



INKLING

Alice

Archer

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

INKLING

By Alice Archer

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Backs to the camera, two men look out over a lake from a rock formation. Both are strongly built and wearing only black boxer briefs. The man on the left sits with head bowed, hands on thighs. In front of him and to the right, the other man stands with hands behind his head, blocking the low sun. Thick, evergreen forest lines the edges of the green lake. A high mist hangs over the water.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These guys are on R&R, but from job or life path? They're on-again-off-again lovers and best friends, but there has been some big conflict(s) going on (can be between them) and they needed to get away to get themselves figured out. Who are they? What is this conflict? Why the R&R? You can go anywhere with this one, except hard-core BDSM. Lots of angst is appreciated and an HEA is a must.

Sincerely,

Stacey Jo

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: hurt/comfort, grief, betrayal, family drama, friends to lovers, business owner

Content Warnings: murder

Word Count: 41,699

Acknowledgements

I shout a bellow of thanks to Stacey Jo for her prompt, because the photograph and text she chose were the perfect combination of specific and non-specific to spark my imagination. I had such a great time pulling possibilities from the prompt she dangled like a carrot and writing my way toward them.

The Goodreads M/M Romance Group administrators and other volunteers wow me with their prowess about all things, including the way they've handled the many tasks involved in pulling off the 2015 Love is an Open Road Event. This was my first time to participate and I felt cared for and valued, both as a reader and an author.

I'm grateful to Armi, generous and encouraging beta reader, whose care and attention saved the story from a number of pitfalls, and also to Jul and Debbie and the editing team for their edifying five-star editing and proofreading.

I send you, reader, a bear hug and a heartfelt thank you for taking the time to read a book, and a kiss on the cheek for taking the time to read this book.

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Chapter One

Lee Sheldrake bends to stare into the shallow water of Second Beach Cove, mesmerized by his blurred reflection, an undulating shape above the rocks and sand. Dark. Wobbly. At the mercy of the tides.

“Anything interesting down there?” asks Lee’s best friend, Reid Douglas. He mimics Lee’s bent stance, hands on knees. Drops of water fall from his dark hair, creating ripples on the water’s surface.

“No, not really.”

“Good, because I’m f-f-freezing. There’s hot coffee in the truck.”

Draped in an oversized towel, Lee tiptoes up the rocky beach of Haro Island’s eastern shore, stepping with care to avoid barnacle cuts on his bare feet. He pauses to hike up his orange and green Hawaiian swimming trunks and measures the distance to Reid’s truck, wishing he’d remembered to bring his shoes all the way down to the water. The snow-capped peaks on the British Columbia mainland across the navy blue water of the channel trigger a renewed case of the shivers, and he hurries on to the truck, where he climbs in and sets a record for getting dressed, rooting around behind the seat for one of the wool blankets.

“Better hurry, Reid. That big seagull’s checking out your ass, and I think I saw Hitchcock disappear into the woods.”

Reid gets in and closes the door. “That seagull can bite me.”

“Really? Nice comeback. Extra points for unintentional irony.” Wishing he’d been the seagull, Lee stares at Reid’s profile, at his straight nose and strong neck, at Reid’s long fingers as he sorts his dark hair into order.

Reid fumbles with shaking fingers to start the engine then reaches for the thermos to pour steaming coffee into two mugs, handing one to Lee.

“C-c-can’t take it yet,” Lee says.

“Remind me why we do this?” Reid sets Lee’s mug in a cup holder and blows on his own coffee.

Too cold to extricate an arm from the blanket he’s tightly wrapped in, Lee cranks the heater with his bare toes, then shoves them back under Reid’s thigh. “Because we’re idiots of the highest order. Because as young idiots we dared each other to swim across Second Cove, and we can’t seem to break the ghastly

habit. Because we're mentally deficient, due to having our goddamn brains frozen solid once a year. Because we lacked adequate parental supervision then and lack adequate parental role models now. Because we're bent on proving to any and all that in addition to being idiots, we're also badassess."

Eyebrows raised, Reid makes a show of turning his head to the right to take in the panoramic view of rocky shoreline, choppy water, and the rugged mountains of the mainland, then to the left to take in the solid wall of dark woods and the cliffs rising above them.

"Yes, I get it," Lee says, "at this precise moment our adoring fans are nonexistent. And thank fuck for that, because my frozen, shrunken balls have me feeling a tad fragile and unmanly."

"Those fogged-up glasses aren't doing you any favours." Reid leans over and plucks off the black frames, wiping them carefully on the hem of his T-shirt before settling them back onto Lee's face.

Slouched and huddled on either side of the truck cab, they slowly warm in the onslaught of heat from the vents. As his shaking subsides, Lee begins a mental countdown. *Seventy-two seconds*, he predicts, by now a pro at guessing how long it takes Reid to shift from playful-pal mode back into responsible business-owner mode.

At sixty-seven seconds, Reid shakes his head and reaches for his phone. "Crap. I have to get back. Todd's a no-show again, and Beth landed that big booking for tomorrow. She can't handle the prep on her own." He continues scrolling. "And Edison's on his way to the office with lunch. Sorry, I'm going to have to bail on our lunch in town. I'll make it up to you soon, okay?" He tugs his wool hat down over his ears and glances at Lee briefly before fishing for his seat belt. And then he's gone—reengaging with his desk, planning tomorrow's tour—though Lee can see him right here, close enough to touch, can feel Reid's purpose and decency radiating outward in waves.

"No problem," Lee says, wishing he dared share Edison's secret with Reid, wishing Edison was out of the picture so he could reach over and stop Reid from putting the truck into gear, could pull him close and hold him closer. Instead, Lee turns away, props his bare feet on the dashboard heating vent, and falls quiet, staring out the side window at the beauty in the distance, withdrawing as the tide ebbs and the water's numbing coldness pulls him further out to sea.

Chapter Two

“Hang on, everyone,” Reid says into the microphone of the tour boat’s PA system. “We’ll head around this point, and then I’ll stop and tell you a story about my grandmother and a whale.” Hands reach for steadier holds, and the crowd of tourists falls silent, heads turning to gawk at the masses of fir and hemlock trees on the islands that rise up steeply from the cold sea between Vancouver Island and the mainland.

“What are all those trees called?”

Reid may need to hire the elderly woman who asked the question, because she has an uncanny knack for feeding him his lines.

“They’re mostly coastal Douglas firs.”

“Any relation?” someone asks with a laugh, and enough of the tourists remember Reid’s last name to chuckle along.

Reid cuts the motor before he answers, the silence signalling the thirty or so passengers to turn away from the view to look at him. “Those firs were named after David Douglas, a Scottish botanist and explorer. There are other Douglas notables who made an impact around here. The English sea captain William Douglas traded along this coast, and another Scotsman, Sir James Douglas, or ‘Black Douglas’ as he was sometimes called, was the first governor of British Columbia in 1858.”

“Any relation?” More chuckles from the audience. “You know, since your grandparents were here so early?”

“Maybe, but if so, the connection is lost in the wind. The stories I know about my ancestors and relations are exclusively about people who worked themselves into early graves and weren’t very savvy about their finances.” Reid’s wry smile fades at the thought of his current relations, including his brother Todd and his increasing absences from work. That worrisome thought feeds into his irritation at the tottering mess on his desk that taunts him with his inability to impose order on it for more than ten consecutive minutes.

The tourists watch Reid expectantly. He releases a frustrated sigh and refocuses on the next segment of the tour. “That,” he makes a sweeping gesture off the bow of the boat with both arms, “is the Salish Sea, named in the 1970s by a biologist working on oil-spill issues. The Salish Sea crosses the

international border, extending from British Columbia—here at Desolation Bay at the southern end of the Discovery Islands—all the way south to Seattle.”

A little more history, more questions answered, and it’s time to do what Haro Island Tours has built its reputation on: making history personal. The sainted, white-haired lady again gives Reid the opening he needs to shift the focus. “About that whale,” she suggests with a smile. “I have a special interest in stories about grandmothers.”

“Okay. See that cleared area halfway up the hill there?” He points and heads turn. “My mother’s parents owned that property and they built a house there. The foundation remains, but the house itself was moved by barge when the property was sold. I grew up in that house after it was moved. It’s the one up the hill from the dock and the tour office—and I still live there with my family.

“My grandparents were a trip. They loved to make bets with each other. It was a game they played for the first thirty-two years of their marriage. They kept a running tab and settled up at the end of every month. They’d bet about anything, and I mean *anything*. What visitor would knock on the door next. The number of steps to the big tree up ahead on the trail. Who would see the first whale every month. My grandmother always won the first whale bet. *Always*. Except for the time that ended up being the last bet they ever made.”

“Which your grandfather probably never let her forget.” The elderly lady chuckles.

“Very perceptive. You’re right, he never let her forget that he was the one who won their last bet, but for a reason that might surprise you. The punch line is that my grandfather saw the first whale of the month, but it almost cost him his life. He took his little fishing boat out at dawn on the first day of June, determined to best his wife, which he did, but in his eagerness to document his whale sighting by photographing it, he fumbled the camera, fell overboard, and almost drowned.

“Grandma Irene rowed to his boat and fished him out of the water. She told him he was a stupid ass and she was done betting on...” For the third time since he cut the motor, Reid’s phone vibrates in his pocket, which irritates him enough to interrupt his story. “Sorry. Please excuse me.” He steps into the wheelhouse to take the call.

“What is it, Alan?” Reid tries to eliminate the exasperation from his voice before he speaks again. “I’m on the water with that big tour group, so unless this is an emergency...”

“It’s an emergency, son.”

Reid lowers his phone to check the screen and confirm the caller’s name, because this person’s voice sounds too throaty and deep to belong to his stepfather, who knows better than to call Reid *son*.

“...right now,” Alan is saying when Reid puts the phone back to his ear.

“I don’t want to come in. I’d have to refund the full tour, and we can’t afford to lose the income.” He turns his back on the worried people waiting on the cushioned benches of his boat.

Silence and ragged breathing from his stepfather. Reid presses the phone tighter against his ear. In the background, he hears his mother crying, and his vision tunnels for a moment, until his heart starts pounding, pumping adrenaline and making the decision for him. “On my way,” he says into the phone before shoving it back into his pocket.

“Hey, man, are you okay?” one of the tourists asks.

Reid starts the motor and works to regain control of his professional-tour-guide face before he raises his voice to say, “I apologize but the tour’s going to have to be cut short. When we get ashore, you’ll all get full refunds or coupons for another tour.”

After a hellish twenty minutes of imagined worst-case scenarios, Reid ushers tourists into the dock’s office for Beth to deal with and sprints up the trail to his family’s house. Alan waits on the lawn at the bottom of the porch steps. He looks... *oh, shit*.

“Don’t tell me,” Reid says. He stops a few yards from Alan, holds up a hand, and closes his eyes. “Just... just give me a moment.”

Reid is afraid this is about his boyfriend, Edison, or Lee, and he tries to calm down a little before hearing the news so he doesn’t bawl like an infant. When he opens his eyes and sees both pity and grief on Alan’s face, he knows the news is worse. “Please,” he begs, and his legs give out as he senses the twinge in his bones, the pull of his worst nightmare—the death of his charming, infuriating brother. “Not Todd. Please don’t tell me he’s...”

Alan makes a *tsk* sound of impatience. “No. Todd’s alive. Come up. We need you inside.” He turns away without another word, and Reid stumbles after him up the porch stairs and into the house, wondering why Alan hasn’t told him more.

Inside, there's nothing but madness—his mother wailing, his aunt Hilary making an unholy racket in the kitchen, the dogs barking—and Reid panics and grabs the back of Alan's shirt before he disappears into the melee.

“Alan. Tell me now.”

Irritation twists Alan's mouth when he turns to swat away Reid's hand. “Shelby's dead.”

After a sharp inhale of surprise, Reid's first thought is of Lee, Shelby's brother. “Christ, what's Lee going to do?” He rubs his forehead, trying to decide who to be most concerned about. “And where's Todd? He must be freaking out.” Reid looks around, but there's no sign of his brother, who has had a major—if unrequited—thing for Shelby for years. *Maybe they've got Todd sedated in a back bedroom.* “And how did Shelby...” He waves his hand, not ready yet to say the word *die*.

“Todd's at the police station.”

“What the hell? Why didn't anyone go with him?”

Alan puts his hands on Reid's shoulders and grips hard, too hard. “Ow, Alan. That *hurts*.”

“I need you to focus, Reid. You're the strong one. Get it together so you can help out, okay?”

“Yeah. Yes.” Reid decides he'll also be strong for Lee, because this is going to be awful for him. *Christ*, please let someone be there for him right now. If Lee's sister—the only family member who actually gives a shit about him, the only buffer between Lee and too many unrealistic Sheldrake dynasty expectations—is really gone, their cold parents are going to deep freeze Lee into submission in about five seconds.

“Reid! Look at me.”

Reid looks up.

“Shelby's dead because your brother killed her.”

Chapter Three

“Leland Andrew Sheldrake, sit your ass in that chair and stay put. You will not pull one of your disappearing acts. Not now. Not today.”

Lee looks up at his father and nods—anything to get Edgar to quit bellowing and pointing his finger. As soon as his father turns to pester someone else, Lee estimates the number of steps between his chair and the front door of the police station. Somewhere in the hopefully piss-infested bowels of this place Todd Douglas is still breathing, and if Lee can’t get to him, can’t pound his fist down the man’s arrogant, depraved throat and choke him to death, then Lee might as well be gone.

Gone. With a *whoosh*, the fact that Shelby is really and truly gone hits Lee again, in spite of his determination to avoid that knowledge for as long as possible.

Stupid eyes. He yanks off his glasses and wipes the tears off them for about the hundredth time since he stepped off the trail at Inkle Lake to discover a family of five pinning down a flailing Todd. Out of the corner of his eye, Lee had seen Shelby’s drenched body lying limp with her feet still in the lake. A survival instinct kicked in, and he’d turned his back on her, desperate not to know, even after the sirens in the distance exploded into his awareness.

That was when Lee had asked the closest person, the teenager parked on Todd’s squirming legs, what was going on. The boy had glanced at the man holding down Todd’s shoulders and then told Lee they’d come down the trail from the road to see Todd splashing in the water alone. Or so it had looked at first. Then the body of a woman popped up out of the water and Todd had screamed, “Die already, you ignorant bitch!”

It didn’t compute.

Lee had shaken his head, and he must have looked really awful, because the man took his hands off of Todd’s chest to hurry over and keep Lee from falling down.

“Do you know her?” the man asked, his voice gentle, and Lee wanted to turn around to look at Shelby, wanted to apologize to her for not being here sooner, for turning his back on her a minute ago when he first saw her, but he couldn’t. He wanted to go to her so bad—she was alone and wet and must be so cold—but the grey-haired man tightened his arms and kept Lee facing away.

He said, “I’m sorry, but she really is dead. We tried everything for a long time. I’m so sorry.”

The only thing that kept Lee together then was the swelling rush of anger he felt as he focused on Todd’s face.

On the fact that he was still breathing.

When Shelby was not.

Cops and paramedics filled the parking lot by the lake, then finally took Shelby and Todd away. Lee’s parents arrived and hustled him to the police station, where they’d been now for the past hour, to no noticeable effect.

Edgar paces and snaps out orders, getting louder by the minute as more and more creepy lawyer clones fill the room and huddle around him. Lee’s mother, Rachel, four empty seats over, remains sunk in her usual state of Herculean denial. She hasn’t looked at Lee once, not *once*, not even when she and Edgar arrived at the lake to get Lee. Referring to his parents by their first names—because they’ve always seemed more like acquaintances than blood relatives—has never felt as appropriate as it does today.

Rachel stares now into the oracle of her cell phone, fingers flashing, probably calling her cronies far and wide, spreading the horrible news, inflating the scandal to keep it distant, requesting reinforcements—as if anyone could rescue her from this “truly outrageous and horrifying incident,” as Lee had heard her say to one of her phone friends.

Lee’s legs ache to move.

He eyes the door but gives most of his attention to trying not to gag. He can almost taste the stench of Todd’s multiple betrayals. He drowned Shelby and tainted Inking Lake, where Lee and Reid have gone to camp and swim and get away from their families since before they were in their teens. The Todd stench makes Lee want to hack and spit, makes him need to be anywhere else. His throat closes at the flash of an image—as clear as if he’d seen the moment in person—of Todd forcing Shelby beneath the dark green water of Inking Lake, her favourite place on earth, as her long brown hair curls around Todd’s clawing hands.

Gone. *Whoosh.*

By the time his father notices he’s gone, Lee is stepping from the end of the long driveway of the police station onto the tarmac of Arbutus Road. He ignores Edgar’s maximum-volume bellow from the stoop of the station.

Doesn't even turn around. Focuses on increasing the distance between himself and the worthless fucktard who took Shelby away forever.

Walks into the woods on a trail and disappears.

Headed nowhere except *away*.

Chapter Four

“Well, thanks anyway,” Reid says to the officer who has spent an hour talking to him, his mom, and Alan, filling them in on the situation, telling them that Todd will be charged with murder, and there’s no chance of seeing him today. Alan hurries Reid’s weeping mother out the door to get her home.

Reid scopes out the L-shaped waiting area, scanning faces. No sign of Lee... but there’s Lee’s father. *Damn it.* Reid pivots quickly to get lost, but Edgar catches sight of him and shouts, pushing people aside, aiming a finger at Reid like a gun.

For once, probably because he’s more worried about Lee than himself, Reid stands his ground and raises his voice above the din of the busy station. “Where’s Lee?”

“What do you care, Douglas? Shouldn’t you be more interested in trying to comfort your murderous brother?” Edgar is so enraged, he spits his sharp words.

Reid takes a step back and rolls his shoulders to suppress the impulse to defend Todd, because, according to the cops, there’s no basis for denying Edgar’s declaration. “I care about Lee because he’s my friend.” The theoretical protection offered by having this confrontation in a building full of cops makes Reid bold in the face of Edgar’s rage. “And because someone should.”

“You little *shit.*”

Before Edgar can get even nastier or call over one of his three-piece-suited henchmen, Reid raises his hands. “I’m leaving. Just tell me. Do you know where he is?”

Edgar glares so long Reid feels a drop of sweat run between his shoulder blades. Finally, Lee’s father says, “Ran off half an hour ago. Now get out of here. The sight of you reminds me why I should have sent Shelby off the island months ago to get her away from... *him.*”

Back in his truck, Reid scrolls the contacts list on his phone for Darren at Island Taxi, knowing from long experience that Lee’s first defence against his parents is escape into the woods.

“Darren, hey. Yeah, yeah. I heard the news. Shut up a second. Did you give Lee a ride today?” The silence goes on so long Reid wonders if his phone died. “You still there?”

“Um, yeah.” Darren’s voice is soft, uncharacteristically tentative. “I gave him a ride. Dropped him off about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Where?”

“Pickup at mile twelve on Shearling Road. Drop-off at Third Cove trailhead.”

Reid considers Lee’s possible trajectories and decides he’s probably taken the long route home through the wildness at the top of the Second Beach cliffs.

“How did he seem?” Reid asks as he takes a right out of the police station driveway onto Arbutus, then a left onto Shearling.

Darren chortles but tries to suppress it, which doesn’t make sense.

“You’re *laughing*? Now? Today?”

“No. *Sorry*. Sorry, man. He seemed upset. It’s just... I hope you find him, all right?”

Reid hangs up on Darren’s oddness and races toward Second Cove, figuring the cops have better things to do today than catch him speeding.

Slowing down to scan the woods at the edge of Second Cove’s gravel parking area, Reid finally sees the old logging road. He shifts the truck into four-wheel drive and heads in, hoping he’s guessed right about the timing.

Twelve bouncy minutes and one harsh scratch of a branch on the side of the truck later, Reid finds the place he remembered, where the logging road crosses Third Cove trail. He stops just shy of the trail, turns off the engine, and gets out of the truck. Pushing through thick brush, he makes his way to the trail and turns to look in one direction then the other. No Lee in sight, but the trail curves, so he can’t see very far in either direction. The truck ticks as it cools, and Reid settles in to listen.

Seagulls. The high keen of a hawk. The distant bleat of sheep on the Maw Headland. The launch and linger of waves down below, though the sea and the cliff’s edge are too far away to see from here. The deep, plaintive hoot of the passing Campbell River ferry.

Shit. Maybe he’s already too late.

He begins to walk in the direction Lee would be headed, thinking maybe if he jogs for a while he can catch up to him, but then he hears a low sound coming from down the trail in the other direction, an awful sound that doesn’t

belong here, a deep moan rising to a wail that unfastens his heart and drops it into his shoes.

He runs.

Chapter Five

Finally far enough into the woods that no one will hear him, Lee lets it all go, sinking to his knees with the misery of making his way through his already lonely life without the one person he could always count on to understand and offer comfort. Leaning forward, he grabs fistfuls of the loamy, dark earth of the seldom used trail and clutches hard, resting his weight on his fists, trying to find an anchor. If not Shelby, then something else solid and real and grounding. And it seems this good earth does have something to offer, because he's suddenly treated to a *Best of Shelby and Lee* retrospective, a goose-bump-evoking rush of good memories.

Shelby helping Lee pile dark earth against a fallen tree in the woods to make a slope for his fleet of toy bulldozers and dump trucks. Fighting with Shelby over the last blueberry torte, ending up berry smeared and laughing, exiled to their rooms. Running the trails together at twilight. Teaching each other to swim in the freezing ocean. Years of showing Shelby how to use a computer and cell phone, over and over, because the information never seemed to stick. Covering for each other with their parents. Shelby persuading Lee to French kiss his pillow and then teasing him about it for weeks. The light in Shelby's eyes as she told Lee nearly every day since he lost his virginity at sixteen, "Hey, little brother, do it, screw it, get to it, but be safe, and remember that I love you more than anyone."

Gasping, Lee opens his eyes. *Wrong. So wrong.* Remembering the good things only makes it worse. He opens his pale hands to push the earth away, and they turn into Todd's hands pressing down against Shelby's dark brown hair.

Unwilling to see any more, he rips off his glasses and flings them into the woods. A broken howl rises up from deep within to fill his head, finally, with something besides Shelby's teasing words and affectionate grin.

When Lee feels Shelby's arms wrap around him from behind, he convulses so hard with fear it shakes his lunch up and out.

Chapter Six

Oh, Lord. Pressing his face into the back of Lee's head, into his sleek dark hair, Reid curls a hand around Lee's chest and up to his neck, wanting to encase Lee with his body to keep him safe.

"Come on, buddy." Reid struggles to keep them upright, but Lee is shaking hard enough to threaten Reid's grip. "I'm here now."

They rock in an awkward crouch, Lee's tears and snot pooling in the crease made by Reid's arms locked around his chest. By the time Lee slumps forward, Reid's thighs burn, and he has to strain to shift his grip and keep them from falling into the mess Lee made when he puked.

"God, Lee. I'm so glad I found you. The truck is right here. Can you stand up?" Reid tentatively loosens his grip, and Lee slides away to lie on his side on the trail, missing the puddle of puke by an inch, lapsing into a quiet stillness that seems ominous. Leaning over to get his first good look at Lee's face, Reid realizes how long it's been since he's seen Lee without his black-framed, weird-but-cute-nerd glasses. Tears leak from Lee's big, brown eyes, and he stares blankly at Reid for a moment. When his eyes focus, his elegant features twist with grief, and he closes his eyes and turns away.

"What'd you do with your glasses, Ace?"

Lee's face goes blank and closed, but the tip of an index finger points to the right. Reid decides getting Lee into the truck and home is a higher priority than getting him to talk or looking for the glasses. He considers the situation. Lee is the same height, but bulkier, and heavy with grief, so unless Lee helps, this isn't going to work.

Reid lifts Lee as best he can. After few failed grips, he manages to shift Lee into a partial fireman's carry, one of Lee's arms and his upper body half draped across Reid's back. Standing upright requires straining his knees, and Reid doesn't manage it until the third try.

Poured into the truck's cab, Lee curls into a ball, face pressed against the back of the bench seat. Without understanding why he does it, Reid locks the truck before going back to search for Lee's glasses, finding them easily because they're so close to the trail he almost steps on them.

After Reid shifts the truck into drive and crosses Third Cove trail to continue down the logging road, he lays a hand on Lee's shoulder, but Lee flinches and shrugs away.

When they're off the old road and back on asphalt, Reid makes an attempt at light conversation, wanting to pull Lee out of the silent, dark place he seems to have fallen into. "Why the hell do you smell like... what is that? Seaweed?"

