept, considering you sleep with anything that walks,” Talon throws back at him. I’m so confused right now.

“You’re just mad because Annistyn picked me and not you, even when you came in like her knight in shining armor saving her from the big bad wolf and taking her off to some castle. But guess what? She still picked some badass biker over you, ain’t that right Sons of Sin?” Cam asks, with a nod of his head in my direction.

I step forward because my blood is boiling. Why the hell are they here? Why is Cam talking about Annistyn? I glare at him as my fists form at my sides. Jerick cuts his eyes at me. “Wait, you and my sister?”

“You mean, your parents thought it was a good idea to have more kids after they released you into the world? Damn, I don’t know if that’s brave or dumb,” I tell him with a smirk. “But no, I’m not with your sister, that’s for damn sure.”

Cam gives me a curious look. “So, that wasn’t you with Annistyn dancing at the drive-in?”

His words start to sink in. The questions and discussions. The way that Talon and Jerick seem to know each other. Gabe, Annistyn’s dad, talking about Annistyn’s brother, but her never mentioning him. “What are you talking about?” I ask. I hear footsteps behind me and when I look over my shoulder, I see Annistyn standing there with a wild look in her eye.

“Damn, Annistyn, you look good,” Cam says with a wink. The little green monster rears its ugly head.

“Go to hell, Cam,” she bites out.

Jerick steps around Talon and toward Annistyn. “Is it true?”

Annistyn nods. “Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” he asks, and I can hear the hurt in his voice, but my anger is at an all-time high.

“Why would I try? You cut us out of your life for Chuck and the criminal life of the Deviant Devils. You haven’t been around us. You haven’t come to see him while he was dying. You haven’t taken care of him or helped pay for his treatments. I have! I have done it all! Mostly by myself, but I did have some help from Talon, Vienna, and Barker, but where were you, Jerick? You were supposed to be my brother and you left me to deal with everything on my own. You knew you were all I had and you didn’t care. So, no I didn’t call. Maybe, instead of getting in Talon’s face, the guy who was the only true friend you ever had, you should be thanking him for reaching out to you,” Annistyn says. Her cheeks are red with anger and her arms are crossed, but I can see the tears in her eyes.

Jerick looks like he's been slapped in the face. He steps forward to try and hug Annistyn. She steps away from him. "Annistyn, please."

She shakes her head. "No, it's long overdue for a hug and I don't need it, nor do I want it now. If you want to see him, I suggest you go inside, but Cam isn't going with you and neither is he," she says, motioning to Patrick.

Jerick nods his head slowly then walks away toward the entrance of the hospital. Annistyn sighs and I watch as Cam starts to walk toward her. I don't know what comes over me, but before I can stop myself I cut him off, my fist flying to meet his jaw.

Twenty-Nine

Annistyn

I knew what Talon was doing and I didn't stop him. Jerick had a right to know that dad wasn't expected to make it through the night, but I didn't have the heart to call him. He had left me alone. If it hadn't been for Talon and Vienna, and most recently Barker, I don't know if I would have survived all of this. We were sitting there just waiting for the inevitable. My dad had congestive heart failure and there was nothing any doctor could do for him. He'd been treated for that and kidney disease for the past few years, and now it was at the end of the line.

When Talon jumped up and took off outside, I knew what he was doing. I didn't follow him though. I couldn't. I couldn't leave my dad right now. The longer I sat there listening to the machines beeping, the more I wanted an escape. Then I remembered Barker was outside. My heart slammed in my chest. He didn't know that Jerick was my brother, my twin brother, but he was about to find out.

I jumped up and rushed outside, but I could tell I was already too late. He was already

piecing things together. Of course, Jerick had brought Cam. My skin crawled as he raked his eyes over my body. What did I ever see in him?

Once Jerick got a piece of my mind, he went to head inside, and then Cam started to come toward me. I didn't have time to even think before Barker stepped into his path and swung his fist at Cam's jaw. I hear it hit, the sickening crack as bone hits bone and I watch as Cam stumbles back and then onto the ground. Cam turns his head and spits blood onto the ground. "You need to leave. Annistyn made it clear that you aren't welcome here."

"Screw you man!"

Barker steps forward and the look in his eye tells me he's about to lose his temper, so I rush forward putting myself between Cam and Barker. I've never seen Barker truly lose his temper but something tells me I don't want to. Barker looks at me, but the look in his eyes is different than before. He shakes his head before stalking off. I sigh and close my eyes. Everything is ruined now. Talon pulls me into him. "Go talk to him."

