

DARK FALCONS
MC
PATRIOT

EM PETROVA

3

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Patriot

Dark Falcons

Book 3

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RIO

A biker in trouble. A woman who doesn't run from it.

Logan, aka Patriot, earned his nickname by fighting for the underdog. Only this time he's the one being crushed under the weight of injustice when his club comes under fire with the law. While he and his brothers fight to find the true criminal, a certain reserved brunette keeps popping up everywhere he goes, making it even more impossible to ignore the things he feels for her.

While she focuses on striking out on her own, Patriot's thrown into Aarica's path so many times that surely Fate has a sense of humor—or a plan. He claims she's too innocent to be in his company, but she's determined to convince him otherwise.

With his reputation in ashes, the timing couldn't be worse for a relationship. But Patriot's a selfish bastard. As if he'd let her go...

PATRIOT

A Dark Falcons MC
Novella

by

Em Petrova

Chapter One

Mountains, sky...and the guy in the next campsite playing a terrible rendition of *Freebird* on an acoustic guitar. Patriot's idea of taking off for the mountains and a three-day weekend to find some peace in order to think on his problems now seemed like one hell of a bad idea.

As the man's voice cracked and his notes got more out of key, Patriot inwardly cringed. The orange flames licking the outer edge of the fire ring wasn't offering any answers, and he sure as hell couldn't think listening to *that*.

The singer pitched his voice louder. Finally, someone from another site yelled, "Shut up!"

More shouts followed. "Shut uuuuuup!"

Patriot couldn't stifle his grunt of amusement. Clearly he wasn't the only person suffering through the song.

Abruptly, the playing stopped and silence followed—long, blissful silence where he only heard nature and the crackle of his own fire. He propped his heavy boots on the edge of the stone ring and closed his eyes.

Hell, he needed more than peace and quiet to work out his problems. With his name in the toilet and now sullied with his lifelong friend and the president of their motorcycle club, the Dark Falcons, how could he begin to clean the slate?

His mind circled to the beginning of the dark, ugly tale, as it did how many times now? Countless. His construction crew traveled all over Mersey, Tennessee and the surrounding areas building additions, garages, doing roofing and repairs on homes and businesses. He prided himself on the reputation he'd cultivated. Stone's Construction had enough clout that he didn't need to advertise these days—word of mouth did it for him.

He'd earned that through hard work and consistent craftsmanship, along with being selective with his crew. He only took on the best, and if a guy

failed to pass muster, Patriot cut him loose.

Somehow, shit went south when a recent client' they were building a small addition onto the house for, accused his crew of theft. He couldn't be more shocked or enraged to be accused of stealing. Him of all people. And he belonged to a motorcycle club known for good deeds and their solid reputation in their community.

The first accusation had been bad enough, but then the second came in. Money and jewelry stolen. Only people who had access to the house during that time was his crew.

Now the owners were taking it to the sheriff and he wouldn't be the only one under fire—his crew either.

His brothers would be investigated.

Every man in the MC would be questioned, because the asshole homeowners thought Patriot had given his guys inside access.

Fucking hell.

He glared at the flames until his eyes burned from the bright colors against the fading daylight.

“Logan?”

He opened his eyes at the sound of his name. He hardly answered to it anymore—the Dark Falcons all called him Patriot. Hell, most people did, even in his business life. It'd been his nickname since high school.

He looked at the two people standing in front of him. For a moment, he didn't connect the old friends he hadn't' seen in years with the mountains. He got to his feet and grinned at the Collins.

“Ben. Man, it's good to see you. And Mel. Damn, how long's it been?” He shook Ben's hand and hugged the man's wife.

They drew apart, and Patriot grinned at friends he hadn't seen in ages.

“It's been at least three years. That's why we weren't sure it was you sitting here.” Ben slid an arm around Mel, pulling her against his side in that way long-married couples had of presenting themselves as one unit.

“A long time,” Patriot echoed, scuffing a hand over his face to clear away the last of his worries from his expression. “You two campin'?”

“Yeah, with some other friends. Over that way.” They pointed. “We were just about to break out the beer. You wanna join us?”

“Sure.” While he wasn't exactly in a social mood right now, and had fled

his brothers to come here to be alone, he couldn't say no to the offer without looking like a dick.

"C'mon." Ben flicked his head, and he and his wife turned. Patriot followed, talking over mundane topics such as Ben still working with the same company and Mel still teaching in the same school the next town over.

As they arrived at their campsite, Patriot determined not much had changed in the three years since they'd seen each other.

"Hey, guys, we ran into an old friend. He's going to join us," Ben announced to five other people seated around the fire. He waved to Patriot. "This is Logan, also known as Patriot."

"Welcome. Pull up a chair." One young man wearing a fleece vest over his long-sleeved shirt against the chill of the mountains motioned to a lawn chair.

Patriot gave him a nod and looked from face to face. He didn't recognize any of these people.

Then a woman walked out from behind a tent. She stopped dead at seeing Patriot there, and he felt her sudden appearance, a balmy summer breeze blowing up from the south.

Fresh-faced, younger than him by quite a few years. A heart-shaped face with wide hazel eyes, wavy hair half pulled off her face...and lips that made a man look not twice but three times.

Actually, he stared at those lips for more than a heartbeat before shooting his attention to her eyes. Christ, what the hell? She was checking him out the same way.

Mel pointed from person to person, naming each. When she landed on the woman standing rooted in place staring back at him, she said, "That's Aarica, with three A's."

He took a second to process that before he gave a nod. "Hi."

"Aarica, this is Patriot, an old friend of ours."

The woman couldn't be more than eighteen. Definitely out of his bounds. She offered him a shy smile and brushed a wave of warm brown hair behind her ear. Then she looked around for an open seat.

"Sit here." He offered the lawn chair he'd been about to sink into.

Her smile widened. She didn't show her teeth when she smiled, but somehow that only enhanced the plump rosebud of her lips. When she moved

to the chair, he dodged out of her path, grabbed a beer from a nearby cooler and then sat on the lid.

“How long you been campin’, Patriot?” Ben asked.

“Just arrived a couple hours ago.”

“Didn’t look as if you set up your site yet.”

“I have what I need. I travel light.” He felt Aarica’s gaze on him and met her eyes. She quickly glanced away.

Fuck, not the cat and mouse game. He didn’t play it. Hell, he hadn’t played anything with a woman in a long time. The women in his proximity—what the club called ‘honeys’—didn’t interest him. After all, they were out to gain something, a place among the Dark Falcons, a patch that said PROPERTY and a family for life.

He cracked open his beer and took a sip.

“Noticed your bike back there. Harley?” Ben asked.

“Yup. 2010 Softtail.”

“It’s a beauty.”

“Thanks. My buddy operates a custom shop, and he’s been doing a little work on it.”

“Got it tricked out real nice.” Ben settled in with his own beer. His wife paused to place her hand on his shoulder, and he reached up to squeeze it.

For some reason, Patriot found his gaze wandering to Aarica again. Aarica with three A’s. She sat quiet but attentive, just soaking in the talk and atmosphere of the snapping fire. When offered a beer, she waved it away and instead sipped on a bottle of water, which only enhanced his belief she was underage.

When she crossed her ankles out in front of her, Patriot found it impossible not to follow the lines of her body, from hiking boots to the hems of her jeans, cuffed once to reveal a tiny peek of white socks, to her full thighs that flared into womanly hips. She might look young, but she possessed all the goods of a woman.

He reached higher on her body, drinking in a heavy barn jacket buttoned all the way to the collar and just knew if he popped open those buttons and slid his hand inside the warm depths, he’d find curves to match the rest of her.

He landed at her chin, a tiny point a man could pinch between his thumb

and forefinger to direct her face up to him. Then those lips—fuck. Tanned skin that took on a glow from the firelight.

She flicked her eyes to him again, and they held a heartbeat too long. A slow burn stirred low in his gut, alerting him to the fact that he hadn't wrapped a woman against his body in a long time.

When she cast her eyes downward again, he watched her lashes cast spiked shadows over her cheeks.

After he finished his beer, he'd best return to his campsite. He didn't have the time or inclination to be involved with anyone, especially right now with his life in turmoil.

But as he finished his beer, one of the guys asked about bikes, and then conversation rolled on for a good half hour.

"I see your patches, man. Didn't know you were with a club these days," Ben said.

The Dark Falcons patch rode on the back of the leather jacket he wore, along with a Sergeant at Arms patch that meant he was in charge of protection for the club. But he wasn't doing a very good job of it by tossing all his brothers into his swamp of trouble, was he?

He saw Aarica lift a hand to the button at her throat. She popped it to reveal a tiny sliver of throat. No way should that buttoned-up bit of flesh entice, but damn if he wasn't shifting on the cooler to ease the tightness in his jeans.

Sometime later, Aarica stood. "I'm going to my tent now. It's been a long day."

Mel looked up with a smile. "Goodnight. If you need anything, let us know."

The woman offered a smile and a wave, and then she started across the site. She rounded the tent before Patriot realized she wasn't sharing their campsite with them.

"Where's she camped?"

"Around the loop," one of the other ladies told him.

He stood. She couldn't walk alone, in the dark and looking like a damn tasty snack. "I'll see she gets there safe."

Without another word, he followed her. When he caught up to her, she threw a look over her shoulder.

“Oh, hi.” Her soft voice soothed the beast in him far more than any solitude of the mountains had so far. Or maybe it stirred the primal beast that wanted to duck his head and kiss those plump, sultry lips.

“Hope you don’t mind if I walk with you. Since it’s dark and all.”

“You don’t have to, but thanks. My cousins would do the same thing.”

“Cousins? How many we talkin’?”

“Five that I grew up with. My aunt and uncle took me in when I was two. They’re parents to me, and my cousins are brothers.” They hit the dirt path leading around the ring of campsites. The silence loomed up, another entity in the night with them, a giant’s hands holding them closer together.

Patriot burned through the urge to reach out and grab her hand. Why? She was safe enough.

Because I fucking want to put my hands on her.

The punch of desire kept him from speaking more on the topic of her family, but he listened as she recounted her cousins’ ages and how she’d grown up on a big farm.

That unsealed his lips. “So you’re fresh off the farm?” he teased.

She chuckled. “It’s true. I never thought I’d get away.”

“You didn’t like it then?”

“I loved it. Growing up there was everything a girl could dream of, having family around. But it was time for me to move on and find my own life. My cousins are very protective, and I couldn’t date without their approval.”

Hell, just as he thought. Inexperienced kid came to the small town to escape the life she knew and looking for excitement. He would *not*, no matter how much the ache in his balls urged him to, be the one to show her the downside of one-night stands.

But the thought of anybody else doing that made him want to pick up his favorite hammer and go after them.

“I’m right up here.” She pointed, and through the darkness he spotted a small two-man tent and a blackened fire ring. He couldn’t think of a lonelier place to leave her.

Once they reached the site, they stopped and faced each other. “Want me to start your fire?” He realized how that sounded.

She looked up into his eyes. Even in the low light he caught the glimmer

in the depths of her gaze. “No, I’ll be all right.”

He didn’t move. Trapped in her gaze. Or too afraid to move away from her for fear he’d never see her again.

Neither spoke.

Slowly, she leaned in. He froze as she went on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his cheek, resting a hand on his chest at the same time.

A guttural need gripped him. He needed to step away from the innocent beauty—do the right thing. But that soft caress of her lips on his cheek proved too much.

He wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her into him. Dark need stole all his thoughts at the mere crush of her tantalizing body against his.

“How old are you?” he grated out.

“Twenty-three.”

Young. But not as young as he originally thought.

“How old are you?”

“Too old for you.”

That pulled a giggle from her. The sound tormented his senses more.

“How old is that?”

A knot worked its way down his throat when he swallowed and then said, “Thirty.”

On his chest, her fingers splayed. Afraid she’d push away, he tightened his hold on her middle, but she didn’t move. In fact, her breaths came faster. Lightly, he kneaded his fingers into her waist. A quiet moan escaped her, the sound hitting the throttle inside him. Damn, what he wouldn’t give to hear more noises from her.

Moving his hand downward, he learned the line of her hip. So womanly.

His heart thumped so damn hard against his ribs he felt his body jolt with each beat.

“Patriot... Is it a nickname?” She searched his face, waiting for the answer she’d missed when she arrived after the Collins’ introductions.

He gave a single nod, too on edge to think about much but picking her up and leaning her against the nearest tree. “My real name’s Logan.” His voice came out gritty.

A smile curved her lips upward. He stared at that mouth, wanting a

glimpse of her teeth...and more. So much more.

“I like both names.” She brushed her hand over his chest, inching it downward. “What do you do to make your body so hard?”

Christ, did she know the meaning of hard? He could move her hand downward over the bulge in his jeans to teach her.

“Construction.”

Nodding, she turned her gaze to his chest. The sight of the top of her head shouldn't fill him with an all-consuming protectiveness, but dammit, it did. His throat closed off as he realized just how much he wanted to wrap this woman in his arms and keep her safe from the ugliness of the world. Ugliness that would ruin her.

Ugliness that he would bring upon her with the mess he was in.

He started to move backward, but she stepped into him. When she slipped her arms around his neck, he felt as if his boots had been bolted to the earth. Without meaning to, he slipped both hands up to cup her breasts. A more insistent moan escaped her lips, and she dropped her head back.

Staring down at her face, he watched pleasure play over her features as he learned the contours of her full breasts—and then the sharp little peaks of her nipples through the coat.

He started on the buttons. She watched him, lips parted. Desire, searing hot, took hold when he reached inside her jacket, edged his hands underneath her top and cupped her breasts fully with only a lacy bra between them.

He kissed her. Took those plump lips for himself and damn the consequences. Instantly, she melted into his kiss, head angled perfectly and her lips parted enough for him to sweep his tongue inside. She gripped his shoulders, gasping and so fucking responsive he thought he'd come in his jeans before he even got her undressed.

When he pushed under the band of her bra and found her straining nipples, he pinched each. She muffled a cry and kissed him all the more. He started to walk her into her actual campsite and off the trail that anybody could come along and see them. The need to conceal her from anybody's view burned hotter than the campfire they'd sat around together.

Swirling his fingertip around and around each hardened nipple, he drew on her lips. She came onto tiptoe again, straining against him, rocking with a need he felt building inside her.

Tearing from the kiss, he moved to her throat, kissing that tiny spot he'd

seen when she unbuttoned her coat and then down to her collarbones. When he popped one of her breasts from the cup of her bra and lifted it to his lips, she sank her fingers into his hair on a gasp.

“Patriot!”

Jesus, hearing his name falling from her lips shouldn't give him such a thrill. He needed to get out more. Maybe date someone.

Or take this woman who urged him on with tiny squeaks as he sucked her nipple into his mouth. He drew on it lightly at first and then with more insistence. His cock throbbed behind his fly, aching hard and ready to go.

“Oh my God,” she rasped out as he grazed her nipple with his teeth. “I've never...”

He froze at her uncompleted sentence. Two heartbeats passed and he raised his head. Looking into her eyes, hazy with passion, he asked, “Never what?”

She drew in a shuddering breath. “Never had a man touch me this way. I...”

The band around his cock moved upward to cinch in both lungs. “Aarica?”

“I'm a virgin.” The words tumbled from her lips, but it took him a moment to understand the meaning.

Fuck, he'd been toying with a virgin. About to take her in a fucking tent. He would have too.

What an asshole.

He started to release her, but she held him tighter around the neck. Reluctant to lift one fingertip from her body, he stared into her eyes. “How did a woman your age get to be a virgin?”

She shrugged. “Farm girl. Five older cousins running everyone off.”

Damn. He couldn't touch her. Stealing her innocence in a campground with the idea of never seeing her again would make him the biggest dickhead on the planet.

This time he peeled his fingers off her and stepped back. “I can't touch you, baby.”

Her eyelids fluttered over those big eyes that grabbed him by the guts in the first place. She dropped her head, giving him a view of the top again. And again, that protective surge drove him to envelop her in his arms once more.

A cry left her as he bore her toward the tent, picnic table, the ground—fuck, anyplace would do.

“Just kiss me.” The roughened plea in her tone set him on fire and awakened him all in three little words.

Capturing her lips, he took up where he left off, brushing her nipples into tight peaks until she writhed and then he inched his hands down her small waist to the button of her jeans. He paused a moment, but she urged him on by flipping her tongue over his.

His cock pounded with need, and he might want to take her in the raunchiest and most primal of ways, but he was man enough to step away from that mentally. That didn't mean he couldn't pleasure her, though.

He popped the button, slid down the zipper and then breached the lacy band of her panties. When he eased his hand inside and located the slick, scorching heat of her pussy, his knees damn near buckled.

“Patriot! Yes!” She shook when he teased up her seam and found the tight knot of nerves that made her scream. All he could do was kiss her to trap the noises inside as he teased that bud again and again. What he wouldn't give to shove a finger inside her but he wouldn't claim her virginity this way.

He toggled her clit under his fingertip. She rocked her hips and scrabbled at his spine. When she tensed, he had to wonder if she knew what would happen in the next second, if she'd ever given herself an orgasm.

She gave one last rock of her hips and then let go. It seemed she knew exactly what would happen, because she took his mouth for her own and kissed the hell out of him while she came on his fingers.

Chapter Two

As Patriot rolled up to the clubhouse, the loud music met him before the guys did. He smiled and shook his head. They had their party on already. Unbelievable. In a short time, the club had morphed from a few guys sitting around a garage on lawn chairs talking about a brotherhood of old friends to a distinct lifestyle complete with leather, patches and more people milling around than ever.

He parked his bike on the corner next to Tank's. Before he removed his helmet and swung his leg over the motorcycle, one of the honeys was on him.

"Patriot. Where you been, sweetie? I missed you this weekend." She ran her long nails over his chest.

He stepped away and tried not to scowl in complete disgust. Some of the honeys were better than others—just looking for a place to call home and a family within the club. But others, such as this one named Rochelle, gunned hard for that patch so the Dark Falcons would take care of her forever.

The man who took Rochelle on would be sorry within a month. It sure as hell wouldn't be him.

Without a glance in her direction, he strode toward the clubhouse. She followed along. "Were you away for work?" she asked.

"No." He opened the door and wasn't so much of an asshole that he wouldn't allow a woman to pass through first. She did with a coy smile that told him she read far more into the gesture than he meant.

The instant his boots crossed the threshold, chairs were scraped back and his brothers shouted his name. Tank reached him first, thumping him on the back. Diesel bro-hugged him.

"How were the mountains?" Tank's question sounded innocent enough, but the concern in his eyes left Patriot aware that Dixon had filled the guys in on the situation.

