

Naima Simone

TROUBLE
for HIRE



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Published since 2009, *USA Today* bestselling author **NAIMA SIMONE** loves writing sizzling romances with heart, a touch of humour and snark. Her books have been featured in *The Washington Post* and *Entertainment Weekly*, and described as balancing ‘crackling, electric love scenes with exquisitely rendered characters caught in emotional turmoil.’

She is wife to Superman, or his non-Kryptonian, less bullet proof equivalent, and mother to the most awesome kids ever. They all live in perfect, sometimes domestically-challenged bliss in the southern United States.

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Readers Love Rose Bend

‘*The Road to Rose Bend* is what romance reads are all about’

‘I would definitely recommend *Christmas in Rose Bend* for anyone who likes books that are immersive, romantic and have a Christmassy atmosphere’

‘A heart-warming story about love, loss and new beginnings. If you want to fall in love with a new romance novel get yourself a copy of this amazing book’

‘Naima Simone is a brilliant author and writer’

‘I can’t adequately convey how much I loved this book’

‘An adorable, quick and easy read that I really enjoyed. A cute plot, endearing characters and a great setting, I loved it’

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CHAPTER ONE

WHEW. So I'M really doing this.

Camille Dansen stared at her phone, and the digits on her screen glared up at her like a quiet shout.

12:00

That's it. Twelve o'clock.

She released a short, incredulous laugh.

Oh my God, am I really doing this?

She gave her head a good, hard shake, laying her phone down on her thigh to, one, keep from staring at that text as if it would go for her throat. And two, hoping the weight of the phone would stop her leg from jumping like a jackhammer on a construction site.

The tattoo artist that had let her inside Forever Ink glanced at her from behind the shop's front desk. The front desk that, if this interview went well, would be her responsibility. The longer she stared at the piece of furniture, the larger it seemed to grow until it nearly swallowed the tall, tatted and pierced man behind it.

Because that desk represented her uncertain present and her murkier future.

"I just spoke with Erik. He's on his way and should be here in a couple of minutes," he said.

She nodded. "Thank you for letting me know."

"No problem." He jerked his chin up, his voice remaining professional, neutral, but curiosity lurked in his hazel eyes.

She didn't blame him. Compared to all the ink covering his dark brown skin, the silver piercing his eyebrows, nose and full lips, the vintage KRS-One T-shirt, black jeans and boots covering his rangy body, she probably looked like she'd veered in here by mistake on her way to the social at one of

the local Baptist churches. And that was fair. Considering the last event she'd attended at the church in Providence, Rhode Island, where she'd been a member with her fiancé had been the Women's Day anniversary brunch.

But that had been months ago. Six to be exact. And like everything else except her car, clothes and the few things she'd had when she began their relationship five years ago, her ex-fiancé, Bradley Luck, had received the church in their breakup. Along with the house, their friends...their life.

Spreading her fingers along her thigh, she dug the tips into the muscle through the knit of her dress. She was here.

Here.

Not in the affluent suburbs of Providence. Not in the two million dollar McMansion with its professionally decorated rooms.

Not in the past.

For all the good it's doing you, a sarcastic voice snarked in her head. A voice that sounded so similar to her former future-sister-in-law, thoughts of an exorcism to expel Raquel Luck from her thoughts might be in order. A breakup had taken care of removing that woman from her life.

Well, a breakup and a move to another state.

Dorothy had a bucket of water, and she had a Nissan Rogue—whatever worked to get rid of the witches in their lives.

Now it was time to move forward. Starting with this job interview. That was if this Erik Mann showed up for it.

Camille glanced down at her phone. Eleven minutes late. Irritation stirred in her chest. Sure, she was applying for this position and needed to make a good first impression, but he wasn't knocking his impression out of the park so far.

A warm tingling sparked to life behind her breastbone. She recognized the sensation, though it'd been a long while—years, to be exact—since she'd last felt its presence. That old recklessness she'd believed had been tamed. Or snuffed out. And not by love and contentment as she would've said only a

year ago. But by the pressure to conform, the fear of disappointing.

She inhaled a deep breath, but nope. The stench of her own cowardice still coated her nostrils.

Still, that touch of wildness urged her to jump to her feet, say to hell with it and walk out. An employer who didn't respect her enough to be punctual for an interview didn't bode well for a future here. But maturity and, well, desperation kept her tail planted on the black leather couch.

Funny what things like rent, clothes and food did to your priorities.

“Hey, Erik. Your appointment for the front desk position is out here.”

The tattoo artist's voice dragged her focus from thoughts of her precarious situation and back to him.

And the man standing beside him.

She blinked. Blinked again.

This couldn't be right. She blinked one more time.

No. Adonis mapped in ink still stood several feet away from her.

And God. He was *glorious*.

Short dark brown hair cut close to his head emphasized a face of razor-sharp angles, bold planes, and blue eyes so bright they gleamed across the distance that separated them. And a mouth... Heat curled like smoke low in her belly, and she fisted her hand on her thigh. There was nothing pure or right about that mouth. It invited sin and all kinds of wrong acts in the dark.

Wide shoulders and a broad chest filled out a plain gray T-shirt, and tattoos in red, black and blue ink sprawled down his muscled arms, even covering his long fingers and strong neck. The desk hid his bottom half, but she harbored zero doubts it was just as impressive as the top.

Didn't stop her from wanting to lean over the wide piece of furniture and verify that fact for herself.

"Camille?" the Adonis asked, his voice a rolling, deep bass.

Not Adonis.

Erik. Erik Mann.

Her brother's friend. Owner of Forever Ink.

And if all went well, her new employer.

So she really shouldn't be drooling over her potential boss.

Slowly standing, she nodded...and ordered her body to calm the hell down. She'd just gotten out of a relationship. A toxic one she could see now with hindsight being what it was. An entanglement didn't interest her. Especially if it hindered The Plan.

Get a job. Set up her own residence. Decide on a new career. Secure it by any means necessary.

Be happy.

Out of all the items included in The Plan, the last one might be the hardest to achieve.

She approached him, hand outstretched. Inside, she braced herself for that first contact. But when his big, elegant-fingered hand wrapped around hers, she was grown enough to admit there was no way she could've prepared herself for this first touch. A rough, calloused palm with a surprisingly gentle grip. It set off warring sensations in her belly. A man who was obviously no stranger to hard work, a strong man going by the corded tendons in his arms. But one who apparently knew how to be careful. Maybe...tender.

She just stopped herself from shaking her head.

Didn't matter. None of that mattered. Not to her anyway.

She just needed him to give her a biweekly paycheck and a W-2.

That's all.

The Plan. Stay on The Plan.

“Yes, I’m Camille. You’re Erik Mann?” Oh look. Her voice didn’t shake. Kudos to her!

His full, give-me-ten-acts-of-contrition mouth thinned then he gave a short jerk of his head.

Whoa. What was that reaction about?

Had Jeremy lied to her about the job? Had he pressured his friend into seeing her? She wouldn’t put either past her big brother. When it came to her, he was a bit of a bulldozer on steroids.

“Come on back.” Erik strode over to a short swing door, popped a lock and pushed it open. “Sorry about being late.”

“It’s no problem.” She rummaged up a smile in the face of his lack of enthusiasm and silently cursed her brother. “I appreciate you taking the time to see me.”

“Jeremy’s a friend and I need someone on the front desk.” He shrugged and turned, leaving her to follow him.

O-kay.

Unease settled in her stomach.

Fine. Everything would be fine. Jeremy wouldn’t arrange an interview with someone he didn’t trust. Or who was an ass.

Well... That last one was debatable. Considering the company Jeremy kept, very debatable.

But this was Rose Bend, Massachusetts. The *Cheers* of towns. Y’know, the place where everyone knew everyone’s name. A place of eternal politeness and community. Erik Mann wouldn’t have lasted in business long in this picturesque, southern Berkshires town if he was an asshole.

She clutched hard to that as she trailed him down a hallway, past a huge area with tall, gray cubicles to a fairly large office.

And yes, she’d been correct. The bottom half most definitely was as impressive as the top. Faded black jeans hung off slim hips and clung to thick, powerful thighs and an ass worthy of a religion. Hell, she might build a temple in its honor.

She dragged her gaze away from him, guilt pumping through her. What was she doing? Inappropriate wasn't just a word in the dictionary between... Well, whatever came before and after it. She had no business ogling this man like a slab of beef. A particularly delicious slab of beef...

Babe, get it together. The Plan!

"Have a seat." Erik waved toward the armchair in front of his wide, scratched to Hades and back cedar desk as he shut the door.

Rounding the furniture, he took the battered, black leather chair behind it. Her heart fluttered under his sharp blue gaze. Fluttered. Such an anemic description for the frantic drum solo happening behind her rib cage. Still, she ignored the pounding in her ears as she lowered onto the seat across from him.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," she said, smoothing her palms down her black pencil skirt. Then, realizing how the gesture probably betrayed the nerves twisting her belly into knots, she clenched her hands together on her lap. "Especially since Jeremy called in a favor to you."

"Yeah, he did," he said bluntly.

Ouch. Obviously, prevarication wasn't one of his faults.

"Well, thank you anyway."

Erik tilted his head, and that bright gaze carried out another pass over her, and she stifled the shiver that tried to work its way through her body. But all of a sudden, the sleeveless, green-and-white polka dot blouse with the voluminous bow tie at the throat, the pencil skirt and green stilettos didn't feel like adequate covering. Maybe sackcloth would.

Maybe.

"I'm going to be honest, Camille." He leaned forward, propping his forearms on the desk and pinning her in her chair with his unwavering stare. "If Jeremy hadn't called me, I probably would've told you at the door this wouldn't work. It's only because he's a good friend that I'm doing this interview."

“I’m glad you’re being honest.” The dry retort popped out of her mouth before she could corral it, surprising herself and him if the flash in his eyes was anything to go by.

And here she’d believed that sarcastic, impulsive part of herself had been snuffed out over the past five years. Being the future wife of a domineering politician had taught her to be seen not heard. To smile pretty, look pretty and be pretty but don’t speak unless she’d been told exactly what to say. Bradley Luck hadn’t physically abused her, but she had been controlled, dominated, her personality smothered. In the last few months, she’d started emerging from that emotional fetal position, discovering herself again.

But this? Her reaction to Erik Mann shook her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “What I meant to ask is what are your concerns?”

“Don’t apologize for speaking your mind. I don’t need pleasantries. I want the truth.” He arched an eyebrow. “As for my concerns, it’s mostly one. You don’t belong here.”

You don’t belong here.

His words struck her like a wildly swung blow to the chest. That could’ve been her mantra for the past few years. She hadn’t belonged with Brad. Hadn’t belonged in his world. And in the end, he’d kicked her to the curb because of it. He’d gifted her with jewelry, clothes, cars and other material things over their time together. But he’d never offered her the one present she’d craved: acceptance.

“Considering we barely met ten minutes ago, I don’t see how you can make that assumption.”

“Look at you.” He did another visual sweep of her and, God, she felt it. Felt it graze her throat, brush her breasts, her stomach. Felt it between her thighs. What did that say about her? She was pretty sure he sat here insulting her, and she was getting wet. Damn. She really might be screwed up.

“You look like you belong at garden parties, not a tattoo shop. We curse, blast rock music, wear jeans and T-shirts, and politically correct is a phrase that hasn’t made its way through

our door. Any of those things seem like they would hurt your sensibilities.”

“I take it my brother told you a little about me,” she said, trying very, very hard not to be offended. And failing. Miserably.

He shrugged. “A little. And I have Google just like everyone else. I know who you’ve been engaged to for the last few years.”

