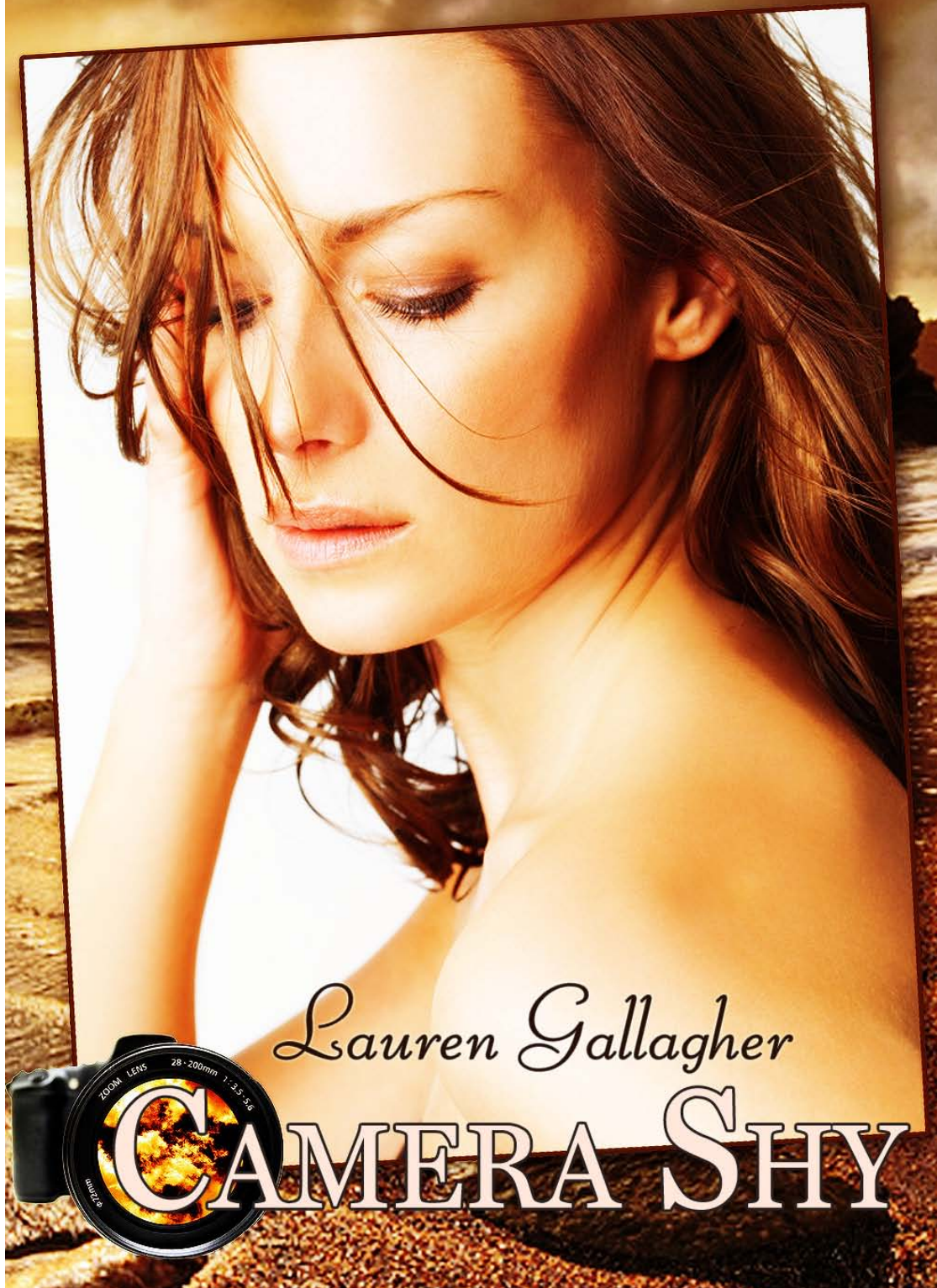


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Lauren Gallagher



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Camera Shy

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Book Blurb

What happens in Tofino, *stays* in Tofino.

Scandal-plagued actress Simone Farrell thinks she's found the perfect fling: He's hot, he's a thousand miles away from her fishbowl existence in Hollywood, and the best part? He doesn't know who she is. Jason is the perfect escape from the losing end of a custody dispute, a career that's on life support, and an alcohol-blurred string of affairs.

What Simone doesn't realize is that the only thing staying in Tofino is her heart. What's more, when Jason falls in love with her, he's giving her something that's been painfully taken for granted in the past: His trust. When Simone's lies unravel and her two lives converge, there may not be any second chances . . . in Hollywood *or* Tofino.

Chapter One

Los Angeles, California

Simone Farrell's cheeks burned beneath the bright lights and heavy make-up. Kevin stared at her, a devastated expression frozen on his face as he anticipated the words that were now lodged in her throat.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the words refused to budge. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. The corner of Kevin's mouth twitched. Anger flickered across his face. Simone swallowed, her heart pounding in time with the dull throbbing in her head.

"*Cut!*"

The director's voice sent a shiver of dread and shame up her spine.

The tension in Kevin's shoulders released as he threw his hands up. He rolled his eyes, sighing with loud exasperation. "Come *on!*" He gestured sharply at Simone before he stormed off the soundstage. "I'll be outside. Someone come and get me when the princess has her focus back." Bright light from outside flooded into the studio and then vanished with the slamming of the door behind him.

"What the hell is the matter with you, Simone?" Henry Wall, the triple-chinned director, barked in her face.

"I don't . . . I just lost my focus, I'm sorry," Simone rubbed her aching forehead and dropped her gaze to avoid his furious eyes. The angry stares of the rest of the crew threatened to burn holes into her back.

"*Again?* How many times are you going to 'lose your focus' before I have to fire your pathetic ass and bring in another actress who's just a little bit more professional?"

Simone bit her tongue. She couldn't meet his eyes. She wanted to beg him to give her another chance, but her chances with him — with anyone, for that matter, in *or* out of Hollywood — were pretty well spent.

"Everyone take a break," he shouted to the rest of the crew. The soundstage came alive with footsteps and voices. Henry stepped closer to Simone. "Look at me."

She did, shrinking back from him like an ashamed prodigal child. His bushy white eyebrows lowered to narrow his big eyes into menacing slits. His nostrils flared with rage.

"My patience is wearing thin," he said. "All it will take is one phone call, and you're out of here. I'm done with this. All of it."

"I know," she croaked, her throat dry. "I'm sorry. I'll get it together."

"See that you do." He pointed an emphatic finger in her face. "I took a gamble with you, Simone, and I'm well past the point of questioning that decision. There will be no more chances." With that, he turned and stomped away. His heavy footsteps rattled the stage and sent vibrations through her that set her teeth on edge.

Simone took a deep breath as she watched him go. He wasn't joking. Henry Wall was a man of his word, and he'd fired bigger name actresses than her in the past and for far lesser offenses. She was lucky he'd given her this many chances. She was lucky he'd given her a chance at all.

Simone shuffled off the soundstage and out into the blinding Los Angeles sunlight. She considered taking a walk to the park just outside the studio, but a glance toward the gate revealed throngs of paparazzi. They waited like circling buzzards for the first chance to jump on her and eat her alive if she got anywhere near them.

A few crew members lingered near the gate, smoking cigarettes and talking. Dread twisted her gut; all it took was an overheard conversation or a, "Hey, have I got a scoop for you," and her latest misbehavior would be all over the media. Again.

She sighed and went to her trailer.

Sinking into the chair beside the table, she rubbed her aching temples. She needed to get laid. She needed a drink. She needed a drink to forget the fact that she needed to get laid.

A bottle of Smirnoff on the table taunted her, but she dared not go back to the set with alcohol on her breath again. Though a little "hair of the dog that bit you" might

take the edge off her headache – and the other insatiable ache that drove her to distraction – she wasn't going to hand Henry another reason to fire her.

Simone needed this job. She *had* to make her comeback. It was now or never. Another flop like *Daunting* or *Three Seconds*, and she was finished. But here she was, blowing it before the film was even in the can.

Her gaze shifted from the bottle to the untidy pile of tabloids across the table. An uncomfortable knot sank deeper in her gut as she put her head in her hands and sighed. She didn't need to look at the magazines. The headlines and captions adorning the damning photographs were seared into her memory:

"Simone Farrell: From Oscar to Ticking Time Bomb."

"Simone – Busted Cheating Again!"

"Simone Farrell – You Won't Believe What Our Cameras Caught!"

"... downward spiral continues ..."

"... out of control ..."

"... cheating ..."

"... drunk again ..."

"... in rehab?"

"... flash in the pan ..."

"... again ..."

Tears of shame stung her eyes, but she swallowed hard. No crying. Not today. Returning to the set with ruined makeup would do nothing to help her. She took a deep breath, trying to force back the tears.

The door flew open and in walked Anne-Marie Bates, Simone's agent. Her presence didn't lift Simone's spirits in the slightest. You know you're in deep shit when your agent is hanging around the set to babysit you, she thought bitterly.

Anne-Marie glared at Simone, her thin eyebrows arching sharply into angry upside-down Vs that reminded Simone of the cartoon characters in Japanese anime films. Usually that thought made her laugh, but not today.

Anne-Marie put her hands on her hips and said, "What the *hell* was all of that?"

"Which part?"

Anne-Marie's lips tightened. "Simone, this is getting out of control." She huffed. "It's long past out of control."

"I know." Simone rubbed her temples. "I don't . . . I" She shook her head. "Shit, Anne-Marie, I just don't know what to do."

"You need to get your head out of your ass is what you need to do." Anne-Marie dropped into the other chair. "You're going to get *both* of us chased out of this town."

"I know." Simone didn't know what else she could say. Her shoulders slumped. "I don't even know where to start." She followed Anne-Marie's gaze to the Smirnoff bottle.

Her agent scowled. "I thought you were easing up on the sauce."

"I was."

"Then what's that?" Anne-Marie nodded toward the bottle.

"I said 'was'. Past tense." She exhaled sharply. "Christ, I think I just need to get laid."

"No," Anne-Marie snapped. "That's the last thing you need." Her gaze darted toward the Smirnoff bottle. "Maybe second to last."

Simone glared at her. "So now you're my moral authority?"

"No, but I have watched you make more of a mess of your life every time you *do* get laid. I'm thinking maybe you need to back off the man-candy as much as you need to back off on the liquor."

Easy for you to say, Simone thought, chewing her lip. Anne-Marie wasn't the one who couldn't even form a rational thought, let alone speak a scripted line, because she was horny to the point of madness.

Anne-Marie's voice softened. "What's really going on?"

"I need a drink, and I need to get laid."

That eyebrow lifted again. "To escape from what?"

"What do you mean?"

"What are you trying to distract yourself from?"

"Are you my new therapist or something?"

Her agent let out a heavy sigh. "Look, I'm trying to help you. Do you really want the tabloids telling the world when you go to the Betty Ford Clinic?"

Simone laughed, but there was no humor in her voice. "I think that's the least of my problems."

"Come on, Simone, tell me what's going on." She paused. "Is it Gregory? Cecily?"

Simone shook her head. Her ex-husband and daughter were only part of the long messy string of insanity in her life. "No, they're fine."

"What is it, then?"

"I just" Nothing came out. She didn't even know what the problem was. Her personal life was a sick joke, her career was falling apart, her drinking was out of control. But why? When did it all happen? It was like she woke up one day in the midst of all of this mess with no idea how she got there, and even less of an idea of how to get out.

"You need some time off," Anne-Marie said in her "don't argue with me" voice.

Simone blinked. "How? I've got another three months left shooting this film." She eyed Anne-Marie, and then shook her head. "I can't quit, I *need* this. If I quit, no one will ever cast me again."

"And you think anyone will want to cast you now with all the albatrosses you have around your neck?"

"No, I *can't* quit."

"I wasn't going to suggest that you quit. You just need a break." Anne-Marie stood. "Stay here."

"Where are you going?"

"To talk to some people."

The door slammed behind her before Simone could say anything. She sat beside the table, staring at the door, all of her questions and objections hanging in the air, unspoken. Not like Anne-Marie would listen anyway. Though she was just Simone's agent, she acted like her mother sometimes too. She also ran interference between

Simone and her directors when the tensions flared, and had gotten her out of more than one screw-up that could have – and probably should have – cost her dearly.

Simone leaned back in the chair. She wondered if even Anne-Marie could get her out of *this* particular mess.

She hadn't forgotten her lines, even though she had frozen up dozens or more times in just two weeks of shooting. She just wasn't *there*. Instead of getting into character as she had effortlessly done in her early years, when she truly felt everything her character felt, right down to the raw emotion, now she was just Simone, standing there mouthing lines and making gestures that belonged to some fictional character. She felt . . . nothing, and it showed. The lead in a fourth grade Christmas pageant could act circles around her right now.

Hollywood was willing to forgive her for her sordid personal life when she could still act. But when she tried to act, and all she could manage to produce were a few mediocre performances, Hollywood wasn't so forgiving.

She ran a hand through her hair. Maybe the tabloids were right. Maybe she *was* just a flash in the pan. It wasn't like she'd had just one successful film: Academy Award nominations for each of her first three films, an Oscar for the third. Critical acclaim. Directors and producers falling all over each other to hire her. She had Hollywood wrapped around her finger.

She *had* Hollywood wrapped around her finger.

She drummed her nails absently on the table, her eyes flicking back and forth from the Smirnoff to the tabloids. Anne-Marie was absolutely right. If the liquor didn't drive her over the edge, her love life probably would. Her life was just one alcohol-blurred affair after another.

Maybe, just maybe, she could get her head together if she didn't have the paparazzi chasing her everywhere. Her life was complicated enough without a camera lens popping over a produce display at the supermarket, or a car full of snapping cameras cutting her off on the interstate. She couldn't blame them for where her life was, but they weren't helping.

The trailer door flew open again and Anne-Marie entered. Before the door even slammed behind her, she said, "You're taking a vacation. A week. At my cabin in Canada."

Simone blinked. "What?"

"I talked to Henry and calmed him down. He's pissed about changing the shooting schedule, but if it means not having to find a new lead actress – and having to admit that hiring you was a colossal mistake – he's willing to do it." Her left eyebrow slanted sharply up, letting Simone know she was dead serious. "Don't you *dare* screw this up. This is your – *our* – *last* chance."

Simone exhaled heavily and leaned back in her chair. Arguing with Anne-Marie was pointless, and quite frankly, a week's vacation in the middle of nowhere didn't sound like a bad idea. "So how do I get to the Bates' Motel?"

Anne-Marie smirked. "Just be at the airport tomorrow morning. I'll get the flight arranged." She scribbled an address on a sticky note and slapped it on the table in front of Simone. "There are flights straight to Tofino, but you're better off driving. Paparazzi can get ahold of passenger manifests and figure out where you are. When you get to Victoria, rent a car and drive the rest of the way. Even if they know you're going to Victoria, you can lose them out on the highway."

"Tofino?" Simone looked at the address. "Where exactly is this place?"

"A few hours out of Victoria, way out on the west coast of Vancouver Island. The middle of nowhere, about as far as you can get from all of this bullshit and still have running water."

Simone absently curled the sticky note around her finger. "I'll have to talk Gregory into taking Cecily. I'm supposed to have her for another few days."

Anne-Marie nodded. "He'll understand. Besides, it's probably better that she's with him until you sort all of this out."

Simone winced, but she couldn't exactly disagree. Anne-Marie was never one to sugarcoat anything, and as much as it hurt to admit it, she was right: Cecily was better off with her father for now.

Anne-Marie reached for the door. "Just go. Relax. Take some time to clear your head, and when you come back, you'd better come back as the Simone Farrell that I agreed to represent." She raised that eyebrow again. "Or, as much as it kills me, Henry Wall won't be the only one crossing your name off a contract."

Simone swallowed. "Understood."

Her agent pointed sharply at the Smirnoff bottle. "There isn't any alcohol in the cabin. I suggest you keep it that way."

"I will."

"Promise?"

"Pinky swear."

"And no men, for crying out loud."

"No men?"

"No. Absolutely no men." She pursed her lips. "The last thing you need is another man, Simone." She paused. "And Tofino is the perfect place. No one there but crusty old fishermen and retired tourists."

"So you're sending me somewhere with no alcohol and slim pickings as far as men?"

"Exactly. Now go. You need this."

Simone chewed her lip and avoided Anne-Marie's eyes.

"I'm serious," her agent said. "Just be by yourself, clear your head, then get your ass back here and be ready to work."

Simone couldn't argue; her problems with men certainly didn't help her drinking or her focus. As much as she would have killed for a good fuck right about then, it was for the best.

Anne-Marie eyed her. "Am I clear?"

Simone nodded silently. Anne-Marie watched her for a moment, then left, the trailer door slamming and leaving Simone with her thoughts.

Simone exhaled. Tofino. Vacation. Relaxation.

No working. No drinking. No men.

She hoped it was enough.

Chapter Two

Tofino, Vancouver Island

Simone stepped into the foyer of Anne-Marie's small but plush cabin. She dropped her bag on the hardwood floor and closed the door with her foot, leaning on it and exhaling slowly.

One week. No one to bother her, talk to her, keep her company. One last chance to get her head straight.

She surveyed her new surroundings. The cabin was rustic and spacious, with a wood stove, and cozy, perfectly matched furnishings. The liquor cabinet in the corner was, as Anne-Marie promised, empty.

Not to worry. In spite of her promise to her agent-friend-surrogate mom, Simone had stopped along the way and bought a few things.

Guilt gnawed at her. Less than two hours in Tofino and already she had given in to the temptation to drink herself stupid and wallow in self pity.

Better a night with a bottle than with a man. She cursed under her breath. How long had it been? Weeks? Months? She couldn't even remember. *Entirely too long*, said her body. *Probably not long enough*, said her rational side that was about to take a swim in some Smirnoff. The bottle would have to do, because she wasn't going to find a man here in Tofino, and at least the bottle wouldn't talk to the tabloids.

She sat on the sofa and reached into the paper bag beside her. A bottle of Smirnoff. A jug of orange juice. And from her duffel bag, the stack of tabloids she probably should have left in her trailer in L.A.

"Just tonight," she promised herself, unscrewing the first bottle cap. "Just one night, then I'll get it together."

After she poured the juice and the vodka, she picked up one of the gossip rags. She was on the cover, on a beach somewhere, barely dressed and in the arms of – who was that? She couldn't even remember his name. Whoever he was, his arms were one place she definitely shouldn't have been, and with all the liquor that was flowing that weekend, she only vaguely remembered being there at all. Her boyfriend would never have known, but thanks to the blurry but damning photos, the entire world soon found out. She laughed bitterly, wondering how drunk she must have been that weekend if she thought she could do anything in secret.

"*Continues on Page Two!*" The headline promised. Taking a long swallow, she turned the page to relive how badly the reporters crucified her.

It took three drinks to get through the first magazine. Two more to get through the second. By the time she picked up the fourth magazine, she couldn't see straight enough through the alcohol and tears to read the headlines, let alone the articles. The pictures were blurring so much they made her sick to her stomach. She stopped reading and kept right on drinking.

At some point, she stopped pouring the orange juice and drank the vodka straight. When her hand shook too much to pour it into the glass, she drank it right from the bottle. She forgot about the magazines, but the pictures were burned into her mind as she swam between drunk and unconscious. She thought she heard glass break, but didn't care.

A blurry eternity passed and Simone opened her eyes. Daylight slammed into her eyes, threatening to cleave her head in two. She moaned and covered her face with her hands.

The nausea followed, and she lurched to her feet – how had she ended up on the floor? – and ran for the bathroom. Panic seized her chest as she realized she didn't even know where the bathroom was, but she found it just in time. Just *barely* in time.

When nothing more came up, she stumbled back to the living room and sank onto the couch, cradling her head in her hands. She dug in her purse and pulled a pair of sunglasses free. They did little to take the edge off. Her skull throbbed mercilessly.

"Day one," she muttered. "Not going so well."

She looked at the pile of wrinkled tabloids, and memories of the night before came trickling back. She had never before read all of them at once, had never bombarded herself with all of her sins — or at least, all the ones caught by the cameras. Seeing it all at once overwhelmed her. The vodka — most of the bottle, she saw now — had done little to numb the onslaught of shame and guilt.

The tabloids had documented it well: The affair that ended her marriage. The drunken antics at parties and clubs. The endless string of affairs, flings, and boytoys with whom she'd cheated on an endless string of boyfriends. The dismembered remains of her career and her feeble, flailing attempts to save it.

She ran her hands through her disheveled hair.

Through the haze of her hangover, clarity slowly crept into her mind.

It had to stop. All of it. *Now*.

She glared at the Smirnoff bottle, what remained of the crystal clear liquid shimmering in the morning light. The smeared lipstick marks on the end reminded her of just how stupid she'd gotten the night before, when she decided to forego the glass and simply drink from the bottle.

She stood and walked to the sink, swallowing another wave of nausea that rose when she moved too fast. On the way there, a bright glitter caught her eye, and she turned to see the shattered remains of an empty Smirnoff bottle on the wood floor. Her stomach turned. Had she really killed a bottle and a half last night? *Thank God it wasn't tequila.*

Staring at the bottle, she swore to herself, "It's all going to stop now." She took a deep breath, turned the bottle over, and watched its contents swirl down the drain. Afterwards, she cleaned up the broken bottle, thankful it had been empty so it didn't ruin Anne-Marie's floor.

She gathered the scattered tabloids. Just before throwing them into the trash, she hesitated and glanced at the wood-burning stove. Her gaze moved from the stove to the tabloids and back to the stove.

She knelt beside the stove with the stack of magazines and struck a match. The intense heat warmed her skin as the fire came to life. One by one, she fed the pages to the stove, watching as each picture faded and curled within the flames. The fire consumed it ravenously and with each page that crinkled down to nothing but black ash, something released within her.

The evidence of her sins burned, Simone rose and dusted herself off. For the first time, she felt strong enough to change, to get her life back on track.

No more alcohol.

No more flings.

No more throwing my career away.

I need to focus on my career, my daughter, and myself. And if that means sleeping alone – being alone – for a while, then so be it.

I can do this.

I will do this.

* * * * *

Simone parked her rental car in front of the tiny general store on the narrow two-lane road that passed for Main Street in Tofino. As she stepped out of the car, she met eyes with a couple of older women strolling by. Her stomach leaped into her throat and panic tightened her chest, certain they would recognize her, but they only gave her a polite smile and a "hello" before walking on.

She smiled and waved. They have no idea who I am, she thought. Moments later, a middle-aged gentleman passed by, giving her a friendly nod. Again, no recognition. With each resident she passed, her breath came easier. She still kept a nervous eye out for the press, but the only camera she saw hung from the neck of a bearded tourist who seemed more interested in the local architecture than in her.

For the first time in years, no one recognized her.

She shouldn't have been terribly surprised. Tofino was as remote as it was tiny, just a quaint little fishing village on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island. A handful of motels, some touristy gift shops, and a few quaint restaurants dotted the two lane road that ran along the piers, where small fishing boats bobbed in the tide by the marina. If there was anywhere in the world she could go to be anonymous for a few days, Tofino was the place.

A little newsstand in front of a café made her nervous: it was well-stocked with tabloids, but for the time being, her face didn't grace any of the covers. Still, anyone who'd read a recent copy might recognize her.

But as she explored the tiny village, no one gave her a second look. Eventually, she stopped glancing around in search of a camera lens pointed in her direction, stopped listening for that telltale *click* of a shutter, and focused on enjoying the scenery.

The landscape in and around Tofino was dramatically different than that of Los Angeles. Towering evergreens dominated the mountainous terrain, a thick blanket of green velvet extending almost to the edge of the ocean. Simone strolled out of town along the shore, which alternated between vast expanses of sandy beach and rocky shoreline. The wind tugged at her skirt and toyed with her hair. She breathed the cool sea air, inhaling the crisp saltiness without a trace of smog.

Tofino was tucked into a small inlet, sheltered from the open ocean, so the water was relatively calm, its surface as smooth as glass in places. Every once in a while, a salmon burst through the surface and splashed back into the water again. The first couple of times, the fish startled her, but eventually she caught herself scanning the water's surface, trying to figure out where the next one would leap through.

She drank in the silence. This place was perfect. Absolutely perfect. *Anne-Marie was right. I needed this.* It had been years since she'd spent any time alone, and most of that time had been spent deep in a bottle. The solitude here calmed and refreshed the soul, and the quiet little village eased the knots of worry out of her bunched shoulders. It even soothed the lingering pain of her hangover, quieting the fierce pounding into a dull ache.

Already, Simone felt ready to face the world again. Part of her was ready to go charging back into Hollywood to claim the reputation she knew she deserved. But Hollywood was hardly forgiving; it would probably be years before she could shake the stigma of her affairs and the dismal movies she never should have starred in.

SNAP.

The all-too-familiar sound stopped Simone in her tracks. Her blood froze.

Was it? No, it couldn't be. She was alone. Wasn't she?

She heard the sound again, and she knew: a camera shutter. Her heart pounded. No, no they couldn't have followed her. Not *here*. No one knew she was here. Did they?

A sick feeling rose in her gut.

She looked around.

The camera and its owner were behind her, maybe ten yards away. To her surprise, the lens was not pointed at her. In fact, it was pointed at the ground. The photographer knelt behind it, oblivious to her. For a moment, she just stared, dumbstruck that he wasn't trying to photograph her. She couldn't remember the last time she had looked at a camera and *not* stared down the lens.

She looked from the camera to the long fingers that held it, and up the chiseled forearm to the well-defined, tattooed bicep that peeked out from beneath a ragged T-shirt sleeve. Her gaze kept moving, taking in the broad shoulders. Between his collar and the black and yellow camera strap, a tantalizing sliver of another tattoo showed.

His fingers turned the lens slowly, carefully, and a subtle ripple worked its way up his arm, making Simone's mouth water.

He must have felt her stare, because he looked up just then. Seeing his face without the camera in front of it took Simone's breath away.

His face was full of perfect contradictions: Prominent and graceful cheekbones sat above coarse stubble, suggesting he hadn't shaved in a few days. His hair – brown and spiky – was tousled and wild, but gave the impression of deliberate unruliness. His eyebrows arched with perfection that would bring a makeup artist to tears, and below their perfect curve, his vivid brown eyes looked out at the world with both intensity

and innocence. Boyish, but rugged. A tattooed bad boy who still called his mother and helped old ladies across the street.

Amidst the stubble, a thin goatee framed his mouth. The corners of his lip curled up into a smile that suggested both shyness and confidence. "Can I help you?"

She realized she was staring. Her cheeks burned. "I'm . . . I'm sorry."

He laughed, flashing perfect teeth and a dimpled smile. His cheekbones were suddenly even more pronounced above the shadowy stubble. "Nothing to be sorry about." He cocked his head. "I don't think I've ever seen you around here."

With any luck, you've never seen me at all. "No, no I've never been to Tofino."

He stood and extended his hand. "Jason Connor."

"Allyson Bishop," she lied, giving him her middle and maiden names. She shook his hand. She swore his thumb deliberately brushed between her thumb and forefinger, sending a shiver through her. *"No one there but crusty old fishermen and retired tourists,"* Anne-Marie had said. Evidently Anne-Marie was unaware of one Jason Connor, whose presence seriously upped the Sexiness Quota of Tofino.

He scratched his neck under the camera strap, briefly revealing a little more of his tattoo. "So what brings you to Tofino?"

I'm supposed to be getting my act together and not getting into bed with anyone, but I might be willing to make an exception for you, especially if you lick your lips like that again.

"Just a vacation." She shifted her weight, not wanting to pursue that topic any further. She looked down by his feet. "What were you shooting?"

He glanced down and gave a dismissive shrug. "Oh, just a flower. Nothing out of the ordinary."

She craned her neck and saw what he referred to: a tiny yellow flower nestled amidst the rocks and driftwood. "I probably would've walked right past it."

Jason laughed. "I notice a lot of the things people walk past. I make my living that way."

She gestured toward the camera. "You're a professional, then?"

He nodded.

Simone's chest tightened. *A photographer, not a paparazzo*, she assured herself. "So, weddings, that sort of thing?"

"God no." He wrinkled his nose. "I shot weddings for two years and swore I'd never do it again."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

"I thought most photographers did weddings."

He nodded. "A lot do. But I can't stand them."

"Really?"

"They're stressful as hell," he said. "A friend of mine once said shooting a wedding is like combat photography, but marginally safer."

Simone laughed. "So what do you shoot? Besides little yellow flowers on the beach?"

"Nature. Seascapes." His tongue absently touched his upper lip, and, before she realized she was doing it, Simone ran her tongue across her own lip.

She cleared her throat. "No people?"

He dropped his gaze for a moment, hesitated. "Not . . . often."

She didn't press. He wasn't part of the paparazzi. That was good enough for her. Looking around the beach, she said, "I'm here for a few days. Maybe you can tell me where some of the best views are."

Jason smiled. "Sure." He paused. "Though some of the best require a boat." Another pause. "There's a great place to catch a sunset down the beach." He gestured over his shoulder. "The sun will be going down soon, but you can still make it. I'd be happy to take you there; it's not far."

She returned his smile. "Lead the way."

Chapter Three

Jason's mind raced as he walked down the beach with Allyson. He wasn't sure what to make of her.

She looked simultaneously exhausted and lively. In spite of the warm radiance in her smile, her eyes looked heavy with fatigue, her shoulders tight in a way that suggested a tremendous weight on her mind. He wondered what went on behind those deep blue eyes, but didn't pry.

Above all, and to his great surprise, he felt completely at ease with her. They chatted like old friends, casual and unhindered. Their conversation wasn't stilted with pretense and façades the way it often went when two people met, when each answer or comment was carefully considered before spoken in a concerted effort to give a good impression. No, there was an honesty between them.

He stopped from time to time to photograph this or that—a bald eagle on a branch, some scattered rocks that formed an interesting abstract pattern—and couldn't help but notice the way she eyed his camera. When they walked and it just hung loosely around his neck with the lens cap on, she was fine. As soon as he picked it up and took off the lens cap, her spine visibly stiffened.

What he wouldn't have given to take a shot of her. Her face was gorgeous, but her body made his pulse race every time he looked at her. Her waist formed an alluring curve that led his eyes back and forth between the gentle swell of her hips and her breasts. Given half the chance, he couldn't decide if he'd touch her hips or breasts first; both looked like they would fit perfectly in his hands.

He stopped and knelt, pretending to be focused on something on the ground, hoping she couldn't see he was really just pausing to give himself a chance to calm himself down. He prided himself on at least trying to be a gentleman, but his physical response to her wouldn't do much for his credibility.

After a moment, he stood and they kept walking. Up ahead, the old dock came into view. He gestured toward it and said, "There."

She turned in the direction he pointed, and his breath caught as the late afternoon sun highlighted her dark hair with flecks of copper. The wind played with

her hair, rippling through it as if taunting his almost irresistible desire to run his fingers through it.

Jason, Jason, come back to earth. He took a breath, forcing himself to look away from her.

The dock, a sturdy but weathered holdout from a bygone day, creaked and groaned in time with the waves that lazily lapped at its ancient pylons. Jason rested his forearms on the railing and cradled his camera in his hands to take the weight off his neck. As she joined him, he tried not to pay attention to the lithe "S" curve her body made as she leaned her hip against the railing. It took everything he had not to stare at her, but he forced himself to be a gentleman. He looked out at the water. From the end of the pier, they would have a nearly unobscured view of the sunset.

"You do know where the best views are, don't you?" she said, her voice soft as she looked out at the breathtaking scenery.

Yes, and I'm trying my damndest not to look at the best view I've seen in a long, long time. He swallowed hard. "Walk around this place with a camera long enough, you start to find all the best seats in the house," he said with a laugh that he hoped masked his nervousness.

She cast an odd glance at the camera, and then looked back out at the water. "I suppose you do. So have you lived in Tofino all your life?"

He shook his head. "I came here from Victoria a few years ago and never looked back. After the business took off and I didn't need to be at the gallery all the time."

"You don't have to run the business yourself?"

"Not anymore. My brother handles it."

"He runs the whole thing for you?"

"Well, he's a photographer too." He scratched the back of his neck where his camera strap annoyed him. "But he runs the gallery, does the advertising. He loves that sort of thing." He glanced at her, rolling his eyes. "I think he's nuts, but if that's what floats his boat . . ."

She laughed.

Jesus, that's a beautiful sound. I wonder what she sounds like when she – no, no, stop it.

She shifted her weight a little, looked at him. "Do you at least have a say in what goes on with the business?"

"Oh of course," he said. "It's just more his forte' than mine. He's more of a businessman than I am. We both take the pictures, but he deals with the nitty gritty crap."

"And sends you a check?" She laughed.

Jason chuckled. "Yeah, pretty much."

She paused for a second. "Are you and your brother close?"

He nodded. "Have been since we were kids." He looked at her. "Do you have any siblings?"

A nearly imperceptible flinch flickered across her face, but she shrugged it away. "A brother and a sister."

"You're not close to them?"

"My brother and I are close." She bit her lip and looked down at waves rolling between the pylons below them. "But my sister and I . . ." She trailed off. For the first time, the air between them tightened with an uncomfortable silence.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

She shook her head and shrugged. "It's okay. It's a long story, really."

"You don't have to tell it."

"I don't think you'd want to listen to it."

He cleared his throat. "Well, I'll leave that up to you."

A splash broke the silence, and they both turned to see an enormous Chinook salmon squirming in the air before crashing back into the water. She laughed. "I could watch them do that all day."

Jason smiled, silently thanking the salmon for its perfect timing. "My brother and I once tried to catch one in a net."

"Really?"

He laughed. "Yeah. We went out in a canoe with a big net, hoping we could catch one in midair."

"Did you get one?"

"No, but we did manage to catch a crab off the bottom."

She blinked. "How long was the net?"

"The water's only a few feet deep in some places," he said. "There's a cove a few miles from here where it's only two or three feet. And the Dungeness crabs are right there."

"Really?" She leaned forward, resting her hands on the railing and looking down.

Don't look down her shirt. Don't look down her shirt. Don't—

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow, grinning. "Wouldn't it be easier to just wade in and catch one?"

"Sure," he said with a shrug, hoping he wasn't blushing after almost being caught looking at her breasts. "But what fun is that?"

She laughed. The music in her laughter warmed him in spite of the cooling late afternoon air. To his embarrassment, he realized it was warming him in specific places, but she didn't seem to notice. He shifted uncomfortably, turning his hips slightly away from her.

"It is absolutely gorgeous here," she said, gazing out at the still water. "I just can't get over it."

"Beats the hell out of living in a city." He straightened, putting his hands on the railing as he opened his mouth to speak, but he stopped abruptly when his hand landed on top of hers.

His breath caught. So did hers.

They stared at each other for a moment. She swallowed hard. The warmth of her skin was jarring, as if all this time he'd worried she was a figment of his imagination, but the physical contact suddenly made her real.

He realized he hadn't pulled his hand away, but she hadn't moved either.

"I'm sorry," he said, dropping his gaze and moving his hand.

"I'm not."

His head snapped up and he met her eyes. "What?"

She wetted her lips, sending a shiver down his spine.

"It's okay." She nodded toward her hand and her momentary brazenness melted into a shy smile.

His heart pounding, he reached for her hand again, touching her softly, hesitating, and then resting his hand over hers. Watching her expression for signs of resistance, he took a breath and closed his fingers around her hand. She moved a little, sending a jolt of panic through him, making him think she meant to pull away, but instead, she turned her hand and returned his gentle grasp.

He took a breath, and, with his free hand, lifted the camera over his head and turned to set it on the pier beside him.

Something in Simone's consciousness screamed at her to stop before she lost control. It was one thing to flirt with him, to look at him and think filthy thoughts. It was another thing entirely to make physical contact and let it continue. That kind of behavior was exactly what she'd come to Tofino to get over. *I don't need this. I can't. I have to —*

He released her hand and let his slide across her palm and onto the inside of her wrist. Goosebumps prickled her skin and a shiver ran down her spine. He trailed his fingers along her forearm, the feather-light touch preceding the more insistent warmth of his palm. She wondered if he knew the effect he had on her, but when he paused to make a small circle with the tip of his thumb just inside the crook of her elbow, she knew nothing about his touch was accidental.

She watched his face, noting how his gaze followed his hand while he traced her upper arm and the curve of her shoulder, along her collarbone to her throat, up her neck and into her hair. He seemed intent, as if memorizing her every feature, by both touch and sight. The brush of his fingertips on her scalp sent shivers down her spine.

Stop. Stop. You can't do this. This isn't why you're here. But she didn't want to stop. Jason raised his other hand and reached for her face, pausing just before his fingertips touched her cheek.

She held his gaze, held her breath, waiting for his touch. When it finally came, she shivered, overwhelmed by the intimacy in that moment. She drew in a long, unsteady breath as his hand drifted to her neck and into her hair. There was no doubt in her mind he was going to kiss her, no possible way he would stop before he did, but he drew it out, as if making his approach with a slowness that was as uncertain as it was calculated and deliberate.

He used the back of his fingers and traced the contour of her jaw and the curve of her neck. His every movement, his every touch ignited fires within her and sent chills all through her body. No man—*no man*—had ever affected her this way, with just a touch. The way her pulse raced. The way her legs shook. The way his hands on her skin sent tremors through her that rivaled what other men did to her clit. *Oh God, if he can do this I can only imagine what he'd do to my clit.* She gripped the railing for balance, for dear life.

Their faces were just inches apart now. Jason wanted to kiss her, to test her lips, discover her taste, but he waited. A delicious electricity crackled in the air between them, that sizzling anticipation, the intense stillness before the lightning brought the thunder. He wanted to savor the feeling, the tension, until he couldn't wait another second, until the lightning demanded thunder.

The lightning came in the form of a sweep of her tongue across the bottom of her teeth. The subtle motion pulled a sharp hiss of breath from him. He closed the distance, pulling her to him, his heart thundering as his lips met hers.

Simone's spine turned to liquid as soon as he kissed her. Her arms slid around him and she held his shoulders as her body melted into him. The coarseness of his

unshaven jaw against her face emphasized the softness of his mouth, his musky scent contrasting deliciously with the sweet taste of his tongue.

It was like no kiss she'd ever experienced, a promise of more to come, but an erotic moment in its own right. The longer he kissed her, the more she wanted him, wanted all of him, but at the same time, she didn't want this moment to end. Jason's kiss wasn't just an overture, it was an entire symphony.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. The tip of his tongue ran along the inside of his lower lip. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Anne-Marie's voice warned her again and again not to do this . . . that it was a mistake . . . but Anne-Marie wasn't looking into Jason Connor's eyes. Anne-Marie didn't have Jason's fingertips against her scalp, the warmth of Jason's breath whispering across her skin, or the lingering taste of Jason's kiss on her mouth.

He kissed her again, silencing Anne-Marie's voice once and for all. Simone let herself get lost in him, in the gentle way his tongue explored her mouth. She didn't care that she'd just met him. She didn't care that they were out in the open, vulnerable to prying camera lenses if anyone happened by. She just didn't care.

Chapter Four

Jason broke the kiss and looked at her as he ran his fingers through her hair.

Simone tried to remember how to breathe as she watched the deep orange of the setting sun reflect in his dark eyes.

He laughed softly and looked away.

"What?" she said.

When he looked at her again, she swore he was blushing.

"I swear to God," he said. "I only brought you out here to see the sunset."

She shrugged and kissed him again, ignoring the warnings and protests and guilt in her mind. Against his mouth, she whispered, "There will be more sunsets."

"You're right," he said, his lips brushing hers. He started to speak again, but paused.

"What's wrong?"

Jason's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as he looked at her. The setting sun illuminated her features, adding a soft shadow beneath her cheekbones and a vividness to her eyes. "Jesus" He finally whispered.

She blinked. "What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just, don't move." He freed himself from her grasp just long enough to scoop his camera off the pier. He clicked it on and raised it.

Allyson balked, moving away from him and raising her hand to block the lens. "No," she said sharply. "No, please."

Her reaction had him fumbling the camera. He immediately placed it back on the pier and put his hand on her waist.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, cursing himself for not remembering the way she'd warily eyed his camera earlier. "I should have asked. I'm sorry."

She stood still in his grasp, her gaze flicking back and forth between the camera and his hand on her arm. "I should have said something. I-I just don't like cameras; I'm sorry."

"No, don't be, it was my fault," he whispered, touching her face gently. *Could I be any less professional?* "It won't happen again, I promise."

She gave the camera one last look before focusing on him again. Her expression softened and she relaxed. A little. "It's okay. I should have said something." She sighed. "I suppose most people aren't as weird about cameras as I am." She rested her hands on his chest and kissed him gently.

"No, I should have asked. It was unprofessional of me." He slid his arm around her waist. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

She leaned into him and let her hand rest on his leg, but her body was still tense. "It's okay." She looked at the camera again, then at him, her expression inquisitive.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you want to take my picture just then?"

His face burned. He was thankful for the heavy warmth of the sunset, hoping it camouflaged the redness he was sure lit up his face. "The light," he said. "It just looked . . . on your face, it looked . . . perfect." She blinked. He continued. "The contours in your face, the contrast between your features . . . the sunlight is so flattering, but that light" — He gestured toward the sunset, avoiding her eyes — "It's . . . beautiful on you."

Allyson exhaled. Some of the tension in her shoulders faded. "I . . . thank you."

He was quiet for a moment. "Listen," he whispered, running his fingers through her hair. "I understand that you don't like cameras, but, if you change your mind" He couldn't believe he was saying it, after her almost phobic reaction to the camera, but the words just spilled off his tongue before he could stop them. "I'd love to photograph you."

She shifted uncomfortably, but didn't pull away from him. "I'll let you know," she murmured.

Jason silently begged for another salmon to splash through the water's glass-smooth surface and break the tension that hung between them, but no such luck.

"It's getting dark," she said. "I should probably get back into town before it's too dark to see my way."

Damn it. Look what you did. You scared her off. He kissed her lightly and then released his grasp on her waist. "I can drive you back into town, if you'd like," he said. "My Jeep isn't far from here."

She nodded. "Yes, thank you."

On the way back down the pier, he took the chance and let his fingers touch hers, hesitating to see if she pulled away. She didn't, so he took her hand, running his thumb across the back of her fingers. "Look, I'm sorry," he said. "I really, really enjoyed this

tonight." More than you can possibly imagine, he thought with a shiver. "I'm sorry I ruined it."

She startled. "Ruined it?" Then she laughed. "No, no, you didn't. My stupid fear of cameras ruined it." She smiled – that broad, warm smile he desperately wanted to photograph. Stopping, she put her arms around his neck. "I had a wonderful time. Really. Thank you for showing me around." She kissed him gently.

A long pause hung between them, their eyes locked in the fading daylight. "I'd like to see you again," he said, silently scolding himself for sounding like an awkward junior high kid.

"I'm only here for a few more days, but" She trailed off, avoiding his eyes.

He wetted his lips. "Do you have plans tomorrow night?"

"No plans at all."

"How about dinner?"

"When and where?"

He shifted his weight. "Maybe" He hesitated. Moments ago, he wouldn't have thought twice about asking her to come to his place – in fact, he was half-tempted to ask her to come home with him that very night – but now he worried he'd made her uncomfortable. "I could cook for you." It was out. There it was. No taking it back. *Idiot*.

To his surprise, she said, "That sounds nice. I'll be there." Her smile backed up her words.

They walked back up the beach to where he'd parked.

"I left my car over by First and Arnet," she said as they drove into town.

They found her rental and he put the Jeep in park.

"Let me give you my address." He pulled a pen and a notepad out of his glove box. "My place is a few miles out of town, but it's easy as hell to find."

"Give me your phone number, too," she said. "Just in case I do get lost."

Or in case you decide that I creep you out and you want to cancel. He smiled in spite of his worries and wrote his number below his address. "Trust me, you'll find it." He tore the sheet off and handed it to her. When she took it, her fingers brushed his, lingering

against his hand just long enough it couldn't have been accidental. He swallowed.

"Seven o'clock?"

"Seven o'clock." She smiled.

"I'll be counting down the hours."

"As will I." She leaned across the console and kissed him. It started out as just a light kiss, a brief parting gesture, but she didn't pull back.

She hadn't meant to let their goodbye kiss linger, but she wanted just one last taste of him. She pressed her lips to his once again, and this time he leaned into it, sliding his hand around to the back of her neck. Her defenses melted as he gently parted her lips and drew her tongue against his. A shiver ran down her spine as she caught herself wondering what else he could do with his mouth.

His lips barely leaving hers, he whispered, "If I don't let you go, we're going to be here all night."