He focused on the question—the mountains. Sleeping rough sucked. He'd eaten much better food in his life. But he hadn't gotten Aarica's soft moans out of his head for more than five minutes at a time since laying hands on her.

He hadn't seen her again after that night either. While he told himself he wouldn't go looking, he did and learned she'd taken off early Saturday morning to start a new job.

"The mountains were good."

"Man, we gotta have a group trip soon." Tank tossed him a grin.

Some of the other guys moved in to say their hellos. He looked through the gap in bodies to see Dixon waiting in the wings. It was clear the president wanted a word.

Patriot lifted his chin in acknowledgement, and got a head tilt toward the rear room in return. Dixon swung for the door of the meeting space, and Patriot wove through the group to follow.

When he stepped inside, the rest of the officers, the core of the Dark Falcons, flooded in behind him. They took their respective seats around the big table. He rested his forearms on the oiled wood that he'd spent hours creating for the club. Each smooth inch of wood he had worked with his own hands, and it felt good to give something to the club.

That only left him feeling disgusted about the other thing he'd brought on the club—trouble with the law.

Dixon circled to the head of the table and leaned back in his seat to survey the guys. Tank positioned himself at his right hand, with Patriot at his left. Down the line, three more men took up each side of the table, all holding different roles within the ranks. Tiny gears all well-oiled and working together to keep their club running without a miss, and they were growing by the month.

Dixon settled his gaze on Patriot. "I filled the guys in."

This shit storm was definitely a step away from their origins and code of the MC.

He stared at the table a moment, chest tight. Each and every brother stood with him, and that knowledge made it difficult to breathe. He nodded.

"We're with ya, Patriot," Rio spoke up from opposite him. The guy clenched a fist and held it up as if they were bumping knuckles. Though the wide oak slab of table rendered that impossible, he raised his fist in return.

“The guys want to know more of the story. I only shared some of it.” Dixon’s expression didn’t read as accusatory. He was the same old friend Patriot had played football with for the Mersey Falcons high school team.

“Give it to us straight, Patriot. We got you,” Diesel added, slicking his longish hair into the swoop that rode over his forehead.

Sitting forward, Patriot pressed his fists together. “I did a job for a couple named Cliff. They wanted a normal contract for a garage with utility space. Concrete poured sidewalk. Nothing major. We were in and out in the timeframe I told them. But about a week after we pulled out, they called me to say they had some things missing from their place.”

“What things?” Diesel rubbed at his trim beard now.

“Jewelry I guess. Mrs. Cliff had a ring from her grandmother taken. And some cash.”

“How much cash we talkin’?” Dixon asked.

Patriot leveled his gaze at him. “They say three grand.”

Rio blew out a whistle. “Not many keep that kinda cash layin’ around.”

“No shit,” Patriot responded.

“So they think you stole it.”

He shifted his shoulders. The weight of his leather coat grounded him. “Me or my crew.”

“Is that possible?” one of the others pressed.

He shook his head. “We never had access to the house besides to turn off the power and wire the new electricity feeding the garage and utility room into the box. And I did that myself.”

“So it looks as though you’re the thief.” Dixon’s rough tone reflected the fury building behind his eyes.

“Yeah, or I permitted access. But there’s more.”

The guys grew silent again, all eyes on him.

“A second client is missing a bike.”

Across from him, Diesel’s brows shot up. “A motorcycle?”

“Yeah.” The wood grain on the surface of the table wavered in his vision.

“Fuck, that looks bad.” Diesel tapped a blunt fingertip on the table.

“What kinda bike?” Tank asked.

“A fuckin’ Harley.”

Dixon blew out a breath. “That looks even worse on us. We got at least ten parked in front of the club at all times.”

“Shiiit,” one of the guys at the end drawled.

Patriot turned his head toward the brother. “Look, I know it’s not the Dark Falcons. But the sheriff will be sniffin’ around here, so be on guard.”

“You heard him. Watch your backs and wrap your dicks.” Dixon thumped a fist onto the table, and they all nodded in agreement. Solidarity to the end, which Patriot was counting on.

“Do you have any suspicions? Any idea who could have stolen these things?” Tank asked him.

“I grilled my crew. This isn’t some mashup of criminals doing manual labor like some construction companies. I’m choosy. I select craftsman, and honest ones. If you so much as lie to me about being sick, I’ll fire your ass. I don’t hold to immoral behavior, period. My guys say they didn’t have anything to do with the crimes and know nothing about the stolen goods, and I believe them.”

He met Dixon’s stare.

“What happens next?” Dixon asked.

“No charges are being filed yet. The sheriff questioned me and my guys. As of now, they’re looking into the claims.”

“We’ll be ready for their questions too. We stand together.” With that, Dixon pushed away from the table and gained his feet. As one unit, they all stood. They opened the door to the thumping music again, and Dixon rubbed a spot between his brows.

“My parents hate the loud music part of living next door to the club.”

Patriot’s lips tipped in a slight smile. “Tell them to turn it down.”

“Guys gotta blow off steam somehow, but yeah. I’ll put a cap on the hours we can have the music up loud.” Dixon walked into the front room again. His woman stood there, and when their gazes locked, Patriot had to look away or feel like a voyeur. The pair loved each other beyond anything in this cruel world. At least they had each other in the rough times.

Fiona crossed the room and stepped into Dixon’s arms. He squeezed her, burying his face in her hair as though he hadn’t seen her in months and not only a few hours he worked in his father’s auto garage and bounced to Tank’s

bike shop to lend a hand there.

Over his shoulder, Fiona met Patriot's eyes and shot him a smile. Why did seeing them so in love shoot his brain straight to that tree-shaded campsite and a sweet and innocent woman writhing on his fingers?

He dragged in a deep breath. Damn, he could remember a total of six minutes since that encounter that he hadn't thought of Aarica. Must be getting better—soon he wouldn't think of her at all.

Who was he kidding? He could still smell and taste her. The ache to be her first, the man to break through the walls she used to hold off every other man the past twenty-three years burned through him like a welding torch to steel.

When a set of long fingernails slapped against his chest, he actually shuddered in disgust. He peeled Rochelle's fingers away, unable to hold Aarica in his mind at the same time this woman touched him.

"Why don't you go find another guy to drape yourself over?" he grated out.

Her eyes flew wide and then she pushed out her lips into a pout. "You know it's you I've got a thing for."

"The feeling's not mutual. So go." He didn't wait to see some perfected act of sadness filling her eyes at his harsh words and turned for the door.

Outside, he pulled in a deep breath of fresh air. The tang of the Smoky Mountains that swept through Mersey filled his nose, but now in his deviant mind, the scent of nature blended with the musk of Aarica's release.

Fuck. He had a man's problems and no time for a schoolboy's fantasy of seeing her again, like he was some goddamn John Travolta crushing over Olivia Newton John in *Grease*. He'd fingered her—nothing more.

He walked down the line of bikes to stare at the two that were the same exact model as the stolen motorcycle. How the hell was he going to clear his—and the Dark Falcons'—name?



"Aarica, would you mind trying to persuade Jay to eat breakfast? He refuses everything I make him." Mrs. Post grabbed her handbag and slung it over her shoulder before leaning in to kiss her eight-year-old son Jay goodbye.

He dodged her affection and she offered him a gentle smile instead.

“Be good for Aarica, okay? She is the nicest babysitter we’ve had.” She smiled at Aarica and then backed out the door on her way to work for the day.

For a moment, Jay stared at the closed door. Aarica assessed the autistic boy’s mood and hoped he wouldn’t burst into horrible tears. She’d spent time with him off and on over the past few weeks, but today was their first day alone together.

“C’mon, Jay. Want to sit down and eat breakfast together?”

He turned his big green eyes on her and then shook his head.

“Aww, c’mon. I’m starved and I’d enjoy some company.”

He eyed her as though she’d force him to eat, but she knew from dealing with one of her female cousins on the autism spectrum that forcing them would be the worst end result. Coaxing was more her style.

She fixed herself a bowl of cereal and then set out another bowl and spoon on the counter next to hers. She took her seat on the high stool and lifted her spoon. From the corner of her eye, she watched Jay inch closer to the counter.

She took a big old bite, filling her cheeks and chewing loudly. Then she grinned around her food at Jay.

He grinned and rushed to the stool. He sat up and reached for the box of cereal. His first attempt at pouring a bowl left little chocolate balls rolling across the counter. She laughed and rolled one his way with her fingertip, and he picked it up and stuffed it in his mouth.

After they got his bowl filled with cereal and milk, they sat munching on their breakfast together. No surprise Jay finished first. If he gave his mom such a hard time eating, he was probably starved.

“Can you carry your bowl to the sink? Just set it on the side and I’ll wash it later.”

He did, but the bowl dropped hard onto the counter with a clash that made him plaster his hands over his ears. Aarica jumped off the stool and hurried to him. She placed her hands atop his and looked into his eyes. “That was loud, wasn’t it?”

He nodded.

“It’s okay now. The sound is gone. See?” She looked around as if searching for it.

Slowly, he pulled his hands out from his ears, and finding the noise that startled him now gone, he lowered his hands to his sides. Good—crisis averted.

“What would you like to do this morning? Read a book together? Roll a ball outside?”

He shook his head and then pointed to the living room.

“Show me.” Ignoring the breakfast mess and the few bits of chocolate cereal that hit the floor when Jay poured, she led the way to the living room. He pointed to the TV and then wiggled his thumbs.

“Ohh, you want to play video games.”

Grinning that she understood him so easily, he bobbed his head and then plopped on the floor in front of the big screen. She wasn’t much of a gamer, but with five older male cousins, she could hold her own with a controller. After setting up the system and allowing Jay to select the game, she settled next to him to play.

Turned out the kid was a whiz with games. They played two and he kicked her butt both times. Laughing hysterically, he pointed at her to poke fun, and she held up her hands in surrender.

“You beat me good!”

He pointed to the games on the shelf again, and she shook her head. “It’s sunny outside. Let’s go out and find a ball.”

She placed the controllers in a safe place and helped her ward through a bathroom break before they headed out the kitchen door. It led to a deck, and the scent of fresh-cut lumber and new stain hovered in the air. The fenced in back yard was ideal for her to really let loose with her ward without fear of him running in the street in front of a car or harming himself.

When she found a big red playground ball, she set Jay up across the yard from her. With a few feet between them, she proceeded to roll the ball. He retrieved it and rolled it back. She had to run for it a few times when it went far out of range, but that only made Jay laugh at her more.

“You like making fun of me. I see how you are now.”

He chuckled more.

“What you don’t know is I have five boy cousins who always make fun of me.” She rolled him the ball. At that moment, she heard the thumping coming from the garage roof. The newly built garage was just being roofed

today, and Mrs. Post told her to ignore the construction going on, but if the noise began to agitate Jay to take him inside and put on some of the music he enjoyed in order to drown it out.

Aarica swung her gaze to the roof and the workers and then to Jay. He stared at the source of the noise too but didn't seem to care at the moment. She waved her arms, encouraging him to roll her the ball.

He bounced it instead, sending her running after it while he laughed at her.

So happy to see him in good spirits and tolerating the pounding on the roof, she bounced the ball soft enough that the toy came within his range and he didn't have to chase it very far.

They went back and forth a few more times, but then Jay froze with the ball in his hands, staring at the roof. The workers were calling out to each other, giving directions about where to pick up when the other left off.

With a scream, Jay threw the ball at the fence. Alarm bells sounded in her brain, and the workers on the roof stopped what they were doing and looked down at them.

She corralled Jay toward the house, but then she stopped dead as one crewman straightened to his full height and his gaze burned into her from above.

With the noise stopped, Jay seemed okay for the time being, which gave Aarica a long heartbeat to stare back at the man...the man from the campground who haunted her dreams.

Patriot. Logan. The gorgeous biker who she still throbbed for whenever her thoughts touched on him.

Dizziness washed over her, and she realized between Jay and Patriot, she hadn't taken a breath in too long. Sucking in a wobbly breath, she continued to stare at him. She never thought she'd see him again, let alone standing on the roof at her new job, body glistening in the sun. Did he recognize her? Only days had passed since their strange and lust-filled meeting in the mountains, but it had been dark then.

Their eyes locked, and she saw that he did know her. And her body remembered his like her body recognized the air now burning in and out of her lungs with each labored, needy breath.

Another crash sounded as a couple of the workers dropped something. Jay cried out and slapped his hands over his ears.

Quickly, she led Jay inside the house. For several seconds, she stood there with her thoughts in a riot. She wanted to go out and look at Patriot, but her obligations lay with Jay, and of course she wouldn't shirk that duty.

While focusing on her ward, her body felt too hot and tight, as if her skin had shrunk in the heat of the day or she got a sunburn. Patriot's eyes scorching down into hers had stolen her mind. She pressed her fingers to her hot cheeks she knew bore a blush from a mere exchanged glance.

She got Jay settled with a picture book and headphones that read the story aloud to him. While he grew engrossed, she drifted to the window and looked out. From here, she couldn't see the garage roof without going outside. She wanted to see Patriot again, but she couldn't leave Jay's side.

Sinking to a chair near the boy, she kept an eye on him while listening to the low thump of hammers and power nail guns as the crew nailed shingles. The dark, exciting moments of being in Patriot's arms returned, leaving her breathless all over again.

From the moment she walked into Ben and Mel's campsite, the man intrigued her. Not only gorgeous and rugged but capable of driving her mad. She practically threw herself at him, and he'd respected her enough to back off—at first. But soon she learned he was made of flesh and blood and unable to resist her pleas for more.

She might have lost her mind out there on the mountain, but she definitely would do it all over again. When she told him she was innocent, she wasn't lying. She had little male attention due to her cousins. She also knew enough about her own desires to have zero regrets about being in that man's arms...or having his lips on her body.

She squeezed her thighs together at the memory of his touch between her legs.

Jay made a sound, and she looked up to find his book had finished and he wanted another put on. After that, she sank to the chair again. The thumping on the roof went on. Patriot was up there. Did he think of her the same way she thought of him right now?

When her day finished and Mrs. Post returned home from work, would he still be up there working? If so, Aarica could stop and speak to him.

And say what?

She heard a light *thunk* and looked over to see Jay's head down on the table. She scrambled up to see him fast asleep. She smiled at the sight of his

long eyelashes and lips open as he drooled on his book.

Gently, she took him by the shoulders. He woke enough for her to ease him over to the sofa. He curled onto his side, and she spread a throw blanket over him.

She stood smiling at the sleeping child. She enjoyed being with Jay so much.

Her aunt's friend knew Mrs. Post, and word of the nanny position had come through to Aarica. She jumped at the chance to leave the farm, on her own, and to begin her life. She loved her family so much, owed her happy life to them all, but she wanted to find out some things for herself. Like how to survive and who to love.

She couldn't do either of those things while totally protected in her family's arms. They were far from thrilled that she took the job offer and struck out for Mersey two days later. She settled in a one-room apartment over the Mersey Bakes and Treats, where delicious scents of pastries and coffee wafted through the cracks in the walls and ceiling to torment her. Of course, she had to pinch pennies and hadn't yet given in to her desire to buy up half the shop and gorge some afternoon.

The boy snuffled in his sleep, and she rested a hand on his shoulder until he soothed to sleep once more. Watching over him felt rewarding. But she only cared for him a few days a week, and his grandmother took him for the others, leaving her in need of more income.

Which brought her around to the second job she needed. Inspiration hit, and she rummaged through a magazine holder and located a recent newspaper. She perused the want ads, wrinkling her nose as she scanned the list.

All these jobs required prior experience. Well, she could milk a cow. Goats too. Shoveling, making hay, all those skills seemed worthless here in Mersey. See? This was her reason for leaving her family's safe haven and striking out alone—to find herself and what she was good at doing.

She quietly folded the paper and replaced it in the magazine rack. Then she drifted to the window again, staring out across the sleepy neighborhood. Down the block a bit and across the street, an older man pushed a lawnmower, and he looked ninety if he was a day. If not for Jay, she'd run out and offer to do it for him.

Sighing, she turned to watch the boy sleep. After her shift here, she'd hit

the streets and search for a job. Convenience store worker, janitor, waitress... surely, someone had a position that would suit her.

She went to the back door and poked her head out. The men weren't on the roof anymore—it was nearing lunchtime. But seeing the ladder stretched to the yard and the powerful thighs navigating down the rungs left her breathless.

Patriot paused at the bottom, facing away from her. He pulled his shirt out of his jeans pocket where it was tucked.

Her mouth went dry. She dug her fingers into her thighs to keep from tearing off her own clothes and begging him to turn around.

He proceeded to spread the cloth of the shirt, and she won the grand prize in getting to watch him dress. Spine muscles rippled, and his torso streaked with sweat and so damn yummy that she had to clamp her thighs to hold in the forbidden desires of wanting a stranger.

Not a stranger anymore—she knew him. His kisses, his fingers on her wet folds.

Without glancing around to find her gawking at him, he walked out of the gate and closed it behind him, which left her staring after him, hot and bothered in a way that had nothing to do with the Tennessee weather.

Chapter Three

Christ, he'd never roofed a damn house with a fat fucking hard-on. His cock was a steel rod sliding down his thigh and making it impossible to maneuver on a roof. If he fell to his death, he'd blame it on Aarica.

What the hell was she doing here, anyway? The woman was supposed to be a one-time thing. A mountain make-out session fit for fantasies only. Yet here she was, in the damn house his crew was working on.

Spotting her from the roof while she played with that boy left him aching and his chest burning. He wanted to climb down that very minute, pick her up and carry her off to his bed. The only thing keeping him from doing just that was her innocence and the fact she took the boy inside.

He seemed to have some disability. When they started pounding, he placed his hands over his ears and Aarica had been quick to calm him.

Her touch could calm the devil in anybody, even himself.

Finished for the day, he climbed behind the wheel of his truck, throwing looks around for any sight of the woman who kept haunting his every waking thought. Thankfully, she wasn't in view and he could drive away without the urge to go back and act like some caveman.

After he reached his house, showered, changed and hopped on his bike, he still couldn't relax. He wanted a woman he couldn't touch, and the woman who wanted to touch him, he didn't want. His crew was a bit behind on the roofing project too, having gotten a few days off schedule from unexpected rainstorms the previous week...

Then the business with the crimes.

The ride to the clubhouse was too short to offer time to relax, but at this point riding three hours wouldn't help. He couldn't relax, not when everything hung up in the air.

When he pulled into the parking lot and spotted the sheriff's car, his gut clenched.

Fuck. Here goes.

The lawman stood in the parking lot with Dixon and Tank. A few of the others stood around, set apart from the trio but close enough to listen in.

