

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

THIS TOO

Isla James

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

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By Isla James

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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's Landscapes*.

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.

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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THIS TOO

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Photo Description

Two young men, lying side by side with their heads on pillows. The first man is a brunette wearing a red T-shirt. The other has lighter brown hair, a five o'clock shadow, and is wearing a grey T-shirt. Both men look slightly ruffled. The man with the grey shirt has reached over and turned the other man's face towards him planting a kiss on his lips. The man with the red shirt appears surprised. They both have their eyes open looking at the other's response.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been best friends since the day we met in kindergarten. I've been in love with him forever, but he's straight—as evidenced by the scads of girls he's dated. I finally worked up the nerve to not only come out to him our senior year of high school but also tell him how I felt for him. As I expected, he told me that he'd be my best friend no matter what but that he was straight and didn't feel the same way. I was heartbroken but knew that I had to suck it up if I wanted us to remain friends. I stayed single for the rest of high school while he dated every girl around. Now we are rooming together in college and I'm doing my best to get over him and move on. Unfortunately, every time I meet someone or date someone new, he thwarts my plans. I don't even want to talk about the time he walked in on me and my new guy about to get down and dirty—let's just say he was NOT happy. I don't understand! If I didn't know better, I'd say he was jealous. But he's straight... isn't he?

Please no threesomes, cheating, paranormal, or BDSM. Also Author, please give me some sweet lovemaking and an HEA ending!

Sincerely,

Mick2012

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: angst, college students, coming out, families, friends to lovers, religion, sports

Word Count: 11,611

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THIS TOO

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The movie played in the background, the sounds of yet another car chase racing across the screen. Thank God it was like every other movie I had seen recently. It wouldn't matter if I recalled everything in detail; I could fake it if asked. Jake's leg was up against mine, its warmth seeping into me. How many times had we lain like this in the past? Piled like puppies while watching a movie. More than I could count. In the last six months, it had become both my greatest desire, and my most vicious torture. Jake had been my best friend since kindergarten. We'd met that first day, both wanting to play at the cooking center, and when the girls said we weren't allowed because we were boys, well, we did what little boys do best and started throwing punches. We were never asked to leave the cooking center again, and it soon became obvious that wherever Jake went, I followed.

"What's up with you, Ryan? I don't think you've watched five minutes of this movie. You're spaced out again..." Jake watched me closely, trying to discern what my big issue was. Over the last few months, it felt like we had begun to drift apart, and I was at a loss as to how to stop it without revealing my feelings. Jake had asked repeatedly if something was wrong, and every time I brushed him off with a glare and a short, "Don't be an ass."

"I'm starting to really worry, Ry," Jake said, the tension drawing out that little crease in the middle of his forehead—the one that only appeared when he was truly concerned.

"No worries. It's my eighteenth birthday, and in a few hours we'll be at the party to end all parties, as all mine seem to be," I said with a wink and a smile, hoping that Jake would ignore the false bravado. "Honestly, I'm just excited, that's all."

"How did you know about the party? It was supposed to be a surprise." Frowning, Jake rolled onto his back, obviously disappointed I knew. He had wanted to surprise me for my big eighteenth, and thought a party at the dam would be a kick. Nothing like alcohol and sex to lift a bad mood, and God knew I had been one moody ass lately. Unfortunately, he forgot to tell everyone it was supposed to be a surprise.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s the thought that counts.” I turned and looked at Jake lying on his side, his beautiful, brown hair tousled from running his fingers through it. That sexy scruff that had bloomed over the past year, shadowing his jaw. How many more days would we have like this, just the two of us? It was slowly eating me up inside that not only was I in love with my best friend, but it wouldn’t be long before we would be at college and our time together would change.

It killed me a little each time I watched Jake with a new girl, and college would have nothing but an endless supply of coeds to catch Jake’s eye. I wanted to tell him how I felt. Sometimes, I even thought Jake might return my feelings. After all, how many other guys did I know who felt comfortable lying side by side while watching a movie? But every time I had a chance, I just couldn’t bring myself to say the words. Because what if Jake told me to fuck off and stay away? I would rather live this tortured existence than live without Jake at all.