"Pity." She wrapped her arms around him.

"I should let you go." He pulled her closer.

"I should go." She held him tighter.

His hand rested on the curve of her waist, his fingertips pressing into her gently while his other hand found its way up the back of her neck and into her hair. She desperately wanted him to touch her everywhere, to feel his hands all over her bare skin, but just the gentle, if insistent, way he touched her now was erotic in its own right.

Forget tomorrow night. She pulled him closer. His mouth was exquisite against hers. *Just tell me you want me to come home with you tonight, Jason. Tell me you want this as much as I do.*

A car door slammed nearby, making both of them jump. Jason looked over his shoulder, then back at her. He kissed her lightly and his arms loosened around her. "I really should let you go."

She exhaled. "I know."

He stole one last, brief kiss. "See you at seven tomorrow?"

"I'll be there."

Alone in her rental car after Jason's taillights disappeared into the night, Simone cursed under her breath. Anne-Marie's warnings came crashing back into her consciousness. *No men. No men. Don't screw this up.*

"Shit," Simone muttered, hitting the steering wheel with the heel of her hand. As irresistible as Jason might be, as delicious as his kiss was, this was a really, really bad idea.

Chapter Five

Simone dropped into the chair in Anne-Marie's cabin, staring at the clothes she'd spread all over the bed. She was supposed to meet Jason in less than two hours, but she hadn't packed for a date. She had nothing — *nothing* — to wear.

She didn't pack for a date because she wasn't supposed to be *going* on any dates. Rubbing her eyes, she groaned.

So much for Anne-Marie's rules. She'd already blown the "no alcohol" rule. A shudder ran through her as she remembered yesterday's skull-splitting hangover. A hell of a morning following a night she couldn't remember.

No alcohol. Whoops.

No men. Shit.

She'd sworn she was here to relax, to think about her life, to get back on track. She really had every intention of doing just that. And Anne-Marie was absolutely right: The last thing Simone needed was a man — even just a fling — complicating things. There was simply too much at stake to risk on a quick lay.

Against her will, though, her mind drifted back to the night before. An involuntary shiver ran up her spine as she remembered Jason's touch, his kiss. She wanted to know what it was like to spend an entire night at the mercy of Jason's sizzling touch. If the hunger in his lingering kiss in the Jeep was to be believed, he was

more than willing to oblige. Just thinking about what he'd look like naked, what he'd feel like, what he'd taste like, made her mouth water. She bit her lip and squeezed her thighs together as another shiver rippled through her.

No men. No men. *No. Men.*

She glanced at the clock. Five fifteen. Two more hours. She still had time to cancel.

It wasn't too late.

She looked at the scrap of paper beside her purse, the one on which he'd written his address and his phone number. All she had to do was call.

But really, what harm could one little dinner date do? Even if it led to more. They both knew she was leaving in a few days, so it would be, at most, just a fling. A short, fun, harmless fling. Probably no more than a one night stand. Goosebumps prickled her skin as her mind again wandered back to the previous night, when she let herself get lost in his kiss, kissing him like nothing else in the world mattered because, at that moment, nothing else in the world *did* matter. His kiss alone did more for her than most men had ever done in the bedroom.

He was precisely what she needed to satisfy her. If his kiss was any indication, Jason Connor was scorching hot in bed.

But if her past was any indication, her newfound friendship with Jason would end just as badly as every other relationship she'd ever had. There was no such thing as a harmless fling that involved Simone Farrell. She sighed and rubbed her forehead. *Call and cancel. This is a mistake. A huge mistake.*

No good could come of this. More distraction. Another heartache to give her a reason to dive into the bottle again. More ammunition for the paparazzi to tear her apart.

The paparazzi weren't here, though, she reminded herself. She hadn't seen a single one; the only camera she had seen in three days, besides some random, oblivious tourists' was Jason's.

She winced at the memory of what happened on the dock, when he tried to take her picture. *Christ, he must think I'm an idiot.* Who could imagine? A camera shy movie star. And how could she explain it to him? *"Look, I work in front of a movie camera all day long, but cameras like that have damn near destroyed my life, so would you please put it away and take me to bed?"*

This was *definitely* a bad idea.

She looked at his phone number again.

There was just one problem: she really liked him, and not just because of the magic he worked on her body. He talked to her like a human being, not a movie star. He wasn't trying to rub elbows with her. His face was nothing if not sincere and his mere presence put her at ease. It had been so long since she'd been with someone so genuine. Even after she freaked out about the camera, he'd still asked her to come over to his place. He'd still kissed her like he couldn't get enough of her.

She swallowed.

Maybe he genuinely liked her. Or maybe he was just a sleazeball looking for another notch in his bedpost. Her thoughts drifted to the tattoos sneaking out from beneath his taut shirt, the way his fingers nimbly manipulated the camera lens, the ripple up his arm, the casual way he touched his tongue to his lips when he was thinking. His soft, tantalizing touch. The way his kiss sent tremors up and down her spine.

After what he did to her on the pier, she'd carve the notch in his bedpost herself if it meant getting to see what else his fingers could do, and what his tongue would feel like —

"Simone!" She scolded herself. Her face must have been cherry red, judging by the way it burned just then. But that wasn't the only place feeling some heat. She couldn't help but wonder what his tattoos looked like, how their edges would feel against her tongue.

No men! Anne-Marie's voice echoed in her head.

But the more she thought about Jason, about the way his mouth tasted and his fingertips brushed her skin, Simone realized that "no men" was an entirely different proposition than "don't fuck Jason Connor"

"If you saw him, you'd understand, Anne-Marie," she said aloud. She pushed herself out of the chair and snatched a halfway decent blouse and pair of jeans off the bed. Whatever happened . . . happened. She wouldn't let it consume her. She could control herself, just have some fun, and go back to L.A.

"What happens in Tofino," she said, pulling her T-shirt over her head, "*stays* in Tofino."

Chapter Six

Jason's house was several miles out of town, on a secluded, dirt road way back in the woods. She rounded the last bend and found a log cabin, much larger than Anne-Marie's, nestled in the trees with a meticulously kept yard and the familiar red Jeep parked out front.

She took a breath as she put the car in park. Just one night, she promised herself, pretending she wasn't already ridiculously aroused just thinking about him.

When he answered the door, her breath caught in her throat.

His face was clean-shaven now except for the slim, neatly-trimmed mustache and goatee that outlined his boyish smile. His hair was still spiky and unruly, but less so than the day before. Beneath the sleeves of his white, button-down shirt, she could make out the vague outlines of his tattoos, though a thicker undershirt kept her from seeing the rest of them. As he put his arms around her and kissed her gently, a hint of his musky cologne sent goosebumps prickling down her arms.

"I'm glad you came," he said. Instantly his cheeks darkened. "Came over, for dinner."

Simone pursed her lips to keep from laughing. "I'm sorry I'm not better dressed," she said, gesturing self-consciously at her jeans and casual blouse. "I didn't pack much, so —"

"You look great."

So do you, she thought. *Good God, so do you.*

He showed her into his spacious house. As he did, she forced herself not to stare at the way his butt looked in those slacks, or the way his shirt pulled tight across his broad shoulders. She tried to focus on the house and everything in it.

The cabin was sparsely furnished, but hardly a bachelor pad. His taste in décor was simple, but elegant: matching black furniture. A few odds and ends that suggested he'd either visited some exotic places or just had eclectic taste. Framed photos hung neatly on the walls. One wall was almost completely glass, with vast picture windows overlooking a stunning view of the water.

The kitchen was separated from the living room by a small dining room table — tablecloth, candles, the works. It wouldn't have surprised her if he said the silver was hand-polished. *And his hands would be perfect for — Simone! Stop it!* He led her into the kitchen. Judging by the immaculate stainless steel appliances and meticulously arranged counters, his kitchen was not just a place to heat up TV dinners. The aroma of something delicious filled her nostrils. Her mouth watered.

"Wine?" Jason asked.

She hesitated. Just one glass of wine. A glass, not the whole damned bottle. Just one glass. "Please," she said.

He pulled a bottle from a well-stocked wine rack and poured two glasses of white wine. "Dinner's almost ready," he said, handing her a glass. Gesturing toward the living room, he added, "You're welcome to look around if you'd like." His smile seemed more shy than confident.

"Take your time," she said, giving him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. *Or, skip dinner altogether and take me to bed.* She quickly turned away and sipped her wine, willing her cheeks to stop burning as she looked at the photos on the wall.

Jason's hands were unsteady inside the oven mitts as he checked on the halibut filets. Somehow he'd managed to pour the wine without spilling it all over the place, and with any luck, she hadn't noticed how much his hands shook. What was she doing to him?

He felt like a school kid trying to impress a girlfriend. She probably thought he was only trying to get her into bed – and, holy hell, after last night, he certainly wasn't adverse to doing just that – but his intentions tonight were not entirely sexual. He asked her to dinner because he wanted to be with her again, to talk to her, to hear her laughter.

He stole a glance at her as she walked through the living room looking at his pictures. She'd been embarrassed by her casual attire when she came in, but he didn't object at all, not with the way those jeans accentuated her long, slender legs and the gentle curve of her hips. He remembered the warmth of her skin beneath his fingertips, the way her hips fit perfectly into his hands. What he wouldn't have given the night before to get her into bed. Hell, if she'd given him the word, he would have fucked her on the pier. Right there. Right then.

And watching her now, he was more than a little tempted to forget dinner and take her to bed. Right *here*. Right *now*.

Shaking his head, he turned to check on one of the pots on the stove, taking a deep breath to calm himself down. Ever since last night, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her and now that she was in the same room, he could barely see straight.

He reached in to pull the fish out of the oven. In the back of his mind, he wondered what she would say if he suggested foregoing dinner altogether and finishing what they'd started on the pier. It took every bit of self-control he had not to grab her by those exquisite hips, lay her across the table, and fuck the hell out of her.

"No, *stop*," he muttered to himself through clenched teeth.

"What?"

Her voice startled him and he nearly dropped the pan as he pulled it out of the oven. He laughed. "I didn't realize you were there."

"I'm sorry." She bit her lip, stifling a giggle. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay." He laughed, silently thankful she hadn't seen what his thoughts of her had done to the way his slacks fit.

"I was just going to ask you" — She gestured over her shoulder with her wine glass — "About one of the pictures in the living room."

He set the pan down and took off the oven mitts. Simone couldn't help but notice the contrast in him: the tousled, rough around the edges man with the boyish face, who wore a neatly pressed button down as well as he wore a ratty T-shirt, wearing oven mitts and pouring wine.

"Which one?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"The picture?" he said. "You wanted to ask about one of them?"

"Oh. Right." She turned and headed into the living room before her face got red enough to light up the whole place. She stopped at a print beside the fireplace. It was an island, its shore completely devoid of any human influence. It was tiny, perhaps twenty yards across, its edge made up of a sandy beach shaped like a little crescent moon.

"Where is this?"

"That's the place I mentioned yesterday," he said. "It's a few miles from here by boat." For a moment, he just gazed at the picture, his expression almost reverent. "It's my favorite place in the world."

"It's beautiful," Simone said, turning back to look at the picture. I wish you'd take me there, she thought. *Jesus, Simone! You barely know him!*

He cleared his throat. "Dinner is ready."

He pulled out her chair at the table, and went about preparing their plates. Soft music filled the air and she wondered when he had turned on the radio. Had it been playing the whole time? Maybe she just hadn't heard it over her pounding heart.

Jason laid a china plate in front of her with a halibut steak covered in a red and white salsa. Beside it, several stalks of asparagus were neatly piled, drizzled over with a dark sauce.

The fish was exquisite, its delicate flavor and tenderness superior to anything she'd ever tasted in the finest restaurants of New York and L.A. "This is amazing," she said. "Really."

"I'm glad you like it." He sipped his wine.

"Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"My mother," he said. "She was a gourmet chef for years, taught my brother and me everything she knew."

Glancing at the photos on the wall, then back at him, she said, "Is there anything you do that you *don't* do perfectly?" She regretted it the instant she said it, wishing she could retrieve the words. Her face burned and she knew he saw it this time.

"Well," he said with a laugh, looking down at his plate, but not completely hiding the mischievous smile on his face. "I can't sew to save my life. And I'm hands down the shittiest golfer you'll ever find."

Simone laughed. Their gazes met across the table. The electricity in the air prickled her skin with goosebumps, but she hoped he didn't notice.

He cleared his throat. "So, where are you from, anyway?"

"California."

"Northern? Southern? Somewhere in the middle?"

"Southern." She gestured around the spacious room. "This is a beautiful house, by the way."

He cocked his head slightly, eyeing her, but followed suit with the subject change. "Thanks. Built it with my brother a few years ago."

"Really? Just the two of you?"

He shrugged. "Well, we roped a few friends in for some of the heavy stuff, but for the most part, it was just the two of us." He sipped his drink and chuckled. "He says I'll pay him back for it someday in some still undetermined currency."

"What's he going to do?" Simone laughed. "Have you whack one of his enemies?"

Jason rolled his eyes and gave an exasperated sigh. "Knowing him, it'll have something to do with keeping an eye on his kids for a few days."

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't like kids?"

"Oh, no, it's not that at all." He smiled. "I love kids. But my brother seems to like handing them off to me after they've each had a Red Bull or two."

"Now that's just cruel. How old are they?"

"Two and four."

"That sadist."

"You have *no* idea."

They chatted lightly, like they had the day before on the beach. Even after they'd finished eating and Jason quickly cleared the table and counters, they returned to the table and chatted. The table between them created a comforting but frustrating distance; she desperately wanted to pick up where they'd left off the night before, but neither made the first move. They could barely pull themselves away from each other in his Jeep the night before, but now it felt like a silent game of chicken to see who would finally make contact again.

The CD in the player changed and Chris de Burgh's *Lady In Red* drifted through the air. Simone paused and cocked her head, listening.

"What is it?" he asked.

She knew she was blushing, but tried to laugh it off. "I haven't heard that song in ages, but I love it."

"So do I, actually," he said. "Even if it is a cliché prom song."

Simone laughed. She didn't tell him it was the song she and Gregory danced to at their wedding.

He stood. "How about a dance?"

Her heart quickened. "Right now?"

"Why not?"

Because my legs will collapse under me if I try to stand. She swallowed. "Okay."

Jason extended his hand and she took it. The warmth of his fingers against hers sent a shiver through her. He led her into the living room, in front of the fireplace, where there was more room. Her gaze flicked toward the black leather sofa. She wanted to pull him down on it, to have what she hoped he wanted as badly as she did, but she let him take the lead.

He held her hand in his and set his other on her waist. She rested her free hand on his shoulder, resisting the urge to grope the muscles beneath his thin shirt.

It had been so long since she'd danced – probably since her wedding, a lifetime ago – but he led her with a gentle insistence that said, "don't worry, I know what I'm doing, just follow me." She did follow him, and he did know what he was doing, guiding them around his small living room as if it made perfect sense to do so.

The sharp edges of a tattoo hid just beneath his starched collar. Tattoos had never turned her on before, but his intrigued her. She wanted to see them, to touch them, to trace her tongue along the edges of them. She suddenly wanted to taste his skin.

She realized he was looking at her, watching her stare at his shoulders. Clearing her throat, she said, "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you're a good dancer, too."

His lips curled into a shy smile. "You're not so bad yourself."

Moving his hand from her waist to the small of her back, he pulled her closer to him. She took in a sharp breath as their bodies touched, and his cologne intoxicated her.

"I'm really not that great of a dancer," he said, finally, his lip brushing hers so lightly she almost thought she'd imagined it. "I just wanted a reason to touch you again."

Chapter Seven

Simone swallowed hard, trying to remember how to breathe, speak, *something*, as he looked into her eyes. Jason's words hung in the air between them, his mouth close enough to hers to taste.

Finally, she said, "You didn't need a reason." They had stopped moving. She wondered how long they'd been standing still, while the music moved around them.

He inched closer, tilting his head as if to kiss her, but still he kept that agonizing sliver of space between them. "So you're saying I could have just touched you, and you wouldn't have minded?"

"Not in the least," she whispered, holding him tighter as her knees went slack.

He laughed softly. "Duly noted." And he finally kissed her. The hand on the small of her back pulled her closer, and his other hand slid around her neck and into her hair.

Her fingers explored the edges of the muscles of his back and shoulders. She breathed him, tasted him, and she wanted more.

He broke the kiss and looked at her, his eyes reflecting the hunger that burned within her as his fingers ran through her hair. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about you," he whispered, his voice nearly a growl.

"Likewise." She pressed her body against his. He closed his eyes and exhaled sharply as her hips found his cock, hard and straining the seams of his slacks. He kissed her again, consuming her, *devouring* her. If she'd wanted him on the pier the day before, she *needed* him now.

She wanted to touch his skin, wanted to taste him. With unsteady hands, she fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. They may as well have been padlocks for all her ability to get them open. He tried to help, cursing under his breath as a button refused to cooperate.

"Let me," she said, but her fingers were shaking too much.

"I've got it," he said, but his weren't any steadier.

"Here — "

"Fuck it," he said, the growl in his voice startling her. "Clothes are cheap." Grasping the lapels of his shirt, he pulled it apart. The sounds of ripping fabric and buttons skittering across the floor sent a tremor of desire through her. She pushed what was left of his shirt off his arms and he quickly pulled his undershirt over his head.

Before she could react, he slid his fingers under her blouse and lifted it over her head in one quick motion. He put his hands on her back and pulled her to him, close to him, the heat of his skin sizzling against hers as he kissed her again. Jason made her head spin in ways no liquor had ever done.

He released her mouth and kissed her neck, flicking his tongue across the hollow of her throat along her collarbone. A chill rippled up her spine and she moaned, pulling him closer. She dragged her fingernails across the softly embossed edges of the tattoos on his back and he exhaled sharply against her throat.

He ran his hand up her spine, stopping at her bra strap.

"Do you want me to take it off?" she asked.

"No," he said simply. With a quick movement of his fingers, her bra went slack about her shoulders. He hooked his thumbs in the shoulder straps and slid them slowly down her arms until it fell away. His thumb circled an erect nipple and she closed her eyes, tilting her head back as his soft touch ignited an ache deep within her, like the earliest rumblings of a tremendous orgasm.

He kissed her again, making her knees weaker with each brush of his tongue against hers. For a long time they just stood there, exploring each other's mouths. Her fingers grasped his bare shoulders as he held her hips and pulled her against him. She couldn't get enough of him. She wanted him. Wanted him inside her. But she didn't want *this* to stop.

He guided her across the room, never once breaking their long, sensuous kiss until he dropped to his knees in front of her. Steadying her hips in his hands, he kissed her just above the waistband of her jeans. Her whole body quivered at his fiery touch.

Gripping his shoulders for balance as her knees threatened to give out, she watched him unfasten the top button of her jeans. He looked up at her face, took the zipper pull in his teeth, and slowly drew it downward. She tried to exhale. Couldn't remember how.

He kissed the exposed flesh in the "V" of her unzipped jeans. She gasped as he ran his hand down her leg, over her quivering knee, caressing the back of her calf through the thick denim. She wanted his hands on her skin. Now. Right now.

She started to push her jeans over her hips, but he stopped her. He laughed softly as he stood, pressing his hips against hers, letting her feel just how much he wanted her. His lips stopped an agonizing inch away from hers.

"In a hurry?" he whispered with a devilish grin. The heat of his breath on her lips destroyed what little balance she had left and her knees buckled. He caught her, holding her close to him.

He leaned into her and sudden panic turned her veins to ice as her center of gravity shifted, as she sensed the room shifting around her. A second before panic took over, she realized he was coming down with her, that he was lowering her, and a moment later, her back landed gently on something soft. Leather creaked beneath them.

For a delicious eternity, they just kissed, lying on the couch in each other's arms, making out like a couple of teenagers. His mouth left hers and explored her neck, pausing here and there to kiss exquisitely sensitive places she never knew existed.

He kissed her, long and deep, then said, "There is so much I want to do to you right now." His voice was strained, almost desperate. "Christ, I just want to touch you and taste you, but—" He exhaled hard. Kissed her mouth. Her jaw. Her throat. Suddenly his body tensed. "*Fuck*." The word came out as little more than a sharp breath against her neck.

The frustration in his voice unsettled her. "What's wrong?"

His shoulders tensed as he drew a long breath. When at last he spoke again, his voice was a deep, throaty growl. "If I don't fuck you *right now*, I'm going to lose my mind."

The hunger in his voice destroyed any chance she had of forming—much less speaking—a coherent thought. She reached for his belt. Their eyes met and they froze, as if searching each other for resistance. Then they moved quickly, almost clumsily,

struggling to get out of their remaining clothes as fast as possible, still kissing even as they fumbled with belts and zippers.

Before tossing his jeans away, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a condom. He glanced at her, one eyebrow raised.

"Figured I should have one handy tonight," he said, a mix of humor and uncertainty in his voice. "I hope I wasn't being too presumptuous."

"Not in the least."

He tore the wrapper with his teeth, and as soon as the condom was on, she parted her legs for him, her entire body trembling with anticipation. A second later, he took her in one quick thrust, knocking the breath out of her, and for a long moment, neither of them moved. Neither breathed.

Finally, he kissed her, that deep, spine-melting kiss, and slowly withdrew. He took long, slow strokes, releasing sharp, ragged breaths against her lips. She could barely breathe at all, inhaling and exhaling at the exact same speed his cock moved inside her.

"Oh my God," she whispered finally.

"Jesus, you feel amazing," he said. He picked up speed, driving himself deeper and harder with each stroke.

"Oh God, Jason," she said, her voice barely more than a whimper. "Don't stop, please, don't stop . . ."

The throaty groan he released told her he couldn't have stopped if he wanted to. She held onto him for dear life, digging her fingers into his shoulders, rocking her hips in time with his thrusts. The incredible sensations he unleashed within her brought cries and whimpers and desperate pleas for more, more, more out of her.

"Faster," she pleaded. "Faster, please, *faster* . . ." Her voice seemed to come from somewhere outside of her, but he must have heard her loud and clear. He gripped her shoulders and rode her, fucked her, faster than she'd ever thought possible.

"Oh God," he groaned.

"You're going to make me come," she said, holding him tighter, her back arching off the couch as the first ripples of an orgasm radiated through her. "Oh God, Jason, you're — " But the words stuck in her throat as a deep tremor surged up her spine.

"I'm going to come too," he said. He sounded like a man in pain, a man on the brink of insanity. "Oh my *God*"

Simone's vision exploded in a shower of white sparks. She distantly heard herself cry his name. Seconds later, Jason took a few last violent strokes, released a helpless moan, and shuddered against her.

Chapter Eight

For a long time, they were both still, just holding each other and trembling. At long last, Jason lifted his head and kissed her.

"Wow," he said.

She laughed softly against his lips. "I was thinking the same thing." He looked at her for a moment, and she thought he was going to speak again, but instead, he kissed her.

After a long kiss, his lips barely left hers as he whispered, "I could do this all night." She moaned softly as he bent to kiss her neck. His voice vibrated across her skin as he pressed his lips against her neck just beneath her jaw. "I don't usually rush like that. I like to take my time. Enjoy a woman's touch, enjoy the way she tastes" The tip of his tongue touched her neck and took her breath away. "But I just couldn't resist you."

She released a helpless whimper and clung to his shoulders. He *had* to notice her trembling. Kissing his way back up to her mouth, he spoke in a low growl that seemed to come from deep in his throat. "I want to take my time with you, Allyson. I want to touch you, and taste you, and I want to fuck you again."

She tried to speak, but the only thing that came out was a soft moan.

"Come with me," he whispered.

He rose and took her by the hand, leading her down the hall. When he stopped, she could just barely make out the shape of his bed in the faint moonlight spilling in through the window. Anticipation pulsed within her. She thought he was going to lay her down then, but instead he leaned against the footboard, pulling her into his arms again and kissing her once more.

After a moment, he reached toward the bedside table and flicked on the lamp, flooding the room in a gentle amber glow. He sat on the edge of the bed, looking at her, watching his hands trace her outline, her shoulders, her hips. A ragged breath parted his lips and when his eyes met hers, they smoldered with insatiable hunger.

"Jesus, you're beautiful," he whispered, his breath cool against her skin. A moment later, the moist warmth of his mouth encircled her nipple and she moaned as his tongue swept across her flesh. The room spun around her and she grasped his shoulders. His voice vibrated against her breast as he groaned softly.

He released her nipple and stood, but he didn't kiss her. Instead, he turned her so she leaned against the bed.

"This time, I'm going to take my time," he breathed against her neck. "I am going to enjoy every" — His fingers slid up the back of her neck into her hair — "inch" — He closed his hand, slowly gripping her hair — "of you."

He pulled her into a deep kiss. She melted against him.

He laid her on the bed then, pulling her legs around his waist. Leaning over her, he kissed her mouth, her neck, her breasts, sliding his hands down her sides as he trailed kisses down her belly. She squirmed against his mouth. Never mind the fact that he had *just* fucked her, she'd never wanted — *craved* — a man this badly.

Jason ran his hands over the smooth curve of her hips and down her long legs. Her knees trembled at his touch and he fought to keep his breath steady and even. He was certain she could hear the deafening pounding of his heart.

He touched his lips to the inside of her knee, working his way up the silky skin of her inner thigh. Exploring her smooth, slender legs, he traced his fingers up the

subtle groove in her well-defined calf muscles. He ached to be inside her again, to feel her squeezing him as he released, but he would wait. Just as he'd promised, he intended to savor her this time, every last inch of her.

Pulling her to the edge of the bed, he knelt on the floor. His mouth watered. Good God, he had never wanted a woman like this.

He hoped she couldn't feel the unsteadiness in his hand as it slid up her thigh. A ragged breath escaped his throat as he watched his two fingers slide easily inside her. She whimpered and tightened around his fingers, and her hips lifted off the bed. As he watched her writhe, watched his fingers sliding in and out of her, he couldn't help the moan that escaped his own throat. His cock ached with anticipation.

But he wasn't ready to be inside her yet. No, not just yet.

He slipped his fingers back in and leaned forward. His tongue traced a slow circle around her clit and —

— a lightning bolt of icy-hot pleasure surged through her.

The bedspread bunched in her clawing hands. She thought she moaned, but didn't know, didn't care. All she knew was the sensations coursing through her with each sweep of his tongue and thrust of his hand. His mouth and fingers worked together, moving in perfect rhythm, pulling each shudder and moan from her as if they were simply waiting within her for him to take.

She had no choice but to surrender to him completely. He pushed her nearer and nearer to the edge, waiting until she was a gasp away from climaxing before he slowed his rhythm and let the tidal wave of ecstasy recede before he started again. Again and again, until the room spun around her and she couldn't remember where she was, who she was.

He brought her to the edge again and held her there, balancing her on the brink. Then his rhythm quickened, the movements of his tongue and fingers taking on a more earnest pace. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think.

With a precise flick of his tongue, he propelled her into a delirious, ground-shaking orgasm. Her back arched, her legs shook, her hands clawed the bedspread. White-hot pleasure pulsed through her. Sensations she had never before felt took hold of her, shaking her to the core. And still he drew it out, his tongue and fingers urging more and more until she begged him to stop.

Jason stood then and leaned over her as the orgasm subsided, his fingers still inside her. "Your body is amazing," he whispered against her jaw, kissing her neck as she fought for breath.

He ran his tongue across his lips and kissed her, his tongue tangy-sweet with the taste of her. She put her arms around him and devoured his kiss, renewed desire burning within her. She needed him inside of her. *Now*. Couldn't wait any longer. She had to have him.

"Fuck me again," she said, her voice unsteady.

"I thought you'd never ask," he growled breathlessly. He made quick work of getting a condom from the bedside table and putting it on. Taking her hips in his hands, he pulled her to the very edge of the bed.

He didn't slide into her; he didn't gently push into her. No, he held her hips and *slammed* into her, forcing the very breath out of her lungs and gasping loudly himself as he filled her completely. For a moment, they were both still, breathless, simply staring into each other's eyes just as they had on the couch.

Finally, he pulled back, withdrawing ever so slowly before sliding back in. The next stroke, he did the same, but he thrust his cock back in this time. She whimpered with pleasure.

His speed and force increased with each stroke, and she couldn't help but cry out as he rode her. The bed creaked and groaned beneath her as he thrust harder and faster into her.

He pulled her legs onto his shoulders, sliding his hands up and down her calves with each stroke. Then he kissed her ankle, flicking his tongue across her skin as if he simply needed to taste her again. Simone moaned as he drove himself deeper. Her back

arching, she found his rhythm and rolled her hips in time with his thrusts, pulling him in, squeezing him each time he withdrew.

"Oh . . . my . . . God" he breathed, his rhythm faltering slightly.

She wrapped her legs around him and pulled him down to her, engulfing his mouth in a breathless kiss and running her fingers through his sweat-glazed hair. "Get on your back."

He looked at her, his eyebrows arching with surprise. Then, he pulled out and did as she ordered, climbing onto the bed and lying on his back.

Before Jason could even think, she was over him, a heavy sigh escaping her mouth as she took his cock into her in one quick motion. He grabbed her hips and started to thrust upward, but she squeezed him with her thighs and pinned his arms beside his head.

"No," she said. "It's my turn." She rolled her hips forward as she rose off him, and then rolled them back on the way down. Faster and faster with each stroke, she rode him. Lying helplessly beneath her, his arms still held captive, Jason groaned softly and surrendered to her. She was in complete control and he loved it.

He watched her breasts bouncing and her abs rippling with each roll of her hips. Holy hell, he didn't know what she was doing, but it was amazing. All he knew was he couldn't have stopped the impending orgasm if he tried.

Just as he was getting close, she tightened around him and moaned. Her hands, still grasping his, squeezed and released, squeezed and released. She threw her head back and moaned again.

Trying desperately to keep his own orgasm at bay, he pulled his hands free and grabbed her hips. They rocked together, his body rising to meet hers whenever she came down, driving his cock as deep as it could go inside her. She overwhelmed him.

He closed his eyes and cried out, "Allyson, oh my God, don't . . . stop"

She seized around his cock in the same instant he came. He couldn't tell whose groans of pleasure were whose, all he knew was the fiery surges that shook him from head to toe. Her body trembled within his grasp. His hands trembled against her body.

When it subsided he took a deep gulp of air, realizing he'd forgotten to breathe. They looked at each other. Her eyes were glazed with delicious satisfaction. He slid his hands up her back and pulled her down to him to kiss her.

After a moment, he got up just long enough to get rid of the condom. Then they slid under the covers together, and for a long time, they just kissed, long, drawn out, lazy kissing. Eventually, she lay beside him, her head on his shoulder, and they both drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Somewhere between dreaming and consciousness, Simone became aware of the warmth of Jason's body beside her. His arms were wrapped around her and his chest rose and fell against her back with each breath.

She absently ran her fingers along his forearm. He stirred then, nuzzling her shoulder and kissing her neck softly. The touch of his lips brought her out of her dreamy haze. Wide awake now, she guided his hand to her breast, and his fingers closed around it. He murmured and stirred again.

He moved his hand from her breast, and for a moment, she was disappointed, thinking he was going back to sleep. Instead, his hand slid to her side and he caressed her, tracing the curve of her waist and the swell of her hip. She exhaled through her teeth, gooseflesh prickling her skin and a warm tremor rippling through her. She pressed her body into his and he pulled her closer, groaning into her ear, his cock hardening against her ass.

His luxurious touch ignited fresh desire within her. He continued his exploration of her body, his touch becoming more insistent as his breath came more rapidly.

"Your body is amazing," he whispered, his voice slurred with sleepiness, his lip brushing her ear as he spoke. "Absolutely amazing."

His fingers slipped around to the back of her thigh. She parted her legs just slightly, allowing his fingertips to glide along her inner thigh. Her entire body quivered as they found their mark. Her back arched against him and a moan escaped her lips. He laughed softly, the hum of his voice tantalizing against her neck.

"Do you like that?" he murmured into her shoulder as his fingers drew lazy circles around her clit.

"I love it." She could barely speak.

"I love touching you," he breathed. His fingers were more insistent now, his voice ragged as if he fought to maintain his composure. "I could do this all night." He slipped two fingers inside her, moving them slowly, deliciously. "I could listen to you moan, listen to you scream, until the end of time."

All she could manage in return was a soft whimper. She squeezed his fingers and he took a sharp hiss of breath.

For a long time, he just held her, nuzzling her neck, breathing against her hair, his fingers sliding slowly in and out of her. The only sound in the room was his breath against her ear and the gasps and moans he brought out of her.

Then, he slipped his fingers out and brought his hand away slowly. Before she could protest, he kissed her shoulder and whispered, "Don't move." In the next instant his entire body broke contact with hers. The sudden separation was jarring, puzzling, but the sound of the nightstand drawer made her shiver as she understood why he had gone.

Foil ripped. Jason muttered something under his breath. Then he was against her again, sliding his hand over the swell of her hip as he kissed the back of her neck. He tugged at her shoulder, urging her to lie on her back. She did, and even as his mouth enveloped hers, she pushed her quivering hips toward him. She ached for him, wanted his hand back where it had been, but he didn't comply.

He broke the kiss and reached across her body in the darkness. "I want to see you," he said. He flicked on the light, and she flinched at the sudden brightness. His warm hand caressed her shoulder, her breast, her hip. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

She opened her eyes and gazed up at him. His hair was tousled and unruly, but complimented the wild desire in his eyes. She touched his face and he turned his head to kiss her hand. His tongue circled her palm, raising gooseflesh all over her body.

His fingers teased her nipple, and then trailed down her belly to precisely where she longed for them to be. He circled her clit a couple of times, the intense sensations making her quiver. Then, he slipped two fingers inside her, all the way in, and rested the heel of his palm on her clit. As he moved his fingers in and out, his palm rubbed her just right, the powerful sensations forcing the breath right from her lungs.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Oh my God, Jason" She clawed at the sheet beneath her.

"You like that?" He kissed her neck and whispered in her ear. "Do you like it when I touch you? Do you like it when I touch you *inside*?" His words came out as half whisper, half groan.

"I love it," she moaned. He bent his fingers slightly inside of her then, his knuckles and fingertips touching her in places she had never before known, unleashing powerful sensations that rattled through her with enough intensity to rival a full-on climax. She pushed against his hand, overwhelmed, consumed. She couldn't think. Couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe.

She moved her hand and as she did, she brushed his cock. He sucked in a breath and shivered as she stroked him through the condom. He shut his eyes, his jaw slack as he tried to breathe, but after a moment, he looked at her with a hungry, insatiable desire in his eyes, a desire that mirrored her own.

He kissed her as their hands moved in unison, drawing moans of pleasure from each other. They devoured each other, breathing each other in, consuming each other's feverish hunger.

"I can't get enough of you," he said. "My God, I just can't get enough."

"I'm yours for the taking," she murmured. If he kept doing what he was doing with his hand, she'd be his devoted slave forever. She writhed against his palm, squeezing his fingers inside her. A moan escaped her lips. "I want you inside me," she pleaded. "*Now*."

He exhaled hard against her lips. "Not yet. Not until I feel you come again."

She tightened her grip on him and he gasped. She grinned. "What if I make *you* come first?"

He released a heavy groan, and for a moment she wondered if she was about to do just that. He shuddered, and then looked at her.

"Then," he said, swallowing hard. "I'll just have to keep doing this." He quickened the movement of his hand, sending lightning bolts through her. "And make you come over, and over, and over, until I'm ready to come again."

She could barely breathe as his fingers continued moving in and out of her in time with the gentle but insistent circling of his palm on her clit.

"Oh God," she whispered, closing her eyes. "Oh God" Before she could draw another breath, an incredible orgasm surged within her, sending icy-hot shockwaves through her entire body. She moaned, she cried out, she didn't know what she said or if she said anything at all, she couldn't think.

Just as she reached the peak of her orgasm, his hand abruptly stopped, his fingers withdrawing, but before she had a chance to protest, he was over her, and then inside her, riding her, hard and fast, drawing her climax out until she saw white, until she saw nothing, until she was *aware* of nothing but the pure ecstasy he unleashed within her. She grabbed his shoulders and held on as he plunged into her. She struggled to catch her breath as each deep stroke he took drove the air right out of her lungs. And still, the orgasm didn't relent.

"God, yes, I love feeling you come," he growled through clenched teeth. "Oh God, you're amazing." His arms quivered beneath him as he fucked her hard and fast.

"Jason, oh my God, Jason," was all she could say when she could draw breath again. Her body trembled, even as her climax subsided, and each stroke he took sent delicious waves of pleasure through her.

He slid his arms under her back, gripping her shoulders from beneath as she rolled her hips and squeezed him in time with his powerful thrusts. With a deep groan, he threw his head back. She ran her fingertips up his spine, sending a shiver through him. He drew a ragged breath and closed his eyes as she dug her nails in then, not hard enough to draw blood, but hard enough to cause him to take a sharp hiss of breath and drive himself even deeper.

She grinned at him. "You like that?"

"Oh yes, I *love* it," he panted. He arched his back, pushing himself into her. His shoulders trembled. His breath caught, his eyes closed, and his jaw clenched. He moved slower now, but thrust hard and deep. His every muscle quivered.

All at once he tightened his grip on her shoulders and took one hard, deep stroke into her. He exhaled in a roar of pleasure and his eyes flew open. He threw his head back as his body shook and shuddered against her.

She kept moving her hips and squeezing him, drawing his climax out as he had done for her. He gasped with each roll of her hips, each time she tightened around him, until he finally collapsed against her, his forehead dipping against her collarbone.

They held each other, their bodies shaking, their skin slick with sweat. She ran her fingers through his sweaty hair.

He looked up and kissed her lightly. "I just can't get enough of you," he said, still breathless.

"Likewise," she murmured. And it was true. No one had ever done this to her. No one had ever touched her like he did, had ever been so hungry for her. And the orgasms he so easily brought out of her — she shivered.

He touched her face. "You okay?"

She smiled. "Better than I've been in a long time."

He returned the smile. They separated and he moved away long enough to get rid of the condom. Then he rolled onto his back and pulled her into his arms.

Her eyes grew heavy as the adrenaline wore off and sleepiness moved back in. She didn't even know what time it was — the sky outside was still completely dark — and she didn't care.

Warm and blissfully satisfied beside him, Simone fell asleep again.

Chapter Ten

Simone awoke to sun pouring in through the windows. Out of habit, she winced in anticipation of the relentless stabbing pain of a hangover, but it didn't come.

She looked at Jason, still sleeping soundly beside her, and last night came back to her. A shiver ran through her at the memory of the breathtaking climaxes he'd brought out of her. Even now, hours later, tingling aftershocks still murmured deep within her.

She couldn't remember the last time a man had done that to her. And she remembered it all with perfect, crystal clarity, instead of in the hazy alcohol-veiled way she usually remembered sex, if she remembered it at all. She smiled.

No men. Anne-Marie's words suddenly echoed in her mind, making her scowl with frustration.

She watched Jason sleep, forcing back the guilt that rose within her. *No, not now, not yet. I'll deal with all of that later. For now . . .*

Jason Connor was exquisite, even now, lying on his stomach, his face half-hidden by the pillow, his entire body still except for the gentle rise and fall of his back with each breath. A hint of five o'clock shadow dusted his jaw and his hair was as unruly as it was the day she met him. As his eyes fluttered in his sleep, she realized he had longer eyelashes than any man had any business having. Even in sleep, exhausted and disheveled from an amazing night of sex, he was a beautiful contradiction of unabashed sexiness, gentle roughness, and boyish innocence.

Her gaze drifted to his shoulders. His tattoos were completely exposed now, and like Jason himself, were rugged and beautiful. The ink on his bicep was an intricate tribal design, leading into meticulously detailed and colorful Celtic knot-work and geometric patterns that stretched across his upper back. She wanted to touch them, to trace her fingers along their edges. She wanted to knead the sculpted muscles beneath them. She —

The muscles in his back rippled and he rolled onto his side. His eyes opened, and he smiled sleepily at her. "So it wasn't a dream," he whispered.

"No, definitely not."

"Thank God." He grinned, but then his expression shifted and his cheeks darkened a little. "I'm really not that kind of guy usually. But, honestly, I just couldn't resist you."

"A willing, horny woman, what's not to love?" *Simone! Way to sound like a complete whore.*

He let his thumb drift over the side of her wrist, raising goosebumps all over her. "No, it's not like that at all. Really."

"What was it then?"

He watched his fingers run up and down her arm, his brow furrowing as if he were searching for the words. When he finally met her eyes again, he whispered, "What can I say? You're very attractive, Allyson. Very attractive. I just, I don't usually get carried away like that."

She shrugged. "I don't know, I kind of liked it when you got carried away."

His lips parted and his eyebrows jumped. Then he cleared his throat and offered a self-conscious smile. "Okay, so did I. But, you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do." She put her hand on top of his. "You don't have to explain yourself, Jason. I enjoyed it."

"Good. So did I." He touched her face. "I hope you'll at least stay for breakfast."

No, no, you can't stay. Don't get wrapped up in this. Don't do it. Guilt tried to force its way to the surface, but she smiled it back. "Of course," she said. "It would be rude not to."

He laughed and propped himself up on his elbow. He kissed her lightly. "Perhaps you'd join me for a shower?"

"Of course." She rose from the bed, pausing to wince at the soreness in her hips. He watched her.

"I didn't hurt you, I hope?" His expression was simultaneously concerned and mischievous.

"Nothing a little stretching won't take care of." *Oh, cute, Simone. Really cute.*

He laughed with a devilish twinkle in his eyes, but said nothing. He rubbed his arm and twisted a crick out of his back.

She supposed they both should have known they couldn't get in the shower together and keep their hands off each other. She didn't see Jason grab the condom on the way out of the bedroom, but she did see him set it on the window sill in the shower. *Great minds think alike, don't they?*

They had scarcely stepped under the water before he took her in his arms. The hot water felt wonderful on her skin, but not nearly as luxurious as Jason's hands all over her.

His mouth engulfed hers, his lips and tongue doing to her mouth what they had done all over her body the night before. She tingled at the memory; his tongue was the stuff *legends* were made of.

Simone broke the kiss and looked into his eyes. Crystalline drops of water rolled down his unshaven face like sweat. She imagined catching them with her tongue, tasting the saltiness of his skin, and unconsciously swept her tongue across the bottoms of her teeth. He exhaled heavily as she did, licking his lips just before he kissed her again.

Jason ached to be inside her again. God in heaven, he'd never wanted a woman like this. And the more he tasted her, touched her, the more he *needed* her.

She pressed her weight against him, urging him to take a step back. As he did, the sudden chill of the tile wall took his breath away. He gasped and tried to step away from it, but her hands held his shoulders and kept him there.

Then, she dropped to her knees, taking him into her mouth before he could react. Her tongue swirled around his cock, sending overwhelming sensations all through his body.

"Oh my God, Allyson," he murmured. He looked down, watching his cock disappear into her mouth, then reappear slowly, before she swallowed him again. He ran his fingers through her soaked hair. Her lips tightened around him, then loosened, then tightened again, each squeeze and release triggering a moan or a gasp. *Holy hell, she's –*

Her hand joined her mouth, stroking up and down his shaft as her lips and tongue worked the head of his cock. Her hand squeezed and released in time with her mouth. A moment later, her other hand wrapped around just past her lips. Both hands and her mouth moved in harmony, but with slightly different movements, enveloping his cock in a melee of sensations like nothing he'd ever felt before.

His hands clawed at the wet tile behind him. He arched his back and groaned with each stroke. She moved faster and faster, taking him deep into her mouth, her hands sliding along his shaft and sending electric shocks of pleasure all through his trembling body. If not for the wall behind him, he was sure he'd collapse.

Each stroke inched him ever closer to climaxing. A powerful orgasm boiled within him. *Not yet, not yet.* He wasn't ready to come, not yet.

He took her wrists and she stopped, looking up at him, a wicked grin on her face. He whispered breathlessly, "Come up here."

She swept her tongue over his cock one last time, then stood and leaned in to kiss him, but he took her shoulders and turned her toward the wall.

Simone yelled in surprise as her breasts touched the icy tile. A second later, his hands were over them and the warmth of his body engulfed the rest of her as he held her to the wall. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him grab the condom.

"I want to be inside you," he growled into her ear, his unshaven jaw deliciously coarse against her skin. The wrapper tore. "I want you so bad it *hurts*." He nudged her legs apart with his knee, his hands sliding down her sides to her hips. He pushed into her from behind, moving slowly, deliberately, so she felt every inch of him. She exhaled in time with his sensuous motion.

