



# Gunner (Iron Sentinels MC #3)

**Author:** *Winter Sloane*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Gunner didn't do relationships.

As the enforcer of the Iron Sentinels, his world was brutal, dangerous, and full of enemies.

But when Dawn stumbled into his life, all fire and attitude, she flipped his world upside down.

He told himself she was off-limits—too good for a man like him.

Then she became his, and nothing would stand in his way to protect her.

Dawn never expected to fall for a biker, let alone one as ruthless and fiercely loyal as Gunner.

But just as she starts to feel safe in his arms, her past comes back with a vengeance.

Threatened by a stalker who wants to destroy her, Dawn fights to survive, knowing Gunner will come for her.

And when he does, there will be no mercy.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

Dawn hesitated outside the roadhouse, gripping the strap of her purse a little tighter. The neon BEER sign flickered in the dirty window, casting a dull glow over the gravel parking lot.

She had expected a bar, maybe a little rough around the edges, but this place looked like it had been carved straight out of an outlaw's fever dream.

The bikes lined up out front were a warning, the deep rumble of conversation and clinking of glass seeping through the cracked wooden door like an omen.

Her heart pounded as she stepped inside. The scent of stale beer and cigarette smoke wrapped around her like an unwelcome embrace. The place was dimly lit, crowded with burly men in leather cuts and women who looked far more comfortable than she did.

No music played, just the steady murmur of voices punctuated by bursts of laughter and the occasional holler from the pool table in the corner.

She swallowed hard, trying not to let the wave of nerves show on her face. She was here to meet Jesse, the guy who'd fixed her friend's bike and charmed her enough to score a date. He had promised to meet her at eight. It was now almost nine.

Dawn pulled out her phone, checking her messages for the third time. Nothing. Not even a lame excuse.

Bastard.

She dropped onto a stool near the bar, setting her purse down carefully as she ordered a drink. Maybe he was running late. Maybe he had a good reason. Or maybe he was just another jerk who didn't have the guts to cancel.

Her irritation simmered as she sipped at the whiskey she hadn't really wanted but needed to feel like she belonged here.

The bartender, a guy with a scar over his eyebrow, eyed her with something between amusement and pity, but he didn't say a word.

She appreciated that. What she didn't appreciate was the way the men at the nearest table were watching her like she was fresh meat dropped into a den of wolves.

"Lost, sweetheart?" one of them drawled, tipping his beer bottle toward her. His grin was slow and lazy, the kind that made her skin prickle.

"I'm fine," she said, voice clipped.

Another man, broader, older, with a thick beard and a jacket patched with an unfamiliar MC logo, let out a low chuckle.

"Pretty little thing like you sittin' here all alone? Dangerous place for that," he said.

Her jaw tightened. She wasn't stupid. She had grown up around guys like this—hell, her own father and his friends had hung around the local MC like some groupie when she was a kid—but that didn't mean she liked the attention.

It felt different when she was alone. She should leave. Jesse wasn't coming, and sticking around just made her look pathetic. But as she reached for her purse, the strap snapped.

The sudden jerk sent it tumbling to the sticky bar floor, spilling its contents in a messy scatter of keys, phone, lipstick, and loose bills. Heat flooded her face as she scrambled to pick everything up, her fingers trembling with frustration.

A couple of coins rolled toward the bikers' table. One of them, the bearded one, scooped up a quarter and twirled it between his fingers.

“Need some help, sweetheart?” the biker asked.

“No.” She snatched up her things, stuffing them back into her bag with jerky movements. Her pulse pounded in her ears. This was mortifying.

She shot to her feet, turning too quickly, and the heel of her boot—her favorite damn boot—snapped clean off. Dawn wobbled, nearly falling, and the sudden burst of laughter from the table behind her made her cheeks burn hotter.

“Damn, she’s havin’ a rough night,” one of them remarked, not bothering to keep his voice down.

Dawn gritted her teeth, clenching into fists at her sides. Screw this. Screw Jesse. Screw this whole damn night. She had spent over an hour waiting for a guy who clearly wasn’t going to show, sitting alone like an idiot while bikers and drunks leered at her.

She had put on her favorite boots, curled her hair, even debated whether or not to wear red lipstick—all for what? A no-show loser who didn’t even have the decency to text her?

She limped toward the door, half-walking, half-hobbling, her broken boot making every step feel more ridiculous than the last. She could feel their eyes on her, hear the amused murmurs and chuckles. It made her stomach twist, her pride stinging like an

open wound.

The cool night air hit her like a slap as she shoved through the door. She took a deep breath, willing herself to calm down. Her car wasn't far. Just a short, humiliating walk across the lot.

Dawn yanked her car keys from her pocket, her fingers clenched so tightly around them that the cold metal dug into her palm. As she moved toward her car, her heel caught on a crack in the pavement.

“Shit!” she gasped as she stumbled forward, her keys slipping from her grasp and clattering onto the ground.

Before she could bend down to retrieve them, a large, callused, and inked hand scooped them up. The scent of leather, motor oil, and something darkly masculine invaded her senses before she even looked up.

She straightened, heart pounding, and found herself staring at a broad chest covered in a black leather jacket.

Her eyes traveled upward, past thick, ink-covered forearms, to a strong, chiseled face with a light dusting of scruff.

His dark eyes were intense, unreadable, and framed by thick brows that made his gaze all the more piercing.

He held her keys out to her. “Drop somethin’, sweetheart?”

Her breath hitched slightly at the deep, gravelly timbre of his voice.

She swallowed hard, taking a half-step back, trying to ignore the way her stomach

twisted—not with fear, but something else.

The leather jacket bore a patch. Another biker. Definitely not a guy she wanted to mess with. But damn, was he attractive in a way that had no right to affect her. And for some strange reason, she didn't feel unsafe around him compared to the other men in the roadhouse.

She hesitated before reaching out to take her keys. "Thanks."

"No problem." He smirked slightly. "Gunner. Iron Sentinels."

She cleared her throat. "Dawn."

"Dawn," he repeated, like he was tasting the name. He swept his gaze over her, not in a crude way, but in a way that made her feel ... seen. "You havin' a bad night, or just pissed off in general?"

She exhaled sharply, pushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Bad night."

His smirk deepened. "Could've guessed that. You looked like you wanted to punch someone when you walked outta there."

She huffed a small, exasperated laugh. "Maybe."

He cocked his head slightly, studying her. "How about a drink? Might help take the edge off."

She blinked. "What?"

"A drink." His voice was casual, but there was something deeper beneath it—an invitation, a challenge. "I'll buy."

Her instincts warred inside her. Everything about Gunner screamed danger—his size, his ink, the MC patch on his jacket.

She'd always been drawn to older men, stronger men, men who exuded confidence.

But none of them had ever treated her well.

They had used her, broken her, left her doubting herself.

But Gunner ... there was something different about him.

She hesitated a beat longer before nodding. "Okay. One drink."

He grinned, stepping aside to gesture toward the door. "After you, sweetheart."

This time, walking into the bar felt different. When she had entered earlier, she had felt exposed, vulnerable. Now, with Gunner's broad form behind her, his hand guiding her lightly at the small of her back, she felt ... protected. Safe.

Heads turned as they walked in. Some of the bikers smirked, others simply took note and went back to their drinks.

One, however, let out a low whistle. "Didn't think Gunner was the type to bring home strays."

Dawn stiffened, heat rushing to her face.

Gunner stopped abruptly, turning toward the man with a look so sharp it could cut steel. "The fuck you just say?"

The bar went dead silent.

The man—an older biker with a graying beard—held up his hands in mock surrender. “Relax, man. Just bustin’ balls.”

Gunner’s stare didn’t waver. “Don’t bust hers.”

A long pause stretched between them before the older man looked away, mumbling something under his breath.

Gunner turned back to her, his expression unreadable. “C’mon. Let’s get that drink.”

Dawn let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding and followed him to the bar, the weight of the room’s attention slowly dissipating.

One thing was clear—Gunner had a reputation. The way the other bikers looked at him, the way they quieted when he spoke, the way no one dared challenge him when he shut down the teasing—all of it told her he wasn’t just another guy in a leather cut.

Gunner asked her what drink she wanted. She told him a beer and he ordered one for himself as well. The beers soon arrived.

Dawn toyed with the rim of her glass as she considered her next move. She could still back away, make some lame excuse, pretend she was too tired or had work early in the morning.

Tonight had already been a complete dud—no different from other nights where she put in the effort, got her hopes up, and was left disappointed. Walking away now would be the smart thing to do.

But a voice inside her told her to stay. Because this wasn’t like other nights. Gunner wasn’t like the other men she’d wasted time on.



There was something about him, something that unsettled her just enough to make her feel alive. Maybe it was the way he watched her, his dark eyes sharp and assessing, like he was peeling back layers she didn't even realize she had.

Maybe it was the way he moved, easy and confident, like a man who had nothing to prove—because he knew exactly who he was. Or maybe it was the fact that, for the first time in a long time, she wasn't the one doing all the chasing.

Besides, Dawn could hold her alcohol. And one drink wouldn't hurt, would it? She lifted her glass to her lips, locking eyes with Gunner as she took a slow sip. His smirk deepened, like he knew exactly what she had just decided.

“Guess you're staying, then,” he murmured, his voice a deep rumble that sent an unexpected thrill through her.

She set her glass down and met his gaze head-on. “Looks like it.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

Dawn wrapped her fingers around a cool glass of whiskey. She had only agreed to one drink, but she found herself savoring it more than she expected.

Maybe it wasn't just the alcohol. It was the man sitting opposite her, his heavy presence wrapping around her like something solid, something grounding.

Gunner leaned back in his chair, one thickly muscled arm draped casually over the back. He nursed his own drink, but his dark eyes stayed locked on her, smoldering with an intensity that made her insides tighten.

“So, tell me, sweetheart,” he drawled, the deep rumble of his voice making her shiver. “You always pick shitty dates, or was tonight just special?”

She huffed out a laugh, shaking her head. “I swear I don't make a habit of it.”

He smirked. “Lucky me, then. Otherwise, I wouldn't have met you.”

Her stomach flipped. The way he looked at her—like she was something worth studying, something worth wanting—was doing things to her she wasn't prepared for. Dawn could feel her nipples tightening under her thin blouse and wondered if he noticed.

She should have been wary, should have kept her guard up. But somehow, with him, the tension that had been wound tight in her chest all night started to loosen.

“I'm starting to think you might be trouble,” she teased, raising her glass to her lips.

Gunner grinned, slow and dangerous. “Darlin’, I don’t think you’d mind a little trouble.”

Heat curled low in her belly. She licked her lips, watching the way his gaze darkened as he followed the movement.

God, she was in trouble.

Somewhere between the teasing, the drinks, and the way he leaned in just slightly when she spoke, Dawn found herself forgetting all about her no-show date.

Gunner was unlike any man she’d ever met—confident without arrogance, playful but firm. And he made her feel ... interesting, wanted.

When he finally set his empty glass down, he tilted his head at her. “Place like this ain’t exactly the best for conversation. What do you say we go somewhere quieter?”

Her heart skipped. The suggestion carried weight, possibility. Her mind screamed at her to be careful, but her body had already decided.

“There’s a diner not far from here,” she said, trying to sound casual. “Good coffee, half-decent pie.”

Gunner nodded, clearly amused. “Sounds perfect.”

They left the bar together, the cool night air rushing over her heated skin. She gave him the name of the diner, then climbed into her car as he swung a leg over his Harley.

The rumble of his bike sent a thrill through her as she followed behind him, watching the way he handled the machine with ease, like it was an extension of himself.

By the time they pulled into the diner's nearly empty parking lot, she was buzzing, not just from the whiskey, but from the anticipation curling in her stomach.

Inside, they slid into a booth, the warm scent of coffee and fried food wrapping around them.

The atmosphere was relaxed, and with Gunner across from her, the conversation flowed more easily than she expected.

She found herself telling him things she hadn't planned to, about how she was juggling two jobs just to make ends meet.

About how her dad had died from cancer last year, and she was still drowning in the hospital bills.

Gunner listened, his expression unreadable but his focus unwavering. And when she finally stopped, feeling exposed in a way she hadn't before, he surprised her by saying, "I know what that's like."

Her brows pulled together. "You do?"

He nodded, running a hand through his short-cropped hair. "Lost my old man a few years back. He was in the MC, like me. Got caught in a shoot-out with a rival club."

She inhaled sharply. "Jesus."

He shrugged, but she could see the tension in his shoulders. "It's the life. Doesn't make it easier, though."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. But it wasn't uncomfortable. If anything, it felt like something had shifted between them, an understanding settling in the air.

She studied him, taking in the rough edges—the tattoos peeking from beneath his shirtsleeves, the slight scars on his knuckles.

He was the kind of man she had always told herself to stay away from.

But here, in the soft glow of the diner, he didn't feel dangerous.

He felt solid. Real. And she liked it. Liked him.

“You ever think about getting out?” Dawn asked quietly, tracing the rim of her coffee cup with her finger. “Leaving the MC?”

Gunner smirked, but there was something unreadable in his gaze, something that told her this wasn't the first time someone had asked him that question.

“Nah. It's in my blood.” He tilted his head slightly, watching her. “Doesn't mean I don't want more, though.”

“More?” she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper.

He leaned forward, his forearms resting on the table, his eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that sent a wave of heat through her.

“Yeah. More.”

The way he said it sent a shiver down her spine. It wasn't just the word itself, but the weight behind it—the unspoken promise, the hunger laced within it.

And for some reason, Dawn pictured herself riding behind him on that massive motorcycle, arms locked around his waist, the roar of the engine drowning out everything else. The image was so vivid it nearly stole her breath.

Dawn clenched her fingers around her cup as she swallowed hard, trying to ignore the rush of something dangerously close to longing. She barely knew this man.

He was a biker, part of a world she didn't belong to, a world that had danger and chaos written all over it. And yet, something about him made her feel seen, grounded, like if she leaned just a little closer, she might understand him in a way no one else did.