Every time something went wrong in life, Jake’s dad would tell us, “This too shall pass.” I always believed him, yet no matter how badly I currently hurt, I wasn’t sure that I wanted my feelings for Jake to pass. The overwhelming anxiety and tension? Yeah, that could pass any time.

“Ry, you’re breathing weird, and you’ve spaced out again. What the hell is going on?” Jake was grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking me. I clambered to a sitting position, leaning my back against the couch and taking slow deep breaths. I had to get myself under control. I hated feeling like I was constantly splintering apart. If loving Jake in silence was the alternative to losing him forever, well, I would gladly suffer the pain. Losing him just wasn’t something I thought I could endure.

“Panic attack. I’ve been having them again,” I wheezed out between breaths. The attacks had begun after my mom died when I was thirteen, but I hadn’t had one in ages. Not until six months ago, when I realized that not only was I gay but also in love with my straight best friend. Yep, that had brought them on with a bang. “Doc says it’s the stress of finals, so don’t worry.” I reached out for Jake’s hand, which was firmly clamped onto my shoulder. “I’m okay, I promise.” I squeezed his hand and then let go, not wanting to prolong the torture touching him provided. Slowly, I ran my hand over my face. Jake’s sweet, woody scent lingered on my skin, and I felt it flow through me like a balm, steadying everything inside me.

I turned to Jake and smiled. I could fake this. I could pretend for one more day that I was the high school's biggest hockey stud. I could fake some cock-attitude, flirt with the girls, and drink with the guys, and no one, not even Jake, would know how I was breaking apart on the inside. I could live the lie everyone believed, because I would not lose Jake. Ever.

“So, tell me what you've planned for my party. I'm presuming it's epic?”

Jake looked me over and once more bought the lie, launching immediately into the evening's plans. It was as I imagined: friends, girls, and booze. At least I'd be able to drown my misery with booze.

Following my party, the final months of high school were hard. Watching Jake work his way through every girl in the twelfth grade had just about killed me. Jake had left a trail of broken hearts, and he still had no idea that with every hookup, he broke more of mine. Maybe the trials of college would change things—settle Jake down somewhat. A boy could hope anyway.

Before I left for school, my dad and sister sat me down for the “big conversation”. Beth started in her usual big sister way, making sure I knew I was loved, then told me straight out that she knew I was gay. I didn't know if I should laugh or run. My dad chimed in by saying he and my mom had both known since I was little, but thought I should figure it out on my own. I quickly hugged them both and told them their acceptance and love meant a lot to me. They asked if I had told Jake yet, and when I said no, they were quite adamant I should tell him immediately. I explained that I was just waiting for the right moment, but they were both worried about me delaying that conversation since we would soon be roommates.

Unfortunately, university started much the same way as high school ended. I was scouted for the Bears hockey team. The scholarship wouldn't cover all my costs, but it helped. Jake and I lucked out getting a nice two-bedroom walk-up on the edge of campus from housing. There wasn't anything fancy about it, but it was relatively cheap, and came with the freedom to be ourselves. We had been roommates for several months now, and nothing had changed. Jake still chased every skirt that caught his eye, and I tried to cope with the pain of watching him with his conquests. I felt it festering inside me, yet I couldn't find the words to tell him how I felt.

“Hey, where are you?” Jake yelled as he came through the door.

“In the living room.” I had a pillow propped under my head as I lounged on the floor. I had been watching TV but had started checking my messages on my phone instead. My sister had sent me a picture of her and her new man, and I had been staring at the photo for a while now.

“What are you looking at?” Jake fell on the floor beside me, my body instantly aware of his.

I glanced to the side. God, he was wearing the red T-shirt I loved so much on him. It hugged his chest and tempted me to run my hands over the hard muscles. “Mm, just a pic of Beth and her new guy.” I responded, my eyes still on his chest. Jake, placing his hand over mine, swung the phone towards him.