Buried to the hilt, he stopped. His entire body quivered, his breath ragged on her wet skin. She tightened her muscles around him, and he released a throaty, primal growl. She rolled her hips, pulling him in even farther. They moved together, with slow, luxurious strokes as he filled her completely. His every moan, every catch of his breath beside her ear, ignited more passion within her.

Suddenly he tightened his grip on her hips and thrust as deeply within her as he could. His hand slid around her waist until his fingers found her clit. She gasped as his fingertip drew lazy, gentle circles around it. He moved within her again, slowly, so slowly, *agonizingly* slowly. Her legs shook. Waves of ecstasy – fire and ice, pain and pleasure – surged through her.

He growled in her ear. "Tell me what you want."

She struggled to form the words. "I want you . . . to . . . faster" She finally managed, pushing herself against his hand, rolling her hips in time with his. A powerful orgasm hung within her, on the brink, ready to overtake her.

"Tell me more," he whispered.

"I want you," she said again. "Faster . . . *harder*"

"Do *what* faster and harder?"

"Fuck me! Fuck . . . me . . . *harder*"

He needed no further bidding; he grabbed her hips and *fucked her*, driving himself into her as hard as he could, fucking her so deep she swore he was going to hit

her throat. Within seconds, she came, delicious spasms wracking her body as he continued to slam his cock deep inside her.

A moment later, he cried out and shuddered against her. His fingers dug into her hips and a long moan brushed past her ear. His entire body tensed, trembled, then relaxed. He rested his forehead on her shoulder and held her while they both caught their breath.

When at last they could both breathe, he turned her around and pulled her into his arms beneath the hot, rushing water.

Chapter Eleven

On the way to the kitchen from Jason's bedroom, a framed picture in the hallway caught Simone's eye. She stopped. It was an incredible black and white image of a nude woman posing on a black couch. Her soft, supple curves contrasted sharply with horizontal stripes of shadow, as if illuminated only by light pouring through venetian blinds. Everything — the angle of her arms, the placement of her hands to emphasize the swoop of her hip, the blinds' shadows framing her erect nipples — was perfect. Deliberate. Calculated. Nothing accidental. She didn't imagine there was much Jason did with a female body that *was* accidental.

Beside the print hung another nude, this one in color, with seashells covering the nipples of another perfectly posed model.

"Jason," she said. He was walking ahead of her and turned around. She gestured at one of the prints. "I didn't think you photographed people."

"Not often, no," he said, his cheeks coloring. "These are, I" He hesitated before gesturing dismissively. "It's just a hobby."

"They're stunning."

He blinked. "You . . . like them?"

"I'm no prude, Jason."

He laughed. "I can't argue with that, can I?" Pausing, he cleared his throat. "I just—" He pursed his lips as he looked at the prints. "I don't usually show these to people."

"But they're in your hallway, for anyone to see."

He shrugged. "Not many people come down this hallway."

Their loss. "Your work is . . . amazing. Really."

"Thank you." He looked at the pictures for a moment, a distant expression in his eyes. His gaze flicked from the prints, to Simone, then back to the prints. "I appreciate a beautiful female figure."

Simone's cheeks burned as she looked back at the woman shadowed by blinds.

They stood in silence for a long time. Jason pretended to look at the picture, but it was really Allyson's reflection in the glass that held his attention. There was an odd expression on her face, as if she had something to say, but couldn't find the words.

Taking a breath, she opened her mouth to speak, but quickly snapped her jaw shut and looked away.

He turned to her. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she said quickly, shifting her weight. But there was a tension in the air, something unspoken.

"Breakfast?" he said, hoping to lighten the mood.

She smiled, but the tension lingered. "Of course."

Simone followed him into the kitchen, but her mind stayed with the photographs on the wall. The women looked so perfect, so . . . comfortable. She spent her entire career—and most of her personal life these days—in front of a camera, but she'd never posed nude. Never. Even the most damning photos of her, the ones that had blown her affairs open and destroyed her marriage, weren't fully nude, and they certainly weren't deliberately posed.

She wondered what it would be like, posing nude in front of the camera. In front of Jason's camera. He made her feel so at ease. He made her feel sexy.

But what if the pictures got out? That was just what she needed. As if her career wasn't in enough trouble without "*Simone Farrell Poses Nude*" all over every newsstand. And —

"Allyson?"

Jason's voice startled her. He raised an eyebrow. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said with a smile she hoped convinced him. "Just daydreaming."

He smiled back. "Coffee?"

"Please. Black."

"Have a seat, breakfast is coming up."

As they walked across the living room, something crunched under her bare foot. On the floor, she found a small, white button with a single tentacle of frayed thread still attached. She bent and picked it up, turning it in her fingers as she followed Jason into the dining room. The memory of him tearing his shirt apart, of the ravenous hunger in his eyes, sent a shudder through her.

"Black coffee," he said, setting a mug on the table. He looked at the button in her hand and laughed, a mixture of mischievousness and shyness flickering across his eyes. "I guess I must have dropped that last night."

She set it on the table and sat to drink her coffee. They chatted lightly as he went about cooking breakfast, but all the while, her eyes kept drifting to the button on the table.

She couldn't remember a time when a man had wanted her that much, or, for that matter, when she'd wanted a man that much. She couldn't remember a time when a man wanted to have his skin against hers like Jason did last night, to the point he'd sooner tear the buttons off his shirt than take the time to unfasten them.

Last night was exactly what she'd been craving. He'd scratched her itch, calmed the maddening desire, and yet it wasn't enough. He'd satisfied her several times over,

but still she wanted more. He'd met her need for sex, but she'd never before had to contend with the need for sex *with Jason*.

After only one night with him, she had no doubt he was going to be a hard habit to break. Guilt coiled in her gut. Sooner or later she had to face reality; this couldn't go on. But not now. Not yet. Reality could wait.

"Do you like movies?" he asked.

Her blood turned to ice. She gripped her coffee cup, hoping he didn't see her reaction to his benign question. "Sure. Some." *Oh God, what if he's a movie fanatic? Sooner or later, he'll recognize me. He'll know.*

"I've got a pretty big collection," he said. "Older stuff, mostly. And foreign films." He wrinkled his nose. "I'm not really into the crap Hollywood's churned out in the last decade or so."

You don't say. She was simultaneously insulted and relieved. "I'm not picky."

He scratched the back of his neck, avoiding her eyes almost shyly. "If you'd like, we could watch a movie tonight."

Her stomach dropped. *Don't do it, don't do it, don't drag this out any more than —* "I'd love to."

He took a breath and stared into his coffee cup. "Look, I've never done anything like this before. Whatever '*this*' is that we're doing."

"Neither have I." *Okay, that's bullshit, but you don't need to know that.*

"If you're not comfortable, I'll understand." He paused. "But, you're welcome to stay here again tonight."

Simone's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. *I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't, but God, I want to.* Finally, she said, "I should probably bring a change of clothes with me if I do."

He smirked. "I don't know that you'll *need* them"

She laughed in spite of the knot that tightened in her gut. *This is a bad idea.* Such a bad idea. She shouldn't. But she wanted to. Hell, in two more days, she would be back

in California, rested and ready to get back to normal . . . whatever that was. Then she could forget all of this. And no one would ever know.

Chapter Twelve

Once she was safely away from Jason's house, Simone let the guilt come bubbling back up into the front of her mind.

Continuing with Jason was a mistake. A huge mistake. A fun, sexy, bed-shaking mistake, but a mistake nonetheless.

On the other hand, it was her private life. She was an adult. She had every right to enjoy some fun with another consenting adult in private. What business was it of anyone else if she decided to take a lover?

Of course, she was not a private person anymore: She existed in the merciless fishbowl of Hollywood, and her most intimate affairs were subject to the media's relentless exploitation. Sooner or later, this would get out. Someone was bound to catch on. And when they did, the fallout would not be pleasant.

Gregory had threatened to take her back to court and sue for full custody if she didn't get her act together. She knew he meant it; he could get over being humiliated in the papers, but he would not have his daughter subjected to seeing her mother's sexual irresponsibility flaunted all over the news again.

Her career rested on thin ice and her name was mud amongst producers and directors. Anne-Marie would probably end their business relationship, and likely their friendship as well. Simone owed it to them to get her head together and stop jumping into messy affairs. And Lord, did her affairs get messy.

Indeed, the last thing she needed was another lover to add to her reputation as a whore.

"Fuck," she muttered, rubbing her forehead. Three days in Tofino, and already she'd broken both of Anne-Marie's rules. Her shoulders slumped as her mind drifted back to the promises she'd made to herself the day she arrived.

No more alcohol.

No more flings.

No more throwing my career away.

I need to focus on my career, my daughter, and myself. And if that means sleeping alone – being alone – for a while, then so be it.

I can do this.

I will do this.

"Shit." She sank into the chair beside the bed, rubbing her eyes. A week in Canada to clear her mind, straighten herself up and get some rest, and what does she do? Drink herself senseless, then hop into bed with a man she just met. All in the first two days.

She'd convinced herself the drinking was a mistake, and she'd put a stop to it. Now she needed to do the same with Jason. She needed to call it off, go back to L.A., and forget about him. The last thing she needed to do was spend another night tangled in the sheets with that amazing man and his hands and his tongue and –

"Stop it, Simone," she ordered herself.

She stared at the phone, debating whether or not to call him, to break things off now before they grew complicated. On the other hand, she'd only be there a few more days. She'd get him out of her system and be done with him. No one would ever know.

What happens in Tofino, she told herself on the way out the door, *stays* in Tofino.

Chapter Thirteen

Jason sank into the leather chair at his desk. He glanced out the window to watch for Allyson's car, but she wasn't there yet.

For a long moment, he chewed his thumbnail and stared out the window, an uncomfortable tightness gnawing at his gut. Finally, he took a deep breath and opened the bottom desk drawer.

He stared at the framed picture, lying face down on a stack of file folders. Don't do this, he told himself. *Don't go there. Just don't.* But instead of listening to common sense, he grabbed the picture and set it on the desk, still face-down. With a growing knot in his gut, he gingerly turned the picture over.

It was a picture of him and Paula, smiling for the camera on the deck of the cruise ship that had taken them to Alaska.

On their honeymoon.

He clenched his jaw and slammed the photo onto the desk again. Christ. His ill-fated marriage had ended long ago, but the memory still hurt. He ran a hand through his hair and cursed under his breath.

He glanced at the driveway again. Allyson was due to arrive any minute. His fingers drummed the desktop.

This was a mistake.

He hadn't dated much since Paula. Hadn't had any inclination to. After everything he went through with her, he was more than content to be alone rather than risk that kind of heartache again.

But Allyson surprised him. She wanted him like he couldn't remember any woman ever wanting him, and she had awakened something in him that he thought was long dead.

But was it too soon?

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Too soon for what? It was just sex. He wasn't in love with her. Was he? He barely knew her. A few conversations and a night of sex. The hottest sex he could remember, but it was *just* sex. He wasn't in love with her.

She'd be gone in a few days anyway. What was the harm?

Still, he couldn't help but wonder if it was too soon.

"Too soon hell," he muttered. It had been four years. If he wasn't over Paula now, he never would be. He stared at the facedown picture frame.

He couldn't go through that again. He couldn't deal with that kind of pain again. Then again, he had been in love with Paula, and he'd known her for more than a couple of days. He sighed.

It wasn't that he didn't think he could love again, he just wasn't sure if he could *trust* again. He'd trusted Paula, and she'd taken advantage of that trust. He'd trusted her so much that when the penny finally dropped, he was the last to know.

His stomach turned as he remembered the humiliation, the pain, the devastation. Was he really willing to put himself in that position again?

But this was just sex. A few days of mind-blowing sex, and then it would be over. No strings. No attachment. No heartache.

A flicker of movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he turned to see Allyson's car pulling into the driveway. His heart raced. Too late to reconsider, she was there.

He carefully put the picture back in the drawer, gave it one last look, then closed the drawer and went to greet Allyson.

Chapter Fourteen

Jason put a movie in the DVD player while Simone took a seat on the couch. He dimmed the lights, sat beside her, and put his arm around her shoulders. As he clicked the remote to start the movie, she pulled her feet onto the cushion next to her and sank against him. The soft leather creaked beneath her when she shifted, and it occurred to her then that the couch looked suspiciously like the one in the nude photo she saw earlier. She wondered what else had happened during that photo shoot, if Jason had done to the model what he did to her last night on this very couch. Her stomach tightened with an unexpected pang of jealousy.

Oh stop it, Simone. What a ridiculous thought; whatever happened with that model, it was probably long before she met him, and she hardly owned him. Besides, he

was a professional. He probably made the model feel as comfortable and at ease as he made her feel, *without* sleeping with her.

Her loss, Simone thought, remembering everything he did to her last night. And afterward, in his bed. And during the night. And in the shower. Something tingled deep inside her, like the lingering aftershocks of an orgasm. *Definitely her loss.*

Jason pulled her closer as the movie started. She slid her hand over his thigh, smiling to herself as his breath caught.

His fingertips drifted down her arm, drawing light circles on the inside of her elbow, making her shiver. He laughed softly. *Touché*, she thought.

She turned to say something, but he met her with a brief kiss. A brief kiss that turned into a longer kiss. A longer kiss that melted into a deep, passionate embrace.

His hand slid from her chin to the side of her neck, then into her hair, bringing a sigh from her lips.

"We're going to miss the movie," she murmured.

"What movie?" he said, and kissed her before she could say another word.

This is wrong. It's a mistake. Her fingers ran through his soft, spiky hair. *But it'll be over in a couple of days.* His hand drifted to her breast and cupped it through her shirt. *What's the harm?* He pulled her into his lap. *What happens in Tofino . . .* He lifted her shirt over her head. *Stays in Tofino.*

Chapter Fifteen

Simone's last couple days in Tofino were a blur of sex and conversation, and before either of them knew it, she was leaving. They lingered beside the open door of her car in his driveway, stealing 'just one more kiss' a few dozen times.

His hand rested on the small of her back, his other touching her face. "I'd love to see you again."

She swallowed. "Give me some time. I don't know when, but . . . I want to come back. Soon." *But hopefully the trip back to L.A. will give me enough time to convince myself not to come back. I can't do this, Jason, I'm sorry.*

"You know where to find me," Jason said with a smile, his voice tinged with sadness.

"I have your number."

"Use it."

"I will." *I can't promise anything. I shouldn't be doing this.* She kissed him again. "I'd better get going."

"I know," he whispered. He pulled her close and kissed her, a long, sweet kiss that weakened her knees.

You're not helping me forget you, she thought. I could stay here forever.

At long last, she climbed in the car and started down the driveway, paying more attention to the rearview than the road until he was out of sight.

Jason watched until the car disappeared into the distance. As he started toward the house, that empty, sick feeling returned. He stopped and sat on the front steps, chewing his thumbnail and thinking.

He had no right to expect any more from her than what she'd given him — time and time again — over the last few days, but he couldn't shake the way he felt about her. He tried to tell himself it was physical attraction, that it was all sex.

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He wanted her again. Desperately. But he was afraid to see where this would go if she did come back, if he let it take the course it was tugging him down; he *wasn't* going to fall in love with her. He couldn't. He didn't want to give her the chance to be Paula, to put him through that kind of grief again. Then again, he didn't know that he could stop himself.

Maybe she would forget him. Maybe she wouldn't call. Maybe she would stay away long enough for him to come to his senses.

"It's just sex. Nothing more."

He took a deep breath. He hoped he never saw her again. He hoped she turned that car around and came careening up the driveway and into his arms. He hoped she didn't call. He hoped she did.

"Fuck, Allyson," he muttered. "What are you doing to me?"

On the winding highway from Tofino to Victoria, Simone gave in to the guilt of what she had done and the dread of what lay ahead.

Everyone was waiting for her in L.A., expecting her to come back from Tofino refreshed, relaxed, and focused, ready to work and be a responsible adult and parent. The last thing she needed to do was come back lovesick and distracted.

Love? No way. It was just sex. Just. Sex. Then why the knot in her stomach? The sick feeling that only got worse the farther she drove away from him? Why did she seriously consider turning around each time she approached a U-turn lane? *It was just sex!*

But "just sex" never kept her awake all night or took her breath away every time she looked at him. "Just sex" had never made her seriously consider calling Henry Wall and extending her vacation by another day – or another week – regardless of what it could do to her career.

"Shit." She didn't need this. There was too much at stake.

She glanced at the wrinkled note sticking out of her purse, the first couple of digits of his phone number taunting her. She could end it now. Call him, tell him she couldn't do it. Or she could crumple up the note, throw it out the window, and leave it – and him – in the dust. Now, before she got too attached.

She snatched the note out of her purse and balled it up in her hand. She rolled down the window and gritted her teeth.

The crumpled piece of paper lay heavy in her palm. If she got rid of it now, she had no way to contact him again. *Do it now. Leave him behind. Forget about him and move on.*

No more Jason. No more heart-stopping sex on his couch. No more losing herself in the masterful way his tongue circled her clit while his fingers beckoned one, two, three orgasms out of her.

She shouldn't. She couldn't. But resisting Jason was rapidly proving to be a much taller order than resisting any other man. With a frustrated sigh, she shoved the paper back into her purse and rolled up the window.

"What are you doing to me, Jason?"

Chapter Sixteen

The return to L.A. jarred her nerves more than she'd anticipated. The noise, the chaos, the traffic, the heavy air choked with smog. She barely recognized the place after just a week of breathing in the peaceful, clean air of Tofino. On the way to the studio that morning, she found herself longing to be back in Canada, for more reasons than just Jason. She hadn't realized just how peaceful the place was until she came back here.

Then again, what could be more peaceful than an afternoon of lazy sex in a secluded cabin?

"Stop it, Simone."

A feeling of dread rose within her as the throngs of paparazzi gathered outside the studio gates came into view. They parted just enough to let her pull through. Simone's skin crawled as camera shutters snapped and barking voices demanded answers about her whereabouts for the last few days.

She ignored them and went on to the studio. As she parked, she took a deep breath. This was it. The moment of truth. She glanced at her own reflection in the rearview, and hoped no one else saw the dark shadows under her eyes.

Anne-Marie slipped into the soundstage area. She tried not to hang around the set, but she needed to see how Simone was doing, if the week in Tofino had done her any good. She folded her arms across her chest and watched apprehensively as Simone

walked onto the set. The actress looked miles away, her eyes glazed with a distant daydream. Oh shit, Anne-Marie thought.

"Quiet on the set!"

Everyone fell silent. Anne-Marie's heart thudded in her ears. She had hoped to see Simone earlier, to get a feel for her *before* she went in front of the cameras – and worse, Henry Wall – but traffic and a half dozen urgent phone calls from some of her less nerve-wracking clients had kept her away. Now she was too late, and Simone looked like hell.

"Action!"

Anne-Marie's heart jumped into her throat, and she watched, powerless to intervene if Simone didn't have it together.

With the snap of the clapboard, something came alive in Simone's expression. She slipped into character and delivered her lines flawlessly, living and breathing her character's sorrow as if it were her own. At the end of the scene – a heated argument between two lovers – when the actors kissed, Simone melted into him. The sparks flew and Henry let Simone and Kevin linger in their embrace several beats longer than the scene required.

At last, he yelled, "Cut!", and they separated. Her co-star stumbled back, wide-eyed and speechless, but Simone only smiled. That distant look was back.

Henry leaped to his feet. "Perfect!" he cried, squeezing Simone's shoulder. "*That* is the Simone I knew I hired."

Anne-Marie released her breath. Her cell phone vibrated in her pocket and she stepped out of the studio to take the call. When she returned, Henry had called a break on the set, and Anne-Marie went straight to Simone's trailer.

When she entered, Simone looked at her over the rim of a coffee cup. Her expression was distant, but there was something else. Something in that grin Simone couldn't quite hide behind her coffee cup.

Anne-Marie crossed her arms and exhaled sharply. "You got laid, didn't you?"

Simone dropped her eyes, a guilty shade of pink washing over her cheeks. "You were right, I needed a break." She slid the cabin key across the table. "Thanks."

Anne-Marie flopped down across the table from Simone and took the key. "I send you to the middle of nowhere, and you *still* manage to find something worth fucking." She rolled her eyes.

"Did I ever." Simone pressed her thighs together to try to still the maddening tingling. As she shifted her weight, her hips ached. She couldn't remember the last time a man had fucked her so many times she still felt it two days later. She smiled. "I guess you never know what's lurking around Tofino."

Anne-Marie's eyebrows lifted again into a curious expression that suggested she wanted all the details, but her face quickly hardened into a disapproving scowl. "Girl, you promised me: No men."

"I know. I know. But —"

Anne-Marie held up her hand. "No, don't even try to tell me this is different. Or he's different."

"Fine. I won't."

"Simone, you looked great out there. The Simone I am supposed to represent is back." Anne-Marie scowled. "But you know as well as I do that if you start getting distracted by another flavor of the month fuck, sooner or later, things are going to get messy."

"I know." Simone sighed. "I've been coming down on myself about it for days; I don't need you to add to it."

"I'm just worried about you."

"You're worried about your career."

"I'm worried about both."

"Look, he's up there, I'm here, it's done. Over with. I got it out of my system." She bit her lip behind her coffee cup, and her eyes looked even more distant than before.

"Liar."

"I swear, it's done."

"Is that why you keep thinking about him?"

Simone's head snapped up. "What? You're a mind reader now?"

Anne-Marie scowled. "I know a distracted, lovesick woman when I see her."

Simone snorted. "It's not love."

"Are you sure?"

"It's *not* love."

"So it's just another fling to put yourself in the headlines and make you drink like a fish until you kill your career? Or yourself, this time?"

"No one knows about it but you." Simone set her coffee cup on the table. "And aside from a couple of glasses of wine, I haven't had shit to drink in the last week."

"That's because he hasn't dumped or humiliated you yet."

"It was *just* a fling."

"Then why are you still looking all dreamy every time you think about him?"

"I'll get over him."

"See that you do." Anne-Marie's voice softened. "Look, I understand. I need to get laid as much as you do. But *you* of all people can't afford anymore bad press. You're on thin ice with everyone in the known universe."

Simone drummed her fingers on the sides of her coffee cup. "I know."

Anne-Marie pursed her lips. "Just" She sighed. "Just be careful."

"I will." Simone looked at her. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Absolutely not."

After Anne-Marie left, Simone closed her eyes and rested her head against the wall behind her chair.

Anne-Marie was right. She really *couldn't* stop thinking about Jason. But in spite of her objections, this really *wasn't* like the others. It *was* different. Whatever it was, it was something. The numbness that had weighed her down was gone. She didn't quite know what she felt, but for once, she felt *something*. It was like she'd been sleepwalking for the past few years and had finally awakened.

She let her mind drift back to Tofino. It wasn't just the sex that drove her to distraction. She'd never felt butterflies before with anyone. *Never*. But all Jason had to do was look at her with those devilish-innocent eyes and her stomach fluttered. When she remembered the touch of his fingertips on her skin, when he caressed her arm while he thought she was asleep or while they watched a movie, she trembled the same way she did when she remembered past men giving her orgasms. The effect he had on her — so effortlessly — boggled her mind. He made her feel like a giggling schoolgirl, a lovesick Juliet, and a beautiful, sexy woman, all at once.

She wondered what went through his mind, what he thought of her.

She laughed as she recalled the way his hands shook when he didn't think she was looking, and the way he blushed the first time she caught him watching her sleep. She remembered the way his breath felt against her ear as he rode her from behind, the way he'd pushed himself as deep as he could inside her when he came, the —

No, no, just don't go there. Not now.

Too late. She squirmed in her seat and shivered at the memories.

She grabbed a shooting schedule from a file folder beside the table. Over the next couple of weeks, she had some long days on the set, but next week, she had a few days off. She bit her lip. Did she dare?

She folded the shooting schedule in half and slipped it in her purse. She'd think about it.

For now, she had a scene to finish.

Chapter Seventeen

Jason snapped out of a daydream and stopped in his tracks in a grocery store aisle. He remembered getting to the store, remembered coming in to get a few things on his list, but hell if he remembered a damned thing after he walked through the door.

He looked around, wondering how he'd even gotten to this aisle. In his daze, he'd walked right past everything he needed in the previous three aisles. Cursing under

his breath, he backtracked. Something—he couldn't remember what—had triggered his memories of Allyson, and off he'd gone into his own little world. It must have been the hundredth time he'd done that since she left.

She's not coming back, get over her.

She said she wanted to come back, but she hadn't called. He hadn't heard a word from her. Maybe she was just being polite when she said she wanted to see him again. Maybe those few days together were great for him, but not worth another trip for her. He wasn't sure whether to be angry, hurt, disappointed, or just plain frustrated.

Though he hadn't seen or heard from her since she left, he'd spent plenty of time with her in his mind. After three days, his wrist was starting to ache almost as much as his cock. She had *no* idea what she was doing to him.

"Hey, Jason." An all-too familiar voice stopped him and snapped him back out of another daydream.

He turned around and forced a smile. Mary, a petite blonde with a longstanding crush on him, worked in the grocery store and never wasted an opportunity to flirt with him. Sometimes it was endearing, sometimes it just set his teeth on edge. In spite of his sour mood, Jason tried to be polite with her, as he always did. "Hey, Mary. How's it going?"

"Great," she said. "You?"

"Fine." Again he forced a smile, but he was sure it didn't look much more sincere than it felt.

As they made small talk, he tried as hard as he could not to look anywhere but her eyes. Her outfit pushed the envelope on the store's dress code, as usual. The blouse she wore covered only slightly more than her red apron, and her skirt left little to the imagination. Jason swallowed. Horny and frustrated over Allyson's absence, he was sorely tempted to take Mary up on her less than subtle overtures.

Another memory of Allyson flashed through his mind, and he shivered. Mary was certainly attractive, but there was no way she could satisfy him, not now. Not with

the craving Allyson had left. She could arouse him beyond rational thought with little more than a glance and a smile. Mary just didn't have that effect on him.

Besides, it wasn't that he needed to get laid. It wasn't just an itch to be scratched by just any woman who happened into his bed.

He wanted Allyson.

As Mary went back to work and Jason finished his shopping, he berated himself over and over for letting himself get so hung up on Allyson. She was *gone*. It was *over*. "It" was nothing more than a fling, and he needed to let her go.

* * * * *

Simone stared at the crinkled note beside her purse. For three days, she'd hemmed and hawed about calling him. Her body ached for his touch, and that need for him was very quickly silencing her rational mind's insistence that she needed to just let him go.

Every time she met someone, she told herself it was different, that he was better in bed than the last, that he was interesting outside of the bedroom. And every time, it turned out the same. If her track record was to be believed, a fling with Jason would be — and end — absolutely no differently than any before it, and she would be wise to pretend she'd never met him.

But she honestly couldn't remember a man who'd left her physically aching for more. The longer she stayed away from him, the more she wanted him. She'd never even craved alcohol the way she craved Jason Connor.

Good or bad, there was *something* different about him. She couldn't deny that. "Maybe I just need to get him out of my system," she said into the silence. She sighed and rubbed her eyes.

Finally, she picked up the phone and dialed his number.

Ring. *Don't do it.*

Ring. *It's just going to end badly.*

Her thumb hovered over the 'end call' button.

"Jason Connor."

His voice sent a flutter through her stomach.

"Jason? It's — " She bit her tongue. She'd damn near called herself Simone. "It's Allyson."

Pause. "Allyson, hey!" Was that relief she heard? "It's good to hear your voice."

"Likewise." She paused. Did she — ?

"I'm glad you called. I'd really like to see you again," he said quickly.

She thought she heard him curse under his breath.

"I have a few days free next week. I wouldn't be able to stay long, but — " She chewed her lip. "I'd love to come back up and see you."

"My schedule is wide open. You're welcome anytime." Was that more relief?

"Excellent." She paused.

"Is something wrong?"

"I," she started. "No. No, everything's fine."

"Okay." He didn't sound convinced. "Well, it'll be good to see you again."

"Definitely," she said. "I'll let you know when I've made my travel arrangements."

He paused again. "You can call me whenever you want between now and then. It's always good to hear your voice."

No, don't say that, don't say that, or I swear to God I'll be calling you every five minutes. "I'm going to be working some long days between now and when I go up, but . . . I'll try."

"Good enough for me," he said.

She could hear that sweet, beautiful smile in his words.

* * * * *

After they hung up, Jason set the phone down and stared at it for a long moment. He couldn't believe she'd finally called. She wanted to come back! But something about the call unsettled him. There was something else in her words, something unspoken that she wanted to say.

He wondered about her long hours and her cryptic pauses. Was she married? Was she using him and hiding him from the rest of her life the way she hid the rest of her life from him? Was he going to be the last to know again? He chewed his thumbnail. *No, no, she's not Paula. She isn't that type.*

He hoped.

Chapter Eighteen

"It's only for a few days, baby, then I'll be back."

Cecily, Simone's eight year-old daughter, pouted in the backseat. "You said you were just going to be gone that one week."

Guilt stabbed Simone in the heart. What could she say? Mommy is an idiot who needs to fly off to Canada to get laid and hopefully no one will find out about it like they always do? Mommy's in the middle of screwing up her life again and doesn't want to drag you along for the ride?

"Why can't I come with you?"

Simone looked at her in the rearview mirror. She sighed. "I'm sorry, baby." She forced a smile. "But Mommy needs a little time to rest." *Yeah right. I'm going to need a rest after Jason's done with me.* A shiver ran up her spine.

"Are you sick?" Cecily's huge blue eyes were round with worry in the rearview.

Yeah, you could say that. "No, baby." She smiled again. "You're going to have a great time at Daddy's this week. He's already said he's got big plans."

Cecily's eyes brightened, but her mouth was still tight with worry.

Simone tore her gaze away from the rearview and watched the road. Poor baby, she thought. Cecily had been through enough with the divorce, with her father's

remarriage, everything. The last thing she needed was to be caught in the middle of her mother's self-destruction again. And maybe this time it was different. Maybe seeing Jason would be good for Simone, would help her get back on track. Just like every man before him, of course.

"Stop it," Simone muttered to herself.

She pulled in to the curving driveway in front of Gregory's palatial home and parked beside the elaborate fountain. Cecily leapt out of the car and ran for the door. Simone followed, her legs heavy, dreading the look she knew Gregory would give her. She could already feel the tension between them. No wonder she always dreaded talking to him, especially when she left Cecily with him during the weeks when she was supposed to have custody.

Rita, the housekeeper, ushered them in. Gregory stepped out of the living room and swept Cecily up in his arms. She squealed with delight, and Simone couldn't help but smile. She missed watching them together.

After he greeted Cecily, Gregory looked at Simone. His smile fell. He turned to his daughter. "Cecily, dear, why don't you follow Rita into the kitchen? I'm told there are cookies baking in there somewhere."

Rita took Cecily's hand, and together they skipped out of the foyer. Simone and Gregory faced each other, the silence between them echoing in the white marble hallway.

"What's going on, Simone?" he asked finally.

Simone swallowed. "I just need some time away."

Gregory raised an eyebrow. "Again?"

I doubt this will be the last time. "Yes."

"What's going on?"

I'm having the most incredible sex of my life and I need more before I come completely undone. "I'd rather not discuss it."

He eyed her. She tried to look him in the eye, but the intensity of his stare caused a thick knot of guilt to coil in her stomach.

"Simone, is everything all right?"

"I just need some time to myself." *With Jason. In his bed. Oh my God, tomorrow can't get here soon enough, I need –*

"And it can't wait until next week?"

It can barely wait until tomorrow, Gregory. Trust me. "It's only for a few days."

"A few *more* days." Gregory glanced down the hall in the direction Rita had taken Cecily. "You can't just keep avoiding her."

Stung, Simone dropped her eyes. "I know. I promise, I'm getting things together." *Right. Of course I am.*

"I hope so."

The condescension in his voice set her teeth on edge, but she dared not show it. That was one of the things she'd always hated about him. He was sometimes more like a father than a husband, and even now, treated her like a child. "I'll be fine."

"If you need anything – "

"I can take care of myself." The words were sharper than she anticipated, but she didn't apologize.

"I know you can," he said, with just enough venom to let her know he was *well* aware that she didn't need him.

"I'm sorry," she said then. "I didn't mean – "

"I know. I didn't either. Look, just take care of yourself, okay?"

"I will."

"Where will you be?"

She hesitated. "Canada."

Gregory raised an eyebrow again. "Canada?"

"At a friend's cabin, just like last time." *A different friend this time. One who will be doing – Stop it, Simone.* She quickly added, "*Alone.*"

He pursed his lips. "And if I need to reach you?"

"You have my cell."

"Am I going to see you in the tabloids again?"

Simone glared at him. "No." *Not as long as I'm safely hidden from the world in Jason's bed. Oh my God I can't get there soon enough.*

Gregory pursed his lips. "And you'll be back when?"

"Before curfew."

He set his jaw.

She clenched her teeth. Finally, she exhaled and said, "I'll be back in a few days. In time to pick her up for my week."

"Okay."

For a long moment, they looked at each other, but neither spoke.

Then she said, "I'd better go."

He nodded and showed her to the door. As she started down the steps, he touched her arm and said, "Take care of yourself, Simone. I worry about you."

She shrugged out of his grasp and kept walking, hoping he didn't hear the doubt and self-loathing in her voice. "I'll be fine."

On the drive home, Simone thought about Gregory.

He must hate me. And why shouldn't he? She'd put him through hell for the past few years and she wasn't exactly up for any Mother of the Year awards right then. He must have thought she was immature and irresponsible, and he'd be right.

When they first married, everyone they knew cautioned them about the twenty year age gap between them, but Gregory and Simone had insisted they were in love, and that was all that mattered. Looking back, it wasn't the twenty years between them that killed the marriage; she was hardly more mature now at twenty-eight than she was at barely twenty. Gregory's new wife was two years younger than Simone, and she had a good head on her shoulders. Those two were soulmates if Simone had ever seen any, and she envied them for the happiness they shared.

As Simone's marriage to Gregory nosedived toward divorce, she found what she thought she needed elsewhere. Maybe she would have gotten away with cheating on him if they hadn't been such public figures. But the paparazzi had their ways of discovering things, and when they did, the resulting photos adorned every tabloid,

magazine, gossip column, and news site. The scandal, so close on the heels of her two film flops, nearly destroyed what was left of her career.

Her cheeks burned at the memory. Even now, three years later, she couldn't escape her past. Whenever her name was mentioned – whether because of her new movie, or because of some other boy toy she'd been busted with – the reporters were sure to mention she'd cheated on Gregory and destroyed their marriage and every relationship she'd had since.

Her thoughts drifted to Jason. She wondered what would happen with him, but really, how could it be any different? She'd been down this road before. Different names, different cities, same outcome.

This is going to turn out the same way it always does, she thought. But still, she couldn't resist going to see him just *one* more time. She physically ached for his touch, craved him in ways she'd never craved anything before. Nothing in a bottle had ever had this kind of hold on her, and she'd certainly never wanted a man like this.

She hadn't touched a drop of alcohol since she returned to L.A. Simone Farrell had a new addiction.

Chapter Nineteen

That night, as Simone packed for her trip, the phone rang, startling her out of a daydream about Jason. She glanced at the caller ID, and scowled when her sister's name appeared on the LCD screen. Bad enough being roused from a sexy fantasy about Jason, but to add insult to injury, it just had to be her sister calling. She debated letting it kick over to voice mail, but knowing Carolyn, she'd leave voice messages every ten minutes until Simone answered.

She took a deep breath, and answered. "Hi, Carolyn."

"Hey. What's up?"

"Not much." She gritted her teeth. *Just getting the hell out of town and not really wanting to talk to you.*

"I have tomorrow afternoon off. Do you want to grab lunch?"

"I can't, I'm – " She hesitated. Did she really want Carolyn to know?

"What?" Carolyn's voice hardened. "You're not going out partying again this weekend, are you?"

"No, I'm" *A party for two, maybe.* She bit her lip. "I'm going out of town."

"With?"

"No one."

"Please. You never travel alone."

"I am this weekend." *I'm not traveling with him. I'm traveling to him. And I can't get there fast enough.*

"What's going on, Simone?" Carolyn demanded. "You just came back from a trip."

And I don't need to explain myself to you, dear. "I know; I'm just taking a vacation."

"I see." Bitterness tinged her voice.

Simone rolled her eyes. Carolyn was more than a little jealous of her success and wealth, no matter how rocky the last few years had been for Simone. Going on vacation on a moment's notice was a luxury Carolyn couldn't afford, and clearly anyone who *could* afford to do such a thing couldn't possibly be stressed enough to *need* to. If you only knew, Simone thought, but she didn't tell Carolyn *why* she was going out of town.

She rubbed her forehead and changed the subject back to lunch. "We can get together when I get back. I'll be home in a few days."

Carolyn huffed. "Well, I work on Thursday and Friday. Saturday, then?"

Simone hesitated. Just what she needed after a few days of decompressing with Jason: lunch with Carolyn. Talk about counterproductive. She sighed. "Sure. Fine. The usual place and time?"

"Bernelli's at eleven."

"I'll be there."

They hung up and Simone sat on the bed. Christ, did everyone need to know every goddamned detail of her life? Gregory pried, Anne-Marie demanded every detail,

Carolyn never backed down until she knew every last tidbit, and, of course, the press had their ways of digging. But her relationship with Carolyn was strained, as it had been for many years. Only in the three years since Simone's divorce had she and her sister begun really speaking again, mostly because of concerted efforts on Simone's part. Carolyn was bitter that her own acting dreams were cut short before they started, and watching Simone live out that dream was enough to drive them apart. But still she pried. It was like a race with the press to find out what was going on in her life, whether for her own vindictive satisfaction or to be the first to put it in print. Simone was as loathe to share her personal life with Carolyn as she was with the press.

The only one who didn't pry into her personal life was Jason, simply because he had no idea who she was. As far as he was concerned, she was probably little more than a booty call, and that was fine with her. He also lived a million miles from anywhere, hidden in a place where she could escape her notoriety and pretend Simone Farrell, the 'Movie Star', didn't exist.

Simone shoved another shirt into her bag. More than ever, the idea of being in the middle of nowhere, away from anyone and everyone except Jason — *particularly* Jason — made her salivate. Her mind wandered back into the fantasy Carolyn had interrupted earlier.

Chapter Twenty

Jason drummed his fingers on the counter. He glanced at the clock above the stove. Seven thirty-two.

An eternity passed.

He looked at it again.

Seven thirty-three.

"Jesus Christ." He picked up his drink and took a sip, grimacing as the Jack Daniels burned its way down. Anything to calm his nerves at this point.

He wasn't nervous, per se, just anxious. She'd be there any minute. Any minute. His fingers drummed the countertop again. It hadn't even been two weeks, but it may as well have been years since he'd seen her. He needed her. Craved her. Ached for her. He wondered if this was what a drug addict felt like after jonesing for a hit and finally being so close, so fucking close, to getting that fix. She may as well have been a drug, for all the sleep and sanity he'd lost since she went back to her own world.

He glanced at the clock again.

Seven thirty-six.

He groaned as he let his head fall back against the cabinet.

Seven thirty-seven.

Simone tapped her thumbs on the steering wheel. "Come on, come on, come on," she muttered at the highway that just refused to pass by fast enough.

Her headlights washed over a faded sign. *Tofino – 19 Miles.*

She gritted her teeth. Less than half an hour to go – and she accelerated to shave a couple of precious minutes off even that – but still long enough to drive her insane.

Shifting in her seat, she cursed under her breath. The week leading up to this trip had been difficult enough. The flight from L.A. to Victoria was excruciating. But this drive, the homestretch before she was in his arms again, was maddening.

Less than half an hour and she'd see him again. Her mouth watered in anticipation of his kiss, of the taste of his skin. Little pulses of lightning radiated from her clit as if his tongue was already working its magic.

Less than half an hour.

Less than half an hour.

She glanced at the clock.

Seven forty.

A tremor rippled through her and her foot pressed harder on the accelerator.

Seven forty-one.

Jason swallowed the last of the Jack Daniels in his glass and put the bottle away. It hadn't done a damned thing to settle his nerves, but he didn't dare drink too much. Not with everything he needed to do to her as soon as she walked through that door.

Though, as horny as he was, he could probably have polished off the entire bottle and still gotten a hard-on.

But still, no more. There was no way he was taking a chance that he wouldn't be able to remember every last detail.

Seven forty-three.

Thinking about her was only going to make the wait that much worse, but he couldn't get her out of his mind. That smoldering kiss on the pier. The first time he fucked her on the couch. His mouth watered at the memory of the way she tasted, the way she tightened around him when she climaxed.

He closed his eyes and exhaled.

In his mind, he went back to that first incredible night together. Waking up in the middle of the night. Holding her. Kissing her. Almost unconsciously, his fingers bent against the counter, moving the way they had when he slid his fingers in and out of her while she came against him.

He wetted his lips and looked at the clock.

Seven forty-five.

A groan escaped his throat. If she didn't get there soon, he'd to have to relieve some of this tension himself.

Seven forty-six.

Seven forty-seven.

In her mind, Simone had already arrived at Jason's. A kaleidoscope of memories flashed through her mind, and she swore she felt his hands on her, his lips against hers, his cock inside of her, his breath on her neck, his —

"Come *on*," she muttered.

Almost there. She chewed her lip. Almost there. She squirmed in her seat.
Almost there. A soft murmur escaped her lips.

Almost there.

Seven forty-nine.

Seven fifty.

The Jack Daniels wasn't doing a damned thing, but it kept his mouth busy. Kept his hands busy. Gave him something to focus on besides her. Besides her sizzling skin against his. Besides her tongue intertwining with his. Besides the way she sounded when she came again, and again.

He drained the glass.

"Come on, come on," he whispered, putting the bottle away again. His head spun, but the buzz he felt had nothing to do with the alcohol.

Seven fifty-two.

Seven fifty-three.

She turned off the main drag. Down the winding road outside of town that led to one place and one place only.

One more turn.

Her heart pounded. Her clit pulsed.

Seven fifty-five.

Seven fifty-seven.

Fingers drumming. Knees shaking.

The ice in his glass rattled. It was just water this time, just something cold to keep him from catching on fire. A cold shower might not even do the trick at this point.

Seven fifty-nine.

Headlights in the driveway.

The clock on the dash turned to eight o'clock a split second before Simone turned the key and the dashboard lights went dark.

She took the porch steps two at a time. As she reached for the doorbell, the door flew open. Jason caught her hand, pulling her into a frantic embrace and a deep kiss. He instantly overwhelmed her. His musky scent mingling with his light cologne. His fingers in her hair. His hand on the small of her back. The sweet taste of his tongue against hers.

They tumbled through the front door together, tangled in each other as they kissed and touched and tried to get out of their clothes.

Jason kissed her mouth, her jaw, her neck. "My God, I've missed you," he breathed against her throat.

"I've missed you too," she murmured, exhaling sharply as his lips set her skin on fire. She was vaguely aware that they were moving across the room, stumbling over each other and their clothes. It was all she could do not to pull him down to the floor.

Something solid hit her hip, jarring her. They both looked down. She was up against the kitchen table.

"This will do," he said against her throat.

Before she could think, he slid his hands behind her thighs and hoisted her onto the table. She barely kept herself from moaning in anticipation of his cock. She wanted him, she needed him; Christ, no man had ever set her on fire like this.

"Fuck me," she pleaded. "Please fuck me, Jason."

"I will," he whispered, parting her legs and pulling her to the edge of the table. "Believe me, I will. But I *have* to taste you first."

When his tongue found her clit, the overwhelming rush of sensations took her breath away. She tried to tell him how much she loved it, how much he turned her on, how much she needed his cock inside her now or she was going to lose her mind, but all that came out was a soft whimper. Icy-hot tremors rippled up her spine as his fingers slid inside her, bending just a little to beckon the powerful sensations out of her.

She didn't remember it being this intense before. In all the fantasies she'd had since she left, he'd sent her to incredible heights, but the orgasm he was creating within her right now was almost frightening in its intensity.

"Jason," she murmured. Her fingers ran through his hair. Grasped the edges of the table. Ran through his hair again. Clenched into trembling fists. "Oh God, Jason" Her back arched off the table, and still her impending orgasm grew, still it intensified, still it thundered inside her until she was certain the release would be nothing short of *shattering*.

White light exploded behind her eyelids and she thought she might have called out his name as electricity coursed through her veins. She was distantly aware that his fingers had withdrawn, that his mouth had broken contact with her clit, but then foil tore, and she no longer cared.

Jason stood, grasped her hips, and thrust into her. Her back arched off the table and she knew she cried out this time, completely overcome as he slammed into her, driving himself deep inside her as her orgasm went on and on.

Even as it subsided, as the strongest shudders peaked and fell, the intensity remained, and still she wanted more. She hooked her hands over the edge of the table, pulling herself toward him.