As Patriot approached, Dixon and Tank threw him take-it-easy-man looks. He kept his fists from clenching as he closed the gap between them. Sheriff Gardener looked up.

“Sheriff,” he drawled out.

“Mr. Stone. I thought I’d find you here.”

“The sheriff was just asking some questions about the thefts you mentioned,” Dixon informed him.

He nodded and looked to Gardener. “I’ve told you all I know, but I’m willing to answer more questions if that helps your investigation.” He wanted to remain as compliant as possible, shake the law off his back and put this all behind him.

“Maybe we can go inside and talk,” Gardener said.

Patriot traded a look with Dixon. “Why don’t you come inside and have a good look around?”

To the side, Tank nodded his agreement. The best thing to do was open every door to the law and show them they had nothing to hide. They wouldn’t need a search warrant—the Dark Falcons welcomed them.

“Lead the way.” Gardener gestured to the door.

Dixon walked in first, with Patriot and Tank at his six. The rest of the guys took up the rear, solid as one. The brotherhood rode together and stood together in all things, including this.

After Dixon and Patriot walked the rooms of the clubhouse with Tank standing guard, the sheriff seemed to understand that he wouldn’t find three grand laying out in plain sight, the heirloom ring or a stolen Harley.

“Mind if I check some serial numbers against the bikes parked out front?” Sheriff Gardener asked.

Dixon spread his hand, gesturing toward the door. “Have at it.” His tone said don’t-let-the-door-hit-you-in-the-ass, but he served it with a smile.

Patriot walked outside with the lawman and tracked his progress along the row of bikes. Knowing he’d find nothing, he still felt relieved when the sheriff climbed into his car and drove away. As he passed a biker on the road, the biker raised a hand.

Patriot squinted at the man rolling into their lot. Who the hell? Then the young kid parked alongside the other bikes and removed his helmet decorated with flames.

A smile broke over his face as he spotted Patriot. “Boss man!”

Patriot smiled at his former employee and shook his head at the nickname the kid used for him. Putting the sheriff’s search behind him, Patriot strolled over and stuck his hand out to shake Hunter’s hand. The young guy gripped it with all the firmness Patriot gave him.

“Good to see ya. You ridin’ now?”

“Yeah, been riding the past nine or so months. My brother got me into it.”

Patriot looked over the bike. “Lookin’ great.” He circled the motorcycle and chuckled. “I dig your license plate holders.” Two chrome hands with middle fingers up locked the plate into place.

Hunter rubbed at his jaw. “Thought it might be your speed.”

“You’re right.” Now more than ever, he felt the need to rebel and flip off the world, but he couldn’t do that in his present circumstances—he had to play nice if he wanted to clear his name, and that of the club.

“Your crew stayin’ busy?” Hunter asked.

Patriot eyed him. He refused to put up with whiners or poor attitudes. Hunter displayed neither—then or now. They’d parted on good terms. Patriot simply let Hunter know that his skills were a passing grade, but he demanded more of his team, and he’d understood.

Seeing nothing but a smile on the guy’s face, Patriot nodded. “Busy enough. What have you been up to?”

Hunter leaned against his bike, ankles crossed and arms folded, settling in for a long bullshit session. “I’ve been working with my brother. He’s heading a crew down near Union.”

Patriot arched a brow. “I’ve heard of some good workers down there. Sounds as though you found your place.”

With a nod, Hunter said, “That’s another reason I’m here.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve heard nothing but good about this club. How do I become a Dark Falcon?”

Considering the guy, he realized Hunter had all the substance they

required of a prospect. Hard worker, eager to please. He was a straight shooter, as direct as they came. While Hunter might not have worked out on Patriot's construction crew, he might be exactly what the club needed as far as a new member went.

"You need a sponsor to become a prospect."

He arched a brow. "Sponsor? Like in AA or something?"

"Yeah, sorta. Someone to stand up and guide you through the process of becoming a fully patched member."

"Does this involve some college frat-boy hazing shit?"

They shared a laugh. "No. But you won't be given cakey jobs—we'll make you work to prove yourself worthy."

He nodded. "That's what I'm lookin' for. Know anyone who'd sponsor me?"

Patriot shot him a crooked grin. "I might know a guy."

Hunter slid a glance down along the line of motorcycles parked in front of the club. When he looked back at Patriot, he recognized the desire to be part of something bigger than himself written on Hunter's face.

"Whattaya say about coming inside and talkin' to the president?" Patriot asked.

A smile stretched over his features, and he gave a single nod. Pulling away from the bike he leaned against, he said, "I'd like that."

Patriot twitched his head toward the entrance. "C'mon."

What better time to initiate a new member into the fold? To show him that even when shit went south, they stuck together.

"You sure about this?" Hunter asked as they reached the door.

He shot him a look over his shoulder. "Having a prospect under me will give back to the club. Besides, you saw all those dirty bikes out there needing a good wash and shine. That ought to keep ya busy for a few days."

Hunter tossed his head on a laugh. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I better get out my polishing cloths."

Patriot held the door for him to pass through. Then he located Dixon seated with his spine to the wall, talking to Tank. Dixon caught his stare and raised his jaw in question.

"Everyone, this is Hunter. Hunter, the guys. The honeys are off-limits to prospects," he added as a side note.

Dixon pushed to his feet. “Did you say prospect? Well, welcome to the Dark Falcons. You better do what this guy says and you’ll do just fine.” Dixon pointed a finger at Patriot.

Grinning, Hunter stuck out his hand and the guys all crowded in to shake it.

Dixon looked to Patriot again. “What’s his first task, man?”

Patriot walked to the bar and a thick stack of fliers they were meant to hang all over the tristate area for an upcoming event at the fairgrounds. He picked up the fliers and returned to Hunter. He shoved the stack at him. “His first task is to hang up about four hundred fliers.”

Hunter wagged his head. “Aw, man, what did I get myself into?”

Patriot thumped him on the back. “Welcome to the Dark Falcons.”



Aarica smiled up at the sign on the front of the bar. The Painted Pig. The illustration of a pig wearing lipstick aroused all kinds of questions, which she intended to ask inside. Then she’d ask about job openings.

She wiped her sweaty palms on the thighs of her jeans and entered the bar. The place looked clean and smelled of fried foods and spirits. Two TVs were at opposite corners of the bar, and a couple guys sat there watching sports highlights.

They looked around at her and gave her nods of greeting before returning to their sports.

Well, her cousins would approve. The place seemed reputable, anyway.

“Can I help you?” A woman appeared, her arms burdened with a heavy crate. She moved behind the bar and dumped it on the counter before turning her attention to Aarica.

“Hi, I’m Aarica. I thought I’d stop in and see if you need any waitresses or bartenders.”

The woman’s eyes slid up and down her. “You look young.”

“I’m twenty-three.”

Still sizing her up, she nodded. “You ever served before? Bartended?”

“I did two years at a pizza place near the farm where I grew up.”

The woman groaned. “Fresh off the farm. You’ll be lucky to make it a night here.”

She ignored the comment and latched on to the rest of the statement. “Does that mean I’ve got a job?”

“We can use an extra hand on Monday nights. The games pack the house, and my other waitress can’t always keep up. Ever used a fryer before?”

She nodded. “The pizza place where I worked had wings and fries on the menu.”

“That’s all you need then. You’re hired. Come back at seven. That’s when we get busy.”

Trying not to let her surprise show that getting a job had been so easy, she stepped closer to the bar. “What’s your name again?”

“Fiona. I own this place.”

She looked around. “The Painted Pig.”

“Yup.”

“What’s it mean?”

Fiona eyed her. The tough little blonde had an exterior that would put most grown men in their place, but something about her smile reminded Aarica of one of her older female cousins who always took her under her wing.

“Come back at seven and you’ll see what the name stands for.”

“Uhh, okay. Should I wear anything special?”

“Yeah, a turtleneck if you have one.”

She blinked. “A turtleneck?”

“Yeah, with a body like yours, fights will break out over you. Can’t have that.”

Aarica stared at her for a long minute.

Finally, the woman laughed. “I’m kidding. Just wear something comfortable you can work in.”

With a smile, Aarica wagged her finger at her new boss. “I’ll have to watch out for you, I see. Thanks, and I’ll be here at seven.”

“If you can handle it.”

Aarica left the bar with a smile plastered on her face. Food service wasn’t fantastic pay, but it was a start and would fill in some gaps. Plus, she wouldn’t have to worry about her shifts overlapping her nanny duties with Jay, since that was during the day.

Since she didn't have much to do now besides wait for seven o'clock to roll around, she took a drive. Exploring Mersey and the nearby area had been something she longed to do, and now seemed to be a good time. The quaint town had an old charm mixed with tourist spots, and she stopped at a couple shops to browse. Then she got in her car and looked to the skyline. The mountains hung as a breathtaking backdrop against the low buildings scattered through the low elevation making up Mersey.

But in the distance, a tall Ferris wheel had been luring her in since the moment she drove down that highway. Rumor was that Mersey boasted its own fairgrounds, open almost year round for the tourists. She couldn't wait to check it out.

When she continued to follow the route, she eventually spotted a sign that the fair was open Thursday through Sunday. She paused at the gates to stare in. A big bandstand, rides, lemonade and burger stands were all currently closed up and that big Ferris wheel really was the showstopper. She could see how, between the townspeople and tourists, this place must be booming on weekends.

She spotted a flyer flapping on a nearby pole and peered closer at the big letters.

AUTISM AWARENESS

She got out of her car to read the fine print, and saw that the local motorcycle club, The Dark Falcons, was putting on a benefit night, with all proceeds going to help autism.

The Dark Falcons. Her stomach bottomed out, but a rush of warmth poured into the hollow.

Patriot sported the Dark Falcons patch on his leather jacket.

Knowing the man she made out with was part of this only piqued her interest more about him. A big, tough guy who also worked on a construction crew helped raise money for a cause such as autism?

She took out her phone and snapped a photo of the flier to show to Mrs. Post. Then she headed down the road farther, meandering toward the mountains, her thoughts pinned firmly on Patriot.

The man had been haunting her dreams since their encounter. Seeing him working on the Posts' roof might have been coincidence. But now this?

Surely, it was a sign of some kind that she would cross paths with him again. And when she did...then what? His scorching kisses wouldn't be forgotten soon. Now she felt more drawn to the man, and for reasons beyond physical attraction.



When Aarica walked into the packed house, she paused in the entrance to gulp down her shock. She never realized there were this many thirsty people in Mersey. And wasn't there a limit on the number of people allowed in?

She pushed through the crowd to the bar. Fiona glanced up from pouring what appeared to be a line of ten shots. "I'm glad you're early," she threw out to her.

"What can I do?" She rounded the bar and jumped in to action.

Fiona reached under the counter and then grabbed something black. She tossed it at Aarica, and she caught it easily. Thank goodness her male cousins had kept her on her toes, always tossing dinner rolls or baked potatoes at her across the table.

"Put that on and take some orders," Fiona called out.

As she wrapped the apron around her middle and tied the strings, she bounced up to a group of customers clustered at the corner. "Hi! Have you been waited on?"

"No, and we're parched." One of the men grinned at her, earning an elbow in the side from his buddy.

"What can I get you?" she asked.

"You don't have a pen and paper."

"I don't need it. I'll remember."

"We'll see about that." The guy proceeded to give her a complex drink order, and his friend added to it with his own detailed drink as well as wings with a certain dipping sauce that she wasn't sure if the Painted Pig served.

"All right, I'll be right back with your drinks." She turned to the liquor wall and searched for the bottle.

"What did they order?" Fiona asked.

Aarica told her, still searching.

She grunted. "Assholes. Third bottle on the second shelf."

"Thanks." Aarica pulled it down as well as a second bottle. She grabbed

a couple glasses and quickly poured their drinks. After she delivered them to the customers and received their money, she spun to Fiona. "They want a dozen wings and siracha sauce."

"Dickheads. We don't have that sauce and they know it. They were fucking with you because you're new." Fiona shook her head. Clearly she was not the type of woman to take crap from any man. "Give them barbecue."

With a grin, Aarica nodded.

"Kitchen's through that door. Destiny's on the fryer right now. Give her your order, but waitresses set up the wing and fry baskets with sauces."

"Got it." She whirled into the kitchen and introduced herself to a young woman her own age manning the fryer. She gave her the order.

"Take these with you, would ya?" She pointed to the filled baskets.

"Sure thing." She grabbed the baskets and hurried to the front. Standing at the bar, she called out, "Ranch wings with two baskets of cheese fries!"

She barely got the words past her lips when she felt a stare on her. Not any stare, but a hot, heavy stare that drilled her into the floor. She relinquished the wings to the customers who'd ordered them and slowly turned her head to see who was watching her.

She knew before she even met his gaze. Patriot.

As their eyes locked, she felt as if all the air had been sucked from the place. His attention moved over her face...her hair...and inched down her white T-shirt. A tendon in the crease of his jaw bulged.

For a moment, she expected him to turn and leave. But in two strides, he reached the bar.

"Hey, Patriot. Your usual?" Fiona called out, thankfully oblivious to the electric heat passing between them.

"I want her." He pointed to Aarica.

Fiona's mouth fell open. So did Aarica's. Did he mean...?

A drink. He wants me to serve him.

Composing herself, she still sputtered when she said, "W-what can I get you?"

"Tequila and tabasco."

Spicy. Hardcore. She couldn't think of any drink that suited the man better. She nodded and somehow uprooted her feet from the floor to move for

the tequila bottle. She felt his stare moving with her and recalled every hint of pressure from his mouth on hers.

On knees as wobbly as a new foal's on the family farm, she managed not to stumble and drop the bottle. She grabbed a glass and poured. And poured. Not paying much attention to how much she poured, she didn't immediately realize she'd grabbed a margarita glass rather than a shot glass.

Hoping her new boss was too busy to notice, she threw a glance over her shoulder to find Patriot's undivided focus. For a blip in time, she watched him back, seeing everything as a movie reel. People milling behind him, laughing and talking, cheering over their team. Then the clink of glasses as Fiona amped up her speed in order to serve people faster.

Suddenly, the moment released her from its grip and Aarica set herself in motion again, grabbing the tabasco. She poured a hefty amount and then plunked it on the bar before Patriot.

His stare shifted from her at least. When he looked down at the big glass of enough alcohol to knock even a big man like him on his ass, the corner of his hard mouth tipped up. Without a word, he curled his fingers around the glass and dragged it across the bar toward him. The scraping noise of glass on wood sent echoes through her system.

"Thanks," he drawled out in that quiet voice filled with the intensity she remembered all too well whenever she thought of him.

She couldn't speak and only managed to nod. He stood there a heartbeat longer than any other man would to claim his drink and then she realized she'd forgotten the price of the drink. She started to open her mouth and then slammed it shut.

She couldn't call him back, because she wanted to leap over the counter and attack him. She'd pay for his drink from her own tips rather than call his name.

A bump from behind made her look around. Fiona stood there with her head cocked and a brow hiked high on her forehead. "What was that?"

Half a dozen answers revolved through her mind, none of which she could say.

"You know that drink goes in a shot glass, right?"

She nodded agreement. "I wasn't thinking."

"No, you were staring." Amusement settled across Fiona's pretty face. "Don't forget next time."

A fierce heat lit up her cheeks, and she ducked her head to hide the blush as she took several more orders and managed not to flub them up. The crowd seemed to swell and she served more wings and beer in an hour than she thought possible. When she finally got a moment to breathe, she stared out over the bar in search of Patriot.

People congregated in the main space, but finding his black leather jacket should be easy—if he hadn't removed it. The thought of his broad, sculpted chest glistening in the sun as he stood on the roof had her mouth going dry.

A few people moved, and she spotted black leather. Then more black leather. An entire long table at the rear was filled shoulder to shoulder with bikers.

Another nudge from Fiona brought her from her daze. “Those are the Dark Falcons. My man's the dark-haired one at the head of the table. I'm going to talk to him for a minute since we have a lull. Watch the bar, would you?”

She nodded, dizzy with excitement as she latched her gaze on to Patriot. In profile, his face took on that of a model and warrior with his straight nose and angled jaw. He spoke to someone next to him, and she studied his mannerisms intently. Then he shifted in his seat, lifting his drink to his lips, and she couldn't believe he was still nursing her awful creation.

Fiona reached the group and slipped her arms around her man from behind. He broke away from his conversation immediately and dropped his head against her chest. She leaned over him, hair swirling, and kissed him.

When Aarica pulled her gaze from the pair, she realized with a start that Patriot stood, topping most men in the room by a good six inches.

Oh God, he's moving this way.

At some point she'd lost all her bravado from the dark campsite where she begged him to give her release. While she thought of bumping into him over and over again since that time—and after seeing him at the Posts'—now that the moment arrived full force, she had no idea how to act around the man.

Nerves pulled her teeth down on her lip. Needing something to busy herself, she grabbed a bar cloth and began wiping the top where people vacated.

Suddenly, Patriot stood in front of her. She lifted her eyes and found his.

That night flooded in, along with several haunting dreams before this.

“What are you doing here?” he asked without any warmup conversation at all. Just direct, straight to the point.

“Working.”

“I thought you worked for the Posts.”

She nodded. “I do that too.” Latching her stare onto his hard mouth proved to be a really bad idea, because her insides jittered so much she didn’t know if she could pour a drink if he asked her.

“I’ll take a beer,” he said after a moment where she forgot how to breathe. She felt as if she might have a seizure. Why did he make her so nervous? She grew up around so many boys—not only her cousins but all their friends streaming in and out of the house. She knew how to deal with teasing as well as bullies. She’d crushed on some and hated others. Why did being around Patriot bring up every single one of those moments and direct them into one sharp pang of awareness?

Moving into action, she grabbed a glass. “Draft?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She poured the beer without a massive head of foam that would leak out her amateur bartender status. When she pushed the glass across the bar to him, he slid a hand toward it. She stopped, thinking his callused fingers might brush over her knuckles. Or the back of her hand.

Just touch me. Anyplace.

She sucked in sharply when his long finger extended to within a millimeter of hers. Her gaze locked on his finger as he stroked it along her own, without ever touching skin.

Jerking her stare to his, she recognized that same burning expression he’d worn in the campsite. She swallowed hard.

With a nod of thanks, he picked up his beer and turned away. She watched him walk to the back of the room and resume his seat at the table with the other bikers.

Crap—she forgot to receive payment again. It seemed she was buying Patriot two drinks tonight.

At that moment, a woman curled her hand around his shoulder, swung herself around his body, and landed right in his lap.

Aarica’s heart fell. He was attached? Either that or a player.