I nod and follow after Barker. I find him leaning against the building with his head thrown back, looking at the stars. "Barker," I start, but then fall silent because I don't know what to say.

"Is it true? Is Jerick your brother?" he asks quietly, as if he's afraid asking the question will make the answer real.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Yes, he's my twin brother actually."

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Barker shakes his head then runs his hand over his face. “Shit,” he mumbles.

“I’m sorry, Barker.”

He holds up his hand to stop me. “Look, I’m not going to lie. I’m angry and I’m hurt that you kept this from me and I know we need to deal with it, if we can, but right now what’s going on between us isn’t important. You need to turn around and go back into the hospital. That’s what is important.”

“Barker, please, just let me explain,” I plead with him.

“Not now, Annistyn. We both know where you need to be right now. You only left his room because I was here and you thought you could keep me from finding out, so please go back inside and be with your dad. We can talk later.” Barker pushes away from the wall and walks toward me. He stops and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I’m going to leave I called Drake already, but I’ll see you later.”

The tears prick the back of my eyes because this feels like goodbye. This feels final and not a ‘see you later’. I listen as his footsteps fade away into the night. My heart is heavy because I know this is it. We won’t talk later.

The next few days were torture. It was like being stuck in a nightmare that I couldn’t wake up from, no matter how hard I tried. Once my dad had passed, Jerick had gone missing once again. I didn’t have time to worry about his absence though. I had to take care of my dad’s last wishes. Luckily, I had Talon and Vienna to help as well as

Landrey, who seemed to be around more often than not.

Landrey had been here at the apartment every day. She was either fixing or bringing food, cleaning something, or doing laundry for us. It was odd, but also comforting. Landrey was just one of those genuinely good people and it showed. I also thought that maybe something was going on with her and Talon, but I wasn't sure, and to be honest I wasn't in the mood to ask about someone's relationship. My heart had gone missing from my chest. I had lost two of the three men I loved in one night. Talon was my true and steady as always but the absence of my dad and Barker haunted me constantly.

Barker had been around, but he kept his distance. I didn't know what was worse. Missing him and then him showing up, but not being able to go to him and wrap my arms around him or him not being here at all. Every time he was in the same place as me my heart would race, our eyes would meet but the underlying truth that I had kept hidden remained between us. We were sinking in the ocean and there was no way to pull us out at the moment. Keeping the truth about Jerick from him made him feel as if I didn't trust him and I had no valid reason for keeping that information except I was scared of this... of losing him for good.

The Sons of Sin had been great. They had given me time off from work, but I also knew that I wouldn't be returning to the Sinner's Den. I couldn't go back there and work with Barker. It was just too hard. My heart hurt too much. Besides, I wouldn't need that much income now. My dad had a small life insurance policy that took care of his cremation and any outstanding bills he had. I'd graduate next month with my degree in nursing and then I could get a real job. I already had one lined up at one of the local clinics in Los Angeles.

Adjusting to everything was the hardest. Sometimes I felt fine, then other times, I'd burst out crying for no reason. Vienna and Landrey kept telling me that was perfectly normal—but was it? Sometimes I thought I was going crazy and everyone around me

was too scared to tell me.

I'm sitting on the couch eating Fun-Yums and drinking a Mountain Dew, which is basically all I've been living off of—yes, I know that's not healthy. There are a ton of casseroles in the fridge, but I don't care. I want the comfort the salty bag of goodness brings me. Talon walks into the room with a worried look on his face. "What's wrong?"

"I just got a call from Barker. I need to be at the clubhouse as soon as possible. Emergency meeting," he explains.

We had both been waiting for the call. The one that would ultimately decide Talon's fate within the club. I was holding out hope that they wouldn't punish him for being my friend, which gave him a connection to Jerick, but it sounded like I might have been hoping for nothing. It just wasn't fair.

"I'm sorry, Talon."

Talon shakes his head. "No, it's not your fault. We can't help who we are related to by blood, Annistyn. We only get to choose who we call family. You're my family and I'll pick you over the Sons of Sin any day of the week." He leaned over and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. "I'll be back in a few." Then he's out the door. I sit back and sigh. I never wanted Talon to have to give up something to be friends with me. This week sucks.