"God, yes, just like that." Her words were little more than a slurred whisper.

Jason moaned, a breathless, helpless sound, and held her hips tighter. "Oh Jesus, Allyson"

His eyes closed and his lips parted, revealing clenched teeth. The cords on his neck stood out and he grimaced, almost as if in pain.

Using her grasp on the table's edge for leverage, she lifted her hips, simultaneously pulling him deeper and tightening around him.

His eyes flew open and he gasped, and then shuddered against her. "Oh God," he said as he exhaled, almost choking on the words. "Oh my . . . *God*" He tensed, shuddered, relaxed.

He released his breath as he slowly collapsed over her, holding himself up with his elbows and kissing her gently. Then he rested his head on her chest.

She stroked his hair, which was cool and damp with the slightest hint of sweat. For a long time, they just listened to each other breathe, held each other as the last aftershocks rippled through them.

Finally, he raised his head, kissed her, and whispered, "I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too," she said, running her fingers through his hair. "I've been dying for this for days."

He grinned. "You aren't the only one, believe me."

She blinked, pretending to be offended. "Jason Connor, have you been thinking impure thoughts?"

"Every waking moment," he said, kissing her shoulder, then her neck. "And even some of the sleeping moments."

She snorted. "I'm disgusted."

"No you're not."

"How do you know?"

He kissed her mouth, and then laughed. "If you are, it's only because I haven't told you about all of the impure thoughts I've had."

She tightened her lips to suppress a laugh. "I don't want you to tell me about them."

"You don't?" His face took on an expression similar to that of a sad little boy, but the threat of a laugh tightened the corner of his mouth. "But I wanted to tell you all about them."

"No," she said. She pulled him into a kiss. "Don't tell me. *Show* me."

Chapter Twenty-One

It was nearly ten by the time they returned to the kitchen, where Jason made them a late dinner.

Afterward, he put his hand over hers on the table and smiled. "I thought I was going to go out of my mind waiting for you today."

"You're not the only one." She sipped her wine, turning her other hand over beneath his. "I could have sworn that drive was shorter."

"You know, there are flights directly into Tofino. Mostly puddle-jumpers, but it might save you some time."

Simone shifted slightly, avoiding his gaze for a moment. "I, well, I figured with the layovers, it would be six of this, half dozen of the other."

Jason's brow furrowed, and she wondered if he saw right through her. Then he shrugged and picked up his glass. "Can't blame you for that, I guess. I'd rather be out on the highway than sitting in an airport."

"Yes, exactly."

A mischievous grin tugged at his lips. "Though a plane might be safer than me behind the wheel on a day like this."

"Oh?"

The grin broadened and he winked as he picked up his glass. "Let's just say I wouldn't have been focusing as much as I should have on the road."

She laughed. "I managed, but it did take some work."

"Did it?"

"Knowing I was coming to meet you?" It was her turn to offer a grin and a wink. "You're damn right."

He trailed his finger along the inside of her wrist, laughing softly when she shivered. Then he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the backs of her fingers. "I'm really glad you're here. I've been looking forward to this ever since you left."

"Me too."

"Though I feel bad having you come all this way," he said. "I'd be happy to come to your neck of —"

"No, no, it's no trouble," she said quickly. *Too* quickly, she realized a moment too late. She cleared her throat. "I like it up here."

Jason inclined his head a little. "Are you sure? It wouldn't take much for me to get down to California."

Simone swallowed. "Given the choice between here, and all of the smog, traffic, and crap down there? Trust me, it's worth the flight and the drive. "

He hesitated, and then smiled, but some of the hesitation lingered in his eyes. "So you're just using me to get to Tofino?"

She laughed. "Sex and Tofino, of course."

"Well, in that case" His eyes finally backed up his smile and he shrugged with one shoulder. "I suppose I can't complain."

"You'd better not be complaining, Mr. Connor."

"Oh, I'm not." They held each other's gazes for a long moment. Then he kissed her hand again. "Well, no sense sitting here all night, is there?" He rose and picked up their plates. "Let me just clean things up a bit, but you might like the view outside."

She glanced out the window. "In the dark?"

"Go out and look up. Trust me."

"Are you sure you don't need a hand in here?" *A hand, how cute, Simone.*

"I've got it. I'll only be a minute. More wine?"

She hesitated. Oh hell, what was one more glass to a woman who could kill a bottle and a half of Smirnoff? "Please."

With his hands full of plates from the table, he gestured with his chin to the sliding glass door. "Go ahead; I'll bring it out there."

Simone stepped out onto the deck and as he suggested, she looked up. Not a cloud in the sky, and the view was magnificent. There were thousands more stars than she could ever see in L.A. The sky was clear of smog, and the only light aside from the moon came from inside Jason's house. Below, gently rolling waves flickered in the soft, silvery light.

Breathtaking.

Behind her, the light inside went out and a moment later, Jason joined her, setting the glass of wine on the railing and resting his hands on her hips. He kissed the side of her neck, sending a shiver up her spine.

For a long time, they stood in silence, staring up at the sky. Without the light from inside the house, even more stars appeared. "It's beautiful," she said.

"I know. It's one of the reasons I moved here."

"It never loses its novelty?"

He shook his head. "Never. I could sit out here every night and look up there."

"Do you?"

"Well, when the mosquitoes aren't out."

"And when the clouds aren't there?"

He glanced at her and they both laughed. "Yeah, the clouds don't help much."

Glancing around on the deck, Simone said, "I'm surprised you don't have a telescope out here."

"I like looking at the stars," he said with a shrug. "But I'm just not a telescope kind of guy."

"What do you mean?"

He gestured at the stars. "They're beautiful as they are. I don't need to try to zoom in on them, to pick one out and focus on it." He shrugged and nuzzled the side of her neck. "Just seems like that's kind of missing the point."

"Like missing the forest for the trees?"

"Exactly."

"But you focus on little things all the time with your camera. The little flower on the beach. That island."

He nodded. "I like to see the things that are all around me. There's so much here to see, so many little things that are beautiful in their own right." He gestured at the sky again. "I just don't have any desire to go looking for it anywhere else."

"I've never thought of it that way."

"Some people get so caught up in looking for beauty that's light years away." His lips brushed the side of her face as he spoke. "They miss the beauty that's right in front of their faces." He slid his arms around her waist, pulling her closer to him.

Simone's mouth went dry.

Jason put his hands back on her hips and turned her to face him. "*That* is why I wanted to take your picture the day we met, Allyson." She tried to avoid the intensity of his eyes, but he gently lifted her face back up to meet his gaze. "I've never been drawn to a woman like I am to you, and I wanted to capture that."

Her legs were unsteady. "Jason. . . ."

But he didn't wait for her to finish her thought. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. The dizzying scent of his cologne mingled with the moist, sweet taste of his mouth and intoxicated her. As many times as he'd kissed her, it still felt like the first time, every time.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and for a long time, they just held each other on the deck, beneath the stars, and kissed. He ran his hands through her hair, caressed her face. It never ceased to amaze her how he kissed with his hands as much as he kissed with his mouth, and he overwhelmed her.

She lost track of time as she lost herself in him. When he broke the kiss and looked into her eyes, his own just barely illuminated by the moonlight, the hunger was unmistakable. She wetted her lips, and, as if in response, he did the same a heartbeat before he kissed her again. Gentleness gave way to urgency, tenderness gave way to need.

His hands slid down her back and onto her hips. "I love it when you wear a skirt," he growled, caressing to her thighs.

"Do you?"

"I do."

"Why is that?"

"Because it's easier to get to what I want," he said, his lips brushing her ear as he spoke. He brought her skirt up over her hips and ran his hands over her bare thighs.

"Jesus, I can't get enough of you." His hot breath against her neck sent a shiver down her spine.

She ran her fingers through his hair and down to the back of his neck. "I can't get enough of you either." Her voice somewhere between a moan and a whisper, she said, "I couldn't get back here soon enough, Jason."

Kissing her neck just beneath her ear, he said, "I haven't stopped thinking about you since you left."

She closed her eyes and moaned softly as he reached between them and unbuckled his belt. Somewhere in her consciousness, she was tempted to look around, make sure no prying camera lenses stuck out of the woods to snap damning pictures, but she doubted anyone knew she was here.

Jason gently grasped her hips and turned her again, kissing the side of her neck and using his knee, he pushed her legs apart. A violent shiver of anticipation shook her to the core. A dozen reporters could have shown up just then, and she couldn't have cared less.

"Tell me you have a condom in your pocket," she whispered, almost moaning.

"Damn right I do."

Fabric rustled behind her, and Simone bit her lip as Jason tore the wrapper. Once he had the condom on, he pushed her skirt up again. She braced herself against the railing and moaned as he slipped inside her. Holding her hips steady between his hands, he withdrew slowly, and then pushed back into her.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered. "You feel" The words seemed to lodge in his throat, replaced instead by a soft moan.

He kissed her neck again, his cock still moving slowly inside her. She let her head fall back, giving him more access to her neck.

"Oh my God, Jason," she said. She chewed her lip. He felt incredible, but she wanted to touch him. She wanted to feel his skin against her hands, and in this position, she couldn't. She moaned with both pleasure and frustration. Then, he released her hips

and put his hands on the railing beside hers. Desperate to touch him, she put hers over his.

"Jesus, I could do this all night," he said, burying his face against the side of her neck as he moved faster.

He gently pulled one hand free from her grasp and ran it down her waist and over her hip. When his fingers found her clit, Simone released a throaty moan and her knees buckled.

Jason used his bodyweight to push her against the railing and keep her upright. His fingers circled her clit faster as he drove his cock deeper into her.

She took in a gasp of breath. "Oh God, oh God, you're going to" Her voice faded to a whimper.

"Tell me," he said breathlessly. He kissed the side of her neck and thrust harder.

"Keep" She gasped again as the tingling inside her rose to a feverish, pulsing crescendo. "Keep . . . just like . . . Jason, oh God, I'm" Her climax destroyed her ability to speak, to stand.

He held her upright, kept giving her more and more until her clit could take no more and she feebly pushed his hand away. Grasping her hips, he rode her harder, driving himself into her as deep as he could, drawing her orgasm out.

"I love when you come," he said, his voice barely audible. "You feel fucking incredible when you come."

She grasped the railing, trying to breathe, willing her legs to keep her standing.

"Give me one more," he said, his words clipped as he kept fucking her. "Come for me, one more time." His voice sounded strained, the way it always did when he was on the edge.

Simone used the railing for leverage and pushed back against him. "You're going to come."

He took a sharp breath. "Not until you do. Not until I feel you come one more time. Oh, God" He slammed into her faster and faster.

She bit her lip. The aftershocks of her last orgasm intensified, rolling together into the earliest pulses of a second climax. "Keep" She gasped as his cock drove the breath right out of her lungs. "Keep doing . . . keep doing that"

He responded with the throaty, primal growl that meant he was on the verge of losing control, the sound sending delicious tingles up and down her spine. He was close, and he drove her even closer. When his growl turned into a breathy, helpless moan, Simone closed her eyes and surrendered as a second climax overtook her.

Over her own cries, she was vaguely aware of a similar cry from him. His hands hit the railing again, his knuckles turning white. The wine glasses wobbled precariously and the railing creaked as Jason braced himself against it, giving Simone everything he had.

"Oh, God." His breath whispered across the side of her neck, sending a shiver down her spine. His rhythm faltered, but he didn't stop. "God, Allyson" And with a deep groan, he came.

Simone's head spun as she returned to earth, and she was thankful for the railing and for Jason, both of which kept her from falling. He rested his head between her shoulders for a moment, his body completely still except for the long, shuddering breaths he took.

He released the railing and slid one hand up her forearm, stopping to let his middle finger draw lazy circles on the inside of her elbow. His gentle touch raised goosebumps on her arms and triggered even more aftershocks deep inside her.

After a moment, he stood upright, taking his weight off her. Her knees buckled and she seized the railing for balance. Instantly, his arms were around her.

"Easy," he said. "You all right?"

"Yeah," she said. "Just, dizzy." Her head spun and her legs wobbled.

"Come on then." He put his arm around her waist and guided her into the house.

"Where are we going?"

He grinned and kissed her cheek. "To bed, of course."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jason took Simone to a quaint little Italian restaurant on Tofino's waterfront the next night. Perhaps it was the fact that they were in public, where they had to keep their hands off each other, but as soon as they were seated, the flirting started.

While Jason told her about some of his misadventures with his brother, Simone ran her thumb and index finger up the stem of her wine glass in a purely suggestive fashion, causing him to stutter and lose his train of thought. When she spoke, he knew just when to swipe the tip of his tongue across his lips to make her heart skip and her words lodge in her throat.

When their meal arrived, it only got worse.

"You really should try this." He gestured at the pasta dish. "The sauce is incredible."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is it?"

"Here." He put a little on his middle finger and extended it to her. "Try it." He grinned, an unspoken dare in his eyes.

She closed her fingers around his wrist and drew his hand to her, sucked his finger into her mouth slowly, carefully, just a little bit farther than necessary to get the delicious morsel he'd offered, and then kept it there a moment longer than necessary. Her plan to tease him very nearly backfired on her as the taste of his skin met her tongue. Of all the times she'd tasted him, that single, tantalizing taste nearly drove her mad. Had they been at home, she'd have stood, grabbed him, and pulled him onto the floor.

Her eyes never left his as she let his finger slowly slide out of her mouth, the tip of her tongue flicking across the back of his finger just before her lips released it.

He closed his eyes and took a breath in through his nose. "Tease."

"Who's teasing?" she said, letting her toe circle on the inside of his thigh. "A tease would have no intention of following through."

He gulped, shifted in his chair. "You're evil." He sounded breathless.

"And you love it," she said, running her toe up the inside of his leg.

He reached across the table and put his hand over hers, sliding it over the back of her hand and running his thumb along the inside of her wrist. Goosebumps prickled her arm, and he laughed.

"Touché," she said, gently freeing her hand and lifting her wine glass.

As they finished their meal, the waiter approached and asked, "Would you like to look at a dessert menu?"

"Well, I *could* go for something sweet." Jason glanced at Simone, his eyebrows lifting inquisitively. "You?"

She smiled. "I could, but I think what I'm in the mood for is at home." She ran the tip of her tongue across her lips, grinning with satisfaction as he shivered.

He looked at the waiter. "Just the check, please." He fished his wallet out of his back pocket and handed over his bank card. When the receipt came, Jason quickly worked out the tip and signed it. Simone noticed his unsteady hand with no small degree of satisfaction. His usually perfect, ramrod straight signature dropped slightly below the signature line. The opposite, she guessed, of what was going on beneath the table.

"Why don't we get the hell out of here?" he said, smiling.

"Lead the way," she said.

He picked his jacket up off the back of the chair and draped it over his arm in front of him, taking her hand with his other. She glanced at the jacket. "It's chilly tonight; you might want to put that on."

Running his thumb across the back of her hand, he said, "I'll be fine. Trust me."

"And what if a lady told you she was cold?" she said, giving him a sassy wink. "Would you be a gentleman and give her your coat?"

He released her hand and slid his arm around her waist, kissing her cheek as they stepped out into the cool night air. "If I give you my coat, the whole town is going to see just how much of a gentleman I am *not* when I'm in your presence."

"But what if I'm cold?"

He gave her backside a gentle squeeze. "Then you'll just have to accept my promise to warm you up as soon as we get home."

The Jeep was only a couple of blocks away, but they couldn't get to it soon enough. Jason opened her door, but she didn't get in right away. Instead, she put her arms around him and kissed him. He leaned her against the Jeep, kissing her with the same hunger that he had the night he laid her on the kitchen table, and she suddenly wanted him even more. Needed him even more. Needed him now. She pulled him closer.

"We should go." He kissed her again. "As it is right now, we aren't going to make it past the front porch."

"Just one more kiss," she murmured.

"If you insist." He leaned into her and her breath caught as his erection pressed into her hip.

Her hands bunched around his shirt. "God, I want you . . ."

"Then let's go." He sounded breathless.

Finally, they broke free of each other long enough for Simone to get into the Jeep. Jason hurried around to the driver's side and got in.

"One more kiss." Simone leaned across the console.

He didn't protest in the slightest, putting his arms around her and kissing her deeply. When her hand ran up his thigh, his spine stiffened. She squeezed his cock through his slacks and he jumped.

"Oh fuck, babe," he whispered. "You're killing me."

She laughed and kissed him. "Mr. Connor, if I didn't know any better, I would think you were a little turned on."

"I'm more than a little turned on." His voice dropped into a deep growl, sending a shiver through her. "Kiss me like that one more time and I may have to fuck you right here."

She grinned and kissed him like that again as she unbuckled his belt.

He stopped her hand, his breath catching. "We should get back to the house. We're too out in the open. Someone will see if I—oh, *fuck*."

Her fingers wrapped around his hard cock. "They'll see us if you fuck me," she said, kissing his neck as he struggled to breathe. "But they won't see a thing if I stay out of sight."

He looked at her, a puzzled expression on his face. "If you—?" His words lodged in his throat as she took his entire cock into her mouth. "Oh *fuck*"

His body tensed and he grabbed the steering wheel just to hold onto something. She devoured him, stroking him with one hand as she took him into her mouth again and again.

"Oh my God," he breathed, letting his head fall back against the seat. Somewhere in his mind, he knew anyone who cared to look would be able to figure out what was going on, but he didn't care, not with the way her tongue kept pausing to circle the head of his cock a couple of times before she—"Oh my God, oh fuck. Please, Allyson, don't . . . don't stop."

She didn't stop. She kept licking and sucking and stroking him. His hands left the steering wheel and grabbed the headrest behind him. His eyes closed, his breath caught, his entire body shook as she did everything right, everything perfectly, everything he could possibly handle without bursting into flames.

"Oh Jesus, Allyson, that's fucking amazing." His breath came in short, shallow gasps. "Keep . . . doing" He grasped her hair with one hand, still holding the headrest with the other. "You're gonna make me come, baby."

She responded by increasing her efforts. Her lips tightened around him, she moved faster, her fingers squeezed him.

"Oh . . . God" His entire body tensed, his back arching off the seat, his breath halting in his throat, and she just kept going until—"Oh, God, Allyson" It came out as a moan, barely more than a breath, and he came.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The weekend went by far too quickly, and before Simone knew it, she was on a plane bound for Los Angeles. And already, just hours after the last kiss she shared with Jason, she was dying for his touch again. Already, she was mentally rearranging her schedule to get back to Tofino as soon as possible, even if it was just for a day.

Christ, what's wrong with me? It wouldn't take much to get another man into her bed in L.A. if she needed to scratch an itch, but this was more than just an itch. She didn't want just any man. She wanted *Jason*.

Closing her eyes and resting her head against the seat, she exhaled. This had never happened before. She'd been with many, many men, but she couldn't remember ever being this wrapped up with one of them. Many of them had left her blissfully satisfied, but not one had simultaneously left her satisfied *and* ravenous for more. He was like a damned drug; the high was incredible, but she couldn't get enough. Every time she touched him she needed more.

Some men were great in bed. Others were fun outside the bedroom. Rarely did Simone find one man who was both. Never — *never* — had she met one who personified both like Jason did.

He was absolutely dynamite in bed. Just thinking about him sent delicious chills through her entire body. He could be rough, gentle, wild, tender, whatever she wanted. The man must have sold his soul for a tongue like that, she thought with a shiver.

But when they got out of bed — or wherever they happened to land when the need for each other overtook them — he was anything but disappointing. He was sweet. He was funny. He was flirty. He cooked, he danced, he was an *artist* for crying out loud.

And is he ever an artist. Her thoughts drifted to the pictures on the wall in his hallway. The woman shadowed by venetian blinds was seared into her memory. It was a striking, sexy, masterfully executed image, the kind that *commanded* a double take.

Simone sipped her coffee and looked out the window as night fell over the Cascade Mountains. She wondered what went through the model's mind while she

posed for Jason like that. Was she tense? Nervous? Vulnerable? If she was, nothing about the image betrayed her feelings. Her body looked perfectly relaxed. For all Simone knew, the model was sound asleep, letting Jason pose her as he pleased until he had the right composition.

That thought made her chuckle to herself. Then her smile fell as she wondered what it would be like to be that relaxed and comfortable with him, that trusting of him, to pose in front of him that way. She'd very nearly asked Jason, when she first saw the prints, if he would shoot her like that. Very nearly. And she had only just met him then. The more time she spent with him, the more tempted she was to ask.

This is crazy, she thought. She'd never even considered posing nude before. Several magazines had approached her in the past about nude shoots, but she'd always declined. Semi-nudes, she could handle. Fully nude, she just couldn't do it. For as willing as she was to strip for this or that lover or one night stand, she'd never been able to do it for the camera.

But with Jason, with this man who was little more than a stranger, she was very seriously considering doing just that.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Simone hung up the phone and exhaled heavily, but the knot that twisted in her chest refused to release.

It was the fifth time she'd picked up the phone, started to dial Jason's number, and hung up. This time, she made it all the way to the second to last digit before she'd chickened out. She desperately wanted to tell him the truth, tell him everything, but she just couldn't do it.

Resting her elbows on the table, she dropped her head and ran her hands through her hair. He deserved to know her real name, the real reason she came to Tofino in the first place. Whatever happened between them after that would happen, but he had been too good to her for her to keep lying to him like this.

She rubbed her forehead. This was one of those moments that would have had her diving into a bottle of Smirnoff in the past, just to ease the tension in her gut, but she didn't crave alcohol. She didn't want a drink. She didn't need a drink.

She needed Jason.

* * * * *

Jason stared at the phone for a while, chewing his thumbnail.

All evening, he'd tried to work up the nerve to call her in between moments of hoping she'd be the one to call him. They hadn't made plans for a future visit; she'd left with an open-ended "soon" in place of a firm date. Maybe she had no intention of coming up again. Maybe she needed to get some more time off from whatever she did for a living. Given her resistance to the idea of him coming down to California, perhaps she had to work out an excuse for her boyfriend or husband.

Jason gritted his teeth. He hadn't asked, she hadn't said. They'd barely had time to talk in between all the time they spent in his bed anyway, but even when they did talk, she hadn't volunteered much about herself. Maybe when — *if* — she came back, he'd try to dig a little deeper. Maybe he'd wait for her to open up to him. Or maybe he'd just enjoy the sex instead of asking for answers he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to hear.

He sighed. The phone, sitting on the desk, silently taunted him. Finally, he got up and went into the bedroom to pack for his trip to Victoria. He'd deal with all of this eventually, but not tonight.

The unsettled feeling was relentless, but not nearly as relentless as his need to have her again. As he packed an overnight bag for his trip to Victoria, he wondered if he would see her again. And if he did, then what?

To her, he may have been nothing more than a booty call, and in the beginning, he'd convinced himself she was just a booty call too, but now, he wasn't so sure. He ached for her like he'd never ached for another woman, and that feeling wasn't confined below the belt. He barely knew her, but his feelings for her were real and growing

stronger by the day. The longer they kept this going, the more it would hurt if — *when, Jason, not if* — it ended.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose and exhaled sharply. He had to get his head together. This was a casual relationship. Sex. *Maybe* friendship. Friends with benefits.

He sighed and zipped his overnight bag.

It's just sex, Jason. Just. Sex. Stop over thinking it.

* * * * *

Come on, Simone, just call him.

Before she could talk herself out of it again, she dialed the last digit of his number and hit "send". Her heart jumped into her throat as soon as the phone rang on the other end, and she very nearly hung up, but he answered on the second ring.

"Jason Connor."

"Hey, it's Allyson."

He exhaled. "Hey, good to hear from you."

She smiled. "I'm not calling too late, am I?"

"No, no, of course not. Besides, I'd rather talk to you than pack."

"Pack?"

"Yeah, I'm heading down to Victoria tomorrow. Going over some gallery stuff with my brother."

"Oh." She paused. "How long will you be away?"

"Just a couple of days. Why?"

Simone swallowed. "I was, well, I was looking at my calendar, trying to figure out when I could get back up there. I mean, if it's not too much —"

"Are you kidding?" He laughed. "You're welcome up here *any* time."

"You're not sick of me yet?"

"Hardly. Hell, like I said before, if you want me to come to you, I can do that, too."

Her heart flipped. "I'd rather go up there. Gets me away from this damned city."

He was silent for a second. "You sure?"

"Absolutely. Really, it's no trouble at all. I love it up there."

Another pause. "Okay, as long as you're sure."

"I am. In fact — " She hesitated. All evening, she'd searched for the words, but now the courage to give voice to them eluded her.

"Allyson?"

She cleared her throat. "Well, anyway, I have a few days coming up in a week or so."

A longer pause. "Hang on, let me get my planner."

* * * * *

After Allyson hung up, Jason set the phone on the nightstand. He stared at it just as he had earlier, searching this time for answers instead of the courage to call her.

They'd arranged for her to come up again in a little over a week for a couple of days. Another short trip, but no matter. She'd be here. That question, whether or not he'd see her again, was answered.

Still, he was more unsettled than he'd been before she'd called. There was something unspoken, something that had hung between them, on the tip of her tongue, as if she'd needed to say it but couldn't bring herself to do so.

He hadn't asked. She hadn't said.

He sighed and shook his head, turning his attention back to packing his overnight bag. She'd be here soon. Maybe then, they could talk a bit more. Get to know each other on more than just a physical level.

Assuming, of course, they stopped fucking long enough to have any kind of conversation. At that, he grinned to himself.

Next week couldn't get here fast enough.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Simone waited at a corner table at Bernelli's, an Italian restaurant a few miles from the studio. She drummed her fingernails on her water glass, waiting for Carolyn to arrive. An uncomfortable knot tightened in her stomach, but this wasn't the same knot that Jason caused. This was the prickly, cold nervousness that always started when she was meeting up with Carolyn.

She sighed. Why did she agree to this lunch? Why did she ever agree to lunch with Carolyn? She sipped her water and glanced at her watch. Eleven fifteen. Fifteen minutes late. That meant Carolyn would be along in about five minutes. Twenty minutes late, every time.

To her surprise, a moment later, Carolyn came in, cell phone pressed to her ear, cheeks flushed. She flopped down unceremoniously across from Simone and continued talking, loud enough to turn a few heads in the restaurant. "I have to go, baby, I'm at lunch with your aunt. I'll call you later. Yes, yes, I know. I'll be there. I promise. Good-bye. No, *no*, good-*bye*, Shannon." She snapped her phone closed and rolled her eyes in disgust.

"Trouble with Shannon again?" Simone asked.

Carolyn nodded and flipped open the menu. "She's got an audition on Monday and needs a lift, as usual."

"I thought she was driving now. What happened to her car?"

"Her latest idiot boyfriend needs the car *again*," Carolyn said into her menu. A half second later, she slapped the menu down and folded her hands across it. "So, this trip you just took —"

Simone sipped her water. "Carolyn, it was just a vacation." *Just an incredible vacation full of the most fantastic sex I've ever experienced.*

Carolyn eyed her. "You never *just* take a vacation. Who is he?"

"There is no one. Look, there's been a lot of shit going on at the studio, and I needed to get away for a while. Clear my head, relax."

Carolyn's eyes narrowed. Here we go, Simone thought.

"Oh yes, the woes of the movie star." Bitterness laced Carolyn's voice. She took a sip of water and slammed the glass down. "What do you possibly have to be stressed about?"

Simone forced herself to stay calm. "I think you'd be stressed too if your personal life was slathered all over the headlines and you were on the brink of losing your career."

Carolyn blinked. "Right. Because you'd have to worry about starving if you never worked again."

"Look, I'm still me, okay? I have stress and worries just like you do."

Carolyn snorted before taking another drink. "Somehow I doubt that."

As she sucked on a piece of ice from her water, Simone fumed at her sister's contempt for her. It was nothing new. Ever since Carolyn got pregnant with Shannon and gave up any hope of pursuing the acting career she had wanted, things had been strained between the two sisters. Whenever Simone's career or personal life took any kind of downturn, Carolyn berated her for daring to be stressed. Yet it was always during these times that Carolyn wanted to get together. Simone wondered if her sister enjoyed watching her go through hell.

And yet I keep doing this to myself, she thought, biting through the ice cube and gritting her teeth. She desperately wanted a close relationship with her sister, and years of strain hadn't dented her resolve to get things right with Carolyn. Nor had Simone's efforts, apparently, dented Carolyn's bitterness toward her.

Mercifully, the waiter came up just then to take their order.

"Manicotti, without meat, please," Simone said, handing her menu to the waiter and smiling. He smiled and gave her a quick nod as he wrote down her order. Something in his smile, or maybe the way his eyes caught the light of the candle flickering on the table, reminded her of Jason. She shifted in her seat, chewing her lip as a tingle ran up her spine. Everything reminded her of him. *Everything*. Earlier, someone passed by with the same cologne he'd worn when they had dinner that first night. A

black and white print of a landscape — by God-only-knows what photographer — in the window of a shop reminded her of the photos on Jason's wall, and, by default, reminded her of Jason. She couldn't remember when any man had ever occupied her mind like this.

Her sister thrust her menu at the waiter, jarring Simone back into the present. "Baked lasagna," Carolyn said, her tone flat. She raised a thin eyebrow and pointed an accusing finger at the waiter. "Make sure it's cooked all the way through this time. I damn near broke a tooth on an uncooked noodle last time."

"I will let the cooks know," the waiter replied through gritted teeth.

Simone exchanged a brief glance with him and she shrugged sympathetically. He smiled again, and there it was again: the way one corner of his mouth lifted just slightly higher than the other, the dimples. The waiter looked nothing like Jason, couldn't hold a candle to him, but that little hint of Jason was enough to prickle Simone's arms with goosebumps.

The waiter brought their salads. True to form, Carolyn bitched about the skimpy toppings. As always, the waiter apologized profusely, though with the icy insincerity anyone developed after they'd become accustomed to apologizing to Carolyn, as any employee in this establishment long ago had.

After the irritated waiter left, Simone tried to lighten conversation.

"So how are the kids doing?" she asked, choosing the safest topic she could think of at the moment.

Carolyn shrugged and sipped her water. "Shannon's had a few small acting gigs. She wants to quit going to school so she can do it full time, but there is no way in hell I will let her. She's getting a degree if it kills her."

She glanced at Simone, as if waiting for her to comment that acting was the girl's dream and she should be able to pursue it, and she was an adult, and all of that, but Simone didn't take the bait. Not this time.

After a moment, Carolyn continued, gesturing sharply with her fork. "Brandon is looking at colleges too. He wants to join the military, but there's no way in hell. I'm not letting my son go into a damned war zone." She waited.

Again, Simone didn't take the bait. They'd had that argument a hundred times before, and she wasn't going there. Not today.

"And what about you? I haven't seen you in a while; are you still seeing David?"

Carolyn wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Fuck no." She took a bite of her salad.

She didn't volunteer what went wrong, and Simone didn't ask. She'd made that mistake with a few too many of Carolyn's boyfriends. They'd be there all day.

Simone took a drink. "What about – ?"

"I want to know who he is." The expression on her sister's face was accusatory.

Simone blinked. "Who?"

Carolyn rolled her eyes. "I know you, Simone. I know when you've got a man in your life." She pointed at Simone with her fork. "Tell me who he is."

Only the sexiest man I've ever laid eyes on. Or hands on. Or –

"Oh my God, you're blushing." Carolyn smirked. "Come on. Tell me. Who is he?"

Simone swallowed. "He *isn't*."

"I'm not the paparazzi, babe. You can tell me."

Right. You're not the paparazzi. But you love it when I'm miserable, so you'd probably tell the paparazzi and make my life hell. "I'm serious, Carolyn. It was just a vacation."

"So you just went off to some mysterious place and sat around for a week? What did you do, find God or something?"

Well, with as many times as I yelled His name, I may as well have found God. Simone shrugged, mostly as a futile effort to mask a shiver. "I just spent some time alone. That's all."

Carolyn eyed her skeptically. She picked up her glass and stopped mid-sip. She gestured at Simone's drink. "Is that – water?"

Simone looked at her glass. "Yeah, just ice water, why?"

"You're drinking ice water?"

"Um, yes?"

"You're not pregnant, are you?"

Simone threw her hands up. "Carolyn, my God, *no!*"

"The only time I've ever seen you slow down on the sauce is when you were pregnant." She narrowed her eyes. "Or *thought* you were."

"That's enough," Simone hissed, stabbing her fork into a tomato. "I'm *not* seeing anyone. I'm *not* pregnant. I'm just trying to get some things straightened out in my life, and it would help a great deal if my sister supported me instead of prying for juicy details."

Carolyn sighed unsympathetically. "I'll take your word for it then. No man. No baby. No alcohol."

"Thank you."

The rest of the meal was tense, but conversation stayed on other topics. Halfway through dessert, Carolyn's cell phone rang. After she took the call, she snapped the phone closed and shoved it back in her purse.

"I have to go," she said. "It's your turn to buy; I'll get the next one."

"Fine, sure." Simone forced a smile.

Her sister gave her a quick, stiff hug before flouncing out of the restaurant, leaving Simone with the bill and what was left of her tiramisu. As soon as Carolyn disappeared out the door, Simone let out a heavy breath.

She rubbed her forehead and pushed her plate away, glaring at the bill. Of *course* it was her turn to pay. It was *always* her turn to pay. Another of Carolyn's little passive-aggressive stabs at the difference in their economic status; when Carolyn had as much money as Simone, then — and only then — would it be her turn to pay. Whatever.

She jammed her bank card into the folder with the bill and set it on the edge of the table for the waiter.

Simone had never made a big deal out of her wealth. She didn't flaunt her money, she didn't rub it in Carolyn's face. Carolyn had always, since she was a child,

resented anyone who was more successful than she. Worse, it was not at all below her to try to sabotage someone to bring them down. Their brother's band nearly lost out on a lucrative recording contract after Carolyn made a few strategic phone calls. Well, Simone could never prove it was her, but she and her brother had no doubt.

And that was precisely why Simone didn't dare breathe a word about Jason to Carolyn.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Driving down the long stretch of highway from Tofino to Victoria, Jason barely noticed the scenery. In fact, he barely paid attention to the road.

Normally, he could multi-task; he'd watch the road, but at the same time, he'd be watching for a new place to stop and photograph a sunset, or scanning the treetops for a new eagle's nest. The four hour drive never got old, no matter how many times he drove it, and he always found a new and interesting place to get out and shoot.

But not today.

He thought of one thing and one thing only: Allyson Bishop.

Just the thought of her face, of that mesmerizing smile, was enough to distract him from the road. Thinking about the way her hips fit perfectly in his hands, he nearly ran a stop sign. Even before he was out of Tofino, he nearly missed the turn-off because he was too busy remembering the cool softness of her hair between his fingers and the heat of her breath on his shoulder when he fucked her.

About two hours north of Victoria, while his mind was back on that pier the night he met Allyson, a logging truck changed lanes and cut him off, startling him back into reality. Rattled, Jason pulled over to collect his thoughts.

With the Jeep parked safely on the side of the road, he rubbed the bridge of his nose. He closed his eyes and threw his head back against the seat. "What the fuck is wrong with me?" He slammed his hands onto the steering wheel, gripping it for dear life as he tried to bring his thoughts back under control.

He couldn't get her out of his mind. The sex alone was enough to distract him from everything short of breathing. Sex with Allyson was the kind of bone-shaking, furniture-splintering, mind-blowing sex he thought he'd never experience again after Paula. In fact, Paula couldn't hold a candle to what Allyson did to him.

And whatever it is she's doing, he thought, shifting uncomfortably in the seat, she's doing it right now without even being here.

No woman had ever done this to him. Never. Not even Paula. And that scared the hell out of him.

An uneasy tightness crept into his gut. Whatever it was she did to him, she did it to more than just the part of him that currently made his jeans uncomfortably tight.

But there was more to it than the sex. There was something else.

Around Allyson, he could just be. No pretense, no façade, just Jason. She was fun, she was sweet, she was —

"Christ, Jason, you barely know her," he said, rubbing his eyes. But what other woman had ever had him checking his voice messages every ten minutes to see if she'd called? Especially after only meeting her twice, knowing full well each time she left that he might never see her again. It could have been just a fling for her, a notch on the bedpost, a fuck and run. Yet he'd waited by the phone like a lovesick schoolgirl for her to call, and when she did he'd nearly jumped out of his chair with excitement

But he was uneasy. Part of him was afraid to rush into anything. More than enough time had passed since his divorce, but he was gun shy. And there was still that unspoken something that had hung between them on the phone the last time they'd talked. More than once, he'd considered calling and asking, but he hadn't quite worked up the nerve. He convinced himself it was because he wanted to talk to her in person, that that was easier than talking over the phone.

"Chickenshit," he muttered to himself.

He could only do one thing now: Wait. Wait until she came back. Wait until she said what she needed to say. Deal with it then if he had to.

Jason shook his head and put the car back in drive. He pulled onto the road and continued south to Victoria.

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"Jason? Earth to Jason?"

Jason looked up. Sean, his younger brother, rolled his eyes. Jason shook his head. "Sorry, I was — " He looked at the photos and gallery brochures spread out on the table in front of them. For the life of him, he couldn't remember what they'd been discussing.

Sean leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his neck. "So who is she?"

Jason blinked. "What? Who?"

Sean laughed. "Come on, bro, I've only seen you this distracted twice in your life."

"Twice?"

"Yeah. Paula and Kelly."

Jason laughed, but the uneasiness in his stomach tightened. *If you only knew, Sean. Paula and Kelly combined never did this to me.* Did it mean something that Allyson distracted him more than his ex-wife or ex-fiancée ever did? He rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed.

"Oh come on," Sean pressed. "Tell me. What did you do, find some chick on the Internet?"

"Yeah right," Jason said. "Because I get *such* amazing Internet access in Tofino."

"Tell me."

Jason shook his head. "It's nothing. Really." *Nothing I should be thinking about right now, but I really don't have a choice.* He cleared his throat and picked up one of the color proofs of a brochure for their new gallery in Vancouver. "Besides, we have a lot of work to do."

Sean took the brochure out of his hand and set it back on the table. "We have a lot of work to do, you're right. But we aren't going to get a damn bit of it done while your head is stuck on Cloud Sixty-Nine."

Jason glared at him. "It's not like that." *It's exactly like that.* He rubbed the bridge of his nose and exhaled.

Sean's eyes widened and he leaned forward in his chair. "You're not in love, are you?"

Jason's head snapped up. *What, are you a mind reader now?* His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. *No. No, I'm definitely not. Right? I barely know her. It can't be love. Yet.*

Sean's eyebrows jumped. "Oh my God, call the press, my brother's in love." He clapped Jason on the shoulder.

"I am not in love." *Yet.*

"Well at least tell me something about her."

"About who?"

Sean glared at him. "Do I look stupid?"

"Do bears shit in the woods?"

Sean laughed, but then his expression tightened. "Tell me. Don't even try to tell me there isn't a girl, because I know there is." Then, his eyebrows leaped and his jaw dropped. "There isn't a *man*, is there?"

"Yes, I'm having a sordid affair with a seventy-year-old fisherman from Nunavut."

"Jackass."

"Takes one to know one."

"Come on. Tell me."

Jason ran a hand through his hair, pausing to scratch the back of his neck as he let out a surrendered breath. He should have known he couldn't hide her from Sean. His brother could read him like a book, especially when he wore his feelings on his sleeve. Exhaling, he leaned back in his chair. "Her name's Allyson. I met her while she was on vacation in Tofino."

"On vacation? In Tofino? I didn't think anyone but you went there voluntarily."

Jason shrugged. "I guess a friend of hers has a cabin there, sent her up to relax from, I don't know, something that was going on in her life."

Sean raised an eyebrow, his humor fading slightly. "A husband, maybe?"

Jason's stomach turned. He swallowed hard. "I've wondered about that, to be honest."

"So you had a weekend fling with a woman cheating on her husband?"

"God, I hope not." He paused. "She's been back up once. And she called the other night, said she wants to come back up. Soon."

Sean clapped him on the shoulder again and laughed. "Good going, bro!"

Jason thumbed a stack of prints on the table. "I don't know what's going on in her world," he said. "But I wouldn't mind her spending a bit more time in *mine*."

Sean snorted. "Your bedroom, you mean?"

Jason laughed. *Sean, you don't even know the half of it.* He shivered. *Just a few more days. A few more days and I can touch her again.* "That, I definitely wouldn't mind."

Sean smirked. "Animal."

Jason flipped his brother the finger and picked up another stack of brochures. "Okay, we need to finish this."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Sean said. He looked at Jason, the humor evaporating from his tone. "Seriously, though. If she's got a husband or something, you could be swimming in some dangerous waters. Be careful with her."

Jason said nothing.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jason's fingers dug into her hips as he railed her on the kitchen table. She moaned, screamed, begged for more, and he gave her more.

Harder. Deeper. Closer, oh God, she was getting closer. She couldn't get enough. Wanted to beg for even more. Couldn't breathe, so close, couldn't form the words, so damned close, couldn't —

The shrill screeching of the alarm clock pierced her consciousness.

Simone's eyes flew open. She looked around the dark room, disoriented, before realizing she was alone in her own bedroom.

In Los Angeles.

A thousand miles away from Jason.

"*Fuck.*" Her voice echoed in the silence just like her dream echoed in her mind. She groaned and smacked the alarm clock to shut it up, at least for fifteen more minutes. It was four thirty. She had to be on set by seven.

A frustrated string of curses rolled off her lips. She'd been so close in the dream, so close to the kind of orgasm only Jason could bring out of her. She pleaded for sweet unconsciousness to return and take her back to Tofino to finish what they'd started, but there was no way she was getting back to sleep now. Not with the way the first ripples of an orgasm still thrummed inside her.

Closing her eyes, she slid her hand beneath the covers and gently circled her clit with her fingertips, letting her mind take her back to that night.

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Jason stared at the ceiling, whispered profanities rolling off his lips as he tried to hold on to the dream that had him *so damned close*.

He glanced at the clock beside the bed. Four thirty. Jesus. Outside, lightning flickered, and a moment later, thunder rumbled across the sky. Fucking storm, he thought. How many thunderstorms had he slept through in his life, and this one *had* to wake him up?

Son of a bitch. He rubbed his eyes. Sleep wasn't going to happen anytime soon, not with as turned on as he was. Might as well just get up and start his day.

In the shower, he put his forearm against the cool tile and rested his head on his arm. He couldn't get the dream out of his mind, so he surrendered to it. Closing his eyes, he wrapped his hand around his cock and let his mind go back to that night when he —

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—fucked her on the kitchen table like his need for her was physically painful. The bed sheets bunched in her hand as she furiously worked her clit. Faster, she begged him in her fantasy. Fuck me faster, Jason.

Her back arched off the table and she knew she screamed this time, completely overcome as he slammed into her, driving himself deep inside her as her orgasm went on and on.

She circled her clit faster as she heard her voice echoing in Jason's kitchen "Don't stop don't stop don't —

* * * * *

—stop, Jason, oh my God"

He gasped as she tightened around his cock, lifting her hips and returning his every thrust, pulling him deeper inside her. "Oh fuck," he whispered. His breath caught. He scrunched his eyes closed, grimacing as the tension built, and built, until his —

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—lips parted just enough to let a helpless moan escape. "Oh, God" The first waves of an orgasm rippled through her, each one more intense than the last. "Oh, God" She held her breath. Couldn't exhale. Couldn't —

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—stop, and didn't even try.

He exhaled hard, bracing himself against the shower wall with one arm as his knees threatened to buckle beneath him, and —

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—came so hard her back arched off the bed and her breath caught in her throat.

She thought she moaned. She might have even cried out, and as she came down, it occurred to her that it was a damned good thing no one else was in the house.

The alarm screeched again and she cursed under her breath as she hit the snooze button. Then she lay still, her eyes closed, letting the aftershocks rush over her, one after the other. Her orgasm satisfied the hunger that her dream had aroused, but it wasn't enough. It was nothing like what Jason could do for her. She had to get back to Tofino. She needed —

* * * * *

—her touch like he'd never needed another woman's touch. The more he had her, the more he craved her.

He turned and let the hot shower rush over his face and down the back of his neck. His knees were still unsteady, his body still trembling from his orgasm, but the hunger lingered.

He didn't know how things were going to pan out with Allyson. There was something she wasn't telling him, something that unsettled him, and he didn't know what. He didn't know how long this would go on, how it would end, what she wanted out of it, what *he* wanted out of it.

But he knew one thing for certain:

She couldn't get back to Tofino fast enough.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The night before she headed up to Tofino, Simone called Jason. Her heart pounded in her chest. She'd see him in less than twenty-four hours, but she needed to talk to him.