"Survival sauce." The words are whispered and hoarse and don't make sense.

Reid laughs without meaning to. "What are you talking about?"

"Spunk."

This doesn't compute either, and Reid wonders if today's tragedies have messed with his own mental capacity more than he'd realized. After a while, Lee offers another non sequitur. "Darren gave me a ride."

"Yeah. He told me. That's how I found you."

Lee snickers. "I mean, he paid me for a ride."

Reid wonders if their current situation—Lee gone foetal, Reid unable to make sense of the conversation and on the verge hyperventilating whenever he thinks about the coming shitstorm between their families—means they're *both* losing it. He lets it drop, hoping that getting him home soon will help Lee make more sense.

At Lee's house, Reid turns off the truck but doesn't move to get out, Lee's snicker reverberating in his head.

"It's a taxi service, Lee," Reid says patiently. "That means you pay Darren."

"Not if I'm in the driver's seat." He snickers again.

"But... you don't drive."

"I wasn't driving the *car*." The snicker turns into a giggle, and Reid's vision blurs, as though a big hand covered his eyes to keep him from seeing what he doesn't want to see.

"*Get out.*" Reid slams his door and walks around the truck, anger altering his game plan from group hug to boot camp. "*Now.*"

"Leave me alone, you demented ape." But there's no force behind Lee's words. Without looking at Reid, he drags himself out of the truck and down the walkway to his place, a carriage house at the edge of the shared driveway with his parents' enormous mansion. Reid pauses to take a few deep breaths and then follows, finding Lee upstairs in the bathroom, wobbling as he holds onto the counter to strip out of his dirty jeans.

When Reid sees the white cum stain on Lee's black boxer briefs, he turns his back and walks away, slamming the bathroom door, leaving Lee to shower off the dirt and snot and "survival sauce" alone. That he's too pissed off at Lee right now to help him in his time of need only makes Reid angrier.

Lee's shower goes on and on, which gives Reid time to reel in his emotions, open the bathroom door, and set a T-shirt and a clean pair of underwear on the counter before shutting the door with less force this time.

Slumped in the chair by the bed, Reid takes a few more deep breaths and his mind slowly refocuses on today's main event. *Todd killed Shelby. Fuck.* Lee must be desperate to escape the full force of that knowledge. Reid can relate, because even thinking that appalling three-word sentence sets off a five-alarm warning from his psyche, as if the words themselves are a nuclear bomb with the power to detonate his friendship with Lee.

Sighing, Reid searches for patience. Maybe Lee can be excused for attempting to find a temporary distraction with Darren. Maybe.

When Lee emerges, flushed, brown hair darkened by dampness and towel dried to spiky wildness, he still won't look at Reid, even when he stands up to block Lee's path to the bed. "Look at me, Lee. I'm not mad, not really."

"Yes, you are." Lee steps around to climb into the big bed, scooting down under the covers.

The clean smell of Lee's shampoo lingers in the air and Reid flexes his hands, trying to dampen his reaction. "But why would you even do that? Why would you trade a ride for a... whatever it was?"

"It was a fuck. I *fucked* Darren. We were facing each other when I *fucked* him, so he doused me when he came. Anything else you want to know?"

Reid sinks back into the chair, sideswiped by this confirmation and disturbed for multiple reasons by the unwelcome and too-graphic images Lee's words bring to mind. The way he described fucking Darren made it seem... *rough* and... *necessary*, like Lee needed a rowdy, untidy departure from the calm, diligent sex Reid and Lee always have.

Reid rubs his hands through his hair, needing to move past the shock and scatter the images of Lee humping energetically against Darren. "But why?" he asks his lap, unable to look at Lee.

"Why did I want to fuck Darren?"

“No.” Exasperated at having to say it now, Reid huffs and waves his hands. “You’ve never once fucked me.”

“That’s right, *Ace*, because the few times I tried to go there you made it very clear nothing would happen between us unless you topped, so I gave in.”

“But... all this time. Are you a switch?”

“No, not really.”

“Then *why*?”

“Don’t be stupid. If I wasn’t willing to bottom, we would never have had sex at all.”

Reid leans to rest his elbows on his thighs and scrubs his hands over his face, hating how much this—all of this—hurts, not wanting to ask Lee the questions he’s going to ask, especially not today, and yet he doesn’t seem able to let it go. Maybe because if he lets this righteous frustration go, something worse will fell him.

“I hadn’t realized you needed...” Reid looks around the room, struggling for words. His eyes land on Lee, whose huddled form under the blankets reminds Reid that this may not be the most important topic today. He’s about to let it go and change the subject, but before he can, Lee speaks again.

“You hadn’t realized I needed what, Reid? More intense orgasms? More control over the other guy’s experience? More devilry and mayhem and torment and pyrotechnics and...”

“Okay, *okay*. I get it. But... who else, besides Darren?”

Lee reaches out from under the covers to unfold the heavy comforter from the foot of the bed and then burrows back under the high pile of bedding to disappear altogether.

Reid waits a few minutes for Lee to answer, but he doesn’t, and then he wonders if Lee has fallen asleep. “Hey.” He pokes Lee—a harder, sharper shove than he’d intended. “I asked you a question.”

“I know you did. But I don’t want to talk about this with you. Leave me alone.” Lee’s voice is muffled and distant, so Reid moves to sit on the edge of the bed.

“You *always* want to talk to me, about everything. And you’re making me crazy right now.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

There must be something in Reid’s sigh that causes Lee to have pity on him because Lee says, “I have a little business.”

That big hand blanks out Reid’s vision again. “Oh... *hell no* you don’t. You’d better not mean what I think you mean. You’re doing this... with other people besides Darren? Are you *tricking* your way around the island?” Reid’s voice rises into a register he didn’t know he was capable of, and he stands to glare down at the mound on the bed, frustrated at not being able to see Lee’s face. “*Look at me, goddamnit.*”

“*No.* Either leave me alone or just leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what you mean about having a business.”

“Then shut up and let me talk because I really want you to go.”

Reid opens his mouth to protest and then closes it. When he sits back down on the edge of the bed, Lee says, “I call my entrepreneurial public transit system Hitch ’n’ Pitch.” He snickers.

“You mean, like, business cards?” Reid can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“No. *Jesus.* That’s what I call it in my mind. Hitch ’n’ Pitch: a ride for a ride.”

“God almighty, how can you joke about it? This is so far from funny it hurts.”

The mound of blankets shrugs. “Whatever. It keeps me out of Edgar’s way. You know how he’s always telling me to do something useful with myself? Well, hey, I’m doing Haro Island a public service—keeping a good portion of the island’s male drivers navigating with a smile on their face and a dance in their pants. In fact, I suspect traffic accidents have decreased.” In the silence after Lee stops talking, Reid blinks and blinks, trying to get over the hurt of Lee having kept such a big part of his life a secret.

When Lee speaks again, his voice has gone dreamy and soft. “The beauty of Hitch ’n’ Pitch is that it keeps me drenched in lovely... survival sauce.”

At this, the mixture of anger and hurt Reid is grappling with shifts toward anger. “How long?” Reid asks, his voice hard and impatient.

“A few years.”

Reid can't get his throat to work right. "You've been doing this for years?" he croaks.

"I've told you about it. Now leave me alone."

"No! Do you... did you go around soliciting rides when we were... together?"

"Stop yelling, Reid. You sound like my mother. We're never *together*."

"Whatever. When we're having sex."

"You mean when you're between boyfriends?"

That makes Reid pause. Of course Reid is monogamous whenever he has a boyfriend. What is Lee getting at? Ever since they hit puberty, Reid has thought of his and Lee's relationship as best friends and occasional fuck buddies. He'd always thought Lee felt the same, but...

"Are you saying you want to be boyfriends?" Reid asks.

"No."

"Oh, well, good. I mean, we've never actually talked about it. We could, but today's probably not the day for it."

"I said I don't want to be boyfriends. I don't need to talk about it."

Reid nods, even though Lee is not looking at him, and suppresses the urge to question the status quo, remembering one of the reasons he has never wanted to be more than friends-with-benefits with Lee—the way their families seem to live to cause each other trouble.

"Yeah," Reid muses, calculating the impacts of recent events. "Todd's ongoing fixation with Shelby provoked this family feud, but after what happened today... God, your father's going to hate me more than ever." Suddenly, the fact that Reid stood up to Edgar at the police station makes him shiver.

"No shit," Lee snorts. "Edgar's fear of scandal is already obsessive. You and me as boyfriends, after what Todd did? I guarantee that would result in more hell than we want to deal with."

Reid studies his shoes and tries to make sense of his conflicting feelings so he can leave. Mostly, he wishes things would go back to the way things were before Todd... *God*, it's still so hard to believe.

The mound of covers rises and falls with a sigh, and Lee says, “The answer is no. I don’t do Hitch ’n’ Pitch when you’re between boyfriends.”

Reid had thought that was the answer he wanted, but it doesn’t seem to help, because now he’s aware of all the other times, all the times when he had a boyfriend. The jumble of too much information suddenly sorts itself into a new configuration. “Has Edison ever given you a ride?”

Lee’s lack of an immediate answer makes Reid attempt to glare a hole through the bedding, especially when he realizes Lee has stopped breathing. Reid struggles to curb his anger before he speaks. “Tell me, Lee.”

“No. You won’t like it.”

“Tell me!”

“Yes, sometimes Edison has tried to... to pick me up. I always say no.”

The ensuing uncomfortable silence is broken by Reid’s harsh breath. With burning eyes and a throat threatening to close, he feels his heart slide off the rails. “Why wouldn’t you tell me my boyfriend is trying to cheat on me?”

“Because he’s probably only doing it as a joke, and because I promised.”

“You promised to *fuck me over*?”

“I promised Edison I wouldn’t tell you about him asking me for rides, even as a joke, if he promised not to tell you about Hitch ’n’ Pitch.”

“So have you done it? Have you ever... you know... *taken a ride* with Edison?” Fed up, Reid rips back the covers, needing to see Lee’s face after this revelation. His body is curled into a tight, unmoving ball, face buried inside arms wrapped around his head, the long curve of his bare spine making him look vulnerable and defenceless.

Reid stands there, holding up the covers and looking down at Lee, growing increasingly uncertain while he waits for an answer.

Finally, Lee says, “Reid, he’d been giving me rides for years—long before you started dating him—but, no, I haven’t been with him since you and he got together. And, yes, I’ve just broken my promise to Edison because I think you should know this about him. Maybe that counts for something.”

Reid steps back, frightened by how much anger he feels. He thought talking things through would diminish his anger, but it backfires. Anger turns to rage and rises up his body, into his limbs, out his mouth as a yell. “Why haven’t you

told me any of this before now?" He's beyond caring how he sounds. He needs *answers*.

Lee shrugs, and starts to shiver. "I didn't want to give you one more thing to worry about."

"What's that supposed to mean? You think I can't handle the truth? You think we can be best friends and keep these kinds of secrets from each other? *Shit.*"

"Reid, no. That's not... you have enough difficult truths in your life. You work so hard, all the time, to put food on your family's table and to take care of your employees and to take care of... of everything. You don't need me to be one more thing in your life that you think you need to take care of. You're too good, Reid. I don't want you to worry about me and my need for..." He shrugs again.

"For what?"

"Hitch 'n' Pitch is the only thing besides being in the woods that gets me through the worst parts of being Edgar and Rachel's child. I'm telling you now because Shelby... it's going to be hell without her. Summers are the best and the worst for me. Best because I get to spend time with you, but worst because... It's different the rest of the year with Edgar and Rachel. In Vancouver or Toronto or wherever else they haul me to, there's always a lot going on so I don't have to see them as often as I do when we're here, and it's not as obvious that they... that they don't..."

Reid knows Lee is referring to how much Edgar and Rachel don't seem to love him, even though he's their only son, but Reid can't say it out loud either.

"I don't take rides to hurt you or anyone else. I'm only trying to..."

Reid gets it. "You're only trying to *survive*. God, that's so pathetically fucked up on about five different levels."

"I agree. Now go deal with these pathetic truths somewhere else. I'm cold and I'm tired and I have a headache and I *really* need to sleep for a while before Edgar and Rachel resume their campaign of making me feel like crap, especially today." Lee uncoils to pull the covers back over his head.

Reid lets the covers go. This new worry about Edison shifts to the back of his mind, pushed aside by his old ache about Lee's parents. He searches his thoughts, wanting to identify something useful he can do to make things better for Lee. Or, if not for Lee, then for *someone*.

What's the right thing to do in this situation?

The only answer clear enough to grasp is that he needs to get back to work, because bringing in more money will reduce everyone's stress at home.

"Okay. I'll leave, but I'll call you later." He takes a step back from the bed. "But will you please, please look at me before I go?"

"No."

That hurts almost more than any of the other bombs Lee's dropped on Reid today. Okay, Reid's been yelling at Lee for the past ten minutes, but before that he went to all the trouble of tracking him down and hauling him home and... and *rescuing* him.

"Fuck you, Lee."

When Reid turns the door handle to leave, Lee says in a careful, even voice, "You look like him."

For a moment, Lee's statement doesn't make sense. When it suddenly does, Reid has to lean into the door frame to catch himself.

Oh, hell. I look like the man who murdered his sister.

Chastened, Reid leaves without another word, that last realization deflating every remaining wisp of anger. Standing in Lee's driveway with a hand on his truck, Reid wonders for the first time exactly what was going through his brother's mind as he held Shelby's struggling body beneath the dark water of Inking Lake.

Chapter Seven

A couple days later, Lee's still in bed. Except for trips to the bathroom and zombie-walks downstairs to the kitchen for sustenance, the bed has been the only place he's wanted to be.

Life without Shelby. Lee can't seem to understand how to go about it. A part of him keeps waiting for one of his parents to come and check on him, but they don't.

All of Lee's calls to Reid have gone to voice mail and none have been returned. Maybe he's mad after learning about Hitch 'n' Pitch. More likely, he's preoccupied with the start of the tourist season, swamped with managing his business while supporting his family and dealing with Todd.

Lee sinks back into sleep. The deep tones of the big wind chimes on the back porch of the main house intrude into his dreams, but he doesn't fully wake until his father's Mercedes pulls into the garage across the wide gravel driveway.

With all the blinds down and the heavy curtains pulled, the entire carriage house remains dark and hushed—empty without Shelby's calming presence or Reid's banter filling it to the brim.

Keeping his eyes closed, Lee searches for the mood of that dream. Something about wind moaning through the big firs atop Second Cove cliff, ruined mud pies clutched in his fists, and rough sex in the salal growing along the trail's edge. Lee on his back in the dirt, watching the flat, waxy leaves of the salal wave in a steady rhythm above his face. Before he can sink back into it, the dream drifts away, lost in the enigma of what never was.

For another ten minutes or so, he manages to block his awareness of Shelby's death.

When he can't hold the knowledge back any more, when he lets it come, his body deflates and flattens and grows so heavy again he can barely breathe. He forces himself past it, certain that the longer he puts off getting up, the harder it will be to disentangle from his parents after showing his face. He might as well let them know he's alive, though they're sure to pull their magic trick of simultaneously ignoring and berating him. He makes a bet with himself about whether either of them will mention Shelby, but doesn't bother wondering if they'll ask him how he's doing, because he knows there's little chance of that.

Dread of the cold desolation waiting for him in his parents' house sends Lee further beneath the covers for a few more minutes, all he needs to finish off what that evocative dream started. He pushes aside everything else and embellishes on the dream's lasting impression, imagining Reid as the man moving above him, making the salal quiver. Reid above him, riding Lee, whose arms strain with the effort of lifting Reid off and dropping him down, forcing him onto Lee's cock, slowly at first, then faster as Reid's whimpers turn into longer and longer moans. He pictures Reid leaning down to kiss him, resting his weight on his forearms to give Lee freedom to move him faster and go deeper. Lee grips himself hard beneath the covers and pulls his cock straight up, planting his feet flat on the bed to push up into Reid the way he's wanted to ever since they were fourteen and Lee discovered Internet porn and saw what was possible between two men.

When Reid cries into Lee's mouth and comes, Lee recognizes his own voice in the cry and splashes his orgasm onto the sheet.

Creeping Christ.

Ten years of unfulfilled fantasies of topping Reid and they only get stronger and harder to resist. If Reid ever saw Lee as more than a bottom booty call, if Lee ever got the chance to top Reid in real life, Lee's sure he'd come within five seconds.

It would be worth the embarrassment.

Lee folds back the covers and reaches for his phone to leave a short message for his mother to say he'll be over shortly. She likes him to give her a warning.

With a sigh, he gets up to clean off at the bathroom sink. After putting on jeans, a T-shirt, and a sweater, he wrings hot water through a hand towel and sits on the edge of the bed. As Lee wipes at the sheet, he tries to forget that in his dream he was fucking in the salal while Shelby's lifeless body bobbed insistently far below, where the cliff intersects the pulsing sea.

Shaking his head to dispel the shadowy dream, Lee tosses the hand towel into the bathroom sink and begins plotting his escape. He moves the blinds and curtains aside to glance out the window. It's early on a day promising sunshine and warmth, a splendid day for a long walk where no one can find him—a walk long enough and punishing enough to prevent his brain from examining this new Shelby-free life too closely.

His cell phone's ringtone for his mother—a squawking chicken—elicits another heavy sigh and he reluctantly accepts the call. "Leland Andrew Sheldrake!" Rachel's voice in the phone sounds the same as it always does. She greets every day as though a great and public emergency demanded her utmost and she's ready to show the world exactly how the crisis should be handled. Lee tries to cut her some slack today, because, for once, her agitation is probably not faked. *Probably.*

"Where have you been, Leland?"

The fact that she'd chosen not to call or walk the short distance to his house at any time during the past two days to find out threatens to send Lee back under the covers. He considers the option, but manages to resist its lure.

"We *need* you here," his mother goes on. "Your father has a list of things for you to do to help out, and the lawyers have arrived. They need you to tell them everything you know about that awful, murdering *bastard* and his family."

And... *there it is.* The unbearable pain of Shelby's death and the way she died crashes full force back into Lee's awareness. He manages to hold the phone a moment longer, long enough to say, "Be there in ten, Rachel," before it falls from his fingers onto the carpet.

"Don't call me that!" his mother barks before she hangs up.

Falling sideways onto the bed, Lee grabs a pillow and hugs it, imagining his mother pulling him into her arms, smoothing his hair, and murmuring, "How are you, sweetheart? You go right ahead and cry. That's fine. I miss her too, so much. We'll get through this together. I love you."

Not going to happen.

Never has. Never will.

The aching need to be a grown man—a man without a child's unresolved dependency on his parents—reasserts itself, vies for his attention, but Lee folds it up and tucks it away as he always has, briefly replaying the familiar justification that he'll stick around until his trust fund kicks in and then make his own decisions about his life.

The phone chicken-squawks again, this time to deliver a text message from his mother: *You'd better be here in five minutes.*

Ten minutes later—just to prove to himself that his parents don't actually own him—Lee slips through the kitchen door to hear his mother muttering in

the butler's pantry. He peers around the door to see her removing an elaborate cake from a bakery box.

"Don't give me that look, young man. Death and grief are no excuse for not showing our guests we can get through this with aplomb." And there's variation 4,012 of Rachel's Reasons for Living, her quest for the glory due a caring, intelligent, flawless hostess.

Lee often wishes he were a guest here—someone who'd had a childhood full of warm cookies and hugs; someone who ran toward home rather than away from it—instead of the only son of an ice queen.

Only child.

Without responding to his mother, Lee turns and walks away, the urge to bolt and melt into the woods already above the red line and rising. He needs to find his father right away because his level of tolerance for talking with Edgar Sheldrake won't last thirty seconds.

Twenty-nine.

Twenty-eight.

Lee finds Edgar in the downstairs study, busy barking at the other suits.

"Dad? May I talk to you please?" Politeness might soften the blow of Lee's bad news about not sticking around, though he's not counting on it.

"Good morning, son. You look tired. You should take a nap later. This morning I need you to run some errands I don't have time for. Jerry's going to drive you to Nanaimo. Before you go you'll sit with the lawyers and give them ammunition about the Douglas clan. We need to improve our prospects of getting Shelby the justice she deserves."

It's not like Lee hadn't expected something like this, but the man's preoccupation with Todd and his family seems to have crossed a line since Shelby's death.

"Seriously, Dad? Todd confessed. There are five witnesses. Don't you think Reid and his family have enough to deal with right now? What more do you want?"

Edgar's eyes turn hard and intense, and he crosses the room to lean into Lee's face. "What do I *want*? I *want* my beautiful daughter back." His voice is a growl, and Lee tries to back up a step but Edgar follows him. "But I'm *never* going to get that, am I? So what I *want* is for that *creep* to suffer, along with the family that couldn't get him under control."

Edgar is focusing on Todd's fuck-ups, but Lee also knows Reid's side of the story, has watched Reid struggle for years to hold his family together and manage Todd's propensity for veering toward crazy. From the very beginning—when Reid was still in high school—his concept for his boat tour business included a place for Todd. Lee followed Reid's progress in developing the company—from idle talk to online classes, from a detailed business plan to saving every cent for years so he could buy the tour boat. Over the past decade of summers, Lee spent a lot of time at the tour office, lending a hand and laughing with Beth, Reid, and Todd. That had been fun until last July when Todd's obsession with Shelby drove Edgar to forbid both of his children from associating with the less-than-worthy Douglas clan. Lee hadn't stopped seeing Reid, but he'd stopped going to the tour office or out on the boat, not wanting to give Edgar more fuel for his anti-Douglas fire.

“Shelby wouldn't have wanted Reid and his family to...” Lee almost says she wouldn't want Reid and his family to be punished, but would she? The answer eludes him, and the swirls in the Oriental carpet swim as his eyes fill. Suddenly dizzy, he reaches out for his father's arm.

And Edgar steps away.

Without anything to steady him, Lee stumbles and bangs his shoulder hard on the corner of the built-in bookcase.

“Pull yourself together,” Edgar snaps. He hands Lee a list of tasks to take care of in Nanaimo and says, “The lawyers are waiting. Let's see if you can use this opportunity to finally earn your keep.” He turns his back on Lee and walks away.

Lee stares after his father for a few heartbeats, then says, “No.” It's not loud enough for Edgar to hear, but for once, for the first time ever, Lee says it.

Sprinting between the red-skinned arbutus trees lining the north side of the wide lawn, Lee flies down the narrow trail, away from Edgar and Rachel and their inability to catch him when he's falling.

It's a trail he knows well. His running feet have created the path over years of trying to escape.

This is one of many trails radiating out from the Sheldrake property.

Because there never seem to be enough.

Chapter Eight

After an hour of reviewing everything he can think of, yet again, to try to figure what could have happened to make bookings drop off so drastically, Reid gives up. He blanks his mind and stares at the pine-needle-shaped shadows shifting on the light blue tour office wall. After a few minutes, his breath comes a little easier, right up until Beth says, “They’re here.” Reid’s gaze shifts to look out the window at the big van pulling into the parking lot: Mitch delivering customers from the ferry for the second of today’s three tours.

“It’s not too late.” Beth hovers at Reid’s desk, welcome packets for the tour customers clutched against her chest, ready to be handed out in the parking lot. “If I cancel the third tour as soon as you set out with this lot, we could save the customers the trouble of getting on the ferry. Please let me do it, boss. You look so exhausted.”

“No. I can’t. I don’t have a choice.” *If I don’t do the third tour today... and, fuck, tomorrow as well... Alan’s got a new prescription that’s ridiculously expensive, and Mom says the bills are piling up to disaster proportions. I have to just push on through.* “Go on. I’ll meet you at the boat in a few minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Knock it off.”

Beth grabs her jacket and turns to go. Reid takes a deep breath, trying to think ahead, to remember something from all the business courses he took that might help. What would make tomorrow easier? What does a week from now look like?

“Beth, wait. As much as I haven’t wanted to go there, the obvious thing would be to find someone to... to replace Todd in the tour guide rotation. Could you, would you please pull the sign-up lists from those history seminars we did last winter—see if you think there’s anyone who might be interested in... *Christ*, how can this work by next week?”

Beth zips her jacket, then pauses with a hand on the door handle. Her face relaxes into her devious office genius look, so Reid waits, rubs his forehead, checks in with the pine needle shadows shivering on the wall.

“Whoever I find,” Beth says slowly, “and I *will* find someone—can join you for this weekend’s tours, for starters. We’ve got seven scheduled.”

“Bloody *hell*.”

“You’ll have to pace yourself. It’s only June.”