“Well then, let me clear up some misconceptions. My ex might’ve held certain beliefs regarding who should marry who, what autonomy women should have over their bodies and the freedoms certain people enjoyed, but that wasn’t and isn’t me.”

“You stood by him and would’ve married him. That’s pretty much cosigning those beliefs in my book.”

Shame churned in her belly.

“I agree,” she murmured. “You’re right.”

And she left it at that. She couldn’t tell him that she’d been so in love, so desperate to *be* loved, to have a family, a fucking man, that she’d lost her values, *herself*. Her silence had made her complicit, and she hated herself for that.

Hated herself more that she hadn’t been the one to break off the relationship and leave. Brad had. And if he hadn’t? Would she have married him and continued to support a platform she wholly disagreed with while dying a little inside until nothing of herself remained?

God, she was afraid to examine that question. More specifically, that answer.

“Yes, I made truly questionable decisions in my not so distant past. But I’m back in Rose Bend to put all that behind me and begin with a fresh start. And that includes a job. Cursing doesn’t bother me, and I listen to Imagine Dragons as well as Josh Groban. I actually own jeans though I prefer my dresses and skirts and can’t see what that has to do with whether or not I can man the front desk. And as long as not being ‘politically correct’ means you still respect me and

everyone who walks through that door and it doesn't cause harm, then I don't care. Speak your truth. That about covers it. Did I forget anything?"

"Yes, work experience. I received your résumé. You have none for the past five years and before that was a retail position here in Rose Bend at a clothing boutique. I need someone who not just greets customers, but also schedules appointments and takes payments. The person I hire would also be responsible for keeping track of and ordering supplies, upselling other products, and anything else that's needed from me or the other artists. Selling skirts doesn't cover that."

"What that résumé doesn't show is that I helped organize and supervise many large events, which included ordering supplies, managing staff and ensuring every event was successful and smooth. I also often acted as my ex's secretary, making sure he didn't forget an appearance, dinner or fundraiser. And as you pointed out, I was phenomenal at selling the image of a partner standing in solidarity beside her man. So while I didn't get paid for those duties or have a title other than fiancée, I acted as manager. And I'm sure if I can oversee a gala for two hundred people, I can oversee your tattoo shop."

By the time she finished speaking, a sting had entered her voice, and she bit off any more words before she totally mucked up her chance of employment. If she hadn't already.

Erik didn't speak for several moments, and she tried not to fidget under that direct, too-perceptive stare. It settled on her like a weight—an all too unsettling and delicious weight. She should feel dissected and dismissed. And a part of her did. But another part... Another part wondered what those piercing blue eyes saw.

Because he did see. She knew he did. And that was both intoxicating and terrifying.

Did he perceive her fear that she would mess up this new start back in her hometown? Her insecurity about whether or not she was capable enough, smart enough to make a success of herself? For too long she'd allowed herself to be dependent

on someone else. It was humiliating to admit she'd become one of those women who'd let a man take care of her rather than stand on her own two feet.

Never again.

Never again would she degrade herself like that. Never again would she underestimate her worth like that.

Even now, as much as she loved Jeremy, she refused to be dependent on him. Yes, he'd arranged this job interview, but she'd refused his financial help. Instead, she'd pawned her engagement ring and other pieces of jewelry to get enough money to support herself while she figured things out.

But she couldn't tell Erik Mann that either.

Although an inexplicable part of her wanted to.

And where had that urge come from? Nothing about this man with his face of brutally sharp angles and lush, sensual curves inspired her to confide in him. And yet...

She straightened in her chair, leaning away from him and the sheer animal magnetism he exuded. God, it was like a pheromone.

"Point taken," Erik conceded. After a heavy pause, he leaned back in his chair as well. "You have the job. My friends list is short and your brother is at the top. And since he's never asked me for a favor, I figure this one must be important, and I'm not letting him down. But that loyalty only goes as far as the hiring." His eyes narrowed. "You're on probation for the next ninety days just like any other employee. You fuck up, you're gone. No second chances."

"That's fair."

His prejudgment of her, not so much. But this chance? Yes, it was fair. And she'd take full advantage of it. This job meant the difference between self-sufficiency and being a parasite for the rest of her life.

One she longed for like a starving woman crawling out of a wasteland.

And the other... Well, that wasn't an option. Not anymore.

“When do I start?” she asked, standing.

He rose to his feet, slower, still regarding her as if she were some creature he couldn't quite fathom.

“Tomorrow. We start scheduling clients at twelve noon. But be here at nine so I can get you set up, go over the point of sale system, show you where the supplies are and other things you'll need to know. Some things you'll just have to learn on the job, but if you have any questions or need any help, I or any of the other artists will be here.”

She stepped forward and extended her arm toward him.
“Thank you.”

She braced herself this time, for the impact. But again, it proved pointless. Fire arced from her palm, up her arm and down her breasts, sensitizing them before continuing lower where a dull, insistent ache took up residence in her sex.

Loosing his hand, she shifted backward and forced herself not to rub her tingling palm over her thigh.

He dipped his chin. “See you tomorrow. Early.”

Taking that as the dismissal it was, she turned and exited the office. And as she walked back down the hallway, a little bit of the weight that had burdened her for the past few months began to lift. Just a little.

Yes, she had a long road ahead. But today, she'd put another foot on that road.

Maybe, just maybe, she was going to be all right.

Now if she could just keep her dirty mind—and hands—off her new boss.

CHAPTER TWO

“I FUCKING HATE YOU.”

Erik gritted his teeth as a long, deep laugh greeted his announcement instead of the apology he deserved. That’s the very least a person should receive when they’d so clearly been set up by another.

“Aw, I love you, too,” Jeremy Dansen said, and Erik could easily imagine the wide grin on his face. Damn him. “Why do I get the feeling this passionate declaration has to do with my baby sister?”

Baby sister.

The hell he said. There was nothing babyish about Camille Dansen. She was a full-grown woman, and wasn’t that his problem in a nutshell? If only he could view her as his best friend’s little sister, then his life would be easier.

His dick would definitely have an easier go of it.

Heaving a sigh, he scrubbed a hand over his head and turned around, staring through Forever Ink’s storefront window at the woman under discussion.

The woman who had claimed a starring role in his dreams. Dreams that could be contenders for several categories in the Adult Video News Awards.

Yeah, he’d keep that information to himself.

Jeremy probably wouldn’t appreciate hearing how Erik fantasized about fucking his sister six ways to Sunday in so many positions it’d make a porn star reconsider their career choice.

Yeah. He’d *definitely* keep that to himself.

In the shop, Camille pushed through the swing door and strode out to the lobby, heading for the merchandise shelf, a clipboard in hand. He should look away, turn back around, do

anything to avoid staring at her one second longer than necessary. Especially when she could catch him in the act.

But he didn't.

Because truth? He enjoyed looking at her. Correction. He *craved* it.

Three weeks. Camille had been manning the front desk in Forever Ink for three weeks, but it seemed longer. It seemed like he'd spent his whole damn life wanting her. And yeah, he got how stupid that sounded considering he'd only met her. But his cock apparently didn't care about semantics.

Not when it came to the thick, dark brown hair that fell in a shiny, sleek mass around her shoulders.

Not when it came to the lovely face that could've graced a painting by Johannes Vermeer that he'd studied in one of his college art appreciation classes. Easily.

Not when it came to the body that reminded him of another artist altogether. Peter Paul Rubens would've begged her to pose for him with all those lush, gorgeous curves.

Especially when those curves were poured into one of her tight skirts. Like today. He narrowed his eyes on her through the window. Today's green skirt molded to generous hips, thick thighs and flared just above the knees. Paired with a white shirt that accentuated breasts he'd caressed and tasted more times than he could count in his dreams, she was a walking cock tease.

To be fair, though, she could be in a burlap sack with a serious halitosis issue and she'd still make him hard.

Something else he'd keep to himself.

"You lied to me, you ugly bastard," Erik growled at Jeremy.

"Lied?" Jeremy parroted, and Erik scowled at the overly offended tone. Next thing, Jeremy would be clutching his pearls. "Tell me one thing I lied about. Just one."

"You told me your sister was a sweet, shy woman who wouldn't cause any trouble."

“No,” his friend objected. “I said she was quiet and wouldn’t be any trouble. And Camille is sweet.”

Erik snorted even as he thought about his new hire’s mouth. He had little doubt she would be like sugar on his tongue.

Again. Keeping to himself.

“I hate to break it to you, but she’s caused nothing but trouble since she’s been here. And quiet? She’s only quiet when she doesn’t ask me to change something. I swear to God, that woman’s motto is ‘I’d rather ask forgiveness than permission.’” He scanned the front of his shop. Had she changed the couches and tables around *again*? “It’s not funny,” he snapped over the loud bark of laughter in his ear.

“I may have forgotten to mention she’s kind of particular and territorial.”

“You didn’t forget shit,” Erik muttered. “All I asked your sister to do was get with the other artists so she could add their appointments to the scheduling system. Next thing I know, I have a new system, alarms going off on phones that remind us when those clients are set to arrive and a damn coffee service for them when they’re in the chair. I’m not running a fucking tea social, Jeremy. This is a tattoo shop, for Christ’s sake.”

Whether or not Jeremy tried to contain his snicker, Erik didn’t know. But he could say the attempt was an epic fail.

“Let me just say this. Is the new system effective? Are the artists okay with the notifications? Because hell, I’m about to call her and see if I can get that shit for my shop. And three, are your clients happy? Because if you can answer all of these with a ‘yes,’ I don’t see what the problem is.”

“The problem is those changes came on the tail end of her deciding the point of sale system was outdated. So she bought a new POS. And then ordered Forever Ink merchandise. I now sell T-shirts and leather cuffs along with tattoos. And right after that, she found a new supplier for our ink—”

“Is that why she called and asked me who I use? Huh.” Jeremy hummed. “Seriously though, Erik. You were paying

too much for ink if you were still using the same place from back in Vegas. I mean, she's actually saving you money."

"Fuck you. And that's after she switched the furniture in the lobby around so much I feel like I'm goddamn Alice in Wonderland every time I walk into my shop. Now—are you listening to me?—now she wants to sit down with me and talk about updating my logo. Hell. No. She's not touching my logo."

Yes, he was bitching but screw it. When Camille had started talking about changing anything on the logo that had been with him since he bought his first shop—the only thing he'd walked away with from the shit show his life had turned into in the four years before moving to Rose Bend—his balls had tried to crawl back up inside him.

No. He was drawing the line there.

"All right, all right, I get it about the logo. Maybe if you tried explaining to her the significance of it, you might not walk in tomorrow with a new design. She, of all people, would understand. After all the bullshit you went through, I get it."

Not happening. He didn't discuss those turbulent four years with anyone. Not with the friends he'd made since moving to Rose Bend, not with the artists who worked for him now and definitely not with the few persistent reporters who still called him. Jeremy only knew about it because he'd gone through that hell with him.

His friend's sigh echoed in his ear. "I already know the answer to that. No. And all right, fine. But you do know keeping all that bottled up doesn't make you the hot, broody type. That's only in books. It just makes you a bitter asshole who's afraid to trust. And I say that with all the love."

"As long as you're saying it with love," Erik drawled.

But damn. Was that how Jeremy saw him? Was that how most people viewed him?

The truth hurt. He was bitter. He was afraid to trust. But when you were left with scars from third degree burns, who

could blame a person for avoiding fire at all costs? His fire just happened to be believing in people.

More specifically, believing in people not to use or leave him. Sometimes both. Because that seemed to be a pattern in his life.

“Are you through crying now? I have to go. Got a back piece coming in. I might be heading up your way though. It’s the motorcycle rally this week, right?”