Gunner flicked his gaze down to her hands. A slow smirk curled at his lips, but it wasn't teasing—it was knowing. Like he could read every thought running through her mind. Damn him.

She forced herself to look away, staring at the diner's checkered floor, the hum of the neon sign outside a quiet distraction. But even then, she felt his presence, like a storm cloud on the horizon, waiting to roll in and change everything.

Thankfully, he must have sensed the shift in her, because after a moment, he leaned back in his seat, the tension between them easing just slightly.

“So,” he said, his voice lower, rougher, but still carrying that ever-present edge of amusement. “You always this deep after midnight, or is it just me?”

She let out a breath, shaking her head with a small, nervous laugh. “I think it's just you.”

And damn if that wasn't the truth.

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Gunner had seen plenty of women home before. Hell, he'd walked out of too many beds, slipped away before dawn, leaving nothing but the scent of whiskey and leather

behind. He never lingered. Never cared enough to. His club came first—always had, always would.

But as he pulled his bike to a stop in front of Dawn's apartment, he didn't feel that familiar detachment. Instead, he found himself gripping the handlebars tighter, reluctant to let the night end.

He swung his leg over his Harley, his boots heavy on the pavement as he followed Dawn to her door. She moved with an easy grace, but he didn't miss the way she glanced back at him, her lips slightly parted, her expression unreadable.

Damn, she was something else. The kind of woman who didn't fit into the world he lived. Too good for it. Too good for him. But he wanted her anyway.

He took his time as they reached her door, letting his gaze sweep over her. The glow of the corridor lights cast shadows along the curve of her jaw, the slope of her neck. Gunner itched to trace that path with his fingers, to see if her skin was as soft as it looked.

"Well," she said, turning to face him. "Thanks for the drink and seeing me safely home."

He smirked, tilting his head. "You always this polite after a first date?"

She let out a soft laugh, shaking her head. "This wasn't a date."

Gunner stepped closer, closing the small space between them. "Felt like one."

She swallowed, and his eyes dropped to her throat, to the way her pulse fluttered.

The air between them thickened. Tension stretched, electric and heady. He could hear

his own breathing, could feel the steady drum of his heart picking up pace.

Dawn's gaze flickered to his mouth, and it was all the invitation he needed. He reached up, cupping her face with a gentleness he hadn't known he was capable of. Her breath hitched, and for a brief second, he hesitated. But then she leaned in, and he was lost.

Gunner's lips pressed against hers, firm and sure. She responded instantly, her hands gripping his jacket as she melted against him.

The kiss deepened, her mouth soft and eager beneath his, the heat of her sending a rush of something dark and possessive through him. Her body felt perfect against him, her breasts soft, and he wondered if he looked down, he could see her nipples hardening underneath her blouse.

He hadn't expected this. Hadn't expected her to feel this damn good. But then she stilled, just slightly, her breath shaky as she pulled back.

Gunner forced himself to stop, resting his forehead against hers. He could feel the way her body trembled, not in fear, but in uncertainty. She wasn't ready. And for once in his damn life, he cared enough to wait.

"Get some rest, sweetheart," he murmured, his voice rough.

She exhaled slowly, nodding as she stepped back, her fingers slipping from his jacket.

He let her go, let her disappear behind her door, even though every part of him wanted to stay.

As he walked back to his bike, his jaw clenched. He had no business wanting more from a woman like her. His world was violence and loyalty, asphalt and gunpowder.



But Dawn had slipped under his skin, and he had a feeling there was no shaking her loose.

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The roar of Gunner's Harley echoed in the night as he rode back to the clubhouse, the wind whipping against his face.

The ride should have cleared his head, but it didn't.

His thoughts kept circling back to Dawn—her lips, her scent, the way she trembled just slightly when he kissed her.

She wasn't like the women he usually spent time with.

She was soft in a way that unsettled him, made something deep in his chest twist.

He pulled into the lot outside the Iron Sentinels' clubhouse, parking his bike beside a row of Harleys before stepping inside.

The scent of booze, sweat, and cigarette smoke hit him instantly.

A few members were already deep into their drinks, the bass-heavy music drowning out their voices.

Sliding into his usual seat at a corner table, Gunner signaled the bartender for a whiskey.

The burn of the liquor did little to dull his restlessness. He barely heard the conversation around him until a familiar voice purred at his ear.

“You look tense, Gunner.”

He turned his head slightly, finding a blonde leaning against his chair, her heavily painted lips curled into a knowing smirk. Candy. One of the club whores. She ran her fingers over his shoulder, her touch light, teasing.

“Want some help unwinding?” Candy asked.

He shook his head. “Not tonight.”

Surprise flickered across her face, but she recovered quickly, her lips pulling into a pout before she turned to another biker at the table.

“Your loss,” she said, running her nails down the guy’s chest.

Twitch, one of the newer members, grinned and pulled her onto his lap. “Guess that means I get lucky.”

Gunner barely paid attention as she giggled and whispered something in Twitch’s ear. Instead, he tipped his glass back, downing the rest of his drink.

A heavy presence settled into the empty chair beside him. Beast, the club president and Gunner’s best friend. The man was built like a damn tank, with a thick beard and sharp eyes that missed nothing.

“How’d the meeting with Razor go?” Beast asked, resting his arms on the table.

“Fine,” Gunner replied. “Shipment’s coming in next month. Should be a clean exchange.”

Beast nodded, but his gaze stayed fixed on Gunner, sharp with something else.

“What’s got you all twisted up, brother?” Beast asked.

Gunner exhaled through his nose, rolling the empty whiskey glass between his fingers. Beast knew him too damn well.

“Met someone tonight,” Gunner finally admitted.

Beast’s brows lifted slightly. “Yeah? And?”

Gunner hesitated, then muttered, “She’s different.”

Beast smirked, amused. “A woman’s a woman, Gunner. Whatever hold you think she has on you, it’ll pass,” Beast pointed out.

Gunner wasn’t so sure. He didn’t say that, though. Just grunted and signaled for another drink.

Later that night, alone in his room at the clubhouse, he lay on his bed staring at the ceiling, the low hum of voices and music from downstairs fading into the background. He slept nude as he usually did. Sleep did not come easy.

His mind drifted back to Dawn—her laugh, the way she’d looked at him with both wariness and curiosity. Gunner pictured her naked and at his complete mercy. He curled his fingers over his dick and began to stroke.

He could see her on his bed, imagine the generous swell of her breasts, her gorgeous body and the tempting valley between her legs.

Gunner imagined she would taste incredibly sweet as he kissed and sucked his way down to her pussy.

Could hear her cries and moans as he made her come over and over again.

Gunner groaned, stroking faster now until he came. He regretted not asking for her number.

But then he remembered. She'd mentioned the diner where she worked. Maybe he'd pay her a visit sometime.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

The bell above the diner door jingled, and Dawn glanced up from behind the counter, absently wiping a damp rag over the stainless-steel surface. Her heart sank the moment she saw who had just walked in.

Jesse.

He was still dressed in his grease-stained coveralls, the Rat Bastards MC patch stitched onto his chest. His dark hair was slicked back with too much gel, and his smug grin made her stomach churn. Just what she didn't need tonight.

He sauntered toward the counter, moving with an air of undeserved confidence, and slid onto a stool directly in front of her.

“Hey, gorgeous. Miss me?”

Dawn stiffened. She shot him a tight smile, purely out of politeness, and turned to grab the coffeepot. “What do you want, Jesse?”

“A second chance,” he said, leaning in. “You never gave me a fair shot the other night.”

She scoffed and set the coffeepot down with more force than necessary. “You mean when you stood me up?”

His smirk didn't waver. “I had shit to do. Club business. You know how it is.”

“I really don't.” Dawn crossed her arms. “But I do know I sat alone in that roadhouse

for over an hour like a fool. I'm not doing that again."

Jesse exhaled sharply, shaking his head as if she was the unreasonable one.

"Come on, don't be like that, babe. I'll make it up to you. Let's go grab a drink after your shift," he said.

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Not happening."

Jesse's expression hardened. He leaned forward, his voice dropping low. "You don't want to make an enemy outta me, Dawn."

A chill ran down her spine, but she forced herself to hold her ground. "Is that a threat?"

He smirked, but there was something in his eyes that set her on edge. "Just saying, people who cross the wrong folks tend to regret it."

The tension between them thickened, the air in the diner suddenly feeling oppressive.

Other customers were too absorbed in their meals to notice what was happening, but Dawn's coworker, Maggie, peeked around the corner from the kitchen, concern flickering across her face.

Dawn had had enough. She stepped out from behind the counter, standing tall despite the way her pulse pounded in her throat.

"I'm gonna say this once, Jesse. Leave me the hell alone. I don't want anything to do with you," Dawn said firmly.

Jesse's jaw ticked, his fingers curling into a fist on the counter. "You sure about that,

sweetheart?”

“Dead sure.”

For a long moment, he didn't move, just sat there, staring her down like he was trying to intimidate her into changing her mind. But Dawn wasn't backing down. Not this time.

Finally, Jesse let out a low chuckle, shaking his head as he pushed off the stool.

“Your loss,” he muttered, but there was an edge to his voice, a promise that this wasn't over.

Dawn stood her ground, watching as he strolled out the door, the bell jingling behind him. Only when he was gone did she let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Maggie rushed over. “Dawn, are you okay?”

Dawn nodded, even though her hands trembled. “Yeah. Just ... pissed off.”

Maggie eyed the door warily. “He's bad news, hon. You did the right thing.”

Dawn exhaled, trying to shake off the lingering unease. “I hope so.” Because something told her Jesse wasn't the type to take rejection lightly.

Dawn spent the rest of the day lost in the monotony of her shift, but no matter how busy she kept herself, she couldn't shake the earlier interaction with Jesse.

Rejecting him might not have been the best decision, and she had a sinking feeling that a man like him didn't take no for an answer.

But despite that, she was proud of standing her ground.

Besides, his threats felt ridiculous. Jesse was nothing compared to a real man like Gunner.

Real men didn't need to bully a woman into submission.

That being said, men like Jesse were common. Gunner, on the other hand ... he was something else entirely.

During her break, she pulled out her phone, her fingers hovering over the screen. The idea of texting Gunner was both thrilling and nerve-wracking. She had never been the kind of woman who asked men out, but maybe this time was an exception. Maybe he was an exception.

Her excitement quickly deflated when she realized they hadn't exchanged numbers. Damn it.

With a sigh, Dawn finished her break and returned to work.

But as her shift was coming to an end, she heard the deep, unmistakable rumble of a motorcycle engine outside the diner.

Her pulse kicked into a frantic rhythm, her breath catching in her throat.

She turned just in time to see Gunner step inside.

The biker scanned the room before his piercing gaze found hers, locking onto her like he'd known exactly where she would be. Then he grinned, a slow, devastating smile that made warmth spread through her, pooling low in her stomach.



Dawn's skin heated, her pulse a wild, erratic beat against her ribs. A shiver trailed down her spine as she forced herself to act normal, to not let her body betray just how much his presence affected her.

"Gunner," she said, surprised as he strode toward her, every step radiating confidence.

For a moment, she forgot how to form words, her tongue tangled, her mind blanking. She scrambled to recover.

"You can sit anywhere you like, and I'll be with you in a sec," she told him.

"I'm not here to eat," he said, his voice a deep, rough timbre that sent a shiver through her. "Just to see you."

Dawn's stomach clenched, her heart slamming against her ribs. She had no idea why those words affected her so much, but they did. God help her, they did.

"Yeah?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"I forgot to ask for your number last night," he admitted, watching her intently. "But I remembered you mentioning the diner where you worked."

"Oh," she said, caught off guard by how observant he was, how good a listener. Most men barely paid attention to what a woman said, but Gunner had.

"How will I ask you out if I don't have your number?" he said, his lips quirking in amusement.

Before Dawn could respond, her manager, Bert, appeared with a scowl. "Dawn, you're still on the clock. If you're gonna flirt, do it on your own time," Bert pointed

out.

Dawn's face burned, but before she could retort, Gunner turned his attention to Bert and gave him a flat, hard look. One that sent a shudder of unease through the other man.

Bert muttered something under his breath and scurried away.

Dawn should have been a little worried that Gunner was so used to intimidating people—or worse, getting exactly what he wanted—but she wasn't. She just found his authoritative presence incredibly sexy.

They exchanged numbers, her fingers brushing against his rough, calloused palm as she handed him her phone. A small, seemingly insignificant touch, but it sent a jolt through her system nonetheless.

"I'll see you soon, Dawn," Gunner murmured, his voice like a promise, making her heart flutter in a way she wasn't sure she could control.

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The meeting was supposed to be important.

Gunner sat at the long, scarred wooden table in the Iron Sentinels' clubhouse, his arms crossed as Beast went over the latest shipment details.

The room was packed with the club's highest-ranking members—men who had spent years building their reputation and running their business with ruthless efficiency.

Deals with suppliers, territorial disputes, and potential alliances were all on the table tonight, and Gunner knew he needed to be present, to focus. But his damn mind kept

drifting.

Dawn.

He should've waited at least a day before calling her. Hell, he wasn't the kind of guy who got hung up on a woman after one night of easy conversation and a few teasing glances.

But Dawn wasn't like anyone he'd met before. Something about her had a hold on him, and no matter how much he told himself to shove it aside, his thoughts kept circling back to her.

"You listening, Gunner?" Beast's gruff voice cut through his distraction.

Gunner blinked, his gaze snapping to his president. Beast didn't look pissed, but there was a knowing glint in his eye, like he had already figured out where Gunner's head was. The man had been his best friend for years, and he could read him better than anyone.

"Yeah," Gunner said, sitting forward and forcing himself to focus. "Shipment's coming in next month. Razor says he's got the logistics covered on his end, and we'll handle our part like always."

Beast grunted. "You seem real interested in this conversation."

A few of the other guys smirked, but Gunner didn't give a damn. He knew what was coming.