Barker

All the current members of the Sons of Sin are sitting around the table. We're just waiting on Talon. I was dreading this. I mean, the guy was great and he was someone

I really considered an asset to the club, but every time I see him, I think of her and it hurts so damn much.

My mood has been in the pits since the night I found out Jerick was Annistyn's twin brother. I still couldn't figure out why she hadn't told me. I guess while I was falling in love with her, she wasn't falling in love with me. I mean, if she couldn't bother to tell me she was Jerick's sister, then I didn't really matter. Annistyn didn't trust me for some reason and that realization freaking hurt.

There's a knock on the door and Talon enters. His dark eyes take in all of us sitting around this table and I know what he's thinking. Hell, if I were in his shoes, I'd be thinking the same thing. Drake stands. "Talon, thank you for coming on such short notice." Technically, this duty falls on my shoulders as the president of Sons of Sin but Drake understands I just can't handle the situation at the moment so he volunteered.

"You ring, I come. That's how it goes, right?" By the way Talon's muscles are tensed, I think he's preparing for the worse.

Drake nods. "Yes, it is. You've been a prospect with us for almost a year now, and throughout that time you have shown that you were willing to stand up for all of these brothers. You were willing to defend the club and do the right thing for other citizens in the town. That's what a Sons of Sin member does. However, there was a conflict of interest brought to our attention recently that has made us question your loyalty. So, I have to ask: why didn't you mention knowing Jerick Tarantino?"

Talon clears his throat, but keeps his head held high. "Honestly, it didn't seem important. He was no longer a person involved in my life."

"Even though Annistyn, your roommate, and best friend, is his sister?" Drake questions.

“Annistyn is my family. I’d do anything for her. Jerick tried to pull her down the same path, but I managed to save her and I’d do it again. Yes, by blood she is Jerick’s twin sister, even though they don’t resemble one another much, but no, he’s not her brother. When you look around this room, what do you see?” Talon pauses, letting the question hang in the air. “I see a family. I see a group of brothers. It doesn’t matter if they have actual Sons of Sin blood running through their veins, because they would do anything for this club and for anyone of you. You don’t get to pick whose blood runs in your veins. You only get to pick who you call family. Jerick hasn’t been Annistyn’s family in years. So, no I didn’t mention knowing him or her being related, because in my world, it was irrelevant. It wasn’t a conflict of interest for me. I knew who my family was, Annistyn, my mom, my siblings, this club; but I also knew who wasn’t, and Jerick fell under that category. I won’t lie, once upon a time I thought I could save him too. He had been my friend but I couldn’t, and I realized that and I had to let him go.”

Damn, I had to give Talon props. He wasn't afraid to say exactly what he felt. “What if you were asked to pick between this club and Annistyn?”

Talon scoffs. “Well, first of all, I’d say I’d be disappointed because I thought this club was better than that. I didn’t think they’d judge someone in that way. Second of all, I’d tell you I’d pick Annistyn. Blood or not, that girl is my family. She is my sister and I won’t turn my back on her. She is caring, funny, sweet, smart, stubborn, and sarcastic as hell, but she’s one of the best damn people you could ever meet. You’ll love her instantly, which I think Barker can attest to.”

All eyes fall on me. Shit. How did he know? Or did he know? After a few moments of silence, I look up. “Come on Drake, get on with it.”

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Drake nods. He knows I don't want to talk about Annistyn yet. I miss her too damn much. I swear, there's literally a hole in my chest right now where my heart used to be, because it's wherever she is. "Talon, I respect the hell out of your answer. Honesty, loyalty, and integrity are characteristics that we hold in high regard within the Sons of Sin club. Therefore, I'd like to officially welcome you as a full member of the Sons of Sin Motorcycle Club." Drake turns around and pulls a black leather vest with our patch on the back and passes it to Talon. The look of shock on Talon's face is priceless as he takes in the new cut. Wilder takes Talon's prospect cut off his back, while Stryker helps slip his member cut onto his shoulders.

"I really thought you guys were going to cut my ass," Talon says with a laugh. I give him a smile, but my mind keeps going back to Annistyn. Hearing him talk about her made me miss her that much more.

Thirty

Annistyn

It didn't take long after Talon left for my worry to get the best of me. I ended up calling both Vienna and Landrey. They both showed up with food and drinks in their arms, and now they are sitting on our couch with me pacing back and forth in front of them as worry consumes me. I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself if Talon loses his place in the Sons of Sin Motorcycle Club because of me and Jerick. It's just not fair to him.