“Yeah.” Reid huffs out a frustrated breath. “I wish I could *think*.”

“Also,” Beth continues, “I’ll give them the full set of tour CDs to take home and listen to. They’ll learn your stories faster and be ready sooner to take out tours on their own. And... and we can reduce the pricing on some of the upcoming tours to give trainees a low-pressure way to get some experience.”

“Brilliant. Yes. Great. Follow up on all of that.”

“Let me get these folks on the boat and I’ll get right on it.” She opens the door.

“Maybe get Artie’s to deliver us a big pizza, and time it for when I get in so we can work on the plans together before that third tour. Mitch can take some pizza with him to eat on the way to the ferry. And, shit, I just remembered. Stop the automatic payment of Todd’s paycheck, would you? Maybe then we’ll be able to catch up on bills for a while.”

“Got it, boss. No problem.”

“God, Beth, I’m so sorry you’re having to work overtime. I’ll make it up to you over and above the time-and-a-half pay. I promise.”

“No worries. I’m glad to help.” She waves good-bye and hurries outside.

Reid picks up the phone. As he waits for someone to answer up at the house, he listens through the cracked-open window to Beth greeting the customers. Their happy chatter seems inappropriate, clanging against Reid’s constantly overwhelmed and sad state of mind.

“Yeah, what do you want?” Reid’s aunt Hilary snaps when she answers the phone.

“Hey, I’m getting ready to do the next tour. Is there any news?”

“Oh. Hang on. There might be. Alan tried to see Todd, and your mother’s got Alan on the phone now. Hold on a tic.”

The flock of passengers tromps past the office, straggling down the long wooden dock toward the boat. If this tour’s going to leave on time—which it must—Reid has to go right now.

“Reid?”

“Still here, Aunt Hilary.” Reid keeps the impatience from his voice by sending it through his fingers drumming against the desk.

“Alan says it looks bad. Really bad. Todd’s held to his confession, but he’s a mess and making problems at the station.”

“Like what?”

“Like going berserk—throwing chairs and screaming—so they’re moving him sooner, on Monday afternoon. Apparently, he needs help. They have to get him off the island anyway.”

“Help?”

“Mental help.”

It’s hard to hear, but Reid’s not totally surprised. The strain of what Todd’s going through must be eating him up from the inside. Reid’s got an appointment to see Todd on Monday morning and maybe then, when he can look Todd in the eye and ask him some questions, Reid will finally be able to believe what’s happened.

“Is that it?” Reid asks, grabbing his daypack and cap.

“Todd was going to get some money from Shelby. Do you know if he did?”

“Are you kidding me?” The barely suppressed anger about the crap that keeps getting thrown his way surges up.

“Well, yeah.” Reid can almost hear his aunt’s shrug. “Todd’s a screw-up, but maybe he got one thing right before he threw it all away.”

“I did not hear you refer to Shelby as an ‘it,’ did I?”

“Well?”

“No, I don’t know anything about any money from Shelby.”

“So now what are we gonna do? You know you’re not making enough. Even Todd knew that. At least he...”

Reid checks the wall clock and interrupts her. “Gotta go. I won’t be up for dinner.” He grabs his clipboard and struggles to clear his mind of everything except giving an unforgettable performance. He smiles until it doesn’t feel fake and wishes he had a reserve tank of energy to tap into.

Until three months ago, when the bookings took an unexplained nosedive, giving one hundred percent had been enough.

Chapter Nine

“Lee! How’s it going, man?” Edison’s big, old Buick slows beside Lee. “May I offer me a ride?” he asks with a snigger.

“Don’t beg. It’s not a good look on you.”

“Nice shirt. And the shorts... Wow, is that colour combination even legal outside the Hari Krishna compound?”

“Leave me alone.” The last thing Lee wants right now is Reid’s loser boyfriend hitting on him, but Edison continues to smirk and drives to keep pace with Lee.

“Get lost, Edison. I’m really not in the mood for conversation today.”

“Oh, hey, right. I’m so sorry about your sister. That whole thing is horrible.”

“Stop pandering. Don’t you have somewhere else to be? I’m really, *really* not interested.”

“What if I gave your interest a little massage? You probably need a good bonk yourself right about now. You know, to ease the grief? What do you say?”

“You are such an offensive ass.”

“Yeah, I am. I’m a prowling, hungry, insatiable ass. *God*, but the luck of finding your talents on this wretched island. I’ve never gotten a pounding that matched yours, not even in Vancouver... where, hey, now that I think of it, you could make a mint. Hell, *I* could make a mint selling you there.”

“Shut *up*. That’s disgusting, even for you.” Lee stops walking to glare at Edison through the open window. No matter how many times Lee’s begged Reid to reconsider Edison as a boyfriend, Reid has always come up with a load of optimistic crap, determined to give Edison the benefit of the doubt and focus on his good qualities. Lee knows Reid’s deluded, but he’s reluctant to offer Reid proof, fearing it would taint Reid’s view of Lee.

Well, until recently. When Reid recovers from learning about Hitch ’n’ Pitch, Lee will tell him the whole story about Edison’s relentless campaign to get into Lee’s pants. *Someone* needs to take the self-important fucker down a notch, and Lee can’t ever quite generate the ferocity for the job. Getting through the days as Edgar and Rachel’s son requires too much energy to have any left over for being fierce.

“I still don’t get why Reid insists you’re a decent guy.” Lee starts walking again.

Edison takes his foot off the brake so the car rolls along, heavy and looming at Lee’s side. “Maybe Reid doesn’t know me the way you do,” Edison says. “Also, I know you. I know you’re jonesing for a trick right now, even if you haven’t realized it yet. I know that if you weren’t considering fucking me you’d have zipped away on that trail we just passed.” He lapses into silence for a few minutes, continuing to drive at Lee’s walking pace.

“I don’t *trick*.” It hurts Lee’s stomach to admit that Edison is probably right. Lee had watched that trail as they’d neared it, told himself to take it and get the hell away, but his mind blanked as he passed it. And now? No way is he going with Edison, but his head is so screwed up he’s not thinking clearly.

“Really? Then what do you call it, babe? Getting paid by the mile is still getting paid.”

Lee ignores the arrogant prick and walks along in silence, biding his time until he can peel off onto the next trail, which is already in sight up ahead.

“Want to know a secret?” Edison swerves the car gently toward Lee and brakes, forcing Lee toward the edge of the road.

Lee examines the muddy ditch and the blackberry bramble beyond it and turns toward the back of the car.

“Hey, wait! I have a little surprise for you—Reid and I split up.”

“I don’t believe you.” They stare at each other through the open window until Edison reaches across the car to open the passenger side door.

“I’m serious, Lee. Reid and I broke up last night. I’m surprised he hasn’t told you. So, what do you say? Come on. Climb in, baby. Please. Pretty please? I’m so hard for you I’m ready to park and splay. I sure as shit shouldn’t be operating heavy machinery in my current state.”

“An ass *and* a despicable degenerate,” Lee mutters, trying to sort through his feelings, because despite Edison’s abhorrent self-serving methods, his smutty words are acting on Lee’s desperation for distraction like an evil enzyme, making him consider the offer.

“At the moment my degenerate ass is all yours.” Edison leers and makes sure Lee’s watching before he theatrically unfastens his jeans, moaning with relief as he spills out. “God bless going commando.”

The sight of Edison's hard cock and slutty readiness annihilate everything but the immediate entertainment value of getting dirty with Edison and the tantalizing prospect of Reid's sudden availability as a fuck buddy. The anticipation of sampling Reid's sweet goodness, even if Lee has to bottom in order to have it, gets the better of his libido. A quick hook-up with Edison will take the edge off until Lee can get to Reid and find out if he's ready for some post-break-up consolation sex. Lee climbs into the car and closes the door.

Edison speeds off, as though determined to keep Lee from changing his mind before Edison's gotten what he wants.

"Don't call it tricking," Lee grumbles.

Edison snorts and takes his right hand off the wheel to gently cup Lee's crotch. Lee looks down at Edison's big hand but doesn't make a move to push it away, and the longer it lays there, the harder Lee's dick gets.

"What do you call it, then?" Edison presses the heel of his hand against the tip of Lee's dick, and Lee gives up all the way, slouching and spreading his legs, hating himself. But the need to feel better as soon as possible wins out over grief and ethical complexities.

"It's not tricking because I don't actually need a ride." As the words come out of Lee's mouth, he half expects a squad of logic police to swarm the car and make an arrest. It's becoming harder and harder to believe Hitch 'n' Pitch isn't hurting anyone. Mostly because it's becoming harder to pretend he's not hurting himself.

Or maybe it's just getting harder and harder, period. He squirms under the pressure of Edison's palm.

"Classic." Edison laughs and turns to smile at Lee. "Your denial is touching. Also pathetic, as you're the only one who believes your bullshit."

Edison's confirmation of Lee's reasoning, or lack thereof, only makes Lee more interested in disengaging his troublesome brain. He lifts his hips to press his cock into Edison's hand. After a hard squeeze, Edison lifts his hand back to the steering wheel and turns into the long driveway of the Anderson's summer house, knowing, as they both do, that the Andersons are never in residence before mid-July.

Here at the southern tip of Inking Lake, vacation houses and their patios and docks occupy the only area of the lake with beachfront instead of rocks and trees crowding right up to shore. From inside the company helicopter Edgar

uses for commuting between Haro Island and Vancouver during the summer months, Lee has peered down at Inkling's long, sinuous shape, curving like a lazy S through the forests of the wilder northern end of Haro Island.

"Have pity on me, Lee." Edison can't seem to turn off his sales pitch, even though he must know by now that Lee's a sure thing. He turns off the car and walks around to open Lee's door. "I'm suffering here. I've been a good boy—well, not totally, but more than usual—while I've been with Reid, but after a year of his boring *boring*, so to speak, I need your talents so motherfucking bad."

Lee remains unmoving in the car, staring out at the lake, going over all the reasons this is certain to be a bad idea, but then ignoring them one by one, except the one that worries him the most, which he says out loud. "Why wouldn't Reid have told me you split up?"

"Oh, you mean since Todd upped the volume on your tragic Shakespearean family feud, you and Reid are closer than ever, eh?"

"Fuck right *off*."

"I'm counting on it. Now move your ass, Romeo."

What Edison says rings true. Since Shelby was... since she died, since Reid found Lee puking in the woods two days ago and then found out about Hitch 'n' Pitch, Reid has been conspicuously absent. And Lee figures now's not the time to disobey Edgar by showing up at the tour office. Going anywhere near Reid's family right now would probably be a health risk. But Reid and Edison splitting up is big news, and the thought that Reid is still upset enough with Lee—or too busy with his family and Todd—to not tell Lee directly tilts his world a few more degrees toward despair.

When Lee looks up at Edison, uncertain and undecided, Edison opens the car door wider. He steps closer, turns around, and pulls his jeans down over his hips to give Lee an up-close-and-personal view of bare ass.

Despite his dislike of Edison as a person, Lee succumbs to the sight of his available, willing ass. That Edison is eager to the point of begging makes Lee's dick sprint to escape his jeans.

"Yeah," Edison says, staring over his shoulder at the visible bulge in Lee's shorts. "Now that's what I'm talking about." He wraps a hand around Lee's forearm, and Lee allows Edison to pull him out of the car. After extracting a condom and a packet of lube from his pants pocket and setting them on the

floor of the backseat, Edison strips his pants all the way off, rolls onto his stomach along the seat, and twists his head to look back at Lee, blue eyes pleading.

Lee looks for a minute then crawls in over Edison's legs, lowers his shorts to his knees, rolls on a condom, and squirts a strip of lube into Edison's butt crease. Gathering Edison's wrists into one hand, Lee pulls on them, pressing them into the small of his back.

When Lee closes his eyes, he falls into a vision of Reid, prepped and ready and held by his wrists beneath Lee in the bed of his truck, imagines Edison's whimpers as Reid's, pictures Reid bare and begging for Lee's cock. He runs his hand through the lube then fingers deep into Edison, drawing out the process now that Edison's given up control, making him whine and curse. Spreading Edison's long legs wider with his knee, Lee settles his hungry dick at Edison's hole and pushes, one foot on the floor for leverage.

Edison sighs on a drawn-out moan, craning his neck around to look at Lee. "Look at me," he gasps, but Lee keeps his eyes closed as his long, focused thrusts make Edison stutter through his harsh breaths and the punishing rhythm Lee's set. "Lee, let me s-s-see your eyes. I love how they get so... *Jesus fuck*, I've missed the way you t-t-take me."

A sound like a scuffle in the driveway gravel makes Lee open his eyes and look out the car window above Edison's head.

Reid's eyes flick between Lee and the cell phone clutched in his hand. His face drains to ghostly whiteness, and he spins away.

Chapter Ten

Afraid he's going to have a heart attack, Reid clutches the fabric of his T-shirt, heart thrashing against his chest in protest at what he's stumbled across. He spins, turning his back on the scene, because he can't persuade his brain to make sense of what he saw. Or heard—Edison's lust-filled words and desperate sounds.

"Lee, wait!" Reid hears Edison pleading, desperation in his voice.

Reid turns around to see Lee backing out of the car and pulling up his shorts. He locks eyes with Reid over the car's roof as they listen to Edison curse and moan, spilling over into his climax even though Lee's already gone. "Ah, God, *holy fucking Jesus*. So... so... *fucking... fantastic*." Edison's staccato, needy groans are unlike any he made when Reid fucked him. The bawdy concert goes on and on, crushing the last of Reid's disbelief.

At last, his brain finds the adrenaline on-switch.

"What the *fuck*, Eddie!" Reid's acceleration from disbelief to outrage threatens to include a sob, but he manages to force it back by fumbling with the door handle. He gets the damn door open and reaches in to grab Edison under the armpits, rage making Reid strong enough to drag him out of the car.

Edison flails and his bare ass hits the gravel, but he laughs like he doesn't care. His skin is flushed to a deep, rosy, aroused glow, his abdomen is covered in cum, he's lying naked in the dirt, caught in the act of cheating on his boyfriend, and all he can do is... *laugh?*

A cog seems to spin off its axis in Reid's chest. His foot arcs back of its own accord, but Lee's arms wrap around from behind, jerking him back, and the foot Reid had aimed at Edison's crotch misses its mark. The residual force of that almost-kick—a vicious, angry kick that would have done real damage—sobers Reid but intensifies his frustration. "Get *off* me." He breaks free from Lee's grip and steps further away from Edison.

Lee turns on Edison with fury in his voice. "Are you *kidding* me? You *lied* to get me to fuck you?"

"Oh, hell on wheels." Edison rolls to his knees and chortles. "Classic slapstick. Yeah, I lied, but only on a technicality. I was on my way to break up with him."

“That’s...” Reid frantically rewinds the past few days and weeks, but finds no clues that he should have noticed but didn’t. “Why would you do this to me now?” He’s not sure why he asks, because after this there’s no way he wants to be with this slimebag.

“Why would I do what? Beg Lee to take me? Christ, if you don’t know, you’ve obviously been wasting your fuck-buddy interludes with Lee ‘Pound Me Please’ Sheldrake.”

When Reid doesn’t respond because his emotions are too tangled to sort out, Edison continues. “Oh... you mean why am I bailing now? Let’s see... boredom? No, that’s been going on for a while. How about the fact that your brother’s a crazy murderer and you’re clueless about him? You’re naive, Reid. I’m tired of pretending it’s cute. Plus, everyone knows your business is tanking. Call me shallow, but I don’t find poverty attractive.”

“It’s not tanking!” But Reid knows it is unless he can figure out why and get it back on track. He hasn’t told Edison any of that, though. “What makes you think it is?”

“You.” Edison waves a hand at Reid, swiping away their relationship in one careless gesture. “Granted, you didn’t come out and say it, but I know you. You’ve been freaking out about something. I made an educated guess.”

Reid remembers a conversation from a week or so ago. “I was trying to share my problems with you! You’re—you *were*—my boyfriend. That’s what boyfriends do—they listen and talk and help each other and support each other.”

“Well, *oops*. Turns out I’m not that interested when you go all whiny and financially wobbly and suddenly have a murderer in the family.” Edison brushes himself off and takes his time walking around the car, showing Reid more of his bare ass than Reid ever wants to see again. As Edison buttons his jeans and closes car doors, Reid becomes aware of Lee speaking, but *not hurting Edison* takes up one hundred percent of Reid’s attention.

“I don’t even recognize you, Edison.” Hurt drives a wedge into the hard anger, compressing all the pain Reid has had to weather over the past few days.

“Welcome to your new reality.” Edison smirks. “Oh, hey, how the hell did you find me here?” He winces and slaps his forehead. “Damn it. Note to self: Turn off geotracking app before boning some guy who’s not my soon-to-be-ex. My bad.” He hitches up his pants and shivers, like he feels the aftershocks of his orgasm where his jeans snuggle against his crotch.

“I can’t believe how quick you are to toss aside our relationship and do *this...*” Reid points at Lee. “*This* works for you?”

Edison snorts and jerks a thumb at Lee. “This? Hell, yes, it works for me.” He opens the driver’s door and puts a foot into the car, then leans toward Reid, his expression serious and hurtful. “*This* is the *best damn fuck* I’ve ever had.”

Edison gets in and starts up the car, grinning out the window at them. “Have fun, boys. It’s been entertaining, but I’m sure you two have *lots* to discuss. Thanks for the break-up gift, Lee. We’ll have to do it again soon.” He waggles his fingers and accelerates fast around the driveway’s loop, leaving Reid and Lee blinking in a cloud of dust.

As the dust settles and the sound of Edison’s car dims with distance, Reid raises his hand to his chest to clutch his T-shirt again. He needs something to hold on to that won’t break him or ask too much of him or fall out from under him.

Chapter Eleven

Reid looks up, and the hurt in his eyes makes Lee rush to say, “I swear, I *swear* I didn’t know, Reid. He assured me you’d already broken up.”

“I would have told you.”

“But you haven’t told me anything lately. You haven’t... Why haven’t you been answering my calls?”

“Oh, no reason. Just work, my brother murdering someone I care about, my family needing food, my business tanking, and... hmm... maybe a few minutes of sleep every now and then.” By the end of the list, Reid looks angry again.

“Where’s your car?” Lee wipes the lenses of his glasses on the hem of his T-shirt.

“I thought he’d be hanging out here.” Reid makes a feeble gesture toward the Anderson’s back patio and dock. “We used to do that. The two of us.” His voice sounds lost, wistful, distant, and Lee hurts for him. He doesn’t want to hurt Reid any more than he already has.

One look into Reid’s eyes drains that hope away.

Reid turns away from Lee and deflates onto the gravel. “I hate you,” he says, pulling his legs into his chest.

“I don’t blame you.” Lee stays where he is, not wanting to spook Reid back into the anger lurking beneath the shock. “I’m sorry, Reid. I really didn’t know.”

The challenge in Reid’s eyes slowly fades to something that looks more like humiliation. “Why do I suck at everything?” Reid bows his head onto his raised knees, but he keeps talking. “I can’t seem to keep the tour company in the black, and I don’t know why. I’m an awful brother. I should have worked harder to get Todd straightened out or away from Shelby. I’ve been ignoring you even though you lost your sister two days ago under the worst circumstances.” Reid lifts his hands to his head and grips his hair as his voice softens to a murmur. “And now I know that I can’t fuck worth a damn.”

Lee wants so badly to go to Reid, to wrap him up, to pet and soothe him—to do whatever it takes to make Reid believe in himself. But even more than that, Lee can’t stand the thought of Reid pushing him away right now, so he stays where he is and offers words instead.

“Stop, Reid. Don’t you dare swirl away into that black hole where self-esteem goes to die. Just... just focus on getting through this moment, okay?”

Reid shakes his head against his hands. “I can’t,” he says. “This moment is the worst.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you want me like that?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “All... all *dirty* and... and urgent and toppy and loud?”

Lee sighs and moves to crouch in front of Reid, but doesn’t touch him. “Hey.”

Reid turns his head to the side, away from Lee.

Lee waits.

After a big breath, Reid raises his head and rests his chin on his hands, as though it would take too much effort to raise his head any further.

Lee studies Reid’s strained face. “I *do* want you like that. I’ve *always* wanted you like that. But... we don’t... you don’t...” Lee can’t seem to say the rest of it out loud, not now, not with the dust of Edison’s cruelty settling around them.

“Oh,” Reid says, his voice small. “It really is because I always insist that I don’t bottom.” He nods, connecting the dots. “I *never* bottom. And you...” He bows his head again. “God, I’m such an idiot.”

“Not usually.” Lee stands and holds out a hand to help Reid up.

Reid looks up with a sigh and takes Lee’s hand. When they’re standing face-to-face, Reid brushes a finger down the side of Lee’s face. “I’m sorry I’m an idiot. I’ve missed you.” He stares at Lee’s mouth for moment and then leans in, but Lee backs away.

“No. Not now. Not here.”

Reid looks around, down at the tire marks in the gravel made when Edison peeled out. He nods again and starts walking down the driveway.

Lee follows with a glance back at the spot where something finally happened. That frozen moment when Lee stared at Reid over the top of the car,

when Reid's relationship with his boyfriend crashed and burned as Edison moaned his pleasure at Lee's touch—that moment altered Lee, broke something, fixed something, illuminated a new path through the tangled growth at the edge of the cliff, a path headed toward something rather than away from everything else.

A path headed toward someone he'd be willing to fight for.

Even if Reid never knows.

Chapter Twelve

The little room the police officer leads Reid into—one table, two chairs, no window—smells terrible, of fear and resignation and acrid body odour. Reid sits and tries to slow his breathing while he waits to see his brother for the first time since... since he became someone capable of drowning Shelby, a person Todd had known and loved most of his life. Or, more accurately, since Reid realized his brother had become someone capable of doing what he did.

“You look like shit.” Todd’s voice sounds hoarse and foreign.

Reid looks up as his brother enters the room with a uniformed officer. Todd grins his cocky, lopsided grin and tips an imaginary hat.

“You look the way you always do,” Reid offers, but a closer study of the face that looks so much like his own makes him uneasy. Shouldn’t Todd look more different? Shouldn’t an *After Murdering Someone* face look glaringly different from a *Before Murdering Someone* face? Reid stares hard at Todd, noting that his eyes won’t stay still. Except for those roving eyes, he looks exactly the same.

Todd flops into the chair on the other side of the table and holds out a cuffed hand to shake with Reid, who balks at the realization that he doesn’t want to touch his brother. He tries, but he can’t touch the hand that held Shelby under the water long enough to kill her.

Todd is a dangerous man.

That thought, once it claims space in Reid’s mind, won’t dislodge. He glances at the big RCMP officer standing beside the closed door with his arms folded, but the man offers no clues about what Reid should do.

“Seriously?” Todd withdraws his hand. The playfulness drains out of his face.

Since Reid found out he’d be able to see Todd, he’s been over and over what he wants to say and ask, but no amount of deciding on the right way to greet one’s newly murderous brother has prepared him for this reality, which makes his skin crawl. All he wants to do is escape, but instead he waits, willing to give Todd a chance to be who Reid thought he was.

“Fact,” Reid says. “You killed Shelby.” The fear in his throat makes his voice come out weird and low.

Todd tilts his head, amused, though his eyes flit to Reid's face, then away, over and over.

"It's hard for me to believe you could have done what you did." But there's no question of Todd's guilt, not in light of the mountain of evidence collected, according to the detective and the provincial prosecutor Reid and his family met with this morning. Todd will soon be gone for good, tucked away in a real prison on the mainland. Reid pushes aside a flood of images from prison movies he's seen. He can't wrap his mind around it, any of it. "Please tell me something, Todd. I don't feel like I know who you are right now."

Todd's gaze settles on Reid for a longer moment, and he seems to make a decision. He raises his hands in the cuffs to rub his forehead. "Okay, okay. I was... I was really high, but that wouldn't have made me... I mean, I'd been plenty high before and I never..." His voice fades and he makes an obvious effort to get his thoughts together. "If it hadn't been for..."

"Wait... what? Are you saying you were using again? Goddamnit, Todd, you've only been out of the last program for four fucking months!"

Todd leans toward Reid, elbows on the table, intensity in his voice. "You need to listen to me, Reid. That's not important. You always think everything is about ten minutes from being all squared away and peachy. It's *not*. The tour company is *never* going to make enough money, so stop imagining you can solve things by adding one tour a week or shaving a few dollars off this or that expense or... or taking another worthless Internet course. Yeah, okay, *fuck*, so I screwed up. I tried to solve my problems—*our* problems—by supplementing our income, but... at least I tried something that might have worked for real."