Erik nodded, though his friend couldn’t see the gesture. “Yeah, it kicks off tomorrow night, but people have already started riding into town.”

Every year, Rose Bend hosted a huge motorcycle ride and rally. For two weeks, musicians, vendors and artists converged on the small town for concerts, to sell their work and goods in booths and to entertain. The Glen, a wide, open field at the end of Main Street, became the site for all the festivities. Riders from all over the country visited to take part in them as well as the daily rides into the mountains. Proceeds from the event went to This Is Home, a local youth home.

Erik had been a little shocked when he’d attended his first rally. He’d visited Sturgis several years back, but this ride couldn’t be more different. It possessed an almost festival-like atmosphere. And it didn’t just bring out the motorcyclists, but their families, as well.

“Yeah, I might take some time here and visit the last week. Don’t let Camille know, just in case I can’t make it. Besides, if I told her I was coming, she’d tell me no. Probably think I want to check up on her.”

Erik snorted. “That is the reason.”

“Only part of it,” Jeremy argued. “Do me a favor and take it easy on her, okay? We didn’t have it easy growing up. Losing our parents early and me having to take over as her guardian at eighteen. I did the best I could with her, but all she’s known is people she loves being taken from her. And now this. She’s trying to find a place for herself again. Which likely explains why she’s going a little hard on your shop.”

“Take it easy on her.” Erik shook his head even as his chest constricted at Jeremy’s description of his and Camille’s past. Because Erik couldn’t help himself, he returned his gaze to the lobby and the sexy as hell pain-in-his-ass in it. As he watched, Camille walked over to the front desk and picked up her cell phone. A frown creased her brow as she answered it. Now, he frowned as her body stiffened and then she closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. What the hell was going on? “I have to go. Later.”

Before his friend could reply, he ended the call and pulled open the entrance door. Without glancing at the clients sitting on the couches, he strode directly to Camille.

“I understand. Well, let me think about it and I’ll get back to you.” She paused and a spasm of emotion he couldn’t quite decipher passed over her face. “Thank you for that. I’ll get back to you.”

She lowered the cell from her ear and tapped the screen, but instead of setting the phone on the desk, she stared at it. But her shoulders were damn near riding her ears.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, no preamble.

“Nothing.” She tilted her head back and smiled at him.

And he narrowed his eyes.

“Try again. If you didn’t look like you’re chewing rocks it might’ve worked. Now, what’s wrong? And don’t tell me ‘nothing.’”

A gleam sparked in her chocolate brown eyes. *Thank fuck.* Anything was better than the dull sheen that had darkened her gaze.

Her smile widened, damn near showing every tooth in her mouth. Too bad she looked like she wanted to take a bite out of him.

A bolt of lust ricocheted through him. Not that he’d mind her teeth on him.

“Nothing.”

They stared at one another for several moments like prizefighters getting ready to throw down in the ring.

Yeah, screw this.

“Jake,” he called out over the sound of buzzing tattoo machines, Megan Thee Stallion and talk.

“Yeah?” Jake yelled from behind the wall that separated the front space from the tattooing area.

“Keep an eye on the desk for a few minutes, yeah?”

“You got it.”

Returning his attention to Camille, Erik jerked his chin.

“Let’s go to my office. Unless you prefer to have this conversation with an audience.”

As if she just remembered where they stood, she noted the three customers perched on the couches. The three customers avidly staring at them.

“After you,” she ground out.

With grim satisfaction, he headed for his office, Camille following closely behind him. And if he heard “asshole” mumbled under her breath, well, it wasn’t the first time he’d been called that...today.

He opened the door and stepped aside to let her enter first. Big mistake when her scent—something that reminded him of apples and soft rain after a furious storm—assailed him, stirring warring but compatible desires to feast on her and wrap his body around hers, sheltering her, comforting himself.

He shook his head. Hard. The first desire he understood. He hadn’t lost his love of fucking along with the life he’d left behind in Vegas. But that just as elemental, pulling need to protect and to be cared for in return? That was new. He hadn’t wanted that in years. Three to be exact.

“You know this is unnecessary, right?” Camille spun on the heels of her cherry red stilettos—whoever sold those to her should either be shot or awarded a badge of honor, he wasn’t sure which—and faced him as he shut the door. “And

overstepping. I work here, but that doesn't give you access to my private life."

He crossed his arms, mimicking her stance. And cocked his head. "If there's one thing I've learned over these past few weeks, it's there's nothing easy about you. But, Camille, I saw your face, your whole damn body change when you answered that phone. And not for the good. Since this happened in my shop and could affect your performance, then it's my business."

"That's a bit of a reach." Her lips twisted.

He shrugged.

After several moments, she sighed and threw her hands up. "Fine." She shook her head then tipped it back, blinking up at the ceiling. "I don't even know why I'm telling you this. I must be desperate."

"Or you really do want to get it off your chest."

She lowered her chin, and his chest constricted at the almost wistful smile that curled her lips.

"Someone to listen to me." She huffed out a laugh. "Isn't that novel?" She gave her head another hard shake. "That was my ex-fiancé's sister. Seeing her name show up on my phone screen is enough to sour my day. We never got along. Not for lack of trying on my part. But from the day we met she took an instant disliking to me, didn't think I was good enough for her brother. And she had no issue with letting me know it. So you can imagine how she probably danced naked under a full moon when he broke up with me." Another caricature of a smile, but this time it was wry. "Which is why she's the last person who should be calling me. But she did. And it's about Brad, my ex. He's in trouble, and they want me to help bail him out."

"They?" Erik asked.

"Her. His mother. Brad. His staff." She lifted a shoulder. "When it comes to Brad, it's never a solo affair." She shifted backward and leaned against the desk. Her fingers curled around the edge, and he had the impression of someone

holding on in the midst of chaos. “A month after our relationship ended, Brad became engaged to another woman. A socialite who’s the daughter of one of his mother’s friends. Now, he could’ve either had a whirlwind romance as I’m sure he tried to spin it or they were already seeing one another while we were together. Call me cynical, but I’m more inclined to believe the latter.”

Yeah, he didn’t even know the prick but that would be his guess, too.

“You know the old saying, ‘if they do it with you, they’ll do it to you’? Well, apparently, a scandal has broken out. He was caught cheating, and his new fiancée broke up with him. Publicly. Which isn’t all that great for the image of a man running for office much less state representative.”

He snorted. “So the other woman was cool with being the side chick but drew a line at him fucking around on her? Makes sense.”

A flicker of amusement flashed in her brown eyes before her lashes lowered.

“At least she got out first. I can’t say the same,” she murmured.

“What is that supposed to mean?” He uncrossed his arms and frowned, stepping toward her.

She didn’t immediately reply. And didn’t look at him. Instead, she studied his boots. He liked them, but there was nothing that damn fascinating about them.

“Camille?” he said, pressing her.

And not because he was nosy and harbored this insatiable curiosity about her. True, that comprised some of it. But more, he looked at a woman who needed to let go of a weight. Or lance a wound.

Yeah, that made him a complete hypocrite. But it didn’t stop him from urging her to talk.

“It means, she may have been the other woman but at least she had enough pride and self-worth to walk away when she’d

been disrespected. She didn't stay and sign up for more. Or allow herself to be tossed to the side like garbage. Say what you want about her, but she valued herself enough not to put up with his bullshit."

"And you didn't?"

"No, I didn't," she said quietly. Her shoulders rolled back, her chin notching up. But that dark brown gaze remained somewhere south of his.

She refused to meet his eyes, and that knotted his stomach.

"I didn't leave until he kicked me out," she added in that same low voice.

"Or maybe, after years with a man you loved, the idea of a future without him scared the shit out of you. Or maybe, after being with this man for five years—since the age of twenty-one when you still had fucking milk on your breath when it comes to experience and living—the thought of losing the world you'd known terrified you. Sometimes the familiar, as toxic as it is, can become more comfortable than the unknown because it's just that—unknown.

"Or maybe, this asshole so dominated your daily life, that everything you did and thought revolved around him, his needs and desires. Maybe you were schooled to be dependent on him. So do we now punish you for doing what you learned? That's bullshit. Nothing is black-and-white. And the shades of gray are often so murky and filled with shadows, it wouldn't just be hypocritical to judge you but harmful as fuck. I'm not one of those people, Camille. And you're going to have to stop being one, too."

Finally, she looked at him.

And it required every bit of control he possessed not to bum-rush that desk...and her. The pain in those chocolate depths was enough to tear at him. But the uncertainty brimming there? He couldn't stand it. Couldn't bear it.

But she wasn't his to touch, to comfort. He didn't own that privilege. And Jeremy hadn't entrusted his sister to his care for Erik to put his hands on her...

Fuck it.

He crossed the few steps separating them, curled a hand around the nape of her neck and tugged her into his arms. A sweet yet almost painful relief pierced his chest. As if his body recognized she belonged right there...

He squeezed his eyes closed and shut down that treacherous thought. His mother might've been the Irish dreamer in his family who believed in fated soul mates and love, but not him. He knew better.

And yet...

Yet, he didn't let her go.

No, he held her closer, his arms tightening. Even as he brushed his lips over the thick, coarse silk of her hair, he instructed his body to stand down. Willed the need pumping through his veins to back off. Ordered his cock to behave.

Because this—her in his arms, pressed against his body from chest to thighs—wasn't about the greed he'd become an expert at hiding. And he wasn't so much of a bastard that he'd take advantage of the situation. Not many people believed he knew anything about loyalty, but he did. His knowledge of and expectation for loyalty had led him to a heartache he could never forget. A heartache so deep the residue still resonated in his bones.

And for a woman who, he suspected, had experienced precious little of it over the past few years, he'd never betray that.

“Go on and finish it. Why did his sister call you?”

He half expected her to draw away from him, return to not looking him in the eye.

She did pull away from him, and returned to her perch on the desk. But she did meet his gaze, and his hands, which still tingled with the phantom impression of her skin, fisted.

“She wants me—*ordered me*—to return to Providence and clean up his mess. Not her words. Mine. Because that's basically what they want from me. To return and play the

dutiful fiancée, spin some wild story of true love conquering all with me being cast in the role of ‘the other woman’ and how he couldn’t stay away from me. So instead of a manwhore who can’t keep his dick in his pants, he’s just a misguided man who didn’t realize he had love all along until he lost it. Apparently, it’s the true American fairy tale.” Her snort wreaked of sarcasm and the pain reflected in her gaze. “And me. First, I’m cast as the naive and jilted fiancée, then put into the role of desperate cheater and finally, the triumphant but pliant girlfriend again.”

“That’s crazy as fuck.” His mouth curled in disbelief. “And I can’t believe they think it will work.”

“Spin a story well enough, and I have no doubt people will buy it. No one has seen through his lies, his charade yet,” she said with only a fair trace of bitterness lacing her voice. “Oh no, they’ll sell this so-called romance to the masses and they’ll eat it up.”

“And they just expect you to give up a life you’re building here and return? Why the hell would you? What do you get out of this?” he snapped.

“Yes, they expect it. Because, according to his sister, I owe them. After all, for five years, they paid for everything from my lifestyle to the food I put in my mouth. And why would I do it? It’s the same explanation for what I get out of it,” she said, that bitterness now thick in the air. “Because I love him, of course.”

He stiffened, a sonorous, hollow pounding in his head. It echoed in his chest, his gut, a deepening gong that threatened to block out every sense. And yet he’d still heard her words in his head.

Because I love him, of course.

“You’re still in love with him?”