It's been almost a year since he became a prospect for them, and I hope that they can look past his connection to Jerick. In the past year, Talon has been nothing but loyal

to the club and what they stood for. He has earned a spot in that club.

I'm still pacing when the door finally opens an hour later. For a moment, I'm afraid to look in Talon's direction, then I see the black leather vest resting on his body and the wide smile on his face. I notice his name embroidered in royal blue and outlined in white on the left breast. It's official: he's a member of the club.

I rush forward and wrap my arms around his neck. "I've been so worried! I thought they were going to kick you out after all your hard work."

Talon shrugs. "I did too, but they didn't. Actually, they are throwing a welcome party and we're all invited. So, all of you beautiful ladies get up because we're heading to Sinner's Den."

For the next few minutes, I try to argue as to why it would be a good idea for me not to go along with them, but no one listens. Landrey is even going. I mean, come on! The barely legal preacher's daughter, Landrey Collins, and she's going to a motorcycle bar for a party.

The truth is I just don't want to see Barker. It'll hurt too much. As I stand in front of my mirror, I realize I had just thought I was falling in love with Barker. I now know that wasn't the case. I was already in love with him. My bed is cold and empty. My bike doesn't hold the same allure as it used to. Everything is so different and it's frustrating. I never wanted to be one of these girls. I never wanted to get so tied up in a guy or in the thought of love, because I knew you couldn't depend on people. Then Barker came into my life and changed everything.

He's been angry and hurt and I don't blame him, but even though he's been upset, he's still been here for me as much as he could be. He came over every day after my dad passed away. He went to the funeral home with me. He stayed by my side, despite the awkward tension that was between us. He still texts me every day to ask

how I am. We just don't talk beyond that, or laugh or kiss. It's hard knowing he's there, but not mine. It makes the love I have for him harder to deal with.

Before Barker, I was convinced I could only count on two people: my dad, and Talon. Barker proved to me that I could rely on someone else if I was willing to let them help.

There's one decision for me to make, and really it's not even a decision. I march over to my closet and pull out the royal blue tank top that I adore and slip it on with a pair of black skinny jeans. I grab my pair of six-inch heels that match the tank top perfectly and slip them on my feet. I touch up my makeup and let my hair down before grabbing my black leather moto jacket and heading out with everyone.

Talon drives us in my car to Sinner's Den and the clubhouse, where the party is already in full swing. I take a deep breath and climb out of the car. Music can be heard from here, but I can't make out the song. Then again, the pounding of my heart is drowning out everything else right now. Vienna walks over to me and gives me a smile before handing me a tube of lip gloss. "I figure you're about to do something big based on your actions and what you're wearing, so you might want some gloss."

I forget that Vienna can read me just as well as Talon. She is literally one of the best friends a girl can ask for. I haven't even told her what I feel for Barker or this plan I've formulated in my head, but she already knows something is up. I should have added her to people I know I can rely on. I take the tube and dab some on my lips. "Thanks," I mumble. My voice sounds weak and I hate that.

"Go get your guy," she tells me, as she passes me to catch up with Talon and Landrey.

Once I'm inside, I scan the room and the first Sons of Sin I spot is Drake, so I head over to him. When I approach, he steps away from Zoey and the rest of the group that

has gathered around him. “Hey Annistyn, how are you doing?”

I nod. “I’m okay. I just wanted to thank you for letting me off work this past week.”

“Not a problem. You needed some time. Besides, that’s what family does. Family helps family.”

I bite my lip. “But I’m not family. Anyways, I also wanted to thank you for not removing Talon from the club because of me. This club means so much to him.”

Drake nods his head. “I know it does. It was never any of our intention to remove him based on a past friendship or even present,” he says, giving me a pointed look.

“Well, I am related to Jerick.” My eyes dart down to the ground because I can’t find any reason to be proud of that.

“Yes, you are by blood, but Talon remindedallof us what true family is. It’s not about the blood you share with someone. It’s about who you can trust, who is there for you when you need them, who can make you laugh when you want to cry, who has your back, no matter what. We all needed that reminder. He’s family. You’re family. It doesn’t matter about who you’re actually related to. Talon proved his loyalty, not only to this club, but to you,” Drake says, as he reaches forward and squeezes my shoulder.

I nod my head. “Thank you.” I take a few deep breaths to collect my emotions. “I actually have something I need to discuss with you too.”