She twisted away and began to wipe down more of the bar in an attempt to keep her attention off the enticing man. Of course her mind—and her gaze—floated to that woman in Patriot’s lap. She was pretty. Aarica expected nothing else. Patriot could attract the most desirable of women.

He must be one of those guys her cousins warned her off of, with a new woman in his lap every night.

I was that woman... I'd still like to be.

She shot the table another look, only to see the woman no longer seated on Patriot’s lap and instead, Fiona leaned over him, talking. Then they both looked straight at her.

Quickly, she dropped her gaze. She couldn’t understand this attraction between her and the sexy older biker, but she was beginning to think her cousins were right—she was too innocent and would land herself in trouble.

One more peek at the man sporting the Dark Falcons patch had her burning.

She had a feeling that getting in trouble with Patriot would be the thrill of a lifetime.

Chapter Four

The bar patrons began to drift out in pairs or groups, until only a few die-hards remained at the bar. Plenty of Dark Falcons had called it a night too, each with early starts to their days. Despite operating his own business in the bike shop and having lenient hours, Tank bugged out to go home and meet his woman, who was getting off a late shift.

Dixon hung back, waiting on Fiona. There was no earthly reason why Patriot should stick around. Aarica went home shortly after the big rush, and he'd missed her—partly on purpose.

First, he told himself that she was nothing to him but a beautiful woman he'd made moan a little.

Then he tried to convince himself that men like him didn't involve themselves with innocents. Not only was he facing some hard charges barring conviction of stolen property but he had too damn many obligations to his crew and his club to put time into a woman.

After he finished the warm draft beer he'd nursed most of the night after giving up on the terrible drink she'd fixed him, he finally decided to ask her if he could take her home.

But she'd already left.

Maybe he was waiting to speak with Fiona about her new hire. Or to find out Aarica's address.

He spent a long minute battling with himself before giving in and approaching Fiona. She glanced up from the stack of money she counted. "Everything okay?" she asked him.

He leaned against the bar. "I wanted to ask about your new girl."

A beat of silence passed between them. "Ah. I thought something might be going on between you two. You know her?"

He opened his mouth to come out with some sarcastic comment about

her needing more training to make a decent drink, but at that moment Hunter walked up. “Can I do anything else for ya before I head out, Patriot?”

He and Fiona exchanged a look. She twisted her lips to contain her amusement.

Looking down the bar at a couple of the drunk customers slouched on the stools, he jerked his thumb their way. “Yeah, take one o’ them home so he doesn’t kill someone driving drunk.”

Hunter’s brows shot up and he scratched his jaw. “Take him home?”

“Yeah.”

“But he stinks.”

“Yeah, and he probably pissed himself too. Go on. Make a good Samaritan of yourself.” He didn’t wait to see if Hunter obeyed the command—he turned to Fiona. She bit her lower lip to restrain a laugh, but her cheeks were pink.

Hunter walked up to the guy and persuaded him to climb off the stool and follow him outside. After the door closed behind them, Fiona burst out laughing, and from across the room where Dixon was sweeping up some broken glass from the night’s festivities, the prez’s laughter boomed.

“That was mean,” Fiona said.

“The kid’s followin’ you around like a lost puppy, Patriot. Just give him a prospect patch already.” Dixon dumped the scoop of broken glass into the wastebasket.

He chuckled. “Fine. I’ll give him a patch and we’ll throw him a party.”

“Make him run for the beer for his own party,” Dixon added.

They all laughed.

Blade leaned on the bar, taking it all in as he usually did—sometimes thinking on things a long time before adding his two cents. So when he spoke, everyone stopped what they were doing to listen.

“What about that girl who was starin’ at you all night? You got somethin’ going with her?”

Everyone zeroed in on Patriot. “Nah, man. Met her on a campin’ trip and she keeps popping up where I’m at.”

“Maybe it’s not a coincidence,” Blade said with a hint of amusement.

“She’s young and innocent. She isn’t stalking me to become an old lady or even a honey.” Just the thought of Aarica being invited into the clubhouse

to be one of the women who stuck around to entertain the men and try to become more to them made his stomach turn.

“Your business, man. I only observe.”

“Yeah, you’re good at analyzing our bullshit. What about becoming a fully patched member of the Dark Falcons and then we might actually take your advice?” Patriot grinned.

“He’s not wrong, man,” Dixon added, leaning on the broom he used to help out his old lady. “We’ve been asking you for months now.”

Blade bobbed his head in a nod. “Been thinking on that too. I figure I’m at the club all the damn time anyway—might as well be your brother for real.”

“Oh hell.” Dixon moved in and gave Blade a bro-hug. Blade thumped him on the spine and turned to Patriot for more of the same.

“Better late than never, man.” Patriot warmed at the thought of having another brother, one he always felt belonged but who kept himself outside the club limits for personal reasons he’d never shared.

Dixon’s grin couldn’t spread any wider. “Time we really celebrate. Postpone that prospect party—we’re celebrating a new full patch tomorrow night!”

Patriot tapped a hand on the bar top. “A damn good night.”

“Would have been better with a decent tequila and tabasco, eh, Patriot?” Blade teased.

He shot a sideways grin at Fiona. “Fiona will have her new worker up to speed for next time.”

“She didn’t make many errors all night, and I threw her in without a life jacket. If she messed up your order, it’s because you make her nervous,” Fiona sassed him.

He chuckled, and Dixon outright laughed. Patriot turned for the exit. “I’m out. See ya later.”

They threw him waves as he left. Outside, the moonlight shed everything in a blue glow, and the gleam of chrome on his bike gave him the urge to take a much longer ride than the few miles to his house. He could take a detour the long way and down a few back roads that would lengthen his trip and give him time to think.

When he did just that, pointing his bike toward the loop that would

eventually lead him home, he found his head space wasn't filled with the crimes his crew was accused of, the sheriff poking around the clubhouse, adding Hunter as a prospect or Blade as a full member at long last.

No, every damn corner of his brain bulged with thoughts of Aarica. Seeing the woman at the house he was working on and now the bar had him wondering what the hell the universe was trying to tell him.

He didn't believe in chance. Things happened in life for a reason. He might not always understand them at the time, but later he could look back and see the purpose of an event or in crossing paths with someone at a certain point in time. Was he meant to help Aarica in some way?

Yeah, in relieving her of her virginity.

Dammit. If only she wasn't untouched.

Hell, who was he kidding? He still wouldn't touch her. Those big round eyes and the tanned skin that both spoke of the girl's wholesome life were enough to throw up a barricade between them. He stood on the side of the wall bathed in shadows. He never committed crimes or treated people dirty, but a man didn't reach thirty and not see some shit in life.

And Aarica surprised the hell out of him. She might proclaim herself a virgin, but the way she'd taken pleasure from him that night spoke of no innocence to the act. She'd been touched before. Or touched herself, at least.

Fuck. He squeezed the thought right out of his head before he wrecked his bike and ended up as a smear on the asphalt.

He'd almost touched her tonight. Fuck, he wanted to feel her silky skin again, even if only a brush of his fingertips over her knuckles. One touch would be enough—to send him over the edge, that was. No telling what he would have done if he gave in to his baser instincts.

He circled to his idea that she'd been placed in his path. To protect, maybe. To watch over, like a little sister. Fuck that. She wasn't his sister, and his urge to peel the clothes off her and fuck her was a volcano ready to erupt.

Jesus, he couldn't keep on this path. He'd lose his mind. If he spent any time in the Painted Pig, he'd bump into her, but he could avoid that easy enough. Drink at the clubhouse only, find something else to do on the nights when the brothers headed to the bar. Though that was still quite a few nights a week, since Dixon kept an eye on his woman and no one would ever harass Fiona with Dixon and all the Dark Falcons at his back.

Riding through the outer loop of Mersey with a lot of units up for rent

had him wondering where the hell Aarica lived. She deserved some cute little bungalow with a nice back yard where she could sit and entertain friends or sunbathe.

He slammed down the image of her clad only in a bikini, the round globes of her ass scantily covered by tight spandex, and wished to hell he wasn't so good at visualizing everything from roof peaks to custom interior cabinets and the ripe curves of a woman's body.

Finally, he turned his bike toward home.

Alone. And it needed to stay that way.



Patriot reached out to shake the client's hand before taking his leave. Another job in the bag, and the new flooring he wanted laid in his home could be completed within a few days with all hands on deck.

He was damn lucky to receive any work at all right now, with his reputation in the toilet.

As he left the house, he scanned the neighborhood. Across the street stood a park with a small playground and a couple picnic tables. He'd helped with the project, where they demo'd a crumbling home and reclaimed the lot for a public space.

He heard a loud cry of happiness and looked over to see a young boy standing there with a red rubber ball trapped in his arms. Across from him, eight feet or so away, stood Aarica.

The woman was going to kill him, he thought as his feet started to carry him across the road. His goal of reaching her never registered in his mind until he felt grass underfoot.

When he started toward the pair, the boy shot him a look from the corner of his eye. Then he dropped the ball and snapped his hands over his ears.

Patriot stopped walking. Crap—he hadn't meant to give the kid a fright.

Aarica shot a look around and spotted him. The electric jolt between their stares seemed to zip through the air like a live rope. He could tug it and bring her to him.

"Jay, it's okay. You're right—this man is working on the roof at your house and makes loud noises. Doesn't he?" She touched the boy's shoulder as she soothed him.

He nodded frantically.

Feeling the need to help in some way, Patriot held out his arms to indicate he wasn't holding a hammer.

"He doesn't have a hammer today," Aarica caught on at once. "See, Jay? He's just coming to say hello." She slid her stare to Patriot before returning her attention to her ward. She eased Jay's hands down and then tucked one through her arm, holding him close.

"Hi, Patriot. Jay, this is Patriot. Can you wave at him?"

The boy lifted his hand in a reluctant wave.

Patriot smiled. "I saw you playing ball. Are you having fun today in the park?"

He gave a slow nod as if he didn't totally trust Patriot not to make some noise to scare him. Slowly, Patriot walked over and retrieved the ball. Aarica's eyes followed him, and he felt the touch of heat.

Holding up the ball, he said, "Mind if I play too?"

He didn't know what possessed him to ask—maybe the need to assure the child that he wasn't a terrifying chump. Maybe the need to be near his babysitter.

Surprise registered in Aarica's eyes. "That would be so nice, wouldn't it, Jay? Would you like if Patriot joins us?"

He nodded again very slowly.

Patriot squared up with Aarica and Jay, standing about eight feet away as she had earlier. He met her gaze. "Do I bounce it or roll it?"

"Bounce. Jay just caught one on a bounce and that was a big deal!" The happy glint in her eyes told him how much she really cared about this boy, and that warmed the hell out of him.

She released Jay's arm. "Get ready. He's going to bounce the ball to you now."

The boy positioned himself, and Patriot released the ball, letting its weight set the momentum and give Jay time to react to catch it. The ball struck the grass in the center between them all, and Jay lunged forward to grab for it. The ball rolled by him, and Aarica used the toe of her shoe to direct it toward the child.

Laughing now, he closed his hands on the ball and picked it up with a huge grin. Aarica let out a cheer, and he jumped up and down.

They continued the same way several times until the child obviously grew more comfortable with Patriot. He couldn't yet say the same about Aarica. She watched him close, as if trying to figure out his motives behind joining their fun.

When the tinkle of the ice cream truck sounded in the distance, Jay's head snapped around to see. He made a noise, and Aarica nodded to him. "I think you can have a treat this afternoon, since you ate your lunch today."

The truck rolled up to the park and stopped. Patriot rolled the ball toward her. "I'll get it. C'mon, Jay. Show me what kind of ice cream you want."

They walked up to the curb where the truck sat with a menu of cool treats spanning the side. Jay pointed at one, and Patriot said, "Three please."

After he paid and they got their snack, Aarica led the way to one of the picnic tables. She sat next to her ward and Patriot took the seat across from her so he could look at her.

She helped Jay open his ice cream and then offered a soft smile to Patriot. "Thank you. You didn't need to treat us."

"My pleasure." He watched her tongue slip out and work over the rainbow-colored ice cream. The pull on his groin almost raised a groan in his throat. "Do you come to the park often?" he asked to keep his thoughts off splaying her out on this table and showing her another sort of treat.

"Once in a while depending on Jay's mood. He likes to play video games, and I prefer to get him outside in the fresh air." Her big eyes penetrated him with a deep look. "Are you on the job?"

"Just came from a meeting about one. I saw you guys playing."

Her soft smile this time revealed her white teeth—the wide smile he'd been burning for ever since meeting her. "I'm glad you stopped, Patriot."

His chest tightened. "Me too."

"We keep bumping into each other."

"That seems to be a thing with you." His tone came out gruff as he licked his rainbow ice cream.

She tipped her head, watching him. "Maybe we're meant to be friends."

Friends. Fuck, he never wanted to bend one of his friends over a picnic table before, but he nodded anyway. "Friends," he repeated.

Jay clapped his hands, and ice cream flew, landing on Aarica's arm. They all started laughing.



Aarica walked up the sidewalk and knocked on the red front door. If life taught her anything since striking out on her own, it was that she had zero time for shyness. Finding jobs to keep the money rolling in meant being bold enough to ask.

She waited on the stoop, hearing bumps and footsteps inside. When the door opened and the sweet little old man with drooping shoulders and a comb-over hairstyle faced her, she gave him a genuine smile.

“Hi, I saw your flyer up at the supermarket for a lawn mower.” She’d also seen him struggle to mow twice now from the Posts’ window.

He looked her over. “I expected a boy.”

“Girls can mow lawns too.” She softened her retort with the million-watt smile her cousins claimed would charm the Devil.

The man grunted. “I suppose that’s true enough. And my own daughter would have said the same thing. You could have called.”

“I know, but I think it’s more personal to meet face-to-face.” She glanced around at the high grass. “Seems as if you still need a worker around here.”

“I do. And since you’re the first person to come by, the job’s yours. I pay fifty dollars a week.”

Decent money. She wouldn’t complain when it meant paying her utility bills, filling up her tank or buying some food.

She nodded. “I’ll take it, and thank you. And you have a mower.”

“I do, out in the shed. If you go around the side, I’ll meet you there and unlock the door for you.”

She waited until he closed the door to shoot around the house, aware of some weeding that needed done as well. After she finished mowing, if she had time before her shift at the Painted Pig, she’d do that for the gentleman.

The back yard was just as unkempt as the front and definitely in need of a good cutting. The older man stood in front of the shed, wiggling a key into an old padlock holding the door closed. When he pulled the door open, he revealed the push mower that appeared to be in use since the eighties. She hoped it started easy. If not, her cousins had taught her a few tricks.

The man stepped aside, and she pulled the mower down a small ramp leading to the grass. He cocked a bushy brow at her. “You sure you can

handle this?”

She smiled. “I grew up on a farm. I’ll be fine.”

Sweeping a hand toward the mower, he said, “It’s all yours. Knock when you’re finished and I’ll pay you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kelley.”

“I never caught your name, young lady.”

“Aarica Byrne.”

He smiled for the first time. “Good luck getting through this high grass, Aarica.” He went inside, and she set to work starting the mower. It took a few tries, and the engine chugged a bit. In no time, she set off across the back yard, cutting paths and thinking she might need to rake up the clippings, bag it and put it at the curb for the older gentleman. But she wasn’t against going above and beyond the call of duty, especially for someone who clearly needed help.

When she got to the front yard, she was sweating. After grabbing a bottle of water from her car and drinking most of it, she started on the front.

A shrill whistle caught her attention. She looked up in search of the sound and spotted three guys sitting in a car—leaning out their windows more like—across the street. They watched her make another pass as though she was a sideshow.

She continued to ignore their whistles and catcalls, turning another corner to cross the yard for a fourth time. Glancing up, she saw the car door whip open and one of the guys fly across the neighboring yard. Stopping dead, she looked on with wide eyes.

What the...?

Another door opened, and then she spotted someone dragging the second man out by the seat of his pants as he obviously struggled to escape. A “someone” she’d recognize no matter if he was shirtless or wearing black leather and an MC patch.

A gasp flew from her lips as the second guy who’d been gawking at her a minute ago hit the turf. Patriot reached in for the third, and he leaped out the door and took off in a sprint down the street.

Without so much as a glance in her direction, Patriot turned and walked away. She scoured the parked cars and not far off spotted his construction truck.

Oh. My. God. What was that?

He'd totally put the smack-down on those young guys watching her mow the grass. She would march after him and ask what he was thinking, but something told her he wouldn't tell her anyway. Also, if he was going to act as a bodyguard protector, he could have at least stopped to talk.

After she finished the front lawn, she pushed the mower around the side. She stopped to yank some weeds and vowed to come earlier next week to do more work in the flowerbeds. She put away the mower, locked the shed again and went to the door for her first payday.

Mr. Kelley had a nod of approval for her, and she'd grown up around enough males to understand that as the best praise she could receive.

At home, she stripped off her sweaty cutoff shorts, tank top and the bikini top she'd worn beneath the tank to work in the hot sun. Even a cold shower couldn't cool off the flames of awareness inside her when it came to Patriot, though.

Of course, his mood changes were giving her mental whiplash. Next time she saw him, he might ignore her or act as though they were close friends. She hadn't yet figured him out, but she wanted to—bad.

She'd see him tonight.

Maybe.

She hoped so.

This time she'd make his tequila and tabasco right and ask him why he'd tossed those young guys out of the car. She already knew the answer, but she wanted him to admit that he was just as interested in her as she was in him, and that the looks they'd exchanged in the park or their interlude at the campsite hadn't been just a passing act on lust.

Three hours at the Painted Pig left her burning with frustration. Not one Dark Falcon walked through those doors, and her hopes of seeing Patriot again faded as the night wore on.

She threw Fiona another look and chewed on her lip. She could ask her new boss where they were, casual-like.

She leaned around Fiona for a glass to pour a draft beer for a customer. "Quiet here tonight," she said to lead up to her question.

Fiona looked toward the back of the room, where a few guys shot pool. "Yeah."

Aarica followed her gaze. “The Dark Falcons don’t come in every night?”

She smiled. “Only a few times a week. There’s a party at the clubhouse tonight.”

“Clubhouse? Where is that?”

“On the other side of town.”

Seeing she wouldn’t learn more information on that topic, she asked, “Must be important to celebrate in the middle of the week.”

Fiona smiled. “They’re patching in a member who is long overdue.”

She delivered the beer to the customer, placed the payment in the register drawer, the tip into her apron pocket, and thanked him with a smile. Then she began to dry glasses while talking to Fiona.

“I admit I don’t know much about MCs. Only what you see or hear on TV.”