"You mean asking Shelby for money? Are you kidding me? And... what? She said no so you *killed* her?"

How could Reid not have known his brother was headed down a road that would lead *here*, to an argument in a stinking room with Todd in handcuffs, having lost his mind? Okay, Todd had always been trouble, but compared to *murder* the other troubles had been minor—shoplifting, pregnancy scares, addiction, speeding tickets. Except, now that Reid's sitting here, his heart breaking more with every ricocheting glance of Todd's scary eyes, he understands that there were probably indicators he should have paid more attention to.

The avalanche of shame threatens to do him in.

“No,” Todd protests. “That’s not what happened.” He looks down at his cuffed hands and immediately away again. “Well, I mean *yes*, I did ask Shelby for money, and she did say no but that’s not the point. The point is Edgar. She would have given us the money if it wasn’t for her meddling shit of a father. Then what happened at the lake... that would never have happened.”

Reid scoots his chair back, physically repelled by Todd’s denial of responsibility.

Todd stabs a finger toward Reid’s chest, the chain of the cuff clanking with the sharp movement. “I loved Shelby, but Edgar *fucking* Sheldrake never gave me a chance. He hated me from the moment he met me.”

“Um... you think he might have a point?”

“*Fuck you!* You smug, righteous, Goody Two-shoes! You know Edgar hates us both. He kept Lee from helping out at the tour office. He’s always tried to get you to stay away from Lee.”

“That’s old news.”

“The *new* news is that Edgar, *the fuck*, told me he was going to send her away. He wormed his way into her mind, and she...” His eyes fill with tears he angrily flings away with the tips of his fingers. “She told me she never wanted to see me again.”

“But...” Reid shakes his head, feeling like he’s going slowly bonkers trying to navigate this conversation with Todd. “Shelby’s been rejecting your advances for years. Why would you...” Reid gulps instead of finishing the sentence.

“He was going to take Shelby away for good! I would never have done it if he’d just *left me the fuck alone!*”

The tether Reid has always felt connecting him to his younger brother loosens and falls away. “*You* pushed Shelby under the water until she drowned. *You* killed Shelby, someone’s cherished daughter, Lee’s beloved sister. *Your* hands held her head under the water until she drowned, not Edgar Sheldrake’s.”

Todd stops trying to wipe his tears away, and the silence goes on long enough that Reid begins to notice sounds from beyond the closed door—phones ringing, voices, footsteps. He considers what Todd has said so far, that fallen tether making him want to cover all the bases now, because he doesn’t know when he’ll see Todd again.

“Were you dealing?” Reid asks.

Todd’s focus turns hard. “*Someone* had to fix the leaks in the family pocketbook since Mom and Alan stopped working and since you can’t get the business to bring in the money you said it would.”

“It’s been better every year,” Reid protests, but he knows Todd’s right. They seem to always be behind the curve instead of in front of it, even with what should have been a steady rise in profits. He narrows his eyes at Todd. “That’s why the bookkeeping is so fucked, isn’t it? Because you stole from my business to buy drugs.”

“Yeah, okay, but I was only cooking the books to get started, because I knew you wouldn’t see the beauty of the plan.”

“To get started dealing drugs.” Reid doesn’t need to make it a question. “Three months ago, right?”

“You’re so dumb. What’s going to happen when Aunt Hilary’s hip keeps her from getting around? You expect Mom or Alan to take care of her or get a job? You think the bit of income you bring home from the tour company is enough to take care of everyone? God, you’re so determined to see what’s good, you can’t see what’s true. And what if you get hurt? We have no reserves. We’re never... you’re *never* going to...” Shaking, Todd lifts a hand to run it through his hair, but when the other hand tags along, dragged by the cuffs, the metallic clink of the chain echoes in the tiny room and Todd loses it.

When Todd lunges across the table to grab at him, Reid’s backward flinch topples him to the floor in his eagerness to escape. The officer by the door is all over Todd in a microsecond, pressing the side of Todd’s face hard into the table while calmly talking into his radio and nodding at Reid to get out.

“I did it for *you!*” Todd screams. He thrashes and kicks and his chair skids across the floor. “God, you idiot, can’t you see that? Now what’s going to happen to you all!”

Reid shoves his way out of the room against the tide of uniformed chests coming in. On unsteady legs, he navigates the hallways of the police station and rushes through the lobby into the cool summer air, Todd’s hoarse scream raking across his soul like an open wound.

Chapter Thirteen

Waiting for Reid, Lee paces the narrow strip of Second Beach that remains at high tide. Normally, they'd meet at Inklings, but Lee didn't think he could face it. Now the melancholy late-afternoon light and the shadows over the churning waters of the channel magnify his grief, and Lee wishes he could have a do-over. The calm, familiar water beneath the outcropping of rocks at the northern tip of Inklings Lake, the closeness of the woods there, and the accumulation of conversations and laughter piled in that spot over time might have made this meeting easier for both of them.

Two days ago, at the end of the Anderson's driveway, Lee had declined Reid's mocking offer of a ride in favour of another long walk through the dark woods. He'd instinctively headed north, drawn into the darkness of the thick forest and the improbability of anyone coming across him there if he started sobbing about his sister. Inside the rich silence and comfort of the deep woods, Lee had discovered that he could feel about Shelby in a way he hadn't been able to anywhere else—especially not anywhere near his parents. He'd spent himself to the point of exhaustion, crying and screaming and cursing over Shelby's death, moving alone through the first thick layers of grief.

Ever since that long cry in the woods and Lee's disturbing suspicion that his grief encompasses more than Shelby's death, his thoughts have gravitated toward issues he's avoided thinking about for a long time.

Fifteen minutes ago, Reid had called to see if they could meet somewhere. He wouldn't say why, other than that he'd seen Todd at the police station this morning. He'd sounded bewildered and lost, and Lee had leapt at the chance to repair the damage done to their relationship by his impulsive actions with Edison.

Reid's truck stops in the pull-out on the road to the provincial marina. When he doesn't get out, Lee walks over and opens the passenger door and climbs in.

"Hey," Lee offers.

"Hey." Reid looks up, and Lee can tell immediately that something new is wrong. "What's happened?" He reaches for Reid's shoulder, but Reid slouches away to lean against the door. Lee rests his hand along the back of the bench seat. "Is this about seeing Todd?"

Reid nods. “He’s... it was spooky. It’s like his body’s there, but the Todd I knew is mostly gone. I hardly recognized him.”

“What did he say? Well... if you want to tell me. I’ll understand if you don’t. I promise I won’t repeat anything you say to Edgar and his circling vultures.”

Reid shrugs. “I doubt it would matter. Todd doesn’t seem to be trying to avoid anything. Maybe that’s why he seemed so gone—he’s really given up this time, I guess because he knows there’s no getting out of this one.”

Lee studies Reid’s hunched, closed-off posture. “What else? Why are you so upset?”

Reid fidgets and stares at his lap. “He told me he asked Shelby to give him money.”

“Yes.”

“You knew?”

“She told me he’d asked, but she wasn’t even considering it. She suspected he was doing drugs again—hard stuff this time—but couldn’t prove it. She said he’d changed since last summer, gotten scarier.”

“Lee...” Reid finally looks up, and the grief Lee’s been buckling under finds a reflective surface in Reid’s shining eyes. “God, I’m so sorry. I don’t understand how you can be sitting here with me, knowing that my own brother...”

“Yes, you do know why. You’re not your brother. You never have been.”

Reid looks away to stare out toward the livid sunset shadowing the snowy heights across the channel. “Thank you. I’ll do whatever I can to help you. You know that, right?” He lifts his hand at the beauty outside in a frustrated gesture, as if to brush it all away as unwanted and inappropriate.

Lee desperately wants to ask Reid if he got an explanation from Todd about why he did what he did, but doesn’t want the already strained conversation to veer off into defensiveness. He settles for asking, “How did Todd seem?”

Reid drops his head into his hands, and Lee can’t stand the distance any longer. “Hey now, you’re shaking. Come here. Let me hold you. Please.”

Reid doesn’t move, only shrinks further in on himself, so Lee scoots across the seat to pull Reid into his arms, resting his chin on top of Reid’s head and

rubbing his back. The shaking turns to shudders, and Lee twists the key in the ignition to blast the heater.

“Tell me, Reid.”

“I couldn’t believe it. We talked awhile, but then he... he was trying to explain his behaviour and he completely went off the deep end—screaming at me, trying to climb over the table to get at me. They... they had to hold him down.”

Lee pulls Reid farther out from under the steering wheel to get his arms around more of him, hold him closer, wrap him up tighter.

Reid’s quiet voice—muted inside Lee’s jacket and blurred by Reid’s mouth pressing against Lee’s chest—sounds distant enough to be a message from a dark dream. “He told me it was for me.”

“What?” Lee tries to work it out.

“I can’t do anything right.”

“What do you imagine you did wrong?”

“Maybe if I’d been...” Reid shrugs inside Lee’s arms. “All I’ve ever wanted is to be someone the people I love could lean on. That doesn’t seem too much to ask, does it? But... I can’t ever seem to get it *right*. If I could make a little more money than my family needs, I could put some aside, but there’s *never* any extra, no matter what I do. And if I can’t even save five dollars, how am I ever going to take care of anyone special... you know, down the road, when...” His voice trails off and his lips press together against Lee’s chest.

“When what?” Lee holds still, afraid to jinx the gift of Reid’s vulnerability and trust.

“Never mind.” Reid tries to wiggle out of Lee’s arms. “I’m pathetic.”

Lee doesn’t let go. “No, finish your sentence. When... *what?*”

The truck’s powerful heater seems to have penetrated Reid’s consternation enough to warm him. He untucks a hand from between their chests and turns off the heat.

“When someone wants me.”

In the sudden silence, Reid’s confession fills the truck to the roof.

Chapter Fourteen

As soon as the words are out of Reid's mouth, he regrets them. The depth of his pitifulness since Shelby died seems to compound daily, like the interest on his maxed-out credit card. The meeting with Todd has spun him until he's not sure which way is up. He'd thought talking with Lee might help sort things out, but this whining about his life suddenly feels beyond selfish. Lee's sister is dead. Reid should be comforting him instead of the other way around.

"Please forget I said that," Reid says. He pushes against Lee, wanting to sit back on his own side of the truck, wanting to prove to them both he can function on his own, but Lee squeezes Reid tighter, leans back further, stretches them both out on the seat until Reid settles between Lee's legs.

"You're right, you are pathetic," Lee says, but there's a smile in his voice.

They lie there for a while, Lee's hand soothing the small of Reid's back, and Reid tries to rally, to think about what he could do right now to be a better friend to Lee. He wishes he was more worthy of friendship and closes his eyes tight against the return of the wave of despair.

Lee whispers into Reid's ear. "There is something you can do for me."

"Anything. But I sincerely hope it won't involve thinking, because my mind feels drunk and disorderly at the moment."

"Good," Lee says. "Lift up."

Reid puts a hand on the seat back and raises off Lee, whose fingers move quickly to undo his own jeans, skimming them off his hips as his shoes hit the floor under the steering wheel. By the time Lee's naked from the waist down and working on unfastening Reid's pants, it's too late to have a dissenting opinion because Reid's cock is already making a beeline for Lee's ass.

Laughing, Lee strong-arms Reid to keep him up and off. "Hold on, Hoss. Give me a chance to get out the tack." Grabbing lube and a condom from the pocket of his jeans before letting them drop back onto the floor, Lee gives Reid a sideways smile that melts tension from Reid's shoulders.

Fully on board now, Reid squirms his pants and underwear down to his knees. Lee rolls the condom onto Reid's dick. "Hey," Lee says with a smirk, nodding toward the window behind Reid, "another first for the record books, Mister Shy-and-Private. You ready to flash your bare ass at anyone who drives by?"

It's a little-used road, but Reid so doesn't care. "Give me," he says, holding out his hand and watching intently as Lee douses his fingers with lube. Lee opens his legs wider to give Reid room to work his fingers inside.

Ever since his earliest teen fantasies, Reid has preferred topping. He wants to help others be happy and find pleasure. He likes coordinating things and controlling the big picture. Topping fits his personality.

Doesn't it?

Now, as in all the times they've had sex, Lee watches Reid with an intensity that makes Reid want to do it right, to focus on what Lee wants. Reid dismisses the memory of Lee saying he's not really a switch but a top and pushes his index finger into Lee for the first time in too long.

"Ah... and you're back," Lee whispers, squirming into the intrusion.

When they look into each other's eyes, the click is almost audible.

"I've missed you." The seductive quality of Lee's voice narrows Reid's focus, shoving everything else out of his mind except making the glide of his fingers in and out of Lee slow and smooth.

"That's it," Lee mutters, then, "Enough."

A swipe of his fingers on the old towel under the car seat, a reallocation of knees, a hot press of long thighs, a sudden gasp from Reid as he touches the tip of his cock to Lee's hole, and the windows begin to fog. Just as Reid pushes into Lee for the first time in *way* too long—in over a year, since before Reid and Edison became boyfriends—the fresh spectre of Edison yowling with lust while Lee pounds his ass rises up unbidden and unwanted. Reid hurries to erase the memory, to shove it back far enough to not matter, but... God, what was Lee doing to get Edison to wail like that?

Reid tries to rescue this moment, tries to resuscitate his mood by imagining himself as Lee, who's apparently the God of Fucking, but he only manages to feel inadequate. And the joy of a sexual reunion with Lee, of being inside Lee again, dissipates and dies along with Reid's erection, drowning in a deep, black lake of unfulfilled desires.

Chapter Fifteen

A week later, after weathering the torture of Shelby's funeral and days of being patted sympathetically by more pretentious family members than Lee remembered existed, Lee's approaching a breaking point. If his mother asks him one more time to "School your face, dear, so you can answer the door with a smile," Lee's going to curl up in a corner and whimper. Money-hungry Sheldrake relatives, Rachel's drama-obsessed cohorts, and Edgar's sycophants have sucked up to Lee to the point of provoking a permanent case of skin crawl.

The worst part—besides denying his need to escape into the woods—has been watching people cry only until they think they're not being observed. Lee's parents seem intent on making Shelby's death into the social event of the year. Apparently, a coveted invitation to the Sheldrake mansion is worth the price of a few fake tears.

Studying the people around him, searching for someone willing to allow an honest feeling to rise to the surface unclouded by subterfuge or manipulation, has given Lee a craving for Reid's complete lack of pretention.

Imagining Reid beside him gets Lee through the social ordeal.

After he lost his erection in the truck last week, Reid had clammed up from mortification. The worst part of that drive to a trailhead had been the silence. They'd parted awkwardly. Reid had promised to call soon, but since then he hadn't answered his phone or stopped by even once.

A week after Shelby's funeral, most of the overnight guests have finally gone, leaving two cold, dignified parents and a disappointing son. Lee escapes the emptiness, heading into the woods for the first time in too long. Getting *away* brings such relief, he stops as soon as he's out of sight of the main house and lean his forehead against the trunk of a tree to let all the suppressed grief and loneliness spill over, grateful for the only safety he's felt since he lay in the truck with Reid.

A couple of hours later, Lee walks slowly home along the low bluff above Pony Inlet, weak late-morning sunbeams flicking over his pants legs. The familiar undulations and turns of the trail free his attention, and his thoughts turn inward to emotions vying for resolution before he reaches home.

High on Lee's worry list are Reid's willingness to shoulder blame for things that aren't his responsibility and his subsequent spiral into feelings of

inadequacy. Also distressing are the reasons Todd gave Reid for why he... did what he did. Lee's seen how the quest for money can break a connection deep inside, fucking people up past the point of no return.

He emerges from the woods to see a case in point smoking a noxious but very expensive cigarillo on the wide back patio of the main house—the *mansion*, as Edgar insists Lee call it. There he is. Edgar Sheldrake, wealth warrior, frightening snob, and the least fatherly person Lee has ever met. Well, unless wealth itself can be considered offspring. For money, Edgar has nothing but love, care, devotion, respect, and consideration.

A heavy numbness sinks into Lee's limbs as he climbs the hill and approaches the steps up to the patio. The trip feels like a forever of moving his legs while making little progress, his father glaring at him the entire time. Edgar only speaks after Lee stops in front of him and waits, knowing he's not going anywhere without a lecture about something, knowing for sure that whatever words come out of his father's mouth won't be a query about how Lee's holding up.

“I do not appreciate you running off before all our guests have gone. Our team has waited long enough for you to sit down and talk with them.” *Our team* includes a second phalanx of even higher-powered lawyers, helicoptered in during the week, now camped out in the downstairs study, determined to show their eager, fretting devotion to Edgar. “I would think you'd want to contribute to the effort of bringing your sister's killer to justice.” The sternness of Edgar's voice is nothing new, but this clinical determination to maintain a focus on legalities—especially when Todd is unquestionably going to be convicted for the crime—seems hostile with a hint of rabidity. Lee suspects that if Edgar stopped swinging his sword, he'd be forced to grieve, and that would be unacceptable.

This observation makes Lee think it might be time to look up information on the Internet about how to deal more effectively with his own grief. So far, he's tried to compartmentalize it, pushing the roaring constant into the background except when he's escaped into the woods for bouts of emoting. But the way grief has of crashing over him at unexpected moments scares the hell out of him. And the bustle of pretend commiseration and jugular-obsessed attorneys in the main house makes Lee feel even sadder and more distant from his parents, emphasizing the fact that they are not available.

The Internet will have to do as a comforting advisor.

It's not until Edgar speaks, with a sharper edge to his voice, that Lee remembers he's waiting for a reply. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Turning to stand beside his father and look down the long, landscaped hill to the islands across the channel from Pony Inlet, Lee says, "I don't have anything to say to the lawyers. I just... I hurt. Walking makes me feel better than revenge ever will." Honesty—especially honesty that brings Edgar's decisions and intentions into question—is a risk, but Lee has too much on his mind and can't come up with a better defence on such short notice.

Big mistake.

"Not all of us have the *luxury* of being able to walk away from our lives, Leland, and your attitude of late is not making me hopeful about your readiness for your twenty-fifth birthday."

And... *there it is*. Edgar's unveiling of his big-stick threat.

Eight months from now, on Lee's twenty-fifth birthday, he'll come into his trust fund, a rather large one, as Shelby did two years ago. This legacy from Edgar's father depends on the fund's trustee to decide whether Lee is worthy of the inheritance.

Edgar is the trustee.

Until this moment, and in spite of Edgar's constant admonishment that Lee *make something of himself*, Lee has considered his life to be a game of taking what's offered and doing the minimum of what's expected until his release from the gilded cage via receipt of that trust fund. On the plus side, his only real labour has been to weather his parents' snobbery and general disappointment. He has an entire house to himself on the family's extensive Haro Island property and a hefty monthly allowance to spend as he chooses. On the down side, attendance is required at family functions on Haro in the summer and in Vancouver and elsewhere at other times of the year.

Until this moment, Lee hadn't comprehended the presence of the trap, hadn't been aware that Edgar had the power to deny Lee his inheritance.

"After misjudging Shelby's readiness to take care of herself, I'm not making the same mistake with you."

A flare of rage at Edgar's apparent assumption that Shelby should have kept herself from being murdered makes Lee dizzy, and he works hard not to let it

show. With deep regret for his flub of honesty a minute ago, Lee reverts to his usual tactic for self-preservation: a state of closed blankness in which he pushes his real self far aside. This requires so much effort in this moment that Lee hopes he doesn't faint.

"Go to my office," Edgar snaps. He stubs out the foul-smelling cigarillo in the ash stand beside the door and gestures Lee inside. "It's been a week. It's time you earned your keep."

For the first time, his father's voice conveys more than disappointment when he says those words. The threat of an ultimatum, a ticking clock, muscles its way into the inflection of his voice.

Lee follows Edgar into the study, the little one off the big room where the lawyers fester and multiply. Sitting across from his father in the conversation area, away from the long desk full of papers and file folders, Lee takes a deep breath and rubs his hands along his thighs, trying to prepare for another dose of punishing reality.

"As of today," Edgar begins, "you will receive assignments from me. If you fulfill them to my satisfaction over the next eight months, you will come into your trust fund. If not... well, then not. This is not a discussion. I'm telling you this is how it's going to be." He picks up a file folder from the coffee table and opens it, looking at Lee only to confirm that he's paying attention.

Lee nods. His mind seems to be holding its breath, stuck between heartbeats, frozen, but poised for the signal to flee.

Fighting back has never been an option.

"First, you will be in this room tomorrow morning at ten a.m. sharp to talk with me and the other lawyers about the Douglas clan. We need a more complete picture of their lives in order to find the chinks and take them down."

Lee's traitorous, stuttering brain makes his head nod again, though he does *not* agree with that course of action at all, doesn't want his knowledge of Reid and his family used to help the Sheldrake empire deliver more hardship. But Lee wants to get back to the safety of the woods again, and nodding is the fastest, surest way out of here.

"Second, you will stop seeing the brother. Reid. *Especially*, you will stop having relations with him, whether in his truck at Second Beach or elsewhere. Is this understood?"

Lee manages to nod in spite of the high whine starting somewhere in the back of his head at the shock of hearing what his father knows.

“Third, you will stop throwing yourself around like a *whore* in exchange for rides you don’t need. If I or the staff I hired to shadow you since I first heard rumours of your disgraceful activities discover you doing anything like that again—”

“Wait. You knew?”

“Of course I knew. You’re my son. Your activities reflect on this family.”

“But... if you’ve known, why didn’t you say anything before now?”

“Shelby...” Edgar swallows and falters, his slip in control passing in the blink of an eye. “Shelby persuaded me not to. She assured me that you were being safe and that your... *antics* flew under the radar of general public knowledge.” He shrugs and then straightens his suit jacket. “She begged me, and I let it go—against my better judgment.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, *oh*. But Shelby’s gone now, and I am no longer inclined to indulge you. Which brings us to point four. On Friday, Barry will escort you to Toronto and set you up in a small apartment. You will show up bright and early at the Toronto office on Monday morning, where you will work at least full-time in an entry-level position until your mother and I arrive in September, when I will begin giving you an education in business, since you’ve shown at least something of a flair for being entrepreneurial.”

Edgar pauses for a glacial smile.

“You will support yourself on your own salary. As of today, no more allowance. You’ve done absolutely nothing constructive with your time since you graduated from high school, and you currently have no skills other than prostitution. That is not acceptable.”

Lee tries to resist the shame that crawls over his skin, making him shrink into the back of the leather chair. He fails when he realizes he agrees with Edgar’s assessment of his life to date.

“And, number five, if you do not follow these rules, if you throw away this opportunity to come into your inheritance in March, your next opportunity will be at age thirty and you’ll spend the intervening five years in Switzerland working as a grunt in the Lucerne office under the supervision of a vice president so strict you won’t recognize yourself within three months. If, by the

end of those five years, I'm not satisfied with your progress, your inheritance will be folded back into the family estate. End of story. Do I make myself clear?"

Lee stares at his lap and nods. The ear-splitting silence fills rapidly with that rising internal whine that Lee finally pays attention to. "One request," he says, lifting his head.

"I'll hear it."

"I want to see Reid one more time, to tell him what's happening, so he doesn't..."

"Granted. Barry will take your cell phone now—he's already fetched your computer. You'll get them back in Toronto. He will be your minder from now on. You may use my phone to arrange to see Reid at your house tomorrow morning for one hour, so make it count. Prepare yourself. Say everything you need to say, because that will be the last contact you have with him before you leave for Toronto. Or, more probably, the last contact ever, because at some point soon he will learn that you helped to send him and his family straight to hell."

Lee clamps down on his emotions so hard he can almost feel his blood run cold. He clenches his hands into fists and manages to keep quiet. Nothing good will come from taking a stand against his father now—it's way too late for that—so Lee focuses on shutting down until he can get home and break down.

"Until Barry takes you away, you will not leave this property. Use your time to pack up what you'll need in Toronto. We'll ship whatever you don't take with you on Friday."

The brief glance they exchange surprises Lee, who feels so diminished by now as to be invisible.

When Edgar clears his throat and says "You are dismissed," Lee stands and walks toward the door, amazed he's able to because he can't feel his legs.

"Leland..."

Desperate not to allow his father to see him cry, Lee stops with his hand on the door jamb to steady himself but doesn't turn around.

"I will not be pleased if you go against me on any of this. It's time you took some responsibility for your life, son. If you follow my rules to get your money, you will have earned it."