“Okay, shoot,” Drake says, as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“I’m graduating college next month and I’ve been offered a job at the clinic in town, so I need to give you my two weeks’ notice, but if you don’t find someone before

then, I can stay on and help out, especially on the weekends.”

Drake smiles and shakes his head. “That won’t be necessary. I’m incredibly proud of you and excited for you. I’m glad you already have a job lined up. I appreciate the two weeks’ notice though.” I smile at him. Drake takes in a deep breath. “Have you talked to Barker?”

I shake my head. “No, I mean, I don’t know what to say. I messed up.”

“We’ve all messed up before, it’s just part of being human. Barker is no saint, Annistyn. Just talk to him. You might both be surprised to know what the other person is feeling. Our minds have a funny way of making things much worse than they actually are.” Drake nods and then turns around to go back to Zoey.

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I take a deep breath and let Drake's words sink into my brain. He makes sense and I did come here to fight for Barker. To tell him that I love him and hopefully he can find it within him to feel the same or at the very least forgive me. I scan the area, but I don't see him. As I start walking, I spot Gunner and Paris and there in the middle of the group is Barker. I take a moment to appreciate him. He's gotten a haircut, so it's shorter at the top of the head now than what it was the last time I saw him in person. His dark denim jeans hug him in all the right places and the shade of olive green t-shirt he has on makes the color of his gray eyes more intense.

I start to walk forward when I notice the girl to the right of him places her hand on his chest. For a moment, he freezes and so do I. What is he going to do? Barker steps back and pulls her hand off his chest with a shake of his head. My heart sags in relief, but the nerves that suddenly take over my body are too much to bear. I turn on my heel and hurry away from him.

I'm a coward and I know it. I had a plan. I had a speech. I knew exactly how to get what I wanted, but now... I'm sitting on the back steps of the building, staring off into the empty field that is behind the actual clubhouse, away from Sinner's Den and the party for Talon. The city of Los Angeles can almost be made out from back here. The moon and stars are brightly shining above, which should give me hope, but it doesn't. At least, not until I hear the heavy footsteps behind me.

Thirty-One

Barker

I am aimlessly walking around between the groups of people that have gathered to

celebrate Talon officially being a member of the club. I found him easily enough and was slightly shocked to see Landrey at his side. I wasn't sure what that was all about, but I didn't have the heart to care right now. I had assumed Annistyn would come with him and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been looking forward to that. Despite the awkwardness between us, every part of my heart, body, and soul wanted her. It looks for her everywhere I go. A huge part of me was quietly looking forward to tonight because I just knew she would be here; I would have bet money on it.

During Talon's speech in the meeting today, I had decided to lay everything out on the line for Annistyn. We hadn't really talked, aside from my daily texts to check on her, and it was long overdue. I was still upset, but I missed her more. My pride was hurt because she didn't trust me enough to open up to me but the love I have for her outweighs my wounded pride that will eventually heal. Besides, she wasn't the only one that had kept secrets. I had kept things from her too. We were both guilty of that and we both thought we were doing the right thing at the time.

I just keep walking around letting my feet move me forward without much thought, and before I realize it, I am behind the clubhouse and there is Annistyn sitting on the steps with a beer in her hand. She looks just like the angel I believed she was. I just drink her in for a moment. The sounds of the party behind me fade away and it's just me and Annistyn.

She must hear me coming, because she looks over her shoulder and I notice her eyes widen at the sight of me. Seeing her right now makes my heart slam. I slowly start to make my way to her. Once I'm in front of her I ask, "Is this seat taken?"

She shakes her head. "No."

I take a seat and her scent engulfs me. I breathe deeply. The silence that falls between us is so different from our normal. There is an underlying tension and uncertainty. I clear my throat. "So, how have you been?" I ask. Mentally, I kick myself. Really

Barker? That's the best you could come up with.

Annistyn doesn't look my way. "I've been adjusting, but good otherwise."

"That's good." The silence falls between us again. Annistyn's heavy sigh is what reminds me of why I wanted to see her. "Listen, we should talk."

Annistyn bites down on her bottom lip and shakes her head. "It's okay, we really don't have to." She stands up and starts to walk away.

She really doesn't love me like I thought she might. I think I wanted it so badly, I made myself think it was possible. I stand up. "That's it? You're just going to walk away?" I shout angrily. Add a freshly crumbling heart on top of my wounded pride and my anger will flare.