It seemed everything stood still as he waited for her answer. The world. The goddamn air. Why did he care? He shouldn’t. It was her life, her decision. Yet... He waited. Because it didn’t matter if he couldn’t explain why.

The answer was important.

A spasm of emotion passed over her face.

“No. I left Rose Bend for love, and it kept me at his side. But distance and pain have a way of making things vividly clear. What I felt by the time we ended wasn’t love. A combination of fear, doubt, uncertainty. Desperation. Maybe that was my problem, too,” she whispered, her gaze sliding over his shoulder, and Erik sensed she might be admitting some epiphany to herself. “Instead of being in love, I was just too desperate for it. So desperate I settled.” She drew in a long breath, and her gaze refocused on him. “But that was then, and I won’t demean myself again to take crumbs. Or let a dream of family, of love that I concoct in my head blind me to reality again.” She shook her head, and the shadows in her gaze darkened. “I won’t do that to myself again.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the dream, just the people you build it around. When you find that your foundation is shaky, you tear it down and start over with a stronger, more solid base. One you have zero doubts about even when the world goes to shit.”

Stop talking, he silently ordered himself. Because now, he didn’t know if he referred to her situation or his past. Or both of them. He’d come in here for answers, and somehow he’d found himself stripping away his own layers.

He and Camille... They had more in common than he’d assumed.

“I’m not going back,” she murmured. Then louder, “I’m not going back.”

“Did you consider it?”

She studied him. “Yes,” she finally said. “For a moment, I felt relieved. That maybe I wouldn’t have to carry out The Plan after all. That I could become blissfully ignorant again and convince myself that I’m happy enough. That path would be less difficult.” She cocked her head. “Do you think I’m weak?”

“Weak?” He huffed out a breath and slowly shook his head.

Pressure shoved against his chest, and, once more, he battled the urge to go to her. And like before he lost against it. He approached her, cupped her chin and tilted her head up. He pressed his thumb into the soft, vulnerable corner of her mouth, lightly smearing her dark red lipstick. He liked it. Liked the idea of messing her up more.

“You could never be weak, Camille. Not the woman who came into my shop and took charge, storming it like a general in battle. Not the woman who goes toe-to-toe with me and more often than I like to admit, wins. She isn’t weak.” He leaned forward, his lips grazing the shell of her ear. “She never was.”

Her breath shuddered against his skin, and he felt it over his chest, his stomach. His cock.

Her hand slowly lifted, circled his wrist. And as his thumb caressed a corner of her lips, hers swept over the pulse at the base of his palm.

They stood there.

Touching.

Staring.

Asking.

But not daring to answer.

A knock resonated on the closed office door.

“Erik, your 12:30 is here,” Jake called out.

Surprise rocked through Erik. Only she could distract him to the point that he’d forgotten they stood in his office with a shop full of people on the other side of the door.

“I’ll be right there,” he replied without removing his stare from hers. “You good?” he quietly asked.

If she wasn’t, they would stay right there in this room until she was better. Loved his clients, thankful for them, but in this moment, fuck ’em.

It’s because Jeremy put her in my care. That’s why they can all wait.

The words whispered through his head, as if they feverishly worked to convince him of their truth. He clung to them.

She nodded. "I'm good."

He dropped his hand, stepped back. But while rubbing his thumb and finger together, massaging the dark red stain into his skin.

"I messed you up," he murmured, tapping the corner of his mouth.

"You don't sound sorry about it," she said in the same low tone.

A beat of silence passed. And he debated whether to acknowledge that or remain silent.

Screw it.

"I'm not sorry."

He turned, opened the door and exited.

Time to get lost in work.

CHAPTER THREE

SHE'D MISSED THIS.

Camille surveyed The Glen that had been transformed into a festival of lights, vendor booths, colorful tents and picnic tables. Rock music pounded along the night air as a local band played from the stage. Mouthwatering aromas of cooking meat emanated from the huge barrel grills on the far side of the wide field. Shouts and laughter from children, chatter from the adults gathered under the tents and sitting on blankets, crowded around the dance area.

Motorcycles packed the parking area and lined Main Street in all their glory, and even though it'd been years, she could still feel the power and rumble of one of those powerful beasts under her. Could feel the wind pushing against her, howling in her ears.

Could feel the adrenaline and freedom singing through her veins.

That had been the most addictive.

It'd been five years since she'd last tasted that particular drug. Five years since she'd started surrendering her desires for someone else's comfort.

Never again.

"You must be really amusing. Otherwise, why would you be over here smiling to yourself?"

Camille briefly closed her eyes at the sound of that low rumble in her ears, savored its calloused stroke over her flesh. Her breath stuttered, and *oh God, please don't let him have noticed*. But that was wishful thinking on her part. Those sky blue eyes never missed a thing.

"I find myself to be very entertaining," she said, surprised but grateful for her calm tone. Especially, when inside, she was anything but. Glancing up, she met Erik's gaze. And

another quake rippled through her. “I didn’t know you planned on coming here tonight.”

He shrugged a wide shoulder. “I didn’t either until a half hour ago. Usually, I just go on the rides when I can fit them around my schedule. But since everyone else was down here and the shop’s closed...” He shrugged again. “Seemed better than eating takeout with some Hulu.”

“You don’t usually go out with your employees?”

He hesitated. It was a very small pause, but Camille caught it. “Not often, no. They have their lives and I have mine. Besides, I’ve learned the hard way that there should be a line between an employer and his staff. Not having that boundary can create a shitload of problems later on.”

Now that sounded like it contained a story. And from the clenching of his jaw and the slight narrowing of his eyes, that story must be heavy. Curiosity flared inside her. What happened to him? Who had hurt him? For him to betray those physical reactions—which were small on him but on someone else would be equal to a full-on tantrum—she didn’t doubt someone had hurt him.

Anger and a strange, unwanted possessiveness spiked in her chest, and she mentally balked. Okay, no. She had no right to demand names so she could tear them a new one. He wasn’t hers.

Even if she could still feel the imprint of his body against hers from a couple of days ago. Even if the press of his thumb to her mouth continued to brand her. Even if she’d never felt as safe and protected as she had in his arms.

Even if in her dreams at night, no knock on the door interrupted them and Erik replaced his hand on her lips with his tongue, his teeth.

She jerked her head around, pretending to scan The Glen once more. Better he believe she had a complete fascination with the band and their take on Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Free Bird” than he catch a hint of the thoughts her face might be betraying.

What was she doing? She'd spent five years with a man who hadn't invested as much of himself into their relationship as she had. A man who hadn't loved her the same. And yet here she was, standing on the precipice of going down that road again. Even with his tattoos, ripped jeans and vintage T-shirts, Erik could give her ex-fiancé lessons in being reserved, contained. Besides irritation, he didn't reveal much emotion.

He showed plenty emotion in that office.

She drew in a breath, conceding to the smug, annoying whisper in her head. Yes, Erik had *emoted* all over her.

"Excuse me," a voice that wasn't Erik's said.

Camille started, so lost in her thoughts, she hadn't heard anyone approach. Two young men, both in T-shirts and worn jeans with tattoos covering their arms and necks, stood in front of her and Erik. But their rapt gazes weren't focused on her; Erik captured their attention.

"We thought it was you," the guy with long blond hair and a Def Leppard T-shirt crowed. "Erik Mann. I can't believe it."

"Holy shit," his friend, a tall Black man with a smoothly shaved head, said. Then, with a wince, he glanced at Camille. "Sorry about that."

She waved off his apology, too confused and riveted by what was occurring in front of her to care about a curse.

"Hey." Erik hiked his chin. "You guys here for the ride?"

The greeting was nice, normal. But Camille's antenna popped up, and she studied Erik closer. Only someone who'd become a student of all things Erik Mann would've picked up on the tense set of his shoulders. The shuttered gaze. The faint shift in his stance that placed more distance between him and the young men.

"Yeah, my family's been coming here for a long time, but this is my first time back in about four years. I brought Connor with me." The closely shaven guy pointed to the blonde. "I'm Billy, by the way. I still can't believe we're here talking to you." Billy shook his head, grinning. "You here for the ride, too?"

“No, I have a shop in town. I live here.”

Connor’s eyes flared wide. “No shit,” he breathed. “Do you think it’s possible to get some ink while we’re here?”

“Call the shop on Monday. I’ll get you in,” Erik said.

“Seriously?” Billy shook his head, obvious hero worship all over his face. “I got my first tattoo in your place in Vegas. It’s still the best piece I’ve ever had done. Having some more ink done in your shop? This is going to be wild.”

The two men, so excited and caught up in the idea of having Erik ink them, didn’t catch the flattening of his mouth. But she did.

Camille frowned. What was going on?

“Hey, Erik, can we get a selfie real quick? Otherwise no one’s ever going to believe we met you,” Connor joked, already pulling his phone out of his back pocket.

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’ll take the picture for you,” Camille offered.

Something was really off, and as nice as these two guys seemed, the quicker she got the deed done, maybe the sooner Erik would lose that horrible strain in his face and body. It grated on her, and an urgency to make it disappear swirled in her belly.

Moments later, the young men strode off, bumping fists and amped up. She waited until they disappeared in the crowd before turning to Erik.

“Are you okay?”

Surprise glinted in his eyes, but his long, dense lashes lowered, hiding his gaze from her.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“That’s my question.” She tilted her head. “But something’s definitely wrong. Do you want to talk about it? And before you say no,” she said, ignoring the hard shake of his head, “do I need to remind you about me spilling all my dirty secrets to you just a couple of days ago? I’d say you owe me. So my

question is really a formality. Dish. And you can start with why those two would want a selfie with you.”

He didn't immediately reply, but his sigh swelled on the night air.

“I was on TV for a while. I guess it makes me a celebrity in their eyes.”

The admission sounded like it'd been forced through churned up gravel. Again, she frowned even as recognition flickered inside her.

“That's right. I completely forgot Jeremy mentioned you'd won a tattoo competition. What was that show?” She scrunched her nose, sifting through her memory. “*Royalty Ink*, right?”

He nodded, the movement stiff, abrupt. “Yeah, but that's not the one I'm talking about, though it started everything else.” Another weighty sigh, and he scrubbed his hand over his head. Muscles flexed in his arm and shoulder, and no, her ovaries did not cry out hallelujah. “Do you want to dance? I need to... move.”

“Oh.” She blinked. Swaying to music and pressed against his body. Again. Good God, that was a bad idea. “Yes, sure.”

A big hand settled on the small of her back, and she bit back a moan at the innocuous but solid touch. Before she had time to assimilate to his hand on her, Erik guided her in front of the stage to the area designated for dancing. His hand applied a small amount of pressure, and she turned into his body. With no coaxing, she looped her arms around his neck. His large palms and long fingers cradled her waist, and that damn near sucked the air from her lungs. She almost glanced down to take in the image of those hands on her, making her feel something she hadn't in so very, very long.

Delicate.

Pretty.

Wanted.

Yes, she almost glanced down. But it seemed her sense of self-preservation burned brighter than she assumed.

With a small tug, Erik pulled her closer, his hands sliding around so one rested just under her shoulder blades and the other at the base of her spine. Her breasts grazed his chest, and her nipples tightened, arrowing a sweet pain down to her sex. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip. Dancing was *not* a great idea. Not when every shift and sway had her brushing up against Erik's big, hard body and sparking need inside hers.

"You know, I get why you want to dance," she murmured, inhaling the warm, musky scent at his throat. Cedar. Soap. And that undefinable hint of *him*. Lust twisted inside her.

"Yeah? You want to enlighten me?" His low rumble vibrated over the beaded tips of her breasts, and she swallowed back a whimper.