“She looks happy. Now we just need to find someone for you.” Jake rolled onto his side, and gave me the softest look. Suddenly, all the barriers that had prevented me from telling him how I felt vanished. I reached up and caressed his cheek, then curled my fingers around his jaw, and brought my lips to his. I couldn't bring myself to close my eyes. I needed to know his reaction—to look into his eyes and see his every thought and emotion. At first, shock crossed his features, and for a second or two I thought he would pull away. Then he reached up and slid his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me closer. His tongue gently brushed my lips, seeking entrance, and I opened, letting him take the kiss wherever he wanted. He slowly explored my mouth, getting acquainted with every nook and cranny. The kiss was carnal, just as I knew a kiss from Jake would be. But it was so much more than that. It felt like home, warm and comfortable. It was perfect.

I should have known that it wouldn't last, and maybe it was better that I just stayed in the moment, taking whatever Jake was willing to give me. Because when the end came, I felt like my soul had been ripped out.

Jake abruptly pulled away from me. “Ryan, what the hell? You kissed me.” Jake's voice was hoarse, barely more than a whisper, and although he may have separated our lips, our bodies were still pressed together. I wanted to point out that technically I may have started the kiss, but he had certainly continued it. Yet that felt wrong, as if I was being petty and trying to start a fight. No, it was time to tell Jake how I felt, and after that kiss, I needed to be honest.

“I did.” I took a big breath, letting it out on a sigh, “in for a penny, in for a pound,” as Mom used to say. “And I need to tell you, I'm in love with you, Jake.” I watched him sitting there speechless, and I knew the moment of truth had come. “I've known I was in love with you for several months but I didn't

know what to do. You're my best friend, and I don't want to lose you, but keeping this secret is tearing me apart."

He stared at me for what felt like hours, and for the first time in ages, I didn't know how he was going to respond. Slowly, he separated our bodies and sat up, leaning against the sofa with his head tipped back over the cushion. "You're gay." It wasn't a question, but I knew Jake would expect an answer.

"Yes, definitely gay, and before you ask, no, I'm not bi."

Jake lifted his head and smiled at me. "I should have known. No straight man can turn down Tammy Spence and her double Ds, especially with how she was shoving them in your face."

I grimaced at the memory. She had been persistent throughout high school, showing up wherever we were, and always making sure her cleavage was directly in my line of sight. Slowly, the smile left Jake's face, and he ran his hand through his hair. "I love you, Ryan, I do, just not like that. I can't be gay."

I had been prepared for the "I'm straight" speech, but the words he chose needed clarifying. Straight I could accept, but denying what I felt in that kiss... that just hurt.

"Can't be gay, or aren't gay?" I could feel my anger rising. No straight man kisses another man the way he had kissed me, and I wasn't about to let him lie to me.

"Does it matter, Ry?" Jake asked quietly. When I nodded, he let out a sigh. I was afraid he wouldn't respond at first, but quietly he said, "I'm bi, Ryan but I prefer men. However with my dad being a reverend, I need to think about how my actions affect him. What would the congregation say if they knew? I love my family, and I don't want to lose them." Jake's eyes were imploring me to understand, but I only heard his rejection—of him choosing his family over me. "And what about your hockey scholarship, Ryan? You can't finish your degree without it. There's just too much at stake, too much for you to lose. I'm sorry."

I scrambled to my feet, intent on reaching my room before the tears building began to fall. "I guess you've got it all figured out. But what you don't understand is that I would give up everything just to be with you. To me, nothing else matters," I said, reaching my room just as the tears tumbled over.

Jake's hand closed around my arm, stopping me from closing my door. "Please, Ryan, I can't lose you. You're my best friend. I need you." Jake's voice was tortured, and I wished I was strong enough to turn around and reach

for him, giving him the comfort that had always been so easy between us, but all I could offer was platitudes.

“I’ll always be your friend, Jake. That will never change.”

I tried to smile reassuringly, but it just wasn’t in me right now. Reaching out, I shut the door on him. My knees gave out, and I crumpled to the floor as the sobs took me, wracking my body until I was too weak to do anything but crawl to my bed and climb in. I felt the need to hide from the world until I could figure out how to get my happy mask back in place, so I could continue to be the bestie Jake said he wanted.