Annistyn stops, and when she turns around I see that fire in her eyes. "What else is there to do? You hate me because I'm related to Jerick and you know what, so be it! I can't help who I'm related to. I didn't ask for it."

I shake my head because her words feel like they physically hit me. "You think I hate you?"

Annistyn rolls her eyes. "What am I supposed to think, Barker?"

"Darlin' I have a lot of feelings for you, but hate ain't one of them. I was angry with you for not telling me about Jerick. I was hurt because you didn't consider me important enough to include me in that part of your life," I tell her.

"Important enough? Barker, you became one of the most important people in my life, and that was with me fighting you and every damn feeling I had. I fought like hell to avoid it all, but I couldn't." Annistyn shakes her head and steps forward, and I swear

she's never been more beautiful. I have to fight back the laugh that bubbles up to the back of my throat. How often can I think she's beautiful? Apparently, every damn time I see her. "You want to know why I didn't tell you about Jerick? It's because I was embarrassed and ashamed. Jerick isn't exactly a stellar citizen. He's not exactly someone to be proud of or brag about. I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to think less of me. I didn't want to see a change in your eyes when you look at me. I didn't tell you, because I didn't want to be connected to him or his actions."

This girl really has no idea that she owns me, every last part of me. "Annistyn, you have to know I could never think less of you because of your brother. What he does has absolutely nothing to do with what you do or who you are. I could never see you as anything but this beautiful, intelligent, determined, independent, hot as hell, stubborn woman," I tell her, as I close the distance between us. I take her face in between my hands and revel in the feel of her soft skin. Over the past week, I had wondered so many times if I would ever get to feel her again. I wondered if I'd ever look into these sage green eyes or kiss that bottom lip she loves to bite down on so much. "Annistyn, I could never see anyone or anything else but you. When I look around, you are all that I see. You own me, darlin'. Every last piece of me. I vowed I'd never fall in love and then you handed me my ass on a silver platter at my own race and got out of your car, mad as hell at me. When you drove off, you didn't just win that race, you won my tattered heart. I love you, Annistyn."

Tears slip down her cheeks and run onto the tips of my fingers where my hands are resting on her cheeks. "Barker," she chokes out.

I shake my head to stop her. "I have some mistakes to own up to. First of all, you didn't make all those tips. Talon and I came up with a plan to slip our tips in with yours. Neither of us wanted to see you working in some sleazy place like the Vixens and we both knew you needed the money, so we did what we thought we should." I watch as Annistyn's eyes flare with a little anger. I chuckle while tracing her cheekbone with my thumb. "Oh, there's more. I also lied about why Gunner took

your car. Jerick or one of his goons tagged your car. They had keyed your car with the word ‘slut’ down the side, so I called Gunner and had him take it to fix the car. I wanted to protect you from him and the hurt that word could cause. I had no right to do either, but I did them because I loved you—even if I didn’t know it then.”

Annistyn is silent for a moment. “I can’t believe you two! I could have managed on my own!”

I quickly silence her with my mouth. The startled gasp that escapes her gives me access to her mouth and I take it. When I finally pull back I tell her, “We both knew that, but what did it hurt for us to help you out?”

She sighs and looks down at the ground. “It’s so embarrassing. You knew all along how much debt I was in. It’s like I couldn’t manage being an adult and you pitied me.”

“Pitied you? I never once pitied you. I was in awe of you and everything you did for your dad and how well you balanced everything and never complained. Pity never entered my mind, darlin’,” I tell her.

Annistyn blushes and I love that look on her. I love so many things about her. “I came here to tell you something tonight, but I chickened out and ended up back here. I love you, Barker Tobin. You make me mad as hell, but even then, I still want you. And despite how angry and hurt you were this past week, you never really left me. You showed me I can rely on you and no matter how much I wanted to fight these feelings of love—I couldn’t, and trust me I tried,” she admits with a laugh.

Her words stun me. I knew I had fallen in love with her, and while I had entertained the idea of her loving me, when I found her back here alone and drinking, I really thought I had lost all hope. When she started to walk away from me, I thought that was it. I thought I had been wrong and she didn’t love me. “Barker,” Annistyn says

quietly, pulling me from my thoughts.

“You love me?” I ask. I don’t even try to mask the sound of shock in my voice.

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Annistyn smiles. “I do. I love you.” Then she presses a kiss to my lips while tangling her fingers into my hair. I don’t know how I deserve someone like Annistyn in my life, and I certainly don’t know how I deserve her love, but I’ll take it and run with it, because this girl is it for me. She’s my endgame. She’s my forever.