"You got somethin' else on your mind?" Beast leaned back in his chair, watching him closely. "Or maybe someone?"

Gunner exhaled sharply, shaking his head. “It’s nothin’.”

Beast didn’t believe that for a second, but he let it slide. For now.

The meeting wrapped up not long after, and Gunner left the main room, heading toward his quarters in the back of the clubhouse.

His space was simple—a bed, a dresser, and a couple of personal items. He wasn’t one for unnecessary clutter. Most nights, he didn’t give a damn where he slept as long as he had a place to lay his head after a long day of business. But tonight, sleep wasn’t happening anytime soon.

Running a hand over his beard, he sat down on the edge of the bed, pulling out his phone. He hesitated for only a second before scrolling to her number, freshly added from earlier that day. He had planned to wait. Maybe give it another night, let her sit with the idea of them.

Fuck it. He pressed “call.” The line rang once. Twice. On the third, she picked up.

“Hello?”

Gunner grinned at the sound of her familiar voice—soft, slightly wary, and undeniably tempting.

“It’s me,” he said, his voice rougher than intended.

A pause. Then, “Gunner?”

Hearing his name on her lips did something to him. Something he wasn’t ready to unpack.

“You busy?” he asked.

She hesitated. “Not really.”

“Good,” he said. “I was thinkin’ about you.”

Silence. He could practically hear her breath hitch on the other end.

“Oh,” she finally murmured. “That so?”

He chuckled, leaning back against the headboard. “Yeah. Figured I’d ask you out, see if you’re free tomorrow night.”

Another pause. “You don’t waste time, do you?”

“Never saw the point,” he told her.

Dawn exhaled, and he could picture her biting her lip, trying to decide what to do with him. He liked that she didn’t just jump at the offer.

She was cautious, hesitant, but there was no denying the attraction between them. He was willing to bet she felt it just as much as he did.

“You really wanna take me out?” she asked, as if she wasn’t sure he was serious.

“I wouldn’t be callin’ if I didn’t,” he told her simply.

A beat of silence passed before she finally said, “All right. Tomorrow night.”

Satisfaction hummed through him. “Good girl.”

Her sharp inhale told him she liked that more than she wanted to admit. He grinned. Yeah, this was going to be interesting.

“I’ll pick you up at seven,” he said. “Wear somethin’ that makes you feel good.”

She let out a breathy laugh. “Bossy.”

“You like it.”

Dawn didn’t respond right away, but he didn’t need her to. The way she hesitated, the way she exhaled again, told him enough.

“See you tomorrow, Gunner,” she said.

He smirked. “Can’t wait.”

The call ended, but he didn’t move right away. Instead, he stared at the phone in his hand, something stirring deep in his chest.

Yeah. He was in trouble.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

Dawn stood in front of her mirror, biting her lip as she eyed the mess of clothes scattered across her bed. Nothing looked right. One outfit felt too casual, the other too dressy. She was stuck somewhere between not wanting to look like she was trying too hard and wanting to look good for Gunner.

Gunner . Just thinking of him made her pulse skip. The man was nothing like the guys she was used to. He was dangerous in a way that excited her, confident without arrogance, and damn if he wasn't the most attractive man she'd ever laid eyes on.

Sighing, she finally settled on a simple but flattering black dress, one that hugged her in all the right places but wasn't over the top.

She paired it with ankle boots, added a hint of makeup, and ran a hand through her dark waves, deciding to let them fall naturally.

Dawn wasn't the kind of woman to fuss over every detail, but tonight felt different. Special.

A knock at the door sent a flutter of nerves through her stomach. She took a deep breath, smoothed her dress, and opened it to find Gunner leaning casually against the doorframe.

Gunner looked devastatingly good in dark jeans, a fitted henley, and a leather jacket. His intense gaze traveled over her slowly, like he was committing her to memory.

"Damn," he murmured, smirking at her. "You're a sight."

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. “You clean up pretty well yourself,” she pointed out.

He chuckled, his deep voice sending a pleasant shiver down her spine. “Ready to go?”

She nodded, grabbing her purse and stepping out, locking the door behind her. He led her to his bike, the powerful machine gleaming under the streetlights.

“You ever been on one of these?” he asked, handing her a helmet.

“Once or twice,” she admitted, securing it in place.

“Well, hold on tight, honey.”

She swallowed as she climbed on behind him, her hands hesitating before resting lightly on his sides. The moment he revved the engine and took off, she instinctively tightened her grip around his waist.

His solid warmth, the way his muscles tensed beneath her fingers, made her heartbeat accelerate for reasons that had nothing to do with the speed.

They rode through the city, the wind cool against her skin, the lights blurring past. There was something intoxicating about the way he moved with the bike, like he was in perfect sync with the machine.

By the time they pulled up to a cozy little restaurant tucked away from the busy streets, her nerves had settled into excitement.

Gunner helped her off the bike, his hands lingering at her waist as she steadied herself. The way he looked at her—like she was something to be savored—made her stomach tighten.



The restaurant was warm and inviting, candlelit with rustic decor. He led her to a table in the corner, giving them some privacy. The moment they sat, she realized how easily the conversation flowed between them.

Gunner wasn't just good at looking dangerous, he was observant, funny in a dry way, and had a way of making her feel like she was the only person in the room.

They talked about everything—her job at the diner, his life in the club, the places they'd been, the things they wanted. She found herself lowering her guard, telling him things she didn't normally share with men. Gunner listened, really listened, and when he spoke, his words carried weight.

At one point, she reached for her drink at the same time he did, their fingers brushing. A current of awareness shot through her, and when she glanced up, his gaze had darkened.

“You do that on purpose?” he asked, voice roughened.

Her breath hitched. “Do what?”

“Make it damn near impossible not to touch you.”

The air between them charged, heavy with unspoken tension.

She could feel the heat of him, the way his fingers flexed as if he was restraining himself.

She wanted to test him, to see what would happen if she leaned just a little closer.

But the waitress arrived with their food, breaking the moment.

Dawn exhaled a shaky breath, forcing herself to focus.

They ate, but the energy between them remained, simmering beneath the surface. Every glance, every brush of his fingers against hers when he passed her something, sent little sparks through her.

When dinner ended, Gunner paid without hesitation, waving off her protests. “You can get the next one,” he said, a promise in his voice.

They stepped outside, and the cool night air did little to calm her racing pulse. He turned to her, brushing a strand of hair from her face, his touch featherlight.

“I had a good time tonight,” he murmured.

“Me too,” she admitted.

He dropped his gaze to her lips, and her breath caught. Gunner was giving her a choice, letting her decide if she wanted to close the distance. And God, did she want to.

She tilted her chin up, just a fraction, and that was all the invitation he needed. Gunner slid his hand around the back of her neck, threading his fingers through her hair as he lowered his mouth to hers.

The kiss was slow at first, exploratory. His lips were firm but soft, coaxing rather than demanding. But when she parted for him, he deepened it, his other hand settling at her waist, pulling her closer. She melted into him, hands fisting the leather of his jacket as heat spread through her veins.

Gunner kissed like he did everything else—with purpose, with intensity, like he was staking his claim. When he finally pulled back, she was breathless, dazed, gripping

his jacket to steady herself.

His thumb brushed over her lower lip, his eyes smoldering. “Damn,” he murmured.

She swallowed hard, her heart hammering. “Yeah.”

A slow smirk curved his lips. “That’s a yes to a second date, then?”

She couldn’t help but laugh, shaking her head. “Yeah, Gunner. That’s a yes,” Dawn said.

Satisfied, he pressed one last kiss to her forehead before leading her back to his bike. As she wrapped her arms around him again, she realized something.

She was in trouble. Because this thing with Gunner wasn’t just attraction. It was something more. Something she wasn’t sure she was ready for. But damn if she didn’t want to find out.

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The rumble of Gunner’s motorcycle still echoed in Dawn’s chest as he walked her to her apartment door.

The ride home had been exhilarating—her arms wrapped around his solid frame, her body pressed close to his, the feel of the wind whipping around them.

It had left her heart racing in a way that had nothing to do with the speed of the bike.

Now, with Gunner standing so close, his towering presence both protective and intoxicating, she struggled to find her breath.

The night had been perfect, every moment drawing her further into his orbit. The way he looked at her, with that quiet, smoldering intensity, made her feel like she was the only woman in the world.

“This is me,” she said softly, gesturing to her door, though she didn’t move to unlock it just yet.

“I know.” Gunner’s voice was low, rough, sending a shiver down her spine.

He reached out, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, his fingertips grazing her skin. The simple touch sent heat curling deep in her belly.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The air between them crackled, charged with something undeniable, something magnetic. Dawn could feel her pulse hammering in her throat as Gunner’s gaze dropped to her lips.

“Dawn,” he murmured, his tone both a warning and a question.

She answered by leaning in first. The moment their lips met, she lost herself in him.

The kiss started slow, a teasing brush of mouths, but quickly deepened. Gunner pulled her closer, his arms wrapping around her as he took control, his lips firm and insistent.

A low, appreciative sound rumbled in his chest as he tilted her head and deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding against hers in a way that made her knees weak.

Dawn clung to him, her fingers gripping the leather of his cut, her body molding against his. He tasted like whiskey and danger, like temptation wrapped in leather and muscle.

Every nerve in her body screamed for more, but then reality crept in—she was standing in the hallway, completely lost in this man, her back pressed against her door as if she might invite him inside.

Reluctantly, she pulled back, her breath coming in short, uneven gasps. Gunner didn't let her go just yet, his forehead resting against hers. He used his thumb to trace slow, lazy circles on her hip.

“If you keep kissing me like that, sweetheart,” he murmured, his voice thick with heat, “I won't want to leave.”

Dawn smiled, though her legs still felt unsteady. “That's dangerous talk.”

His lips quirked into a smirk, but there was something deeper in his eyes—something that made her stomach flip. This wasn't just a casual kiss. It was something more.

She stepped back, fumbling for her purse, trying to ground herself before she lost all sense of reason. But in her haste, she knocked it against the doorframe, and it slipped from her fingers, spilling its contents onto the floor.

“Shit,” she muttered, crouching down just as Gunner did the same.

Her phone landed screen-up, the bright glow illuminating a text preview. Her stomach clenched the moment she saw the name. Jesse.

The message was short, but even from the quick glance, she could see the threat in it. Big mistake, Dawn. You'll regret this. Her blood ran cold.

She snatched the phone up before Gunner could see more than just the name, shoving it back into her purse like it meant nothing. Like it hadn't just sent a wave of unease crashing over her.

But Gunner was perceptive. His eyes narrowed slightly, his entire posture shifting, sharpening. “Something wrong?”

“No.” The word came too fast, too clipped, and she knew he didn’t buy it.

Gunner didn’t say anything right away. He just watched her, his gaze assessing, his jaw ticking slightly as if debating whether to press her on it. Finally, he sighed, raking a hand through his hair.

“If you say so,” Gunner said.

Dawn forced a smile, trying to push aside the lingering tension in her gut. “It’s nothing. Just ... work stuff.”

She could tell he didn’t believe her, but thankfully, he didn’t call her on it. Instead, he stepped back, giving her space, but not before reaching out and brushing his knuckles along her cheek one last time.

“I’ll call you,” he promised, his voice quieter now, softer.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

As he turned and walked away, the powerful rumble of his bike starting up filled the quiet night air. Dawn exhaled a shaky breath, pushing her door open and stepping inside.

The moment she was alone, she pulled out her phone, her fingers hovering over the screen. Jesse’s message sat there, taunting her. She should just delete it. Pretend it didn’t rattle her. Jesse was a nobody, a bitter, insecure man who didn’t take rejection well. He wasn’t worth her energy.

And yet... Curiosity won out. Her thumb hesitated, then tapped the message open: You think you can just brush me off like I ' m nothing? You don ' t get to make a fool out of me, Dawn. You'll see.

A cold shiver raced down her spine.

She had no idea what Jesse was capable of, but something told her he wasn't the kind of man to let things go easily.

And for the first time since rejecting him, she wondered if she'd just made a terrible mistake.

No, she told herself, forcing her spine to straighten.

Of course it wasn't a mistake. She knew that entertaining guys like Jesse wouldn't lead to anything good.

Men like him took and took, demanding more than they were owed, twisting reality to suit their egos. She'd seen it before, lived through it with past relationships that left her drained and questioning herself.

But Gunner was different. He didn't need to play games or push boundaries to prove his worth. He carried himself with the kind of confidence that didn't demand submission but rather commanded respect.

There was strength in the way he looked at her, a promise in the way he spoke her name. He made her feel something raw and unshaken, something real. And she wasn't about to let some entitled asshole like Jesse make her second-guess that.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

The lunch rush at the diner had finally settled, leaving Dawn with a moment to breathe. She wiped her hands on her apron and turned toward the counter, ready to grab a much-needed cup of coffee. Just as she reached for the pot, the sound of the bell above the door made her pause.

She didn't have to look to know who it was. The air seemed to shift, a prickle of unease running down her spine. Jesse.

Dawn turned slowly, schooling her features into a calm mask as he strode toward her. He was dressed sharper than usual, like he was trying to impress. But she knew better than to fall for the act.

"Dawn," Jesse greeted smoothly, leaning against the counter with a casual confidence that set her teeth on edge. "Been thinking about you."

She crossed her arms over her chest, resisting the urge to step back. "I told you, Jesse. I'm not interested."

His smile flickered, but he didn't drop it entirely. Instead, he leaned in just a fraction. "You were real quick to turn me down the other day. Thought maybe you just needed some time to think it over," Jesse said.

Dawn forced herself to hold his gaze. "I don't need time to think. I meant what I said."

His fingers tapped against the counter, the rhythm slow and deliberate.



“Come on, don’t be a bitch. I’m trying to be nice here.” Jesse lowered his voice, taking on a sharper edge. “It’d be a shame if you kept making things difficult for yourself.”