"So," she breathed, then cleared her throat. Tried again. "So you can say whatever it is you're going to say without looking at me."

He didn't answer, but his fingertips pressed harder into her back. Maybe it was her imagination, but she could swear his lips moved over her hair.

"Not that I'm judging," she continued. "However you need to do it."

Just, please... Do it.

She didn't just want him to confide in her, to trust her with his truth. For some reason she didn't dare analyze too deeply, she needed it.

"Jeremy ever tell you how we met?" Erik asked.

She barely heard the question above the band's really decent cover of Warrant's "Heaven." But she did catch it. And she shook her head.

"He used to work in my shop in Vegas before I went on *Royalty Ink*. He was one of my best artists and we became friends. After *Royalty Ink*, he decided to move on, open his own place. So he wasn't there when the offer to do my own

reality show came in. I'd like to think if he had been, I would've turned it down. But I didn't. I never thought of the people who worked with me as employees, they were family. Most of us grew up together. They were closer to me than people that shared my blood and last name. Nothing should've been able to come between us," he murmured.

That sin and grit voice softened, as if he were lost in a memory. Happy memories. Yet her stomach tightened because she sensed they wouldn't stay that way.

"I said yes to the show for them. The opportunities it could bring us, the doors it could open. They convinced me to give it a try even though I hated being on *Royalty Ink*. The intrusiveness of the cameras, no privacy. Don't even get me started on the social media part. People, didn't matter if they loved or hated you, were relentless. No one prepares you for that. But then I was by myself. This time I would be with my family. I was so fucking naive."

His hands flexed and loosened on her back. She stroked the nape of his neck, her fingertips brushing the shorter strands of hair there. Did he realize he leaned into her touch? Sought it? Heat and greed tangled below her navel. She liked that he wanted it.

"It started fine, maybe even a little fun. But soon, everything changed. Gradual at first. The petty arguments, the grandstanding for the cameras. The social media wars. Things like that supposedly bring in higher ratings. But what do they do to friendships? To trust? It erodes them." His head bent over hers, his lips moving over her hair, brushing the rim of her ear. Those large hands rubbed up and down her back as if soothing her. But maybe it was himself he tried to calm. To comfort. "One day I had a family, and it seemed like the next, I didn't. The petty arguments turned into bigger ones. Resentment toward me festered and then the people I called friends were trying to ruin my shop behind my back to get their own show. Like I gave a fuck about a show."

At some point, they'd stopped moving, and she could just imagine what they looked like. The two of them, standing there, arms wrapped around one another, his lips buried in her

hair. Lovers. They looked like lovers. She hadn't had him inside her, but they definitely were intimate. In this moment, he shared part of himself with her, and she'd remain in this one spot all night if he needed to purge himself.

"I walked away. From the shop. From the only family I'd had since my mother died. From the show that started it all. I wanted nothing to do with the cameras, fame or being the day's topic on some tabloid site. I came to Rose Bend to start over, and I have. My place, tattooing and peace. I don't want anything else. I definitely don't need any of what happened back there. That was my past."

Camille leaned back, staring up into his face for the first time since he led her to the dance area. The strain of reciting his past was evident in the taut pull of skin over his honed features and in his hooded gaze.

"You say start over, but it sounds like you came here to disappear," she whispered.

"Maybe you're right," he said in return, just as quietly.

She slowly shook her head. "That's a shame then. You shine too bright to ever disappear."

If possible, his features sharpened even more, and a tension entered his body, transforming him into a flesh and blood statue. Warmth flooded her face, and she swallowed a groan. God, why had she said that? She should've shut up because now he probably thought she was a—hell, she didn't know what ideas lurked behind that beautiful, cold facade.

"Look, I'm—"

"Thank you," he said.

The low, rough timbre of those two words rubbed over her skin, vibrated against her chest, affecting her body as much as her heart.

"You're welcome."

With her pulse pounding in her ears and at her throat, she brushed the backs of her fingers along his strong jaw and stubborn chin. And when a shudder rippled through his big

body, she closed her eyes, absorbing it. Part of her wished she hadn't noticed it, hadn't felt it. And the other part... The other part longed to elicit another one from him.

Step back. Walk away. Don't do anything foolish that you can't take back.

The warnings filtered through her head, but the desire pumping through her veins muffled them. Even knowing she didn't return home for this... complication didn't compel her to back out of his embrace and insert much-needed distance between them.

Because as unwise as that decision was, she stood right where she wanted to be. Her gaze dropped to his beautiful, made-for-all-things-dirty mouth...

The loud swell of applause and whistles rose on the night, shattering the cocoon that had wrapped around them. She blinked, glanced around them. People cheered for the band as they ended their set, not noticing she'd been so close to granting them another show.

"I should..." She cleared her throat, finally shifting backward and away from Erik. Dipping her head, she glanced away from him on the pretense of searching the crowds. "I should get back to everyone. They're probably wondering where I've gone."

As far as excuses went, hers was pretty lame. But it would do the job, and dammit, she was desperate. Desperate for distance. Desperate to regain control of her rebelling body. Desperate to remember why putting her mouth on him in front of half the town was a bad idea.

"I'll see you at the shop Monday," she said.

Not waiting for his response, she walked away from him. Relief should've filled her. But it didn't. Instead, a need to turn around, return to Erik and bury her face against his chest rose inside her like a piercing howl.

That dangerous hunger forced her to walk faster.

CHAPTER FOUR

“ARE YOU SURE you won’t hang?” Jake wrapped an arm around Patrick’s neck, another tattoo artist at Forever Ink.

“Yeah, Camille. It’s just eleven. Too early for bedtime.” Dara, another artist, slid her arm around Jake’s waist and grinned. “Have you been to Road’s End yet?”

Camille shook her head. “Not yet, but I’ve heard about it.”

“And everything you’ve heard is true and probably more,” Jake bragged. “A good friend owns it and not only does it have great beer and a greater game room, he pulled in a band for tonight. So live music. You wouldn’t think li’l Rose Bend would have one of the best dive bars in the Berkshires.”

Laughing, Camille held up her hands, palms out. “You guys are really convincing but I’m going to pass. But next time, I’m in. I promise.”

With some grumbling and good-natured teasing, her coworkers strode off toward the parking lot. Giving her head another shake, she headed in the opposite direction. She’d left her car near the tattoo shop, having headed over to The Glen right after work.

The Glen emptied of people, and she joined the exodus. The chatter and laughter, and some whines from children, surrounded her, and she allowed herself to sink into it. This, too, she’d missed. Living in the city had its advantages—nightlife, easy access to malls, restaurants and other entertainment. But she’d let herself forget about the charm and comfort of small town living. Of community events like this, of calling out to people you knew and walking outside at nearly midnight with little fear.

At first she’d resented returning home a failure, in the same position—if not worse—than when she’d left. But now...now it was all as clear as the star-speckled night sky above her. She’d needed to come here to heal, where it was warm, welcoming, safe. Where she belonged. This might not have

been the path she'd envisioned for herself, but maybe right here was where she'd been meant to end up all along.

Inhaling a deep breath, she held it, then released it. And another chunk of the burden she'd carried around for so long cracked and tumbled from her chest.

Smiling wider, she slowed her pace and meandered down the sidewalk. That's right. She *meandered*. Because she could.

Laughter bubbled up in her chest as she glanced into the dark windows of Mimi's Café and The Ride, the local shop that catered to a motorcycle enthusiast's every need, and other storefronts lining Rose Bend's quaint Main Street.

Soon enough she approached Forever Ink, and without her permission, her feet slowed to a stop. This place had become her haven in such a short amount of time. She'd found herself here—her confidence, her strength, her talents—and had been unconditionally accepted in spite of her very recent past, her clothes and how she talked.

Well, almost unconditionally accepted.

Her heart thudded against her sternum, dispersing the calm that had settled over her like dandelion seeds on a summer breeze.

Erik.

He'd disappeared after their impromptu dance and confession, and yet it seemed she couldn't escape him tonight. She peered through the display window as he stood behind the front desk, and she could no longer escape one vital question: Did she want to?

No.

The answer ricocheted off the walls of her mind, gaining volume and certainty with each pass.

No, she didn't want to escape him. On the contrary, she longed to be found. And held. And...and taken.

Before she even fully acknowledged that she'd made a decision, Camille rapped on the window. Erik's head jerked up and their gazes caught.

Through the glass and the space of the dark shop, shadows partially hid his face. He remained behind the desk, unmoving. And doubt sank in her belly, pooling wide. She lowered her arm—

In one moment, he strode across the lobby in an explosion of movement. Her breath snagged in her throat, and she barely had time to register that he barreled toward her before Erik unlocked the door and pulled it open. Long fingers encircled her wrist in a gentle but implacable grip and drew her inside.

Her gaze locked on his face, drinking in every stark line, every sharply honed angle, every arrogant slope. The only softness in his face belonged to his mouth, and her fingertips tingled and itched to sketch each gorgeous feature.

A thick, drugging need flowed through her like melted, dark chocolate. Sweet, bold and addictive.

“Last chance,” he said, reaching around her. The click of the lock punctuated his offer—or warning.

A shiver quaked through her. But not out of fear from his faintly ominous words. No. She trembled in excitement.

“I don’t need it.” She shifted forward until her breasts pressed against the solid wall of his chest, until the thick length of his cock branded her belly. “I need you.”

As if her words snapped a tether leashing his control, he cupped her face, tilted her head back and took her mouth.

That’s the only way she could describe it. Took.

And that’s when she stopped thinking at all.

His lips parted over hers, and she opened for him. Willingly but not helplessly. Because as his tongue plunged deep, tangling with hers, their breath and groans mating, power sang through her, its melody strong, clear and emboldening. She’d never been the aggressor in her past relationship, but then desire had never burned as bright inside her as it did now. It never permitted her the freedom to fist a shirt and drag a man closer as she rose to her toes to demand more. More of his touch. More of his fire.

So this was abandonment.

It was glorious.

She tunneled her fingers through his hair, dragging her nails over his scalp.

And she accepted another rough groan as a reward, as her due. But satisfied? Nowhere near.

Sliding a hand up his chest, she curved it around his neck, anchoring herself and keeping him in place as she snatched control of this marauding they unimaginatively called a kiss. Tilting her head, she nipped the full bottom lip that had become her obsession, then soothed any sting she might've caused by sucking on that wicked curve.

His growl vibrated against her breasts and she crushed them to him, seeking to alleviate at least some of the sweet ache.

“Not here.”

His low, rumbled words were the only warning she received before he hiked her into his arms, cradling her to his chest. Apparently, the kiss hadn't left her breathless because a gust of air escaped her at being swept off her feet—literally. Though she would've never cast herself in the role of damsel in distress, she curled her arms around his neck and hung on, heart fluttering at his casual display of strength.

He strode down the hallway, not stopping until he reached the room where the artists inked tattoos that required more privacy. Kicking the door closed behind him, he whirled around and pressed her back to it.

That mouth—that gorgeous, diabolical mouth—claimed hers again, and she submitted to the pleasure that submerged her beneath its dark waves. How a man's kiss could be sexier, hotter than any sex she'd had, she couldn't begin to explain. It just was. And she chalked it up to this man. This man and his hungry lips that bruised her own.

This man and his seeking hands that fisted her hair, scattering pinpricks across her scalp. His busy hands that slid under the flowy skirt of her dress and stroked up her bare

thighs to cup her ass, squeeze it and then moan as if he'd discovered a long-lost treasure.

This man and his big, hard body that promised all kinds of pleasure even as it held her aloft, granting her security and safety.

This man, this man.

God, she wanted him. Needed him.

"Erik, please," she whispered. Begged. Because, yes, she was begging.