Thirty-Two

Annistyn

I roll over and snuggle into Barker’s side. He’s still asleep based on his even breathing. I watch the steady rise and fall of his chest and can’t believe that the heart kept inside, somehow fell in love with me. I don’t know how I got that lucky, but I’ll take it. I trace the ink on his collar bone, lightly with my fingernail.

He mumbles something and I prop myself up on my elbows. “Well, good morning, sleepy-head.”

Barker chuckles sleepily. “Well, someone wore me out,” he tells me, as he peeks out one eye. His voice is husky and thick with sleep and causes my body to move on its own accord. I sit up and press my mouth to his. When I pull back Barker groans. “You’re going to kill me.”

I pout. “But you love me.”

He laughs while shaking his head. “That I do, darlin’.” He sits up, pulls me into his lap, and devours my mouth.

A few hours later, Barker wakes me up. “Darlin’, I have a plan for today, so you have got to get up.” I mumble something, and it sounds pretty angry, because we both know I’m not a morning person. “I have a Mountain Dew for you.”

That wakes me up. I slowly sit up and take the cold drink from him. “Thank you,” I tell him.

He reaches forward and traces my bottom lip. “No need to thank me.”

I watch as his stormy eyes speak something else that I can’t decipher. “What is it?”

“I like having you here, in my room, in my t-shirt, in my space. I could get used to it.”

“Well good, because I’m not planning on going anywhere,” I tell him, but my voice is breathless and my heart is slamming wildly in my chest. My entire body is flushed from his words.

Barker smirks. “Well, you do have to go because I have plans. We’ll swing by your place so you can change.” I notice he’s already dressed and the excitement of the unknown has me climbing out of bed and throwing on last night’s clothes to climb on the back of Barker’s bike. When we pull into the parking lot of my apartment, Barker takes his helmet off. “You go on and change. Wear something relaxed, comfy, and cool since the weather is supposed to be kind of warm. Oh, and a bathing suit if you have one.” The devilish smirk on his face has me shaking my head.

“What if I don’t have a bathing suit?” I ask.

Barker wags his eyebrows. “Skinny dipping it is, and I ain’t about to complain about

that.”

I shake my head and slap his shoulder, which causes him to clutch it and act as if I actually hurt him. “You’re not coming up?”

“Not this time. I think we’ll get... distracted.” He winks at me and I bite my bottom lip as the memories from last night come flooding back. “Okay, don’t do that. Just go change!” I laugh and take off towards my apartment.

Talon isn’t home as I walk in, but he left a note to let me know he took care of Augustus for me. I write a quick thank you to him before rushing to my room. I grab a pair of denim shorts, a mint green tank top, and my mint green daisy bikini. I throw my hair up into a ponytail before heading back out to Barker.

He’s still sitting on the bike, looking so damn good it should be illegal. “Damn darlin’,” he groans, once I’m close enough to hear him. He pulls me into him and kisses me senseless before patting the back seat of his bike. I climb on, wrap my arms around his toned stomach and breathe him in.

As we drive out of Los Angeles, I think I know where we are heading. It’s a perfectly beautiful day for this. The sun is shining, but it’s not unbearably hot or humid today. It’s one of those days you wish for, just so you can go out and enjoy the world around you. I look up at the white puffy clouds in the clear blue sky and despite everything, I find peace in my heart. I have Barker to thank for that. Days like this remind me of my father. They were always his favorite.

Once we reach his spot, he pulls his bike to a stop along the side of the road. He helps me off before retrieving the bag of goodies he had stashed on the bike. He takes my hand and leads me through the tall grass that now has blooms of white wildflowers mixed in. It’s breathtaking. The water glistens in the sun, inviting you to jump in.

That afternoon I found my happy spot, but it had nothing to do with my surroundings. It had to do with Barker and everything he had given me.

We were just lying back on the blanket he had brought with him. The trees' leaves danced in the spring breeze. Barker grabbed his phone and turned on some music. A slower country song comes on and Barker stands up and reaches his hand down to me. "Dance with me?" he asks, and without any hesitation, I place my hand in his while we dance under that tree where we shared our first kiss and he first took a piece of my heart. "God Made a Woman" by Jerrod Niemann ends and Barker places a kiss on my forehead.

"This song is exactly how I feel about you, Annistyn."