Fear flickered in her chest, but she tamped it down. She wouldn’t let him see her shaken. “Are you threatening me now?” Dawn demanded, thinking of his text to her the night before.

Jesse chuckled, shaking his head like she was being ridiculous. “Of course not. Just looking out for you. I’d hate to see you make a mistake,” he said.

Before she could respond, the bell above the door jingled again. This time, the air shifted in a completely different way. The tension in her shoulders eased just a little as she recognized the heavy footsteps approaching. Gunner.

He was supposed to meet her for lunch, and his timing couldn’t have been better. His gaze swept the room, instantly locking onto Jesse. Even without knowing the details, Dawn saw the change in Gunner’s posture. His easy confidence turned sharp, shoulders rolling back as if bracing for a fight.

“Everything all right here?” Gunner asked, his deep voice cutting through the thick air between them.

Jesse didn’t move, but Dawn felt the way his body stiffened. “Just having a conversation.”

Gunner’s eyes flicked to Dawn. “That true?”

She swallowed, her pulse hammering. “Jesse was just leaving.”

Jesse let out a low laugh, turning back to Gunner like he was just now seeing him for

the first time. “And who the hell are you?”

“Gunner.” He said his name like it was all the introduction necessary. “And I don’t like the way you’re talking to her.”

Jesse smirked, clearly unimpressed. “Oh, yeah? And what exactly are you gonna do about it?”

Gunner didn’t flinch. Instead, he stepped closer, his sheer presence making Jesse shift uneasily. “You’re gonna walk out of here, and you’re not gonna come back. That’s what you’re gonna do.”

Jesse exhaled sharply through his nose, shaking his head like he found the whole thing amusing. “And if I don’t?”

Gunner didn’t say a word. He just stood there, eyes dark and unreadable, his entire body coiled with an unspoken threat. Dawn had never seen someone so still and yet so damn intimidating at the same time. The air felt thick with tension, the kind that could snap at any second.

Jesse licked his lips, gaze bouncing between them before he let out a sharp laugh. “You think you’re some kind of tough guy, huh?”

Gunner finally moved, leaning in just a little. “No. I just don’t tolerate men like you.”

The words were quiet but heavy, weighted with meaning. And for the first time, Dawn saw a flicker of uncertainty in Jesse’s eyes. He wasn’t scared—not yet—but he sure as hell wasn’t as confident as he had been a moment ago.

Jesse straightened, rolling his shoulders as he took a step back. “This ain’t over,” he muttered, but the bravado was slipping.

Gunner tilted his head slightly. “Yeah, it is.”

For a long moment, Jesse just stood there, jaw clenched, before he turned on his heel and walked out of the diner. The second the door shut behind him, Dawn let out a breath.

Gunner turned to her, his expression unreadable. “You okay?”

She nodded, but her hands were still shaking. “He’s ... he’s just pissed I told him no.”

Gunner’s jaw tightened. “That guy’s a problem.”

Dawn sighed, running a hand over her face. “Yeah. I know.” Dawn took a breath, then told Gunner he was the guy who stood her up the other day. She also showed him Jesse’s text the night before.

Gunner frowned before reaching out, his fingers brushing her arm gently. “You tell me if he bothers you again.”

His touch was light, barely there, but it sent warmth spreading through her. “I can handle myself,” she said, though it lacked her usual confidence.

“I know you can.” His lips quirked slightly. “Doesn’t mean you have to.”

Something about the way he said it—like he genuinely wanted to look out for her—made her chest tighten. She’d spent so long fending for herself that the idea of someone having her back felt ... foreign. But with Gunner, it didn’t feel suffocating. It felt safe.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

Gunner nodded, then glanced toward the door, his expression darkening again. “I don’t think that was the last of him.”

Dawn shivered despite herself. Deep down, she knew he was right.

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The steady rumble of the Harley matched the tension building in Gunner’s chest. The night air was cool as it whipped past them, but it did nothing to take the edge off the heat that had been crackling between them since he’d picked her up.

Dawn wrapped her arms around his waist, her body pressed to his back, and damn if he didn’t like the way she fit against him.

The town lights faded into the distance as he took them down winding back roads, the kind only bikers and late-night wanderers knew. The sky stretched wide and endless above them, the stars bright pinpricks in the darkness.

He could feel Dawn relax behind him, her grip loosening just a little as she melted into the ride, and that made him grin.

After what had happened earlier with Jesse, she needed this.

He wasn’t blind—he saw the way she tensed when she spotted the bastard at the diner, the way she held her shoulders stiff when she told him off.

She had guts, but she also had fear, and Gunner didn’t like that.

No one should be making her feel unsafe.

Especially not some lowlife who couldn’t take a damn hint.

When they finally pulled over at a secluded overlook, he cut the engine and placed his boots firmly on the ground. The silence that followed was thick, but peaceful.

Dawn hesitated before getting off the bike, stretching slightly as she pulled off the helmet he'd given her. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders, catching the moonlight in a way that made his chest tighten.

"Damn," he muttered, mostly to himself.

Dawn turned toward him, curiosity flickering in her eyes. "What?"

He shook his head, kicking the stand down and swinging off the bike. "Nothing."

She arched a brow, clearly not believing him, but let it go. "I forgot how freeing a ride like that can be," she admitted, glancing out over the darkened horizon. "It's like everything just fades away for a little while."

Gunner nodded, stepping closer. "That's the whole point. The road don't ask questions. Don't expect nothin' from you. It just is."

She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself, and he wasn't sure if it was from the cool night air or something deeper. Without thinking, he shrugged off his leather cut and draped it over her shoulders.

She looked up at him in surprise, her lips parting slightly. "Thanks."

"Anytime." His voice was rougher than he intended, but the way she was staring had him on edge. Not a bad kind of edge—the kind that made his blood run hot, that made him want to close the distance between them and find out just how soft those lips of hers really were.

Dawn must've felt the shift, because she took a step closer, her hands curling into the lapels of his jacket. "Gunner..."

He didn't give her a chance to finish whatever thought had been forming.

He closed the space between them, his hand coming up to cup her jaw as he tilted her face up to his.

Their breaths mingled for a moment, hesitation flickering in her eyes, but when he brushed his thumb over her cheek, she let out a soft exhale and leaned in.

The moment their lips met, something ignited. She tasted like coffee and something sweeter, something uniquely her, and fuck if it didn't make his head spin. The kiss deepened almost instantly, her fingers gripping at his leather as if he was the only thing keeping her upright.

He backed her up against the bike, one hand sliding down to rest on her waist, holding her steady. Her body pressed against his, and heat shot through him. His fingers flexed against her hip, itching to explore, to feel more, but he kept himself in check. Barely.

Dawn was the one who surprised him, her own hands roaming, tracing the hard lines of his chest through his shirt before slipping beneath the fabric, fingertips ghosting over his skin. He groaned against her lips, deepening the kiss until they were both breathing hard.

And then she pulled back.

He stilled, forcing himself to loosen his grip on her. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, her lips slightly swollen, her pupils blown wide. But there was something else in her expression—hesitation. Uncertainty.

Shit.

“Too fast?” he rasped, keeping his hands firmly at her waist but making no further moves.

She nodded slightly, looking almost embarrassed. “I just ... I haven’t done this in a while. And you...” She exhaled, running a hand through her hair. “You make me feel things I’m not sure I’m ready for.”

His chest tightened, but he nodded, brushing his thumb over her side in a soothing motion. “I get it. And I ain’t gonna push you, sweetheart.” He met her gaze, making sure she saw the sincerity there. “But don’t mistake me—I want you. Bad.”

A flush crept up her neck, and she bit her lip, glancing away. “I want you too, Gunner.”

His grip on her tightened briefly before he forced himself to step back, putting space between them before he lost all sense of restraint. He ran a hand over his beard, exhaling sharply. “Then we’ll do this right. No rush, no pressure.”

She smiled, small but genuine, and it damn near undid him. “I’d like that.”

He nodded once, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

He climbed back onto the bike and watched as she did the same, this time pressing even closer against him as she wrapped her arms around his waist. He felt her exhale against his back, felt the way her fingers clenched briefly in his shirt, and he smirked.

She might not be ready yet. But she would be. And when she was, he’d be right there, waiting. Because something told him that whatever this was between them, was

worth the wait.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

The first thing Gunner noticed when he pulled into Dawn's apartment complex was her car sitting lopsided in the lot. He cut the engine and swung his leg over the bike, his stomach tightening as he took in the damage.

All four of her tires had been slashed—deep, deliberate cuts meant to send a message. And if that wasn't enough, a single note had been left on her windshield. One letter: J. There was no doubt in Gunner's mind who was behind it. Jesse.

He curled his hands into fists as he fought the urge to tear across town, hunt the bastard down, and beat the ever-loving shit out of him. Instead, he forced himself to take a breath. Dawn didn't need his anger right now. She needed reassurance.

He made his way up to her apartment and knocked. A moment later, she opened the door, her face tense. "Gunner?"

"Saw your car," he said, stepping inside. "You okay?"

She sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I'm fine. Just pissed."

Gunner shut the door behind him and crossed his arms. "This wasn't random. Jesse did this."

"I know." She exhaled, rubbing her temples. "I should've seen this coming."

"That's exactly why I want to handle this." His voice was rough, edged with the frustration he was barely keeping in check. "I need to loop in the club."

“No,” she said firmly. “I can handle it.”

He gave her a look. “Handling it how, Dawn? You think the cops are gonna do something? They won’t. And Jesse’s only gonna keep pushing.”

She shook her head, her expression tight with worry. “I don’t want you getting caught up in this, Gunner. I can’t have this blowing back on you.”

His eyes darkened, a muscle ticking in his jaw. “That’s not your call.” He took a step closer, his voice dropping low, firm. “You really think I can just stand by and do nothing while some piece of shit stalks you? Slashes your tires? Sends you threats? Hell, no, Dawn.”

Her lips parted slightly, her gaze searching his. For a second, she looked like she might lean into him, might let him be the shield he was aching to be for her. But then she straightened, that stubborn fire in her eyes. “Just let me handle this my way for now.”

Gunner ground his teeth, everything in him rebelling against the idea of standing back while Jesse prowled around, unchecked. His fists curled at his sides, the urge to hunt the bastard down nearly overwhelming. But he respected her too much to bulldoze over her decision. Even if it killed him.

He blew out a slow breath, forcing his fingers to relax. “Fine. But the second this escalates, I’m handling it my way.”

Dawn hesitated, like she knew what that meant. Knew exactly what kind of man Gunner was. Finally, she gave a small nod. “Deal.”

But even as the word left her lips, he could see the worry flickering behind her eyes. And that only made him more certain that this wouldn’t be over until Jesse was

handled for good.

Gunner forced himself to push Jesse out of his mind as Dawn led him into her apartment.

He didn't want that bastard ruining their night.

Not when Dawn had gone out of her way to make things special.

The scent of something warm and savory filled the space, wrapping around him like an invitation to stay.

“Dinner's almost ready,” she said over her shoulder, heading into the kitchen. “Make yourself at home.”

He watched her move, captivated by the natural sway of her hips, the way her hair slipped over her shoulder when she turned to check on whatever she had cooking.

Gunner had been with women before, plenty of them, but there was something different about Dawn. The way she pulled him in without even trying. The way he wanted to stay, not just tonight, but longer.

Shaking off the thought, he settled on a stool at the kitchen island, watching as she stirred something in a pot. “Didn't take you for the cooking type.”

She glanced at him, smirking. “You don't know everything about me yet.”

Yet . That word settled deep in his chest, warming something inside him. He liked the idea of learning more about her. About seeing all the sides of Dawn she didn't show the world.

“Well,” he said, leaning his forearms on the counter, “color me impressed.”

She plated up their food—a rich, homemade pasta that had his stomach growling—and they sat at the small table, candles flickering between them.

It felt domestic in a way that should have made him uncomfortable. But it didn't. Not even a little. They ate, talked, laughed. Dawn had a way of making even the simplest moments feel easy, like she wasn't just tolerating his company but enjoying it. And damn, he enjoyed hers.

After dinner, they moved to the couch, her soft body pressing against his side as she curled up next to him.

Some action movie played on the screen, but he barely paid attention.

His focus was on Dawn—the way she smelled like something sweet and warm, the way her body felt so damn right tucked against his.

His arm rested along the back of the couch, his fingers grazing her shoulder lightly. Just enough to test the waters. When she didn't move away, he let his fingers drift lower, tracing slow circles against her arm.

She shifted slightly, her breath hitching, and that was all the encouragement he needed. Gunner turned toward her, one hand reaching up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Her gaze met his, something uncertain but wanting lingering in her dark eyes.

“Dawn,” he murmured, his voice rougher than intended.

She swallowed, her lips parting, but she didn't say a word. Didn't have to. He leaned in slowly, giving her every chance to stop him. When she didn't, when she tilted her

chin up just slightly, he closed the distance, pressing his lips to hers.

The kiss was slow, deliberate. Not rushed. He wanted to savor her, memorize the way she tasted, the way she melted into him.

Dawn curled her fingers into his shirt, tugging him closer, and he slid his hand to her waist, gripping her just enough to feel the warmth of her skin through the thin fabric of her top.

Heat flared between them, a slow burn threatening to turn into something wilder.

He trailed his fingers down her spine, pulling her flush against him, and she let out a soft sound that had every muscle in his body tightening.

But just as he was about to deepen the kiss, she pulled back, her breath shaky.

“I—” She licked her lips, looking up at him with a mix of want and hesitation. “I just ... I don’t want to rush this.”

He exhaled, forcing himself to dial back the hunger roaring inside him. He cupped her cheek, brushing his thumb along her jaw. “I’m not rushing you, sweetheart. But I’m not gonna lie—I want you.”

She let out a small laugh, a little breathless. “I kind of figured.”

He grinned, but then his mind shifted, darkening slightly. Because as much as he wanted to lose himself in her, he couldn’t shake the image of her slashed tires. Couldn’t ignore the nagging sense of unease in his gut.