Maybe she didn't have the exact words, but Erik didn't seem to need them. His mouth abandoned hers and trailed a damp, searing path over her jaw, down her throat and collarbone to the valley between her breasts.

Oh God.

A cry ripped free from her as he closed his lips around her nipple, right through her filmy, summer dress. Her clothing and bra might as well have been air for all the defenses they provided her. His tongue lashed the beaded tip then curled around it, sucking hard. Bright, sharp pleasure arrowed from her breast straight to her moist, spasming sex.

"Oh God," she repeated, this time aloud.

How could she survive this heat, this nearly overwhelming lust? And he hadn't even touched her naked skin yet.

As if he could read her mind, a hand lifted to the bodice of her dress and tugged it and her bra down. Her flesh popped out over the top, baring her to him.

"Fuck, sweetheart," he breathed, brushing his lips over her nipple. Once. Twice. Again. "You're so goddamn gorgeous. I knew you would be. I knew it."

She didn't have time to dwell on the knowledge that Erik had thought about her naked. The blast of ecstasy that ripped through her as his mouth closed around her obliterated everything but him and how he played her body like a finely tuned guitar. One he might very well smash to smithereens before this all ended.

She curled over his head, wrapping her arms around him, feverish words dropping from her lips. Words urging him not to stop, harder, more. And he acquiesced. God, did he.

Erik lowered her to the floor but didn't release her. Good thing, too, because she couldn't have said with certainty that her trembling legs could hold her up. One strong arm wrapped around her waist while his other hand trailed over her hip and dipped underneath her panties, cupping her flesh.

A keening wail crawled up her throat but lodged there. It echoed in her head as she arched tight as a bow against him. Her fingernails scrabbled at his shoulders, searching for purchase not just in the here and now, but in this carnal, chaotic storm he'd tossed her in.

"Erik," she gasped, surging up on the balls of her feet. Attempting to escape the electrical currents of pleasure that assailed her or seeking more of it? She didn't know. Both?

"No?" he asked, his voice like brand-new sandpaper. "Or yes?" He rolled the heel of his palm over her clit, and she loosed a strangled whimper at the swell of lust that swamped her, pulsed right where he cradled her. "Is that a yes, sweetheart?"

She groaned. Now he wanted to tease her. When he had her body strung so tight she threatened to snap into pieces.

"Yes, dammit," she hissed. Or tried to. It came out as more of a whine.

His low chuckle brushed the base of her throat seconds before he raked his teeth down her neck...and thrust two long, large fingers inside her.

And she broke. Exploded into all those pieces. Pieces he would have to be responsible for gathering because she couldn't think, couldn't move. Could do nothing but accept the pleasure shattering over and through her in endless, exultant waves.

"Fuck, that was beautiful. I want to see that again. Except with you around my cock this time."

Erik's muttered words barely penetrated the erotic fog that encased her brain. And when he swept her up in his arms again, carrying her to the tattoo chair and positioning her so she straddled his thick thighs, she didn't put up any protest. Not when bliss had replaced blood in her veins and she grieved leaving this place of utter peace.

But then his fingers brushed her inner thighs, and she glanced down in time to see him remove a condom from the small foil package and roll it down over his cock.

And that quick lust reignited as if it'd never been sated.

He. Was. Beautiful.

Long, thick, with a wide, flared cap that glistened with slick, pearly drops that slid from a slit at the top. He could've been cast from marble by an artist's touch, that's how hard and perfect he was. Unable to resist, she reached for him...

A tender but firm grip prevented her from obtaining her goal.

"Just the thought of your hand wrapped around my dick is enough to have this over before I get inside you," he growled, and guided her hands to his shoulders. "When I come—and when you come again—it's going to be buried so deep inside you I can feel you when I breathe."

Holy...

She shut her eyes against the blaze of lust in his bright eyes and the stamp of hunger on his face. No one had ever spoken to her like that before. No one had ever transformed her into this needy creature willing to crawl, to beg for the burn of his possession.

"Do it," she rasped, ordered. "Do it now."

He didn't make her wait. His mouth flattened, and again, his other hand grazed her flesh as he aligned his flesh with hers. The broad tip nudged her folds, and without hesitation, she sank down on him.

The air propelled from her lungs as if with every bit of her he claimed, she expelled breath, needing to make room for

him. A long, high whimper swirled in her chest, scrambling for her throat, desperate for release. Each inch of his cock stretched her, branded her. This position didn't allow her to hold back; it opened her wide for his inexorable siege on her sex, her senses, her...

No. She shut that down. Quick. No going there.

“Open your eyes,” Erik demanded, and the steel in his command—because it was nothing less than a command—left no room for anything but her obedience. His hands gripped her hips, stilling her. “You good? You with me?”

“Yes,” she breathed. Leaning forward, she kissed his throat, licking it and sucking on the golden, damp skin. “Yes,” she repeated for added emphasis.

Rolling her hips, she gasped, pleasure rocking through her, sharp and breath stealing. Fingernails digging into the dense muscle of his shoulders, she pushed down, driving the last few thick inches of him inside her.

She shook, full body tremors at the depth and power of his possession. Her feminine muscles quivered and spasmed around his cock, adjusting to this invasion, this taking. He filled her—filled her to the point that she felt nothing but him. Inside her. Under her. Surrounding her. She was a castle laid siege to, wasted and left with nothing but ashes.

Oh yes, ashes. Because by the time he was through with her, that's what he would render her to.

And she'd gladly throw herself as a willing sacrifice to burn.

Cupping his face between her palms, she tilted his head back. Lowering hers, she brushed her lips over his but didn't claim his kiss. Instead, their breath mingled, mated, fucked.

Then she moved.

Up. Down. Roll. Grind.

She repeated the pattern, and that long, weighty dick stroked her in places she hadn't known existed. Hitting spots that scattered stars behind her eyelids.

Up. Down. Roll. Grind.

She took and he gave. He demanded and she surrendered. The slide and slap of their bodies punctuated the room. His rumbled orders and her whispered pleas peppered the air.

Up. Down. Roll. Grind.

Even though she straddled him, rode him, she didn't wield the control. He did. His big palms grasped her hips and guided them in a punishing and erotic rhythm that hurtled her toward a climatic end that would do just that...end her. He held her still while he powered into her sex, imprinting himself on her so she would feel him hours, days later.

He owned her.

Cries tumbled free of her lips, straight into his mouth, and when he lowered a hand, sliding it between them to circle and pinch her clit, he slung her into oblivion.

There was nothing gentle or easy about this orgasm. Its power and intensity ripped her apart, breaking her, and leaving nothing to scrape together afterward. It was raw, rude and wild. The cataclysmic pleasure didn't respect her personal boundaries but consumed her whole.

And as he strained beneath her, pistoning into her sex in hard, abrupt thrusts before stiffening with a low roar, she knew, nothing would be the same for her again.

CHAPTER FIVE

JEREMY WAS GOING to kill him.

And dammit, Erik would have to let him. Because he had zero intentions of keeping his hands off his best friend's sister.

Erik pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering, "Shit."

He'd really screwed up. Jeremy had sent his sister to him to provide a safe place to work and land. And he'd betrayed that trust by fucking her in a tattoo chair.

Not only had he broken the Bro Code, but he'd blown it up and salted the earth beneath the pieces.

Guilt crept through him, but another, hotter emotion wound along his veins, settling in his dick—and his chest. This would all be so much easier if he could chalk it all up to lust and sex. Not that Jeremy would go for that, but it wouldn't have Erik firmly stuck in WTF mode.

He'd had sex before. Good sex. Dirty sex. Even phenomenally good, dirty sex.

But what happened here in that back room with Camille Saturday night... That didn't even have a level or a name. Other than What the Fuck Was That?

Just thinking on it—again—had his body hardening, readying. His fingers curled around the armrests as if that would prevent him from launching himself across the office, down the hall and into the lobby where she worked the front desk. This morning had been the first time they'd seen each other or spoken since Saturday night. And while she'd acted as if nothing had happened between them, he'd barely convinced himself that hauling her back to his office and burying his face between her legs was a bad idea.

Barely.

So he'd hidden here in his office until he could get his thoughts and dick under control.

He'd tagged Camille as trouble from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. And he hadn't been wrong. But instead of being a threat to his daily routine and business, she threatened every resolve and shred of control he possessed. Every decision and opinion about his life here in Rose Bend.

He'd temporarily hired trouble, and now he wanted to keep her.

Shit.

Propping his elbows on his desk, he thrust his fingers through his hair, tugging on the strands. He wanted the right to slide back inside that tight, perfect body. Desired the freedom to touch her, brush his lips over hers or that elegant slope of shoulder. Longed to see her face light up with a smile that reflected in her chocolate brown eyes.

He craved it all. And he didn't know what the fuck he was going to do about it.

A knock on the office door interrupted his spiral of thoughts, and he glanced up to see Jake standing in the doorway, a troubled frown creasing his brow.

"Hey, Erik, sorry to bother you, man, but I think you should head out front. Camille—"

Before the other man could finish the sentence, Erik erupted from the chair and rounded the desk. Urgency propelled him past Jake and into the hall. Before he reached the doorway leading to the lobby, he heard Camille.

Ice crackled like a spiderweb over his chest. And underneath, a simmering, red-tinged anger.

"I'm only going to tell you one more time. No," Camille said, her tone flint. "It's the same in several languages. Now, I'll ask you one more time to leave me alone."

"I just have a few more questions, Camille—"

"Ms. Dansen," she corrected in the same flat tone that still conveyed her disgust.

"Sure. Ms. Dansen. If you'll just tell me whether or not you were the woman Bradley Luck met at the downtown

Renaissance. And if so, how often did you two meet? Did you plan on stealing him back from his fiancée?”

Even before Erik charged through the door, he knew he'd find a reporter on the other side of the desk. Only one of his kind possessed that particular note of vicious yet gleeful avarice. As if he'd scented blood in churning water and couldn't wait to feed.

The tall, slender man in a white shirt and jeans leaned over the desk, crowding into Camille's personal space. Behind him, another man held a camera, filming the entire exchange. Erik didn't even stand in its glaring, intrusive eye and his skin crawled.

But worse than that creeping sensation over his body was the completely blank expression she wore. He didn't know Camille, with her expressive eyes, could appear so...removed.

The anger kindling inside him flared into a fire, and he strode over to stand beside her.

“You're in my shop, bothering my employees, and she told you to get out. So why the fuck are you still standing here?”

The reporter's eyes widened. “I was just asking Camille a few questions and then—”

“Ms. Dansen. You don't know her like that. Again, she doesn't want to talk to you. And since this is private property, *my* private property, I'm only going to tell you one more time to get out. Or get thrown out.”

Out of his peripheral vision he noted Jake, and Paul, another of his artists, leaning against the doorjamb behind him. Apparently, so did the cameraman, because he swung the camera toward them.

“I know you,” the reporter said, snapping his fingers, his eyes narrowed on Erik. Fear punched him in the chest, choking him. “You're Erik Mann from *Royalty Ink* and *Downtown Tattoos*.” He laughed, moving toward Erik, and with every step his stomach tightened and tightened. “Where have you been? You just disappeared off the face of the earth.” His dark gaze shifted between Erik and Camille. “Wait, wait.

Are you two...?” The reporter whipped around to face Camille again, a wide smile spreading across his face. “Does Bradley Luck know about this? Did you break up his engagement and now you’re with Erik Mann?”

“Is that what you do?” Camille’s lip curled in disgust. “If you don’t have a story, you just make one up? I’m going to tell you for the last time. Get. Out.”

“Is Erik the reason your relationship with Bradley Luck ended?”