Chapter Sixteen

Mondays at the tour office are reserved for Reid alone: no tour bookings, no Beth. Today, when he's not shuffling through the printed financial reports and projections fanning across his desk, he's working the bookkeeping program on his laptop.

In the dim, midmorning quiet of the office, Reid's focus approaches superhuman, his determination to avoid all the topics he's currently running from subsumed by the task at hand. Somewhere at the horizon of his mental awareness, grim shapes cavort—shadowy moments and concepts he shies away from, though they keep popping into his consciousness whenever he lets his attention wander: Todd unhinged, lunging across the table; Shelby waterlogged, frozen in time; the tour company tottering uncertainly on Reid's shoulders; Edison beneath Lee, keening with aroused abandon; Reid, slack and shrivelled, poised above Lee in the truck.

Reid's plan for the day is to avoid all the *other* painful stuff and focus exclusively on the business, with the idea that if he can make a positive dent in one thing, maybe he'll gain enough breathing room to be able to deal with the other shit hitting the fan.

Knowing, after his talk with Todd at the police station, that Todd pilfered money from the business for the drug buy-in, Reid should have been able to find the false entries by now, but there must be something really wrong with his ability to understand simple math. The books shouldn't balance, but they do, and he can't figure out how Todd covered his ass. He flips through the enormous manual for the bookkeeping software, but stops in frustration when he realizes he's looking for the word *traitor* in the index.

Shit. He slams the book closed in exasperation and leans back to stare at the ceiling. He needs to solve this *now*, because there are a hundred other things he needs to do today to shore up other aspects of the business. But the numbers aren't making any goddamned sense. If he can't straighten this out, the bills piling up at the house—which his mother reminds him about several times a day—aren't going to get paid.

A few more unfilled tours and Reid won't be able to put food on his family's table.

He closes his eyes, lifts his feet onto the desk, and laces his hands behind his head, giving the problem his full attention, determined to grapple until he's got the solution in a headlock.

What if he narrowed down the timing? Bookings started flagging in the second week of June. After four years of steady growth, and the recent extra boost from several pre-season, high-profile articles about Haro Island Tour's unique offerings and growing reputation, bookings should be maxed out.

Why would Todd's thievery have affected bookings so drastically?

Reid sighs heavily and drops his feet back on the floor, noticing the absurd height of the stack in his in-box. Beth, bless her soul, has been busy, though he has dropped the ball in the wake of everything else going on. Maybe the two new tour guide trainees who will start to take tours out next week—Reid crosses the fingers of both hands for a moment—will relieve enough pressure to allow him to catch up.

Wanting something to cheer him up for a few seconds before he makes a cup of coffee and bends back over the reports, he lifts the *Salish Seafarer* from the top of the in-box pile and flips the magazine open to the page marked by a green sticky note. Beth knows Reid likes to check the placement of their ad and browse through the magazine for potential marketing ideas. It always gives Reid a little thrill of pride to see the Haro Island Tours ad in a real magazine.

Beth's neat handwriting on the sticky note doesn't make sense at first. *Ad?* she wrote. Reid flips through the pages, unable to find an ad for their tours.

Oh, hell no.

Haro Island Tours has a standing order for a half-page ad in a primo spot, the page right after the table of content. It's a major expense, but also a major source of bookings. *And it's not there.*

The pieces suddenly fall into place. Reid lurches forward to pick up the phone.

Five minutes and a short but horrible conversation later, Reid has learned that their *Salish Seafarer* ad was cancelled weeks ago. By someone named Todd. The chirpy voice of the ad agent informs Reid they've already sent a refund cheque. "You should have received it by now," she says. Reid tells her he'll look into it and then call her back.

He sets the phone down in a daze and, on a hunch, paws through his in-box to unearth the other publications in which they've placed regular ads.

No ads.

Gripping the computer mouse like a lifeline, he rushes to check the online ads.

Gone.

All the ads are gone.

A few calls later, a few more assurances that refund cheques were sent a while ago, and Reid's flying through the bookkeeping system, now that he knows what to look for. The ad payments are all recorded, but no refunds have been entered. *Shit.* Reid had added Todd as a signatory to the account a couple of years ago when Reid had caught a bitch of flu and hugged the bed for two weeks. Todd must have cashed the refund cheques at the branch in Campbell River, where no one would recognize him. Otherwise, Stacey from the Haro branch would have called Reid to confirm that it was okay.

With a yelp, Reid pulls up the bank balance online to confirm that Todd hasn't cleaned out the account. No. Thank God. In a twisted way, it's refreshing to find a line Todd wasn't willing to cross.

Crossing lines makes Reid wonder about Haro Island Tour's brochures in the racks on all ferries in southern B.C., because they bring in the highest percentage of their bookings. Surely, Todd wouldn't have messed with those. Would he?

Keys squeezed in his hand, Reid races to his truck, clearing the driveway with a spin of wheels and banking hard around Lupine Road's first curve, knowing he should slow down, but too scared not to. The dashboard clock shows it's going to be too close to call, so he guns it. Luck—for a change—is with him and he catches the tail end of the ferry line and makes it on board.

Before they've even cast off, he's pawing through the brochure racks in the passenger cabins.

Fuck! No Haro Island Tours brochures.

Reid drives off the ferry in Campbell River and speeds south to the B.C. Ferries offices in Nanaimo, where he's forced to wade through several gatekeepers before getting answers. Yes, someone named Todd Douglas called about three weeks ago to have all the brochures pulled.

"All of them?" Reid asks, too upset to care about the squeak in his voice.

The nice lady in the marketing department taps at her computer again. "Yes. Distribution of your brochures on all B.C. ferries between Vancouver Island

and the mainland and on all inter-island ferries. He asked for a prorated refund of the unused balance.”

Reid must look as destroyed as he feels because she stands and pats him on the back as she leaves the office, returning a few minutes later with a mug of steaming tea. Reid nods his thanks and makes an effort to speak.

“Do you still have them, our brochures?” he asks.

“We should. I take it this was a mistake, then, and you’d like to reinstate your contract?”

“Please. Yes. God, yes.” He pulls out his wallet, but she waves it away.

“No, I’ll send a bill. I have all your information. Since it’s a reinstatement of the contract, you don’t need to do anything.”

“Thank you.” Reid forces himself to focus. “Can we... is there some kind of security code or something we could set up, so this can’t happen again?”

“I think so. Give me a minute to remind myself how to do that.”

Reid leaves the ferry offices and makes his weary way back to Campbell River and Haro and his desk. By five he’s made enough calls to have gotten most of the ads reinstated. The feeling of having defied disaster sparks a chortle, and he rewards himself with a moment of levity by looking down at his chest and imagining a big, colourful Superman S blazing for all the world to see.

Get real.

The reality is that Reid is drained, wobbling, and so hungry he could eat the bookkeeping manual. A groan marks the official end of celebration time. Now that the emergency has been handled, his normal Monday to-do list needs to be tackled. He takes a short break to head up to the house to tell his aunt Hilary that he’ll fetch his dinner when it’s ready and eat it in the office.

Back at his desk, he downs a cold orange juice from the little office fridge and settles his butt in the desk chair.

When Lee calls at ten p.m., Reid slumps and reaches for the phone, grateful for the interruption, because the figures on the screen have become an indecipherable blur.

Chapter Seventeen

All day, Lee has avoided calling Reid to arrange the one-hour meeting for tomorrow. It turns out there's no snarky, painless, light-hearted way to tell your best friend good-bye for the foreseeable future.

The timing of Edgar's ultimatums is terrible. It's early summer on Haro Island with the whole of July and August ahead, the bright blues of water and sky, the myriad greens of woods and fields, the splashes of colour as gardens cascade into the growing season. The freedom to roam the wild trails and breathe Haro's fresh air instead of city smog.

Reid between boyfriends.

The suitcases Lee unpacked only a few weeks ago fill up again little by little as the day progresses. He keeps his mind firmly on the fact that there's no way he would go along with Edgar's rules if not for the dangled carrot of the multimillion-dollar trust fund.

I can do anything for eight months. Right?

Once Lee's received his inheritance, a rite of passage long touted by Edgar as a sign of true manhood, Lee can return to Haro Island—maybe buy a house of his own on the other side of the island, closer to Reid and his family. He can help Reid with the tour company again. That thought eases his chest. He sits on the bed next to the open suitcase and lapses into daydreams of possibilities.

Lee's buddies in Vancouver have teased him for years about having a best friend they've never met. Though he doesn't fully understand it, befriending Reid and spending time on Haro with him has become home, an anchor in the best of ways. They've held onto their friendship through a decade of summers spent goofing off together—mostly at Inkling Lake or Second Beach. Well, except for when Reid's working, which he's done more and more as the years have gone by. Also except when Reid's officially with a boyfriend.

Lee sighs and stands up, taking another look at the clock. Though it's after ten, the slowly setting sun lights up the horizon out the west-facing windows. If Lee puts off the call to Reid any longer, Edgar will be in bed, and access to a phone will be out of reach.

He treads heavily across the driveway through the soft sounds of late evening, calmed a little by the twitters and rustling along the edges of the lawn,

to find his father in the den in an armchair, a sheaf of papers on his lap, the news muted on the big flat-screen TV, a tumbler of golden liquid in his hand.

Without letting go of the tumbler, Edgar extracts his own phone from his shirt pocket, hands it over without a word, and looks down at the papers again, as though he's already forgotten Lee is in the room.

Lee takes the phone to the kitchen, far enough away for privacy. He knows without being told that he has only a few minutes to make the call before his father comes to resume possession of his phone.

"Yeah. Hi," Reid says distractedly.

"Did I wake you up? God, you sound like you're drunk."

"No, idiot. I'm working, which even I can't believe. Christ almighty, what a day."

"I'm sorry I can't talk much now or I'd ask about it. Are you okay?"

"I don't even know anymore. Family shit, business shit, all shit I don't actually want to talk about, except to ask when it will end. But how are you? Want to meet at Second tomorrow for a swim and a pizza?"

"Sounds great. God, that sounds so great, Reid, but I can't. I'm, um..." This is the part Lee spent all day trying to find words for, the part where he tries to explain the reason for the meeting. *Fuck it.* "I'll explain later, but can you spare an hour tomorrow morning at nine? I really need to see you. At my place. I promise it will only take an hour."

"Er, let me check the—"

"It's important."

"Well, then sure. Nine o'clock."

"Thanks, Reid. I'll see you then."

Phone delivered back to Edgar, the entire visit to the main house occurring without a single exchanged word, Lee finds his way back home. With difficulty, he passes three paths into the woods between the big house and his smaller house.

From his chair by Lee's front door, Barry watches his progress the whole way.

Door closed and locked, shoes off, lights out, Lee only has enough energy to crawl around the open suitcase on the bed and burrow into the dark silence

beneath the covers, willing sleep to yank him into a magical time warp and spit him out eight months later, happy and rich and free.

Chapter Eighteen

Right after Reid hangs up with Lee, Edison calls.

Staring at Edison's name on the face of his cell phone, Reid's reaction consists of a repeating loop of *What the fuck?* He lets the call go to voice mail, waits until his phone alerts him that he has a message, then deletes the message without listening to it. After a moment, he deletes Edison as a contact from his phone.

It feels good.

The memory of that day a little over a week ago in the Anderson's driveway isn't so easily deleted. Reid can't seem to stop replaying it over and over in his mind. The approach to the car, eager to surprise Edison. Confusion at seeing the back door open. Walking closer, curious about those odd sounds. Looking through the window to see Lee lifting and settling and lifting again above Edison.

It took a ridiculous amount of time for Reid's brain to compute what he saw and heard. By the time he registered the multiple levels of betrayal, Edison was coming unglued.

Coming in a way he never had when Reid topped him.

In the late-night privacy of the tour office, behind closed blinds, Reid's exhaustion peels away protective layers until the question he's avoided since Edison howled his climax at the edge of Inkling Lake creeps in.

How would it feel to be topped by Lee?

Could Reid even allow himself to do it? He opens the shallow centre drawer of his desk and roots around to find the golf ball he remembers seeing there. Feeling like a teenaged horn dog, he grabs the dimpled ball, gets up to make sure the door is locked, sits back down in the desk chair, and drops it between his jeans-clad legs. With unnecessary subterfuge, considering the impossibility of anyone observing him, Reid picks up a boating magazine and aims his eyes toward it while keeping his attention on the golf ball. He wiggles his ass carefully—so as not to allow the ball to slip away out the back of the chair—until it's settled firmly against the pucker of his asshole, and lets his weight press against its rounded, hard surface, testing the possibilities by moving slightly this way and that. *It feels...* a long, drawn-out inhale and a sigh accompany the awareness that his dick is waking up.

Now that he's hard and interested, he can imagine the seam of his jeans pressing between the golf ball and his hole as the touch of a fingertip. He reaches for his belt buckle, ready to open his pants and... *yeah*.

Actually, no, not here. It's time to go up to the house and get into bed, because when he imagines that pressing finger belonging to Lee, he kind of gets why Edison might have been so turned on. That look in Lee's eye right before he saw Reid standing outside the car—intent and wicked and dictatorial, taking control of... *yeah*.

The vision sends a tingle down Reid's spine.

He grabs the golf ball from between his legs and buries it in a bottom drawer, eager now to get to the house, but when he reaches out to close the computer and sees the cursor blinking under next month's projected profit, the thrill fades. The stack of unpaid bills on the big desk up at the house pulses like a silent alarm, cancelling the diversion the golf ball promised.

Staring at the blinking cursor, Reid wishes again that his family was more interested in helping out with the tour company, but they've long since declined to participate. His mother and Alan have disabilities; Alan and Aunt Hilary are retired.

Hmm.

A late-night, clandestine look at the disability and retirement cheque stubs up at the house would give Reid a sense of what everyone's bringing in. With Todd's delinquency and pilfering out of the picture, they stand a better chance at collective financial stability. Reid can draw up an "all for one and one for all" family financial plan that could get them out of the danger zone sooner rather than later.

After locking the office, Reid heads up to the small house. In the living room, he quietly roots through the big desk shared by the three older members of the household. Within a few minutes, he's collected a little stack of recent retirement and disability cheque stubs. With his index finger poised over a handheld calculator, he prepares to tally up their collective monthly total... but he doesn't get that far, because when he sees the figure on the first stub his mind goes blank.

Alan has a huge monthly retirement cheque from the government. He flips to the next stub. And his mother's disability cheque is much larger than he'd expected. And here's another retirement cheque stub for Alan, this one from the company he worked for until he retired.

There's a *shitload* of money coming in.

Reid sits with his mouth open, blinking at the tour office out the window.

Conversations over the past year float up in his memory. His mother complaining endlessly about how much groceries cost, but then all they ever seem to have on hand to eat are sandwiches and cold cereal. Alan insisting that the roof needs to be redone this summer and harassing Reid to start a savings account for it.

Reid stares down at Alan's two retirement cheque stubs from last month. Either cheque would have been enough for the roofing job.

What in the fuck have they been spending their money on?

A more invasive search through the desk reveals a mint in lottery tickets, paid and unpaid bills for absurd things like doll collecting club memberships, cooking show DVDs, and cute outfits for the dogs. He also finds, in the tottering pile of unpaid bills on the corner of the desk, a cut-off notice for the electricity due to unpaid bills and—*oh, crap*—a long-overdue bill for the property taxes.

The last straw is opening the locked bottom drawer with a key found lurking in the paper clip holder and discovering credit card statements showing nauseating credit limits and pages and pages of charges for everything from expensive meals at fancy restaurants in Campbell River and Nanaimo to day trips to a spa in Victoria.

The *very* last straw is the note Reid finds in mother's handwriting.

Alan, remember that lady at the library, the one whose daughter is a friend of the Sheldrakes? She told me Lee will be 25 in March. Todd couldn't do it, but maybe Reid can. Even though he's gay, he's always been the good son.

Chapter Nineteen

At nine the next morning, when Lee opens his front door to welcome Reid, Barry makes a show of looking down at his watch. Lee rolls his eyes to let Barry know the message has been received: they have one hour, starting right now.

Lee takes a look at Reid and says “Holy crap-fest, Dudley, you’ve aged ten years since I saw you last.” Reid’s grey skin and slumped shoulders are enough to distract Lee from his own problems.

“I’ll tell you what I look like. I look like I have a murdering, thieving delinquent of a brother and I live in a nest of lazy vipers. I look like I got about two hours of sleep after working my fingers to the bone and then was the victim of a rude awakening. That’s *exactly* what I look like.” He falls onto the couch on his stomach, a leg and an arm flopping onto the floor. “Crap, I hope this is a booty call, Lee, because if it’s not and you expect me to talk, I’m going to need industrial-strength, super-caffeinated synapse reinforcement.”

Looking down at Reid from the end of the couch, Lee can’t help but wish again for that time warp, the one where he’s standing right here in eight months, independently wealthy and free to spend an entire day lying on top of Reid. An hour is nowhere near long enough—even if Reid was interested in doing things Lee’s way—to do that tight ass justice. He sits on the floor with an arm folded on the couch cushion at Reid’s side.

“Mmm,” Reid mutters when Lee pokes him. “I’m listening.”

“We have to talk.”

“I said I’m listening.” Reid’s eyes open to gaze at Lee, but then his eyelids droop and close again.

“Tell me why you look like a bag of second-hand kitty litter?”

“Gross.”

“We don’t have much time here, so go ahead and give me the slightly more detailed version of the hell you just described.”

“Okay. Drugs, murder, advertising scam, theft, lies, profligate spending, and, to top it all off, performance anxiety. Ta-da!” With a resigned sigh, Reid hauls himself to a sitting position.

“I’m hoping at least some of that is dramatic exaggeration.”

“Nope.” Reid shakes his head to dispel Lee’s look of uncertainty. “All true. I’m living the thrilling life of the son who’s good, even though he’s gay.” Rubbing a hand over his cheeks, Reid makes a wry face. “Now would be an excellent time for a pep talk if you’ve got one.”

They peer at each other for a while. Lee sorts through all the things he’d been planning to tell Reid as the clock ticked down and decides he’s much more interested in a revised plan. “Rise up, good soul, and follow.”

“Anywhere,” Reid mutters. He slips out of his shoes and heaves himself to his feet to pad behind Lee up the stairs and into Lee’s bedroom.

“As it turns out,” Lee leers as he closes the door, “this *is* a booty call.”

“At nine in the morning? You’re downright malicious.” Reid gives Lee’s bed a desperate look and moves toward it, but Lee catches him by the upper arm before he can topple.

“Wait! Get undressed first.”

“Yes, sir.”

They both freeze at Reid’s words, Reid with his hands on his belt buckle and Lee holding the alarm clock. The look that passes between them intensifies Reid’s words. Not only the words, but the way they came out, because they sounded like Reid might welcome a role switch.

Lee keeps his cool, finishes setting the alarm for forty-five minutes from now, and pulls his shirt over his head, but his heart is pounding. He wants so badly for the eleventh hour to grant that long-hoped-for wish.

Reid gets naked first and climbs in, holding the covers up for Lee, who hesitates. Knowing that once he lies down next to Reid, the logical part of his brain will shut down and he’ll forget to tell Reid his news, Lee blurts out the introduction he memorized. “Reid, Edgar laid some harsh ultimatums on me, and if I don’t do what he says I won’t get my trust fund until I’m thirty. And maybe not even then.”

“Man, you need to find your real parents, pronto. Okay, what ultimatums? How bad?”

“Bad. Really, *really* bad. Edgar found out about Hitch ‘n’ Pitch.”

“Oof.”

“This time he’s serious about me earning my keep—his way. So... um, I have this last hour with you right now, and then I’m on house arrest—no phone, no computer—until Friday, when Barry will frog-march me to Toronto to work at company headquarters until my birthday. Full-time work, no allowance, a little apartment I pay for with my salary, and Edgar on my back, in person, as of September.”

Reid’s eyes bug out with disbelief, and he laughs tentatively. “You’re joking, right? Using a fake sob story to get me into bed when I should be at work.”

“No, not joking. Not even a little bit. And I *have* to do it. I hate to admit it, but Edgar’s right for once. I have been stupid. I thought the trust fund was a sure thing—something Edgar couldn’t deny me—but it’s not. So now I have to start thinking about how to earn a living, because he’s made it clear that my access to the money in the trust fund is far from guaranteed.”

Reid smirks, but his eyes remain sad. “So it was only you and your Hitch ’n’ Pitch that was a sure thing.”

“Shut up, you ass. This is serious. I wasn’t planning to shove you into bed, but if I have to say good-bye, I think this is how I want to do it.”

“But your... exile is only until your birthday, right? I mean, you think you’ll want to come back here to Haro then, on your own, when you can?”

“Of course. Definitely. Edgar won’t consider me a grown man until I get my inheritance, but then I’ll be golden. I think. I hope. I just need to be his version of a good son for a while.”

Reid turns his head away from Lee to stare up at the ceiling for a long moment. When he looks back at Lee, he holds out his hand. “Then stop wasting time. Come here.”

“One more thing.” There’s a shake in Lee’s voice that he tries to cover with a rustling of bedding as he scoots in and lies down.

“Okay, what?” Turning on his side, Reid tugs on Lee’s hand to nestle it against his chest.

“I want to fuck you.”

Reid swallows and his fingers twitch against Lee’s.

Lee waggles his eyebrows.

“Lay off with the demented grinning,” Reid mutters.

“God, but you look so cute when you’re scared.”

Lee strokes Reid’s freshly shaved cheek and tries not to feel the precious seconds ticking by as they stare at each other.

“I sat on a golf ball last night in the office,” Reid finally says.

“You did what?” Lee brushes his fingers against Reid’s lips, surprised by his odd sentence.

“I thought of you as I did it. I thought of you, you know, in me.”

“Really?” Lee moves closer, pushing his quickly hardening cock up against Reid’s and pushing a thigh between Reid’s legs.

“I’d... I’m willing to try it.” Reid shifts to press his crease against Lee’s thigh. “I’m pretty sure I’d rather associate you topping with something besides Edison’s screams of lust, so... yeah. Plus, I didn’t bring you a going-away gift, so maybe... um, this will do?”

Lee moves closer and smiles against the side of Reid’s nose. “Oh, it’ll do. You have no idea.”

Their kiss, now that they both know where this is headed and how little time they have together, includes something new, an edge of intensity and focus their fuck-buddy frolics haven’t approached. Reid gulps and tightens his hold on Lee’s hand. With an accompanying kiss along his throat, Lee pushes against Reid to lay him on his back. Reid swallows again and shudders, his nervousness showing clearly in his widened eyes.

“You *are* a good son,” Lee murmurs against Reid’s jaw. “Such a good man.” Since those ultimatums came down from on high, Lee has spent most of his time thinking about Reid, about his devotion to his family and to Haro Island, about the company he created, about the way he’s turned his reverence for his family’s history on Haro into stories he’s proud to share through his tour company. About the many ways Reid’s been kind over the years they’ve know each other.

“Reid?”

“Mmm?”

“I never thanked you properly for rescuing me from the dark woods that day.”

“The day you almost puked on my shoes?”

Lee can't suppress a surprised snort.

"You know you don't need to thank me for stuff like that, right?"

Sliding a hand to Reid's sternum, Lee checks in with the quickening beat of Reid's heart and bends to kiss him there, pinching his nipple at the same time.

"Mmm... *ow*... you're welcome."

"I wish we had more than an hour. It's your first time, Reid. It should take all day."

"Doesn't matter."

"It *does* matter, but I'm selfish enough to not want to wait until March, so it will be faster than I want it to be, but... I promise I'll make it good."

"Yeah? How good?" The look on Reid's face—curious, vulnerable, a little scared—makes Lee wonder again how much self-confidence Reid lost when he discovered Edison and Lee in the car, how much it damaged his self-esteem.

"I'll make it as good as you are."

Lee presses closer, rolls on top of Reid. His gentle kisses against Reid's mouth turn deep and slutty and hard. Moaning, Reid turns his head to the side, wrapping his arms and legs around Lee. He presses an endless, tender, open-mouthed kiss against Lee's neck and squeezes tight, as though they'll never be parted.

As though maybe Reid's not doing this only for Lee.

As though maybe they could be more than friends.

Chapter Twenty

After a long, full-body hug that feels to Reid like it includes more truth and devotion than all the times they've touched before added together, Lee lifts his head and resumes mauling Reid's mouth. Reid's acquiescence under the onslaught of Lee's ferocious kisses—his first taste of not trying to be in charge—takes effort at first, but it doesn't feel like he'd always feared it would. It doesn't feel like giving up his involvement or making Lee do all the work. It doesn't feel like being the weak one or admitting defeat. It doesn't feel like failure.