"You're getting all romantic on me. If you're not careful, you're going to ruin that badass reputation you have," I tell him with a laugh.

He grins and before I know what's happening, I'm thrown over his shoulder and he's rushing toward the water. I scream in protest, but it's not believable through my laughter. Even though the water is chilly, I can't be mad at him. All I can be is thankful for what he's given me... his heart.

Epilogue

Barker

I'm folding the last piece of laundry when my phone goes off. I look over and see a text from Annistyn, letting me know that she'll meet me at the drag races since she's running later at work than she expected. A stomach bug has hit Los Angeles with a vengeance, which means the clinic that Annistyn now works at has been packed. They've been staying open until almost nine every night just to doctor all the walk-ins.

The past few months have been like a dream to me. Annistyn graduated from her nursing program and stepped in as a full-time nurse at the clinic. A few weeks later, I convinced her to move in with me. It seemed kind of crazy, but it was exactly what I wanted and I knew it. When she said yes, I was over the moon. We managed to find a small two-bedroom house for rent and it was perfect for us and Augustus.

I'm pretty sure I shocked my brothers of the MC by becoming so domesticated. I often make dinner for Annistyn, since her job requires her during the day. Then there are times like this past week when she's worked twelve-hour days that I'll step up and take care of laundry and cleaning. My brothers give me hell about it, but I know Annistyn appreciates it and I do it for her.

I put the laundry away and grab the keys to my car. I run out to the backyard and move Augustus to the inside of the garage so he won't be out in the weather. Autumn is in the air and the nights can get pretty chilly. Once he's situated, I hop behind the wheel of my Camaro and head to the clubhouse. As I'm pulling up, I spot Annistyn's Civic. I park and head over to where she and Talon are talking. I wrap my arms around her waist. "Hi, darlin'."

She smiles and sighs. “Hey, you.”

“How was your day?” I ask.

Talon rolls his eyes. “You two are sickening. I’m going to leave now,” he teases us with a smile before he heads over to where Stryker, Arbor and Vienna are standing.

Annistyn turns around in my arms and wraps hers around my neck. “It was long, but I think most of the people have suffered from the bug so it should start slowing down. How was your day?”

“Well, I did the laundry, washed the bikes and filled them up with gas, and cleaned up around the house and yard.”

Annistyn laughs. “Barker Tobin, the badass cleaner. Who knew you could be the wifey?”

I tickle her sides. “Hey now, I’m all man, which you know,” I remind her, with a devious smirk and a wink. “I’m just man enough to help out around the house while my love goes to work to do what she loves.”

Annistyn smiles. “I really do love what I do.”

“I know,” I tell her, as I press a kiss to her lips. I take a moment to appreciate how amazing she looks. Her hair hangs around her shoulders now. She cut it some once she graduated from college. She said it was easier to wear it back, out of her face, at work than to have long hair falling over onto the patient all the time. The golden streaks she added last week dance in the moonlight. Her makeup is light, which is how it looks most days now. Her jeans hug her just right along with her black knee-high boots. Her long-sleeved brown t-shirt is simple, but it’s on Annistyn so it’s perfect. “Are you ready to race?” She nods.

We line up and I watch as she easily crosses the finish line before her rival. She gets out and shakes his hand. The guys still have a hard time with their pride when Annistyn beats them, but I couldn't be more damn proud.

I easily cross the finish line as well, but when I get out of the car the crowd is giving me hell. Wilder laughs. "Why don't you and Annistyn race against each other?"

I shake my head. "I think I know better than to race against the woman I love."

Annistyn smirks. "I think he's scared of getting his ass handed to him again."

"Oh, is that how you think this will go?" I ask her, raising my eyebrows in challenge.

Annistyn's head falls back in laughter. "I don't even have to think about it. I already know."

I step up to her and meet her eyes. I take her face between my hands and bring my mouth down to hers. I know the moment she gets lost in the kiss, because her nails bite into my biceps. I pull away. "It's on, darlin'." I hop back into my car and Annistyn follows. Although, based on the flush covering her cheeks, her mind is elsewhere.

We pull up to the starting line and I holler over to her, "Darlin'."

She turns to look at me and I notice that fire of determination in her eyes. "Yeah?"

"Bring the hell," I tell her.

She leans over. "Already done," she tells me, with her voice lower before blowing me a kiss and speeding away from the starting line with my heart right with her. Damn, I love that girl.