"Jason Connor."

His voice sent butterflies fluttering through her stomach.

"Jason," she said. "I just wanted to hear your voice before I come up there."

Because I don't hear it in my mind every waking hour, and I don't still feel your breath next to my ear, and I don't –

"I'm glad you called." The grin in his voice made her knees weak. "I can't wait to see you."

"Neither can I. And" She trailed off.

"Yes?"

"There's, I need to ask you something." *Ok, you're committed. No getting out of it now.*

She heard him swallow just before he said, "Okay, shoot."

Was that nervousness in his voice? She wished she could read his mind. "I want . . ." *Shit, I can't believe I'm asking this.* The tension hung on the line between them, crackling like static. Her mouth was dry. She took a deep breath. "Would you photograph me?"

Silence. A long silence. "You – you mean, you want me to?" He paused. "Sure, I, of course, I'd love to. What did you have in mind?"

"Like the photos on your wall." Her cheeks burned. "Nude."

He coughed and she realized he must have been taking a drink just then. He cleared his throat. "Really? You're serious?"

No, no, forget I said anything. What the hell am I thinking? I'm not thinking clearly. What's wrong with me? No! "Yes."

"I'd love to, Allyson. But I thought—I thought you didn't like the camera. And nude"

"I know," she said. She chewed her lip for a second. "I've been thinking about it for a while." Deep breath. "I want you to do it. If you want to."

"I do, I absolutely do," he said. "Did, um, did you have anything specific in mind?"

Besides you fucking me senseless afterward? And beforehand? No, not really. "No, I figured I would leave that up to you. You're the artist."

He was silent for a moment. "I think I have some ideas."

"Oh?"

He laughed softly. "You'll see when you get here."

"Tease."

"Me? Never."

"Okay. I'll be in tomorrow night. Late. Probably eleven or so."

"I'll be up."

I'm sure you will. You'd better be.

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Jason hung up the phone and thought for a long moment about her request. So *that* was what she'd been thinking all this time.

He thought of the night they met, how she had balked at the camera. She was the last person on earth he had expected to ask to be photographed, let alone in the nude. But if ever there was a woman he wanted to look at through the camera lens . . . *God Almighty, Allyson, I'll take as many shots of you as my camera will hold.*

He rose from his chair and took his camera bag down from its shelf. He pulled out a case of lenses and sorted through them, looking for the perfect combination for her shoot. A long portrait lens, a wide angle, a couple of backups. She had a face that

was made for the camera, and her body, good lord, that body. Her curves were gentle and supple, slim and soft, absolutely exquisite for modeling.

Or fucking.

He swallowed hard.

He picked up his macro lens and held it in his hand for a moment, wondering. It was intended for ultra close-ups of the tiniest things. Perfect for a nipple. Or her carefully manicured nails. Or her lips. In his mind, he pictured some ultra close up shots of her nipples, her fingers, the ends of her hair splayed along her shoulder.

But on second thought, even if she was asking him to do the shoot, she was — or at least had been — camera shy. He'd have to get the macro lens right up near her skin to get the shot, and he guessed that would make her nervous. Really nervous. Cameras unnerved a lot of people, and being right up in her face the way a macro had to be, that would certainly be too much for her. No, she would be better off if he used the other lenses so he could stay a few feet away from her, making the camera's presence less invasive.

He wondered what it was that terrified her so much about being in front of the camera before, and what had changed. Her reaction that first night was more than just a little camera shyness. It was like she had a phobia. Yet now she was okay with it. Now she was okay with being naked, completely exposed and vulnerable, in front of it. Maybe it was less a problem with the camera and more of an issue with the photographer. Maybe she just needed to trust him. Yet she'd only met him twice, spent those few blissful days with him. Was it really enough time for her to trust him like that?

He zipped the lenses into the camera bag and hoped she really meant it, that she really was comfortable with his camera, that she really did want him to shoot her like that.

Because, holy hell, he wanted to shoot her like that.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The next morning, before she drove to the airport, Simone walked Cecily up the front steps to Gregory's house. When the door opened, Cecily squealed with delight and hugged Gregory's wife, Jessica, before running into the house to find her father.

Jessica watched over her shoulder as Cecily disappeared down the hallway. Simone gritted her teeth at the loving, maternal smile on Gregory's new wife's face. That's my daughter, girl, she thought. *Not that I'm God's gift to parenting, but don't you dare take my little girl from me.* She couldn't remember the last time her daughter had been so excited to see *her*.

"Gregory should be down in a minute," Jessica said. She stood aside and gestured for Simone to come in.

As she walked past, Simone couldn't help but notice the subtle swell beneath Jessica's blouse. Bitter jealousy stung her tongue. She quickly swallowed it and forced a smile. It wasn't as if she had any reason to be jealous; she was the one who'd pushed Gregory away in the first place. What business was it of hers if he and his new wife were expecting?

"Simone." Gregory's curt voice caused her to turn her head. He stepped into the foyer, his expression stiff and blank.

"Gregory," she said with a nod.

Jessica's eyes flicked back and forth between them. Simone pretended not to see the way her hand absently rested on her barely-noticeable belly.

Jessica looked at Gregory. "I'll leave you two alone." She started to leave the foyer, pausing to exchange a quick kiss with her husband.

Simone watched her leave. "When is she due?"

Gregory blinked. "January."

"Congratulations." The word was sour on her tongue.

Gregory watched her. "I will still be able to take Cecily even when the baby comes." He shifted his weight. "In fact, I would like her to be here during that time. So

she doesn't feel like we're pushing her away to make room for the new baby, or that we love her any less."

We? Jealousy flared within her at the thought of Jessica loving her daughter. Or worse, Cecily loving Jessica, maybe more than she loved her? *Christ, Simone, stop it, you're being petty.*

"Simone?"

Simone nodded. "Of course. Certainly. I don't see why not." *I wonder how much time I can spend with Jason then.* As soon as that thought went through her mind, she cringed inwardly, hoping Gregory didn't notice. *Mother of the Year, here I come.* She took a breath. "Does she know about the baby?"

Gregory nodded. "She does. I told her a few weeks ago."

But you couldn't tell me. Stop it, Simone! You're divorced, for crying out loud! She cleared her throat. "She didn't say anything to me about it."

Gregory shrugged. "She's been through a lot, Simone. She probably doesn't want to be in the middle of any of this anymore."

Smart kid. Pity her mom is such a petty idiot. "You're probably right."

"I think she's worried about you."

Simone's heart quickened. "Why?"

Gregory rolled his eyes. "Come on, Simone, she's not stupid. She's heard about everything—the tabloids, the divorce, all of that. And now—" He paused.

Simone bristled. "Now what?"

"What's going on? With you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Something's changed. Everything has changed. Your attitude, everything, it's changed."

"Is that good or bad?"

Gregory shifted his weight again. "You tell me." He raised an eyebrow. "Are you dating again?"

Not that it's any of your business, and not that I want Cecily to know yet, because I don't know what I'm doing, or where this is going, or –

"Simone?" He furrowed his brow. "What's wrong with you? You keep zoning out."

"I'm fine."

"You're not." He paused, raising an accusing eyebrow. "You're not getting into . . . ?"

Simone caught the implication of his words and narrowed her eyes. "Jesus, Gregory, I'm not doing any kind of drugs."

"Good," he said.

He looked relieved, which set her teeth on edge. Christ, was she that much of a mess that people expected her to be into drugs now? She sighed. *Come to think of it, yeah, I am that messed up.*

"I'm not doing drugs," she said again. *Unless you count a man named Jason Connor as a drug. In that case, send me to rehab, because I'm hooked.*

Gregory cocked his head. "What is going on then?"

She rubbed her forehead. "Look, it's complicated."

Gregory laughed bitterly. "I've heard that before."

"Don't start," she growled. "What I do in my personal life is –"

"All over the media, sooner or later." Anger flashed in his eyes. "I'm not trying to pry into your personal life, Simone; I'm not interested in any gossip fodder or anything of the sort. But we have a daughter, and we *both* have a responsibility to her. I don't want her being blindsided when her mother's latest misdeeds wind up all over the tabloids again."

Simone's face burned. "It's not going to happen this time."

"I've heard that before."

Stung, Simone looked away. "Look, I'm not trying to blindside her with anything. If nothing else I"

He waited. "You what?"

She sighed. "There isn't anything to tell her right now, because I don't even know what's going on."

"Simone — "

She raised a hand defensively. "Gregory, I swear, I'm doing things differently now. I just — I'm just trying to sort it all out in my head before I start getting her involved."

"She's involved in everything, Simone. That's called parenting."

"I know. I know. Listen, just give me some time, and I will tell her what's going on. But I want to be a bit surer I *know* what's going on."

"What *is* going on?"

Simone bit her lip. How much did she really want him to know? She avoided his eyes. "Look, I'm trying to keep it quiet, but I trust you." She took a breath. "I met someone . . ."

"Is it serious?"

Is it? Her mouth went dry. Why didn't she have an answer? Of course it wasn't serious. It was just sex. Wasn't it? She wetted her lips. "I, I don't know."

He raised an eyebrow again. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"It's — it's too soon. I'm not sure where things are going yet. We've barely spent any time together yet." *But I'm still going to pose naked for him this weekend, because apparently I am as insane as everyone thinks.*

Gregory's face hardened. "Figure it out. Soon. Before the tabloids catch wind of it and tell your daughter for you."

"That's not going to happen. Not this time."

He said nothing, but his expression said, *I've heard that before*. She looked away, shame rising in her throat like bile. How many times had she sworn that *now* would be different? That she'd stop cheating, stop drinking, stop giving the press a reason to smear her picture all over the tabloids? Why *should* he believe her now?

"Gregory," she whispered. She looked in his eyes. "I promise. It's not going to happen overnight, but as soon as I figure it all out, she'll know. As will you." She swallowed. "I just don't want to rush it."

He regarded her for a long moment. Then he nodded. "Okay, I believe you." His tone added an unspoken "barely" to the end of his statement.

She started toward the door. "I'll pick her up on Friday."

"Will you be in town this week?"

No, I'll be in Canada posing nude for a man who can make me damn near orgasm just by looking at me –

"Simone?" He eyed her. "You're blushing."

She gulped. If her cheeks weren't red when he said that, they certainly were now. "I'll be out of town for a few days."

The raised eyebrow asked dozens of questions, but she quickly looked away and cleared her throat.

He opened the door for her, and as she stepped out into the blazing California sun, he said, "Take care of yourself, Simone."

"I will."

"And I don't mean that just because I'm worried about Cecily." His expression softened. "I don't want to see you get hurt again."

A lump rose in her throat. For all the pain she'd put him through, for all she'd done, he still cared. "I'll be fine," she finally whispered.

"Okay," he said, just before closing the door. "I believe you."

Chapter Thirty

When Simone arrived in Victoria, rain fell from the sky in great, blowing sheets. She headed up the highway toward Tofino, eager to get there as soon as possible but not daring to speed on the slippery road. The miles couldn't fly by fast enough.

Just like every time before, Jason was on her mind more and more with every mile as she drove up the deserted highway. By the time she was within an hour of Tofino, she was so turned on her silk panties were soaked through. With a sly grin, she decided to give Jason a little surprise.

She pulled off the road on a straight, deserted stretch of highway and threw the car into park.

A half second later, she tossed her panties on the passenger seat beside her, smoothed her skirt, and pulled back onto the road.

After an eternity in the pouring rain, her headlights skimmed past the *Welcome to Tofino* sign. The highway ended and she hit the main road through town. Her heart raced. He was close. *So close*. In spite of the lowered speed limit, she couldn't help but press harder on the accelerator. *So close*.

She took the turn off the main road onto the dirt road that led toward his driveway. In her urgency, she took the turn sharper and faster than she intended and the car fishtailed. A jolt of adrenaline shot through her. She got the car under control and slowed, but the pounding in her heart and the tingling below urged her to step on it.

When she skidded into the driveway, before she'd even stopped, his front door flew open. Jason ran down the steps as she fumbled with her seatbelt. As soon as she stepped out of the car, he pulled her into his arms. They kissed with an intense hunger, breathing and consuming each other in the pouring rain as if they hadn't seen each other in years. If she'd wanted him a moment ago, now she *needed* him.

He pushed her up against the car and engulfed her, his kisses like moist fire. Her clothes were soaked through, the pouring rain cold on her skin, but his body was so hot against hers, she barely noticed.

His fingers sizzled against her skin as he slid her rain-saturated skirt up to her hips. She shivered as the cool night air and icy rain hit her legs, but she didn't care.

His hand moved between her thighs. His eyebrows arched in surprise and he inhaled sharply when he found nothing between his hand and the hot wetness he sought. She flashed him a devilish grin and he devoured it.

His tongue slipped between her lips just as his fingers slid into her. His palm pressed deliciously against her clit and the flames within her roared into an inferno of pleasure. It didn't take him long to send her over the edge. The pounding rain swallowed her moans as she trembled between the cold of the car and the heat of his body. When at last she could breathe, she took in a long, deep breath just before he covered her mouth with a hungry kiss.

Jason broke the kiss and licked his lip, their mouths so close his tongue brushed her lip as he did. "I need you *now*." His voice was a low growl, his words as shaky as her knees. "Right here, right now."

They struggled with his clothes, quickly unbuckling his belt and working the zipper of his jeans, both cursing under their breath as clothing refused to cooperate. Jason persuaded his shaking hands to maneuver a condom on. Once it was in place, he lifted her feet off the ground, pulling her legs around his waist. She hooked her ankles behind him and held onto his soaked shirt as he pushed into her. He groaned as she enveloped him. Her entire body still shook with the aftershocks of her orgasm, and spasmed with indescribable pleasure as he drove himself deeper into her against the side of the car.

He came quickly and he came hard, letting loose a primal growl that turned into a helpless moan. Trembling, he closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers, rain dripping down the sides of his face. For a long moment, they were still, breathless, shaking, the floodlights in the driveway casting a shimmery glow to the steam that rose off their hot, rain-soaked bodies.

Then he looked into her eyes. He pushed a strand of wet hair out of her face and kissed her. As he pulled away, she shivered, this time from the cold, and her teeth chattered.

"Maybe we should do something about these wet clothes," he said, so softly she barely heard him above the rain.

He eased her back to her feet. She pulled her skirt back into place and he zipped his jeans. Then, he took her hand and they hurried into the house and out of the rain.

Once inside, they both peeled off their saturated clothes and stepped into the hot shower. He held her tight and kissed her tenderly while the water warmed their shivering bodies.

Stroking her wet hair, he said, "I'm so glad you're here."

"You and me both."

Cupping the small of her back, he held her close as he kissed her. Then he paused and looked at her. "What changed your mind? About the photos?"

She avoided his eyes. "I'm, I'm not totally sure. I guess I—" She wetted her lips. "Maybe it's stupid, given how long we've known each other, but, I trust you."

"I'm glad you do." He smiled and kissed her. "I promise, if anything about it makes you uncomfortable, just say the word and we'll stop."

She nodded. "I will."

He pulled her closer and kissed her. "I was thinking we could do the shoot tomorrow morning, if you're up for it." He glanced at the heavy raindrops that beat against the window. "Assuming the weather cooperates."

Simone's eyes widened. "You mean we're doing the shoot—*outside*?"

He laughed and kissed a drop of water from the tip of her nose. "That was the plan." Then he hesitated. "Assuming you're okay with that . . . ?"

"Yes, sure, it's fine," she said. "It just wasn't . . . what I expected. "

He smiled. "I know the perfect place."

She nudged him with her hips and grinned. "I know a perfect place for us right now."

He groaned and pushed back. "You're incorrigible." He laughed against her lips.

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Not at all." He kissed her as he reached behind her to turn off the shower. "Not a bad thing at *all*."

Chapter Thirty-One

The next morning, the rain had stopped, but grey clouds still covered the sky. Simone looked out the window and frowned. "It doesn't look like the sun is going to come out anytime soon."

Jason shrugged and slung his camera bag onto his shoulder. "Overcast is perfect. The clouds soften the shadows."

"Are you sure?" *Of course he's sure, you idiot, he's a professional.*

"Trust me. It's perfect."

They got into his Jeep and drove into town. He parked beside the marina.

"Where are we going?" Simone asked, stepping out of the Jeep and following him onto the dock.

"You'll see," he said over his shoulder. At the far end of the dock, he leaned into a small boat and set his camera bag down. He offered her his hand. "Ladies first."

She smiled and took it nervously, stepping aboard. Jason untied the lines and tossed them over the edge before following her in. He fired up the engine and steered them away from the pier.

She chewed her lip and gripped the side for dear life. He stood behind the wheel, rocking effortlessly with the motion of the waves.

"You all right?" he asked over the loud engine.

"I will be as soon as I'm on dry land."

"Seasick?"

"Not yet."

His face tightened with concern. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'll be fine. I'm just — I'm not used to being out on the water."

"You'll get your sea legs pretty quickly. Just don't forget to breathe."

He was right; as they wove between the scattered islands and inlets, she gradually adjusted to the rocking and bouncing. Before long, she was admiring the breathtaking scenery: tree-blanketed mountains, rocky coastlines, the occasional bald eagle soaring overhead.

"Look in the water," he said.

She leaned on the edge of the boat and looked down. The water was shallower than she expected, the bottom perhaps three or four feet down. A flash of silver caught her eye as salmon swam past. Amidst the vegetation on the bottom, a huge Dungeness crab skittered along.

"Is this where you and your brother caught that crab?" she asked with a laugh.

"With the net?" He laughed. He shook his head and gestured over his shoulder. "Different inlet."

They rounded a bend and Simone looked ahead. Instantly, she knew where they were going.

The boat was headed straight for a small, crescent-shaped island. "That's the island from the picture on your wall, isn't it?"

He nodded. "My favorite place in the world." He gave her a grin and her heart fluttered.

He cut the engines and grabbed an oar from beside the wheel. As the boat drifted closer to the island, he used the oar to nudge it past a couple of rocks to a stump that stuck out horizontally. He looped a line over it and tied them off securely.

"Here we are," he said with a grin. Putting his camera bag on his back, he jumped out of the boat, landing with the grace of a cat, then turned and extended his hand.

Delighted to be back on terra firma, she wandered along the short coastline as he put his camera together and snapped a few test shots. The beach looked rocky in the pictures, but up close, it was sandy and smooth.

"Ready?" He stood with his camera in his hand, an eyebrow raised slightly. She smiled, hoping he couldn't see how nervous she was. "Of course."

He watched her for a moment. "Just unbutton the first couple of buttons. Slowly."

She took a breath and did as he said. The cool air brushed against her chest and her skin prickled with goosebumps. The snapping of the camera shutter startled her. For a second, she froze, wondering if she wanted to continue with this, if this was all a huge mistake. She imagined the pictures splashed all over the cover of a tabloid, another circle in her downward spiral.

"You okay?"

She realized he was looking at her over the camera. How long had she been standing there? She cleared her throat and shifted her weight, ignoring the tightening knot in her gut. "Yeah, yeah, I'm good."

He didn't raise the camera. "Are you sure?"

"I'm fine."

He eyed her. After a moment, he raised the camera again. "Keep doing what you were doing: one button at a time."

Her fingers were still on the third button, barely any skin exposed. *There's still time to turn back.* Taking a deep, unsteady breath, she unbuttoned it. *Click. Click. Click.*

"Keep going," he said.

She unbuttoned the last few, and her shirt was open now, her skin exposed, even if her breasts were still covered by her bra. Her throat constricted. Her heart beat faster and a gentle wind cooled the sheen of sweat on her forehead. *Maybe this is a mistake.* She thought she could handle it, but

"Are you sure you're okay?" He looked at her over the camera. "We can stop anytime you want."

Yes, please, stop, why the hell am I doing this? "I'm okay."

He didn't look convinced. "Are you *sure*?" The genuine concern in his expression lessened the knot in her stomach.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said, and she was more convinced now, even as a drop of cold sweat rolled between her shoulder blades.

He nodded and raised the camera again. "Let your shirt fall off your shoulders."

She pushed her shirt back, letting it fall down her back until it hung on her elbows. The wind was crisp against her bare shoulders.

"Now turn around," he said. "So your back is to me."

She cocked her head. "Turn around?"

He nodded.

"You're the boss."

As she turned, he said, "Now look toward me, over your shoulder."

She did, tossing her hair out of her face and letting the wind play with it.

He took a sharp breath as he snapped a couple of shots. "Do that again."

She tossed her hair again, but didn't hear the camera. "Do you want me to do it one more time?" When she glanced at him, he wasn't looking at her through the lens, but had lowered the camera.

"Nope," he said, a whistle of breath escaping his lips before a grin flickered across his face. "That one was just for me."

Simone laughed. The tension in her gut eased even more. He offered more instructions, having her turn this way and that, until she didn't even hear the shutter anymore. Shot by shot, he instructed her to remove more and more clothing, until she was completely naked. By the time he had her turn and reveal everything to the camera, she was completely relaxed.

"You're absolutely stunning, Allyson," Jason said as he shot her lying on a towel in the sand.

She flinched at the reference to her false name. Sooner or later, she would have to confess that she'd lied. But not now. She wasn't going to ruin this.

"You're not half bad yourself," she said with a smirk. The camera wasn't enough to hide the flush of pink along his cheekbones.

"It's a shame you've been so camera shy," he said. "You'd make a perfect model." He lowered the camera and furrowed his brow as he pressed a couple of buttons. She guessed he was looking at the preview screen. Letting out a sharp sigh, he shook his head. "The camera adores you. I swear, you're made for this."

She bit her lip. Another lie she'd have to wriggle out of sooner or later. "Maybe someday," she said with a forced smile.

Jason shifted his weight and brought the camera back up to his face. As he did, she noticed the way his jeans were hugging him tighter than they did a few moments ago. She giggled like a schoolgirl. "Am I turning you on, Mr. Connor?"

Jason glanced down and laughed. "You always turn me on, my dear." *Even when you're not here.*

"Do I?" She crawled off the towel toward him, grinning devilishly. "Tell me more."

He kept snapping, pulling the lens back as she got closer to him. He could barely hold the camera steady. "All I have to do is think of you." He could barely breathe. "And when I can see you, especially like I see you now . . ." He swallowed hard, his mouth dry. "I can't even think at all."

"Oh? And what happens if" — She ran her hand up his clothed thigh, sending a deep tremor through his entire body — "I touch you?"

"Then," he said, pulling the camera strap over his head and setting the camera aside. "You leave me no choice but to touch *you*." He took her face in his hands and kissed her.

"What a terrible thing, forcing you to touch me," she said around his lip.

"I know," he breathed, pulling her onto his lap. "A terrible thing."

"Don't you know it's unprofessional to sleep with your models?" she said with a devilish grin.

"Am I getting paid for this shoot?" He cupped her breasts and circled her nipples with his thumbs.

"No, you're not," she said against his mouth.

"Then fuck professionalism."

"No."

He broke the kiss and looked at her, his lips parted in surprise.

She grinned. "Fuck *me*."

"Yes, ma'am," he breathed, pulling her close. Her spine straightened as the fabric of his shirt grazed her erect nipples. She moaned softly, shivering at the warmth of his hand on her back as he pulled her into a deep kiss. His other hand reached between them and unbuckled his belt, the muffled jingle making Simone's mouth water with anticipation.

She slid a hand around his waist and into his back pocket. The foil packet's sharp edge met her fingertips, just as she'd expected. She grinned and kissed the side of his neck.

"I had a feeling you were prepared."

He held out his hand and she laid the square packet on his palm. "I'm always prepared when you're around."

Once the condom was on, she raised her hips. When he pulled her down onto his cock, they both exhaled as he slipped inside her.

Riding him slowly, she put her arms around him and held him as close as possible. Her inner thighs tingled against the coarseness of his jeans. There was something decidedly erotic about his clothing brushing against her skin, about having him almost completely covered except for his face, his hands, and his cock.

"Oh God, Allyson," he whispered.

The sound of her false name once again set her teeth on edge, but she ignored it. *Later*, she vowed.

His thumb circled her clit as she moved, and she gasped as lightning bolts surged through her veins. She rode him harder, needing his cock as deep inside her as possible.

"Oh God," she whispered.

"Like that?" he said.

She moaned and nodded, not even bothering with speech at that point. His thumb continued its gentle but insistent circles on her clit.

"You're getting close, aren't you?" he said. "God, I can feel it, you're fucking close. You're so . . . *tight*" From the sound of his voice, he wasn't far behind.

She whimpered and held onto his shoulders, trying to stay upright, trying to keep this delicious, perfect rhythm going as he hit all the right places inside her. She wanted to beg for more, more, more, but an involuntary shudder kept the words from coming out.

"Oh . . . God" And she flew over the edge. She arched and threw her head back, closing her eyes and crying out as she came.

As she floated back to earth, she thought she heard Jason's voice, but couldn't make out the words. Her eyes were still closed as the overwhelming sensations passed, and when her lungs screamed for air, she realized that at some point, she'd forgotten to breathe.

"Look at me," he said, his voice strained. "Allyson, look at me."

She opened her eyes and looked into his. His lips were parted, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps, but his eyes were locked on hers. The intensity of his expression overwhelmed her, but she didn't look away and neither did he.

She bit her lip and moved faster, rocking her hips back and forth in time with each stroke. He closed his eyes for a heartbeat, and then looked at her again, holding her gaze as his body began to tremble. His hands slid up her back to her shoulders, grasping them gently, as if he just wanted to feel her, not impede her movement. His fingertips twitched against her skin as his spine straightened.

"Jesus, I'm so close," he breathed. "Allyson, oh my God, oh—" His breath caught. His hands tightened on her shoulders and pulled her down onto him, knocking the breath out of her lungs. "Oh my God, Allyson, *oh fuck!*" And still he looked into her eyes, even as his orgasm took over. Finally, the last tremors shuddered through him, and at last he closed his eyes and let his head fall back.

When he looked at her again, she swore there were tears in his eyes. She touched his face. "You okay?"

He blinked. Swallowed. Then he nodded. "Yeah." A second later his smile backed it up, and he pulled her into another kiss.

Kissing her, holding her, feeling her against him as the last aftershocks of his orgasm faded, Jason was unsettled. Shaken.

Whatever had just happened was like nothing he'd ever experienced. Something had shifted in him, between them. Something had changed. It simultaneously exhilarated and confused and terrified him. He didn't know what it was, but the one thing he knew for certain was that, whatever it was, it wasn't just physical.

Chapter Thirty-Two

After Jason tied the boat to the marina, they left his camera gear in the Jeep. "As long as we're in town, I need to get a few things," he said. "I'd like to cook for you again tonight."

"You can't just conjure a meal out of thin air? Mr. Connor, I am disappointed."

He laughed and kissed her cheek. "Sorry, darlin', I'm not a miracle worker."

"That's debatable." She winked.

"That, and this place has the best cherry cheesecake on the planet." He chuckled, sliding his arm around her waist. "Come on, the store is this way. It's not far to walk."

They strolled through the grocery store, not in any particular hurry. Simone couldn't remember the last time she'd been able to do something as simple as wander through the store without worrying about a camera lens popping over a display in the produce section. No one recognized her here. No one noticed her any more than they noticed the next person, though they almost all paused to exchange pleasant greetings with everyone they passed. L.A. grew less and less appetizing every time she came to Tofino.

Wandering down one aisle, Jason stopped and picked up a bottle of chocolate syrup. "Oh, we might need some of this for tonight."

Simone eyed him. "With cherry cheesecake?"

He grinned. "No, for the other dessert."

"Other dessert?"

He winked, giving her a devilish, dimpled smile.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. "You're incorrigible."

He pretended to pout as he set the bottle back on the shelf. Putting his arm around her waist, he kissed the side of her neck. "You mean you wouldn't let me cover you in chocolate sauce and lick it off?"

"I thought you liked the way I taste."

"I do." He nuzzled her neck. "But chocolate makes *everything* better."

"Okay, I can't argue with you there." She playfully pulled away from his grasp and kissed him.

His eyes lit up like a little boy on Christmas. "So we can do the —?"

"No chocolate syrup."

"Damn." He paused, pretending to be deep in thought. "Whipped cream?"

She rolled her eyes again. "No whipped cream."

"You're no fun."

"That's not what you said this afternoon."

"Or this morning, for that matter."

"Or last night."

They continued down the aisle. After a moment, he said, "You know, I've heard that honey —"

"No."

A few minutes later, "What about —?"

"No."

They exchanged a quick look and both of them laughed. As much as she tried to convince herself Jason was just a booty call, even the time they spent out of bed was fun. Of course it was just flirtation that would ultimately lead them back into bed, but it was enjoyable in its own right, too. Booty call or not, he was fun.

As they approached the cashier, the busty blonde checkout girl set a magazine down and slid it under the tabletop. Simone pretended not to notice that the girl had been reading a tabloid. A nervous shudder rippled down her spine.

"Hey Jason," the girl said, her voice so perky it was almost shrill.

"Hey Mary," Jason said in a tone that suggested he was being much friendlier than he really cared to be.

Mary gave Jason a flirty smile, then her gaze darted to Simone, and her expression darkened slightly. The temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees as the two women exchanged looks. Simone just gave her a polite smile and turned her attention back to Jason.

"I haven't seen you around here," Mary said to Simone.

Jason looked up from sifting through his wallet for his bank card. "Oh, that's right, you two haven't met," he said. "Allyson, this is Mary. Mary, Allyson."

They exchanged half-hearted "pleased to meet you's". Obviously *someone* had a crush on Jason, and the jealousy was palpable in the air. Simone resisted the urge to put an arm around Jason's waist or kiss him on the cheek. She wasn't going to play territorial games. Jason was not her boyfriend. He was not hers, and for all she knew, Jason and Mary had a thing going as well. That thought immediately sent prickles of jealousy through her.

What is wrong with you? He's a single man. You're a booty call. Deal with it.

She gritted her teeth and tried to stay pleasant.

"So how long have you been in Tofino?" Mary asked Simone with a smile that was obviously forced.

Simone gave a casual shrug. "I come and go."

Jason snorted with laughter, a boyish grin curling his lip. Simone rolled her eyes and playfully backhanded his arm. He gave her an innocent look. "What?"

"I can't take you anywhere," she said. When her gaze shifted to Mary, her humor evaporated and the air got even colder. Though the checkout girl's face still wore a smile, her eyes betrayed her irritation.

"Huh." Mary sharply swiped a can of vegetables across the scanner. "You look really familiar, though." Her eyebrow lifted slightly, a gesture that reminded Simone of Carolyn. "*Really* familiar."

Simone's gaze darted toward the shelf where Mary had stashed her tabloid. She looked up again before the girl noticed, and smiled in spite of the unsettled feeling in her gut.

"I've been here a few times," she said. "You must have seen me around."

"I could swear I recognize you from somewhere else, though." This time her eyes shifted to the corner of the magazine that stuck out under the tabletop, and Simone's blood turned to ice.

Jason put his arm around Simone's waist and slid his hand into her back pocket, tugging her close enough to kiss her gently on the cheek, evidently oblivious to the chill between the two women. "Well, she's been coming up here for a while, so you've probably seen her around." He chuckled. "Whenever we've actually gotten into town anyway."

"Jason!" Simone said, elbowing him playfully.

"What?" Jason said, laughing. Mary handed him his receipt, and when they made eye contact, his smile fell a little. He glanced at Simone. "Well, we'd better get going." To Mary, he said, "Good to see you."

"Good to see you, Jason," she said, her voice returning to its flirty, shrill tone.

"Nice to meet you," Simone said as she and Jason started out. The girl muttered something under her breath. Outside, Simone said, "Someone has a bit of a crush on you, Mr. Connor."

He rolled his eyes and groaned. "Tell me about it."

"Not your type?"

He glared at her. "I prefer my women a little bit closer to my age, and a little bit less" He glanced over his shoulder. "Just a little bit less *Mary*."

"I see what you mean. Have you ever — ?"

"No."

Simone laughed. "Could've fooled me with how territorial she is."

He raised his eyebrows. "How do you figure?"

As Jason unlocked the Jeep, Simone said, "Jesus, Jason, every time she looked at me, the room got colder."

"I didn't notice." He paused. "Well, I take that back, I did. Eh, she's harmless."

Unless she figures out who I am. Then she could cause some problems. Simone swallowed. "Well, she's *your* stalker."

Jason put the last of the bags into the Jeep and rolled his eyes. "She's not a stalker."

"Isn't she?"

"No. She's harmless."

Simone pointed over his shoulder. "Then why is she following you?"

Jason's eyes widened and he turned to find the parking lot behind them empty. Simone barely suppressed a giggle, and he gave her a playful glare. "Wicked woman."

"I thought you liked that about me."

He slipped his arm around her waist and kissed her. "I do. I wouldn't want you any other way." As they got into the Jeep, Jason paused, cocking his head. "You know, I was just thinking about what Mary said in there."

Simone raised an eyebrow. "About?"

He looked at her. "You do look oddly familiar."

Oh shit. Her mouth went dry. "Well," she said, forcing a smile. "It's not like you haven't seen me before."

"True, but —" He snapped his fingers and nodded. "That's it."

"What?"

He grinned. "You look just like the woman who was flat on her back and begging for more in my bed last night."

Simone laughed, hoping he didn't hear the relief in her voice.

Jason leaned across the console and kissed her. "I can't be completely sure though," he said, running his fingers over the front of her shirt.

"Oh?"

"Just to be sure" — He thumbed her nipple through her shirt — "I think I'd better take you home and put you flat on your back in my bed."

She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him. "Are you sure that would be enough? To convince you?"

"Maybe not," he said. He paused for a long, deep kiss before whispering, "I might have to do it a few times to be sure." He kissed her one last time, then gave her a playful wink and sat back in the driver's seat.

The whole ride back to Jason's, Simone worried over the conversation with Mary in the grocery store. How much longer before someone recognized her? She didn't want Jason finding out from someone else. Sooner or later, she needed to tell him.

As soon as they were in the house, though, Jason made her forget all about Mary's comments, as well as the existence of anything outside of his bedroom.

Chapter Thirty-Three

After dinner, Jason and Simone went out to his deck, but Jason brought his phone out with him.

"My brother is calling me sometime tonight," he said, setting the phone on the railing beside them before putting his arms around her. "I hate to take it while you're here, but he's got some last minute info for me for our gallery opening coming up."

She pretended to pout and pulled him almost close enough to kiss. "But what if I don't want to wait?"

"You'll just have to," he said, grinning into a kiss. "I'll make it worth your time, I promise." He ran his hands through her hair and pulled her closer.

"You're always worth my time," she said. "But I don't want to wait."

"You have to wait."

"I don't want to wait."

"You're going to wait."

"I'll bet if I started taking my clothes off, you would change your mind."

He laughed, but it didn't quite mask the shiver that ran up his spine. "You wouldn't dare."

She pulled back and unbuttoned the top button of her blouse. "So you're saying it *would* change your mind?"

Jason's eyebrows lifted as he watched her fingers. "About what?"

Another button. "That's what I thought."

Releasing a breath, he put his arms around her again and pulled her to him. "Vile temptress," he whispered just before he kissed her.

The phone rang.

Jason jumped and nearly knocked the phone off the railing. "I'll keep it short, I promise," he said, kissing her one last time before he picked up the phone. "Jason Connor." Pause. "Let me get into the office, hang on." He nodded to Simone to follow him into the house.

She gave him a playful scowl, but followed.

In his office, Jason dropped into his desk chair and grabbed a folder from next to the computer. "Okay, so they want to do the opening – " He paused, exhaling as Simone's hands kneaded his shoulders. "What? No, I'm still here. Sorry. No, no, nothing." He glanced up at Simone, giving her a playful, disapproving look.

She silenced a giggle and let go of his shoulders, walked around to sit in the chair beside his desk.

Without taking his eyes off his paperwork or his attention off the phone call, he put his hand on her knee. Her breath caught as he caressed up her inner thigh, and he gave her a devilish wink.

"So the opening is on the fifteenth, but – " His jaw fell open, but no sound came out. His eyes flicked down to Simone's foot, which ran up the inside of his leg. "No, sorry, I was just looking at – " He looked like he barely kept himself from gasping audibly as her bare foot made a gentle circle on his inner thigh. He put his hand on her ankle and held her foot in place. "Are they going to be finished with the interior by

then? You told me last week they were running way behind." His thumb ran back and forth along the arch of her foot. It was intensely ticklish and she tried to pull away, but he held tightly, grinning at her.

Something Sean said caught his attention. He furrowed his brow and looked back at his paperwork, releasing Simone's foot. She pulled it away quickly.

Jason leaned back in the chair. "Okay, I'll be down on the twelfth. How does the RSVP list look?" His eyebrows jumped. "Wow. Hell of a turnout this time. Sweet. Yeah, I'll be —" He did a double take and his lips parted in surprise as Simone approached him and straddled him on the chair. "So, everything's in order then?"

She unbuttoned the next button on her shirt, then the next.

Jason chewed his lip. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the chair, his brow scrunched with frustration. "Anything else I need to take care of before I come down?"

His eyes flew open as Simone brushed her fingers over the front of his jeans. He swallowed hard. "Uh huh, okay, right." Silently, he mouthed, "*You're evil.*"

"*You love it,*" she mouthed back, shrugging her blouse off her shoulders.

"Okay, man, sounds like everything's under control." He rolled his eyes and made a *come on, hurry up* gesture in the air. "Right. Well, that can wait until —" He exhaled, closing his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his nose. Simone reached back to unsnap her bra. His eyes widened and he mouthed, "*Don't do it, don't, you're killing me.*" To his brother, he said, "Go ahead and e-mail all of that to me; I'll look at it in the morning." He bit his lip as she tossed her bra away. "No, no, I don't think we need to go over it tonight. It can wait."

Simone cupped her own breasts, running her thumbs around her nipples and squeezing him with her thighs as she pressed her hips against his now rock-hard cock.

A frustrated sound escaped his lips and he closed his eyes again. He quickly cleared his throat. "Nothing. Don't worry about it. Okay, I'll see you on the twelfth. Later." He let the phone clatter to the floor and pulled Simone's body to his, pushing one of her hands away so he could touch her breast. "You're such a fucking tease," he

murmured, running his tongue around her nipple while he thumbed the other. He paused, glancing around her and frowning, his gaze darting around the room.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Too much crap on my desk," he muttered, still playing with her nipple with his thumb.

"What?"

He looked around again, clicking his tongue and furrowing his brow.

"Jason, what are you – ?"

Suddenly, he put his arms around her and lifted both of them off the chair.

"There's too much crap on my desk," he murmured, kissing her neck before releasing her to fumble with his belt. "Or I'd fuck you right there." He cursed as the buckle snagged. His hands were shaking. Glancing at her, he said, "Get those jeans off, baby."

Puzzled, wondering what he had in mind if the desk – the only flat surface in the room – wouldn't work, she did what he asked. She'd expected to turn him on, but this, this desperate need to have her right now, sent delicious tingles up her spine.

As soon as the clothing was out of the way, his body was against hers, his hands pulling her as close to him as possible while he kissed her hungrily.

"God, I need to fuck you," he growled. He nudged her with his body and she took a step back to compensate for her shifting center of gravity.

They moved again. Just like she'd followed him the night they danced in his living room, she let him lead, neither questioning nor resisting, her mouth never leaving his.

A coarse, cool surface hit her back and startled her. She opened her eyes, realizing they were against the wall, between a shoulder-height file cabinet and an adjacent wall. Her heart pounded when he reached for his back pocket.

"Right here?" she asked. She shouldn't have been surprised. Where *hadn't* he fucked her?

He tore the condom wrapper with his teeth. "Anywhere else is too far away." With the condom on, he slid his hand over her hip and down her thigh to her knee. He

hooked his hand underneath and pulled her leg up. Then the other. He held her hips and pressed his body weight against her to hold her steady against the wall. "I need you *now*." As he said the last word, he thrust his cock into her.

"Oh my God," she whispered. She hooked her ankles behind him.

"Jesus, you're so tight this way," he breathed, taking quick, shallow strokes. There wasn't room to move in this position, but it was enough. More than enough.

She held his shoulders, whimpering softly each time he moved inside her. It reminded her of when he'd fucked her up against the car, but his body was pressed harder against hers now, trying to keep her up against a perfectly vertical surface instead of using the contours of the car for balance. It was hot, deliriously hot, but their movement was restricted like never before.

He exhaled against her neck, a hot hiss of breath against her neck that raised goosebumps on her skin.

"I can't get enough of you," he groaned. "That whole time . . . when you — oh my God" He paused. "When you teased me, I just wanted to hang up — " His breath caught. "Hang up and fuck you."

Digging her fingers into his shoulders, she tried to move her hips in the restrictive position. "That's why I was teasing you." Her voice was little more than a pitiful moan. "I love it when you're like this."

He raised his head and kissed her, thrusting as hard as he could. "You're the only one," he said through his teeth. "Who can get me like this." He closed his eyes, his lips parting, and released a soft, throaty sound, one that could almost be mistaken for pain. "Oh, God"

He moved faster, thrusting hard enough to move Simone's body up the wall with each stroke. The coarse plaster bit into her skin, but she didn't care. All she cared about was what he was doing to her, about the orgasm lurking just beyond her reach, closer, closer, closer still.

"Come, Allyson," he whispered, his voice shaking. "God, I know you're close. Come, baby."

"Oh, oh God," she moaned. Her back tried to arch, but she didn't have room. Her entire body tried to writhe, shake, spasm. Couldn't. It was as if her climax needed more room to move than she had, and so it just kept building. Only her arms and legs were free. She pulled him deeper with her legs, held him tighter with her hands, and the impending release grew stronger still.

Something inside her finally released, finally broke, letting massive shockwaves crash through her, over her. With no room for her body to move, to shake and tremble and rise and fall, it was as if her climax was trapped inside her, pulsing with an intensity she'd never before felt as it exploded within confines that could neither contain it nor release it.

"Oh my God," she whimpered, losing all sense of time and place as he kept fucking her and she kept coming.

"Oh fuck," he said. He drove himself into her, harder and faster, sending her deeper into a climax that refused to end. His body shuddered and he gasped. "Oh God, I'm gonna come" And a heartbeat later, he buried himself inside her and roared.

When it was over, neither moved, their bodies still tense. Slowly, one limb at a time, their bodies relaxed. Simone released her grasp on his shoulders. One hand went to the file cabinet for balance, the other to the wall. Jason let one of her legs down, bracing himself against the wall with his now free hand. He let her other leg fall, sliding his hand around her waist. His head rested on her shoulder. Her head rested against his.

Eventually, they both exhaled.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered.

Lifting her hand off the file cabinet, she gently stroked his sweaty hair. Deep tremors still pulsed inside her, aftershocks that were intense enough to rival full-on orgasms. She'd expected him to come undone, to get riled up and turned on when she teased him, but nothing like this.

Jason lifted his head and stepped back to let her move. The skin on her back stung as she stepped away from the wall. She winced and he furrowed his brow. "Are you okay?"

She grimaced. "I think the wall chewed my back up a little."

"How bad? Turn around, let me look."

She shook her head. "It's fine. Just a little rug burn."

He scowled just before pulling her into a gentle kiss. "I didn't want to hurt you."

"It's okay," she said. "It was well worth it."

Jason exhaled. "Was it ever. Jesus, Allyson, that was incredible." He kissed her, his hands still trembling as he ran them through her hair.

"Maybe I should tease you more often when you're on the phone."

"Evil woman," he said with a laugh.

"I thought I was a vile temptress."

"You are a vile temptress."

"Is that a bad thing?"

His arm snaked around her waist and he pulled her close. "Not a bad thing at all."

Chapter Thirty-Four

The weekend went by far too quickly, and before they knew it, Jason and Simone stood beside her rental car, saying their goodbyes.

"I can't wait to see the pictures," she said.

"They'll be done next time you come up. I doubt they'll need much work," he said with a smile. He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "There's nothing to touch up."

She grinned. "I'm sure you'll find something."

"I doubt it. But I'll certainly look."

Scoffing in mock offense, she said, "You'd *look* for flaws on me?"

He laughed. "No, but I will look at your pictures. A lot."

"You filthy man." She winked at him.

"Guilty." He kissed her. A brief kiss turned into a longer one, and once again they were wrapped in each other's arms up against the car. Already they had drawn out their goodbye as long as humanly possible – including going back in the house just one last time – and she was going to miss her flight if she didn't leave soon.

"I had a wonderful time," she said.

He smiled. "So did I. As always." Then he touched her face again. "Before you go" The sudden seriousness in his voice unsettled her.

"What is it?"

"Maybe it should wait," he said, scratching the back of his neck and avoiding her eyes. "I don't want to keep you."