It feels deliciously like surrendering to a benevolent force greater than himself.

In short order, after the demanding thrust of Lee's tongue down Reid's throat in a way Reid wouldn't have the nerve to initiate—a swiping, unquestioning claiming—Reid forgets to compare this experience to what Lee might have been doing to Edison in the car.

Right now, here, there's only Lee and his unspoken demand that Reid let go and give in. He's everywhere, his wide shoulders looming overhead, his roving hands multiplying and insistent, his knees nudging Reid's legs wider. The hot, luscious, familiar weight of him. He slides down to make their balls jostle together, growls and uses his teeth against Reid's throat. The whirlwind of Lee fills Reid's senses—the rush of his closeness, the smell of his skin and his sweet breath—taking what he wants from Reid and pushing away the rest of the world in the process.

“Fuck you, Reid.” The curse is a rebuke. “For not giving me all of this sooner.”

Before Reid can protest or offer an apology, Lee fills his mouth again with his maddening tongue and Reid can't answer for a long while.

“All of what?” he pants when Lee finally lifts his head.

“This.” Lee shivers and squeezes his eyes closed and reaches between them to lift Reid's balls and caress the skin behind them. “*This*.” His fingers stir the hairs deep between Reid's cheeks but don't touch skin. “Your willingness. Your...”

“My defeat?” Reid offers a sad smile to take the sting out of his words.

“God, *no*. No...” Lee groans, sucks his finger, and finally touches Reid’s hole, sucking in a sharp breath through his teeth as he does so. “Your consent. Your honour. Your... your *goodness*.”

“The surrender of the good son.”

Lee withdraws his finger to take a long, stern look at Reid from a few inches away, a look bursting with a heady combination of reprimand and kindness. He moves his finger again, sliding it back and forth against the delicate tightness of Reid’s hole.

Reid can’t believe how much better it feels than that golf ball and his imagination.

“Your willingness, your surrender is a gift.” Lee leans in to kiss Reid. His kisses are unlike anything they’ve ever shared before—biting, demanding, almost punishing—kisses Reid wishes he hadn’t wasted so many years not knowing about because they have the magical ability to remove all the worrisome questions from his mind: *Is this okay? Am I doing it right? Am I good enough? Does he like this? Does he like me?*

Nothing.

No questions. No expectations.

Only expanding space and overwhelmed nerve endings. It’s like being trapped inside a glorious bubble of Lee. All Lee, all the time, everywhere, all at once, allowing zero space for worries or fears or anything that’s not Lee, leaving Reid with nothing to ask for or wonder about or do, because, for once, someone else is handling it.

How can being absent feel so much like being present for the first time?

This body Reid inhabits—he can’t quite claim it as his own right now—pushes itself hard against Lee’s spit-slicked finger, requesting more. Lee’s immediate response is a deep growl that ignites a bonfire of joy in Reid’s solar plexus.

“Oh,” Reid sighs. “Yes, that’s...”

Lee takes his finger away from Reid’s hole. “That’s your unlubed *ass*, you idiot. Your ass that you’ve denied me for *too fucking long*.”

Reid can only shake his head in disagreement, because, although that’s true, the reason eluded him until now. It wasn’t Reid’s ass he was denying Lee, it was his trust. Wanting to show Lee he doesn’t feel that way anymore, Reid

pushes against Lee's finger again, seeking more of this joy, needing Lee's help to capture and clarify it, needing to memorize it so he can carry it with him when he has to leave in less than an hour.

This feeling... The tiny part of Reid's brain not on hiatus tries to describe it. It's... it's the feeling of finally doing the right thing by not doing anything. Finally succeeding at making sex enjoyable for someone else. Finally being the right person. Finally being good enough.

Reid's restricting, expectation-filled life loosens, offering a new space, room for something different, something infinitely better, and Reid spreads himself open, pulsing his willingness against Lee's finger, which pets and taunts but remains elusive.

"*Reid.* God, Reid, look at me." The command and the emotion in Lee's breathless voice make Reid open his eyes. He smiles up at Lee, his mind blank and peaceful and perfect.

"Holy shit." Lee studies Reid's face. "*I knew* it. You're a natural." His smile glitters.

Reid blinks slowly and smiles back.

Lee lunges for the bedside table drawer, then manhandles Reid into the position he wants him in—on his back with knees bent and spread.

At the cool touch of lube against Reid's hole, he closes his eyes, content to let Lee's finger work back inside him while Reid wallows in the bliss of Lee knowing exactly what to do, knowing precisely what Reid needs. Other than that thought... nothing, nothing at all.

Reid's smile widens.

"Do you have any idea how much your goodness has always turned me on?" Lee asks against the upward curve of Reid's lips. "Thank you for giving me this chance to show you how much."

Reid wants to answer, wants to be honest and say no, he never knew that, and "good" doesn't seem like the right word to describe him, unless it's bundled up as "goody two-shoes"—but he can't find the place inside that pushes words out of his mouth. Maybe because his mouth belongs to Lee and Lee needs it right now for better things, things like nibbling Reid's tongue until the tickle makes Reid moan.

And all the while, the finger.

God, that finger.

Lee's finger, the first thing ever to go there, pushes into Reid a tiny bit, then stops.

"You're a hero, Reid. Do you hear me?" Lee's words tease and taunt while his finger pushes farther inside.

Reid notices a new thrum of heartbeats at his temple.

Lee pours more words over him.

"You... you're strong and loyal, so eager to help out, always working so hard."

Lee shoves his finger in so far it causes Reid to open his eyes.

"You're everybody's knight," Lee says, looking right into Reid's eyes.

Nice work, if you can get it, offers Reid's cheeky brain, and he closes his eyes again because it's easier to believe Lee's fancy words when they seem like a dream.

Reid dares to slide a hand between them to press against Lee's wrist, to suggest he's going too slow. When he opens his eyes to see if Lee got the message, and receives the full force of Lee's rapt attention, he eases his hand back. Lee pulls his finger out and pushes all the way in, over and over.

Exactly what Reid wanted.

"Has anyone or anything ever been here?" Lee whispers.

Reid shakes his head.

After another deep kiss, Lee says, "Thank you," and his eyes darken.

Wanting more of those crude, insistent kisses, Reid raises his head a fraction of an inch and Lee attacks him from all sides in a zero-to-eighty full-body assault of mouth and tongue and teeth and legs and another finger pushing in beside the first one. The hairs all over Reid's body stand at attention, like they've found their flag, their cause, their king.

Panting, twisting his fingers to make Reid moan and writhe, Lee says in a low, aroused voice that scratches like sandpaper, "You, here, like this, for me? You're a warrior, Reid. Do you know that? So strong. *So. Fucking. Beautiful.*"

Reid nods because even though he's lost and gone, found and undone, he feels it too, and it's okay, because he sees now that he couldn't be all of those

amazing things on his own. But if Lee's above him, inside him, he *is* that person; he's willing to be that for Lee. He reaches for Lee's cock because it's time.

"You sure?" Lee asks, but without waiting for an answer, he gently removes his fingers, opens the condom wrapper, and starts to put it on.

Reid stops him. "No condom." He has to dig deep to find the words and then reconfigure his brain to get them out, but it's worth it, because this is important. He knows they're both scrupulous about being safe, and he needs Lee to agree to this.

"But... what about Edison?" Lee asks.

"Clean freak."

Lee scoffs. "Seriously?"

"He took us to get tested every month."

"Okay, then. No latex chaperone." Lee sets the condom aside and asks again. "You're sure? Really sure?"

Reid smiles his answer—a smile so big and bright and ready it must be enough of an answer, because Lee drapes one of Reid's legs over his arm and settles on top of Reid, his gaze intent as he aims his dick at Reid's hole and pushes inside just enough to be there—*really there, oh holy hell*—then he loops Reid's other leg over his other arm and waits for a sign from Reid that he can handle it.

Not looking away, Reid slides his palms along the mattress until they meet skin, then lifts his hands to grab Lee's ass and pull him closer.

The effect on Lee is electrifying.

He leans in, no more hesitation. With brow furrowed, tenderness making his brown eyes infinite, he moves. Slow and relentless.

And, again, Lee knows exactly what Reid wants. Reid opens his mouth and lifts his chin. It's like he can feel Lee's cock all the way up into his throat, filling him with something new, and he wants it more than he's ever wanted anything in his life.

Lee's rocking motion generates an irresistible force, and they grab and grip and stick to each other, holding fast like strong magnets snapping together. The more Lee grants Reid—the more stretch and sweat and poetry—the more Reid

wants, and soon Lee's fucking Reid the way he was kissing him, rough and crude and insistent, taking what he wants, erasing everything else.

Until Reid floats above the curving earth, unfurling on a shout of release, spreading him far beyond anywhere he's ever been.

Chapter Twenty-One

Like a cannon announcing the start of a new skirmish, the alarm clock blares.

They both jump and Lee has to pull out of Reid to reach it and turn it off, which he hates doing, because who knows how long it will be until he can be inside Reid again.

“Ow.” Reid presses his legs together and curls onto his side, but a beatific, calm expression bathes his face.

Lee puts the clock down and decides that nothing—not even the risk of Barry bashing the door down—will stop him from pulling Reid closer, wrapping him up for one more minute, revelling in the rush of having gotten something he’s wanted for so long. The buzz of euphoria remains potent, singing through his limbs, tingly and intoxicating.

“Okay?” Lee asks, but it’s a formality, because Reid’s breaths come slow and easy and his body remains limp and heavy.

Reid hums on a fading sigh.

“Don’t fall asleep. I’m sorry, for so many reasons, sorry for us both, but you have to go in about five minutes.”

Right on cue, there’s a knock on the front door downstairs and a deep voice calls out, “Five minutes.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lee grumbles. “Shit. Don’t want to let you go.” He hugs Reid closer, tighter, and finally Reid protests with a muffled yelp.

Reluctantly, Lee releases Reid and prods him out of bed toward his clothes, then gets up and reaches for his shirt. When Reid finishes fastening his belt, he looks up at Lee. “I don’t want to go.”

“Wish we’d done this differently. Sooner.”

Holding his socks, Reid shakes his head. “I couldn’t have done it sooner. I had to...” He shrugs.

“You had to know I was leaving?”

“No, not that. I had to... break. God, Lee, shit’s gone down that I haven’t even told you about. When do you get your phone back?”

“End of this week, Friday night, when I arrive in Toronto.”

“Damn. Your father’s a real prick.”

Barry pounds on the front door, then rings the doorbell.

“I can’t stand this,” Lee says, making an impulsive decision he hopes won’t spawn a disaster. “If I... if I sneak out tonight, will you meet me at Inking, at our place?”

Reid’s eyebrows furrow. “You’d go there? Where Shelby...”

“We know our way around in the dark there. And it’s way the fuck out on the wild side. I know a place we can go where we definitely won’t be found.”

“For sure? Because if you sneak out and Edgar gets hold of you... I don’t want you jeopardizing your inheritance, Lee. I can wait until March. I mean, if I know you’ll be back.” Reid shoves his socks into his pants pocket and keeps his hand there, but not before Lee notices the way his hand shook.

Barry starts pounding on the door without letting up. A key turns in the front door lock.

“Fucking *hell*.” Lee runs his fingers through his hair in frustration. “*Please* say yes, Reid.”

“Yes, of course, yes. Where? When?” Reid whispers.

The front door closes loudly behind Barry as he shouts up from the front foyer. “Get down here right now, Mr. Douglas, or I’ll come up and get you.”

“Christ, your world is barbaric.” Reid turns toward the closed bedroom door, but keeps his eyes on Lee, waiting for answers.

Lee forces his brain to think ahead, running through a few what-if scenarios, then he crowds Reid against the bedroom door to whisper in his ear. “Don’t go to the rocks. Come in through the park and take the trail toward Coweton Peak. I won’t be able to get there until late, like two a.m.”

“Fine. Whenever. I’ll be there.”

“The park gate will be closed. Hide your truck somewhere no one will find it, then walk in. Leave your phone behind.”

“Really? You think Edgar would use my phone to...”

“Please? Just in case.”

Barry can be heard tromping up the stairs.

“Okay. But how will you get there?” Reid whispers back, glancing worriedly at the door. “I’ll pick you up. Tell me where.”

“No. Don’t worry about me. Just be there, please—where Coweton Trail crosses the side path to our rocks.”

Reid nods and reaches for the door handle.

Lee stops him with lips against Reid’s ear. “Even if it’s only for a few more hours, I want to see you again before I leave Haro.”

Barry knocks on the bedroom door.

Exactly one hour after Reid arrived, he’s gone.

That hour remains, solid and significant, a dividing line between old and new.

After surviving a harrowing meeting with his father’s lawyers, during which Lee divulges nothing about Reid that could be used against him, he endures a long day of cabin fever. In the evening, he makes it through an excruciating family dinner, barely refraining from stabbing his parents with a fork to end the misery of making small talk

Hours later, Lee hovers in his darkened living room, waiting for an opportunity to escape.

Watching Barry through a gap in the curtains, Lee bides his time, certain that if he doesn’t get this part right, he’ll miss his chance to see Reid. Barry remains stretched out in a lawn chair on the porch outside the front door, reading a boxing magazine, until Lee fears he plans to sleep there.

Sure enough, around eleven, Barry closes his magazine, folds up the lawn chair, and schleps them to the security staff’s house near the front gate—Lee assumes for a late dinner and a short sleep, no doubt having been ordered by Edgar to resume his post before dawn.

Just to make sure he’s predicted his father correctly and Barry won’t reappear after his dinner, Lee decides to wait an hour or so more before he starts walking.

Upstairs, Lee stands in the middle of his bedroom and looks around, wondering if he should take anything other than a warm jacket, a hat, and a flashlight. After a while, he thinks of a few more things to stuff into the inside pockets of his coat. He spends a good twenty minutes opening and closing all the drawers and cabinets in the house, mostly for something to do. *Right, extra batteries might come in handy.*

With a flinch at the near miss, he races back upstairs to pocket the tube of lube.

After confirming that the bedside reading light is on and the bedroom curtains are closed, Lee settles in the armchair in the dark living room with his coat draped over his legs, waiting, thinking, remembering, and wishing.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Have a nice trip?” Lee can’t help a chortle from escaping as he bends down to offer Reid a hand up.

“Fuck you. Look at that monster of a root. It’s got no business sticking out into the trail.” From his inadvertent position—sprawled on his ass—Reid shines his flashlight on the offending root, which looks even bigger than it felt when he tripped over it.

“It’s a trail through the woods, Reid. There may be a root now and then. I’m beyond curious to discover what you thought important enough and... *oof*... heavy enough to bring along on our four-hour outing that warranted filling a backpack.”

“Well, I’ll show you if you stop walking already and pick a spot to park.” Reid had all but forgotten the obscure trails Lee’s been choosing through the thick woods on the northeast shore of Inking Lake. “These trails must have required a machete to hack out.” Other than the thin trail itself, there’s not a bare patch of ground to be seen. “I barely remember the last time we were on this particular mouse path,” Reid says. “I think it was that time when we were twelve and...”

“...running from Bettina’s gang.”

“Yeah,” Reid snorts. “The summer of the Great Water Gun Wars. You bugged off and ran down this trail while Ronnie pinned me and tried to shoot water up my nose, you cowardly ass.”

“Stop complaining. Your outrage at being left behind was upstaged by your hysterical laughter.”

“He was tickling me! It was torture. And so is this. Are we there yet?”

“Yes.”

Reid bumps into Lee’s back before the word registers. By the time he finds his footing, Lee’s lifting a rock with the toe of his boot. Reid’s headlamp illuminates a key in the mulch beneath the rock. He raises his head to look around. A small wooden structure the same colour as the tree trunks huddles amid the trees. No bigger than a garden shed, made of roughly hewn, weathered boards, the hut blends into the surrounding woods.

Lee brushes dirt off the key and uses it in the padlock on the door latch.

“What is this place?” Reid asks. “It’s kind of creepy that I’m standing right next to it and I can’t quite distinguish it from the woods.”

“Marty’s sugar shack.”

“How come I didn’t know about it? How do you know about it?”

Lee pauses with his hand on the door handle and smirks back at Reid. “I get around.”

“*Marty?* Seriously? But he’s not even... never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“Don’t tell anyone it exists or Marty will never forgive me. He brought me here once all freaked out because he thought he might be bi and wanted a lesson in gay. Turned out he was very horny, but also very straight, so the sex was strictly *meh*. I was way more into the shack than Marty... so to speak.”

“I *said* I didn’t want to know.”

Lee holds the door open for Reid to go in. “Pretty cool, eh?”

The structure is bigger inside than Reid had thought it would be. It’s only one small room but it’s clean and dry, and the ceiling is high enough to provide a sense of spaciousness, even with the shack’s small footprint. A nicely made-up double bed on an iron frame takes up most of the space, but there are also a few unmatched chairs around a small table with a lantern on it. Blackout cloth covers two small windows.

“Marty’s got layers,” Reid muses. “I knew he was secretive, but this is downright clandestine.”

Lee gets busy lighting the lantern. When the wick catches, warm light fills the room, making the hut cozy and private and too good to be true. With a fiddle of his fingers behind one of the blackout curtains, Lee cracks a window, and a rush of freshness moves the air, letting in the sound of the frogs at the lake.

“So...” Lee rubs his hands together. “What’s in that backpack? I’m hope it’s lasagna and cheesecake and...”

Reid shrugs the heavy pack off his shoulders and drops it to the floor. “Camping gear. I thought we’d need a tent. And I have, you know, sleeping bags.” He can feel his face redden with embarrassment.

“For some reason you thought we might want to lie down and... do what? Tell ghost stories? Sleep?”

“Something like that,” Reid mumbles.

In two steps, Lee’s across the shack pulling Reid into his arms. “You’re very sweet. You know that, don’t you?”

“Get off me.” He gives Lee a token push. “You don’t get to tease me for trying to be prepared.”

“Aw, don’t be fooled. I love that you want to take care of us and make us comfortable.”

When Reid rolls his eyes, Lee leans in to lick Reid’s lips, then pushes him hard against the wall of the shack and mauls him expertly for a while, until Reid is breathing harder than when he was hiking with the heavy pack.

“*God. Lee.*” Reid moans as Lee hauls him closer by groping and squeezing his ass inside his jeans. “I don’t know what to think of you this way.”

Lee winks and lifts a hand to push Reid’s sweaty hair off his forehead. “Well... the way I was before...”

“When I insisted on topping.”

“That wasn’t me so much.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I did, at first, but you didn’t want to hear it, or couldn’t hear it.”

“Yeah, I know. But now? Can’t think about anything else. All those years we fooled around, you were keeping this on lockdown? This... this...” Reid’s words turn to whimpers, and Lee pulls back from sucking marks onto Reid’s collarbones to watch his face.

“Yes?”

“This... slutty, wicked, ruthless, demanding...”

Lee lifts an eyebrow.

“...*overlord.*”

“Holy crap, I sound hot when you describe me like that.”

Reid shivers. “I’ll say.”

“Hey.” Lee pokes Reid in the stomach. “You promised to tell me what happened yesterday that made you look like you hadn’t slept in ten years.”

“You want to have a conversation *now*?”

“I’m an overlord. I can make you wait if I want to. Watching you squirm with anticipation is fun.” Lee worms a hand under Reid’s T-shirt and feathers his fingers against his nipples, slides his cool fingers against bare skin, and places wet, sloppy nibbles along Reid’s collarbone, his breath alternately heating and cooling Reid’s skin.

The pile-up of sensations evokes that expansive space Reid first experienced this morning in Lee’s bedroom. “No,” Reid says. He pushes Lee away and goes to lie on the bed. “I’m not telling you anything until you fuck me again.”

Lee’s response is to remove his coat.

When Reid sees what’s on Lee’s T-shirt, he guffaws. A simple drawing of an angry hippie carrying a protest sign reading Down With Pants!

Reid pops off the bed and drops his pants.

“Obviously,” Lee drawls, “I need to wear this shirt more often.”

Reid reaches up to gently remove Lee’s glasses, setting them on the bedside table, then tugs at the hem of Lee’s T-shirt. “I’ve seen it. Now take it off.”

Lee pulls the T-shirt off over his head but then hesitates. He stares down at the shirt hanging from his hand then up at Reid, his light suddenly extinguished.

“What?” Reid asks, reaching for him. “Something made you think of Shelby, didn’t it?”

Lee nods and sits beside Reid. “I’d forgotten.” He sets the T-shirt on the bed and pats it. “She brought it for me from her trip to L.A.”

“Come here.” Lee tilts and Reid pushes him around until they’re lying side by side. “Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

After a while, in case a change of topic will help, Reid says, “Todd’s left Haro. They took him to a prison ward for inmates who are mentally...”

“Wonky?”

“Pretty much. Apparently, he’s not right in the head anymore.”

“I am so sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I am about Shelby, sweetie.” The endearment slips out, but Lee doesn’t seem to mind. He tucks his face into Reid’s armpit and breathes there quietly while Reid strokes his hair.

“I wish I didn’t keep forgetting about her,” Lee whispers.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lee knows he sounds abandoned and lonely, but that's how he feels, and it's hard to hide it. Besides, there's no one left in the world he can talk to about stuff like this except Reid, so maybe he *should* try talking about it now.

"Why do you think you keep forgetting about her?" Reid asks.

The fact that Reid asks a question rather than offering an opinion releases some of the tension in Lee's neck. Reid's calm silence—and his hand petting Lee's hair—provide enough safety for Lee to admit the truth.

"Edgar scares me."

Reid snorts. "He scares everyone."

"Mom's no help. She's... she's only a ghost. Edgar's obedient shadow."

"What does this have to do with you grieving for Shelby?"

Reid's armpit is the perfect place for Lee's face right now. The flawless, familiar, safe smell of him is like a strong sedative, tranquilizing enough of Lee's anxieties to allow the truth to continue to roll out.

"I haven't cried in front of anyone since you found me on the trail that day," Lee says. "I didn't cry at the funeral, even though Edgar told me to."

"That's probably why you couldn't."

Lee nods. "Maybe. But... I'm... I'm afraid..." He can touch the feeling, but articulating it threatens to pile more sadness on top of all the Shelby sadness already overwhelming him most of the time.

After a few minutes, Reid finishes the sentence for him. "You're afraid because it's not safe to feel when Edgar's around, and since Shelby's been gone, he's gotten meaner and he's hounding you more than ever. When you're with your parents, the real Shelby seems forgotten, and that makes you feel like you're forgetting her too." He doesn't even offer it as a question.

"The day she was killed," Lee tells Reid's armpit, "when you found me in the woods? I couldn't... I couldn't find the end of it. I was sure I was trapped there forever, on my knees, pressed against the ground... trying to find a way through."

Reid places his hand gently on Lee's head.

“God, Reid, I’m so glad you found me that day.”

“Yeah, me too.” Reid pulls Lee closer. “I’m here now and Edgar and Rachel are far away. We’re safe here in our wee hidey-hole. It’s okay now to...” He shrugs and kisses Lee’s forehead, leaving his lips pressed there like a benediction.

Reid’s permission and ever-present warmth seep into the hard knot of grief Lee has kept at arm’s length. Lee can’t help shuddering as the same awful cavern of heartache he touched on the trail the day Shelby died—and then in the woods a couple days later—yawns open before him, sucks him down. He falls into the blackness and opens his throat to give up the pain stuck there, releasing a lament that rises up through the ceiling of the shack and out into the clear sky above Inking Lake.

Safe, held tight, Lee finds Shelby again, remembers her laughter, the way she looked at him, the adventures they had together, everything she gave him—and tucks them forever into his heart.

He cries until the edges of the black hole shrink inward, until he looks up from the bottom to see the pinprick of light at the top that is Reid’s face, compassionate and strong, and his body, enfolding Lee as though he knows that even though they only have a few more hours together now, they’ll always somehow be in each other’s lives.

The tears on Reid’s cheeks refill Lee’s heart with more of what Todd took away.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Lee sleeps just long enough for Reid to work through a fairly detailed fantasy involving Edgar, Rachel, and a punitive decision by child protective services to extract Lee and place him in a safer home at a much earlier age.

Waking on a deep breath, Lee immediately shoves his face further into Reid's armpit. "Tell me what happened yesterday?" The vibration of Lee's voice tickles and Reid titters. He squirms, but doesn't move away.

"Now?" Reid asks.

"Yes. I want to know." Lee must be feeling better, because he slides his hand between Reid's thighs. Reid lets his legs fall open.