Jesse wasn’t done. That much was clear. And Dawn, as stubborn as she was, had no idea what kind of man she was up against.

Gunner leaned in, pressing one last kiss to her forehead before pulling her back against his chest. “Get some rest,” he murmured, his hand rubbing small circles on her back. “I’ll stay until you do.”

Dawn didn’t argue. She let out a small sigh and relaxed against him. But even as he held her close, his mind stayed sharp.

Jesse had already made his move. And Gunner wasn’t about to wait around for the next one.

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Back at the clubhouse, tension simmered in the air. The Iron Sentinels had been dealing with their own set of problems lately, and tonight was no exception. The Rat Bastards MC had been getting bolder, encroaching on their turf and sniffing around their business.

Inside the meeting room, Gunner sat with Beast and the other senior members, discussing their next move.

“They’re testing us,” Beast said, his voice level but firm. “Pushing to see how far they can go before we push back.”

“We can’t just let them,” one of the guys said. “They’re already screwing with our shipments.”

“We won’t let them,” Beast assured him. “We’re just not making the first move.”

Gunner leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. “We may not have to. Jesse’s been stirring shit up. If he keeps at it, he’s gonna give us a reason.”

“Who the hell is Jesse?” Beast asked, his tone edged with suspicion.

Gunner exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his hair. “Some lowlife from the Rat Bastards,” he said. “He’s been harassing Dawn—slashed her damn tires last night.”

Beast’s gaze flicked to him, sharp and knowing. He wasn’t the kind of man who missed details, and right now, Gunner could tell he was seeing too much.

“That why you’re so worked up?” Beast asked, his voice deceptively calm.

Gunner clenched his jaw. He’d known Beast long enough to understand when the older man was fishing for something deeper, reading between the lines that Gunner wasn’t laying out in plain sight.

Beast didn’t wait for an answer. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “What’s going on, Gunner?” he pressed. “This about that girl?”

Gunner’s silence said more than words could.

Beast huffed out a breath, shaking his head. “Shit.” He eyed Gunner like he was sizing him up for a fight. “You really into her, huh?”

Gunner didn’t confirm or deny it, but the tightness in his shoulders, the way his fingers flexed restlessly against his jeans, made it obvious.

Beast cursed under his breath. “Listen, brother. You know how this life works. You get involved with her, and she’s in it, whether she likes it or not. That something you’re ready for?”

Gunner’s gut tightened. He didn’t need the reminder.

He knew exactly what kind of world he lived in—one where loyalty was everything—and enemies didn't just come at you, they went after the people you cared about.

But the idea of walking away from Dawn, of leaving her to deal with Jesse on her own, was not an option.

“She’s already in it,” Gunner said, his voice like gravel. “Whether she likes it or not.”

Beast studied him for a long moment before shaking his head. “I’m telling you now, brother. Getting too involved with a woman right now is not smart. We’ve got enough on our plate.”

Gunner’s jaw tightened. “This isn’t just some woman.”

Beast’s lips curled into something close to amusement. “Oh, I know.”

Gunner didn’t respond. He didn’t need to.

The fact that he was even talking about Dawn like this spoke volumes.

He’d never given a damn about a woman beyond a night in his bed.

But Dawn had gotten under his skin. He couldn’t stop thinking about her.

Couldn’t stop wanting her. And he sure as hell wasn’t about to let Jesse, or anyone else, mess with her.

Beast let out a slow breath, his sharp gaze locked onto Gunner. “Just be careful, Gunner. Women like her have a way of changing a man.”



Gunner leaned back in his chair, rolling Beast's words around in his head. He wasn't a man who scared easy—he'd faced down rival clubs, taken bullets, and buried more brothers than he cared to count.

But the thought of Dawn having that kind of pull on him should've scared him. It didn't. Instead, his mind drifted, unbidden, to images he had no business entertaining. Not just Dawn in his bed, tangled in his sheets, her bare skin pressed against his, but something more. Something deeper.

He pictured them in a home, maybe a place of their own.

Waking up to the warmth of her curled against him, her sleepy voice murmuring his name first thing in the morning.

Cooking breakfast together, her stealing a piece of bacon off his plate with a teasing grin.

Ending the day with her wrapped in his arms, the world shut out, knowing she was his and his alone.

The thought should've felt foreign, unnatural even, but it didn't. It settled in his chest, solid and real, like it had been there all along, just waiting for him to see it.

Gunner smirked. "Maybe I don't mind changing."

Beast chuckled, shaking his head. "Yeah, we'll see."

But Gunner already knew Dawn wasn't just some passing thing. She was something more and he wasn't letting her go.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

Gunner had been looking forward to spending another evening with Dawn since the moment he walked out of her apartment the night before. Hell, if he was being honest, he hadn't wanted to leave in the first place.

He'd spent the whole damn day thinking about her—the way she laughed, the way she looked at him when she let her guard slip, the warmth of her body when she leaned in just a little too close. It had been a long time since a woman had taken up this much space in his head. Maybe no woman ever had.

Even Beast had noticed. During the MC meeting earlier, Gunner had caught him shooting pointed looks his way, clearly unimpressed with how distracted he was. He could practically hear the lecture coming, about priorities, about staying focused, about how the club always came first.

And Gunner got it. The Iron Sentinels had been his life for years.

He'd given them everything—his time, his blood, his loyalty.

He'd ride and die for the club, no question.

But for the first time in a long while, maybe ever, he was paying attention to something else.

Someone else. He wasn't about to apologize for that.

If Beast had a problem with it, he'd deal with it. But Gunner figured he'd earned the right to have something for himself. To want something for himself. And right now,

that something was waiting for him. Or at least, he hoped she was.

He was halfway to her place when his phone buzzed with a message.

Dawn: Hey, can you pick up a few things for dinner? Red bell peppers, a bottle of white wine, and fresh basil. Oh, and if they have fresh Parmesan, grab that too. Thanks!

Gunner smirked at his phone before changing lanes toward the nearest grocery store.

The request wasn't a hassle—he liked the idea of contributing, of showing up at her door with something she needed.

It made him feel like he was already a part of her life in a way neither of them had fully acknowledged yet.

He parked, made quick work of grabbing the ingredients, and was back on the road within minutes. The moment he stepped into her apartment, the rich aroma of garlic and tomatoes filled his senses.

Dawn was in the kitchen, stirring a pan on the stove, her hair swept up in a loose bun with tendrils escaping around her face. The sight of her, so at home in her space, cooking dinner with a relaxed ease, made something tighten in his chest.

She turned at the sound of the door clicking shut, smiling as she wiped her hands on a dish towel. “You’re a lifesaver. I realized last minute I wanted to make something special.”

Gunner held up the paper bag. “Got everything you asked for, including the fancy Parmesan.”

She peeked inside the bag and grinned. “Perfect. Feel like helping?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yeah, what do you need me to do?”

Dawn handed him a cutting board and a knife. “Chop the bell peppers. Even pieces, no weird shapes.”

He chuckled. “You saying I look like a guy who butchers vegetables?”

She smirked, nudging him playfully with her hip. “I’m saying I have high standards in the kitchen.”

Working side by side, they moved in sync. Gunner diced the peppers while Dawn sautéed onions and garlic, their conversation easy, natural.

He found he liked watching her in this element—focused, yet relaxed, humming under her breath as she worked. When she reached across him for the wine bottle, her fingers brushed against his forearm, and the brief contact sent a jolt of awareness through him.

When the meal was done, they set the table together, and Gunner poured them each a glass of wine. Sitting across from her, he couldn’t help but think about how good this felt—simple, normal, like they’d been doing it for years.

They ate slowly, conversation drifting to their pasts. Gunner shared stories about the club, about how he got into riding. Dawn talked about growing up in a small town, about her dreams before life got complicated.

At some point, the mood shifted. She toyed with the stem of her wineglass, biting her lip. “I don’t know why I said yes when Jesse asked me out,” she admitted, her voice quiet.

Gunner reached across the table, covering her hand with his. “Whatever the reason was, you don’t have to face him alone. I won’t let him hurt you.”

Dawn’s fingers curled around his, gripping tight. “I don’t want to be afraid of him anymore.”

“You won’t be,” Gunner promised.

Something in her eyes shifted then, as if some invisible wall she’d been holding up finally cracked. The tension that had been simmering between them since the night they met flared into something hotter, more urgent.

They cleaned up in a comfortable silence, but the air between them buzzed with unspoken words, unacknowledged desires. When they were done, Dawn hesitated before turning to him. “Stay?”

Gunner’s chest tightened. He didn’t need to ask what she meant. The look in her eyes told him everything.

He reached for her, his fingers brushing over her cheek, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Are you sure?”

Dawn swallowed, nodding. “I want this. I want you.”

That was all the invitation he needed. He closed the distance between them, capturing her lips in a kiss that was slow and deep, meant to savor. She melted against him, gripping his shoulders as he backed her toward the couch. They tumbled onto it together, limbs tangling, mouths exploring.

His hands slid down her waist, over the curve of her hips, and she gasped against his lips. The sound went straight to his gut. He wanted to take his time, to map every inch

of her with his hands, his lips, his tongue.

They took their time exploring, touching, reveling in the heat between them. When they finally stumbled to her bedroom, breathless and hungry for more, they took off their clothes.

“Get on the bed,” Gunner ordered, voice a little rough.

Dawn did as he asked and he couldn't help but growl at the sight of her gorgeous, nude and all his. He didn't know where he wanted to put his mouth first, the generous swell of her breasts, her nipples tightening to pebbles, or the tempting valley between her legs.

Dawn beckoned to him with her fingers and just like that, he was crawling on top of her, straddling her. He pelted her with kisses, moving his lips from the side of her neck, sucking on the hollow of her throat.

He paid close attention to her nipples, sucking first on the left, then the right. She cried out above him, begging him for more. Gunner planted more kisses down her ribs, her stomach, on the inside of her thighs.

Dawn spread her legs wider for him, moaning as he licked the folds of her pussy.

Soft like petals, he thought, licking and sucking, swirling his tongue around the sensitive nub between her legs.

Gunner focused on her clit until she cried out and came against his mouth.

He licked her honey up, like a cat with cream.

Then he moved his body up again. Dawn panted beneath him, pupils dilated, mouth a

gorgeous cherry pink, which he kissed and plundered again. When he thrust his tongue down her throat, she greedily sucked down hard on it.

“Gunner, fuck me,” she whispered after they parted from the kiss.

“I like when you talk dirty to me,” he teased. He parted from Dawn momentarily to retrieve a condom from the back pocket of his jeans.

“I love that you came ready,” she flirted back.

“Never hurts to be prepared,” Gunner said, grinning. He tore the packaging, slipped the condom on. God knew his cock was already hard and ready for her heat.

Gunner resumed position, hoisting her legs above his shoulders. He leaned in close, pinning her arms above her head. By the heat in her eyes, he could tell she liked that. He spread his fingers over hers and then entered her.

He didn't push in right away, but slowly and carefully, wanting to make sure she felt every inch of him. Dawn groaned when he finally buried himself to the hilt. “You good?” Gunner asked her.

“Move, Gunner.”

And he did, pumping in and out of her with slow and leisurely strokes, before building up speed. Dawn felt so good around his dick, squeezing and milking every inch of him. Gunner reduced them both to panting and needy animals, and before long their bodies were covered in sweat.

At Gunner's last thrust, she cried out and arched her back. He knew he found her sweet spot and kept aiming for it, over and over again. Each time he entered her, it felt like a piece of his soul drifted out to touch hers.

His balls drew in tight against his body. So close, he thought, but he wanted to hear her sweet cries of pleasure again first. Gunner made sure with each push, his dick brushed against her clit. Eventually, Dawn came, screaming out his name, the sound like music to his ears.

Gunner entered her a few more times before he hit climax. The pressure building inside him burst open. The room fell away from his line of sight as he emptied his balls. Gunner lingered inside her a few moments, kissing her on the mouth before pulling away.

He rose, headed to the bathroom, disposed of the condom, and grabbed a towel. Gunner returned to Dawn, cleaning both of them up, before sliding next to her in bed.

Gunner lay on his side, draping his arm protectively over Dawn's waist. Using his fingers, he traced slow, absentminded circles against the warm skin of her stomach. They didn't speak, didn't need to. With Dawn, he found a comfortable silence.

Her bare back was pressed against his chest, her body fitting against his like she'd been made for him. He hadn't felt this settled in a long damn time—maybe ever.

The soft rhythm of her breathing, the way she relaxed in his arms did something to him. He wasn't used to this. Women were fun, a distraction at best, but this? This was different. He wanted to hold onto it.

Dawn shifted slightly, curling her fingers over his hand where it rested on her stomach. "You're still awake?" she murmured, her voice thick with exhaustion.

"Yeah," he rumbled, tightening his grip around her. "Just thinking."

She gave a lazy chuckle. "Dangerous habit."



His lips twitched. “Depends on what I’m thinking about.”

She turned her head slightly, glancing at him over her shoulder. The dim light from the bedside lamp cast a warm glow over her face, highlighting the contentment in her soft features. It made something tighten in his chest.

“Regretting dinner?” she teased.

He huffed, amused. “Hell, no. Best meal I’ve had in a long time.”

She smiled sleepily. “Good. You can come over anytime. Especially if we end the night like this.”

Gunner chuckled, pulling her even closer until there wasn’t an inch of space between them. His lips brushed against her shoulder, a slow, deliberate press of warmth.

“Careful what you offer, sweetheart. I might take you up on that every damn night,” Gunner warned.

She sighed, melting further into his hold, and it wasn’t long before her breathing evened out, her body going completely slack in sleep.

Gunner stayed awake, his mind still too wired, too focused on the woman in his arms. He had no business feeling this way so soon, but he did. And he wasn’t the kind of man to ignore his gut.

Dawn was his now, and no one—especially not that rat bastard Jesse—was going to touch what was his. He would protect her, keep her safe. Even if it meant burning the whole damn world down.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

Dawn woke up feeling lighter than she had in weeks. Sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains, casting warm golden streaks across her bedroom.