She put her hand on his chest, leaning into him. "No, tell me."

He exhaled. "I just, maybe it's too soon –"

Oh shit. Shit. Shit shit *shit*. "Jason –"

"I don't want to rush into anything," he said. Relief swept over her, but he went on. "But I'm not going to lie, Allyson."

Shit.

He met her eyes finally. "Whatever this is, whatever it is I'm feeling for you, it's more than just sex."

She stared at him for a long moment. It was only her lungs screaming for air that reminded her she needed to breathe. "Jason –"

"I'm sorry," he said, dropping his gaze. "I shouldn't have said anything." He closed his hands around hers. "I just – I didn't want to be dishonest with you."

"I know," she said. "Look, it's still so soon. I'm not – I really don't know *what* I feel right now."

He nodded. "I understand." He ran his fingers through her hair.

Oh God, Jason, don't do that, you're making it so hard for me to leave. Goosebumps prickled beneath her sleeves as he kissed her forehead.

"I want you to come back. Soon. I want to see you again."

"I want to see you, too."

"But I just" He hesitated. "I didn't want you to get the wrong idea about me, that I'm using you for sex."

The way I'm using you for sex, you mean? Simone swallowed. "I will come back. I'm not sure when, but I want to see you." She kissed him again. "Just, give me some time to think about things, to sort a few things out." She bit her lip. "In my head."

"I will."

They met each other's gazes for a long moment. Finally, she whispered, "I should go."

"I know." He pulled her into a deep, sensuous kiss. They whispered their goodbyes, and she got in the car.

* * * * *

As he watched her car disappear down the driveway, Jason was certain she was gone forever.

He started toward the house, kicking a rock as he did. "Fuck!" he shouted.

In the house, he fell onto the couch and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He'd said too much. Couldn't just let it rest, could he? Just *had* to blurt it out, and as she was on her way out, no less.

But what could he do? He'd been torn about it for days, wondering if he should say anything or leave well enough alone. Scare her away, or leave her thinking he was just using her?

He sighed. At least he hadn't come out and said he loved her. He didn't. His emotions weren't that strong. He had feelings for her, but—hell, who was he kidding? He was falling fast and hard for her. If this wasn't love, he didn't know what was.

And he'd likely just lost her forever.

* * * * *

"Shit, shit, shit!"

Simone pounded the steering wheel with her fist. This wasn't supposed to happen. It was just supposed to be sex. A fling. *Fun*. But then why the hell had she come back up here again and again? Why was he occupying her mind all the time? What was he doing to her?

And why, *why*, did he have to go and say he felt the same way she did? No, she didn't feel that way. She didn't. She was *not* in love. She did *not* have feelings for him. This was sex. Casual, no-strings-attached, non-committed *sex*.

At a stoplight, she rested her forehead on the wheel. She couldn't be in love with him. It wasn't the right time. She was just starting to get her head together. The last thing she needed was another messy relationship, and all of her relationships were nothing if not messy. *Really* messy.

But she'd never felt like this before. The butterflies in her stomach were there all the time, not just when he looked at her or touched her or kissed her. When he *did* look at her, or touch her, or kiss her, the butterflies went crazy. And when he made love to her —

"When he *fucks* me," she said aloud. "He doesn't make love to me. He fucks me. I'm a booty call. He's a booty call. This is not love. This —"

A car behind her honked and she snapped her head up. She accelerated through the green light, waving an apology to the driver behind her.

How would she even know if she was in love? Looking back, she couldn't remember ever feeling this way. Not even with Gregory and certainly not with the men who came after him. Just thinking of Jason made her heart ache in that tear-jerking, "just one kiss and I can die happy" way a schoolgirl felt when she looked at a picture of the latest Hollywood heartthrob. But in his presence, she was so at ease, so comfortable.

He could make love to her for hours, like his entire purpose in life was to bring her pleasure. He could fuck her against a car in the pouring rain because neither of

them could wait long enough to get inside. And he did, because he wanted to. Because he wanted her, he desired her. *Her*. Not the Simone Farrell the whole world thought it knew, *her*. She didn't have to pretend to be anything, didn't have to put on an act.

Except the whole lying about my name, my career, and every other relevant detail.

She clenched her jaw as guilt rose in her throat. She needed to tell him. She couldn't keep lying. He had to know. He deserved to know.

Then what? Keep pretending she didn't love him?

She sighed. *Good one, Simone. Another lovely mess you've gotten yourself into.*

Chapter Thirty-Five

At the end of the film's final shoot, Henry Wall clapped Simone on the shoulder. "I damn near lost my faith in you, my dear," he said. "But you've done well." He tapped the film can containing the day's footage. "I think you might be looking at another Oscar nomination."

Simone beamed. In spite of all of the distraction lately, she was back at the top of her game. She slipped into character as effortlessly as she did during her first few films. The numbness was gone. She could *feel* again.

As she headed back to her trailer to get her purse and head home, her smile slowly fell with the uncomfortable weight in her chest. She was back at the top of her game with acting, but Jason still dominated her thoughts.

A week had passed since she left Tofino with her heart in her throat and his confession ringing in her ears. She hadn't called. He'd left a few messages.

"Allyson, it's Jason. Look, I'm sorry, I'll understand if you want to back off, but . . . I want to talk. Call me."

"Allyson, it's Jason. Please, just give me a call."

"Click"

Simone sighed. She sat at the table in her trailer and cast a sideways glance at the Smirnoff bottle. No, she thought. *That's not going to help*. Though if it weren't for the fact

that she was driving home in a few minutes, she'd be sorely tempted to do a couple of shots.

That's when her trailer door flew open. Anne-Marie entered and tossed a tabloid in front of Simone. "Page nine," she said, helping herself to a cup of coffee.

Simone eyed the coffee cup. Anne-Marie planned on staying a while.

She sighed and turned to page nine. Tucked in the corner, amongst a scandalous article about another actress's "Simone-like Spiral of Self-Destruction" — Simone flinched at the title — was a small article titled "Is Simone Farrell making a comeback?" The inset picture showed her with the fling that had destroyed her marriage, and another recent photo of her smiling and waving at the paparazzi on her way into the studio.

She skimmed the article. ". . . *mysterious trips out of the country . . .*" ". . . *sources close to Simone say her attitude has done a complete one-eighty . . .*" ". . . *rehab? A new man?*" She closed the magazine and pushed it away.

"The vultures are circling, hon." Anne-Marie leaned against the sink and watched her over her coffee cup. "Whatever it is you're doing, they're going to sniff it out sooner or later."

Simone glared at her. "Not unless someone 'in the know' lets the cat out of the bag."

"I'm not going to say a word," Anne-Marie said coldly. "But they're going to figure it out. These guys could find Jimmy Hoffa if it paid as much as chasing after you." She furrowed her brow. "This is more than just a fling, isn't it?"

"No." Simone avoided her eyes. "It's just a fling."

"Bullshit."

"It's *just* a fling." Simone looked up then. "And it might not last much longer."

Anne-Marie's eyes widened. "What?"

"Why is that any shock? Me? Ending a fling with a guy? What's so shocking about that?"

"No, it's shocking because I think you're in love with him."

Simone laughed. "No, I'm not." *Liar*. She stood and poured herself a cup of coffee, her back turned so Anne-Marie couldn't see how red her cheeks were probably getting.

"Simone, I know you," Anne-Marie declared. "If you're not in love, then I don't know who is."

Staring into her coffee cup, Simone didn't turn around. "Why do you say that?"

"Come on, babe," Anne-Marie said. "The way you smile when you mention him. The way you stare off into space when you don't think anyone is looking. The fact that you are willing to run off to Nowhere, Canada, every other week to see him."

Simone's shoulders slumped. "It's the worst possible timing. I shouldn't be doing this."

Anne-Marie touched her arm. "If you're in love with him, then go with it. You don't need another scandal or an affair, but—" Her voice hardened. "He's not married, is he?"

Simone laughed in spite of herself. "No. No, he's not married." *I don't think he's married. But then, what do I know about him? Not a damn thing? How can I be in love with him? I'm not. I'm not.* "I'm not in love with him." Her voice cracked.

"Yes, you are," Anne-Marie said in that, *don't argue with me, I'm right*, voice. "Look, if you've met someone, and it's more than just a stupid romp, why not go public? If you just come clean about it, the paparazzi will find someone else to stalk."

Simone turned to face Anne-Marie. "Or they'll stalk us together."

"Maybe. But that reflects worse on them than it does on you." Anne-Marie shrugged. "Maybe it would do good for your image, some positive publicity for once. This, and the way your film is going right now, maybe you'll be back in Hollywood's good graces sooner rather than later."

Simone scowled. "I'm not going to use him to get back on the A-list."

Anne-Marie's lips parted and she raised a knowing eyebrow. "You *must* be in love."

"Why now?"

Her agent drained her coffee cup and set it in the sink. "Because the Simone I know and love has no qualms about using a man to impress the rest of the world."

Before Simone could respond, Anne-Marie flounced out of the trailer. The door slammed just before Simone's jaw snapped shut. She watched her agent through the window for a moment, but didn't follow her. Anne-Marie was right, and Simone's face burned with shame. She had used men in the past: everyone before, after, and including Gregory.

But not Jason. She wouldn't do that to Jason.

She absentmindedly let his name slip off her tongue, whispering it into the silence of the trailer, and her heart fluttered. Maybe Anne-Marie was right, and there was only one way to find out.

She picked up the phone, and called him.

* * * * *

The ringing phone startled Jason. He picked it up and cradled it on his shoulder, his hands still moving the mouse and pounding the keyboard.

"Jason Connor."

A beat of silence. "Jason, it's Allyson."

The sound of her voice brought his hands to a halt. He leaned back in his chair. "Allyson" His heart quickened. He couldn't decide if he was angry that she'd waited this long to call, or just giddy with relief that she finally *had* called.

"Listen, I'm sorry I didn't call for so long."

"It's okay. I'm glad you called now."

"I've been thinking a lot about what you said, before I left."

Jason's throat went dry. *Here it comes.* "Okay"

"Things are complicated here now. I mean, I just have a lot going on in my life."

His heart sank. *Here comes the bombshell. She's married.* "I understand." *I'm pissed that you led me on, that you used me, but I guess I –*

"I think it would be best to talk more in person."

"You – what?"

"Look, I can't promise one way or the other how this is going to go, how I feel. But . . . I just need to see you. Discuss this face to face."

So I can see the wedding ring? So you can tell me that it's not me, it's you? Christ, Jason, give her a chance. "Uh, sure. When?"

She paused. "As soon as possible. My schedule is a bit of a mess right now, but" Another pause. "I'll let you know."

"Listen," he said. "If you don't want to pursue this, if you just want to let it go, forget it ever happened –"

"No," she said quickly. "Not at all. I'm just – it's complicated."

"In my world, that usually means, 'I'm married'." *Way to go, idiot.*

She was silent for a second. Then she laughed. "Married? Oh God no. No, that's not it at all." She paused again and he could hear her smile fall. "Is that really what you thought?"

He was glad she couldn't see how red his face undoubtedly was. *You're an ass, Jason. A total ass.* "No, well, I – I wasn't sure."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I should have been a bit more open in the beginning. No, I'm not married."

"I'm sorry, too," he said. "I really shouldn't have been such a dick about it."

"It's okay." That smile was back. "Really, Jason, I do want to see you again."

"Just let me know when. I'll be here."

There was a long pause. Her voice was low when she said, "Just . . . don't think that I balked because I don't have feelings for you too."

His heart raced. "What *do* you feel?"

She sighed. He imagined her rubbing her forehead with her fingertips like she often did. "I'm not sure. I'm just, I don't know. To be honest, I've never felt this way before." She paused. "Just, be patient with me."

"Take as long as you need." He couldn't help the smile that curled the corner of his mouth. "I'll be here when you're ready to come up, and we'll figure out what the hell it is we're doing."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"I'm glad you called."

"Me too."

A few minutes later, they said their goodbyes, and he hung up the phone. He leaned back in his chair, chewing his thumbnail. Relief swept over him, just having heard her voice and reconnected with her, but that apprehensive knot was still there.

He stared at the picture on his screen, the one he'd been cropping and touching up — what little it needed — when she called.

Allyson's face smiled back at him over her bare shoulder.

He didn't know if this was love, but it was something.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Simone finally managed to wrestle a few free days in her calendar to go to Tofino. In spite of her nerves, she was giddy with excitement as she packed for her trip. She was uneasy about facing him, about discussing where this was all really going, but just the thought of seeing him gave her butterflies.

She glanced at the clock. Ten thirty. Less than twenty-four hours, and she'd be in his arms again. Whatever came of their conversations, she'd be with him again, and that was more than enough. She shivered with excitement.

Her cell phone startled her. Gregory's number popped up on the caller ID. She gritted her teeth and flipped it open.

"Hi, Gregory."

"Simone." The unsteadiness in his voice sent a chill up her spine. "I need you to take Cecily."

"Tonight?"

"Yes. The sooner the better. Now if you can."

Worry gripped Simone's heart. "What happened? Is she all right?"

"She's fine," Gregory's voice wavered. "It's Jessica; I'm taking her to the hospital."

"Oh my God, what's wrong?"

"I'm, I'm not sure." He exhaled sharply. "Rita's at the house with Cecily right now, but I think she'd be better off with you."

Simone's eyes flicked to the bag she'd almost finished packing. Disappointment filled her, but she couldn't let Cecily down. She took a breath. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Thank you, Simone."

You owe me, she thought bitterly as she hung up the phone. Instantly she regretted even thinking it. He owed her? Hardly. If anything, she owed him, and this was the *very* least she could do for him.

On the way to Gregory's house, she called Jason.

"Jason, it's Allyson."

"Hey, beautiful."

"Look, I have to cancel the trip," she said, trying not to break into tears.

"Oh."

"It's a family emergency. I'll —"

"Shit, what happened?" he asked. "Is everything okay? Is there anything I can —?"

"No, no, don't worry about it. It's just —" She hesitated. He didn't know about Gregory, Cecily, or anything else in her world. This wasn't the conversation for dropping all those bombs on him, but what to tell him now? She cleared her throat. "Just some things I have to take care of." *Right. That isn't going to rouse any suspicions.* She quickly added, "I want to get back up there as soon as possible though."

Jason was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his tone was flat. "Okay, well, just let me know if there's anything I can do. Or when you want to come back up."

"I'm so sorry, Jason."

"Don't worry about it. Things happen. I understand."

Her heart ached at the disappointment in his voice. "I want to see you again, though, soon. As soon as all of this blows over."

"Just let me know. I'll be here."

She flinched; his voice was taut with skepticism and suspicion. "I'm not sure when yet. A few days. But as soon as I know, I'll let you know. I'm really sorry, I—"

"It's okay, I understand."

She wasn't sure he did. *He must suspect the worst about me.* He already thought she was married, now she was blowing him off with an ambiguous, "family emergency" excuse? "I'll call you."

"I'll be here."

His words hung in her ear long after she'd hung up the phone.

"I'll be here."

For the first time, she wondered if he would be.

* * * * *

Jason leaned back in his chair. This wasn't good.

He wanted to trust her. God, how he wanted to believe her when she said she was genuine, that she wasn't keeping some major secret from him. Like a husband. The thought made him flinch.

Allyson wasn't Paula. She *wasn't* Paula. He had to remember, *she wasn't Paula.* But on the other hand, the Paula he thought he knew wasn't—

Stop it. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. He'd have faith in her. He'd wait. He'd see if—*when*—she called again, and see where things went from there.

He sighed. He was setting himself up for another heartbreak. Any man with half a brain would end it now, just call the whole thing off and be done with it. Nip it in the bud. End it before the truth came out. The truth that he would, as always, be the last to know.

He picked up the phone and pulled up her number. For a long, long time he stared at her name on the glowing LCD screen, his thumb on the *send* button. He ground his teeth. *Do it, Jason, she's not worth it.*

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath. He slammed the phone down. Any man with half a brain would end it now, but damn . . . she had a hold on him.

And maybe she *was* telling the truth. Guilt burned in his throat. Emergencies happened. *Like the "family emergencies" that kept Paula running out of town every other damned weekend, right?* He winced at the memory. She's not Paula, he told himself again.

He stared at the phone. No, he would have faith in her.

God, please don't let me be making a huge mistake

* * * * *

Simone and Cecily rode in silence for a long time on the way back to her place. The girl's eyes were red with tears and her mouth turned down with worry. At a stoplight, Simone chewed her lip and watched her daughter in the rearview. Her heart raced. This is where I'm supposed to be a mother, damn it, she thought. *I'm supposed to give her comfort, tell her it's going to be okay, do something. But I don't even know where to start.*

She tried to push Jason out of her mind. Guilt gnawed at her — not to mention that maddening ache that *only* he could satisfy — but she had to put him second right now.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" she said finally.

Cecily looked up, as if startled to hear her mother speak. "I guess so." She bit her lower lip. "Is Jessie's baby going to be okay?"

Oh shit. What am I supposed to say? My God, what am I supposed to do? "I hope so, baby," she said finally. What else could she say? Her palms were sweaty against the steering wheel. She didn't know what else to say. They drove in silence for a while.

Out of nowhere, Cecily said, "Why have you been gone so much?"

Simone blinked. She glanced in the rearview and found herself staring her daughter right in the eye. The steely, accusing tone in Cecily's voice startled her. "I've, I've just been trying to—" *Oh hell, how do you explain something like that to an eight-year-old child? Mommy's been trying to stop drinking and is spending all her time fucking some stranger up in Canada?*

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

Ouch. Even Cecily had caught on. It wasn't like she hadn't seen Simone in a rash of messy relationships; she must have known the signs, even if this one was different from all the rest. Then again, her latest was *always* different from all the rest, so—

"Mommy?"

"I'm just trying to sort some things out, baby," she said finally. She took a breath. "You know how I always tell you to treat everyone else like you want to be treated?"

"Yes."

"Never to lie to people, or hurt people?"

"Yes."

Simone swallowed a lump in her throat. "Mommy hasn't been very good about that. I've been bad to a lot of people, and I'm trying to fix that. I don't want to be like that anymore."

"You've been in jail?"

Simone laughed aloud. "Oh God no, not in jail. Just—just spending time alone, sorting some things out." *Right. Because an eight-year-old understands this sort of thing.*

"Did I do something wrong?"

"What? Oh my God, baby, no, not at all." She looked in the rearview again and met Cecily's eyes. She took a breath. "It has nothing to do with you. I promise."

"So you don't have a boyfriend?"

Shit. What am I supposed to do? Keep lying to her? Lie to her like I've been lying to everyone else? What's one more lie in this tangled web of bullshit I've been feeding everyone? Fuck. "No, baby, no boyfriend."

Cecily accepted that, but the knot of guilt grew in Simone's gut. She felt like shit now. It was one thing to lie to Anne-Marie, and Gregory, and Carolyn. It was even one thing to lie to Jason, as much as it killed her to do it. But lying to Cecily about it, that was just too much for her to take. She'd done more than enough of that over the years, but she had promised herself she would change. Lying to her daughter was nothing if not counterproductive.

Whatever this was she had going with Jason, she needed to figure it out. She needed to be honest with herself about him. Then she needed to be honest about him to Cecily. She owed her daughter that much.

And for heaven's sake, she needed to be honest with Jason before his patience ran out.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jason was almost asleep when a shrill bleating pierced the stillness. He flinched at the sound, muttered a slurred expletive, and closed his eyes, but then he heard it again.

Swimming back into consciousness, he realized it was the phone beside the bed. He felt around on the nightstand for it, found it just as he woke up enough to wonder if he should be annoyed or worried that someone was calling this late.

He rubbed his eyes with one hand as he said, "Ello?"

"Jason, it's Allyson."

Her voice instantly brought him back to reality. "Allyson? What's —?" He looked at the clock. It was a little past eleven. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, her voice hushed. "Nothing's wrong, I just . . . I wanted to talk to you." She paused. "Did I wake you up?"

Jason sat up in bed, running a hand through his hair. He wanted to be annoyed that she'd called so late, but the only thing he felt was relief. "It's okay. Don't worry about it. Is everything okay?"

Simone ran her hand through her hair. Hugging her knees to her chest, she said, "Maybe it's silly, calling this late. I just needed to talk to you again after . . . after earlier."

He took a breath. "About?"

"I'm not, I don't know," she said. "Us, I guess."

"Anything in particular?"

Her heart thundered so badly she could barely hear him. "Not really. I—" She swallowed. "I didn't want you to think I was blowing you off."

He was silent for a moment. "Babe, if you have an emergency —"

"I know, but, you know, I didn't want you to think it was just some lame excuse not to come see you." *God only knows I've used it before.* "I do want to come see you. The sooner the better, actually."

A breath of laughter. He still sounded tense, but that smile was there. "That feeling's mutual," he said. Pause. "When do you think, do you . . . ?"

She rubbed her eyes. "Hopefully I'll know something in the next few days. Believe me, when I do, you'll be the first to know."

"I'll be waiting to hear from you."

She smiled. "I just, I wish I could be there right now."

"I wish you could be here, too." He paused. "I guess it's par for the course with long distance —" Beat. "When we're this far apart."

A long distance relationship. Of course. Except this isn't a relationship. This is a fling. A damned fling. And the Nile isn't just a river in Egypt.

"I guess it is par for the course, isn't it?" she whispered.

"I suppose there's always the next best thing." There was just a hint of mischievous humor in his voice.

"Oh? And what's that?"

It sounded like he was moving. Lying back on the bed, perhaps. "What are you wearing?"

"I—what?"

"I want to know what you're wearing."

"Jason, you – " She paused.

"Try it, you might like it." He laughed softly. That grin, Jesus, she could almost see it.

She hugged her knees tighter to her chest. "I've never" *Yeah, right.*

"If I can't be there to make you come," he said, his voice dropping to that low, whispering growl that always made her weak in the knees. "I can still hear you come."

Her spine stiffened. Though she'd tried this before with other lovers, it had always made her feel stupid. Nervous. But the desire in Jason's voice ignited an entirely different feeling in her. She thumbed the edge of the comforter. "I don't even know where to start."

"Start by telling me what you're wearing."

"You first."

He laughed softly. "Same thing I always wear to bed."

Her breath caught. Immediately she thought of his naked body up against hers when they slept, and a shiver ran through her so violently her teeth chattered.

"Your turn," he said.

She looking down almost self-consciously at the simple nightgown she wore. "Just, just a nightgown."

"What color?"

"Blue."

"You look sexy in blue," he said. "But you look better without a damned thing on. Take it off."

"Take it – right now?"

That soft laugh again, but there was an edge to it, a tightness in his voice as if he was hiding how wound up he was already.

She grinned. "Jason, am I turning you on?"

He exhaled. "Just thinking about you turns me on, babe."

Her insecurities dimmed. "Tell me more."

"Do you still have that nightgown on?"

"I do," she said. "And it stays on until you tell me what you think about that gets you so turned on."

The catch in his breath was faint, a sound she would barely have heard even in his presence. "Taking over, are we?"

"Are you objecting?"

"Not in the least."

She wetted her lips. Keeping her voice low, she said, "So tell me, Jason, what do you think about when you're getting turned on?"

"I think about the sweet taste of your pussy," he growled, the uncharacteristic crudeness both startling and arousing Simone. He went on. "And the way you squeeze my fingers when you're about to come. Jesus, you don't know what that does to me."

Finding her breath, she whispered, "Tell me more."

"When my fingers are inside of you," he said, his voice unsteady. "When I'm fucking you with my hand and licking your clit, and my cock is *aching* to be inside you, *fuck . . .*"

Simone squeezed her thighs together, biting her lip as a pulsing wave rippled through her. She started to speak, but he beat her to it, whispering, "My cock's aching to fuck your tight, wet pussy right *now*."

She whimpered softly. He may as well have been speaking right to her clit, with the way her body reacted to his voice.

She could barely speak. "Tell me — tell me more."

"I'm so turned on right now," his voice was barely audible. A sharp hiss of breath made Simone's mouth water. What she wouldn't have given to feel that breath on her neck right then. "I don't think I'd last a minute inside your" A breath. "Inside" He cursed under his breath. "I wouldn't last a minute inside your *sweet fucking cunt*."

A violent tremor ran through her and she couldn't help whimpering. He wasn't being crude for the sake of being crude, he wasn't going for shock value, he was just too

far gone to mince words. Moaning softly, she whispered, "Oh my God, Jason, I need you"

He gasped, then, "Oh God, oh God, I'm —" The tension in his voice made Simone's entire body tremble, as if Jason was right there, slamming his cock into her just before his orgasm overtook him.

Another sharp breath. "*Fuck, I'm coming*" He groaned, almost whimpered, and exhaled.

Simone couldn't speak. Couldn't think of anything to say. Couldn't make her mouth work. All she could think of was the maddening ache inside her that demanded attention, that demanded *his* attention.

He was silent for a moment, catching his breath. Then he said, "Now it's your turn."

"This isn't going to make the next few days any easier," she said, biting her lip.

"No, it won't," he said, laughing softly. "But it's all we've got right now."

She released a frustrated whimper. "Jesus, I need you so badly right now, Jason."

"Tell me more"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Three days after her scare, Jessica came home from the hospital, rattled but all right. Cecily watched out the window for Gregory's headlights, and squealed with delight as her father pulled in Simone's driveway.

After father and daughter were reunited, Simone sent Cecily upstairs to get her things. She turned to her ex-husband. "How is Jessica doing?"

Gregory pursed his lips. "She'll be okay."

"And the baby?"

"The baby's fine."

"Good."

The silence hung between them for a long moment. "Thank you for taking her on such short notice."

"She's my daughter too."

"I know." Gregory offered a gentle smile, one that seemed to say, *you're finally acting like it*.

Simone rubbed her forehead. "I'm going to go back up to Canada this week. Hopefully."

Gregory raised an eyebrow. "I hope our little event didn't inconvenience you."

Simone glared at him. "Give me a little credit, Gregory. I'm not God's gift to parenting, but I'm trying."

His expression softened. "I know, I'm sorry." He paused. "Whatever it is you're doing up there, you're not getting yourself into—"

"Gregory, please. I'm getting myself together, I promise." She shrugged. "I'm not even drinking anymore, so I must be doing something right."

Gregory blinked. "You're not—you're not drinking? At all?"

Simone shook her head.

"You're not pregnant, are you?"

Simone threw her hands up. "Jesus, *no!*" She looked at him, hurt. "Is it so hard for anyone to believe that I can at least try to get myself back on track?" Her voice cracked.

"I'm sorry, Simone," he said. "You're right. I should have more faith in you. I do have faith in you. And I'm proud of you." He smiled. "I think you really are on a better track now."

Tears stung her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. He took her into his arms and hugged her.

"I know you'll get yourself together," he said, patting her back gently before he released her. "Does Cecily know about your new man yet?"

Simone shook her head. "Not yet. But I—as soon as I know what's going on, I'm going to talk to her about it."

"You said that weeks ago."

"I still don't know. Gregory, for once, I'm trying not to rush things."

He sighed. "I understand. Just . . . Just don't wait too long."

"I won't."

A moment later, Cecily came back into the room, and Simone said her goodbyes to her daughter and ex-husband.

She chewed her lip as she watched them pull out of the driveway. She hadn't been lying; she really was trying to get herself together. But she needed to stop the lying. She owed everyone – Cecily, Jason, Gregory, Anne-Marie – the truth.

She swallowed the guilt and promised herself she would figure out what was going on with Jason, and when she did, she was going to be honest with him. With everyone.

Simone grabbed her phone and called Jason.

"Jason, it's Allyson."

"Allyson" Was that a sigh of relief? "It's good to hear your voice."

"Look, I'm sorry about what happened. I'm free again, for a while, and I'd love to come see you."

"Absolutely." He paused. She bit her lip. Was he thinking? Hesitating? She couldn't tell. Finally, he spoke. "I'll be out of town this weekend, though. But I'll be back Sunday night."

Relief swept over her. "Why don't I come up Monday morning then?"

"I'll look forward to it."

"As will I."

"One question, though, before I let you go."

Simone took a breath. "I'm listening."

He was silent for a moment, but it sounded like he was moving. Sitting down, maybe. Finally, he said, "What are you wearing?"

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Simone drummed her fingers anxiously on the table. Amidst the butterflies, a strong feeling of dread twisted within her, but it wasn't her upcoming visit to Jason that unsettled her.

She sat in Bernelli's, glancing at her watch, waiting for Carolyn, wondering for the hundredth time why she did this to herself.

Right on schedule – twenty minutes late – Carolyn walked in. "Sorry I'm late," Carolyn said, flopping down on the other side of the booth.

No you aren't. "No problem," Simone said through a forced smile.

After they had looked at the menu and ordered, Carolyn looked at her. "So I've seen your face in the tabloids again recently."

"What else is new?"

"They think there's a new man in your life." The bitter pout in Carolyn's voice grated on Simone's nerves. "Isn't that exactly what I said? So now I want to know: who is he?"

Simone absently swirled her straw in her Coke. "'He' isn't. There's no one."

Carolyn raised a penciled-on eyebrow and cocked her head. "Bullshit."

"I've told you, I'm just trying to get some things straightened out in my life. I've got a lot going on –"

"Oh yes," Carolyn said melodramatically, putting the back of her hand against her forehead. "The woes of the movie star."

Oh good lord, Carolyn, please don't start. Not today. "I'm serious," Simone said. She shrugged. "I may have been the last one in the world to figure it out, but that doesn't mean I had to find a man to do so." *Okay, so it did, but you don't need to know that.*

"But you *have* found a man."

"Is it so hard to imagine I could get my life straightened out without hanging on a man's arm?"

"For you, yes."

"Thanks, glad to know you have such faith in me." *Okay, you're right. I'm useless. I'm an idiot. I can't fix my own life without a man in the picture. And speaking of pictures . . .*

Her mind wandered back to the photo shoot on the island, and the passionate sex that had followed, and —

"Simone?"

"Huh? Sorry."

Carolyn raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm —" Simone cleared her throat and took a drink. "Sorry. I haven't slept much the last few days." *And I doubt I'll be sleeping much over the next few days. Christ, tomorrow can't get here soon enough.*

Carolyn watched her for a moment, her expression somewhere between puzzled and suspicion. After a moment, her demeanor softened. She lowered her voice.

"Honestly, Simone." She took a breath and looked away. "I know things haven't always been great between us, but . . . I want us to be like sisters again."

Simone kept her guard up. "As do I."

"Then why won't you talk to me?"

"Because we *haven't* been like sisters for years."

"You don't trust me." It wasn't a question.

Why should I trust you, you backstabbing bitch? Simone shrugged. "After everything with Dan's band, I—"

"That was a long time ago," Carolyn said, dropping her gaze and playing with the edge of the wine list. "A *very* long time ago." She raised an accusing eyebrow and looked up at Simone. "We've both made more than our fair share of mistakes since then."

Touché. "And you probably don't trust me all that much either, do you?"

Carolyn sighed. "I do. I really do." She wrung her hands on the table. "I want us to move forward, Simone. A fresh start, a clean slate."

Simone played with the edge of her napkin, avoiding her sister's eyes. She wanted to believe Carolyn. It had been so long, and she missed her sister. "I know. I want to too."

Carolyn clasped her fingers together, her thumbnail absently running up and down her index finger. "I'm worried about you, Simone." She paused. "You've been right about me; I was jealous that you've done so well while I fell on my face."

"You didn't fall on your face."

Carolyn huffed. "Yeah, I did. But that was my fault, not yours." She wrung her fingers. "I should never have blamed it on you, or taken it out on you. I see now that you have problems in your life, just like everyone else." She took a breath. "I just want to know what's going on, because I'm worried about you."

Simone watched her, cautious and uncertain. "Just, you know, a lot of pressure at work. Problems with Gregory. I'd been drinking too much." She exhaled sharply. "Drinking *way* too much." She shook her head. "I just, I needed to get away."

"But what about this mystery man?"

Simone laughed and rolled her eyes. "Mystery man. Everyone's so certain there is someone, and no one's even seen him or heard his name." *Unless they've been within a mile or two of his house. Then I guarantee they've heard his name over, and over, and over.*

"So there *is* someone?" Carolyn smiled. "You're blushing, so don't even try to tell me there's no one. I can read you like a book, woman."

Simone ran a hand through her hair and laughed. "Okay. I'll tell you." Her voice hardened. "But you have to promise you won't tell anyone."

Carolyn grinned and held up her hooked pinky finger. "Pinky swear."

Simone laughed and hooked her own finger around Carolyn's. A giggle passed between them and for the first time in years, she actually felt like she was talking to her sister. "Okay, there is someone"

"Tell me about him." The giddiness in Carolyn's voice did nothing to calm the butterflies in Simone's stomach.

"He's incredible," she gushed. "A photographer, I met him up in Canada. Oh my God, Carolyn" She didn't even know where to start. She certainly wasn't going to tell him about the amazing things Jason did to her body. Opening up to her sister was one thing; there were some things a sister just didn't need to know.

"Come on, tell me," Carolyn practically squealed with delight.

"We met on a beach," Simone said. "We just, I don't know, ran into each other."

"Sex on the beach?"

Simone scoffed. "My God, Carolyn, I said I *met* him on the beach, I didn't say I ripped his clothes off and *did* him right there on the beach." *Oh, but when we were on the dock, I was half a heartbeat away from – stop it, Simone . . .* She barely kept herself from visibly shivering.

"So when *did* you do him?"

As soon as I damn well could and every chance I've had thereafter. "That is none of your business."

"And?"

"What?"

"How was it?"

Simone laughed. *Incredible. Unbelievable. So breathtakingly perfect that it's almost driven me to tears.*

Carolyn grinned at her over the rim of her glass. "That good, huh?"

From the heat in her cheeks, she guessed her face was about as red Carolyn's wine. Simone picked up her water. She would probably need a cold shower in a minute or two. "A girl doesn't kiss and tell."

Carolyn gave her a mock pout. "Not even to her sister?"

"Not even to her sister." *Because I don't think I could put it into words, Carolyn, he's just that amazing.*

"You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Simone blinked. "What?"

Carolyn set her drink down with a heavy *clink*. "Oh come on. I have never seen a man render you speechless."

"I'm not speechless; I'm just not going to tell you every little detail." *About his hands. His tongue. His cock, oh my God, the things he does with his –*

"Right. And that's why you keep getting that faraway look on your face." She clasped her hands beside her face and cocked her head. "He's just so, *dreamy*!" She let out a dramatic sigh.

"Whatever," Simone said with a laugh.

"So are you in love with him or not?"

At this, Simone balked. She was delighted to be talking to her sister like this again, but she wasn't sure how *much* she trusted her. "No, it's nothing like that."

Carolyn eyed her skeptically. "So Mr. Dreamy is just an international booty call?"

No, I actually do have feelings for him, feelings I can't even begin to understand, but I'm not quite ready to admit that to him, let alone to you. Simone shrugged. "Basically."

They laughed aloud. It felt good to laugh with her sister again.

"So what does he look like? You don't have a picture, do you?"

"No picture. But he's absolutely gorgeous." She took a quick drink before gesturing wildly with her glass. "And, oh the horrors, he's got *tattoos*."

Carolyn snorted. "What is he, some kind of biker? A rocker?"

"No, he's not a biker." She paused to think about Jason's incredible body, all the things he did to her, that mesmerizing way he looked at her like she was the only woman on the planet. "He's . . . just trust me, he's gorgeous."

"Where did you find him, anyway?"

"Canada. I already told you that."

Carolyn gestured with her wine glass and gave an exasperated sigh. "I may have failed high school geography, but last I checked, Canada's a pretty big place." She pointed at Simone, raising that accusing eyebrow again. "And not one that *you* go sauntering off to every chance you get."

"My agent sent me up to her cabin in Tofino," Simone said casually. Instantly she regretted it, wishing she could take back the words. *Too much! Damn it!* "I, uh, I met him on my way back. When I was in Victoria." *Good save . . . idiot.*

"Well, if he's that incredible, I can see why you've been so much more relaxed."

"Everyone's been saying that, that I seem more relaxed."

"You are. Definitely. My God, Simone, you're usually a ball of nerves."

"I *feel* like a ball of nerves right now."

"Are you sure you aren't in love with him?"

No, I'm not sure at all. In fact, I'm beginning to think I might just be in love with him, but you don't need to know that right now, thank you very much. "I'm not in love with him."

Chapter Forty

Jason absently fingered the stem of his champagne flute. All around him, voices buzzed and cameras flashed, but his mind was a thousand miles away. One more day. One more day and she would be back in his arms. He chewed his lip nervously.

An elbow nudged his arm. "You look like you need more to drink." Before Jason could object, Sean topped off his champagne. His brother eyed him. "What is wrong with you tonight? Are you going for the 'brooding, depressed artist' look, or what?"

Depressed? Oh my God, brother, that's the farthest thing from the truth. Nervous. Scared to death. Confused. Horny. But not depressed. Jason shook his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "No, no, I'm just — "

Sean raised an eyebrow and watched Jason over the rim of his own drink. "Someplace else, that's what. What's going on?"

"Just" Jason hesitated. He shook his head. "Just thinking."

Sean rolled his eyes and gestured at the crowded gallery. "Save your thinking for tomorrow's hangover. We've been working on this for months; it's time to celebrate a bit."

Jason took a sip and looked around. Dozens of people swarmed around the prints on the wall, discussing composition and lighting. Sean was right; they had been working toward opening this new gallery for a long time. It was a huge step for their business.

But all he could think about was Allyson. Of the afternoon on the island, watching her disrobe one button at a time, posing for his camera, the way the sunbeams off the water danced in the shadows of her cleavage, the —

"Jason, Jesus Christ," Sean said, waving a hand in front of his face.

Jason shook his head to snap out of it. "Sorry."

"Seriously, man, what is wrong with you? I've *never* seen you like this, least of all at a gallery opening."

"Just distracted."

"By *who*?"

"Who says it's a person?"

Sean rolled his eyes. "I doubt it's a Cuisinart." He shook his head and laughed. "Whoever this mystery woman is, she's got quite the hold on you."

You have no idea. Jason cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Why don't we mingle with our guests?"

Sean clapped Jason on the shoulder, but didn't press for more details. Together they joined the guests gathered in front of framed prints of the brothers' work. Eventually, Jason managed to focus on the prints, discussing their art, their various projects in progress. The director of a prestigious gallery in New York City dropped more than a few hints about showcasing some of their work. Sean paused to discuss specifics with him, but Jason, confident his brother had everything under control as always, continued mingling with the crowd.

"Mr. Connor? Leo Carson." A gentleman with an Irish accent shook Jason's hand. He nodded toward a series of three black and white seascapes along one wall. "That's a limited edition, right?"

Jason nodded. "One hundred prints of each."

Carson nodded, taking a sip of his drink and rolling it around in his mouth for a second. "I'll be orderin' a few for my office. Probably my home as well." His eyes flicked toward the prints, then back at Jason. "I assume you'll ship to the UK?"

Jason sipped his champagne. "You'll have to check with my brother on that one." He gestured with his chin toward Sean, who was engrossed in another conversation, and shrugged. "I just take the pictures."

The Irishman laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Sounds like a dream job." He lifted an eyebrow. "Christ, if I had a job like that, I think I'd be pointin' my camera at somewhat" He paused, watched a busty brunette walk by, before he looked back at Jason. "*Softer* subjects."

Jason swallowed hard. *If you only knew.* He smiled, trying to stay professional. "I've been known to do some portrait work."

Leo eyed him, then shook his head and laughed. "Lucky bastard; bet the ladies love a man with a camera."

And the camera loves a certain lady in particular, now that you mention it. "It's a living," Jason said.

Leo laughed again and excused himself to go talk to Sean.

A woman grabbed Jason's arm and gestured toward another print. "Mr. Connor, this is exquisite. Where was it taken?"

Jason paused to look at the picture in question. A chill trickled down his spine. It was the crescent-shaped island, his favorite place in the world. It was practically sacred to him, a place of solitude and peace, that he had always gone to alone until Allyson came along. And now that she had been there with him, it was even more sacred to him.

He looked at the woman. "It's—" Did he really want anyone to know where it was? On the off chance they could find it and tread on the beach where he'd spent such an intimate, perfect day with Allyson? He took a breath. "It's off Vancouver Island. Somewhere." He gestured dismissively with his champagne glass. "I don't think I could find it again if I tried."

"It's lovely, Mr. Connor. Absolutely lovely."

"Thank you," Jason said. The woman and her companions moved on, leaving Jason staring at the print. He took a sip of champagne, barely tasting it.

He stared at the island, remembering. Something in him stirred.

Yes, that was where it had happened. On that beach. Somewhere during that shoot—as he watched her through his camera lens, watched her take off layers of clothing and inhibitions to pose nude for him in spite of all her fears and insecurities, until they just couldn't wait anymore and had to be in each other's arms—at some point something in him had shifted. Sometime between the moment when her fingers released the first button of her shirt and the moment when he'd called out her name in the throes of a breathtaking orgasm, he had fallen in love with her.

Completely, totally, undeniably, irreparably, in love with her.

A hand grasped his wrist. "I leave you alone for five minutes and now you're a shaking mess." Sean eyed him. "Are you *sure* you're okay?"

Jason looked down and realized his hand had begun to shake. He glanced back at the photo of the island, then at his brother. "I'm fine."

Sean didn't look convinced. "I'm beginning to wonder." He glanced at the print. "You've never been one to get emotional over a damned landscape, for Christ's sake."

Oh, you have no idea, Sean. You just don't even know. He took another sip of champagne.

Sean rolled his eyes and shook his head. He tugged on Jason's upper arm. "Come on, we've got some buyers that want to talk to both of us."

Jason took one last lingering look at the island. He wanted to go back there, wanted to be there again with her. Without her there, the island was just a strip of sand and rocks in the middle of a narrow strait. Whatever was so sacred about it before paled in comparison to what he felt now.

Yes, he had to take her there again.

He cast one last look at the island, and followed Sean.

Chapter Forty-One

Jason chewed his thumbnail and glanced out the kitchen window for Allyson's car. Any minute now, she'd be —

The ringing phone startled him.

"Christ," he muttered, reaching across the counter for the phone. Momentary panic flooded through him. What if it was her? What if she was cancelling again? No, she wouldn't have waited this long. Her flight had landed hours ago. What if she was in an accident?

He shook his head and answered the phone. "Jason Connor."

"Hey, bro." Sean's voice simultaneously aggravated him and made him release a relieved breath. It wasn't Allyson calling to give him bad news. But it also wasn't Allyson.

"What's up?" Jason asked.

"I was calling to ask you the same thing."

Dude, not now. Seriously. "I, um, okay. What do you mean?"

Sean snorted. Probably rolled his eyes. "What the hell was the matter with you at the opening the other night? I have never seen you like that before."

Jason closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. *I was completely distracted by the woman I'm currently waiting on? I'm a lovesick idiot who can't see straight right now?*

"Man, I don't know. I guess I was just" He exhaled. "I have no idea."

"Right. I think I have a pretty good idea."

As do I. And she's on her way here right this second, so I'm lucky I can remember how to breathe. "Fair enough."

Silence. "You really are wrapped up in this girl, aren't you?"

"Something like that."

"Did you ever find out if she's married?"

Jason blew out a breath. "As far as I know, she's not."

"No angry husbands on your doorstep yet, then?"

"So far, so good."

"That's always a plus. You really don't want to fuck with an angry husband."

Jason scowled. "I'd rather not be on either side of that coin again, thank you."

Pause. "Shit, sorry man, I didn't mean to go there."

"Honest mistake. Don't worry about it." Jason drummed his fingers on the counter. "Anyway, no, I don't think she's married."

"I'll take your word for it. But seriously, after the other night, I just wanted to make sure you hadn't gone off the deep end or something."

Maybe I have. In fact, I probably have. I am so far off the deep end with this woman, I don't know which way is up. "Yeah right, you just wanted to be the first to call Mum if I had."

Sean chuckled. "Okay, you got me."

"Jackass."

His brother laughed. "Look, anyway, while I've got you on the phone, we made some great connections the other night. That gallery manager in New York is seriously considering showcasing some of our work. You might —"

"Sean —"

"— hang on, hang on, you gotta hear this, Jason. Top of the line gallery, serious potential for money. I'll send you the details, but —"

"Sean."

"— and holy shit, that Irish guy? You should *see* the order he placed, he —"

Sean."

"Huh? What?"

"That girl? The one that's scrambling my brain?"

"Yeah?"

"She's here."

Sean laughed. "Later, bro."

"Later." Jason clicked off the phone and was halfway to the door before the receiver hit the counter.