"I don't want to talk about that. Don't want to pollute this perfect little spot we've finally found. Just us. Far away from everyone else."

"Mmm... perfect little spot." Lee wiggles his fingers against Reid's underwear to torture the sensitive hole. "Okay, then, how about this? You talk while I torment you, then I fuck you five different ways."

"Mmph."

"Try again. I didn't understand you."

"Ahh... Lee, seriously? I can't talk about that stuff. I need..."

"Yes, you can. Take a deep breath and let my fingers relax you while you give me the highlights, then I'll strip you down and we'll get to know each other better."

After a heavy huff and a shivering shimmy against Lee's insistent fingers, Reid manages to line up enough words to create a sentence. "Todd cancelled the company's ads and pocketed the refunds to launch a new career as a drug dealer."

"Jesus, that's low. Were you able to recover any of it?"

"No, but I fixed it so the ads are running again. That was why bookings had slacked off so much. And then, last night after you called, I stumbled on a dirty little secret. You know how Mom and Alan always put so much pressure on me to give them more money?"

"Yes."

“Well, that’s total bullshit, because they have considerably more income than they’ve led me to believe.”

“What the hell?”

“I know. It’s too depressing. Next topic.”

“Have you ever thought about us being boyfriends?” It’s a conversational left turn, but Lee’s finger caressing his hole dilutes Reid’s discomfort about this tricky topic.

“I’ve thought about it, but…” Lee must sense Reid’s struggle to gather his thoughts because he stops moving his hand. Reid takes a deep breath and weighs his words carefully. “You’re my best friend, Lee. Of course I love you, but… but…”

“What? Just say it.”

“It’s not any one thing.”

“What’s the biggest one?”

“I don’t consider myself…” Reid shrugs.

“I will be pissed off you if you say *worthy*.”

Reid presses his lips together and Lee removes his hand. He gets up to pull off Reid’s boxer briefs and to take off his own clothes, then digs the tube of lube from his coat pocket and pushes Reid around until they’re both underneath the covers.

“That’s ridiculous,” Lee finally responds.

The muffled *snick* of the lube’s flip-top lid under the covers punctuates his words. Reid’s mind blanks for a second. “Is it?”

“Yes. You talk. I’ll torment. Go.”

“Bastard.”

“Yes.”

Reid talks before Lee’s torment begins in earnest, figuring that the more words he gets out now, the better. “I’ve shied away from even thinking about us as more serious than friends with benefits because it would be too complicated. Your father… Edgar scares the ever-loving fuck out of me. The way he treated Shelby when he thought she was going out with Todd, even though she wasn’t, and the intense pressure he put on her about what she does—did—with her time

and her own money... it hurt to see her have to deal with that. I don't like how he's pressuring you now, and I sure as hell don't want to give him a reason to think he can pull that shit with me, too. I'd probably crumble."

"Your family puts pressure on you, too." Lee watches Reid carefully as he moves his lubed fingers toward Reid under the covers.

When Reid feels the cool lube inside the cleft of his ass, his eyes widen and his thighs part. Grinning, Lee does nothing more than gently stroke the hypersensitive skin between Reid's balls and rectum.

It almost makes Reid forget what he wants to say.

"You're right, they do pressure me, but not the way Edgar does. Every time we've met, your father's been arrogant and mean and rude—about me, about my family, about my work. He makes damn sure I know he considers me unworthy—of you and of him."

"You believe him?"

Reid tries to formulate an answer, but the distraction of Lee's finger makes him writhe and his mind goes blank until Lee pauses. Reid blows out a breath. "It's more like I already struggle enough with the issue of whether I'm... enough. I can't take on the burden of his view of me, too. You know what he'd be like if I was your boyfriend."

"The only thing unworthy in this scenario is my family."

"Maybe, but... honestly? I also figure that when you turn twenty-five and get your pile of dough, it's going to make you see things differently, in spite of your current intentions. I predict that you won't want to settle on a fairly remote island in the Salish Sea. You'll have the resources to go anywhere and do anything, and... that's not what I want. I don't want a long-distance relationship, or a short-term boyfriend."

"What about all the boyfriends you've had that didn't last more than a year?"

"With every single one, I aimed for forever."

Lee snorts and gives Reid a sceptical look.

Speaking past the embarrassed flush he can feel reddening his face, Reid says, "Don't tease me about Edison. You don't get to do that. He may have turned out to be a first-class beast, but I thought he was a good person, right up until... until he proved he wasn't."

“Then can I tease you about all your other loser boyfriends?”

“Shut up. *No*. Maybe I haven’t been great at picking guys to be devoted to, but I always invest 100 percent. I always go for it, do my best to begin building a life with them, even if my heart ends up getting broken.”

“And me?” Lee spreads the sloppy lube deeper, nudging more insistently against Reid’s hole, the tip sliding inside and then out again.

Reaching for Lee, Reid lifts his arms to encircle his shoulders and pull him closer. “You and me? We’re best friends in the summertime and occasional no-strings fuck buddies, but more than that? Frankly, I’ve never seen a viable long-term option with you.”

Watching Lee closely, with as much attention as he can muster under the circumstances, Reid catches the flicker of pain that comes and goes across his face, the way his sharp cheekbones pink up slightly, the pinch at the edge of his wide mouth, the shadow dimming his normally sparkling eyes. The possible meaning of that fleeting look mingles with the way Lee’s touching him—crude and unashamed and tender, all at once—and it makes Reid wish they had more than this last handful of minutes to revisit the issue of whether or not they *could* be boyfriends. He wonders if the option will be on the table when—or if—Lee comes back to Haro after getting his inheritance. He wonders, but doesn’t allow himself to hope.

Reid allows his concerns to fade away, no longer interested in holding on to something with that much power to hurt. He’d rather focus on the revelation of how much he loves what Lee’s doing to him with that sly look and all that slippery lube.

Slowly, Lee bends forward and touches their lips together. It feels like an apology. Then he pulls his finger out of Reid and pushes it all the way in, and Reid’s mind goes completely blank again. He spreads his legs and pulls on Lee’s other arm to get him to move closer, get him on top, get him to do more that feels strange and wonderful and...

“Want to know why I never wanted to be boyfriends?”

Reid pants and lifts his hips. “Only if you keep doing what you’re doing as you say it.”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll raise you one finger.”

The pressure of two fingers inside feels filthy good, good enough to demolish the internal voice asking him if he’s doing the right thing. The filthy

goodness builds and expands into that pervasive silence from yesterday morning at Lee's, the internal silence that makes Reid feel absent and complete at the same time.

Lee's voice winds through the silence like a ghost. "I never wanted to be more than friends because I don't like to bottom and you only wanted to top. I didn't think we could make that work."

"If you don't like to bottom, why did you with me?"

Lee pulls his fingers out, his eyes on Reid's, his movements slow, a wicked shine in his eyes. "How else were we going to fuck?"

Lee kneels between Reid's legs and pulls the covers over his shoulders like a cape. He bends Reid's legs and lifts them to his shoulders, leaving Reid feeling beguiled and exposed. Brandishing the tube of lube again, Lee makes a show of squeezing out a dollop and rubbing it onto his hard cock with slow, raunchy thrusts of his pelvis that decimate the remaining vestiges of Reid's inhibitions. Reid wants everything Lee's got, right now, and he's no longer reluctant to admit it.

"Lee—*God*, look at you—please tell me I never have to top again."

One last long pull along his own cock, with a twisting rub at its fat tip, and Lee lets it go. It bounces against the crease of Reid's thigh, and Reid draws an involuntary breath at the contact.

Lee leans forward and thrusts a hand between them, guiding his cock to Reid's hole. "I promise." As he pushes the fat head of his cock slowly inside, he says, eyes glinting, "And that is a promise I never expected to have the chance to make you."

Reid shivers with built-up anticipation. He's revisited the memory of their short fuck this morning a zillion times, a memory that by now has mutated into an unreal jumble of intensity and mirage, leaving Reid with an urgent need to prove it wasn't a fluke but a prototype, a precedent.

The good son's escape from his cage.

When Lee pushes all the way inside, the tawny flecks in his pretty eyes blaze. Within the majesty and fluid grace of Lee rising and falling above him, the burdens weighing on Reid's shoulders—expectations, guilt, pressure—heat to steam and evaporate. Reid stops pretending he can handle his life, his family, Todd, his business, even this moment with Lee. Stops pretending, stops acting. His face crumples and he lets the tears come, giving them to Lee along with everything else.

Gives it all away.

Opens his chest.

Invites the light of Lee to bathe and purify his heart.

Chapter Twenty-Five

So beautiful. More beautiful than I ever imagined.

The sight of Reid below him, blissed out, straining to take in more of Lee without thinking about it first... the *gift* of Reid fills Lee with the kind of power that razes kingdoms and builds armies. An exhilarating feeling of supremacy sends Lee's awareness of Reid into overdrive. He zeroes in on Reid's stuttering breath, the steady fall of tears from his clear eyes, his waiting willingness.

Needing more, needing to test how much Reid is willing to give, Lee pulls out and flips Reid over, hauls him to his knees and pushes quickly back inside. This position gives Reid more freedom to participate, and he does so without hesitation, shoving back hard onto Lee's cock.

Yes.

Laid over Reid's back, arms wrapped tightly around his chest, Lee grips Reid's shoulders for leverage and experiments with thrusting harder to see how Reid reacts. Reid shouts and lifts his hips for more, giving them both permission to fly. Lee uses his weight to force Reid flat onto the mattress so he can intensify the pace. With vicious, repetitive accuracy, Lee nails Reid's prostate on the way to sending his cock deeper—stockpiling sensations for the long winter months alone in Toronto.

Reid practically throws Lee off the bed in his eagerness to lift his ass to Lee's cock for more. With a rumbling groan, Lee picks up the punishing pace, closes his eyes, follows the urge, gives in, loses himself inside Reid.

When Reid's gasps turn into a high cry that stretches to a keen, the slutty overlord in Lee backs off, and Reid's sounds evolve into begging curses as Lee slows his advances and withdrawals.

"Lee," Reid mumbles, shuddering and squirming to find the climax Lee's keeping just out of reach.

"Keep still, wench. I'm busy having my evil, sovereign way with you."

"I hate you."

"You love me."

"I love you."

The sighing certainty of Reid's admission erases Lee's desire for more torture. He speeds up again, working a hand under Reid to rub the tip of his cock as he whispers in his ear, "I want everything you've got. Right... now."

Reid convulses and comes in perfect synchronicity with Lee, who's so overwhelmed by the whole experience—including his dual-climax coordination skills—that he drools on the back of Reid's neck.

"Fuck," Lee pants, "your fucking ass is fucking delectable." With messy kisses, he smears the saliva he drooled onto Reid's muscular neck.

"Mmm," Reid mutters. "*Oh, yeah.*"

"You're ruining me for all other asses."

To prove the uselessness of Lee's revelation, the alarm clock goes off.

Lee pulls out of Reid to reach the clock and turn it off.

"Freaky déjà vu," Reid says into the pillow, thinking about this morning at Lee's house.

They flop in an entangled heap of shudders until Lee rolls all the way off and away. Reid turns to lie on his back.

"Now I *really* don't want to leave," Lee sighs. "I hate it that all I'm going to do for the next two days until Barry hauls me to Toronto is pack and... and..."

"Rewind the last thirty minutes."

Lee sniggers. "You got that right. So I won't."

"Won't what? Rewind?"

"I won't go back to the house until Thursday evening. I'll stay here with you."

"You can't do that." Reid looks up, his brow furrowed with concern.

"I can."

No matter how hard Edgar looks for Lee—even if he hauls out the company helicopter—he'd never find them at Marty's sugar shack. And although Edgar's always been good at coming up with punishments that fit the crimes he believes Lee has committed, as long as Lee gets on that plane to Toronto on Friday, Edgar's punishment won't be too bad to handle. It'll be something demeaning, like paying Lee minimum wage for a month, or making him live in a hostel all winter, but it won't be more than Lee can handle.

“No, I mean it, Lee, you *can't*.” Reid gives him a nervous shake of his head. “Please don’t do that. Don’t risk the wrath of Edgar. He doesn’t need another reason—real or imagined—to punish you more than he already is, or require you to jump through more hoops before you get your money. Don’t risk it.”

“I don’t care. I know how he works. If I show up on my knees by Friday morning and beg for forgiveness, he’ll punish me, yeah, but I don’t care, because it’ll be worth it. *You’re* worth it. Could you... um... would you be willing to take some time off? If you can’t, I’ll stay here anyway, but...”

“If you insist on baiting your father, then, yeah, I want to be with you before you go, so... yes.”

Lee sucks and nips at the back of Reid’s neck for a few minutes, savouring the prospect of tasting more of Reid before he leaves. Winding his arms and legs around Reid, he sweeps the hair off Reid’s forehead to get a good look at his face.

Reid’s already fast asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

By the time Lee and Reid are both awake at the same time, it's around six-thirty—on a northern summer evening saturated with daylight. Over the course of the long, quiet hours of the day, Reid has been awake a few times, but he hasn't wanted to wake Lee. The guy's been through so much lately. Why not let him rest before his sorry excuse for a father gets his hands on him again?

Reid stands with his hands on his hips, looking down at the table where he's spread the items he'd hurriedly stuffed into his backpack. He wishes he'd thought more about what to pack, because most of this stuff is sad and inappropriate.

He hears Lee stir and watches as he opens his eyes and disengages from the twisted covers. Sitting on the end of the bed, Lee studies him. "Hey, since we're in the sugar shack, mind if I call you honey pot?"

"Not at all, fructose."

Chuckling, Lee shoves his bare feet into his black All Stars and shuffles closer. "What's up? This the stuff you brought in the pack?"

"Yep."

"Water?"

Reid hands Lee a bottled water and plucks six others out of the jumble, grouping them together on one corner of the table.

"I'm starving." Lee starts to paw through things, but stops when Reid hands him a lump of something wrapped in waxed paper. "Of course you brought homemade sandwiches."

Okay, so Reid hadn't planned thoroughly, but he'd tried to prioritize, and sandwiches were the first things to go into the pack after the tent and sleeping bags.

Lee pulls out a chair, sits, and offers Reid a fond smile before digging in. "Bless you," he says around a mouthful of PB and J.

"You're welcome." Reid unfolds the waxed paper on another block and takes a big bite of a Swiss cheese, tomato, lettuce, and mustard sandwich. He pulls out a chair to join Lee at the table, and when he sits down his sore ass prompts an "Ow," but his smile betrays his true feelings. Pausing for a slatty,

evil-overlord grin, Lee swallows so he can lean over the table to bite Reid's lower lip, triggering a full-body shiver that threatens to halt the bit of sandwich halfway down Reid's throat. He forces the bite down to free his throat for impromptu panting and looks up at Lee, who winks.

"Let's go for a hike." Lee swallows the last of his sandwich. "Give that first-class ass of yours a little break."

"I think you mean my top-notch ass," Reid suggests with a smirk.

"Enough with the wisecracks."

Before Reid can think of another rejoinder, Lee stands up to lean over and rest his elbows on the table, getting right into Reid's space, tilting his head to lick up Reid's throat to his stubbled chin, dragging his teeth across Reid's lips, then initiating a scorching kiss that has Reid gripping the edge of the table.

"You are too fun," Lee says as he pulls away. "Hmm... your top-notch ass may be taking a break, but..." He walks around the table to wrench Reid's chair around so he can kneel in front of him.

"Close your mouth, Reid." After unfastening Reid's pants, Lee reaches into the slit of Reid's boxer briefs with wily fingers and extracts his cock. He locks his scheming, sparkling, chestnut eyes onto Reid's and treats Reid's cock to a skilled quickie—zero to sonic boom in no time at all—ending in a short, sharp rush of a climax that leaves Reid slumped and gasping, mouth hanging open, his forgotten, half-eaten sandwich strangled in his hand.

Standing up, Lee refastens Reid's pants and finishes with a tender caress of Reid's recovering jeans-clad cock. "*That* is what I call a five-star snack."

Reid cranes his neck, craving the taste of his own cum on Lee's mouth, wanting proof of what just happened, wanting to make sure it was real and not a desire-induced delusion.

By the end of the kiss, Lee's straddling Reid's lap. "God, Reid, you are monumentally adorable like this, all pliable and eager and..."

"All stupid for you," Reid says, feeling bashful, turning his head away. The about-face from years of trying to get into men's pants by insisting on getting into their asses, all the while consumed with worrying that he wasn't doing it right, to *this*, to shaking compliance, has Reid reeling. Reeling, but very, *very* turned on, to the point of feeling delirious with lust that doesn't quit. He clears his throat and glances at the bed.

Lee laughs. “Not yet, honey pot. Let’s go for that walk. I need fresh air and I know a trail that’s hidden in the woods but follows the lakeshore.”

“Okay, but then let’s swim at the rocks. I mean, when it’s late enough and safe enough. After the park’s closed.”

A couple of hours later, after a hard hike and long talks on easy topics requiring neither tears nor emotional declarations, they arrive relaxed and sweaty at the jumble of rocks jutting into Inking Lake that Reid has long thought of as his and Lee’s personal spot, a place they’ve returned to again and again over years of summers spent in each other’s company.

The haze over Inking mutes the blue of the sky overhead but admits the low sun, which casts long, sharp-edged shadows behind them as they stand on the rocks and face the sun and the lake. They’ve been hiking through woods thick enough to block views of Inking except for brief flicks of reflective water between thick tree trunks. It’s a relief to finally be out in the open at the edge of the gently rippling, dark green water.

Staring out over the lake where Shelby died.

In the midst of taking off his clothes for a swim, Reid glances back to see how Lee’s doing. His head is down—he’s busy fussing with his pile of clothes, then putting a hand on a rock for balance as he slips out of his underwear—so Reid can’t see his face. Reid finishes undressing and duckwalks down the steep slope of rock and into the cold water, wanting to give Lee a moment if he needs it.

Treading water, getting used to the cold after the first hit of welcome freshness fades, Reid realizes he’s reluctant to submerge his head. That’s new. He forces himself to do it anyway, pushing through the heartache of how Shelby must have felt in this water as she struggled. Grateful that he can, he takes a big breath and stretches his arms to swim out a few strokes. Not far, because he wants to keep an eye on Lee.

Turning back toward the rock, Reid studies Lee for signs of distress. He seems okay at the moment, poised on the edge of the rock, ready to jump in, the sun hitting him full in the face. Lee’s usual mode of entry into the lake is a maximum-effect splash bomb, but this time he dives cleanly off the rocks into the deep water, the sleekness and muscled power of his body activating an ache in Reid at the thought of being separated from him soon and for such a long time. Possibly for a very long time. Possibly forever.

Then Reid yelps and forgets about anything but breathing because Lee grabs his legs from beneath the water, yanking him under for a spluttering moment before dragging him around by the foot, lampooning the belated changes to their sex life and his new role.

Nothing in Reid resists.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After that frolicking swim, Lee gets as far as putting on his underwear, but then the slant of the warming sun on their pile of rocks makes him pause. His legs ache from walking and sex and swimming, so he settles onto a curve of rock that allows a prime view of Reid, who's standing closer to the water in his black boxer briefs, looking out over the lake. The distraction of the strong triangle of Reid's shoulders and torso, the taut neatness of his five-star ass, helps Lee not think too much about whether any of Shelby's cells are still floating in the lake, drying on his skin, dampening his hair.

The seriousness of his thoughts makes him ready to say aloud what he hasn't been able to stop thinking about since he woke up in the sugar shack and saw Reid staring down at the table.

"Reid?"

"Hmm?"

"You ever think about what you'd do if your family wasn't holding you back? I feel awkward saying that, but... you've done so much for them and they've given you so little respect or even acknowledgment. It doesn't add up..." There's more to say, but Lee's courage flags. He takes a long breath and braces his palms on the rock for balance.

"...to a family," Reid finishes Lee's sentence. "It doesn't add up to a family."

"No, not really."

In case Reid has more to say, Lee waits, but when the silence stretches, he plunges back in, wanting to get through this before it's too dark and they have to start back to the shack. "My family doesn't add up either, though my role is different. I haven't done things for my family the way you have. All I've done is laze around or find ridiculous things to occupy my time while I wait to turn twenty-five so I can give Edgar the finger." He rubs his forehead. "I've been stupid."

"How so?"

"I wanted to walk here last night because I think best when I walk, and ever since Edgar's ultimatums I've been trying to get real about what's happening and what's going to happen, and I figured out a few things. I don't like them, but it's time for me to accept them."

“Like what?”

“Between now and my birthday, Edgar is going to punish me for not being the son he wants me to be—even more so now that Shelby’s gone.”

“Think you can make it to your birthday?”

“Well, that’s the question I started with, but... by the time I got here last night I’d dug so deep into that question I’d discovered other questions beneath it, questions I’ve never thought to ask myself before, and... and I don’t like what they’ve led me to.”

“Dark matter?”

Lee huffs a grim laugh. “Yeah. Dark matter. Exactly. I spent the entire walk here forcing myself to take an honest look at what’s likely to happen when I get my inheritance, assuming I can convince Edgar I deserve it. I’ve been shying away from reality for a long time, content to put my head down and plod toward the finish line of my birthday, convinced that’s when I can finally start to live.”

“It’s almost that time,” Reid says softly to the lake.

“Yes, except for the twist of that dark matter. I’ve been assuming that when I turn twenty-five I’ll be able to escape its pull, but even after I have control of my trust fund, Edgar is never going to let me go. He kept at Shelby after she had hers—questioning her decisions, using the weapon of his disapproval to keep her from...” Lee falters again, thankful Reid’s facing the lake. The struggle to get the words out has come to blinking against a fall of tears he doesn’t want showing in his voice. He needs to get through this conversation without Reid flipping into caretaker mode and making this about Lee instead of about both of them. Lee swallows and forces his voice to sound calm and contemplative instead of unsteady and wrecked. “He used his disapproval to keep Shelby from being herself.”

Reid nods but doesn’t turn around, and Lee sinks into the comforting *shush* of water lapping against the base of the rocks. He looks up at Reid’s muscular back, and a wave of gratitude rushes through him at Reid’s ability to simply listen, without judgment. Now that Shelby’s gone, Reid is the one person in his life who accepts Lee exactly how he is and encourages him to be himself. The thought of being separated makes Lee’s legs shake, and he presses his palms down on his knees, as if pushing down the possibility.

“Edgar tried to run Shelby’s life,” Lee goes on, “even though she went to university and got a degree and had a plan that he could understand. He considers me a total waste of space, Reid. He’s never going to leave me alone.”

“He doesn’t own you.”

“He thinks he does.”

“Our families *suck*.”

“During that walk last night, I also thought about why I’ve never spent much of my allowance. If I don’t spend Edgar’s money, I feel less like he owns me, less like I owe him...”—he searches for the word—“...like I owe him fealty. I feel less like a vassal.”

“You *don’t* owe him anything, Lee. He’s your *father*. He shouldn’t be asking the things he asks of you, the things he demands. And you do have choices.”

Reid lifts his hands to the back of his neck, and the sight of him—so perfect and noble and familiar—pierces something tender inside Lee, causing a pain recognizable as the sudden release of pressure.

Lee bows his head.

He’s right.

I can choose.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Reid keeps his back turned to Lee and blinks against the setting sun, his skin slowly drying in the cool breeze.

Lee's revelations make Reid smile with relief and hope that he's ready to build a life that will light him up all the time instead of only on the rare, blinding occasions Reid has felt lucky to witness. He deserves a life of believing he's valuable. Though Shelby was Lee's constant advocate, Reid sometimes felt that Lee depended on her too much. It's about time he took a stand on his own.

"I'm going to change the subject now," Lee says, "kind of."

"Okay."

"You're a warrior without a worthy cause. I keep thinking about what you could do with all that benevolent energy you're bursting with."

Lee's statement dovetails spookily with Reid's discovery two nights ago of his own family's betrayal. And with Todd's accusation at the police station. "*You're so determined to see what's good, you can't see what's true.*"

Impressed by Lee's determination to look into the darkness of his life and search for a source of light, Reid experiments with what that might feel like.

"A warrior without a worthy cause."

Is that me?

My life has felt like a war for so long.

What would it be like to be a warrior with a worthy cause?

A deep inhale and a long exhale come and go as Reid wonders for the first time what his life might have been like if he hadn't taken on the burden of his ungrateful, deceitful, irresponsible family.

When he looks down, the water beneath his feet sends up a reflection, shifting and blurry but discernible, a sparkling someone he might want to become.