“The Dark Falcons aren’t that kind of club. Not only is my boyfriend the president but my brothers are members. They’re on the up and up.”

A couple guys came in, followed by a deputy sheriff in uniform.

“I’ll take the deputy,” Fiona said to her quietly and moved to the bar. “What can I get you?”

“I’m looking for a man who frequents this bar. Hoping you might know his whereabouts tonight.”

Though she found it hard to focus on serving the other two customers, Aarica managed to pour their drinks while listening in on Fiona’s conversation with the lawman.

“I don’t know too many of the customers’ names, Deputy,” Fiona told him.

“I’m looking for a man named Logan Stone. Goes by the nickname of Patriot.”

Aarica’s insides steeled. Her head whipped around and she stared at the deputy and then shifted her gaze to Fiona.

Her boss didn’t move or indicate that she recognized the name. “Why are you looking for him?”

“I need to speak to him regarding a couple recent thefts. If he comes in tonight, tell him I’m looking for him and to call the sheriff’s department.”

Skitters of dread washed up from the depths of Aarica’s stomach and

spread—a wildfire through her system. What was going on? Thefts? Had Patriot been robbed? Her mind went straight to those guys he'd ripped out of their car and tossed in the yard like trash. Maybe they had retaliated. She couldn't help but think she was to blame if that was the case.

Just as the deputy turned to leave, the door opened again and three men entered, all in black, two bearing the Dark Falcons patch—and one of them was Patriot.

He sized up the situation in a heartbeat, gaze flicking from the deputy to Fiona's face and finally resting on Aarica's. Energy trilled through her at the impact of his stare, but then he directed his attention away.

"You looking to talk to me?" His voice grated across the space—and her senses—as he spoke to the deputy.

The lawman nodded.

"Let's take it outside." Without another word or a backward glance in her direction, Patriot turned and left the building, his friends behind him and the deputy bringing up the rear.

"Shit." Fiona threw her a look. "Hold down the fort." She grabbed her phone, shot off a text to someone—most likely her boyfriend and MC president. Then she ran out the door.

Aarica stared after them, gripping the edge of the bar. That pounding in her chest was dread. She knew little about small-town life but she wasn't blind. Something big was going down, with Patriot at the center of it all.

She inched out from around the bar, throwing a glance at the customers. Everyone seemed to be taken care of for the moment—could she possibly peek outside and see what was happening? What if she witnessed the object of her infatuation being arrested? Her cousins' voices rose in her head, telling her to back away—she did not want involved in that.

Still, she walked over to the door. As she flattened a hand against it and pushed it outward, her heart tripped faster. She poked her head out the crack she'd made and surveyed the parking lot.

Her gaze landed on black leather, and she followed the broad chest upward to find Patriot staring back at her. Quickly, she withdrew her head and hurried on wobbly legs to the bar once more.

She replayed the scene. The sheriff standing with Patriot, the other Dark Falcon and the third man who seemed to be some sort of sidekick, standing off to the side with an odd smirking smile on his face. Fiona beside them,

arms folded and looking about to slay a man. The family feeling she got from the group was something Aarica understood so well. If one of her cousins ended up in the principal's office, one of the brothers would hear about it and barge in to back him up, whether he was allowed to be there or not.

Seeing that just now made her more certain that Patriot was innocent in the matter.

Not five minutes passed and then a rumble started outside. Pretty soon she realized the noise came from the engines of every motorcycle in town associated with the Dark Falcons. Of course the moment she wanted to run to the door and look out again, a group of guys requested whiskey shots all around to celebrate a birthday that she stopped listening to the details about.

She set shot glasses up as fast as possible and poured down the row, took the money and was about to run to the door to look out again, when Fiona returned.

Feeling the air sucked from her lungs, Aarica made eye contact with her. Her sassy little boss appeared flushed. Ticked off too.

"Everything okay?" She attempted to keep her voice casual as Fiona returned to the bar.

"Freakin' peachy."

She burned to ask more, but Fiona hadn't been clued in about her hookup with Patriot or that they'd bumped into each other several other times. She also probably hadn't heard that he'd ripped two men from their car for whistling and calling to her, or that the third guy had sprinted down the road to get away from him.

Or that the attraction between them bordered on planetary. She certainly saw stars when she so much as thought about Patriot.

When Fiona extended a hand to reach for a glass, her hand trembled.

Alarm hit Aarica, and she placed a hand gently over her forearm. Fiona looked at her.

"I'll get the drink. Maybe I should pour you one too."

Fiona relinquished the glass to her and stepped aside to lean against the bar. "I'll have some Jack."

"Coming right up." She nodded and poured the customer's drink and then the shot for her boss. Despite the fact that drinking behind the bar wasn't allowed, this called for desperate measures. Her boss slammed it down and

set the glass on the counter.

“Dammit,” she ground out.

Concern left a sticky black dread inside Aarica. She pitched her voice low. “Can I help at all?”

She shook her head. “Thanks, but it’s something the guys will need to handle.”

She wanted to ask about the situation but bit off the words. “Well, the offer stands.”

“You’re a good woman, Aarica. Thank you.”

With a soft smile at the compliment, Aarica nodded. After a minute passed, she said, “Who was that third guy? The one not wearing a patch?”

“A guy who wants to become a prospect. Friend of Patriot’s. Why?”

That look on his face must have been a smirk of disgust at the sheriff was questioning his friend. She knew loyalty ran deep in MCs.

“No reason,” she said. “I just wondered.”

She listened to the engines rev again and finally fade away, and she knew Patriot wouldn’t return to the bar tonight.

Chapter Five

Son of a bitch. Whoever stole that shit and hung the crime on Patriot's neck better be living on another goddamn continent. Because when he got ahold of him, the guy'd be dead and Patriot in prison.

The anger inside him leveled on a boiling point, and he gripped the handlebars of his bike harder, wishing he could squeeze the metal into the shape of his hands.

The party for Blade had been in full swing when he, Diesel and Hunter made a run to the Painted Pig to pick up a big order of Blade's favorite hot wings from Fiona. They got no farther than the door when they were confronted by the deputy. After that, more talking in circles ensued, with the same questions being thrown at Patriot about the thefts.

When the guys caught wind, the celebration ground to a quick halt and shit went south from there. Everything from talk of a manhunt to find the real criminal to blaming it on the Mayhem, the biker gang they'd driven from Mersey months ago, sprang up.

In the end, he had to get the hell away. Except the open road couldn't offer the peace he sought tonight.

He kept seeing Aarica's eyes when she peeked out of the bar and saw him being questioned by the deputy. Goddammit, that made him see red more than actually being accused. Having her form a bad opinion of him... No. Just no.

Which was how he ended up at the Painted Pig. He hoped to hell Aarica was still here. If not, he planned to weasel her address out of Fiona. Either way, he would see the woman and set her straight about him.

But he had to keep his hands off her.

After parking near the place where the employees exited, he cut the engine and sat there, straddling his bike and waiting for her. A small older model car sat parked next to Fiona's, and as far as he knew, nobody else

worked tonight.

From through the thin wall of the bar, he heard some bangs and clanks as the pair closed down the kitchen. Soon the sounds stopped, and he listened to the thump of his heart.

What would he say to her?

I want you. More than I damn well should.

He gripped his handlebars again and stared unblinkingly at the open door. A moment later, a woman stepped out. Fiona spotted him, and he caught her look of surprise in the glow of the overhead parking lamp. He lifted a hand in acknowledgement.

When Aarica appeared behind her a second later, his stomach dipped. Hell, he couldn't fool himself into believing his own bullshit. He wouldn't keep his hands off her.

She locked her gaze on him where he waited for her in the darkness.

Fiona looked between them. "Everything okay?"

He gave a nod. Aarica pivoted to her, and the music of her soft voice reached him, twisting up his guts. "It's fine, Fiona. Thanks. See you next shift."

Fiona might be protective as hell of her employees, but she was also the old lady of a Dark Falcon, and she knew when to walk away and mind her own business. She climbed behind the wheel, backed out and drove off before Aarica moved.

He swung his leg off his Harley and approached her slowly. He felt so damn tense he might crack at any moment. Clenching his fists, he battled the urge to pin her against the wall of the bar and claim that sweet mouth of hers.

As he neared, she tipped her beautiful face up to him. That tumbling sensation of his heart rolling downhill should be nothing more than lust, but if that was the case, then why didn't he feel himself growing hard first?

"Thanks for waiting." His voice came out rough.

She visibly shivered and wrapped her arms around her middle. Her arms were bare in a T-shirt, and even in the low lighting coming from the parking lamp he realized her skin stood out in gooseflesh.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said.

He arched a brow. "You did?"

She nodded. "I wanted to ask why you pulled those guys out of their

car.”

Hell. He didn't know himself. Except he'd been working on the Posts' garage and heard them calling out lewd things to someone. When he came out to investigate—and spotted Aarica pushing a lawnmower across the street wearing nothing but shorts that revealed the undercurve of her ass and a string barely holding up her breasts with what hardly passed as a tank top over the ensemble, red lights pulsed before his vision.

“I was teaching them a lesson.”

She tipped her head in that adorable way she had where she looked both young and full of innocence and wore a skeptical don't-bullshit-me expression at the same time. “A lesson in what?”

“Manners.” He took a step closer. To his relief, she stood waiting. When he closed his hands around her upper arms, chilled to the night air, and lightly rubbed some warmth into her skin, he knew for sure he lost his mind.

Her eyes widened at the first stroke of his hands. She inched closer, but no encouragement was needed—he caught her in his arms, drawing her against his length.

Face tipped up and her lips parted on a gasp, she let her eyelids flutter shut, giving him ample opportunity to study her beauty unchecked. When she opened her eyes, the expression he wore drew a harsh moan from her lips.

“Patriot...”

“What is it about you that I can't stay away from? Or is it you who can't stay away from me?” he rasped.

“Both.” She ran her tongue along her lower lip, making it gleam in the dim lighting.

“Fuck.” The curse tore from his throat a split second before he wrapped her long hair in his fist, tipped her head all the way back and lowered his mouth to the thumping pulse in her throat.

She squelched a cry and threw her arms around him as he bent her backward, sucking on her neck and drawing her onto tiptoes to move closer to him.

He tasted up and down the column of her neck and reached her ear. With his mouth close to the shell, he rumbled, “I wanted to beat those guys' asses.”

Her fingers tightened on his shoulders. “Why?”

“Because I don't want anybody looking at you.” Damn, that was some

‘you’re mine’ bullshit and a property patch about to be tossed down.

“Why?” she pressed on, twisting her head so the silky strands of her hair slipped through his fingers.

Their gazes clashed.

“Because I’m the only one who can do that.” He kissed her.

She opened to him immediately, giving his tongue every advantage to sweep the hot interior of her mouth and dive deep. His cock stretched against his fly as he dragged her body into his hold and pushed her against the wall as he wanted to do before.

She broke from the kiss long enough to lever herself in a display of strength, shimmying up his body to wrap her thighs around his waist.

He rocked his cock into her. She moaned a plea against his lips that had him shaking for control. He would not take her out in the open night air a second time.

As she molded herself to his body, he took control again, kissing her until he couldn’t remember any reason on Earth why he *couldn’t* take her.

He went for her delectable throat again, drawing paths up and down in long sweeps with his tongue as his cock damn near broke his zipper. The taste of her. Those tiny moans breaking from her lips. All the sweetness he shouldn’t want but dammit, he did.

Raising his head, he pierced her in his stare. After a few heartbeats, her eyes cleared of some of the passion.

“You know what you do to me?” His voice roughened more.

“The same thing you do to me. I knew it in that campsite, when I saw you on the roof, the first time I saw you here at the bar...and the park when you were so wonderful with Jay.”

“Dammit.” He braced her into the wall and twisted his head from the truth.

Her light touch on his jaw brought his face to hers. Their lips hovered so close, he tasted her without so much as a flick of his tongue. “Why fight it? We both know there’s a reason we keep getting thrown together.”

“Because you’re too young.”

“Old enough to be on my own and make my own way.”

He let her slip down the wall a little, but she refused to unlatch her heels from his spine and anchored herself in place.

“I’m not that inexperienced, Patriot. I just haven’t gone all the way because I was taught to save that for someone special.”

Jesus H. Christ. His eyes fluttered shut. Special. That sure as fuck wasn’t him.

“I’m not the man you’re looking for then.”

She brushed her fingers over the stubble on his jaw. Leaning in, she planted her baby-soft lips over his in an insistent stamp. It felt like heaven. It felt like hell.

It felt like a claiming.

Maybe he had no control over this attraction, after all.

He kissed her with all the heat scorching his insides, dragging her closer and sinking his tongue into her mouth and then chased it around until he thought fuck it, he’d take her up against the wall of the bar and damn the consequences.

“Not your first time.” He panted. “I won’t take you here for your first time.”

“Then come home with me.” Her voice came out as the plea of an angel, which only made him feel blacker.

“Aarica. Fuck, I want to. But I can’t.”

She stared at his mouth, eyes downcast and he spotted the web of shadows cast across her cheeks from her long lashes, just as before at camp.

“What do I need to do to prove to you I’m good enough?” she whispered.

Her words punched the air from his lungs. It took him a second to sputter through the thoughts in his mind before he could spit out a sentence. “You think you’re not good enough? Hell, baby. You’re everything a man like me could ever dream of having. But that’s just it—it’s a fantasy.”

“Why a fantasy? I know you’re not a bad guy. You work hard for a living. You do good work. You do good things with the club. What about that autism night at the fair? And I know that whatever the deputy is questioning you about, you didn’t do it.”

He dropped his head forward. “I came back to convince you that I didn’t and you already knew.” His rumbled words against the heat of her throat made her shiver in his arms.

“I don’t know why I know, but I do. Deep down, I just feel it. There’s a

knot from here”—she pressed her fist over her heart—“to here.” She pressed it over his.

Looking down into her eyes, he knew the truth. And it plowed him over.

Throat constricted, he nodded. “You’re right. But it won’t begin with lust. I’ll treat you the way you deserve to be treated.”

He let her slide down his body, and this time she lowered her feet to the ground. Bracing his hands on each side of her head, he leaned in and kissed her soft and slow. She might want to throw a match on a gas line and burn with him, but he intended to light a match and hold it to a wick, giving them time to get to know each other.

Her breaths came out as sharp pants. He pulled from the kiss and gathered her into his arms, cuddling her soft body against his chest and tucking her head beneath his chin. Hell, how had this happened? There could be a better time in his life to find a woman he finally cared about. The last thing he wanted to do was drag her through this legal shit with him.

He released her and took her by the hand. When he led her to her car, she threw him a look. Those big eyes nearly ripped away what little control he managed to find.

“You’ll follow me home?” She stared up at him.

“I’ll follow.”

She unlocked her car and slid inside. He watched her close the door before walking to his motorcycle and climbing on.



Her top was down around her waist and her nipples wet from Patriot’s mouth. He ravished her with lips and tongue before sanding his beard stubble across her flesh to snake his tongue around her other nipple.

She sank her fingers into his hair, pulling on him and begging the only way she knew how. She’d tried with words and to no avail. If he wouldn’t listen to her, then maybe her body would do a better job of showing the man just what she wanted.

He grazed her sensitive bud with his teeth before issuing a growl and lifting his head. “I promised we’d take it slow.”

She searched his face, wearing creases of hardcore desire around his eyes and mouth. “What does slow mean? Holding hands in the Mersey Park?”

Kissing on the Ferris wheel?”

He nodded. “For starters.”

“I don’t need a teenager’s love story. I’m not a teenager. I’m ready for a man, and you’re it.” She hated that she sounded so breathless and overeager, but the inferno inside her was getting the best of her.

“You deserve—” he started.

She cut through him. “I deserve the man I chose to pleasure me. Unless he doesn’t want to.”

That got to him. She watched the change in his eyes as the pupils drew to pinpoints. And the tendon in his jaw flickered as though he ground his teeth.

He dragged in a deep breath. “Baby...”

Long seconds passed.

“Fuck!” He lifted her and carried her through her living space to the corner where her bed sat. He dumped her onto the mattress and went straight for her jeans.

Her insides tumbled. Her clit throbbed, and juices flooded out to wet her panties. Grasping his shoulders, she tried to pull off his shirt, glad he’d shed his leather jacket at the door before scooping her into his arms.

He popped the button of her jeans, and a shiver coursed down her spine. His eyes burned into her as he skimmed the zipper downward and held her prisoner with his stare when he dipped his callused fingers into her panties.

Shaking with need, she pushed at her clothing. He helped her out of her jeans and panties, leaving her top ringed around her middle and her bra and shoes somewhere near the door.

When he stared down at her, she saw his throat work with a swallow. “You’re so damn beautiful. All this warm, perfect skin.” He ran a fingertip down her stomach to where her brown curls began. He continued downward, swishing the same finger through her curls, ruffling them, until he found her straining, wet bud.

The instant his fingertip landed atop her bundle of nerves, she trembled and cried out. “Yes, Patriot!”

“Unless I don’t want to. Jesus Christ,” he ground out a moment before dropping his heated mouth to her core.

Her mind blanked as he loved her with his mouth. A slow sucking kiss that expanded to long laps of his tongue. He drew her legs apart and then up

and over his shoulders. When he yanked her down the bed and impaled her pussy on his long tongue, the waves started coming.

She thrashed, gripping the covers, his hair, his shoulders, anything to anchor her to this world as the biggest orgasm of her life rose up. It clutched her like an animal tossing its prey, and helpless, she gave herself up to it.

He sank his tongue in and then pulled it free to work up to her clit once more. As he sank two fingers deep into her pussy, her insides flooded and clamped around his digits.

“I need your cock. Need you. Patriot!”

“Mmm.” Without moving from his position, he watched her coming apart for him. He added a third finger, stretching her to what must surpass any man’s size—his hands were so big. But the burn of being stretched so far stole her last shred of sanity, and she came.

Screams escaped her lips, and she writhed under him. He didn’t stop loving on her, eating her pussy until she thought she’d lose her mind, and then tipped over the edge and started to climb a second time.

Was that possible? Coming two times in a row? She was about to find out.

When she peaked again, he slowed time, space and every cell of her body to his own schedule. His fingers moving slow as he gave long, agonizingly slow licks of his tongue. She shook and gasped his name while he dragged her release on and on.

Small twitches of ecstasy made her body jolt with every touch, and a final cry tore from her.

Dazed, she centered on his face. A smug expression loomed in his eyes, along with small creases at each corner.

As she looked on, he flattened his tongue and drew it up, up, through her slick, quivering folds, over the sensitive bud of her clit and then he slowly lifted it from her skin.