Simone's heart fluttered when the front door opened and Jason came sprinting down the porch steps. By the time she was out of the car, she was in his arms. They kissed desperately, grasping hair and clothing and breathing each other in.

On the agonizing, never-ending drive from Victoria, all she'd been able to think about was fucking him. She needed his cock inside her *yesterday*. But now that she was in his arms, she just felt strangely . . .relieved. Relieved just to be touching him again. When they broke the kiss, neither moved to go in the house or remove clothing. They just pulled each other close and held each other.

"God, I missed you," he whispered, stroking her hair gently and kissing her forehead.

"I missed you too." More than ever, she realized her insatiable hunger for him wasn't just physical.

The hand stroking her hair went to her neck and he lifted her chin to meet his kiss. It was a long, tender kiss, but as his tongue gently parted her lips, he pulled her body closer. Her hands grasped his shirt tighter.

"Let's go inside," he said, breathless.

He took her hand and they hurried into the house. Down the hall. Into the bedroom. Though the hunger between them was palpable in the air, this went beyond anything she'd felt for him before. This went beyond getting just enough clothing out of the way to fuck on the nearest flat surface. This was the kind of unbridled passion that couldn't be contained in a wild fuck against the car or a quickie on the kitchen table.

Simone shivered as they crossed the threshold into Jason's bedroom. Even before he kissed her, the intensity between them raised goosebumps on her arms.

They undressed each other slowly, carefully. The only sounds between them were the whisper of clothing drifting over flesh and the occasional catch of breath when skin met skin. When there was nothing left between them but electrified air, Jason put his arms around her and kissed her, the gentleness of his mouth against hers reminding her of the way he'd kissed her the very first time on the pier, and she shivered.

Without breaking the kiss, he lowered her onto the bed. Lying over her, their hands clasped together on the bed on either side of her, he kissed her until she couldn't remember what day it was. His kiss was still gentle, tender, but this time it felt like the calm before the storm, and they drew it out, savoring it. Her heart pounded faster with each passing second. She wanted him, ached for him, but still they lingered in this gentle embrace.

They were both eerily in control, unusually calm, but Simone could feel herself rapidly losing her grasp on that control. An odd, almost intimidating tension hung between them, a feeling of being on a precipice, as if they both knew once they started, once they went beyond this calm, controlled point, there would be no stopping.

Jason broke away just long enough to get a condom. Then he was over her again, holding her to him and kissing her gently. He wasn't inside her yet, though. Close to her, touching her, but still just beyond her reach.

Her breath caught in her throat as Jason shifted his weight, releasing her hands and propping himself up on one arm. They were still in control, but rapidly sliding toward that inevitable precipice.

His mouth left hers and he bent to kiss her neck, lingering just beneath her jaw and releasing a sharp breath against her skin. "Allyson," he whispered, the unsteadiness in his voice telling her he was quite possibly farther gone than she. A shudder made him catch his breath. He hadn't just said her name for the sake of saying it. There was something else, something yet unspoken.

Stroking his hair, she waited for him to finish what he had to say. She bit her lip; they were inching closer and closer to that edge.

Finally, he lifted his head and looked into her eyes. He kissed her lightly, their lips barely making contact. At last, he said it: "*I need you.*"

She opened her mouth to respond, to tell him she, too, needed him, but the barely-restrained desperation in his voice destroyed any chance she had of speaking. She let herself surrender to this overwhelming desire for him and lifted her head off the bed to kiss him.

As his tongue parted her lips, she wrapped her legs around his waist. He didn't hesitate, sliding into her so slowly, so deliciously, painfully slowly, drawing out the breathtaking sensation until it drove her nearly to tears.

"Jason," she whimpered against his lips, holding his shoulders and rolling her hips back to accommodate as much of his cock as she could take. "Oh God, Jason"

He buried his face against her neck, his lips brushing her skin as he whispered, "Jesus, Allyson"

Their every movement seemed to be in slow motion. Slow, but more intense than anything she'd ever experienced, his deep, rhythmic strokes inside her as languid and gentle as they were fervent and desperate.

He raised his head and looked into her eyes, his expression an overwhelming mix of lust and emotion that very nearly brought tears to her eyes. She had never felt so wanted, so needed, and she had never wanted or needed a man as much as she wanted and needed Jason Connor right then.

She put her arms around his neck and drew him down into a deep kiss, rocking her hips in time with his slow strokes. His arms slid under her back, pulling her into a full embrace as he returned her kiss.

Their lips parted briefly as she released a shuddering breath, and she held him tighter as the first tremors rolled through her. Like everything else, her orgasm happened in slow motion, her body coming undone piece by trembling piece. She moaned against his lips, but couldn't let him go, couldn't stop that deep, sensuous kiss even as the shockwaves rippled up her spine, needed to taste him just a moment longer, just a heartbeat longer, just —

"Oh God," he groaned, his lips leaving hers and letting her restrained cries escape, the escalating sounds of their simultaneous releases mingling in the narrow space between their mouths.

"Jason, oh God" she moaned.

"Jesus," he growled. He took one last, deep stroke, shuddered, and went still.

He kissed her, just his lips against hers, until the aftershocks calmed and their bodies stopped trembling. "That was," he said finally, "insane."

"Incredible."

He smiled and kissed her gently, started to lift himself off her, but she stopped him. He cocked his head. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, running her fingers through his hair. "I just don't want you to move."

He hesitated for a second before settling over her again, careful not to rest his weight on her chest. "I'll stay here as long as you want me to," he said with a soft laugh.

She smiled and kissed him, wrapping her arms around his neck again. On her way to Tofino, she'd anticipated the kind of wild, landing-where-they-fell sex that usually happened when she arrived. She'd needed him, craved him, desperately wanted him to fuck her within an inch of her life, but this . . .

She shivered. This slow, tender, *intense* reunion was like nothing she'd ever experienced.

Chapter Forty-Two

Simone avoided Jason's eyes as they sat on his couch, the silence hanging in the air. She chewed her lip; she came here because she needed to talk, to be able to talk face to face, but the words refused to come.

He took her hand in his, his warm touch comforting, sweet. The brush of his thumb along her palm sent a shiver through her.

"I don't even know where to start," she finally said.

"Neither do I."

She looked at him at last. "I feel like I've known you my whole life," she said. "But I know nothing about you."

He nodded, running his tongue across his teeth as he considered his words.

Stop doing that, Jason; that tongue is not helping me stay focused.

He raised an eyebrow. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything. Where you're from, your family, where you've been." She glanced at the exotic knick knacks on his mantle. "You've traveled, I assume?" There. That was a safe, comfortable topic to start with. One that just stalled them getting to the uncomfortable stuff, but it was a start.

Following her gaze to the mantle, he nodded. "I traveled a bit while I was in the Navy." He shrugged. "Nothing overly exciting." He took a breath and held it, tonguing his lip absently. The air bristled with something unspoken. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, and said, "I met my wife on that ship."

Simone's blood froze. "Your —"

"Ex-wife," he added quickly, his lips tightening.

Time to just jump in and pry, Simone. Get it all out now. "How long were you married?"

He looked at his left hand, thumbing his ring finger as if in search of a wedding band. "Three years." His eyes narrowed and his teeth clenched.

Danger, danger, proceed with caution. "What happened?"

He exhaled hard and pressed his fingers against his nose again. "Came out of left field." His tone was venomous with fury. "We were at the hospital, when she had the baby —"

He's got a kid. Oh my. Well, at least I'm not the only one hiding a baby. Her gaze flicked around the room, searching for evidence, a photo, a knick knack, but nothing suggested a child had ever been here, let alone that he had one of his own.

"The baby was, I don't know, an hour or two old. Then some bastard I'd never seen before comes barging in and demands a paternity test." He sighed.

"Oh my God, Jason," Simone whispered. The pain in his voice cut her deep. The shameful memory of the devastation in Gregory's face burned in her gut. She wondered if her ex had ever talked about her like this, with pain in his eyes and hatred in his voice. She couldn't have blamed him if he had.

"The thing that killed me," Jason continued, "was that she didn't seem all that surprised. She really didn't. If anything, she was pissed that he'd blown her cover." He shook his head. "I was the last to know. I've never felt like such an ass in my entire life."

"And the baby — ?"

"His." The viciousness in his tone raised goosebumps on her arms, but when he looked at her, his eyes were sad. "One minute, I'm on top of the world: a loving wife, a brand new son. And the next" He gestured sharply with one hand. "Nothing."

"I'm so sorry." What else was there to say?

He exhaled heavily. "Well, I've killed the mood with my confession." He raised an eyebrow. "Same question."

Simone's mouth went dry. The whole point of this trip was for her to tell him everything, to confess the lies she'd told him over the last couple of months, but that was before she learn about his past. Shit. What could she say? *Well, Jason, I basically did the same thing to my husband, including the damned paternity test, but mine was splattered all over the tabloids so the whole world knew about it, except for a heartbroken photographer in Canada who seems to be the only one who doesn't know who I am.*

She took a breath. "I'm divorced. Three years ago." His eyes silently prodded her to fill in the details. Biting her lip and dropping her eyes, she said, "It still, it's still hard to talk about." *Especially after you told me your past, so now I'm scared to death to tell you . . .*

"You don't have to finish."

I should, I really should, you need to know, but I can't, not without telling you everything I've lied to you about, and I'm just not sure I can do that yet. She took a breath, but the words stuck in her throat.

He stroked her palm with his thumb and changed the subject. "You've mentioned you and your sister don't get along. What happened?"

"She and I both wanted to act. We both had big plans from the time we were kids." She swallowed. "But Carolyn got pregnant when she was fifteen. Ten years later, when I was seventeen, I got my first real role." Simone sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "She never forgave me for succeeding. It was like a slap in the face to her, since

she was suddenly saddled with a kid and her baby sister was actually getting somewhere with acting."

"But" — Jason furrowed his brow — "It was her choice to have a baby, not yours."

"I know. But she didn't want to see it that way. Our brother was doing well then, too; his band was getting it together. She — " *What? She nearly cost him his record deal and resulting success? Go ahead, Simone, see if he asks what band then, and see if you can explain yourself out of being the high-profile sister of the lead singer.* She wet her lips. "Well, she made a few phone calls and damn near cost him everything his band had worked for."

"Wow," Jason said. "I can see why the two of you don't get along."

You have no idea. "It's better. We're working on it."

"That's admirable."

"An exercise in futility, if you ask me." She gritted her teeth, swallowing the knot of fury that her sister always brought out of her.

He squeezed her hand. "We don't have to do this now."

"Yes, we do," she said.

"Not everything. It'll all come out as we go along." His thumb stroked her palm again. "When you're ready, I'm listening."

I'm not ready. No way. But I need to tell you, Jason. I don't want to keep lying to you. You need to know. She took a breath, but before she could speak, he changed the subject again.

"What really brought you to Tofino? This isn't exactly a dream destination."

"I needed some time away. To relax, take a break. A friend of mine has a cabin on the other side of town."

"Some time away from what?"

"Work. Life."

"You said you're an actress?"

"Yes." *And a damn good one, apparently, since I've been filling your head full of tangled lies that I'll never be able to weasel my way out of without you hating me.*

"Stage?"

"Some." She hesitated. "Mostly film."

He blinked. Then he laughed. "I knew the camera loved you. So what have you been in? Film? Television?"

She shrugged. "Not a whole lot. A few feature films, but probably nothing you've seen." *Otherwise you would have recognized me a long time ago.*

"Interesting," he said with a nod, but he didn't press. Then he furrowed his brow. He cocked his head. "Yet you're —"

"Camera shy, I know." She stared down at her wringing hands. "It's . . . hard to explain. It's a long story." *One I need to tell you sooner than later, but obviously don't have the guts to do so.*

"I don't want to interrogate you about your life. I'm just curious about you."

"Likewise."

He put his other hand on top of hers. "But I do want to get to know you more. I know I put a damper on things, with what I said before you left last time —"

"No, not at all. It just, it made me think."

"About?"

She shrugged. "About what I want out of this."

"And?"

"I still don't know."

He hesitated. "I guess I really don't either. I just —" He shrugged. "I can't pretend not to feel something for you."

"I know." *If you only knew how much I can pretend, you'd never believe me if I told you what I really feel. Hell, I don't even know what I really feel.*

"I guess we'll see how it goes then, from here on out."

Forcing a smile, she said, "I suppose so."

After a long pause, his mouth broadened into a mischievous smile. "I finished with your pictures."

Another subject change. Rather than getting annoyed, she was relieved and followed suit. "Oh?"

"Would you like to see them?"

"Of course!"

His thumb traced the inside of her palm, doing it on purpose this time, and she couldn't hide the shiver that ran through her.

He grinned. "It's going to cost you."

"Is it now?"

"It is."

"How much?"

He shifted his weight and leaned toward her. "It's negotiable."

"Give me a starting bid."

His lips were almost touching hers now, and his hand slid around her waist.

"How about every stitch of clothing on that body of yours?"

With a wicked grin, she said, "You're going to wear my clothes?"

He laughed, his breath warm against her skin. "No, I'm not." His lip brushed hers as he spoke. "But neither are you."

"Then what ever are you going to do with them?" She let her tongue flick his lower lip and he released a ragged breath.

"I'm going to throw them on the floor." He slid his hand under her shirt. "All over the floor." His lips closed around hers.

In between kisses, she breathlessly whispered, "But I might get cold."

"No, no," he said, kissing his way down her neck. "I assure you, you *won't* get cold."

Chapter Forty-Three

Simone's narrow frame swam in Jason's oversized bathrobe, but it was soft and comfortable. He showed her to his office, and pulled the chair out from the desk for her. He leaned past her, his light, musky smell brushing past her nose as he moved the cursor around the screen to a folder, opened the folder, and set it to *preview* the photos.

"Just use the arrow keys to move back and forth," he said, gesturing toward the keyboard.

She clicked through the photos. The first few showed her still mostly clothed. Her expression reflected her nervousness more than she expected, but his work was exquisite. She paused on the close-up of her fingers unbuttoning her blouse, the vaguest hint of cleavage behind her hand. For the longest time, she stared at it, amazed such a simple image could be so intriguing, so elegant.

"These are incredible, Jason."

Behind her, he exhaled, and she realized he had been holding his breath while he waited for her reaction. She glanced over her shoulder at him and he smiled.

"I'm glad you like them," he said. "I'm rather fond of the subject, myself."

"Well, I can't say I'm in love with seeing myself in pictures," she said. It was true; she cringed seeing herself in films, too. "But I love them. I really do."

He put his hands on the armrests beside her and kissed her cheek. "Pity we couldn't have gotten pictures of everything *after* the shoot."

She giggled. "Pervert."

"Guilty," he said. He nuzzled her neck and watched as she continued going through the pictures.

The photos were in sequential order, and she noticed something about her expression. In the beginning, her tension and self-consciousness bled into every image. Her smile was timid, her eyes shy. But as the shoot went on, as more and more skin showed up in each photo, her smile grew brighter and her eyes more confident.

She had never been so at ease with someone, let alone someone who had a camera pointed at her. Even as she stripped her clothes off, moved into a realm of posing she'd never even considered before, making herself more vulnerable with each frame, she was completely comfortable with him.

He touched his lips to her shoulder. Not a sexual hint, not an attempt to get her attention, just a gentle, affectionate gesture. With her free hand, she stroked his forearm.

She didn't usually like constant physical contact. When they were married, Gregory *constantly* had a hand on her or an arm around her. With him, that contact was a protective gesture, but always felt possessive. Clingy. Suffocating. Jason's touch was just comfortable. It didn't say, "Stay here"; it said, "I'm touching you because I want to."

And she wanted him to.

He kissed her on the cheek and wrapped his arms around her from behind. "I was thinking," he said, "that we could go back there tomorrow. Just spend a day there, enjoying each other, without worrying about anything else."

"That," she said, stroking his arm with her fingertips. "Sounds like a wonderful idea."

Chapter Forty-Four

That night, after finishing the fantastic dinner Jason had cooked, they settled onto the couch to watch a DVD.

As the movie started, Jason's fingers closed around Simone's shoulder. Absently, he stroked her arm with his fingertips. Not an attempt at foreplay or to turn her on—though, good Lord, it didn't take any effort on his part to do just that—just a warm, affectionate touch. At one point during the film, he turned his head toward her, and when she looked up, he tenderly kissed her forehead. So *this* is why people like watching movies on dates, she thought.

The tranquility she found in his arms was like nothing she had ever known. She was used to a lover who was just that: someone, with whom she had wild, satisfying sex, then went on her merry way. Arms that held her in front of a crackling fire or under a blanket in front of a movie were never the same arms that held her in the throes of passionate sex, yet there they were.

When the end credits started, she didn't want to move. She was so comfortable, so warm. He clicked off the movie, but made no effort to get up, his fingertips still

stroking her arm. She didn't want to change a thing, didn't want to breathe, afraid she'd ruin the moment.

"Allyson," he whispered, his soft voice breaking the silence.

She looked up to answer him, but before she could speak, he kissed her. There was no urgency in his kiss, no ulterior motive, just the softness of his lips against hers. His fingertips stroked the side of her face.

Her lips parted and her tongue brushed his lower lip. A shudder went through him and he pulled her closer. His tongue met hers, entwined with hers. Time ceased to exist as they kissed on the couch. They weren't making out like a pair of horny teenagers, weren't pawing at each other in a desperate need to get naked. They just held each other and kissed, two people wanting nothing more than to taste and breathe each other.

He broke the kiss and looked into her eyes, caressing the side of her face. "I could do this all night," he said, his warm breath whispering across her lip.

She pulled him closer again. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good."

The tenderness of his kiss almost drove her to tears. She could barely believe he was the same Jason who had fucked her like a madman on his table, against the wall, up against a car in the pouring down rain. Sometimes he was driven wild with insatiable passion, a need to have her *right now*. But now he just kissed her, held her, his touch soft and gentle.

If this isn't love, I don't know what is. She stiffened as soon as the thought crossed her mind.

Jason broke the kiss and looked at her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said.

He stroked her cheek with his thumb, the rest of his hand cradling the side of her neck. "Are you sure?"

She took a breath. *I'm not sure of anything right now. I'm not sure of anything other than the fact that there is no place in the world I'd rather be than right here with you, but there's*

so much you need to know, so much I need to say, so goddamned much I can't even figure out in –

"Allyson?" He cocked his head. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She wetted her lips. "I need – " She cut herself off.

His eyebrows lifted slightly. "Tell me."

She finally said the one and only thing she could be certain of right then. "I need you to kiss me again."

He smiled, that dimpled smile that was sexy and sweet and mischievous and everything in between. That smile that turned her spine to water and made her head spin.

"Kiss you again?"

"Please."

"That," he whispered, drawing her closer, "I can do."

Chapter Forty-Five

Simone only took a moment to adjust to the wobbling of the boat this time, getting her sea legs beneath her within a few minutes. Jason steered them out of Tofino and into the stunning maze of forested islands. He effortlessly navigated the labyrinth of straits and inlets, as if he knew it like the back of his hand. Like the back of her hand. Like any part of her. She shivered.

"There're a lot of other boats out today," he said, scowling at the various Bayliners and pleasure boats leaving foamy trails of wake in every direction.

"Tourists?"

He shrugged. "I guess so. Not really the season for them." He shrugged again. "But I doubt they'll find us where we're going." He winked at her.

As they continued through the maze of inlets and straights, there were fewer and fewer other boats. Soon, they were completely alone.

Simone watched the crystalline water for jumping salmon and scanned the cloudless sky for bald eagles. She loved this place. God, she loved it. Never in her life had she found a place more peaceful, more serene, more beautiful. She looked over her shoulder at Jason, watching him steer the boat, his brow furrowed above his sunglasses as he watched the water ahead of them. He glanced at her and smiled.

She returned the smile and turned her gaze back to the scenery. No, there was no place in the world where she could find peace like this, and no one else in the world she wanted to share it with. She realized now that when she was in L.A. and wanted to come back, it was not just Jason, it was Tofino. She was nearly as in love with Tofino as she was with Jason.

Wait. No. I'm not in love. No, it's too soon. This is just – it's – oh hell, I don't know. But no, I can't be in love. She bit her lip as her heart sank in her chest. She was thankful Jason couldn't see her face just now. All the guilt came rushing into her mind, weighing so heavily she half-expected the boat to list beneath her. This wasn't fair to Jason. She was leading him on.

But at the same time, she'd never been so happy with someone. Maybe, in spite of her objections, this *was* the right thing for her. And with all of her fears and worries, really, what harm had come of it? She was back in the game with her career, she'd had less to drink in the last couple of months than she usually had in one night, and she was getting the best sex she could remember.

He didn't push her to figure out how she felt, but sooner or later, he would want an answer. And he deserved one. Especially after she'd cancelled on him before at the last minute. He needed to know about Cecily, and Gregory, and everything else, sooner or later. Why couldn't she just tell him?

She wrung her hands in her lap. He deserved an answer; she just didn't know what that answer was. And now that she knew his history, she was even more terrified of telling him the truth.

Jason suddenly cut off the engine, startling her out of her thoughts. She turned to ask him what was wrong and he pointed off to the right. She followed his gesture

toward shore. There, just before dry land, three round, shiny objects bobbed in the water. After a moment, she realized the objects had eyes and long, twitching whiskers. A second later, all three disappeared beneath the surface. The water shimmered in three ripples heading toward shore, where the otters shot out like bullets with barely a splash between them. The trio paused and stared at Jason and Simone, round black noses sniffing the air.

Simone laughed aloud. She glanced back at Jason, and he gave her a smile. A moment later, the otters disappeared into the forest. Simone watched the empty shoreline for a long moment, waiting to see if they returned.

Whatever it was that Jason and Tofino were doing to her, she loved it. The serenity of the secluded village and the calm of Jason's company intoxicated her. There was a freedom here, with him, that the bottle had never offered. It occurred to her then that she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a drink, besides the occasional glass of wine with Jason. Maybe, just maybe, this was better for her than she realized.

She wasn't ready to say the words, not quite ready for the commitment that came with giving voice to what quietly simmered within her, but with each passing moment, she was more and more certain.

I love you more than life itself, Jason, she thought. She looked at him, a shudder rippling through her in response to the sexy half-grin he shot her. *I just hope you'll wait for me to be able to say it.*

They arrived at the crescent-shaped island and tied the boat. After Jason helped her out, he reached in and grabbed a small cooler she didn't remember him loading.

"What's that?" she asked.

He grinned. *Don't give me that grin, Jason, don't you dare; don't you know what it does to me?*

He took her hand and nodded toward the cooler. "You'll see."

He led her toward the shoreline where they had done her photo shoot, where they'd made love on a blanket. She shivered at the memory. Not only had he gotten her

in front of the camera — naked, no less — he'd turned it into one of the most erotic moments of her life.

He set the cooler in the sand and looked around. "Shit, I forgot something." He started toward the boat. "I'll be right back. No peeking in the cooler!"

Simone laughed. Jason jogged down the beach to the boat, leaned in — *my God it should be illegal to have an ass like that* — and grabbed a folded up blanket from inside.

He returned to her and laid the blanket out on the sand. He set the cooler beside the blanket. "Join me?" he asked with a grin as he sat.

"You have to ask?" she said with a smirk.

"Well, it seemed like the polite thing to do."

Simone sat on the blanket and he scooted toward her.

"I get the feeling you have something planned."

He tried to look innocent. "What ever gave you that idea?"

"I know you too well." She laughed.

"Well, you're right," he said. He touched her face and brought her almost close enough to kiss. His lips still a hair's breadth away from hers, he whispered, "We're going to spend the entire afternoon out here." He was so close his voice hummed against her lip. "We're going to take our time and enjoy every second."

He closed the distance between their mouths and kissed her, slowly, tenderly, his tongue exploring with no urgency at all, as if time stood still until he was satisfied. Each motion of his lips, of his tongue, of his fingers on the back of her neck, was electric on her flesh, her body reacting to every movement as if he was kissing her for the very first time.

His hand drifted under her blouse, his feather light touch on her skin inducing an involuntary sigh. Breathing her sigh in, he pulled her closer, his hand sliding up her back, pushing her blouse up.

He took her blouse off, and, with a swift, effortless motion of his fingers, her bra came with it. The crisp breeze raised goosebumps on her flesh, but it was the sizzling

warmth of his lips and tongue that hardened her nipples. Simone closed her eyes and let her head fall back, gasping with each deliberate, calculated sweep of his tongue.

He put a hand on the small of her back, and, his mouth never leaving her breast, he lowered her onto the blanket. He cupped one breast while his mouth worshipped the other. She ran her fingers through his soft but spiky hair. The beginning hints of an orgasm thundered within her, intensifying with each kiss, each touch.

God, she wanted him, she wanted him to be inside her right then, but he was in no hurry.

Resting his weight on his elbow, he kissed her breasts, her neck, and finally, her mouth. She grasped the back of his neck and pulled him closer, kissing him hungrily, desperately.

He pushed his jean-clad thigh between hers. With one hand, he unbuttoned her jeans, and his fingers slid into them. His fingertips found her clit, and she shuddered with the first sweep of his finger.

She clawed at his shoulders, her lips devouring his as he kept his subtle, delicious rhythm, sending her higher and higher with each motion. For a moment, she thought he was going to pull back and keep her from coming, tease her back and forth until he *let* her come, but he didn't. He just kept sending her farther and farther into orbit.

"Oh my God, Jason," she murmured between kisses, her entire body trembling as he pushed her closer and closer.

He kissed her neck, his breath hot on her skin. "Come for me, let me feel you come." His voice was steady, even, completely in control. Kissing the skin just below her earlobe he whispered, "*Come* for me."

She did. She came hard, trembling against his body, her back arching beneath him, her hands clawing at his back. He held her, kissing her neck and whispering in her ear, his every breath on her skin sending her further into ecstasy. Her nails dug into his shoulders. A soft growl escaped his lips.

When at last the climax subsided, he held her while she caught her breath. She looked at him and he grinned back at her.

"I love watching you come," he said, his voice ragged for the first time. Desire smoldered in his eyes. He bent to kiss her and said, "I assure you, my dear, it won't be the last time I get to watch you do so today."

They kissed for a long, lazy moment. Then, he sat up. "Let's get all of these unnecessary clothes out of the way, shall we?"

She smirked as she sat up. "Define 'unnecessary'?"

He pulled his shirt over his head, tousling his unruly hair. "If you're wearing it, it's unnecessary."

"Fair enough." She wriggled out of her jeans and tossed them aside. A moment later his landed on top of hers, but not before he got a condom out of his pocket and set it within easy reach. She laid on the blanket again, but to her surprise, he reached for the mysterious cooler.

"So are you finally going to tell me what's in that?" she asked.

"I'm not going to tell you," he said, pushing the lid open and reaching inside. "I'm going to show you."

She half-expected a bottle of wine to emerge, but instead, he brought out a bottle of chocolate syrup.

She blinked. She didn't need to ask. She couldn't have if she wanted to because her mouth had gone completely dry.

He leaned forward and kissed her. "I've always wanted to do this," he said with a grin. "And something tells me you're a woman who might enjoy it."

She nodded. It was the only reaction she could come up with.

He popped the top on the bottle and poured a tiny drop on his fingertip. He offered it to her and she took it, sucking it off his finger.

A boat engine startled Simone. Jason turned toward the sound, pursing his lips.

Simone sat up and instinctively reached for her shirt to cover up. "I didn't think anyone else came out here."

He shrugged and turned back to her. "Damn tourists. Don't worry about it." He grinned. "Besides, let them have a look."

She forced a smile, but didn't relax just yet. She watched the boat come toward the island, then turn. A moment later, it disappeared. Simone held her breath until she couldn't hear the engine anymore.

"Relax," he whispered. "They're gone."

She exhaled and nodded. She glanced at the bottle, then back at him, but didn't lie down just yet. "So," she said. "What were you going to do with that?"

He took her hand and kissed her forearm, then the inside of her elbow, sending a shudder through her. He picked up the bottle and drizzled a lazy swirl of chocolate down her arm to her wrist. The syrup was cool against her skin. He brought her arm to his lips again. He flicked his tongue across the inside of her wrist and his thumb circled her palm.

Working his way up her arm, he kissed every drop of chocolate from her skin, lingering here and there to trail the tip of his tongue across some sensitive spot. His other hand slid around her waist as his lips found her shoulder.

He laid her on her back again and picked up the bottle. He made a thin line of chocolate going up her belly, the coolness of the syrup taking Simone's breath away.

Setting the bottle aside, he put his hands on her waist to steady her and touched his tongue to the end of the stripe of chocolate. The heat of his tongue with the chill of the syrup was a delicious contradiction of sensations. Simone shivered.

Distantly, she heard another boat engine out on the water, but she didn't care. *Let them look.* Jason's words echoed in her mind, and she couldn't help but grin at the thought.

After his tongue licked away every last drop of chocolate, Jason drizzled on more, this time making a thin swirl around her breast, slowly working his way to her nipple. She trembled with anticipation as he got closer and closer, until finally the smooth coolness of the chocolate sizzled against her nipple.

He grinned at her and bent to lick the syrup off. *Oh my God, Jason, what are you doing to me?* Her skin quivered at his touch and the warmth of his tongue.

But why should he have all the fun? As he licked the last couple of drops off her nipple, she picked up the bottle and brought it up just behind him. She drizzled chocolate onto the back of his neck, and he tensed, a hiss of surprise escaping through his teeth onto her skin. She licked a drop off the front of his shoulder, and he shuddered.

"You didn't think I'd let you do *all* the work, did you?" She wriggled out of his grasp and moved around behind him as he sat up. The salty warmth of his skin mingled with bittersweet chocolate on her tongue as she traced the edges of his tattoos. She wanted him, ached for him, but she'd draw it out for him just as he had done for her.

She knelt behind him, kissing the side of his neck and pressing her breasts against him. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back, groaning softly. Her hand slid under his arms and around to his chest, her fingers running through the fine hair and tracing the contours of his abs. His breath caught as her hand slid down farther, her fingertips slowly, deliberately brushing his fully erect cock. She fought to keep her own breath controlled and even, forcing her hand to remain steady as she wrapped her fingers around him.

Her face was beside his now, and he turned toward her. He kissed her. With each slow stroke of her hand, his mouth became more insistent, more urgent.

"I can't wait anymore," he said, his voice hoarse with desire. He didn't wait for her to respond, but turned her around and took her into his arms.

They both trembled with arousal, and it took both of them to get the condom out and on, but they finally succeeded.

She wrapped her legs around him as he laid her down, and he was inside her before her back hit the blanket beneath them. He pushed himself deeper into her with each urgent thrust. Arching her back, she dragged her nails across his shoulders and he growled into her neck, taking her hard and fast, his breath ragged against her skin.

Jason's muscles tensed under her fingertips. His breath came in shallow, rapid gasps. He closed his eyes and let out a throaty groan as he drove himself deeper.

A moment later, he collapsed beside her, breathing hard against her neck, his breath sweet with chocolate.

Chapter Forty-Six

They stayed on the island well into the afternoon.

On the way back to town, there were a dozen or so boats milling around between a couple of inlets. Jason scowled at them, shaking his head. "Looks like the rental place is making a killing today." He steered his own boat in another direction. "It's usually deserted out here."

Simone glanced at him. "Busy tourist weekend?"

"Apparently. Bastards."

She laughed, raising an eyebrow. "You don't like tourists, do you?"

"I don't mind tourists," he said, trailing his fingers across her shoulder. "Except when they're interrupting my plans."

"Plans?"

He smirked, but said nothing. He steered them down a quiet inlet, far from any sign of the other boats, and cut the engine.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He put his arms around her. "Not a damned thing. I just wanted to touch you again. Now come here."

She laughed, staying just out of his reach. "So commanding."

"You wouldn't make a horny man beg, would you?"

"I absolutely would."

He leaned forward and pulled her toward him. "She-devil."

She sat on his lap, straddling him and wrapping her legs around him as he kissed her neck.

"So what would I have to do to talk you out of this shirt?" he asked.

"All you have to do is ask." She laughed.

He put his hands under her shirt and quickly lifted it over her head. "I didn't feel like asking."

"You're incorrigible."

"So?"

"So you should shut up and kiss me."

He laughed and drew her in for a kiss. The sound of an engine raised the hairs on the back of her neck. They both turned and saw a boat turning sharply and rooster-tailing on its way out of the peaceful inlet.

"Fucking tourists," Jason muttered.

Simone watched the boat nervously, kept watching even as it disappeared into the distance. She scanned the mouth of the inlet, searching for more, her blood turning to ice.

"Hey," Jason said, gently turning her face back to him. "They're gone. It's just a bunch of tourists."

You don't know that. "Right," she said, stealing another glance at the mouth of the inlet. *They don't know who I am. They're just tourists. This is a tourist destination. Relax.*

He touched her face gently. "You okay?"

Just tourists. "I'm fine," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"You should kiss me again to make sure."

"I can do that." He kissed her, but then broke the kiss and scowled at the mouth of the inlet as another boat motored past. He sighed. "Why don't we go back to the house? These tourists are not doing much for the atmosphere."

"Sounds good to me." She eased herself off his lap, trying not to rock the boat in the process. As she put her shirt back on, Jason fired up the motor again, and they made their way back to Tofino.

A tiny knot of disappointment tightened in Simone's stomach as the village came into view. The little island was paradise, and she didn't want to return to civilization. Just a few more hours, she wished. A few more hours of daylight, lounging with Jason on the secluded beach, making love until neither of them could move.

But they had to go back. And soon, she had to return to L.A. Her stomach tightened with dread.

She wouldn't think of that. Not now. For now, she was with Jason, and that was enough.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Before either of them knew it, they were standing in each other's arms in Jason's driveway, leaning against her car, postponing the inevitable goodbyes.

"I'm glad you came," he whispered, running his fingers through her hair.

She smiled. "Me too. I wish I didn't have to leave again."

"I know, but you'll be back. I hope . . .?"

She nodded. "Absolutely." She ran her fingers along his arm, tracing the velvet edge of his tattoo. "I know I'm being difficult about all of this, about figuring out what I feel —"

"Allyson, you don't have to apologize." He shrugged. "If anything, I've probably moved a bit too fast."

"I know, I just, I feel like I'm dragging you along while I take my sweet time getting my head out of my ass."

He laughed. "If this is what it feels like to have you drag me along, then do feel free to take your sweet time, because I'm loving it."

She smiled and ran a hand through her hair self-consciously. "Thank you," she said. "For being so patient with me."

"My pleasure," he said with a devilish grin. His expression shifted, and his tone became more serious. "Honestly, Allyson, all I want is to be with you. Even while you're

still sorting things out, figuring out what you feel, what you want, I'm perfectly happy just being with you." He kissed her before she could say anything more, and for a long, delicious moment, they just held each other, kissing beside the car.

Finally, she whispered, "I do have to go." Her heart was heavy with sadness; each time she left, it was more difficult than the time before. She wanted to stay here. Forever. *No, Simone, not forever, don't jump into these things, you've got responsibilities, you can't –*

"I know you do." He kissed the tip of her nose, and pulled her into a tighter embrace, hugging her tenderly. "I'll miss you."

The warmth and affection of his arms took her breath away. She could have stayed there, standing in his driveway in his arms, for the rest of time. But after a moment, he released her.

He started to speak, but hesitated. She swore he was biting back some emotion.

"What is it?" she asked.

He swallowed hard, avoiding her eyes.

She touched his face. "Jason?"

When finally he looked into her eyes, the intensity in his pulled the air out of her lungs. "Allyson, I know I said I didn't want to rush things, but I need –" He cut himself off, looking away again. "I need to say this."

Shit. Jason. Don't. Please. "Jason" She drew him down to kiss her, if for no other reason than to keep his thoughts unspoken for a few seconds longer.

He broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. His hand rested on the back of her neck, and she thought a tremor ran down his arm. "Allyson –"

Don't say it, Jason, she silently pleaded. *Don't make this more complicated than it is. I know it, you know it, we can't go there. Not yet.*

In little more than a trembling whisper, he said, "I love you, Allyson."

The threat of tears constricted her throat. He kissed her forehead and held her in silence. An endless silence, the tense quiet that happens at a crossroads, when a direction must be taken. She took a ragged breath.

His fingertips brushed the side of her neck. If he hadn't been holding her so close, she wouldn't have heard his unsteady plea as he whispered, "Say something. Allyson, please."

She chewed her lip, struggling to find the words.

"Allyson"

I love you, Jason, more than you can possibly imagine. She drew back slightly and looked up at him. "You barely know me, Jason." Her voice cracked and she tried to swallow the threat of tears.

"I know enough. I want to know more about you, but I know I'm in love with you."

She avoided his eyes. *I love you like I've never loved another man, and it scares the hell out of me.* "I don't, I don't know what I feel yet, Jason," she said, choking back emotion.

"It's okay," he said, brushing his thumb over her cheekbone. "I just needed you to know how I feel."

"Jason *I love you, and I can't bring myself to say it, because saying it would make it too real.*"

He dropped his gaze. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't —"

She took his hand. "No, don't be. I'm not saying I don't —" She paused, nearly choking on the "love you" that threatened to follow. *You don't know who I am. You don't know me, Jason.* "All I know is" She took a breath. "Is that I *don't* know." *You don't know that I'm scared you won't love me when you find out who I really am, and I'm so in love with you I'm scared to take that chance.*

Jason exhaled. "When you do, one way or the other, tell me. But" He wetted his lips. "I can't pretend I don't." His fingers ran through her hair. "Right or wrong, it's what I feel."

"Just give me some time," she whispered.

"As much time as you need." He stroked her hair. "I'll be here."

"Thank you," she said, forcing the words past the lump in her throat. "I should go."

"I know." He kissed her gently. "Whenever you want to come back, I'll be here."
She gave him one last kiss and got in the car.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Allyson, I love you.

His words echoed in her mind and tears sprang to her eyes. Driving down the highway toward Victoria, she desperately wanted to turn around and go back to him.

This was exactly what wasn't supposed to happen.

She was supposed to tell him. She was supposed to be honest, tell him everything he deserved to hear. She was supposed to tell him *before* he fell in love with the façade she'd so masterfully maintained since they met what felt like a lifetime ago. The longer she dragged this out, the more it was going to hurt when the truth came out.

"Shit." Her knuckles turned white on the steering wheel.

Guilt gnawed at her. The *whole point* of this trip was to tell him everything, but when she learned about his history, she'd lost her nerve.

This trip was supposed to be more than just getting her Jason fix. But God, she hadn't expected him to have such a painful past. He was married to a woman who'd behaved eerily similar to the old Simone. She was scared he would reject her if he knew half of the things she'd done. There was simply no denying she was more in love with him than she ever thought possible, no matter how much she'd sworn up and down she wouldn't fall for him. The harder she fell, the more afraid she was of losing him.

But the time had come for honesty. And not just with Jason. She'd hurt a lot of people in the last few years, and it was time for a change. She had a daughter who needed her, a man who loved her, and a lot of people who were waiting for her to get her head out of her ass.

Which is, of course, why she went to Tofino in the first place.

No more excuses.

No more lies.

No more stringing people along.

"As soon as I get back to L.A.," she said aloud. "No more excuses."

* * * * *

Jason reclined on the couch and rested the cold glass against his forehead. For the hundredth time, he relived that moment by her car.

Couldn't wait, could you, Connor? Had to just throw it out there while she already had one foot out the door. Again.

"Fuck," he whispered. He sipped the Jack Daniels, then rested the glass on the arm of the couch and sighed.

That familiar knot of cold dread coiled in his gut. She was still hiding something from him, still not telling him everything. One minute she trusted him enough to photograph her naked in spite of her camera shyness, the next, she pretended nothing was bothering her while they held each other on the couch. Each time she took two steps toward him, she took another three back.

What was he missing? He'd tried to be open with her. Tried letting her know how he felt, thinking that would make her feel more comfortable with him. In the heat of the moment, he'd thrown the Hail Mary. Stuck his neck out, laid everything on the line for her, and still she balked.

He sipped his drink and grimaced as it burned its way down his throat. Part of him wanted to just call the whole thing her off, to tell her to come back when she figured out what she felt. He was nobody's doormat, but he couldn't help the way felt about her. He was in love with her. Completely, totally, helplessly, stupidly in love with her.

He just needed something from her. A sign. A signal. *Something.*

"What do you want me to do, Allyson?" he whispered.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The next morning, Simone was ready to call Jason and iron things out, but a glance at her calendar reminded her that she had other obligations. Though she wanted nothing more than to call him and get it over with, she was supposed to pick Cecily up from Gregory's. Before she dealt with Jason and told him everything — *and damn it, I will. This time I will. He has to know* — she was going to be a responsible, attentive parent for once in her life. She'd neglected her daughter for too long.

Tonight, she promised herself. *Tonight, I will call Jason and lay it all out on the table.* Discussing this on the phone seemed cowardly, but she'd blown her chance to do so in person, and her confession couldn't wait another day. She gulped back the fear and the what ifs. She would. She had to.

But first, Cecily.

As she pulled out of her driveway, the throngs of paparazzi swarming in the street soured her good spirits. "Fucking vultures," she muttered. There were more than usual; someone must've found out she was flying in the night before. She kept her windows rolled up and her eyes on the road, refusing to let them dampen her good spirits.

All along the way to Gregory's, her mind kept going back to the last few days with Jason.

She fidgeted in the driver's seat. It had been less than twenty-four hours since she last tasted his kiss, but she couldn't wait to be in his arms again. A man like him had to be too good to be true. He just had to be. How could he be so fun, and so sweet, and so unbelievably phenomenal in bed? She didn't deserve a man as incredible as Jason. How could she have ever thought she wasn't in love with him?

Even through her happiness, guilt gnawed at her that she still hadn't been completely honest with him. He knew there was still more to tell, and seemed confident that when she was ready, she would tell him. She just hoped he understood. He would, she assured herself. He had to. Telling him over the phone seemed cowardly after she'd

had every opportunity to tell him in person, but it couldn't wait anymore. He needed to know who she was. He deserved the truth.

And he needed to know how she felt, because there was no mistaking it now; she was absolutely in love with Jason Connor.

She hummed along with the radio and smiled until her face ached. In spite of her nervousness about telling him everything, she couldn't remember being this happy.

After parking in front of Gregory's house, she took the front steps two at a time and knocked on the door. She had a few ideas of places to go with Cecily today, but figured she'd leave that up to her. Maybe they'd even make the trip to Disneyland, or head out to the beach, or just hang out at home and —

The door flew open. The fury in Gregory's eyes nearly sent Simone tumbling backward down the stairs.

"I do hope you're proud of yourself," he snarled.

"I, what? What are you talking about, Gregory?"

He threw a magazine at her. "You know damn well what I'm talking about."

She picked up the magazine — a tabloid — and her blood ran cold as she stared at the front page:

Troubled Star BUSTED in Canada with Mystery Lover!

' . . . another fling . . . ' says a source close to Simone Farrell. 'Another notch in the bedpost.'

Her stomach lurched into her throat at the fuzzy but undeniable images of herself with Jason. Topless, kissing him in his boat. In his arms on the little crescent-shaped island. Big, bold letters promising: *Even more photos we could barely censor enough to show you!*

"Gregory, I —"

"You promised me you'd get it together," he said through clenched teeth. His voice was raw with hurt and rage. "You promised you wouldn't humiliate yourself like this." He gestured at the closed door behind him. "Your daughter saw this, Simone."

Tears burned Simone's eyes. "It's not what it looks like, Gregory."

"Oh, isn't it?" He threw his hands up. "I suppose your fling with that Australian asshole *wasn't what it looked like* either, was it?"

She gulped, bunching the paper in her sweaty hands. "This is different, Gregory, I swear to God. I'm *not* just fooling around this time. They've got it all wrong."

He gestured at the tabloid. "Well, pictures say a thousand words, don't they?" She opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off with a sharp gesture. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer on Monday. I'm taking you back to court, and I'm taking Cecily. If you're lucky, you *might* get a supervised visit from time to time, but I wouldn't count on it." He turned to go but she grabbed his arm.

"Gregory, please. I swear to God, this isn't what it looks like."

"It wasn't last time, either."

Simone's gut twisted. "No. No, last time it was exactly what it looked like." He turned away, the corner of his mouth twitching with emotion. She went on, "I'm sorry, Gregory. I'm sorry for everything I've done to you, and to Cecily."

He looked at her, his eyes wet. "It's not going to cut it this time, Simone. I had faith in you, that you were getting back on track, but you blew it. Again. For the last time."

Before she could say another word, he wrested his arm from her and went inside, slamming the door. The sound echoed through Simone's head. Her hand went to her mouth. She couldn't breathe as she stared at the pictures.

She had to talk to Jason.