"Remember when I was writing my business plan?" he asks Lee.

"You mean that entire year?"

"Hey, so it took me a year. I was only nineteen. I had a lot to learn."

“Yes, I remember.”

“I spent most of that time collecting stories about my family’s history because that was the backbone of my unique offering for the tour company, but I’ve never told anyone why it took that much time, why it took me a whole year to complete my business plan.” He stares over the lake, remembering the disappointment and pain of that year.

“So why did it?”

“I didn’t like what I kept digging up about my family, so I kept digging, hoping I’d come up with something different.”

“What were you digging up?”

Reid shrugs, not wanting to get into the specifics of those stories, because they make him feel ashamed of the people he sprung from. “Everything. Multiple assaults on First Nations people, fraud, embezzlement, domestic abuse, out-of-control gambling, drug addictions, mountains of unpaid debt. I finally stopped trying to find stories I could be proud of and changed my strategy to focusing on little moments I wasn’t too ashamed to share.”

“Like when your grandmother rescued your grandfather from drowning?”

Reid nods. “What I don’t share with tour customers is that my grandparents sold their property—that beautiful spot on the hill overlooking the channel—to pay off half of their gambling debts. Then they skipped town. No one ever heard from them again.”

“Shit. Seriously?”

“Yeah. Seriously. Way, way too many sad stories. Only a few I wanted to share.”

“But you still made a business out of them. That counts for something, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose. But how successful can I be if my business will always make me sad?”

The bottom edge of the sun touches the tip of the tallest tree across the water, and Reid turns around to sit next to Lee on the rock. Neither of them say anything for a long while, not until the sun has slanted beneath the horizon, spangling the sky with pinks and blues and oranges.

“Reid?” Lee says, the solemnity in his voice focusing Reid’s attention.

“Yeah?”

“You and Shelby are the best family I’ve ever had.”

Reid reaches a hand out to grasp Lee’s. “I feel the same way about you.”

“I’m not going back.”

“What?”

“I’m not going home. There are too many strings attached. I don’t want to live like that.”

“Wait. Are you saying you’d give up your inheritance?” The shock of Lee’s words almost overshadows the rightness of them. “*Jesus*, Lee.” Reid breathes through the shock as the rightness gains strength.

Yeah.

After a long, charged silence, Reid says, “I would give up my family, my other family. In order to keep you.”

Reid turns away from the sweeping sunset to look at Lee, to see if he’s as serious as Reid is. Their gazes snag and hold and deepen, and the truth and warmth of the moment settles Reid deep inside.

Lee’s eyes sparkle and he leers his evil-overlord smile. “Hop into your clothes, honey pot. It’s getting colder and we need to get going because this flashlight battery’s about had it.”

Reid dresses quickly, suspecting Lee’s sudden push for a change of venue is a revelation-induced need for a bed, a need Reid definitely shares. He wants to pull Lee close and whirl him around between the trees in celebration, but holds back for now, content to follow the flicker of weak light playing around Lee’s boots as they walk.

Surrounded by growing darkness, pulled by the waiting bed, Reid tries again to sort the complex mix of emotions around the shifts in their relationship, shifts that go beyond the switch in sexual roles. Being topped by Lee feels life-changing—like a window has opened for Reid to fly through. For the first time in his life, he can see further than the hand in front of his face.

At the shack, Lee grabs Reid’s hand and pulls him inside, undresses him, seduces him all over again... and again, until Reid can no longer fight sleep for one more kiss.

That night and part of the next morning, they lie low in the sugar shack, playing hooky, snacking on the weird smorgasbord Reid lugged in his

backpack, taking turns making each other crazy with need in various positions around the tiny room, and planning their getaway.

“You know,” Lee says against Reid’s ear as late morning light filters through the trees and seeps into the window Lee removed the tar paper from, “Edgar would be proud of me.”

“How so?”

“I’m finally going to earn my keep.”

“Maybe so, but let’s not confirm that in person.”

“Good call.”

“Besides, now that you’ve dangled the possibility, I need you all to myself.”

“You know better than to use the word ‘dangled’ when I have my hands on you.”

Reid attempts to understand Overlord Lee’s paradoxical ability to both tenderly and viciously maul his cock, balls, and ass, but after a few sharp breaths his focus is shot and he opens his legs wider to give Lee all the room he needs for whatever he wants to do.

When Lee’s tongue touches Reid’s hole for the first time—the first time *any* tongue has touched him there—Reid writhes and grabs two fistfuls of Lee’s hair. Lee pauses with his lips against Reid’s pucker and says, “You have no idea how long I’ve desperately wanted to do this.” When Lee plunges his tongue inside, Reid comes, just like that, with a bellow.

“There’s another On button,” Lee mutters, and within seconds he’s lubed and inside Reid, plying his overly sensitized ass, making Reid hard again so quickly Reid opens his eyes to look around the room, convinced the heat and electricity radiating off Lee must be generating steam and sparks.

Lee rams into Reid with a twist of his hips and comes with his mouth locked on Reid’s, his groan entering and filling Reid, sending shivers down his spine, filling him with the joy of being what Lee needs. Trembling and huffing, Lee breaks the kiss to drop his head against Reid’s neck. Reid wraps him up, using his legs to clamp Lee’s hips to make sure he stays put as long as possible, inside Reid, right where he’s meant to be.

“You’re ready to earn your keep,” Reid whispers in Lee’s ear with a smile. “And I’m ready to keep what I earn.”

“Hey.” Lee lifts his head and assesses Reid. “If I’m lodged in your ass, then anything’s possible, because I never, ever thought I’d be here.”

“Yeah, me either.”

“Is this all really okay with you?”

“What, this? Being mauled by my wicked overlord on an hourly basis? *Hell*, yes. Sign me up. With a ‘please’ and a ‘more’ and a ‘don’t-you-ever-stop.’”

Lee’s flushed cheeks and proud grin make him look like a diabolical cherub.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

They do their best to clean up the shack. Around noon—after leaving Marty a note and ten twenties as heartfelt thanks and compensation for the debauched state of the bedding—Reid hoists his backpack and they walk out the door.

The padlock *snicks* closed, and Lee takes a few steps before turning back to see Reid snap a picture of the shack with his digital camera. A spark of happiness flares in Lee's chest at the thought that Reid considers their experience here worth documenting.

They walk through dappled sunshine to Reid's truck—tucked at the end of an abandoned driveway a fifteen-minute walk from the most remote park entrance—and the long drive to the Haro Island Tours office goes by in a pensive but companionable silence.

They have a plan.

The first thing Reid does when he and Lee arrive at the tour office is close the blinds and lock the door, eliciting raised eyebrows from his employees, Beth and Mitch. Mitch puts down his newspaper and looks at Beth, who stands up behind her desk.

"I have some big news," Reid begins. His unrestrained smile threatens to fan the happy flare in Lee's chest into an explosion.

Lee sits on his hands to keep from kissing Reid's sunny smile to smithereens and tries to concentrate on his voice.

"I'm leaving Haro, today, in a few minutes, for good," Reid announces. He doesn't wait for a reaction. He has swept aside all the what-ifs, the endless questions that always seemed to plague him in his quest to do the right thing.

Beth and Mitch exchange a worried look, but they don't say anything.

Lee closes his eyes, because sitting on his hands is no longer enough to quash the need to reach for Reid. When he hears a clatter, he looks up to see Reid hauling a lockbox out from under his desk. He unlocks it and walks around to lean against the front of the desk.

Reid pulls a few documents out of the box, unfolds a piece of paper, picks up a pen, and is done writing in a few seconds. "Mitch, I've signed the title of the truck over to you." He hands Mitch the title, but Mitch's surprise keeps him from lifting a hand to take it, so Reid sets it on Mitch's lap. "I need the truck for a couple of hours, but then it's all yours."

Mitch blinks and stutters a “Th-thank you, Reid.” He opens his mouth to say more, but jolly Reid has already moved on.

“Beth, I’m giving you the business. Well, if you want it. With Todd and the rest of the”—Reid points toward the house—“not draining the profits, it’ll be a nice income for you.”

Lee notes Reid’s apparent avoidance of the word “family.” The certainty that Reid considers Lee his family now prompts a smile that takes over Lee’s entire face.

Beth manages to nod at Reid. She clears her throat and says, “Yes. Thank you.”

“Great,” Reid says before she can ask any questions. “I urge you to move the office to the dock on the other side of the marina. I was planning to do that if I ever had the money, but I never did. Now you can. It’s a sound dock, and there’s a little building you could fix up into a nice office. Bert Sanders owns it. He’s offered me a very reasonable rental rate. I made some notes about it—they’re in the lockbox. Just tell Bert I sent you.”

Reid smiles at Beth until she smiles back, then he bends to sort through the lockbox for more documents, piling them on the desk—the desk he’s not sitting behind. It’s as though the old Reid sat there, but this new Reid, the true Reid, needs to be closer to the door and freedom.

Reid leans down to write on a few of the documents. He files some of them back into the box, folds some into thirds and stuffs them in an inside pocket of this jacket, and then straightens to hand two documents to Beth.

“Here are the boat and van titles. They’re yours.” He hands her the key to the lockbox. “Inside the box are some other things you’ll need—insurance and whatnot. Later today, in Vancouver, I’ll take care of other things regarding the changeover.” He pats the papers in his jacket. “It’ll take a little while to get the bank accounts signed over to you and make the business transfer final, but I’ll do it all as soon as possible, okay? And I’ll make it ironclad, with no chance of Mom or Alan or Aunt Hilary getting anything.”

“Um... okay?” Beth looks uncertain, but Reid doesn’t slow down.

“Can you stand strong if there’s fallout from the house?” He points again toward the house on the hill behind the office, where he’s lived with his family all his life, the house his grandparents built and moved when they sold the land to pay off gambling debts. “Do whatever you have to do to make it easy for yourself, okay, Beth?”

She can only nod, because she's crying outright now. She blows her nose on a tissue then stands to wrap Reid in a bear hug that lifts him off his feet, squeezing him until he squawks. "You're welcome," he sighs when she puts him down.

"But why?" she asks. Mitch stands to hug Reid, too, nodding that he also wants to know.

"Here's the deal..." Reid looks from one to the other of his stunned former employees. "I'll tell you later. Right now, I need to go."

Beth laughs and shakes her head. "Reid... I can't tell you how good it is to see you happy and smiling. It makes you look ten years younger. Whatever's going on, I'm glad for you. Just... you'd better tell me more at some point. Promise?"

"I promise. We'll stay in touch no matter what." He holds her away from him, his hands on her shoulders. "You going to be okay? I mean, hell, you should be. You know it all anyway."

Beth nods again, and Reid releases her to lean back over the desk and open a drawer to extract a chequebook. "I'm taking two thousand from the business account as severance pay. The rest is yours. It's enough to get moved and to tide you over while you get your sea legs."

Mitch hasn't said more than his stammered thanks but his eyes shine, and he clutches the truck title and stares at Reid in awe. Reid doesn't seem to mind, just hauls him in close for a final hug.

On the way out the door, Reid pulls his little digital camera out of his jacket pocket to take a picture of Beth and Mitch, then the office, the dock, and the boat. He doesn't take a picture of the house.

They walk to the end of the dock, and when Reid turns toward Lee, the relief and peace on his face make Lee catch his breath. He sidles up to Reid to whisper in his ear. "You are the most adorable businessman I have ever known."

That's when Reid stretches out his arm and snaps a picture of them both.

The photo appears on the screen for a moment before Reid turns the camera off, and Lee knows it will be his favourite.

Behind their grinning faces is nothing but clear blue sky.

Chapter Thirty

When Reid goes up to the house to tell his family his big news and to repack his backpack with items more appropriate for leaving Haro for good, the brief encounter results in a loud, one-sided fight that he thinks must look pretty silly.

He locates his passport, collects the photos of his father, snags his laptop and a few favourite books, and stuffs lots of warm clothes in to fill up the spaces, humming all the while, which seems to drive his mother batty. She yells and waves her hands and gets in his face and turns red. Alan folds his arms across his chest and scowls. “Do not do this to your mother,” he snaps. Aunt Hilary curses and bangs things in the kitchen. Reid smiles, imagining their drama as insignificant wisps of thin vapour. He moves through the house with the freedom of a being from another dimension, immune to their drama, disconnecting from their grasping tentacles as he passes from room to room.

When he’s packed and standing in the open front door, he waves cheerfully and calls out, “Take good care of yourselves!”

Then he walks away.

It doesn’t feel scary or bad to leave his family. He doesn’t feel irresponsible or mean. In fact, he can hardly believe how easy it is and how right it feels.

He strides around the corner of the house, the pack bouncing on his shoulder. The sight of Lee waiting patiently in the passenger seat of the truck makes Reid want to do something special for him. He thinks hard for a minute, then sets down the pack on the gravel at the edge of the driveway. Lee looks over and Reid holds up a just-one-more-minute finger to answer his questioning look.

Reid’s mom is on the phone as he passes through the living room on his way to his room to get what he needs. On his way back out, she says something into the phone that includes the words “Yes, Mr. Sheldrake.”

Neither Reid’s smile nor his steps falter. His destiny has a one-track mind, and Mr. Edgar Sheldrake no longer has a say in it. Walking to the truck feels like walking across the earth for the first time in his life, his feet and legs solid and strong and connected to something big and vital and colourful, something magnificent that doubles his lung capacity.

The very best moment of leaving is when he says to Lee, “Mom was on the phone with Edgar,” and Lee only smiles and shrugs, the unspoken *so what* chiming against the inside of Reid’s chest like an all-clear signal.

Chapter Thirty-One

In the village of Haro, Reid cashes his severance cheque. Then they stop at the grocery store to stock up on road food and get Lee a toothbrush, a six-pack of underwear, and a daypack.

Heading out of town, Lee expects Reid to take the right fork back to the tour office and Mitch, back to the boat that will deliver them to Vancouver, but Reid takes the left fork instead.

“One more thing on the to-do list before we blow this joint,” Reid says.

“Okay.” Though Lee doesn’t object out loud, his anxiety kicks up a level at the delay, now that he knows Edgar has been notified. Lee doesn’t think his father would do anything rash to keep him around—like have Barry cuff him and whisk him straightaway to Switzerland. But he doesn’t want to risk looking into his father’s eyes and seeing how little it matters if Lee goes, or seeing his father’s glee at Lee surrendering his inheritance. As if his father needed millions more dollars.

While Reid packed up, Lee sat in the truck in the driveway and texted a message to his father using Reid’s phone: *Message from Lee – I’m leaving Haro for good. Keep the money. I’ll let you know where I land, but it may not be for a while.* The cursor had blinked at him for a long time, but he couldn’t think of a single thing to add that would be honest without being mean, so he’d pressed Send, repeated the message to his mother, and turned off the phone.

Reid turns onto a gravel road that winds toward the little cemetery on the southern tip of Inkling, the opposite end of the long lake from Marty’s sugar shack and their rock pile. Lee hasn’t been here in a long time, but he recognizes the road. He glances over at his best friend and marvels again at how the man always seems to know the best, kindest thing to do.

“You told me this was where Shelby wanted to be buried,” Reid says.

Lee remembers the despair he felt when his mother informed him they’d decided to bury Shelby in the big family plot in Haro’s main cemetery. Rachel preferred having convenient access to Shelby’s grave—and greater exposure of the family’s name on the awful, gigantic marble headstone they’d chosen, Lee suspected—rather than putting Shelby to rest where they knew she’d wanted to be buried.

“I thought it might be nice to do a little something for Shelby here before we go.”

Lee nods, because his throat is too tight to say anything right now.

After Reid parks the truck, they walk through the leaning gate and swish their way through the tall grass between scattered headstones. From this beautiful, wild little graveyard at the wide southern end of Inking Lake, the view is spectacular. The water, stretching almost a mile before narrowing into the first curve, invites sunlight to collect and multiply, drawing nature to a pulsing, multisensory frenzy of blooms and birdsong and insects and whispering wind. An enormous maple tree shades the far edge of the graveyard near the shore.

“Shelby used to come here with her sketchbook when she needed to work through something,” Lee says, squinting against sun reflecting on the sky-blue water. “She’d let me tag along if I promised to keep quiet and let her be.”

“You never told me that.”

“No. I never told anyone. It was our secret. We hadn’t done it in a long while.”

“It sounds nice.”

“It was perfect.” Lee squats and touches the water, sending ripples out like sound waves spreading a story. Maybe that’s what he’ll do—tell the story of Shelby, how she was the fixed point in his life, the way she stepped in to be his caretaker when his parents weren’t up to the job, how she never judged him, only stood by him, held his hand, patted his hair, told him he was fine, a lovely boy, and then a nice man. There’s enough of Shelby left inside Lee, plenty of her, to make a damn good story, maybe even one others would like to hear.

Lee submerges his hand. He wishes leaving Haro Island didn’t have to mean leaving Inking Lake, leaving behind bits of Shelby.

Reid steps up behind Lee and lays his hand on Lee’s head. Not rubbing or seducing or interrupting, just... there. Here. The weight of that hand—which Lee knows will remain until Lee makes a move to get up, no matter how long it takes—anchors Lee to the spot, to the centre of a wheel, the different spokes of his life spreading around him. Shelby and his life with her. Shelby’s death and the strange twists it has wrought. Inking Lake’s long, curving, forest-darkened shoreline and the stories it holds. And Reid, holding him steady.

The delicate branches and rounded leaves of an aspen pattern the water at Lee's feet. He stares at his reflection in the undulating water until his eyes lose focus and memories of Shelby make him cry.

Without speaking, Lee stands, wipes his eyes and his glasses, and he and Reid spend a long, slow time together choosing rocks, bundling interesting grasses, questing for flowers, gathering beauty, arranging their offering at the spot near the shore where Shelby liked to sit and draw.

And then they walk away.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Wind pushes the weather in from the west, cooling the air. Clouds sift and part and unite until they've become a solid grey shield by late afternoon when Mitch steers the tour boat away from the dock. The house on the hill remains shut tight. Only Beth stands on the dock to wave them off.

Heading south along the eastern coast of Haro, they'll pass the Sheldrake property. Reid moves to stand next to Lee as they approach. When the wide, sloping lawn comes into view, he wraps a protective arm around Lee's shoulder. The lawn stretches up and up to the formal flower garden. The big house looms from the top of the hill.

"He's there." Lee stares and his hands grip the railing tight enough to turn his knuckles white.

The boat is far enough out that they can see Edgar on the patio, but not his expression, and they wouldn't be able to hear him if he shouted. Reid can tell Edgar is smoking as he stares out at the water by the way his hand moves up and down from his face.

"The man can't walk on water, so we're going to slide on by, fructose."

Lee snorts and plants a quick kiss on Reid's cheek. "I know, but... God, I'm ready to be away."

"Me too. And that's coming up in... three, two, *one*." Reid emphasizes the *one* as they draw even with Edgar and pass him by.

Edgar turns and walks into the house. No wave, no nod. No anything.

"That's... wow," Reid manages.

"That's *over*," Lee says and lets out a long, slow breath.

They stare at the passing shore for a while, then gravitate to a cushioned bench at the back of the boat to watch Haro shrink out of sight.

When Reid checks to see how he feels, there are no alarms. Not a single one. There's only the peaceful space that's most intense when Lee's fucking him, but which now seems to fill all their time together. He has no complaints. None at all.

Ready to move forward and leave the disappointments of Haro behind, Reid puts his head on Lee's lap, and the shifting patterns of grey clouds above make his brain float away.

Lee lifts a finger to tease Reid's lips. "I'll give you something to smile about." He leans down to kiss Reid, a claiming kiss for the beginning of a new adventure.

Reid hadn't even realized he'd been smiling.

"What shall we do with our two thousand dollars when we get to Vancouver?" Reid asks.

"You mean *your* two thousand dollars."

"Hey, you left home thinking you'd only be gone a few hours."

"Hmm. Yes and no."

"Edgar might have fried your bank account access by now."

"Probably."

"So we need to share my money, right? What am I missing here?"

In the glare created by the water and the cloud cover, Reid doesn't immediately make sense of what Lee's hand is doing. His fist twists back and forth above Reid's face, but the fist looks oddly too big. Reid makes more of an effort to focus. "What is that?"

"This, dear honey pot, is a little going-away-with-me present." Lee sets whatever he's been wiggling onto Reid's chest, and Reid raises a hand to hold onto it. When he finally sees what it is, his eyes bug out.

"Are you *shitting* me?" He sits up in a hurry, tightly clutching the fat roll of bills bound by a thick rubber band to make sure it doesn't fly away in the wind. It's bigger than Reid's fist.

"Don't bother trying to count it now. It's mostly hundreds."

"Holy fucking Jesus *fucking* hell! This must be..." Reid tries to guess how much money, but stops because he hasn't got a clue. A lot. A *fuck* of a lot. "Where did you get it?"

"You know how I was saying I haven't spent much of my allowance?"

"You stashed it as cash? You've got this much from your *allowance*? Christ, even if I'd saved every penny of my allowance until it stopped when my dad died, it would've only added up to one fifty dollar bill."

"It's eighty thousand. A donation to the worthy cause of my favourite warrior. I haven't offered you money before now because I knew you'd give it to your family and that didn't feel right."

“Holy *shit*. Lee, seriously. That’s so nice, but I can’t take this, you know that. Maybe we can share some of it, but...”

“Oh, yes, you can take it, and you will. It’s all yours, no matter what, no strings. Make a new start. Plus...” Lee’s hand hovers again, holding another roll of bills about the same size in his hand.

Stunned, disbelieving at first, Reid stupidly checks the roll he holds to make sure Lee hasn’t pulled a sleight of hand using the same money. Nope.

“...I have my own,” Lee says.

Desperate to prove he’s not dreaming, Reid reaches out to touch the second roll. “You were able to save this much?”

Lee shrugs. “There wasn’t anything I needed that I didn’t already have.”

Reid tries unsuccessfully to think of what Lee has bought over the years—a few books, cell phones, clothes and boots for hiking.

“I needed to walk in the woods and by the water. I needed to be friends with you.”

A flight of freed wishes rushes through Reid’s awareness, and in the space of a few seconds the idea of being a warrior seems to solidify and take shape as a certainty.

“Okay,” says Reid, excitement deepening his voice. He sits up and stuffs his roll of bills securely inside the waistband of his pants, then grabs Lee’s shoulders. “Our plan is Vancouver, bank, lawyers, right?”

Lee tilts his head and nods.

“I’m adding one more to the list. Airport. Please say yes.”

Lee laughs, and Reid swears the sun is out after all. “Yeah. Yes. Sure.”

“We need to fly away to start fresh, so at the airport, I’ll buy us tickets—my treat—to somewhere with trails through the woods and along the water. How about... how about Halifax, at least to start out? There’s great music there, too. We need a chance to make some new friends, and I think maybe we need to dance for a while. Okay?”

“Perfect, yes. Thank you.”

Reid yanks Lee into his arms. They stay like that for a long time, staring out at the mainland sliding by to the east, at the steepness and the different shades of green, at the other boats passing by.

“Oh!” Reid suddenly pushes Lee back and extends his legs, shoving one hand into each front pocket to pull out two identical glass vials. “Hey, I have something for you, too.”

Lee takes one of the little vials from Reid and turns it over in his hands to examine its thick, clear glass and black screw-top lid.

“We’ll replace the tape around the lid with wax as soon as we can, to make sure the seal stays tight.”

Lee tilts the vial back and forth, watching the mostly clear liquid move inside. “What is it?”

“A reminder. One for each of us. A reminder of where we started and of what Shelby gave up. Maybe even, in an odd way, a token of gratitude to Shelby for saving you and for bringing us together.”

Lee blinks and goes very still for a long moment. On a shaky breath, his shoulders curl protectively over the vial in the palm of his hand, which begins to shake. When he lifts his head and looks at Reid, his face contorts.

Around a gulping breath, Lee manages to say, “*Inkling*,” before he forces an energetic, sloppy, grateful kiss on Reid’s smiling mouth.

The End

Author Bio

Alice Archer's readings in the M/M romance genre inspired a turnabout, from stuck and afraid to brave and ready. She rearranged her life, moved from Europe back to the U.S., and got busy drawing on her experiences of living in more than 80 places to create stories about loving through the challenges. If she's not writing, she's on a bench under a tree playing Scrabble via cell phone, or on an unfamiliar street corner, thrilled to be lost. Writing M/M romances with happy endings solves her in a way that feels deep and right, though exactly why remains a mystery. Her short story, "Executive Decision," will be published in the Dreamspinner Press Bare Studs anthology.

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