She trembled. “Patriot,” she rasped.

His stare smoldered through her. “You like that?”

Words couldn’t express the sensations that overlapped feelings layered with emotions. She drew him up her body. He hovered over her, arm muscles bulging. Tenderness washed over her, so deep and strong that she had a new awareness of what it all meant. She might be inexperienced but she wasn’t

stupid. She was falling for him.

She reached up and stroked his jaw, learning the angled lines and every hair sprouting from it. “I’m ready for more,” she whispered.

Running his tongue over his hard lower lip, he studied her. “I’m not.”

She blinked in shock.

His answering smile told her she wouldn’t receive more from him tonight—what she got would have to tide her over until he made the choice to move forward. Patriot wouldn’t be pushed, no matter how much she wanted to feel him joined with her. He considered waiting as an act for her own good, and maybe he was right.

Still, she felt her lips pout outward.

He chuckled and lightly brushed a kiss across her mouth. “You’re beautiful, sweet and delicious. I want more of you, baby. Never doubt that. I wanted more on that mountain and more than ever now. If I could spread these tanned legs and work my hard cock into you right this minute without feeling like a son of a bitch, I would.”

His dirty talk had her dragging a deep breath into her lungs and shudders passing through her body.

Another full heartbeat passed between them before he did a pushup and moved off the bed. He stood at the side—fully clothed, damn him—and gave her one dark perusing look.

He started to turn to go.

Panicked, she sat up. “Wait! When will I see you?”

“I’ll find you.” He threw her a crooked grin that curled her toenails. He took a few more steps before he tossed a glance over his shoulder. “No more mowing lawns in those shorts and bikini top.”

She raised her jaw. “Or what?”

“Or I’ll do more than toss those guys out on the lawn.” Without another word, he left her apartment.

All at once, the situation hit her with excitement and a level of happiness she’d never known.

At the click of the door, she buried her face in her hands and giggled. Her family would tell her she’d lost her mind...and she couldn’t care less.

Chapter Six

“Jay, would you like to play a board game before your mom comes home?” The boy sat at the window staring outside, but he refused to go out since the hammering episode bothered him last time.

Aarica rested a hand on Jay’s shoulder and turned him from the window. Admittedly, some of her urge to change his fixation was her own question of why Patriot and his crew weren’t outside working right now, when clearly the project wasn’t finished.

The boy turned to her, and she led him to the coffee table, where they knelt over the board game she already set up.

“Blue,” he said.

“You want to be blue?” She smiled at him as he enthusiastically spun the dial in the center of the board.

Several minutes passed in innocent fun, but her mind kept returning to Patriot. Not only did the man have a grip on her she couldn’t explain, but she was excited to open up to someone she felt close to—someone she could trust—to share her personal goals with.

Getting off the farm was only her first step. She never wanted college for herself, but she didn’t want to work three jobs to have enough to live in a small efficiency apartment either.

She enjoyed working with Jay more than anything else she’d ever done. She’d been looking into some online classes or aide programs near Mersey to widen her scope of knowledge. Fact was, she’d lucked into working with Jay in the first place, and she wanted to continue with him or others who required extra guidance.

She’d seen people at the grocery stores assisting adults through their own purchases and taking them to doctor’s appointments and such. She wanted to be there for someone in that capacity, and from what she’d seen, she only needed a little training.

She'd been thinking on it a long time, and coming to Mersey to take the position with the Posts had been the first step in her plan. Now, understanding this was where her heart lay, she was ready to take a step forward.

It would still be nice to have someone to confide in who wasn't her family member. After all, they'd support her if she told them she decided to build her own rocket and fly to Mars. She needed someone less bias to bounce things off. Maybe spoken aloud, her decision would begin to feel real too.

She glanced toward the window and the clear blue Tennessee sky. Why *wasn't* Patriot working today? He spread his time between projects, probably based on demand, but it did feel rather odd as well as quiet around here.

Jay won the first game, and she won the second. Grinning, she told him, "If I lose the next round, I'll buy you a snow cone the next time the ice cream truck comes around."

His smile couldn't widen more at the challenge. "You're...on!" he said in his disjointed speech she was growing to love hearing from him the more he opened up and talked to her.

In a short time, they'd become friends and he seemed to trust her—a huge step for a child with autism. He also liked having her near and had taken to holding her hand even if they walked to the kitchen for lunch. All these things warmed her heart, and she couldn't wait to come back to see him next time.

They got halfway through the third game when Jay's momma entered the house. Carrying a bag of groceries and with her face flushed red from the heat of the day, she walked to the kitchen counter and dumped the bag on it.

Jay looked up at Aarica, and she knew from his crestfallen expression what he was thinking—they hadn't finished their game and he wouldn't have a chance to win that snow cone.

She smiled at the boy. "I'll still buy you that snow cone. We can finish this game next time I see you. Wanna go see what your momma brought home in that bag?"

The sad look in his eyes cleared, and he jumped up from his cross-legged position around the coffee table to run to the kitchen.

Aarica cleared away the game and placed it on the closet shelf before she walked in to see Mrs. Post speaking to her son as he unpacked the bag. He

found his favorite fruit drink and asked for some right now.

His mother allowed him half a glass before dinner and then turned to Aarica with a smile. “How was everything today?”

“Great. We get along so well. I love spending time with him.”

She beamed. “I’m so glad to hear it. I know having him several days is hard on my mother sometimes. She’s getting older and Jay can be a handful. Maybe we could discuss you coming an extra day every week?”

Her smile spread. “I’d love that,” she said with genuine feeling and a lump rising in her throat.

“It’s great to have someone Jay connects to sitting with him, and I can see he’s learning things from you that others haven’t taught him before. It’s only been a few days and I already see a change.”

Aarica helped Jay pour his juice and then replace the cap on it. She told him to place it in the refrigerator and watched him complete the task. Then she turned to Mrs. Post.

“Can I ask about the crew working on your garage?”

Her eyes took on a flat look as she turned to Aarica. “What about them?”

How to phrase it so it didn’t sound as though she only wanted to see the hot, shirtless man on the roof again? The man who gave her two back-to-back orgasms and said things that blew her mind.

“I wondered if you told them not to come today because the noise upset Jay last time.”

“Oh. No. Haven’t you heard about the crew?”

Tensing, she shook her head.

Mrs. Post continued, “They’re under investigation for thefts on the properties they work on. Several things missing, including a motorcycle.”

Stunned beyond words, she took in the information while at the same time downright rejecting it. She had not been told about the motorcycle. No wonder the sheriff was after a member of the Dark Falcons. Everything was pointing directly to Patriot.

He was a biker, and guys involved in the MC life were known to have bad reputations. But she never looked into his eyes and saw a criminal. At the bar, the guys were nothing but respectful, and the other patrons seemed to respect them rather than fear them. Surely, that was a sign of their upstanding reputation in the town.

When she remained quiet, Mrs. Post nodded. “It’s shocking, I know. As a single woman, I always investigate any repairmen or servicemen, and Stone Construction has a very good rating and a lot of good reviews in Mersey.”

“Do you think they did it?” Her voice came out weaker than she wanted.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But I felt better putting off the rest of the garage work until they know more about the thefts. Since the garage is under roof, the other things can wait, and I thought postponing the work is best.”

Poor Patriot. He must be beside himself. First the accusations that sent the deputy sheriff after him and now losing work and income from the mess.

Fiona hadn’t scheduled her to work tonight, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t go into the bar looking for Patriot. He said he’d find her, but no telling how long that would be, and she wanted to speak to him. He might be a big tough guy, but she needed to make sure he was okay.



Patriot leaned his elbows on the table and dropped his head. “I can’t believe shit’s gone so sideways.”

Dixon pushed out a rough growl. “Your crew has to be lyin’. One of them stole that shit.”

He grunted. “The sheriff questioned all of them twice.”

“But did he search their homes?”

Patriot lifted his head and speared his prez in his stare. “I don’t hire dumb asses. If one of them did it, they wouldn’t be stupid enough to keep the stolen goods on their property.”

Dixon scrubbed his hands over his face. “They’re gunning for your ass, Patriot. Pure and simple.”

“Someone made it look as if it was me or my crew behind it. Someone who’s been watching us and tracking our whereabouts.”

Resting against the back of his chair, Dixon seemed deep in thought, working over the conundrum. “It definitely seems that way.”

“We just need to find out who this motherfucker is and make him pay for what he’s doing to my business. I’ve spent the last ten years building a name for myself. I won’t just let it crash and burn without putting up a fight.”

“No way in hell. We have to find this person. Did you give the sheriff a list of names of all the guys on your crew over the past five years?”

“Yeah, I got him the information. But I doubt he’ll find more than I did when I questioned them.” He and Dixon’s eyes met. “Without security footage from either of the homes, we have no damn clue who really did it, and I’m in line for arrest.”

“Man, you don’t know that.”

He stared bleakly at his prez. “Bet me. The sheriff’s coming with a warrant for my arrest any time, and I’ll have no choice but to go with him.”

“Fuck.” Dixon shoved away from the table, and Patriot got up to lean over the table, hands braced on the edge he’d created in the wood himself.

A long silence fell over them, and Patriot’s thoughts darkened more. The sheriff mentioned having enough to charge him, and Patriot had no damn clue who he gleaned his information from, but he didn’t think the sheriff was bluffing.

“Everything’s fucking falling apart,” he grated out.

Dixon turned and exchanged a look with him. “It’s not over, man. Whatever happens, we’re behind you. We believe in your innocence, and we’ll all go down in flames trying to find who the real thief is if it means clearing your name.”

His throat thickened. “I appreciate it, brother.”

Dixon threw a look at the big neon beer clock on the wall that used to hang in Fiona’s bar. “I gotta go. I told Fiona I’d be in to help her move some heavy shit in the back to make room for a new fryer.”

“Yeah, take care of your business, man.” Patriot straightened from his hunched pose over the table.

Dixon walked over and gripped his shoulder hard enough to bruise. The pressure gave him hope that even if things went to hell and he couldn’t clear his name, the brothers would still accept him back into their fold after he did his time.

Fuck.

He gripped Dixon’s hand and then the man walked to the door that kept their conversation private from the rest of the club. He whipped it open and there stood Hunter.

“What do you want?” Dixon’s tone made the guy back up a step.

Hunter threw a look past the prez to Patriot. What he saw on the young guy’s face caused an eel of dread to slither through his gut.

“I was coming to find you, man. The sheriff...” He pivoted, and Patriot spotted the sheriff standing in the silent clubhouse behind him, along with his deputy. Hunter looked at Patriot. “They want you to come quietly.”

“Of course they do. They know we can take the motherfuckers.” He might sound like an asshole, but being arrested for a crime he didn’t commit wasn’t going down easy. He might want to fight his way out of it and escape, but he knew it wasn’t the right thing to do.

Dixon turned to him. “We’ll hire you the best fucking lawyer in Tennessee.”

He clenched his jaw. “I’m countin’ on it.” He pushed past Hunter and into the big open room where the music had stopped. All the guys stood staring at him in various poses of menace, and the honeys clustered in a corner, looking afraid.

“Logan Stone. We have a warrant for your arrest.” The sheriff’s official-sounding tone sent his stomach dropping even further.

This was really happening.

Biting off his fury, he leveled his glare on the sheriff. The man had been a friend to the Dark Falcons during the time they were trying to drive the Mayhem gang from the town. And countless other times they’d worked together on various charity rides benefitting Mersey. Now this.

“I guess loyalty and friendship only go so far,” he said roughly.

He walked up to the sheriff and looked the man in the eyes. “You gonna slap the cuffs on me or can I walk outta my club in front of my brothers with dignity?”

Sheriff Gardener nodded. “Don’t give us any trouble, and we won’t give you any in return.”

He grunted. “Oh I intend to raise hell when I get to the jail. I didn’t commit this crime, and I plan to free myself.”

“You have the right to do just that, son. C’mon then.” The sheriff led the way out of the clubhouse.

Patriot followed. Behind him, not a murmur sounded among his brothers...his family.



Aarica’s nervous energy had her lending a hand to Fiona despite the fact

she wasn't on the clock. The last two hours she sat wringing her hands while she waited for a sign of Patriot—or any Dark Falcon—but not one man wearing the patch had entered the Painted Pig all evening.

She cleared some glasses off a table and carried them behind the bar. Fiona looked up, her brows drawn in worry too. Dixon was supposed to come move some things in the kitchen to make room for a new fryer, since business boomed and their equipment couldn't keep up with the demand for all the wings, fries and onion rings.

Fiona tried for a smile, but it appeared halfhearted. “Thanks, Aarica. You don't need to work when you're not getting paid.”

She twisted her fingers. “Won't you tell me where to find Patriot?”

She bit down on her lip as if contemplating the question Aarica had already asked twice before. “I can't. It's sort of club code—we keep our business private.”

“And I'm not in the club,” she added flatly.

“Aarica, I'm sorry. I don't know the state of Patriot's mind, and I can't say if he wants to be found right now. Especially right now.”

The door burst open. She whirled to stare at Dixon striding straight toward them. Before he reached the bar, she could see something bad had happened. Anger rolled off the big man in waves.

She and Fiona stepped up at the same time. “What happened?” Fiona demanded.

He didn't grace Aarica with so much as a look when he answered, “Trouble. Shit went down.”

Her heart slammed hard and fast, a piston with too much power behind it. “Where's Patriot?” Damn her voice for wavering instead of coming out strong as she intended.

Dixon swung his gaze her way. “In jail.”

Her whole body felt as if someone had yanked the muscle from it, leaving her unable to support herself. “Oh no...” she barely whispered.

“What the hell happened?” Fiona leaned into the bar toward her man.

“Sheriff Gardener came for him. Guess they have enough evidence to charge him. We're goin' over now, though we probably can't bail him out until morning after he goes before the judge.”

“Oh my God,” Fiona said weakly.

Aarica clutched the edge of the bar. Her fingers tightened. In one swift move, she launched up and over the top, landing on the other side next to Dixon. “Take me with you!”

He gaped at her, and Fiona’s jaw dropped.

“I...I’m sorry, Fiona. I shouldn’t disrespect your property that way, but I couldn’t move around fast enough to make my point.”

The woman shook her head. “You better take her.”

She searched the woman’s face for the source of amusement she heard ringing in her voice but saw no indication as to why.

Dixon gave a stern nod. “I’ll be home when I can. Be careful, okay?” He reached out and pulled Fiona onto tiptoe, leaning over the bar to kiss her.

Aarica hurried to the door while they said their goodbyes. With her car keys already in hand, she started toward her parked vehicle. Dixon came out and waved to her. “Follow me.”

She nodded and silently climbed behind the wheel. As she performed the automatic actions of driving, her mind couldn’t be further from the task.

Patriot arrested.

That must mean they had hard evidence against the man. She knew injustices happened every day, and why it had to happen to Patriot, she had no idea. The man kept his head down, worked hard for everything he had.

Her insides sank lower when they pulled into the Mersey jail. She didn’t want to think about those small holding cells and how a big man such as Patriot would deal with that.

Dixon gave her a nod as she fell into step next to him. “Keep quiet.”

She nodded and trailed along. When they entered the front door, a wall of black leather greeted them. What seemed to be half the Dark Falcons stood here waiting for their president to give orders on how to make this situation better for their friend.

Aarica pressed herself into the group and spotted that guy again—the one who wanted to be a prospect.

Dixon stepped up to the lady at the desk. “What can you tell me about the charges?”

“I can only tell you that your friend is being processed right now. In the morning, he’ll speak with his lawyer and be brought in front of the judge for arraignment. At that point, you can bail out Mr. Stone and he will be required

to show up in court on the scheduled date.”

“I know all that.” Dixon slashed a hand through the air. “I’m asking about the charges. What evidence do you have to make the arrest?”

The woman eyed him as if trying to decide to tell him. Dixon wasn’t to be ignored.

“Some of the parts from the stolen motorcycle was found on Mr. Stone’s motorcycle.”

Aarica sucked in a gasp that had Dixon’s head swinging her direction. Then he pierced the receptionist in his glare. She shrank under the dark weight of it.

“That is not possible,” he said evenly through clenched teeth.

Around Aarica, the men erupted with bellows of injustice and foul-play. Someone jostled her, and she had to grip the edge of the desk to keep from being knocked over. She could see now how situations such as this got quickly out of hand, and that couldn’t happen.

“Look, this isn’t helping Patriot! Take it outside, guys!” Her raised voice projected a notch higher than the noise they made, and for the second time, Dixon gave her that look as though he couldn’t believe her behavior.

He turned to the guys. “She’s right. Wait outside.”

Grumbles sounded, but the guys filtered out the door, leaving her and Dixon.

She looked up at him. “It’s not true. How did it happen?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.” He shouldered past her, and she grabbed his forearm.

His penetrating gaze unnerved her, because she recognized a glint of helplessness there. “Go on home,” he said. “Come in the morning and we’ll get him out. Okay?”

She nodded and let her hand drop. As she watched the strong man fighting for her own strong man walk out, she could only feel a hopeless weight slump over her shoulders. Things didn’t look good for Patriot.

Chapter Seven

The first face he spotted when the doors opened, and he walked out as a free man, was Aarica's.

God, her beautiful face broke his damn heart. Her big eyes were filled with concern—for him.

She pushed past his brothers who also showed up for his release from jail and ran straight into Patriot's arms. He caught her against him, telling himself to push her away, tell her to go, even as he brought her tighter to his chest and bowed his face into her thick hair.

Only milliseconds passed before he let her go and started toward his brothers. He felt her hand clasp around his but shook her off.

"Patriot. Stop! I know what you're doing and you can't ignore me!" Her voice pitched higher over the shouts of the guys in his club.

He stopped walking and turned to her. "What the hell are you doing here?"

The gruff tone of his voice made her flinch, and fuck, he hated himself more.

"You can't get involved with me. Don't you see that? You can't get into this."

She narrowed her eyes. Fire lit them. She edged right up to him. If she were a man, he'd call it squaring up and he'd ready himself for a fight. But this little woman was about to throw down against him. For what?

"Too late," she spat. "I'm here. And you're not getting rid of what you know we have just because you think I'm too innocent for all this."

The room went silent. Big, rough bikers silenced by the tirade of a woman who weighed a hundred twenty pounds.

She reached out and snagged his hand, pressing down on his knuckles with her fingers. "Let's go."

Patriot felt the tug on his hand as she pulled him along, out of the building. Dixon fell into step beside him, cracking the hell up over all of it.

“You better listen to her. She’s got spunk, that one. You shoulda seen her pull Fiona’s signature move yesterday, jumping over the bar and demanding that I bring her here with me,” Dixon said.