Fear and revulsion seeped into him, but he still shoved through the swing door and stalked toward the reporter and his cameraman. He didn’t need to glance over his shoulder to know Jake and Paul followed him. It was in the flaring of the reporter’s eyes and the quick backward shuffling of the cameraman. But he didn’t drop that lens. No, he would catch every bit of this confrontation.

“Erik, give me just a couple of minutes. I have just one question—”

Erik rounded the two men in several long strides and slapped the door open. With a not-so-gentle tap to the reporter’s shoulder, he shoved him outside the shop, and Jake ushered his buddy out.

“Assholes,” Paul muttered. “My next client isn’t set to arrive for another hour. I think I’ll sit out here and wait for him.” He stared out the window, fixing his green gaze on the pair still standing outside the shop door.

Anger clawed at Erik. Anger and a helplessness he’d vowed never to feel again. It burned underneath his skin, eating him alive and he couldn’t escape it.

“Erik,” Camille murmured, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know—I *don’t* know...” That cold reserve evaporated from her face, and her soft mouth turned down at the corners. She spread her hands wide, palms upturned. “I can only guess that Brad or his sister gave them my number and information. I never meant for them to show up here.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said, and she didn’t quite hide her flinch at his abrupt tone.

He wanted to soften it, silently told himself to, but the hold of the past gripped him too tight.

“Erik—” she whispered.

“Can you let me know when my one o’clock gets here?” he said, interrupting her.

He didn’t wait for her reply but shoved through the swing door and strode for his office. Trapped. He was both trapped and too exposed out there.

For the first time in three years, he didn’t feel...safe.

* * *

HAD TIME SLOWED and no one told her?

For the umpteenth time, Camille glanced at her cell phone. Eight twenty-nine. Forever Ink would be closing in another thirty-one minutes. In other cities, a tattoo shop would remain open much later into the night. But this was Rose Bend. And Forever Ink closed at the same time as every store along Main. Usually, it seemed early to her. But now, when she desperately needed time to fly, it crawled.

Her fingers curled into her palms, fingernails biting into the flesh. The last client had left ten minutes ago, and she’d closed out the POS system. The artists cleaned up their areas; the rock music blaring from the speakers couldn’t drown out their laughter and loud voices.

She glanced at the doorway that led to the hall—the hall Erik had disappeared down hours earlier. Grief and anger merged in her chest like a grimy, muddled mixture. She couldn’t separate one from the other. And it threatened to drown her.

Glancing down at her cell phone, she checked on the time again. Four minutes later.

Oh screw it.

Moments later, she knocked on his office door.

“Yeah? Come in.”

She closed her eyes at the sound of Erik’s voice. Of course, she’d heard the low rumble today after those reporters left. But it hadn’t been directed toward her. He’d been avoiding her. And the time for that to end had arrived. Good or bad, they needed to have this out.

She just feared it would be bad.

There was no way she’d missed his stare before he turned away from her. No way she’d missed the pain and resolve in it.

No. Though she hoped for the good, reality assured her this would be bad.

Lifting her lashes, she grasped the knob, turned it and pushed the door open. Erik looked up from his desk as she entered. And though her heart drummed against her rib cage, she met his sky blue gaze. The drumming sped, grew harder, louder.

“Can I talk to you?” she asked.

“Yeah, come in.”

She stepped forward, closing the door behind her. Part of her wanted to lean against it for support. Or open it again and rush out, postponing this conversation... forever. But it was that longing that had her moving forward. She had learned to stop putting her head in the sand and avoiding the truth.

“Erik, we need to talk about earlier. I’m sorry that happened here in the shop. I can only assume since I didn’t give my ex and his sister a quick enough answer, they went with the story anyway, maybe trying to force me to go along with it. But I never meant for any of that to touch you here.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It wasn’t your fault.” He jerked his chin toward the door. “I heard your cell going off all day. More reporters?”

Reluctantly, she nodded. “I have my suspicions about where they got my number, and now I’m considering changing it.”

“Maybe you should make a statement and get it over with,” he suggested, and she locked down the shiver that tried to

ripple through her at his cool tone.

Even when they'd first met and he'd been at his best blunt self, he'd never sounded so...formal. Distant. As if he'd already placed an uncrossable space between them.

"I don't know if that would help," she murmured, her gaze roaming over his features. "Give them anything, and they'll twist it into something you don't even recognize."

"You'll probably need to say something." He tapped on his laptop's keyboard and turned it around so she could see the screen. "They're already coming up with their own stories whether you agree to talk to them or not."

Camille barely heard his last words. A dull roar had entered her head, and underneath it, her pulse pounded like a hammer against steel.

On the screen scrolled a bold headline, "Has Brad's Luck Run Out?" And underneath, a subtitle, "Candidate for House Representative Bradley Luck's ex-fiancée and 'other woman' seen cavorting with ex-reality TV star." An article followed and above it was a picture the cameraman must've taken earlier while in Forever Ink. Erik stood shoulder to shoulder with Camille, his expression fierce, protective.

And it was all a lie.

"Have to give them points for the clever twist on his name," she said, disgust and pain a sour swirl in her stomach. Closing her eyes, she inhaled a deep breath. When she opened them again, she met Erik's shuttered gaze. "I'm sorry," she said, apologizing again.

"Not your fault, Camille." He lowered the laptop monitor and rose to his feet. "You might want to take a few days off, though. At least until all this dies down and the media stops hovering around this place like vultures. Paul spotted a few more of them hanging around at Sunnyside Grille. They're not going away any time soon."

"You're firing me?" she whispered. Hurt and disbelief crowded in on her, and she could only stare at him.

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m not firing you. I’m just saying putting space between you and them, giving them a less visible target, might help this die down quicker. Maybe you should go visit Jeremy—”

“This is convenient, isn’t it?”

The hurt flickered, giving way to the flames of anger. Good. She embraced the anger. It energized her while the pain sapped her strength, her pride. And after all she’d been through in the last few months, all she had left was her pride. Cold company, and it’d abandoned her once. But she’d found it again, and she wouldn’t be giving it up. Especially not here in this office where a man she’d foolishly started to fall in love with couldn’t wait to get rid of her fast enough.

A shame how she seemed to be so easy to walk away from. But damned if she’d ever do that to herself again.

She’d never abandon herself again.

“What’re you talking about?” Erik’s eyes narrowed on her, but she hiked her chin up.

“Just what I said. This whole thing—” she waved her hand toward the laptop “—is convenient. But if it hadn’t been the reporters showing up, I’m sure you would’ve found another reason to put distance between us. To send me away.”

“The fuck?” he rasped. “This isn’t about Saturday or an ‘us.’”

She just barely managed to control her flinch at that sneered “us.”

“I’ve been down this road, living under the microscopes of cameras and having the public give their unsolicited opinions about my life, about me. I walked away from that. Yet, there I am—” he jabbed a finger toward the laptop “—back in that damn fishbowl with random strangers speculating and commenting about who I fuck. About who I am. Bringing up a past I buried. I didn’t ask for this and want no part of it.”

“I understand your anger. I do,” she softly said. “It’s invasive and unfair, and it feels helpless when you can’t combat the lies being spread about you. I, more than anyone,

understand that. I lived it, too. For five years. And believe me, now I want to just hide in a hole.” She clutched the back of the chair in front of his desk, leaning forward. “But I can’t disappear. And neither can you. I told you once that you shine too bright, and it’s true. You, Erik, are a light that draws people. You’re safety, a haven, a calm in a chaotic storm. How do you think you were able to move to a small town as far from Vegas as possible and still find another family loyal to you? Who respects you? Who loves you? And that’s what you have here, no matter what you want to call them—employees, artists. They’re your family. And you can keep them at arm’s length, but you’re only depriving yourself of the full measure of the joy they can bring to your life.”

She drew in a deep breath, loosed her grip on the chair and stepped back. But she couldn’t look away from him. Didn’t want to look away from him.

“Camille, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” he ground out.

“If it makes you feel better to tell yourself that, go ahead. But this isn’t about my ex or those reporters as much as it’s about your fear to trust anyone else, to love them. You’d rather be alone than risk the pain of someone betraying you again. Just look around you.” She waved a hand once more, encompassing the office. “This shop, this town, your friends here—they’re all a beautiful second chance and you won’t open yourself to all that they’re offering you. Erik, I know about betrayal. You don’t have the market cornered on that. But unlike you, I’m willing to let it go. I’m willing to *try*.” She swallowed hard, pain radiating from her chest like a beacon. “I was willing to try with you. You gave me hope. But I guess it’s best I found out now that you’ll walk away at the first sign of trouble. I need someone who won’t just weather the storm with me, but who will let me be their shelter from it even as they’re mine.”

“Camille,” he said, and she could almost believe her name sounded like a prayer on his lips.

No. More like a benediction.

She held up her hands, palms out in the age-old sign of “stop.”

“I feel sorry for you, Erik,” she murmured. “You came all the way to Rose Bend to start over, and yet you’re still chained to all of the pain and anger from the past. You might as well have stayed in Vegas. Moving here was just geography.”

She turned and exited his office, gently closing the door behind her.

And still the soft catch of the lock echoed like a small boom in her ears.

Maybe that’s what it was supposed to sound like when you closed a chapter in your life.

CHAPTER SIX

“YOU’RE AN IDIOT.”

Erik jerked his head up at the sound of that all too familiar and pissed off voice. Slowly, he stood from behind his desk and met his best friend’s dark, angry gaze.

Jeremy.

Shit.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Erik demanded, noticing the balled fists at his friend’s sides.

Erik bit back a snarl. Dammit. He really didn’t feel like getting his ass kicked. Not when Camille had already delivered a hell of one.

“I told you I planned on visiting for the motorcycle rally, and my schedule lightened so I made the trip this morning. And a damn good thing, too,” he snapped, stalking farther into Erik’s office. “During my layover, I received a phone call from a reporter asking my opinion on your affair with my sister behind that bastard Brad’s back. Now I know the second part is bullshit—she wouldn’t go back to that asshole if he came gift wrapped in hundred-dollar bills. But the first part? I did some googling and saw a picture of you two. Something you want to tell me?”

Erik heaved a sigh, thrusting his fingers through his hair. Should he lie? Would it be a lie? As of an hour ago, nothing existed between them any longer. But as quick as the questions popped in his head, he ditched them. The thought of denying Camille sickened him. He’d just have to take this ass kicking.

“Yeah.” He rounded the desk and came to a halt in front of his friend. “Your sister and I became...close. I’m sorry I betrayed the trust you placed in me, but I don’t regret her.” Erik narrowed his eyes on Jeremy, surprise shimmering through him. “Why aren’t you mad?”

“I *am* mad,” Jeremy said.

“Okay, let me correct that. Why aren’t you fucking up my face?”

Jeremy snorted. “The night is still young. And I want to get my hands on that Bradley Luck first. Hell, Camille got away from him. And he’s still not happy until he’s interfering with her life again. I never liked that motherfucker. Too entitled. Too spoiled. I doubt that family of his let him wipe his own ass. But you...” Jeremy glared at Erik, and he braced himself. But it wasn’t a fist flying at him but a verbal blow. “You’re damn right I trusted you with my sister. But I also trusted her with you. There’s no one I love more than Camille, and you come in a close second. I sent her here because she didn’t just need you, but you needed her. Since all that shit went down in Vegas, you’ve isolated yourself from the world, closed off to any chance of happiness. And with that huge heart of hers, she has so much love to give. For so long my sister has been searching for someplace to belong, to be accepted for who she is. And you could’ve been that place, been that person. But when I walked in here and saw you sitting there like your dog just died, I knew you fucked it up. And knowing you, royally.”