Chapter Fifty

The earliest flight she could get to Victoria left in a few hours, and she couldn't reach Jason by phone. Before she left, Simone had time to make one more brief stop. She parked, stormed up the walkway to the posh jewelry store and shoved the glass door open.

Every head in the place turned. Rage bubbled inside Simone as her gaze swept over everyone.

"Simone, what a pleasant surprise." Her sister's saccharine-sweet tone inflamed Simone's fury even more. Carolyn stood behind the counter, holding a necklace up for a younger couple.

"You *bitch*," Simone snarled.

"Simone, this can wait," Carolyn said through gritted teeth.

A few people whispered as they stared, wide-eyed, at the two sisters.

"No, I think that really *is* her," one said.

Simone bristled. She was going to pay for this one in the gossip columns, but she didn't care.

"Now *is* the time, Carolyn," she said. "We can either do it in here, or out there." She gestured sharply at the door leading out to the parking lot.

Carolyn flashed her customers a phony smile. "Will you excuse me for a moment?"

The woman nodded, still staring at Simone, while her husband glowered at Carolyn.

An older woman with an expression as steel-hard as the taut silver bun in her hair touched Carolyn's arm. "Why don't the two of you take care of this *elsewhere*?"

The tone reminded Simone of Anne-Marie's "don't argue with me" voice, but it held decidedly less affection. Carolyn glanced at her boss, swallowing with worry. Then she glared at Simone and followed her out into the parking lot.

As soon as they were outside, Simone whirled on her heel and stabbed a finger in Carolyn's direction. "How could you do this to me?"

Her sister folded her arms across her chest. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh really? I suppose it's just a coincidence that a 'trusted source close to me' reported details *only you knew* to a tabloid."

A smirk flickered across Carolyn's mouth. "I guess you should be careful who you leak details to, then."

"You're my sister, Carolyn!" Her eyes burned with the threat of angry – and now, deeply hurt – tears. "I trusted you."

Carolyn's gaze flicked toward a group of wide-eyed passers-by who had stopped to stare. "Oh give it a rest, Simone," she hissed. "You're making a scene."

Simone laughed. "I'm making a scene? You smear *bullshit* about my personal life all over the media, as if it's any of your business, and I am the one making a scene?"

"I didn't take those pictures," Carolyn said. "And I didn't write the articles. And I *certainly* wasn't the one running around naked on a beach with some tattooed young man." She threw her hands up and smiled. "It seems to me that you did most of the work."

"You were one of *two* people who knew I was in Tofino. An amazing coincidence that the paparazzi found me there *days* after I told you."

"Then I guess I'm guilty, aren't I? Heaven forbid someone finds out where a goddamn movie star is hiding out."

"What is your problem, Carolyn?" Simone demanded. "You just can't stand to see anyone else happy?"

The sarcasm evaporated and Carolyn's tone turned venomous. "I can't stand to see people get rich and famous who don't deserve it and then fuck it away." Her eyes narrowed. "And I do mean *literally* fuck it away this time, just like you've done all along."

"Is that what this is all about?"

Carolyn's eyes narrowed. "You've done nothing but fuck away everything you've been given. A movie career, a movie star husband, a life anyone would envy." She shifted her weight. Her jaw was rigid. "I think you damn well deserved to be knocked down a notch."

Simone shook her head in disbelief. "You don't have a clue, Carolyn."

"What? About how *stressed* you've been? About how miserable you are in your *mansion*?" She gave Simone a look of mock sympathy before rolling her eyes. "Give it a rest, Simone. I suppose you curl up at night with your Oscar on a bed of hundred dollar bills and cry, don't you?"

"Just because you pissed away your chance at this life doesn't mean I didn't earn my way to where I am," Simone said. "And there are some things in life that money and a goddamned trophy won't fix."

"And cavorting around with a different man every weekend will?"

Simone flinched. "I'm done with that." By then, a thick crowd was gathering, and Simone winced at the sound of a camera shutter.

Carolyn glared at her. "You're done with it, except on your little trips to Canada."

"That isn't the same."

Carolyn laughed. "Isn't it? From what I saw in the news, it sure looks the same." She paused and smirked. "Excellent taste this time, though. I must commend you. I'd have done the same if a man like that had thrown himself at my feet."

"He didn't throw himself at my feet," Simone spoke through clenched teeth. "He doesn't even know who I really am." Her veins turned to ice. *Unless he's read the paper, oh God, please tell me hasn't read it!* She glared at her sister with renewed fury. "You've gone too far this time, Carolyn. When you grow up and decide it's not your life's mission to make sure everyone else is as miserable as you, look me up." Her tone softened from one of anger to one of deep sadness and regret. "I wanted us to be close again. I really did. I told you about him because that's the kind of things sisters tell each other about." She shrugged and turned to walk away. "In the future, I'll try not to be so optimistic."

Carolyn screamed something at her from behind, but Simone ignored her. She concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, avoiding the eyes of the people who'd gathered as they parted to let her past. The snapping shutters made her skin crawl, but she kept walking.

Once she was safely in her car, she checked her phone, praying for a call from Jason, but the only missed calls were from Anne-Marie. She cringed; she'd been avoiding her agent's calls, but sooner or later, she would have to face that music.

She glanced at her watch. Her flight left in four hours. Time to head to the airport. She just hoped she could get to Tofino before the tabloids did.

Chapter Fifty-One

"Jason, it's Allyson, I need to talk to you. Please call me back."

"It's me again. I'm on my way up there. I really need to talk to you. Call me. Please."

"I'm getting on a plane right now. I'll probably be in around nine. Please call me, Jason; I need to talk to you as soon as possible."

Jason rubbed the bridge of his nose as the last of her voice messages wrapped up. He replayed them. Again. Then again. Her voice shook. She sounded on the verge of tears. With each message, the urgency in her voice intensified, and each time he replayed them, the knot in his gut tightened.

He glanced at the clock. Seven thirty. She had long since landed and was on the highway. By now, she was well out of cell phone range, so there was no point in calling her back. With a heavy sigh, he leaned back in his chair.

His eyes went to the photos on his desk and he wondered what she needed to say to him. As far as he could tell, there was nothing left to say.

"A picture says a thousand words, doesn't it, *Simone*?"

* * * * *

It was a quarter past nine when she pulled into his driveway. Her heart pounded as she saw him through the rain sliding down the windshield. The warm glow inside

the house lit his silhouette on the front steps. She got out of the car, her heart in her throat, and started across the muddy driveway.

He sat on the third step, oblivious to the icy rain that slicked his hair back and dripped down his expressionless face. The soggy magazine rolled up in his hand told her she was too late. *Much* too late.

"It's not often this town makes the news." The cold fury in his voice sent a chill straight to her core. "Everyone in town made sure I got a copy."

"Jason, I can explain —"

"What is there to explain?" He unfurled the wet magazine. "Another fling? Another notch in the bedpost? The latest in the adulterous, out-of-control star's downward spiral?" He snorted bitterly and glared at her. "I should have known you were married."

"I'm divorced, Jason. I'm not married, I swear."

"Obviously when you *were* married, it didn't stop you from having a fling with —" He paused, glancing at the wet tabloid. "Well, whatever his name is."

"They have it all wrong, Jason."

"Do they?" He looked at the tabloid again. "Which part, *Simone*?" His voice was venomous with fury as he said her name, sending her heart into her feet. "The part where you cheated on your husband before he was, as you claim he is, your ex-husband? Or maybe the part where you've got a *daughter* you didn't bother mentioning? Tell me, *Simone*, are they wrong about the part where you're using me just like you used the last dozen 'boy toys'?"

"Those were their words, not mine."

"Then what *are* your words?" But he put up a hand. "No, forget it. I don't want to know."

"Jason, please, just hear me out."

"No." His eyes narrowed. "No, you've had plenty of time to say it. Plenty of chances to do something other than lie to me."

"Jason —"

"It's a damned good thing we used condoms, isn't it?" he growled.

Stung, she dropped her gaze.

"I thought you were different. I thought I could take a chance with you, but you're no better than her." He pursed his lips as if the words left a bitter taste in his mouth.

She didn't need to ask to know who 'her' was. "I wanted to tell you. Jason, please —"

He shook his head. "No. Time is up, sweetheart. You had more than enough opportunity. I didn't pry, and I knew you had something more to tell me, but this Not *this*." He glanced at the paper again. "You couldn't even tell me your real *name*." His voice was acrid with disgust.

"I was going to tell you."

"When?"

"Not soon enough. I know."

He stood. "Look, if you wanted this to just be about sex, you could have just said so. I would have been fine just fucking you like everyone else in the world apparently has."

Simone could neither speak nor meet his eyes.

He went on, his voice unsteady, more hurt than angry this time, "But you knew I had feelings for you. I was in love with you, Allyson. Simone. Whatever the hell your name really is. I was *in love with you*."

She faced him, forcing back the tears that threatened. "I'm sorry, Jason, please. I can never be sorry enough."

He tossed the wet magazine at her feet. "You're right. You can't."

He walked into the house, leaving her standing in the rain. The door slammed behind him.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Simone keyed herself into the cold, sparse room of the rundown motel and threw her overnight bag on the decrepit yellow-upholstered armchair. Clutching a brown paper bag for dear life, she sank onto the hard bed.

The bag in her hand held only a couple bottles of Smirnoff. No sense bothering with the orange juice or even a cheap paper cup this time.

* * * * *

Icy rain poured down Jason's face and cascaded down the back of his neck. Water ran off his arms as he dug his fingers into the deck's railing. His teeth would have chattered from the cold, but his jaw was clenched against a deeper chill.

He stared up at the dark sky. The stars, which usually gave him a sense of calm, were hidden behind the thick blanket of clouds, but he barely noticed. Even if he could see them, he doubted they would bring him much peace tonight.

More than once, he wondered if he'd been too cold and cruel to her when she came to apologize. He'd been angry, and justifiably so, but had she really deserved everything he'd thrown at her?

Then he thought of the pictures all over the tabloids. All the looks people had given him when he'd gone into town, the way they'd done that behind-the-hand whispering that only happened in small towns. The phone calls from his brother, his parents, and God only knew who else before he'd finally shut off the ringer.

For all of that, she'd earned every drop of venom that had been in his voice.

He picked his glass up off the railing and drained it, grimacing more out of habit than anything as he swallowed. He was too distracted to taste how much the rain had watered down the Jack Daniels, too numb to feel the half-hearted burn as it went down his throat.

He should have known.

* * * * *

She should have known this would happen. She should have just been honest with everyone from day one. Better yet, she should have tossed Jason's number out the window while she still had some sanity left in her idiot brain. She should have just focused on fixing all the bullshit in her life, not adding something else to the mix. She knew this would bite her in the ass. She knew from the beginning.

Now her career was toast. She'd been warned. The director and producer took her on with the understanding that she wouldn't bring any bad press on herself and, with it, the film.

She'd promised Gregory she would be a responsible parent to Cecily. She'd promised Anne-Marie she'd get her head out of her ass.

And she'd taken Jason's love, trust, and patience for granted just a *little* bit too long.

All that was left was damage control, but it was really too little too late.

* * * * *

He relived their earlier conversation over and over in his mind. Of *course* she was just about to tell him the truth. Of *course* this wasn't what she wanted to happen. And the tears in her eyes were a nice touch. They probably helped her win that fucking Oscar.

"Good show, Simone," he said through his teeth, flinching at the sound of her real name.

He'd wondered if their relationship—their *fling*—would end badly, but he never saw *this* coming. Now she'd come all this way to talk to him, to grovel and apologize, but how could he believe a word of it after everything she'd lied to him about all along?

Then again, he told himself, she *had* come all this way. Maybe she was sincere. After all, she'd *only* cheated on her ex-husband and her past *several* boyfriends. Clearly she'd turned over a new leaf.

He rolled his eyes and muttered a string of profanity into the night. Simone wasn't here to apologize to him. She only wanted to do damage control and minimize the destruction of her damned career. Never mind what this could do to *his* career. The consumers of her work were more than accustomed to actors making asses of themselves. His clientele was not quite so forgiving of this kind of scandal. While he would still be able to sell his work, this was going to follow him for a long, long time. *Maybe I should start signing my work, 'Jason Connor, that guy who fucked Simone Farrell on a beach'.*

"Right," he said into his glass. "That would narrow it down to about ten people." He finished his drink, realizing then that it was nothing but rainwater. He went back inside to find something a bit stronger.

* * * * *

She pulled one of the bottles out of the bag and held it for a while, just staring at the crystalline liquid inside. This wasn't going to help with damage control. No matter. Damage control would come tomorrow. Tonight, she just didn't want to feel.

She unscrewed the bottle cap and took a long drink. Then more.

It had been months since she'd touched more than a few glasses of wine — the few sweet glasses of wine she'd shared with Jason, god damn it why did she *do* this to herself? — and her stomach wasn't ready for the vodka. She barely made it to the bathroom — bottle still in hand — before it all came back up. But that didn't stop her; she kept right on drinking. The numbness she needed was deep in that bottle, or maybe the second one, and she needed to get there *fast*.

* * * * *

Jason wandered from room to room, cursing in between swallows of Jack Daniels. He couldn't find a moment's peace in the house. Every room reeked of

Allyson's — no, *Simone's* — memory. All the times he couldn't wait to get her into bed and took her right there on the couch. Or the table. Out on the deck. Out in the goddamned driveway, for crying out loud.

Even his office wasn't safe. All he could think of was that afternoon when she'd mercilessly teased him in the chair while he was on the phone with Sean. And there was the damned computer that was full of photos of her out on the island — his island, his *refuge* from the rest of the world, his sacred place that now graced the cover of *every fucking tabloid on the planet*.

He threw the empty glass at the wall. Leaning against the doorway, he rubbed the bridge of his nose as his shoulders slumped. "Fuck," he whispered, the sound of his own voice startling him more than the shattering glass had a second ago.

He wasn't going to find any peace from her memory, not tonight. Not without some serious help from his good friend, Jack, at least. Running his hand through his still wet hair, he headed back into the kitchen to find that bottle.

* * * * *

She took another swig while she slumped on the floor between the water-stained wallpaper and the toilet with the crack in the lid. By the time she'd drunk enough to know it wasn't coming back up, her legs weren't about to hold her upright, so she just stayed where she was.

* * * * *

He rested his elbow on the couch armrest and closed his eyes as he pressed the bottle against his forehead. His mind was hazy and the room spun around him, but his eyes still stung more than his throat burned, so he hadn't had nearly enough to drink.

"Take me away, Jack," he said, raising the bottle to his lips again. "Get me the fuck out of here." He took another long swallow and kept drinking until he couldn't remember why.

* * * * *

She drank until she was sick again, she was sick until she cried, and then she drank until she couldn't cry anymore. She threw up again, and she cried again, but she couldn't remember why. All she knew was how badly she hurt. And the more she drank, the more she hurt, until she couldn't remember where she'd left the bottle, even when it was still in her hand. She couldn't remember why she was drinking, but couldn't think of a reason not to.

So she drank.

Chapter Fifty-Three

The next morning, Simone heard herself groaning before she was even aware of the pain slicing through her skull. Opening her eyes to the blinding light of day, she realized she'd passed out on the retina-searing orange carpet with the empty bottle still in her hand.

The room spun around her, but she managed to pull herself to her knees and slump against the wall. For a long time, she just sat there, waiting for the nausea and the headache to recede.

It was no surprise when reality sliced its way into her consciousness and rattled through her skull. She should have known by then, should have known long ago, that she couldn't drink away her sorrows: she could just drink enough to ensure she faced her sorrows with a bitch of a headache.

"So this is what rock bottom feels like," she muttered. Her voice snapped painfully against the insides of her head.

She looked at the phone on the night table. Swallowing a wave of nausea, she pushed herself to her feet – a herculean effort – and stumbled toward the bed. She stared at the phone a while longer, waiting for the numbers to stop blurring.

When at last she could focus, she picked up the receiver. She hesitated, trying to decide who to call first.

She dialed.

Ring.

Ring.

"Hello?"

"Gregory, it's Simone." Silence. "Please, I need to talk to you." Her voice cracked.

There was a lengthy pause. Finally, he said. "Okay. Talk."

"I just wanted you to know I'm sorry."

"For which part?"

I deserved that. "For everything." She took a deep breath. "Everything during our marriage, the way I've treated you and Cecily, the way I've behaved in the public eye."

"You've been drinking, haven't you?"

She winced. "Last night. I'm sober now."

He laughed, but there was no humor in his voice. "Funny. You usually only grovel when you're drunk."

"I'm not groveling, Gregory." She closed her eyes and ran an unsteady hand through her hair. "Listen, about Cecily –"

"If you think for a minute –"

"I'm not going to fight you this time."

"You – what?"

She forced back the emotion that rose in her throat. Her voice quivered in spite of her best efforts. "I think it would be best if you had full custody. At least for a while. While I get myself straightened out."

She heard him exhale. When he spoke, his voice was still hard. "This isn't so you can spend more time with your 'boy toy', is it?"

She flinched. She deserved that, too. It wouldn't have been the first time. "No. Not this time."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"Rehab?"

She rubbed her aching neck. "The press would have a field day with that, wouldn't they?"

"It might be the best thing for you."

She looked at the unopened bottle of Smirnoff on the night table. "I don't know," she said quietly. "I think this morning is enough to get me off that shit forever."

"You've said that before."

"My head didn't hurt this bad before."

Gregory sighed. "I'm worried about you, Simone."

Simone choked back the emotions that tightened her throat. "I know."

"Are you sure you're going to be all right?"

No. My God, how could I be sure? I'm a long way from 'all right', Gregory, a long, long way. She took a breath. "I'll be fine."

"Just, at least consider getting some help. Even if it's just a therapist. Something."

"I will."

There was a heavy pause on the line. "I want to hear it from you. What's *really* going on with this guy?"

Simone let the tears fall then. "Nothing, now. He wants nothing to do with me." She wiped the tears and tried to pull herself together. "I don't blame him, I guess. But . . ." She put her hand over her mouth as the sobs overtook her.

"What *was* going on with him?"

"More than what the press said." The words were bitter on her tongue. "*Way* more. I swear to you, I was trying to get myself put back together. When I went to Canada the first time, I didn't expect to meet anyone." She paused, what was left of her composure dangerously close to breaking. "And after I met him, I, I was happy for once."

I was going to tell Cecily. I just needed to talk to him again first, and then I was going to tell her. I swear to God, Gregory."

Gregory said nothing for a moment. Then, "Are you serious about Cecily? About giving up custody?"

"Yes," Simone said without hesitation. "I'd still like to see her."

"I know," Gregory said. "I won't keep her from you."

Guilt flared up in Simone's chest. He had every right to keep Cecily away from her, but he still had faith in her. Somehow, after all she'd done, he still had some faith in her. "Thank you," was all she could say.

His voice was gentler now. "I'll have our lawyers talk on Monday. For now"

"Tell Cecily I love her."

"I will. I promise." He paused. "If you need anything"

"I have to handle this one myself, Gregory."

"You're not going to do anything rash, are you?"

"What? Like kill myself?"

He hesitated. "Something like that."

It didn't sound like a bad idea right then, but she wouldn't. She was through with being selfish. "No. I won't." She rubbed her forehead and took a breath. "I'll be fine. I promise."

He was quiet for a moment, as if digesting her words. "Okay, then." He took a breath. "You'll take care of yourself, right?"

"Of course."

"Good-bye, Simone."

"Good-bye, Gregory."

The click of the receiver on its cradle echoed through her with a note of finality. She exhaled heavily and put her head in her hands for a long moment. She was definitely out of the running for Mother of the Year, but she felt considerably better knowing Cecily was in Gregory's care, surrounded by stable, mature adults who could take care of themselves enough to take care of her.

After she hung up with Gregory, Simone gritted her teeth and dialed Anne-Marie.

"Anne-Marie Bates," her agent answered.

"It's Simone."

The line fell silent. "You haven't returned any of my calls."

"I know. I'm sorry." *Christ, I'm going to be saying that a lot for a while, aren't I?*

"What the hell is going on, Simone? One minute you're telling me you've got it together, you're not going to fuck up; the next moment I'm doing damage control with Henry Wall and the press."

"You're probably not going to believe me, but it's not what the press made it out to be."

Anne-Marie paused. "I know. But — Christ, how did you let this happen?"

Simone rested her elbow on her thigh and ran a hand through her disheveled hair. "Carolyn found out —"

"You told *Carolyn*?"

Simone winced. "It was stupid, I know."

"Jesus, babe, what did you expect?"

"Evidently I thought she was actually willing to be my sister for once."

"Shit. What now?"

"I'm not sure."

"Has Gregory found out?"

"*Oh* yes," Simone said. "I found out from *him*."

"Oh shit. That must've been a pleasant conversation."

"Delightful." Simone rubbed her forehead. "I told him I'm giving him full custody of Cecily."

Anne-Marie sighed. "Probably a good call. What about your man?"

"Jason?" Simone bit her lip. "He didn't take it well." She hesitated. "I'm going back to his place this afternoon. Hopefully he'll talk to me, but . . ."

"But?"

"I doubt he will. He's furious."

"I would be too."

"Me too." She laid back on the bed and rubbed her eyes. "I really fucked up this time."

"Yeah, you could say that." Anne-Marie was silent for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was softer. "Listen, I'm not going to lie; this isn't looking good with the brass."

"As if I'm the first actress to make an ass of herself in the tabloids."

"No, you're not," she said. "But an actress with bad publicity is a liability these days. People don't think it's quite so cute anymore."

"What can I do now?"

"You may want to think about rehab —"

"I don't need rehab."

"So says damn near everyone who *does* need rehab."

"Look, I know it's fashionable to do a stint at the Betty Ford Clinic, but I don't need it. I'm not going to do it just to pacify the press."

"Simone, your drinking —"

"Trust me," Simone said, eyeing the unopened Smirnoff bottle warily. "I think this morning has done more for my drinking than any rehab could ever do."

"I'll take your word for it," Anne-Marie said, in her, *we'll talk about this later but you will do things my way*, voice. "I have to go; I've got a meeting with my boss."

"Okay. I'll be back in L.A. in —" She paused. "Soon."

Anne-Marie sighed. "Take care of yourself, Simone."

"I will. I promise." Simone hung up the phone and rubbed her eyes. She would do more damage control on her career when she got back to Hollywood. She wasn't the first actress to go off the deep end, and she certainly wouldn't be the last. It might take a while to shake the stigma of a tarnished reputation, but that was a wound only time — and a complete one-eighty on her part — would heal.

Besides, she had one more thing to address before she went back to California.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Jason's house came into view. Simone gritted her teeth against the tears that thickened her throat. This was going to hurt.

The Jeep was in the driveway. That was a good sign. She swallowed. Hopefully he hadn't gone out walking on the beach. She didn't know how long she could sit and wait for him before she lost her nerve.

No. No backing out. She had to do this, no matter how much it hurt to see him hate her.

The sound of her own fist knocking on his door sent cold dread through her veins. He glanced out the window at her; judging by the hardness in his expression, he knew it was her even before he saw her.

He opened the door and stood in the threshold, arms folded across his chest. His unshaven skin rippled with the fierce clenching of his jaw. His eyes were red around the edges. Maybe he'd had too much to drink. Maybe he'd been crying over what she'd done to him. Hell, maybe he just didn't sleep. She supposed finding oneself naked on the cover of a tabloid could cause someone to lose sleep; she was practically numb to it now.

"Are we just going to stand here?" he asked, his tone arctic.

Her heart pounded. "I just want to talk."

"Whatever it is you came to say, just say it and be done with it." There were no contradictions in him anymore. His expression, his voice, and his body language were all in perfect agreement now.

In spite of the pain and the fear, she forced herself to look into his eyes. "I just came to say I'm sorry."

"Funny, you mentioned the same thing last night."

She dropped her eyes. "Jason—"

He shifted his weight. "Is that why you never could tell me how you felt? Because it was just another fling?"

"It *wasn't* just another fling."

"So you're telling me the reporters just made it all up. That you never told anyone I was just another notch on your bedpost. You know, I was under the impression that even reporters still had some ethics left." He raised an eyebrow. "They leave the fiction to the actors."

She winced. "I know who told them that," she said. "I didn't think it would get leaked to the press."

His eyes narrowed. "So you did say it?"

"I said it because I didn't trust the person I was talking to with the truth."

"But you didn't mind making up a lie?" He rolled his eyes. "Then again, I suppose lying comes naturally to you. You certainly had no trouble convincing me."

"Look, I never should have said anything to her. I know what a conniving, evil bitch she is, and I should have known this would happen. But I . . ."

"You what?"

"I didn't even know how I felt at that point, Jason," she said. "I was so giddy every time I got back to L.A., from being with you; I needed to tell someone about you. I just—I didn't want her to know how I *really* felt."

"Apparently you didn't want *anyone* to know how you really felt, whatever the hell *that* is." He fidgeted against the doorframe.

"I didn't even know. Not until a few days ago."

"Pity you didn't figure it out before you let the rest of the world find out." He ran a hand through his unruly hair. "I suppose I should be used to being the last to know about these things, but I guess I thought you were different."

"I am different, it's not —"

"Why did you hide everything from me? Your entire life? Even your name? What did you think I was going to do? Throw you out because you're a fucking movie star?"

"No, not at all," Simone said, struggling to keep her composure. "That's just it, though: you were the only man who ever loved me because of *me*, not because I'm 'Simone Farrell, the Movie Star'." She wrung her hands and avoided his eyes. "I didn't want to lose that."

"And you thought I'd keep loving you after you lied to me?" His voice was unsteady.

She turned away, her shoulders slack. The weight of his glare was leaden on her back. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"Then what *did* you mean to happen, Simone?"

Simone put a hand to her mouth as the tears threatened to fall. "I didn't want you to be the last to know. I had no idea the press knew. Hell, they *don't* know truth. They think they do; they think they know but they got it wrong this time." She wiped her eye and cleared her throat. "I came up, this last time, because I wanted to tell you everything. But after you told me about your ex-wife, about everything that had happened with her, I just, I couldn't. I don't know, I got scared." She took a breath. "The morning the story broke, I had already made up my mind I was going to tell you the truth, tell you everything." She bit the inside of her cheek, taking a deep, ragged breath. "I was going to call you that night, but first"

"But first *what*?"

She looked at him then, forcing her words out through gritted teeth. "I needed to see my daughter. I've been a shitty parent, and I needed to be with her. She's been through hell, she's been humiliated by me time and time again, and I owed it to her to be her parent for once. After that, I was going to call you *that night* and tell you everything." She put her hands up. "That's the honest truth, Jason."

He watched her, his intense brown eyes burning with unreadable emotions.

Simone ground her teeth. "I have nothing to offer you but my word. I know that isn't worth shit to you now, but it's all I have." She swallowed hard and wetted her lips. "All I can do is hope you believe me when I tell you I wanted the whole world to know about you, about how I felt — and still feel — about you, but not like this. Not some

sleazy lie." She took a ragged breath. *Time to let the guard down. No more defenses, no more walls. No turning back.* "And I just came here to tell you what I wanted the whole world to know. I want you to be the *first* to know. Not the last."

"And what is that?" His expression was cold, but the corner of his mouth twitched with a flicker of emotion as he watched her.

She exhaled. "That I am deeply, undeniably, in love with you. And I have been from the beginning. I was scared. I've never felt like this about anyone. I know I'm the last person in the world you'll believe, but I needed you to hear it from me. I love you, Jason."

His breath caught. It was an almost imperceptible reaction, but it was there. Please, Jason, please, she silently begged. *Please believe me.* Then his arms tightened across his chest. He still said nothing, but his expression hardened again.

She cleared her throat. There was nothing more to say. "I just wanted you to know."

"Well," he said, his tone cold and flat. "Now I know."

They looked at each other in silence for a long moment, until she couldn't stand the weight of his stare any longer. She turned to go, started for the car, hoping he would stop her, but knowing he wouldn't. She didn't look back as she got into the car and left.

Chapter Fifty-Five

After Simone had gone, Jason closed the front door and leaned against it. He rubbed his temples, trying in vain to get rid of the aching remains of last night's binge. It had been years since he'd drunk that much that fast.

Fat lot of good it did me.

He wondered if Simone had done the same thing last night. It was impossible to tell if the red around her eyes had been from tears or booze. If the article he'd read was accurate, she was no stranger to the bottle.

Staring up at the ceiling with unfocused eyes, he thought back to the time they'd spent together. All told, she *might* have consumed two bottles of wine in his presence. She'd never had more than one or two glasses at a time, never enough to slur her words or compromise her balance. For someone with an alleged drinking problem, she never got carried away around him.

She never got carried away with the liquor, anyway. From the sound of it, alcohol wasn't her only addiction, or her most destructive. Grinding his teeth, he wondered how many other men were on her roster in between those incredible nights she'd shared with him.

He shook his head, reminding himself there was no sense dwelling on it. Time to move on, no matter how much it all pissed him off. And hurt him. And humiliated him. And —

Definitely time to move on.

But moving on was easier said than done in this house. Just as it was last night, the cabin was alive with her memory. The thought of drowning those memories in Jack again was tempting, but the throbbing in his head made him think twice.

Well, if I can't get her out of my head, I can at least get out of the house for a while.

He grabbed his keys and headed into town.

* * * * *

Simone drove around for a while before going back into Tofino. The press was there, and she just couldn't face them. Not yet.

Her heart ached and her stomach was tied up in knots. All she could think of was the chill in Jason's voice, the anger in his eyes.

Well. Now I know. The echo of his cold words brought tears to her eyes again. She deserved his contempt, all of it and more, but seeing it, hearing it, feeling it in the air, was unbearable.

Finally, she headed back into town. She turned the rental car from Campbell Street onto Main, in the heart of Tofino, and her blood turned to ice. The red Jeep. Parked in front of one of the shops. She thought about driving away then; she couldn't face him, not here, not out in public.

But then, up ahead, she saw reporters swarming the sidewalks, the street, the end of the marina. Anger boiled within her. She wanted to hate them for what they had done to her life, and it was true, without them, she might still have Jason, but the fact was she had done it to herself. She could blame Carolyn and the press and everything between here and Mars, but she alone had hurt him. She had lied to him.

And if the media could broadcast her sins, perhaps they could also broadcast her apology.

She pulled into a parking space and put the car in park. She took a long, deep breath, and reached for the car door. Though there was no way to convince Jason how sorry she was, perhaps she could at least convince the rest of the world.

She got out of the car and started toward the heart of the swarming mass of reporters. They instantly saw her. Every snap of a camera shutter, every probing question, tightened the knot in her stomach, but she steeled herself and faced them down. Her heart pounded like she was standing on the tracks facing a speeding freight train.

In an instant, they were all around her, circling like sharks. Dozens of lenses vied for a good look at her and a massive bouquet of microphones was thrust into her face. The questions buzzed around her, but she heard nothing.

"I want to say something," she said quietly.

Slowly, the crowd fell silent except for the occasional snap of a camera shutter. They watched her. Waited.

She took a long, deep breath. She couldn't remember ever feeling so vulnerable, so exposed. "I want to clear up the lies that have been fed to you by my sister." She waited for a barrage of questions to interrupt her, but when it didn't come, she

continued. "Not for my own benefit, but for the person who was most hurt and humiliated by all of this."

She looked around at the reporters. Every one of them stared at her, eyebrows raised in anticipation. Finally, she said, "It is true that I have been coming here to Tofino, and that I have been involved with someone here." She swallowed. "But contrary to what my sister may have told you, my relationship with him was not 'just another fling', another 'notch in my bedpost'. For once in my life, I was not using someone." Emotion tightened her throat, but she forced herself to go on. "I made some mistakes in the past, and God knows I was self-destructing, completely falling apart, on a one-way ticket to rehab. But that has changed now. I've stopped drinking. I've stopped running around with any man I can find. The woman you see standing before you is not the Simone Farrell you're accustomed to."

"When will we meet this boyfriend?" a reporter interjected, pushing a microphone toward her face.

"Will he appear publicly?"

"How has he handled this latest scandal?"

Simone gestured for them to be quiet. She narrowed her eyes and forced herself to keep the anger out of her voice, but the venom seeped through her clenched teeth. "There is no more relationship to *make* public." She took a breath. "I lied to him about who I was, about what my intentions were. Although I truly had fallen in love with him—and remain more in love than I've ever been with anyone in all my life" Her voice wavered, and she paused while she regained her composure. "He was the last to know. I waited too long to tell him. I waited too long, and he learned the truth about me through the photos and the articles that were published." She cleared her throat as tears threatened to fall. "I can only say that I am sorry. To him, to everyone. I have made a mess out of my life over the last few years and too many people have been hurt along the way. I only regret that this man, the one who was probably more responsible than anyone for getting me back on the right track, isn't likely to forgive me anytime soon."

"Where can we find him?"

"Will he be willing to comment?"

"What's his name, Simone?"

Vultures, she thought bitterly. Simone opened her mouth to answer, but a voice from behind the crowd spoke first.

"Jason Connor."

The reporters' heads turned as one and Simone craned her neck. The crowd parted, and a second later, Jason's face came into view as he moved toward her.

His eyes were locked on her, but he spoke to the gathered reporters. "My name is Jason Connor."

"Jason," Simone whispered. His very presence sucked the breath out of her chest as he strode toward her. She couldn't read the intense expression on his face. It was somewhere between the icy fury she saw earlier and the feverish desire he'd had every time they made love. She couldn't breathe as he came closer, her knees trembling as she wondered what he'd come to say. She wanted to run to him and back away all at the same time.

She wetted her lips and started to speak, but his hand went to her hip and the other to her face, pulling her to him in a deep, passionate kiss.

When he broke the kiss, her hand went to her mouth as emotions overwhelmed her.

"I'm so sorry, Jason," she said finally. "For everything."

"I know," he said. "I heard everything you said." He dropped his gaze for a moment. "I understand why you did it." Simone stared at him in disbelief, and he went on. "I was angry, but now I see why you did it." His eyes swept an angry arc across the gathered press. "I suppose if my life were spent under a microscope, I'd have done the same thing."

But . . . ? There had to be a *but*. There had to be.

He swallowed hard, and when he looked at her, his eyes — his devilish, boyish eyes — were filled with emotion. "I forgive you," he said. "And I'm sorry I was such an ass to you over it. I hope *you* can forgive *me*."

Forcing the emotions back, Simone could only nod.

Jason's arm tightened around her waist, gently pulling her closer. "I love you, Simone."

The sound of his voice saying her name was almost more than she could bear.

"I love you, Jason." Tears overcame her and Jason held her close, kissing her lightly. She was vaguely aware of the snapping cameras and questioning reporters, but she didn't care. All she cared about was being back in Jason's arms.

After a moment, they took their eyes off each other and turned their attention back to the press.

"What's next for you two?"

"Wedding bells?"

"Babies?"

Jason tensed beside her, but Simone just held up a hand and shook her head. "For once in my life," she said. "I think I'm just going to take this a day at a time and see where it goes."

Without another word, she clasped Jason's hand and led him out of the crowd. They ignored the questions and the cameras until they were in the Jeep.

Away from the prying eyes and ears, Jason muttered, "I don't know how you stay sane around that."

Simone shrugged. "I don't know that I'd call much of what I've done in the last ten years 'sane'."

He slid his hand onto her thigh. One of his "I just need to touch you" gestures, and damn it, it felt so good just to be touched by him again. Gooseflesh prickled her skin, a shiver running up her spine just like it did the first time he touched her out on the pier.

She rested her other hand on top of his. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. About everything."

"I know." He turned his hand over under hers and laced their fingers together. "Let me ask you something, though."

She swallowed. "Go ahead."

He glanced at her before looking out through the windshield again. "Why were you here the day we met? I mean, what really brought you to Tofino."

"Honestly?"

"Yeah."

"Ironically," she said. "My agent sent me up here to sober up and get my head together."

He nodded once, slowly. "So, you were trying to straighten your life out?"

"Yes."

He said nothing for a moment. Then, "Did it work?"

"Well, sort of. I gave up the alcohol that day, but . . ."

Jason glanced at her again. "But?"

"She told me I was forbidden from alcohol and men." She paused. "So, technically I made it halfway."

Their eyes met. When Simone gave him an innocent smile and a shrug, they both laughed.

"So you did," he said, squeezing his hand as he chuckled.

Simone's laughter faded and she chewed her lip. "To be serious, I really am sorry about all of this, Jason."

"So am I." He nodded and squeezed her leg gently. "I overreacted."

"No, you didn't. I think I would have done the same." After a moment, she whispered, "I meant everything I said last night. And today. I really do love you."

"I know." He smiled. "And I love you."

They drove in silence for a while. As Jason's house came into view, she turned to him. "So where *do* we go from here?"

He put the car in park and thought for a moment, chewing his thumbnail. "I don't know. I really don't." Then he grinned. "But I know where we can go right *now*."

Simone raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

He cocked his head and rubbed his chin, pretending to be deep in thought. "Well, except that I can't quite decide between the bed or the sofa"

Simone laughed. "I'll race you."

He flashed her a devilish grin and they both leapt out of the Jeep.

They didn't make it past the front porch.

Epilogue

About a year later

Los Angeles, California

The limousine stopped and started, inching along the limo-packed boulevard toward the red carpet. Simone looked out the tinted window at the throngs of fans and paparazzi swarming up ahead. Nerves tingled in the pit of her stomach. How many times she'd done this, she couldn't count, but this time was different.

Beside her, Jason switched the phone from his right ear to his left. "Well, if that's what you want to do, then we will when you come up next weekend." He paused, listening. Then he chuckled. "Yes, yes, I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die." Another pause, another laugh. "Okay, kiddo, I should let you go. Here's your mom." He held the phone out to Simone. They exchanged smiles as she took it from him.

She'd barely put the phone to her ear before Cecily said, "Did Jason tell you? We're going to take a canoe out and try to catch a crab in a net!"

"Is that right?" Simone looked at Jason, who showed his palms and gave her an innocent look. She laughed. "Maybe I'll have to follow you two around with a camera, then. Can't miss this."

"I can't wait!" Cecily said, practically squealing on the other end.

"Neither can I, baby." The limo lurched forward. Simone glanced outside. They were almost to the red carpet. "I have to go for now, but I'll call you tonight before you go to bed."

"Okay. I hope you win."

"Me too. I love you, baby."

"Love you too, Mom."

Simone hung up and slid the phone into her purse. "Hopefully the weather holds out next weekend. She'll be mighty disappointed if you guys can't go out."

Jason laughed softly. "We can still go out if it rains."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

He said nothing. When she glanced at him, he idly fingered the cufflinks on his tuxedo shirt. Their eyes met and he smiled, but a hint of nervousness tugged at the corner of his mouth. She took his hand and squeezed. His palms were sweaty.

"Nervous?" she asked.

He raised his eyebrows and took in a hiss of breath through his teeth. "You could say that."

"Are you sure you want to do this? It's not too late to turn around."

He shook his head. "I'll be fine. I can do it."

"Are you sure?"

"No." He squeezed her hand. "But you're not going to miss this because I've got a little bit of stage fright."

Simone smiled at him. They had spent the better part of the last year in the seclusion of his house in Tofino, but when the announcement came out that she was nominated for an Oscar for her most recent film, he had not only suggested they go together, he had insisted on it.

"We can't hide from the rest of the world forever," he'd said. "It's not like they don't know about me; we might as well face the music and go public." Now, though, she wondered if he was second-guessing that decision. He had never quite grown to like the fishbowl life she led, and they had never appeared publicly together after the incident in Tofino. They still dodged paparazzi in Tofino from time to time, but otherwise avoided the public eye.

But now, he insisted he was ready to face the cameras and the reporters. Ironical, she thought. *He's the one who ended up being camera shy.*

She watched him. He looked out the window, drumming his fingers nervously. Several times, he slipped one hand into the pocket of his trousers, as if making sure he hadn't forgotten or dropped something. He'd done it a dozen or more times since they left the hotel room.

He tried his best to look comfortable in the tuxedo, but she was certain he felt completely out of his element. Even at his gallery events, he'd told her, he rarely wore anything more formal than a shirt and slacks. Just like the first night we had dinner at the house, she thought, an involuntary shiver running through her at the memory.

In spite of his discomfort, he looked amazing.

Simone stifled a soft giggle when she noticed the smudge of makeup on the collar of his tux. They had tried to get all of it off, but a faint whisper of color still remained. She hoped no one noticed, but every time Simone looked at it, her breath caught.

Back in their hotel room, just before they hurried downstairs to catch their waiting limo, he had to have her just one more time. Up against the hotel room door, completely dressed, her legs wrapped around his waist—bringing to mind that night a lifetime ago when he had pushed her up against her rental car in the pouring rain—he'd had her just one more time. And somewhere amidst the passion and urgency, a little bit of her makeup ended up on his collar.

Smiling to herself, she looked out the window again. A moment later, they pulled up to the red carpet, and the door flew open, allowing the blinding camera flashes to invade the warm dimness of the car. Simone squinted against the harsh light. She turned to Jason and touched his hand. "Are you ready?"

He tugged at the starched collar of his tuxedo shirt, checked his pocket again, and wetted his lips. "As ready as I'll ever be."

She smiled. "Let's go."

He took a deep breath, nodded, and stepped out of the car ahead of her before turning to hold his hand out for her. She took it, stepping out onto the red carpet into the sea of camera flashes.

Simone slid her hand around his elbow, and together they started up the long walk. He followed her lead, pausing here and there for the occasional photo or question. Occasionally she squeezed his arm to reassure him and he'd give a squeeze in return. Once or twice, they exchanged a brief smile. Each time, his smile both warmed her to the core and sent a shiver down her spine. Never in her life had she been so proud to be on the arm of a man. God, I love you, Jason, she thought.

They stopped before a particularly aggressive clutch of reporters. Her stomach knotted as they probed for intimate details. This was a mistake. A huge mistake. *Shit.*

She glanced up at Jason. His expression was blank. A ripple ran down the front of his throat as he swallowed hard and his body stiffened. She thought he had paled. *Shit.*

"Breathe," she whispered.

His gaze darted toward her and he released part of the breath he was holding, but he didn't relax.

Then, a reporter thrust a microphone into their faces and demanded, "What's next for the two of you, Simone?"

Simone opened her mouth to answer, but Jason said, "*That* is a damn good question." He turned to Simone, his face unreadable. "I'm actually wondering the same thing."

Simone's heart leaped. *Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.* He gently freed his elbow from her hand. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and she sucked in a breath.

"Jason —"

Right there on the red carpet, Jason dropped to one knee.

A collective gasp rippled among the reporters. Simone's heart pounded as he reached into his pocket — the pocket he'd checked a hundred times earlier — and pulled out the ring. Dozens of cameras flashed around them.

"Simone." His hands — one holding the ring, one clasping her hand for dear life — shook. Drawing a deep, unsteady breath, he said, "Simone, will you marry me?"

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Her knees turned to liquid. She couldn't even see the ring. All she could see was his eyes: a mixture of fear and pride, certainty and doubt, and pure, genuine, sincere love.

She realized he was holding his breath.

So was she.

Everything around them faded into nothing.

Finally, she willed her tongue to work. "Yes."

He exhaled in a laugh, one of joy and relief. He slid the ring onto her finger and stood, taking her into his arms and kissing her. They ignored the microphones and cameras in their faces.

"So *that's* why you were so nervous," she whispered against his lip.

"Nervous?" He kissed her again. "I was terrified." The laughter was gone from his expression when he looked at her again, replaced by pure, heartfelt love. His voice hoarse with emotion, he said, "I love you, Simone."

"I love you, Jason."

~The End~

About the Author

Lauren Gallagher was born and raised in Seattle, spent five years in Norfolk, Virginia, then moved to Okinawa, Japan, at the end of 2008, where she currently lives with her husband and two cats.

She does not collaborate with any other authors (though she hasn't ruled it out for future projects), but she does have the privilege of a writing partnership (or unholy alliance, depending upon who you ask) with Scottish writer, Scarlett Parrish. If she had to pinpoint one secret to her success, it's Scarlett, hands down. There is nothing quite like having a skilled writer looking over one's shoulder, critiquing where it's needed and not pulling any punches. Scarlett has also given her the ideas for a few of her

books, including *Between Brothers* and *Rules of Engagement*, and bestowed titles on several of them.

Lauren writes full-time now, but in other times and places, she has worked in everything from customer service to lower management, from jewelry to car rentals to compressed gas equipment.

She was a professional photographer at one point, but decided she enjoyed it more as a hobby than a career. She and her husband still enjoy photography and happen to live in a place that lends itself very well to a couple of shutterbugs.

Learn more about Lauren at <http://www.loriawitt.com/default.htm>