Patriot raised his brows, and Dixon nodded. At his side, Aarica marched them out the doors as if she hadn’t just overheard what Dixon said about her. The guys held the door wide for him to exit through. He stepped out into the air and dragged in a deep breath of mountain air.

Aarica squeezed his hand. Looking down, he saw the understanding reflected in her gaze—she knew the toll being behind bars overnight had taken on him.

Hell, maybe she really was the woman he needed by his side. Before now, he hadn’t witnessed her stubborn streak or the bald determination the woman possessed to get her way. Seeing it now made him realize he had no idea of the things she was capable of, because until now he brushed her off as being too young. But young didn’t mean immature or incapable.

Aarica was far from flighty, and she knew what she wanted. Was he any different at her age? Was he any different now?

They might be separated by an age gap, but that didn’t mean they weren’t suited to each other. He turned his hand, palm against hers, and clasped her fingers.

She snapped her head around to stare at him. Then her eyes lit up, a smile crossed her face. Damn, he really was important to this woman.

The guys parted to reveal one of the stunning new custom bikes Tank recently built and had been sitting on the showroom floor.

His throat closed off as Dixon gripped his shoulder.

“We couldn’t get your bike out of impoundment, so we thought you could put the first few miles on this baby.”

Fuck—how could he have let his revelation of what really happened slide? The thrill of walking free had his brain lapsing from the one thing he’d spent all night locked up dwelling on—burning over.

He looked around, a growl bursting from his throat. “Where is that little shit?”

Dixon arched a brow. “Who?”

“The prospect-wannabe. Hunter. Where the fuck is the prick?” he growled out.

Aarica rested a hand over his chest as if she could hold him back.

“What the hell are you talking about, bro?” Dixon asked.

“I gave Hunter my bike to wash and detail. Then suddenly the sheriff’s arresting me because they found stolen parts on it.”

“Oh my God!” Aarica stepped away, hand over her mouth.

He turned to her. “What is it?”

“Hunter is the guy who follows you like a puppy?”

He wanted to punch something at the mention of the guy. “Yeah, why?”

“I noticed something off about him. He was always in the corner just watching and wearing a weird look on his face. Actually...that look I saw on his face when you were outside the Painted Pig speaking with the deputy...”

Heart hammering, he waited for more.

“Hunter had this twisted smile. At the time, I thought of it as a smirk but I thought I was reading it wrong, that if he was loyal to you that he was really angry with the deputy.”

“He’s not loyal to me. Thank fuck I never patched him in even as a damn prospect.” His words fell with all the heavy weight of bullets raining down on the head of the man who would pay the price—right after he found him.

He looked at the guys still fanned around him. “Get on the road and look for that motherfucker. First man who finds him chains him up in the club so I can come pound the truth out of him.”

Since he was the sergeant at arms for the MC and gave commands about their security, the guys took action, scattering to climb on their bikes and speed out through Mersey.

Patriot pulled Aarica’s hand, towing her fast to the new bike. “Put this on.” He grabbed one of the helmets dangling off the handlebar and thrust it toward her.

She whipped it onto her head and fastened it into place, and damn, he wished he could watch her swing her leg over the bike over and over again, all day long, but there wasn’t time. He had a criminal to catch and teach a lesson to, right before he handed Hunter over to the sheriff.

When he seated himself on the bike and started the engine to a fine purr, he didn’t need to tell his woman to wrap her arms around him. She scooted

close with her pussy sealed against his body and her thighs tightening around his hips. She stretched her fingers over his abs and held on as they shot onto the road.

“Baby.” He spoke into his mic’d helmet and she jerked at the sound of his voice filling hers. His chuckle caught him by surprise. That he had any emotion but fury against the man who’d acted as a friend, and then betrayed him by setting him up for a crime he never committed, surprised the hell out of him.

“The helmets are synced so we can talk,” he told her.

“It was a shock to hear your voice.”

He thought of what he wanted to say to her. What could he say that meant he was sorry for trying to shove her away while letting her know what she meant to him? He couldn’t think of any words.

“I’m glad you’re with me,” he said simply.

He heard the smile echo in her voice when she answered, “I’m glad too.”

He covered her hand with his own and rode with his woman wrapped around him for the first time.



Aarica slid her gaze to the women clustered in the corner of the clubhouse, watching her and whispering about her. She tried to ignore them, but she didn’t often meet with people who flat-out disliked her for no reason.

Her cousins would tell her to hold her head high and ignore them, and she would. She pulled her soda to her lips and took a sip while listening for any hint of what was happening behind the door.

Over an hour ago, Hunter had been found hiding out in a relative’s house. The guys had dragged him out kicking and screaming, according to accounts she overheard, and they really had chained him up in the room in the back of the clubhouse. The deep, disturbing silence that followed when they closed the door still set her on edge. She pushed her soda away and cast another look at the women in the corner.

Honeys, Patriot had once called them. Were any of them *his* honey? Judging by the glare of one in particular, she thought maybe it was true. The woman had been the same one to drop into Patriot’s lap that first night she’d seen him at the Painted Pig. He’d shoved her away then, but the woman

obviously believed Aarica to be the reason for it.

Another woman suddenly pulled out the chair opposite Aarica at the round table and plopped into it. The stunning woman offered her a smile.

“We haven’t met, but I’ve heard about you.”

She blinked. “Oh?”

“Yup. I’m Catarina. Tank’s my man.”

She pictured the huge man who looked to be able to rip a man in two with his bare hands but had a smile ready for Aarica the few times she was around him.

“I’m Aarica.”

“I know. You’re a legend at the Painted Pig now.”

She stared at her. “What?”

The curly-haired woman grinned. “Dixon told everyone about that move you pulled, where you leaped over the bar and demanded to go with him to free Patriot.”

Straightening, she shook her head. “I’m not sure what that has to do with being a legend.”

She chuckled. “It’s something that Fiona is known to do at the first sign of trouble.”

Gaping at her, she couldn’t feel more stunned. “I didn’t realize she did that. I’ve never seen it.”

Catarina laughed and grew prettier for it, though how was a mystery to Aarica. The woman was already at model status, with her freckles and big green eyes.

More whispers projected from the corner.

“Don’t worry about them, sweetie,” Catarina raised her voice so they heard. “They’re only here because they’re man hunting. They want someone to take care of them.”

One of the women stood and stalked out. Another followed, leaving the other two grouped tighter, talking in furious murmurs.

Aarica tugged on a lock of hair. “I’ve never spoken to them, but they seem to hate me.”

“It’s because you snagged one of the most eligible Dark Falcons. That one in the red top’s been gunning for Patriot since day one.”

She slipped her gaze to the woman, who sent her a knife-edged glare.

“Has Patriot ever...been with her?” She didn’t want to be *that* kind of jealous woman, but she had to know.

Catarina’s eyes softened with sympathy. “Not that any of us know of. If he had, she’d be wrapped tighter around him, so my guess is no. Besides, he’s not that stupid.”

Amusement bubbled up in Aarica’s throat, and she couldn’t contain it. After the stress of having him arrested and then his clear intention to drive her away from him during those heavy seconds after they set eyes on each other again, followed by the search for Hunter and now the long, frightening silence that seemed to go on and on, she never expected to laugh.

Catarina joined in, and the women in the corner stood and walked out of the clubhouse in a huff of fried hair, unnaturally long fingernails and bad attitudes.

“Looks as if the trash took itself out.” Catarina’s announcement had them both breaking down in more laughter.

Suddenly, the door opened. Two men walked out—Diesel and the one they called Blade. Their scowls made her shoot to her feet, and Catarina stood as well.

Next a pair of boots exited horizontally through the door, carried by Tank. Aarica gasped as denim-covered legs followed. His knees were duct-taped together.

Reaching out, she grabbed at Catarina’s arm as a shocked gasp hit her. Was that man Tank carried...dead?

More of his body appeared, until she spotted his arms pinned to his body with rope, a bungee cord and plenty of duct tape mummifying him to the shoulders, which another man carried. The man known as Rio bore half of Hunter’s weight.

With wide eyes, Aarica stared at Hunter’s face. Expecting to see a death mask, she actually gasped out loud when he blinked. He bore a few bruises and a swollen eye, as if they’d roughed him up to get the answers they needed.

They watched the men carry him outside. Catarina rushed after them, but Aarica stood rooted in place, waiting for Patriot to emerge from the room forbidden to all who weren’t in the MC.

Locking her hand on the table to hold herself in place and keep from running to find him, she felt her heart thump harder. The man she was falling

for was capable of things she never imagined before. But seeing it with her own eyes didn't frighten her as she thought they would. He took care of himself and found justice where the legal system had failed him. He was her very own primal warrior, a Viking of modern times.

He stepped out, and their gazes locked. She knew from the stress lines on his face that he waited for her reaction to what she'd just seen.

She hurried around the table, walked straight up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He brought his hand to her lower back and bowed his head against her hair. "It's over, baby. It's gonna be all right now."

Chapter Eight

Patriot scrubbed a hand over his tired face. He hadn't slept in forty-eight hours and wringing the truth out of that little fucker who claimed to be his friend—his brother—had taken more of a toll on him than he cared to admit.

The minute the man was brought before Patriot, he realized that this wouldn't come easy. And it hadn't. Simply demanding that Hunter spill the truth had only resulted in seeing that smirk Aarica told him about and he now witnessed for himself.

Damn that kid. He'd used his link with Patriot to hang those crimes on him, stealing into those houses after their crew had worked there. Replacing the parts on his own bike with the ones from the stolen bike and then going to the sheriff about it. Thinking of the trust he'd betrayed really sent Patriot's blood pressure through the cloud cover.

But in the end, with a few well-placed punches and threats, he'd gotten the kid to spill everything. They got it on video and then had carted him off to the sheriff to deal with.

Now he wanted his woman—to sleep with her in his arms and wake to her soft body riding him.

He planned to claim her this time. She wouldn't need to beg for it, because he was finished fighting his instinct to make her his.

His plan to drive to her apartment and sweep her into his arms the minute she opened the door was a beacon to him in the night. He stepped into his dark garage and flicked on the light. His gaze landed on the bike he was borrowing and stopped dead. Was he seeing things?

Aarica perched there on the leather seat, without a stitch of clothing on. Her warm locks tumbled over her breasts, the ends tickling against the hardened points and her bare thighs closed so he couldn't see the treat between.

With a jolt, he realized she was no illusion.

“How did you get in?” he grated out from lust and lack of sleep. His instantly hard cock told him there wouldn’t be any rest for the wicked—not tonight.

A soft smile passed over her beautiful face. Slowly, she lifted one leg in a seductive pose, to reveal her slick pussy.

“Jesus Christ, baby.” He crossed the garage in a few strides, still believing her to be a mirage to a parched man until he closed his hands around her shoulders, leaned in and kissed her.

Her soft gasp woke him fully. She pressed upward into his kiss, parted her lips and sucked his tongue into her mouth. A grunt of desire escaped him unchecked. He was through holding back with this woman. Some higher power had sent her to him like a sweet, tormenting angel, and he didn’t care how far he fell when he took her for himself.

Delivering greedy passes of his tongue to her, he skated his hands down her spine to the dip of her waist and then lower to cup her ass where it rested on the leather seat.

He worked his body between her thighs so they spread around him. The scent of her arousal flooded his senses and stole the last bit of control he might have a grip on.

Lifting her, he broke the kiss to look into her eyes. She locked her thighs around his middle and her arms around his neck. Meeting his gaze, she whispered, “You’re not turning me away tonight.”

“No.” The grit in his voice might be determination or madness.

A soft smile tipped the corner of her lips, and a gleam came into her eyes as she rubbed her body sensuously against him.

He hardly remembered leaving the garage and storming with her in his arms through his dark house. He’d planned to go to her, and instead she’d come to him, because she needed him. Or knew he needed her.

When he stretched her out on his bed and slammed his mouth over hers, she tore at his hair, his leather jacket and then his shirt. As the hot, tight peaks of her breasts met his bare chest, she wiggled, and his cock gave one hard, threatening throb that told him his time to claim her was ticking by too fast. Between lack of sleep and holding back with her, he couldn’t wait.

But first, he had to ready her. The thought entered his mind and he had to slow things or risk hurting her the first time.

Closing his hands on her breasts, he watched her face contort in pleasure.

Foreplay never seemed so achingly sweet or so pure. It was always a means to an end, where he'd get off and blow his load in order to ease himself for another week or month. Not this time, with this woman.

He sucked at her nipples with soft pulls of his mouth, growing increasingly more insistent with every rough moan from her lips. He bit into one juicy tip, and she scrabbled at his shoulders with her short nails.

“Patriot! Please!”

He had no doubt in his mind that she knew exactly what she wanted from him.

He teased his fingers over her mound, through her pussy curls and nestled his fingertip over her hard bud. She bucked against his hand and cried out.

While he sucked and nipped at her breasts, he circled her pleasure nub with light pressure meant to torment. Seconds later, she came on his fingertip and then he plunged the same finger into her pussy.

The hot, tight clench of her walls on his finger ripped a growl from his throat. He almost dropped his jeans then and fucked her. Somehow, he managed to hold on enough to stretch her for him. Using one finger and then two, he felt her tight virgin walls give way to him as another orgasm shattered through her.

She looked up at him, panting, her eyes wide with lust and something else that had his own heart flipping over.

I'm in love with her.

The realization he always believed would scare the hell out of him and send him running actually grounded him. He pressed his fingers higher, against the tender wall of her pussy until she flooded for him.

“I want your cock in me. Now.” Her breathless demand came out with a rough edge that reflected her need.

When she reached for his waistband and unbuttoned his jeans, slid down his fly and then cupped his throbbing length through his boxer briefs, he let her have her way. He'd give this woman anything in the world to make her happy.

She drew his arousal out and into her silky hand, gliding it through her fist from root to swollen, red, mushroomed, leaking tip.

“A condom,” he rasped.

She shook her head. "I'm on birth control."

Surprise lifted his head, and he pierced her in his stare. "For what?"

"Bad periods, since I was sixteen."

"And you've been saving yourself despite that?"

"Yes. Until now. Patriot..."

He couldn't resist the pull of her gaze any longer. He shed his boots and the rest of his clothes. Covering her with his body, he kissed her long and deep. The tangle of their tongues nearly unmanned him, but he clung to his control.

Grasping his cock in hand, he ran the thick head through her folds. When he bumped against her clit, she cried out. Damn, but he wanted to explore that more—getting her off just by rubbing his cock over her slick pussy. That was for another time, when he had more willpower.

Clenching his jaw, he angled toward her entrance. She didn't even tense, holding onto him and watching his face as he fed her his cock.



Girlfriends always told Aarica that sex hurt the first time. But when Patriot slid right through her barrier and deep into her pussy, she barely felt a twinge. He had her so ready and primed for him, how could she feel anything but acute pleasure?

Waves of desire burned down her spine and spread through her entire body as he stared down into her eyes.

"All right?" he rasped out.

"Yes. Very well, actually."

His teeth flashed on a grin. "So polite while my cock is buried inside you."

She felt the pressure to move, to rub herself against him, and when she tested it by rolling her hips, she saw the grimace of what appeared to be pain cross his face.

"Fuck, I want to pound my cock into you, but I can't and won't. Not yet." He withdrew with a slow gyration of his hips, and she let out a long moan.

He kissed her, and her soul seemed to blossom to him. She rocked into the next thrust, yanking a barbaric noise from him. Shivers sped along her

nerves. Passion flooded in.

She held on as he took her in gentle glides until she felt the burn of release claiming her. As she let go, coming for the first time ever on his cock, their eyes locked.

“I’m in love with you,” she choked out.

“Fuck, baby. Hold on to me.” He levered himself into her faster, taking her to the brink of an orgasm she never knew before. The first hot splash of his cum and the shout of ecstasy he issued had her riding the waves with him. Cresting, pulled deep under the waters. Then he tumbled apart from her and leaned on his elbow to stare into her face as he slid his finger along her cheek.

“Did I hurt you?” Concern burned in his eyes.

She shook her head. “I was more than ready.”

“I’m relieved,” he admitted. “I’ve never deflowered a woman before.”

She grinned and wrapped her fingers around his thick, muscled biceps where his Dark Falcons tattoo rode along the tanned skin.

“You can take it back, you know.”

She blinked in confusion at his words. “Take back what?”

“What you said about loving me. You’re young—got caught up in the moment. I won’t lock you to me if you want to walk away now.”

Staring at him in shock, she could only open and close her mouth on words she couldn’t seem to form. “Patriot. I meant every word,” she finally managed.

As soon as she spoke, she watched the relief pass over his rugged features. He closed his eyes first and then dropped his forehead against hers, breathing deep and even as if he’d just taken his first breath of life.

“I’m so damn glad, baby.”

“Didn’t I tell you that I saved myself for someone special? Do you think I’d say you’re not special enough and thanks for the ride?”

A hint of a smile passed over his face. “I promise I’m not usually so simpleminded.”

“No, you’re just stubborn at seeing that people actually want to be with you.”

He grew silent a long moment. Finally, he said, “I was wrong about Hunter’s motivations.”

She knew he'd thrash himself for this sooner or later.

"I let him go from my crew on good terms. I figured he must not harbor resentments. All the time he was looking to screw me over."

Running a hand down his chest, she tried to think of something to ease the sting of that betrayal, but nothing came to mind. "He was pretty convincing. Everyone in the club was fooled—not only you."

"You saw right through him."

She raised her head and studied his eyes. "I should have brought up my misgivings sooner. This might have been avoided."

"No, it was too late for that. He'd already followed the crew and stolen from the job sites."

She felt him growing more relaxed as minutes sped by. She thought he might drift off, when his voice rumbled up.

"Hold onto me again." He flipped her over him and tucked her into every hard plane of his body. She nestled into him, a perfect fit when he rested his jaw on her head. She listened to his heart thumps slow and then recognized his deep, rhythmic breathing as exhaustion claimed him and he drifted to sleep.

The pull of desire from being plastered to his chiseled body would have to wait—her man needed his rest.

She grinned against his warm, bulky chest.



"Dix, can we talk?" Patriot was getting a little sick of hearing himself say that.

Luckily, his prez didn't shoot him the glare he expected. He stood from the table he shared with a few other Dark Falcons and waved for him to follow him to the meeting room.

They faced each other the same as the first time, what seemed like only short days ago, when he first informed him about the thefts.

Patriot eyed him. "I've been thinkin' about the good of the club."

"If you're about to say you're leaving because of what happened, I refuse to accept your resignation," Dixon cut over him.