She stretched lazily, muscles pleasantly sore, a slow smile tugging at her lips as she turned her head toward the empty space beside her. Gunner had left early, saying he had an errand to take care of in town.

The sheets were still warm from where Gunner had slept, his scent—leather, smoke, and something purely him—lingering in the air.

Last night had been ... everything. She'd let her walls crack, let herself fall into his arms, let him touch her in ways that made her feel wanted, cherished—even safe. That last part still felt foreign to her, but she didn't hate it. Not with him.

With a soft sigh, she rolled out of bed and got dressed, still wrapped in the afterglow of their night together. Her mind drifted to Gunner's promise: "You don't have to face Jesse alone." For the first time in forever, she actually believed it.

By the time she grabbed her keys and headed outside, the morning was crisp and bright, the kind of day that made her want to take the long way to work just to enjoy the ride. She hummed to herself, unlocking her car, but the second she opened the driver's side door, the illusion of peace shattered.

A folded piece of paper sat on the seat.

Dawn froze. Her breath hitched, fingers gripping the car door as a sick feeling curled low in her stomach. Slowly, she reached down, snatching up the note with trembling

hands. Her heart pounded as she unfolded it: You think he can protect you? Think again. This isn't over, Dawn.

No signature. No need for one. She knew exactly who had left it. Jesse.

Why was he so obsessed with her? Why couldn't he just leave her the hell alone?

Dawn had spent countless nights asking herself the same damn question, but no matter how much she tried to make sense of it, there was no logic to be found.

There was nothing particularly special about her, at least not in a way that should warrant this level of fixation.

Guys like Jesse had egos the size of mountains and skin as thin as paper. They couldn't handle rejection. They couldn't take no for an answer.

The air rushed from her lungs, her pulse hammering in her ears. She whipped her head around, scanning the parking lot, the street, anywhere he could be watching from. But there was nothing. No shadowy figure lurking in the distance. No engine revving in warning. Just silence.

Dawn clenched the note so tight the paper crumpled in her fist. She should've known last night was too good to last. Jesse wasn't done. Not even close.

Her first instinct was to shove the note in her pocket, pretend it never happened. She could handle this. She always had. But then she thought about Gunner. About his words, his promise. Dawn swallowed hard. Maybe, for the first time, she should take him up on that promise. Dawn texted Gunner.

Twenty-minutes later, she heard the familiar roar of a motorcycle echo down her street.

She turned her head just in time to see Gunner pull up, the powerful rumble of his bike sending a shiver down her spine.

He barely waited for the engine to cut off before he swung off the seat, moving toward her with a storm brewing in his dark eyes.

She knew that look. Knew that barely contained fury, that possessive, protective edge in the way he carried himself. It made her pulse quicken—not from fear, but from something else entirely.

His gaze flicked down to the crumpled note still clutched in her fingers, and his jaw tightened. “That the note from Jesse?”

Dawn exhaled sharply, resisting the urge to crumple it further. “Yeah.”

Gunner didn’t say anything at first, just took the note from her hands, smoothed it out, and read the words. His fingers curled around the paper, knuckles going white. Then, without hesitation, he ripped it in half.

“Pack a bag,” he ordered.

She blinked. “What?”

“You’re not staying here.” His voice was low, gravelly, leaving no room for argument. “You’re coming with me.”

Dawn stiffened. “Gunner, I—”

“Don’t.” He cut her off, stepping closer until she had no choice but to tilt her head to meet his gaze. “I told you, you don’t have to deal with this alone.” His eyes burned into hers. “And I sure as hell ain’t letting you stay here while that bastard keeps

playing his little games.”

Dawn swallowed hard. “I can handle—”

“You shouldn’t have to,” he snapped.

She opened her mouth to argue, but he wasn’t done.

“You think I’m just gonna stand by while he leaves threats on your car? While he slashes your tires? What’s next, Dawn? Huh?” His voice was rough with barely restrained rage. “I’ve seen how this shit escalates, and I’m not waiting around for it to get worse.”

Her throat tightened. The truth was, she was scared. Jesse wasn’t just trying to scare her anymore—he was getting bolder. More reckless. And deep down, she knew Gunner was right. Still, old habits were hard to break. She hated feeling like she needed saving. Hated feeling weak.

But when she looked up at Gunner—at the fire in his eyes, the pure, unwavering determination on his face—she knew this wasn’t about weakness. It was about trust and she did trust him.

Finally, she let out a slow breath, nodding. “Okay.”

Gunner’s shoulders relaxed slightly, but his expression stayed firm. “Good. Now go get your things.”

Dawn turned, heading toward her apartment. But just before she disappeared inside, she glanced over her shoulder.

He was still there, watching her with that same fierce protectiveness, and honestly,

she was a little relieved. Dawn didn't waste any time. She grabbed a small backpack and packed some clothes and essentials, before returning to Gunner downstairs.

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Gunner rode hard, the deep growl of his bike cutting through the night as he guided Dawn toward the one place he knew she'd be safe. The clubhouse.

She held on tight, her arms wrapped around his waist, her body pressed against his back. He could feel the tension in her grip, the way her fingers dug into his cut, like she was still fighting the instinct to run. But she wasn't alone anymore. He wouldn't let Jesse get to her.

When they pulled up to the clubhouse, the parking lot was already packed with bikes.

The Iron Sentinels never slept—there was always someone drinking, playing pool, or just killing time between runs.

Gunner was used to it, used to walking through those doors and feeling at home. But today, he felt something else.

Because as soon as he killed the engine and stepped off his bike, he could already sense the shift in energy. Conversations slowed. Heads turned. A few of the guys leaned against their bikes, arms crossed, waiting. Yeah. This wasn't gonna be smooth.

Dawn hesitated as she climbed off behind him, her fingers lingering on his arm. He gave her a look, one he hoped told her he had this under control, before turning toward the clubhouse doors.

The second they stepped inside, the heat and noise of the room hit them. Music

blasted from the speakers, beer bottles clinked, and smoke curled in the air. But what really caught Gunner's attention was the group of guys standing near the bar.

Beast, of course, was at the center, his massive frame leaning against the counter, a bottle of whiskey in his hand. His dark eyes locked onto Gunner the second he walked in, then flicked to Dawn. And just like that, the room got a hell of a lot quieter.

"Gunner," Beast drawled, setting his drink down with a deliberate thunk. "What the hell is this?"

Gunner kept his expression neutral. "This is Dawn."

"No shit." Beast cocked his head. "I meant, what's she doing here?"

"She's staying with me," Gunner said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "It's not up for discussion."

A few guys exchanged looks. Someone muttered something under their breath. Gunner didn't care. Beast, though, wasn't one to let things slide. He pushed off the bar, stepping forward, his presence alone enough to make most men take a step back. But Gunner held his ground.

"She's the one you mentioned who caught the eye of a member of the Rat Bastards MC?" Beast asked, voice low.

Gunner's jaw ticked. "Yeah."

Other bikers brought women back to the clubhouse all the time, but Gunner knew Beast only had an issue with Dawn because this wasn't just about a woman—this was about a war waiting to happen. By helping Dawn, Gunner might be causing a bigger

rift between the Iron Sentinels and the Rat Bastards.

“I’ll handle this problem on my own,” Gunner reassured him.

Beast studied him for a long moment, his sharp, assessing gaze pinning Gunner in place. Then, finally, he let out a slow exhale. “You sure about this?”

“I wouldn’t have brought her here if I wasn’t.”

More silence.

Then, finally, Beast gave a small nod. “Fine.” His eyes flicked to Dawn. “But if she causes more problems, it’s on you.”

Gunner didn’t even hesitate. “She won’t.”

Another beat passed before Beast jerked his chin toward the hallway. “Take her to your room. Keep your head on straight.”

Gunner didn’t need to be told twice. He put a hand on Dawn’s lower back, guiding her through the clubhouse, past the lingering stares and hushed conversations.

He knew this wasn’t over, but Gunner didn’t give a damn what Beast or his other MC brothers thought. Dawn was his to protect, and anyone who had a problem with that could take it up with him.

As they reached his room, he pushed the door open, motioning for her to step inside before shutting it behind them. Dawn hesitated, arms wrapping around herself as she took in the space. It wasn’t much—just a bed, a dresser, and a bathroom attached—but it was his.



“Are you sure about this?” she asked, turning to face him. “I mean ... maybe this isn’t a good idea. I don’t want to cause problems for you with your club.”

Gunner closed the distance between them in two strides, and rested his hands on her hips. He could feel the tension in her body, the uncertainty, the worry.

“This is the safest place in town,” he murmured. “No one—no one—can get to you here. And I don’t give a damn what anyone else thinks. You’re here because you need to be, and I’ll make damn sure nothing happens to you.”

Dawn swallowed, her eyes searching his like she wanted to believe him, but fear still lingered in their depths. Gunner couldn’t stand it.

He cupped her face, his thumb brushing over her cheek. “This is just temporary, Dawn.” His voice was low, rough with emotion. “I’m not letting Jesse—or anyone—touch you.”

Something in her cracked then. He saw it in the way her lips parted, the way her breath caught, the way she melted just a little against him. Then she surged forward, her mouth crashing against his.

Gunner groaned, arms wrapping around her as he pulled her flush against him.

Dawn gripped his cut. She seemed desperate, needy, and he gave her everything she asked for.

Their kiss was deep, hungry, filled with everything they’d been holding back.

Dawn wasn’t just kissing him—she was claiming him, just as much as he was claiming her.

He slid his hands downward, gripping her waist, lifting her onto her toes as he deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping against hers. She tasted like fire and sweetness, like something he knew he'd never get enough of.

When they finally pulled apart, both of them were breathing hard, their foreheads pressed together.

“Stay with me,” Gunner murmured, his voice husky. “Here. Tonight. As long as you need.”

Dawn exhaled shakily, but she nodded. “Okay.”

Gunner's grip tightened on her, as if making sure she was real, making sure she wasn't going to disappear on him.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

Dawn sat on the edge of Gunner's bed, absently twisting a loose thread on her jeans as the distant rumble of motorcycles echoed outside. She knew Gunner was busy, caught up in club business, handling whatever business dealings the Iron Sentinels had going on, while also trying to track down Jesse.

She hated this. Hated feeling like a liability, like dead weight slowing him down when she knew damn well he had bigger things to worry about. The last thing she wanted was to be another burden on his already heavy shoulders.

Sighing, she stood and stretched. Maybe she could help.

Maybe if she got out of this room, got some air, she'd be able to think clearer.

She made it to the door before she hesitated.

Gunner had been adamant that she stay put.

He didn't trust anyone in the clubhouse to watch over her the way he would, and he'd made her promise—swear—that she wouldn't step outside unless he was with her.

But he wasn't here now and she was sick of hiding.

With one last glance at the empty room, she slipped out into the dimly lit hallway, ignoring the way a few passing bikers gave her lingering looks.

Most of them had kept their distance, clearly aware that she was under Gunner's protection.

She doubted any of them would be stupid enough to mess with her.

The clubhouse doors loomed ahead, and she pushed them open, stepping outside into the cool night air. The lot was mostly empty, save for a few parked bikes and the faint glow of a cigarette from one of the club members standing watch by the gate.

Dawn took a deep breath, letting the tension in her shoulders ease just a little. The night was quiet, the roar of engines long gone as the Sentinels handled whatever business they were wrapped up in.

Maybe she should go back inside. Maybe Gunner had been right. She had just turned back toward the door when a cold hand clamped around her wrist. Her breath hitched. Before she could scream, a strong arm wrapped around her waist, yanking her back against a solid chest.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment,” a familiar, taunting voice whispered in her ear.

Jesse.

Ice flooded her veins. She thrashed, kicking back with everything she had, but Jesse was ready. He tightened his grip, dragging her toward a dark-colored van parked just beyond reach of the clubhouse lights.

No. No. No. She wasn’t going to let this happen. Dawn twisted in his grip, bringing her elbow up and slamming it into his ribs. Jesse grunted, momentarily loosening his hold, and she took her chance, spinning around, aiming a knee right between his legs.

She missed by an inch. Jesse snarled, recovering fast, and backhanded her so hard stars exploded in her vision.

Pain burst across her cheek, but she barely had time to register it before he was

shoving her forward, forcing her toward the van.

The door was already open, the back lined with rope and duct tape.

A scream clawed up her throat, but Jesse's hand slammed over her mouth before she could get it out.

"You never learn, do you?" he sneered. "You should've stayed where you belonged. But you had to be difficult."

Dawn bit down on his palm, hard enough to taste blood.

"Fuck!" Jesse yanked his hand away, and she used that split-second to twist free, bolting toward the clubhouse.

She didn't make it three steps before he grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back. A sharp cry ripped from her throat as she hit the pavement hard, her knees scraping against the rough ground.

Jesse loomed over her, shaking out his injured hand, eyes burning with fury. "You want to fight me, baby? Fine." He crouched down, his breath hot against her face. "But you will learn your lesson."

Her heart slammed against her ribs. She wasn't going down without a fight. She swung at him, her nails catching his cheek, drawing blood. Jesse hissed, then grabbed her wrists, pinning them above her head.

"You're really gonna make me work for this, huh?" he growled, his grip tightening until she winced.

Terror pulsed through Dawn's veins. Gunner. She needed Gunner but he wasn't here

and she was on her own. Jesse's breath smelled of alcohol and cigarettes. He grinned down at her, his sick satisfaction making her stomach churn.

"You thought you could just leave me hanging?" His voice was smooth, mocking. "Thought you could hide behind your little biker boyfriend and I wouldn't come for you?"

Dawn bucked against him, twisting, kicking, anything to get free. His laughter was cruel.

"You never learn, do you?" He tightened his grip on her wrists.

She fought harder, adrenaline flooding her system, but Jesse was stronger. His knee pressed against her thigh, his hand clamping over her mouth again, muffling her scream.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, a frantic drumbeat of panic.