Erik’s surprise bloomed into shock, and he damn near shook with it. Jeremy had set this whole thing in motion? His friend had...? Maybe he should be mad at Jeremy’s meddling but he couldn’t be. Not when Jeremy’s words reverberated through him, rocking his very foundation.

I sent her here because she didn’t just need you, but you needed her.

He had—*did*—need her.

Maybe he hadn’t acknowledged it until this moment, but deep inside, he’d known it. With every challenge about the shop, every smile, every shared confidence—every touch and kiss—he’d known. He was falling in love with Camille Dansen.

And that was why he’d grabbed ahold of the opportunity and pushed her away as hard and fast as he could.

He’d been the scared coward she’d called him, running from his past, insulating himself from any further hurt. And

for what? The pain of losing her before he ever really had her still throbbed within him like an open wound. As soon as she'd walked out of his office, he'd wanted to charge after her, apologize, beg her not to go.

But again, he'd allowed his fears to rule him. Now, in his refusal to let go of the past, he might've lost his future.

Not yet.

He silently snarled the words, and a quiet, aching determination rose within him. Yes, he'd fucked up, but he could fix it. He *would* fix it.

His happiness depended on it.

"I hope the sudden silent treatment means you're having a much-needed come to Jesus moment with yourself. Either that or I'm seriously rethinking the fist to the face," Jeremy drawled.

Erik arched an eyebrow. "And let all your efforts go to waste? No, I'm not an idiot. Although, I'd advise you to prepare yourself for when Camille discovers you practically pimped her out to your best friend."

"Oh shut the fuck up. I'm still trying to convince myself that getting 'close' to my sister means you just held her hand." He snorted. "Besides, I prefer the term matchmaker. And you're welcome, you ungrateful bastard."

Erik laughed at Jeremy's sour expression and at the lightness that suddenly filled his chest and head. He hadn't won Camille back yet, but for the first time in three years, he had hope. He had peace.

And if he could convince Camille to give him another chance, he just might have love.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAMILLE STRAIGHTENED A stack of Forever Ink tank tops, and her fingers lingered over the black cotton.

How quickly Forever Ink had changed from just the name of a tattoo shop to meaning family. She cringed to analyze what that said about her. Had she been so hungry for true friendship, to belong, for...love that she'd leaped without bothering to look into this group who'd become so important to her? Friends...family. And the thought of leaving them broke her heart.

Well, broke the pieces of that heart. Erik had already shattered the majority of it.

Shaking her head, she drew in a deep breath and moved on to the rack of jewelry and began refilling the stock. Shrieks from running and playing children, the excited conversation and laughter as well as the rumble of passing motorcycles filled The Glen. Technically, she'd been fired the night before. Oh, Erik had given her that line about taking time off, but she understood what that meant.

But she was damn tired of running. And from the first, something about Erik niggled at her. Poked her. And challenging him had become one of her favorite pastimes. So why should that change now? He'd basically ordered her to leave, but she would decide if and when she did. And with the Forever Ink booth at the motorcycle rally needing manning, today wasn't that day. She'd been scheduled to help Dara, and she refused to let her down.

Even if part of her just wanted to return to her apartment and get lost in Netflix and strawberry shortcake ice cream.

“Oh this shirt is adorable.”

Camille turned around, gladly putting aside her morose thoughts to focus on the pretty Black woman holding up one of the Forever Ink tank tops. Pride whispered through her. The shirts had been her idea, and this one was a favorite. Black, a

faux rip down the center creating the V-neckline and with roses surrounding the logo, it really was adorable. And she'd almost sold out of them since being in the booth this morning.

"It's one of our bestsellers," Camille told the woman with the lovely natural curls.

"I love it." Smiling, the woman extended a hand toward her. "Hi, you probably don't remember me, but I'm Korrie Noel, Pastor Noel's daughter. It's been a while."

"I'm sorry." Camille winced. "I don't, but in my defense, I avoided church like a BOGO sale on Crocs back in the day."

Korrie laughed, and the happy sound drew a smile from Camille. "I totally get that. Well, it's nice to see you again and welcome back home."

"Thank you." Camille nodded toward the shirt. "What's the verdict? A yes?"

"Definitely." Korrie handed it over to her and reached in the back pocket of her jeans, pulling a wallet free. "And someone said you were scheduling tattoos here, too?"

Camille slid the top into a plastic bag. "I am. One of the artists just stepped away for a moment, but she can offer you a consultation if you'd like." She tilted her head, scanning Korrie's bare arms and chest. "Will this be your first?"

"Yes." Korrie grinned then turned, pointing in the direction of a small group of men a short distance away. "See the Ragnar look-alike with the blond mohawk? He's mine." Such love saturated Korrie's voice on that "He's mine," that Camille's heart twinged in happiness for the woman...and maybe just a tiny bit of envy. Did she know how lucky she was to have that? From the light in Korrie's eyes when she turned back to Camille, she'd have to say, yes, Korrie did know. "And we're both getting tattoos. Although, he's had a bit of a head start," she said with a snicker. "But it's on my bucket list of 'firsts.' Israel, my fiancé, and I are still knocking them off together."

"That sounds wonderful," Camille said, handing Korrie her bag and taking her credit card. "And like fun."

Korrie chuckled. “You have no idea.”

Okay. That sounded...interesting.

Moments later, Camille rang up the purchase and offered the other woman her card back.

“Thanks, I’ll see you—oh, hey, Erik,” she said, turning to smile up at the man who’d monopolized Camille’s thoughts all night and day. “I was just getting ready to schedule tattoos for me and Israel. Finally.”

Erik nodded, his gaze roaming over Camille in a quick scan before returning his attention to Korrie. But just that glance left her scorched and tingling with awareness. It’d only been hours since she’d seen him, but it might as well as have been days. That’s what the sizzle in her veins and the tightening of her stomach denoted anyway.

And the squeezing of her chest.

“Good,” he said to Korrie. “I’ll do the pieces myself. You just let me know when you’re ready to come in.”

Korrie beamed. “Thank you. And I love the T-shirts, by the way. All the new merchandise. I’ll probably be stopping by later for one of those rose and skull necklaces.”

“I can’t take credit for it. Everything you see here is because of Camille.” He glanced at her again, and her breath evaporated in her lungs at the heat in that bright gaze.

How dare he look at her like that? Like he wanted her. Like he...

He kicked you out, remember?

Yes, if her heart refused to recall, that hole in her chest right next to it definitely had a perfect memory.

“Well...awesome.” Korrie chuckled softly. “Don’t mind me. I’m just going to go...somewhere.”

With another low laugh, she walked away, leaving Camille alone with Erik. She damn near called the other woman back.

“Camille,” Erik said.

“I know you told me to take a break,” she said, interrupting his imminent demand to know why she was working his booth. “But I couldn’t just leave Dara hanging today. If you want, I’ll stay over here until the rally is over. That way, any lingering reporters will have to bother me out here instead of at the shop.”

“I don’t give a fuck about reporters at the shop.”

“Since when?” she scoffed. “That wasn’t your tune last night.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“How very nice for you,” she snapped, her temper crackling like a match to dry wood. She whipped around and grabbed the last stack of shirts and started folding them. Anything was better than studying his beautiful, maddening face. “How very awesome that you can just flip a switch like that. Although I can’t imagine how you can care about guarding your precious privacy and life one moment and don’t the next.”

“Camille, look at me, please.”

The “please.” That’s what penetrated when nothing else could’ve. Well, that and the hoarse tone that sounded as if it’d been dragged down an unpaved street.

Slowly, she set down the shirt in her hands and turned around to face him.

“I need to show you something,” he said.

She nodded, oddly breathless and speechless. An... expectation settled on her chest, and she stilled, watching him. Waiting for...something.

Without glancing away from her, he shoved up the short sleeve of his dark gray T-shirt, exposing the very top of his shoulder. He paused, and it hit her that he wanted her to look there. Ink covered his entire arm and shoulder, but as she leaned forward, she noted a slightly reddened area. She’d been around Forever Ink long enough to spot the sign of a fresh tattoo. And his...

Oh God.

She jerked her gaze to his face, immediately ensnared by his bright blue eyes. Trapped by the emotion she hadn't wanted to acknowledge moments ago. Feared acknowledging. But if she'd doubted her eyes, she couldn't question that new tattoo. Or its meaning.

The Forever Ink logo.

The *new* Forever Ink logo. One she'd designed and presented to him over a week ago and he'd slapped down with a firm, "hell no." Now, knowing his past, she understood why he'd reacted so strongly to her proposition.

And now, she understood even more what it meant for him to change it.

Slowly, she emerged from behind the booth and didn't stop until she stood right in front of him.

"You changed your logo."

"Yeah, I did."

"For me," she whispered.

"Yeah, I did."

"You love me."

Without hesitation, he said in that rough voice that reached to every hurt, every wound, and healed them.

"Yeah, I do."

Tears stung her eyes, and she threw herself at him, flinging her arms around his neck. Rising on tiptoe, she crushed her mouth to his, delighting in his taste again. In being able to hold him again.

In finally loving him out loud.

Over his shoulder, she caught cell phones aimed in their direction and even caught the click of a camera. Sighing, she sank against him.

"We're creating a spectacle. This will probably end up on some blog or site by this evening."

He squeezed her, then cupped the back of her neck and tilted her head back.

“I don’t care. As long as they get my good side—which is all you.”

Joy took flight in her and she laughed. And laughed.

This was happiness. This was belonging. And she was never giving it up.

“I love you,” she said, brushing another kiss along his jaw, his mouth.

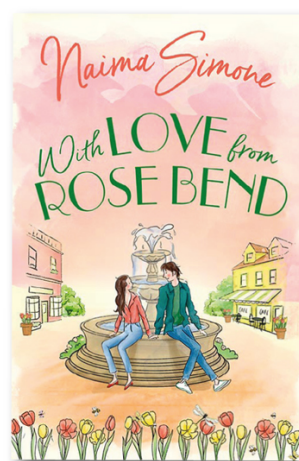
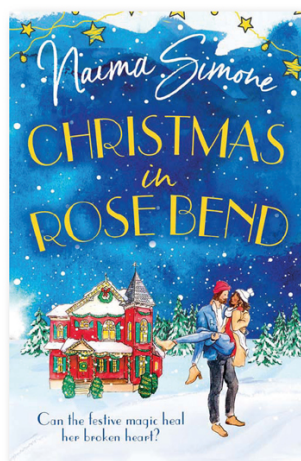
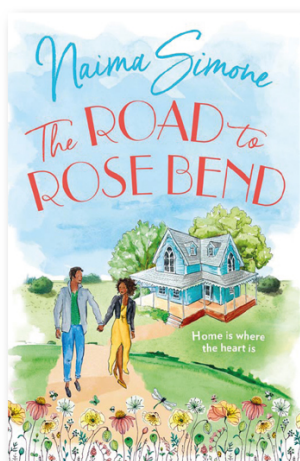
Cradling her face in his hands, he pressed his forehead to hers.

“Thank you for being my second chance.”

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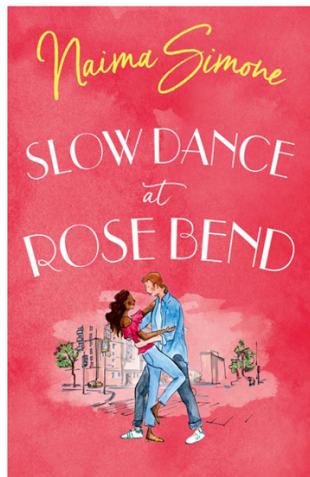
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