He stared at him for several seconds. "I'm glad to hear that. It feels good to know I'm still wanted after all the shit I brought down on the MC. That's

why I wanted to talk about the way we've been accepting members."

Cocking his head, Dixon waited.

"We started in your garage with a handful of friends. Since then, the Dark Falcons' ranks have grown so much."

"It sounds as if you're questioning that now."

"I am." Patriot braced his legs wider. "The problem with other clubs is they stab each other in the backs until nobody's left standing. They're supposed to be brothers, but there's no one loyal left to count on."

Dixon gave a stiff nod. "That's true. I've seen it myself in other chapters we ride with."

"We can't have that. I think it's time to really examine the members we have in the Dark Falcons. We can't trust these prospects coming to us asking to join."

"Sounds reasonable to me. And the only way to keep this clubhouse filled with something good."

Patriot felt himself relax. "I'm glad you see things the same way I do."

"Been thinkin' on it more with all the shit that went down. We could use some new rules when it comes to members."

"Honeys too. That one named Rochelle needs to go. She causes too much trouble around here. She's a fire just waiting to start. All she needs is a reason."

"You're right on that count too. She goes now. We don't need women like that hanging around. If the guys want pussy, they can find it themselves instead of having it waiting around for them to take it." Dixon scuffed his knuckles over his jaw. "We'll call the guys in to a meeting."

"Better do it before Diesel goes outta town for his sister's wedding."

"We'll do it tonight."

Patriot held out a hand, and Dixon grasped it. "Thanks for everything, man."

"Dude, you know I got your back. That shit won't change."

With a warmth in his chest, Patriot stepped out of the room again, to see Aarica standing there. The minute the door opened, her gaze tracked to him. He dragged in a deep breath when their gazes locked.

The sway of her hips seemed amplified to him when she walked up to him. Might be his imagination, but he knew he'd put that swing in them. And

she claimed to love him.

A knot of possessiveness yanked tight in his core as he drew her against his chest. Over her head, he caught Rochelle's glare, and then she stomped out. Dixon followed the woman, and Patriot knew he was cleaning house and telling her never to step foot on Dark Falcons property again.

Cupping Aarica's jaw, he tipped her face to his. "What have you been doing all day?"

"Mowing Mr. Kelley's yard."

His brow shot up. "No fucking way. You're all done with that."

Her jaw dropped. "But I need the work, and I can't let him down. You're just afraid I'll have spectators while mowing, but you'll be happy to know that today there was no sign of that car or those guys."

Withholding a growl of irritation, he had to stop and ask himself why he felt that way about her. She'd given herself to him and he'd challenge another man to try to lay hands on her now. But more than that, he hated the thought of her working so much to pay the bills. He had no idea what she paid for that tiny apartment, but whatever it was, he knew it wasn't worth the money.

I have to let her do things her way. But the minute I get a sign, I'm moving her in.

"Good. Then I don't have to worry about your safety when you're mowing Mr. Kelley's grass."

She slid her arms around his neck and went onto tiptoe to brush her lips over his. "No, you don't. I was wondering if we could talk."

He blinked at her. "Of course. Here?"

She shook her head.

"We'll take a ride." While he missed having his own wheels, he couldn't complain about the beauty Tank had built. In fact, he planned to stop by the bike shop later on and hand him a fat stack of cash to lease it until he got his own motorcycle from the sheriff's department.

Taking Aarica by the hand, he led her from the clubhouse. The sky was the perfect cloudless blue to ride beneath, and the air crisp with the tang of the mountains.

He knew right where he'd take her—to the place where they'd met.

Once they were seated on the bike and her arms were wrapped tight around his waist, words started to tumble out of her. It seemed having the

intercom in their helmets provided the link she needed, and who knew he enjoyed talking so much when he rode?

As they rolled out of Mersey, headed toward the Smokies, she told him about all five of her male cousins and a few of the others she'd grown up seeing. One in particular had some learning disabilities, and that had set her on her path here to work with the Post boy.

Patriot listened to everything she said and a lot she didn't say. Reading more into her words was easy when his heart had opened up completely to the woman. Hearing her dreams and ideas filtered through her perception of the world meant he felt more attached to her.

When he finally turned into a scenic lookout and he parked, they both sat there a minute.

"C'mon. Let's walk." He waited for her to climb off the bike. She removed the helmet and fluffed her hair out over her shoulders. The pink in her cheeks tugged at an invisible cord connected to his cock. Whatever happened, he would not be bending her over his bike out here at the scenic lookout.

They hung their helmets on the handlebars, and then hand in hand, walked over to the rail of the lookout.

"It's breathtaking," she whispered. "The way the greens are so different, each complementing the rest of the greens, but the shades stand out in their own individual beauty."

He watched her face as she stated this. He could barely tear his gaze from her to notice the view, but he did look for her sake. She was right that the greens created sweeping outlines of each elevation, growing almost black in the distance before converging with the sky. Orange and gold rays of light fanned across the land.

Reaching out, he slipped the pad of his thumb along her lower lip. A soft rush of air crossed his thumb, and her eyes took on a faraway expression he recognized so well now.

They moved in at the same time. Their mouths met in a soft, seeking kiss. When he thumbed the corner of her mouth downward to plunder her, she swayed into his arms and gripped the open edge of his leather jacket.

The soft interior of her mouth against the insistent hardness of his tongue drew moans from them both. She wiggled close, wrapping a thigh around his hip. Inches away from his steely cock nestled the slick heat he wanted to bury

himself in so damn much.

Before he compromised her out here in the open, he withdrew. That dazed expression slowly faded in her eyes, and she rested her head against his chest. They stood embracing until his blood cooled enough.

“I’m glad we came here. I wanted to speak with you too.” Why did his voice sound so gritty?

She tilted her head to meet his gaze. “About what?”

How to say any of the feelings rushing through his heart? He wasn’t good with words—he was a man of action.

Holding her by the upper arms, he stared down at her. That tingle of emotions around his heart had spread so much since that night she tumbled into his arms and begged him to touch her. When their paths kept crossing and she showed him she would stand at his side through thick and thin, he realized that she’d become the center of his world.

“Do you understand what a property patch means in the MC?” Hell, he’d just jumped right in, hadn’t he? Probably scare the hell out of her.

Her brows creased, giving her such an adorable look that he found himself thinking up other ways to perplex her.

“It means you’re property of the club, I’m guessing.”

He nodded. “In a way. But if I give you the property patch, then it binds us. You’re my property.”

She blinked rapidly. “I don’t know if I approve of that.”

“Its meaning depends on the couple, I suppose. For me, it means that no other man can put his hands on you. It means that I’ll protect you until my heart stops beating, and then my brothers will do it for me.”

“Like family.” Her whisper left the short hairs on his nape standing on end.

“Exactly like family.” His response came out with a vehemence born of love for his brotherhood and all it stood for.

She drew free of his arms and turned to the view. He studied her profile, waiting for her to come to some conclusion. If she chose to refuse his patch, then he understood—but that didn’t mean he’d give up on her.

“You know I was drawn to you from the first moment I saw you at that campsite. Something about you being alone... Though you were with friends, you held yourself apart from them in a way I came to understand later once I

knew you better.” Her words came out quiet, and he leaned closer to hear.

She went on, “At the same time I saw you alone, I just knew I was meant to be with you. After our first encounter, I thought I was only supposed to touch your world briefly, for a few fleeting, stolen minutes. Then I met you again and again and again...and I saw your brothers in the club and how close you all are. That’s when I realized why I’m so drawn to you. It isn’t just you—it’s all you stand for and all you have to offer.”

She turned to him, and the glowing intensity in her eyes was a lightning zap to his system.

“I come from a big, protective family. I left them to find something for myself...and ended up finding it again with you.” She stepped into his arms, and he felt the quiver of her body.

Tightening his arms around her, he inhaled the rich scent of her shampoo. “Does that mean...” It was too much to hope for, and the words wouldn’t dislodge from his chest.

“Yes, I want that patch, Patriot. More than anything. But on one big condition.” She met his stare.

“Anything.”

“I help organize the fundraisers—especially the upcoming one for autism. You see, that’s what I’ve decided to do with my life. Working with Jay really showed me that I’m on the right path, and I want to learn more and do more with people who face challenges such as his.”

“God, baby. You’re so damn incredible. Do you know that?”

She buried her face against his chest as if embarrassed by his praise. “I’m just passionate about helping these people is all.”

Using a knuckle beneath her chin, he raised her face to his. When he lowered his mouth to hers, their kiss instantly shot from 0 to 100 mph in a single flip of her tongue against his. With a growl, he bent her over his arm and worked on stealing all the little whimpering sounds she made for him.

Chapter Nine

The strains of carnival music drifted to Aarica before the roar of motorcycle engines ever died down. She craned her neck to see around Patriot's broad back for a peek at the fairgrounds.

Some of the rides were already in motion, whirling without fair-goers in the seats, as they got warmed up for the upcoming event.

An event she'd helped plan. The guests today were sure to walk away with big old smiles on their faces.

Patriot cut the engine, and the guys all clustered in a group waiting for the rest of the Dark Falcons to drive in. Excitement gripped Aarica, and she grabbed Patriot's hand. They shared a grin.

Once the gates were opened for them, they spread out in their various positions. Booths were set up and manned by the Dark Falcons throughout the fairgrounds, where they'd sell raffle tickets, hot dogs and apple dumplings, with all proceeds benefitting autism.

From beneath an awning to keep them out of the hot sun, she looked at the huge crowd of people milling through.

"At least Hunter did one thing right for the club—he put up enough fliers in the area to draw a decent crowd," Patriot rumbled.

She laughed despite the darkness behind the reference. "This is so great! I'm so thrilled to be part of this."

Gliding an arm around her middle, he drew her into his side. At that moment, some people emerged from the crowd, and she waved frantically at Jay and his mom.

The boy's face lit up when he saw her, and she pulled away from Patriot to circle the table where they sold leatherworks made by one of the Dark Falcons to hug Jay. He squeezed her tight and then pointed to Patriot. Instead of placing his hands over his ears to indicate that he made loud noises, this time he motioned throwing a ball.

Patriot laughed. “That’s right, bud. I’ll come by this week with Aarica, and we’ll toss a ball again. Does that sound good?”

His face split into a wide grin and he nodded.

Aarica traded smiles with Mrs. Post. “I’m so glad you came today.”

“This is amazing. Seriously, I’m so impressed by all the things you’re doing.” Mrs. Post beamed at her. “Jay can’t wait to visit the bouncy house, can you, Jay?”

He looked around for the big red castle and pointed, impatient to get over there.

“You’d better hurry before the line gets too long,” Aarica said with a chuckle. “I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

He paused to pretend to throw a ball again, and Patriot nodded. “I’ll come too. See you then.”

After the mother and son walked away, they got crushed with throngs of people looking at the leather wallets, knife sheaths and more that one of the Dark Falcons had donated. She noticed how many other bike clubs came out to support them, and they were tossing out money right and left. She saw more than one person carrying bags filled with apple dumplings in plastic takeout containers and knew they were snatching them all up to take home to their families at six bucks a pop.

Tank and Catarina strolled up, and Tank clapped Patriot on the shoulder. “We’re here to relieve you and your lady. I’m supposed to tell you the prez says to go have some damn fun for once.”

Patriot barked out a laugh at the message. He didn’t waste time in grabbing Aarica’s hand and dragging her away from the booth. She barely got to throw a wave at Catarina before he dragged her through the crowd. Raising a hand at all his bros as they passed, he marched her right up to the line at the Ferris wheel.

Surprise flitted through her. “We’re going on the ride?” she asked.

“Unless you’re afraid of heights.”

“Nope. I’m just surprised that a tough guy like you would think to bring me to the Ferris wheel.”

He gathered her near and placed his lips at her ear. “Maybe I want to make you come at two-hundred feet,” he rumbled.

Shudders of desire rushed down her spine, and she leaned into his

muscled body. “We definitely can’t do that, but I hope you’ll make it up to me later...” She trailed off with a seductive bite down on her lower lip.

“Mmm. You drive me crazy, woman.”

At that moment, Diesel walked by pushing a lemonade cart that looked dwarfed by his size. Patriot poked jeers at him but purchased a drink, and after the man walked off to peddle more of his wares, Patriot handed her the cup.

She sipped the fresh-squeezed delight, so ice cold that she wanted to drink the entire thing in one long gulp. After she passed it to Patriot, a gleam came into his eyes. He tipped the cup up and took a sip. Then he kissed her.

The icy press of his hard lips against hers ignited deep in her core. The lemony sweetness on his lips built that rush of need. And when he parted her lips and pushed an ice cube into her mouth with his tongue, she gasped.

His grin stretched over her lips. “When I have you alone, I’ll slide an ice cube over your clit until you sizzle for me.”

“Oh God,” she murmured on a moan.

They drew apart when the line moved. She found herself gazing toward the mountains in the distance and imagining how they’d look from the top of the Ferris wheel.

Patriot followed her gaze. “I fell in love with you back in those mountains.”

Her jaw dropped. She turned to him, eyes wide. “You...fell in love?”

It was the first time he spoke the words to her. She searched his face for signs of stress over his admission but saw only love gleaming in his eyes.

Planting his hand on her spine, he drew her close enough that their hips bumped, same as that first moment in the mountains. “Yes, baby. I love you more than I can ever put into words. It’s why I haven’t said it aloud—I was hoping to find a way to express it better.”

She cupped his face and kissed him with all the passion burning to life for this man. Her own love overflowed, and she didn’t know if she could find a way to put it into words either.

“Next!”

The ride operator’s call separated them, and Patriot tossed the almost empty lemonade into the trash before grabbing Aarica’s hand and towing her to the waiting seat.

Her stomach lit with butterflies as they began to circle upward. Her hand tight in Patriot's grasp, she replayed his words over and over in her mind. She hadn't come to Mersey looking for love, but it'd found her. Her life couldn't feel more complete than right this minute, looking out over the mountains where their love affair began.

"Maybe we can go back next weekend and finish what we started there." Patriot stared at the mountains rising up in the distance.

"Really?" she asked.

His gaze locked on hers, and she saw that same expression in the depths that she read at the campfire when he looked at her. "Maybe I better seal the promise with a kiss."

She nodded and closed the small gap between them.



Patriot skimmed a fingertip over the crest of Aarica's nipple, down the slope of her breast to her ribs. She sucked in sharply at his barely-there touch, and he felt her quiver as he continued down the flat of her stomach. When he reached the junction of her thighs, she parted for him.

He couldn't see in the dark of the tent, but he could feel his way. Through her damp curls to her wet clit. She rocked upward as he settled his fingertip over the bundle of nerves and pressed down gently.

He let up the pressure and she issued a tight cry.

"You want that, baby? Just like the first time?" He pressed down again, and she writhed. "Tell me how you like it this time," he urged.

"I need...that!"

He circled her clit with a slow circle of his fingertip. "And this?"

"Yes!"

"How about this?" He pinched her clit lightly between his thumb and forefinger, and she came off the air mattress to meet his touch.

"Patriot." His name came out as a rasp from her lips. "Patriot, yes!"

"That's what you said the first time we met, baby." He shifted down her body, holding her thighs prisoner in his big hands and spreading her as wide as the tent would allow.

She dug her fingers into his hair as he lowered his mouth to her wet heat. The first taste had his cock pounding. Sucking on her clit, he gorged himself

on her flavors and the soft moans of ecstasy he ripped from her. In seconds, she was peaking, just as she had that first time. God, would he ever grow used to how responsive she was to his touch? He hoped it never changed.

He dipped his tongue through her seam, down to her entrance and flicked the tip inside her.

“This time you’re not stopping, Patriot. I’m giving myself to you on this mountain.”

He moved up her body again, cock in hand. When he pressed the flared head through her folds to burrow into her heated walls, he kissed her long and deep. Her jagged cries fueled the fire inside him, and he withdrew fast to thrust in again.

Breaking the kiss, he looked down into her eyes. “You belonged to me before you ever walked off this mountain the first time, baby.”

She dragged him down again, sealing herself to him as he fucked her nice and slow. When their movements grew jerky and their breathing harsher, she clawed at his spine. “I love you. Love you!”

“I love you too,” he grated out a second before jets of cum shot insider her clenching pussy.

Epilogue

Diesel shoved a hand into the wood door and strode outside. The clubhouse was starting to feel too damn cramped for his liking.

He seemed to be surrounded. Everywhere he looked, he saw happy couples. Dixon and Fiona, Tank and Catrina. Now Patriot held his woman as if she was the most precious bit of spun glass in his rough hands. Hands that could smash heads if he wanted.

Hell, he'd just stood up as the best man at his sister's wedding, stood there with his hands clasped in front of him while listening to them exchange vows that they would stand by each other forever.

Fuck that. Forever meant nothing.

He leaned against the wall and glared at nothing.

While he might feel like a dick for feeling this way, deep down he was happy for his fellow brothers who'd found love, and he couldn't be more thrilled for Lily. His sister deserved a good man to help take care of her two-year-old son.

Rain loomed on the horizon, a steely gray band that seemed to constrict not only the air but Diesel's mood.

He had to get the hell out of here and take his thundercloud of a bad mood elsewhere instead of sharing it with his brothers.

As he straightened from the wall and started across the parking lot, his phone buzzed. Ignoring it, he took two more steps and swung his leg over his bike. His phone kept buzzing.

"Dammit," he ground out and ripped the phone from the inside pocket of his leather cut.

He stared at the screen. Then his heart gave a wild flip as though he was about to wreck his bike.

He knew that number the same way he knew his own face in the mirror.

Selena.

Love of his damn life. Gone from his arms too soon.

She left him in the night without a damn word. That was a month ago, and despite his attempts to reach her, his calls went completely ignored. Now she wanted his attention?

Fuck that. Fuck her.

He hit mute on his phone and stuffed it into his cut. When he revved the engine of his Harley, he couldn't make it loud enough to drown out the voices in his head telling him to respond to her call. After all, she was finally reaching out to him—wasn't it better late than never?

He stuffed that way down, burying it along with the memories of their time together and her beautiful dark eyes. Or all those long talks night after night. Or the stolen moments where he showed up at her house, kissed her before he even said hello and carried her off to bed...

Never again. Nobody played him for a fool twice.

He hit the gas and shot out of the parking lot of the Dark Falcons club, headed east. Where he ended up, he had no damn clue.

Diesel wasn't afraid of anything. But the more miles he put behind him, the more restlessness followed him. It wedged itself into his chest and rode there like a hundred-pound weight.

Maybe he *was* afraid of something. Maybe he was fucking terrified of it.

Dammit—he'd never be able to outrun his feelings for the woman who owned his heart.

THE END