No. She wasn't going to let this happen. Summoning every ounce of strength she had left, she turned her head and bit down on his palm as hard as she could.

Jesse roared in pain, jerking his hand away. She took her chance, her fingers clawing at the pavement as she tried to scramble backward, but she barely made it a few inches before he struck.

The slap came fast and hard, snapping her head to the side. White-hot pain exploded across her face. She gasped, the world spinning, and in that moment of disorientation, Jesse's fist slammed into her stomach. Air rushed from her lungs in a choked gasp.

Her body folded inward as agony speared through her ribs. She heard her own breath hitch, a strangled sound that barely reached her ears over the ringing in her skull.

Dawn tried to move, tried to fight back, but her body wouldn't listen. Her limbs felt sluggish, her vision blurring at the edges.

Then—darkness. The world tilted, and she felt herself being lifted, her body limp in Jesse's grasp. She tried to hold on, tried to stay conscious, but the blackness swallowed her whole. And she saw and heard nothing else.

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The vibration of Gunner's phone against his hip sent a jolt of unease through him. He didn't recognize the number, but something in his gut told him to answer. He swiped the screen and brought the phone to his ear.

A slow, mocking chuckle greeted him. "Miss me, asshole?"

Gunner's entire body went rigid. Jesse.

His knuckles went white as he gripped the phone tighter. The clubhouse noise faded into the background, his focus narrowing to the sick bastard on the other end of the line.

"Where is she?" Gunner's voice was low, deadly.

Jesse hummed like he was thinking it over, like he wasn't keeping the one person Gunner cared about more than anything in the world hostage. "She's right here with me. Poor thing put up a fight, but you know how women are—so damn fragile. You should've seen the way she..."

Gunner moved before he even realized it, shoving back from the table and knocking over his chair. The clubhouse fell silent as every Iron Sentinel turned to look at him.

Jesse laughed again, slow and taunting. “Bet you’re real fucking pissed, huh?”

“I swear to God, if you touch her—”

“What?” Jesse sneered. “You’ll kill me?”

“Yeah,” Gunner growled. “I fucking will.”

Silence.

Then Jesse exhaled a dramatic sigh. “You Iron Sentinels think you own this town, don’t you? Think you can take what you want, keep what belongs to me?”

“She was never yours,” Gunner stated.

“Well, she is now. If you want her back, you’ll have to come get her. But don’t worry, I’ll take real good care of her until then.”

The line went dead. Gunner’s vision blurred with rage. His pulse pounded, his breath coming in ragged bursts as he forced himself to stay still, to think.

Dawn was out there, with that bastard

A chair scraped against the floor, and Beast was suddenly at his side. “What the fuck was that?”

Gunner’s jaw clenched so hard it ached. “Jesse has Dawn.”

A heavy silence settled over the room before Beast swore under his breath. “That son of a bitch.”



“I need everyone,” Gunner said, his voice sharp with urgency. “We’re getting her back. Now.”

No one questioned him. One look at Gunner’s face and every Iron Sentinels member knew this wasn’t just about club business—this was personal. And when something was personal, they didn’t hesitate. They moved.

Within seconds, the entire MC was in motion.

Chairs scraped against the floor as men shot to their feet, voices sharp and urgent as they called for weapons.

Someone shoved a shotgun into Beast’s hands.

Another brother passed a pistol to Ruger.

Tires screeched in the distance as a few of the younger prospects scrambled to their bikes, ready to ride at a moment’s notice.

Gunner stood in the center of it all, pulse hammering, rage simmering just beneath his skin. He forced himself to breathe, to think, to focus. Losing his head wouldn’t help Dawn and would only slow him down.

But every second that passed, every wasted moment felt like a goddamn eternity.

The tracking took time—too much fucking time.

Gunner paced like a caged animal, hands twitching at his sides.

He wanted to move. He wanted to act. Sitting around while Jesse had his hands on Dawn made him feel fucking useless.

“Where the hell is he?” he snapped.

Ruger, their resident hacker, barely looked up from his laptop, fingers flying over the keys. “Working on it.”

“Work faster,” Gunner demanded.

Beast stepped in. “We’ll find him,” Beast reassured him.

Gunner clenched his jaw. That wasn’t good enough.

Jesse could be doing anything to her right now. Hurting her. Scaring her. And Gunner was just standing here, waiting for a goddamn address. He shoved a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply. Then—

“I got him,” Ruger announced, voice tight with focus.

Gunner was at his side in an instant, heart pounding.

Ruger tapped the screen. “Bastard’s holed up in an abandoned warehouse at the edge of town.”

A flicker of hope, sharp and deadly, ignited in Gunner’s chest. Gunner didn’t wait. He turned on his heel, already heading for his bike. “Then that’s where we end this.”

The Sentinels followed without hesitation. Engines roared to life, the deep, thunderous growl of Harleys filling the night air. Tires spun, kicking up gravel. The sound was a warning. A promise.

Jesse thought he could take Dawn. He thought he could get away with it. He was fucking wrong because Gunner was coming for him. And he wouldn’t stop until Jesse

was six feet under.

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The warehouse reeked of oil and rot, a damp, suffocating stench that clung to the air like decay. The flickering overhead lights buzzed, casting jagged shadows across rusted metal beams and cracked concrete floors.

Gunner moved like a predator, his gun firm in his grip, every muscle in his body coiled tight, ready to strike. His pulse pounded in his ears, but his focus was razor-sharp.

He could hear his brothers spreading out behind him, securing exits, ensuring there was no escape. But none of it mattered. All he cared about was Dawn.

A voice cut through the silence, lazy and taunting.

“You got here faster than I thought, Gunner.”

Jesse.

Gunner rounded the corner, his breath stalling in his chest.

Dawn.

She was tied to a chair, her wrists bound with thick rope, her cheek darkened by a fresh bruise. A thin trickle of blood ran from the corner of her lip. Her chest rose and fell in quick, uneven breaths, her eyes wide with something between fear and defiance.

Gunner’s vision blurred with rage. Jesse stood behind her, one hand fisting her hair,

the other pressing a gleaming knife to her throat. His smirk was lazy, confident, like he thought he had the upper hand.

“Not so tough now, are you?” Jesse sneered, digging the blade in just enough to make Dawn flinch. A crimson bead welled against her skin.

Gunner’s grip on his gun tightened, his finger feathering the trigger. His voice was low, deadly. “Let her go.”

Jesse tsked, shaking his head. “Now, where’s the fun in that? You took something from me, Gunner. I’m just here to take it back.” Jesse curled his fingers tighter in Dawn’s hair, yanking her head back. “Maybe I’ll carve my name into her first. Make sure she never forgets who she belongs to.”

White-hot fury detonated in Gunner’s chest.

“Last warning,” he ground out, shifting his stance, lining up his shot. “Let. Her. Go.”

Jesse chuckled. “Nah.”

He pressed the knife deeper—

Bang . The gunshot shattered the air. Jesse’s eyes widened, his smirk faltering.

For a moment, he swayed on his feet, as if his body hadn’t caught up to the fact that there was now a hole in his skull. Then, like a marionette with its strings cut, he crumpled. The knife clattered to the floor beside him, the handle slick with blood.

Gunner was on Dawn in an instant, holstering his gun as he dropped to his knees in front of her. His hands shook as he reached for the knots, ripping at them, desperate to get her free.

“Baby, are you okay?” His voice was rough, thick with emotion.

Dawn nodded, but her eyes glistened, her breaths coming in shallow, unsteady gasps. The moment her hands were free, she sagged forward, and Gunner caught her, pulling her into his chest, wrapping his arms around her like he could shield her from everything, even the memories of tonight.

His fingers threaded into her hair, his lips pressing against the top of her head. “It’s over,” he murmured, voice fierce with promise. “He’s never touching you again.”

And he meant it.

Jesse was gone and Dawn was finally safe.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

Dawn sat curled up on Gunner's couch, wrapped in one of his oversized flannel shirts.

The fabric was warm, carrying his scent—leather, smoke, and something distinctly him.

She clutched the steaming mug of tea he'd made for her, but her hands still trembled, her body still caught in the lingering aftershocks of fear.

She was safe. Jesse was gone. She kept repeating those words in her head, but her heart hadn't quite caught up yet.

Across the room, Gunner stood with his back to her, bracing his hands against the kitchen counter, his head bowed. His muscles were tense, his shoulders rigid, as if he was barely holding himself together.

"This is on me," he finally said, his voice low, rough with self-recrimination. "I should've ended him sooner. Should've been there faster. Should've—"

"Stop," Dawn interrupted softly.

Gunner exhaled hard, shaking his head. "I knew he was a threat. Knew he wouldn't stop. But I still let him get that far. He put his hands on you, hurt you, took you, and I—" He turned, his eyes meeting hers, raw with frustration, pain, guilt. "I should've protected you better."

Dawn set the mug down on the table and stood, crossing the space between them. She

placed a hand over his, feeling the tension in his fingers, the barely controlled storm beneath his skin.

“You did protect me,” she said, her voice steady despite the emotions tightening her throat. “You saved me.”

Gunner’s jaw clenched. “I shouldn’t have had to.”

“But you did,” she insisted. “And I don’t regret any of it. I don’t regret us.”

He sucked in a breath, like her words physically hit him. His hands turned beneath hers, gripping her wrists gently, brushing his thumb over the bruises Jesse had left. His gaze darkened, the self-loathing still lingering in his expression.

Dawn reached up, cupping his face, forcing him to see her. “You are the best thing that’s happened to me, Gunner.” Her voice was thick with emotion. “You make me feel safe. Even now. Even after everything. You think I’d trade that? Trade you?”

His breath was ragged. “Dawn...”

Gunner pulled her against him, his arms encircling her so tightly she could barely breathe, not that she wanted to. She melted into him, tangling her fingers in his hair as she pressed her face against his chest, feeling the steady, grounding rhythm of his heartbeat.

Then he tipped her chin up, his eyes searching hers, as if looking for any hesitation, any fear. There was none. He kissed her. It wasn’t careful. It wasn’t soft.

It was desperate—a collision of need, of relief, of something deeper that neither of them had the words for yet. His lips claimed hers, demanding and reverent all at once, like he had to prove to himself that she was real, here, in his arms where she

belonged.

Dawn met him with equal fervor, her fingers gripping the fabric of his shirt, holding onto him like an anchor.

Gunner's lips were still on hers when the words tumbled out. "I love you, Dawn."

The kiss stilled, their breaths mingling as they hovered close, the weight of his confession pressing between them like a live wire. Dawn's heart pounded so hard she swore he could hear it.

Gunner cradled her face, using his thumbs to brush away the tears she hadn't even realized were there. "I mean it," he murmured, his voice rough, raw. "I love you, and I swear to God, I'm never letting anything happen to you again."

A choked sound escaped her, half-laugh, half-sob. "Gunner..."

He held her tighter, as if afraid she might disappear. "You're everything to me, baby. I didn't even see it happening, but now I can't imagine a damn day without you." He pressed his head against hers, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I should've told you sooner."

Dawn swallowed hard, her entire body trembling—not with fear, but with something deeper, something that made her chest ache in the best possible way.

"I love you too, Gunner," she whispered. The moment the words left her lips, she felt something inside her settle, like puzzle pieces finally clicking in place. "I never thought I'd get to have this, but with you ... it's different. It feels different. You feel different."

A deep sound rumbled in his chest, something between relief and fierce devotion.



“Damn right it’s different. You’re mine, Dawn. And I’m yours.”

She nodded, pressing her lips to his, soft and slow this time, savoring the moment. Gunner kissed her back just as tenderly, but when he pulled away, his expression hardened with determination.

“I swear to you, baby, you’ll never have to look over your shoulder again. I’ll always protect you. No matter what. No one’s ever touching you again.”

Dawn believed him. Because for the first time in her life, she knew—truly knew—what it felt like to be loved by a man who would burn the whole world down just to keep her safe.

Gunner exhaled a sharp breath, then cupped her cheek, tilting her face so she had no choice but to meet his gaze. “Come live with me.”

Dawn blinked. “What?”

“I don’t want you going back to that apartment,” he said firmly. “I don’t want you sleeping in an empty bed or looking over your shoulder every time you leave your place. I want you here. With me. Let’s get a place together.”

Her breath hitched. “Gunner, are you sure? I mean ... that’s a big step.”

He let out a rough chuckle. “Baby, after everything we’ve been through, that’s not a big step. That’s the only step.” His fingers traced her jaw, his touch gentler than she ever thought a man like him capable of. “Say yes.”

Dawn searched his face, seeing nothing but raw honesty, nothing but love. She thought about her quiet apartment. About the cold bed, the empty nights. The loneliness she’d carried for too damn long.

Then she thought about Gunner. His warmth, his strength, the way he looked at her like she was the most important thing in the world. There was no choice to make.

“Yes,” she whispered, a smile breaking across her lips.

Gunner grinned, then crushed his mouth to hers in a kiss that left her breathless. “Good,” he murmured against her lips. “Because you were never leaving my bed again anyway.”

### One Month Later

Dawn stirred, warmth cocooning her as the soft morning light filtered through the bedroom curtains. She stretched beneath the covers, reaching out instinctively, and found nothing but cool sheets beside her.

She cracked one eye open, smiling as she caught the scent of coffee in the air. Gunner was already up. Their apartment—their home—still felt new in some ways, but in others, it felt like she'd always been here.

A month had passed since she'd left behind her old life, stepping fully into Gunner's world, and she didn't regret a second of it. The club, the brotherhood, the family—she was part of it now. And most of all, she was his.

Sliding out of bed, she padded into the kitchen, where Gunner stood shirtless, sipping from a mug of coffee. His tattoos stretched across his broad shoulders, his muscles flexing as he turned, his sharp eyes softening the second they landed on her.

“Mornin’, baby,” he greeted, setting down his cup.

Dawn wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing herself against his solid frame. “Morning.” She sighed contentedly. “You ready for this weekend?”

He smirked. “Been packed since last night. You?”

“Almost.” She looked up at him, excitement flickering in her eyes. “It’s gonna be perfect.”

He kissed her forehead, then smacked her ass lightly. “Damn right it is. Now, go get dressed. I wanna hit the road before the sun gets too high.”

The wind whipped through Dawn’s hair as she clung to Gunner’s back, the rumble of his bike vibrating through her bones. A month ago, she might have been afraid of the ride, of his world, of everything he represented. But now, she wasn’t just along for the ride. She belonged here.

The open road stretched ahead of them, the scent of pine and fresh air growing stronger as they neared the campsite. She held onto Gunner a little tighter, pressing her cheek against his back, feeling the steady, reassuring beat of his heart beneath his cut.

She was safe. She was home. When they reached the site, Gunner parked the bike and swung his leg over, immediately turning to help her off.

“You okay?” Gunner asked her.

She smiled, nodding. “More than okay.”

They worked together to set up camp, the ease between them effortless. The fire crackled, casting flickering shadows as the sun began to dip behind the trees. It was peaceful—just the two of them, no noise, no distractions.

But Dawn’s heart raced, her pulse thundering in her ears. She had news, big news. Dawn twisted her hands together in a nervous dance as she sat on the edge of the blanket they’d laid out, watching Gunner add another log to the fire.

The crackling flames cast flickering shadows around them, but all she could focus on was him—his broad back, the way his muscles flexed, the steady rhythm of his movements. When Gunner turned back to her, his brow furrowing in concern, her

breath hitched.

There was no easy way to say this, but she couldn't keep it in any longer.

“You good, baby?” Gunner asked.

Dawn swallowed hard, her stomach in knots. Now or never. She took a shaky breath, staring at her hands as they fidgeted in her lap.

“I need to tell you something,” she managed.

Gunner stilled immediately, his eyes sharpening. The warmth in them shifted to something else—concern, curiosity—and he dropped to a crouch in front of her, his hands gently settling on her knees. The moment felt too heavy, too important to rush.

“Talk to me,” he said.

She could feel the weight of his gaze on her, his fingers warm on her skin. Her pulse thundered in her throat. This was it.

“I ... I found out a few days ago. I wanted to wait for the right moment to tell you,” she whispered, her heart hammering in her chest.

His grip on her knees tightened, his eyes flickering with confusion, then worry. “Tell me what, Dawn?”

Dawn took a deep breath, steadying herself as best as she could. She met his eyes, her voice trembling as she finally said the words she'd been holding in. “I'm pregnant.”

Silence crashed down between them like a tidal wave. For a moment, it was all she could hear, her breath ragged in the stillness. Her stomach twisted in knots as she

waited for his reaction, the uncertainty of what came next choking her.

Then—

Gunner inhaled sharply, his eyes widening, and before she could even process what was happening, he surged forward, cupping her face in his large, calloused hands.

His lips crashed against hers with a force that took her breath away. Dawn gasped against him, her hands instinctively gripping the sides of his vest as he pulled her closer, his breath shaking as he kissed her, deep and frantic, like he couldn't get enough of her.

When he pulled back, his thumb brushed over her cheek, his voice a raw, broken whisper. "You serious?"

Her chest tightened, tears welling in her eyes as she nodded. "Yeah. I'm serious."

His face broke into a slow, incredulous grin, a sound escaping his throat that was part laugh, part disbelief. "Jesus Christ, Dawn..." He shook his head, as though trying to process it, but his hand moved instinctively to rest over her stomach, his palm warm and protective. "We're having a kid?"

Dawn nodded again, her heart swelling in her chest as tears slipped down her face. "Yeah. We are."

Gunner's jaw clenched, his eyes suspiciously glassy, and without a single word more, he scooped her up into his arms, lifting her easily and sitting down on the blanket with her on his lap.

He held her so tightly she could barely breathe, but she didn't care—not when he was holding her like this, like she was everything to him.

“You have no idea how happy you just made me, baby,” he whispered. “You and me ... we’re gonna do this together. We’re gonna be a family.”

Dawn let out a breathless laugh, running her fingers through his hair, trying to steady herself. “You’re really okay with this?”

He pulled back just enough to meet her gaze. “Okay? Dawn, this is the best damn thing that’s ever happened to me. You and this baby? You’re everything to me.”

Her heart soared at his words, the warmth in her chest flooding through her veins. She leaned into him, her forehead resting against his. “I love you, Gunner,” she told him.

Gunner tightened his grip around her. “I love you too, baby. So damn much.”

The End

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am*

Winter Sloane

Sample Chapter

I can't fall asleep , Amber Chase reminded herself.

She peered over the bus seats, heart racing.

Amber half expected David to climb up the steps to the bus, wearing one of his expensive business suits and a Cheshire grin on his face.

Her hands started shaking. David should still be at work at his fancy Manhattan office.

He liked to drink with his lawyer buddies on Friday nights, she remembered.

A man entered the bus. Same height and muscular build as her ex-boyfriend.

A woman, probably his girlfriend, said something in his ear that made him laugh.

Not David. Amber checked the watch on her wrist. The watch with the big circular display and worn leather strap used to belong to her dad.

She'd left behind the gold Rolex David gave her for their first-month anniversary.

She had zero regrets. That Rolex felt heavy like shackles.



David only showered her with gifts when he felt guilty about hurting her.

The bus was supposed to leave five minutes ago. Was there going to be a delay?

Her most valuable possessions were stuffed in the packed backpack at her feet. An elderly black woman in her early fifties made her way to the seat next to her. She gave Amber a warm smile, then sat down. Amber was too full shot of nerves to return her smile.

She pulled out her cell phone from the pocket of her jeans, then stared blankly at the black screen for a few seconds.

Right. Amber had forgotten she turned the dratted thing off to avoid receiving any more calls and messages from David.

Once she arrived at her destination, she'd block his number.

Redemption, Illinois. Population? Less than two thousand. Amber had chosen Redemption at random.

Amber was a born and bred city girl. Small towns freaked her out, or maybe she read too many thrillers which were often set in small towns.

Either way, David would never think to look for her in Redemption.

It would just be a pit stop. A place to lay low for a few weeks before moving on to greener pastures.

Hopefully, by then, David would have forgotten all about her.

In a month or two, David would have a new girl on his arm.

She didn't envy that woman. Amber pitied her because she would have to live through the same nightmare Amber did.

Her panic subsided a little when the bus started to move. Finally, they were leaving the station. She leaned against her seat. The woman next to her busted out her knitting needles and yarn. Amber envied her. She wished she knew how to knit. She heard it was a calming hobby.

"I have an extra pair of knitting needles if you're interested, dear," the woman said, noticing her stare.

"No thanks, I'm good. I don't even know how to knit," she admitted.

"It's a four-hour journey. I can teach you," she offered. "I'm Mary, by the way. I own the Cherrywood Inn in Redemption."

"Amber," she said, not willing to offer more information about herself. David didn't like her talking to random strangers, but she was no longer under his control. "And I'd like that. Thank you."

Needles and yarn kept her mind occupied for the entirety of the drive.

Mary turned out to be a patient and great teacher.

By the end of her journey, she made a simple baby blanket.

She held out the piece of bright red cloth.

Emotions clogged in her throat. Memories she locked in a box weeks ago threatened to spill out.

What was she thinking, making something like this? Maybe her subconscious mind

wanted her to remember what she had lost. Amber briefly touched her flat stomach, then she decided to tuck the ugly blanket away.

“Are you visiting relatives?” It was the first real question Mary asked her. The bus was pulling into the station.

“Taking a vacation actually,” Amber replied. Lies usually didn’t come smoothly to her. I learned from the best, she thought sardonically. As a criminal defense lawyer, David had a knack for convincing juries his very guilty clients were guilt-free. Nothing innocent about them or David.

“Vacations are good. A nice and bright young woman like you must be weighed down by a busy job in the city. Here in Redemption, we take things real slow.”

“Actually, I made this decision on a whim. I haven’t had the chance to make a booking. You mentioned you owned an inn?” Amber asked, recalling Mary’s introduction.

The big smile Mary flashed her seemed genuine. Her father, back when he was alive, always said she had good instincts about people. Amber had been terribly wrong about David, but she had a good feeling about Mary.

“Right this way, dear. We’ve just been newly renovated. I’m on my way right there,” Mary said as they got off the bus.

Amber shouldered her heavy pack, grunting softly at the weight. “It’s okay, I can make my way there. What was the name again? I can use Google Maps for directions.”

“Nonsense. It’s a short walk there. I can show you some of the town’s sights,” Mary said.

How could Amber say no? She'd worked out a plan during the bus ride. Once she reached Redemption, she'd go to a café and search for a place to stay. Staying at Mary's inn would save her loads of research time. She only hoped the inn was as nice as Mary described.

They left the bus stop and emerged onto Redemption's Main Street.

Charming two-story shops lined either side of her.

Mary seemed to know a good number of locals because they were stopped a couple of times.

Amber couldn't imagine living in a place like this.

Back before she moved in with David and lived in her own apartment, she barely knew her neighbors.

She noticed some of the locals giving her curious stares.

Mary introduced her as a friend, and they warmed up to her a little.

"Sorry for the delay," Mary said.

"This town seems charming," she murmured.

"It does, doesn't it? You just have to watch out for the bikers." Mary stopped in front of a charming, two-story cottage-style home that had been converted into an inn.

Amber's mouth went dry. Did Mary just make a joke? "Bikers?" she pressed.

"The Fallen Saints MC. They own this town."

Amber stared at her. Mary had sounded so matter-of-fact, like a town controlled by a bunch of rough bikers was a perfectly acceptable thing. Mary walked her to the reception area.

“What about the local authorities?” she asked.

Mary paused, as if she regretted saying anything at all. “Some folks here would say the MC taking control of the town is the best thing that ever happened to Redemption. Before they came along, Redemption was riddled with gangs and drug dealers.”

“But you believe otherwise?” she asked.

“Those who stay in power, abuse that power. Please, just forget what I’ve told you. Enjoy the town as much as you can. Candy here will tell you all about the activities you can sign up for while you’re here,” Mary said.

“One room?” the twenty-something brunette manning the reception desk asked her.

After receiving her key, Amber went to the second floor, where her room was located.

Candy had given her a room with a fantastic view.

Dropping her backpack by the bed, Amber walked to the opened window facing the rest of the town.

She started to wonder if coming here was a bad idea after all.

It had taken her weeks to gather her courage to leave David.

Then she made the awful decision of coming to a place governed by controlling and ruthless men just like David.

Despite the generously sized room and all the opened windows—Amber counted three total—she began to feel a little claustrophobic.

The walls seemed to close down on her, and she needed to get some air.

She planned on taking it easy today. Soak in the bath, stay in, order room service, and eat dinner on the bed in her bathrobe.

Those plans went out the window right this instant.

What Amber needed was a drink or two. God.

She could practically taste the cold beer in her mouth.

She hadn't been able to drink for months.

Amber settled for a quick shower. She felt refreshed afterward.

The urge to go out and let her hair down was still there.

After she moved in with David, he seldom let her out of the apartment.

It didn't help that as a freelance graphic designer, Amber worked from home.

For the past year, she felt like a prisoner.

Now she was free to do whatever she wanted.

She left her room and asked Candy where the closest bar was.

“O’Riley’s,” Candy answered. “It’s just two streets down from here. I overheard Mrs. Thompson warning you about the bikers. They’re not as bad as she makes them out to

be.”

“Really?” Amber doubted it. She wanted to avoid a run-in with any of these bikers tonight.

Have a drink, a couple of dances, and some dinner.

That was all she wanted. Then she’d head back to her room and try not to think about what she was going to do next.

Amber had planned on staying here for a week, but maybe that wasn’t a wise idea.

“Yeah, she’s still a little bitter because one of her nephews got into a car accident with one of the Fallen Saints MC members,” Candy told her.

Amber would be a little angry if she was in Mary’s position, too.

She thanked Candy and headed to O’Riley’s.

Before David, she had a few girlfriends she went out for drinks with.

That ended when the controlling bastard decided he wanted her all to himself.

He didn’t allow her to meet anyone. It was only later Amber realized David had slowly but surely isolated her from everyone she once knew.

“I can do this,” she whispered to herself. Amber took deep breaths. She waded through the crowd and somehow managed to find an empty seat at the bar. She ordered a local beer. The cool amber liquid tasted heavenly on her tongue.

“Never seen you in these parts before, sweetheart,” slurred a voice.

A portly man wearing a dirty cowboy hat occupied the seat next to her. Her skin crawled when he looked her up and down. He took his hat off, revealing a balding patch of hair. He flashed her a mouthful of cigarette-stained teeth.

“Daryl McGibson,” he said, offering her a hand, which she didn’t shake. Amber took a sip of her beer. “You a tourist?”

“Amber,” she said. “Yeah, I’m just passing by.”

“Another drink for the pretty lady!” Daryl yelled to the bartender.

“You don’t have to do that,” Amber said quickly. “Sorry, but I just want to be alone tonight. I just came from a bad breakup.”

Another lie. David wouldn’t let her go. She wondered what he was doing now. It was only 8:00 in New York. Was he working late in the office? Or was he already roaring drunk with his colleagues at his favorite sports bar?

Maybe she would luck out, and David would choose to hook up with some random woman at the bar.

It certainly wouldn’t be the first time he brought another woman to their apartment.

It always seemed strange to her that David seemed to think it was completely fine that he cheated on her all the time and yet refused to let her have a little bit of freedom.

“Then I’ll keep you company,” Daryl said. “Tell me about yourself.”

This wasn’t good. She had forgotten how to say no, to stand up for herself.

Living with a monster like David for months had beaten all the fight out of her.



She noticed her hand on her glass bottle beginning to tremble.

What was she thinking? After leaving the nightmare that was her life, did she think she could just forget about the past and start anew?

End of sample chapter