Three Years Later

The pub was like so many other sports bars I had attended with the team over the last three years at university. The flat screens stationed around the room blared at different volumes, each with a different game playing. We had won tonight, and whenever the Bears beat the Dinos it was a big deal, bringing the puck bunnies out in droves. I’d had a few too many pairs of breasts rubbed up against me, along with way too many strategically placed bums shoved into my view, and I was done. *Maybe I should leave and head to Buddy’s*. It was the only gay bar in town, and it was always busy on weekends. Who knew, maybe I’d even get lucky. I sighed. One more beer, then I would go.

“I’m gonna get another,” I yelled, holding my bottle up for all to see. I gently told the young blonde, who obviously thought I was offering an invitation for her to come with me, that I would be back, and she should talk with Dave across the table until then. He had been eyeing her for most of the night, and she had a much better chance getting what she wanted from him than me. She gave me an accusing glare, but really, I couldn’t care less.

The bartender was busy at the other end, so I grabbed the nearest stool, relishing the short break from the craziness of our table. I had played hard, and was actually tired, but I was still too wound up to head home yet.

“You played great tonight. The goalie didn’t see the puck coming with your backhand in the second.” I turned around, wondering why Seth had followed me from the table. Last I had seen, our captain had a redhead on one knee, and a brunette on the other.

“Thanks. You had a solid game tonight, too. Coach was happy, that’s for sure. Nothing he likes more than beating the Dinos.”

Seth smiled and grabbed the stool next to me. Before long, we had each downed another couple of beers while reliving all the moments—good and bad—from the game. The thought crossed my mind that it was odd he hadn't return to the table, but I was enjoying myself for the first time in a long while, and I wasn't about to suggest he leave. We moved our conversation to movies and games, and before we knew it the bar was closing around us.

“You hungry? I'm starving.” Seth looked me up and down as he asked the question, and for a fleeting minute, I wondered exactly what he was hungry for. But there was no way a guy like Seth could be gay. Was there?

I admit my gaydar was pretty nonexistent. Our high school had been small, and I couldn't think of one gay guy there other than me, obviously. At college, the flamers were easy to spot, but what about the guys like me? There had to be others, right? I didn't have a clue what was happening in this situation, and not wanting to out myself, I went with the flow.

“Yeah, I could eat. You want to hit Urban Diner?”

“Sure.” Seth threw some cash down, and I added a couple of bills to pay my tab before we headed outside. “Want to come with me? My truck's just over there.”

I snorted at the pun. Obviously, my mind was in the gutter, and I still wasn't sure which way Seth rolled. He gestured to a black Dodge Ram at the back of the lot, and we headed in that direction. Seth hit the auto locks, and I was opening my door when I felt his breath on my neck.

He moaned slightly before his lips and nose buried under my ear. “God, Ryan, you smell good. It's been torture watching you in the locker room and not touching you.” His lips continued a path down my neck, and I couldn't help but groan. God, he felt amazing. It had been so long since someone had touched me like this. I slowly turned around and found myself wrapped in his arms as his lips met mine. The kiss was so different from the one I had shared with Jake. That one had been tender and loving, but this was just full-out lust.

All I wanted to do was rip off his clothes and fall to my knees. Unfortunately, Jake was the extent of my kissing experience, and Seth must have felt my nervousness. There had been a few quick hand jobs and a couple of blow jobs over the years, but those had all been about quick relief. This felt like it could be more. For the first time, I was considering more with someone who wasn't Jake, and it scared me, but thrilled me a little too.

Slowly, he parted our lips. “You okay?” In response, I licked the taste of him from my upper lip, and he groaned and muttered, “Jesus, Ryan.”

I smiled, pushed him back a step and hopped up into the truck. He was still standing a few feet away. “I’m great. Still interested in breakfast?”

Seth leaned into the cab and gave me a quick kiss. “Definitely.”

I had some thinking to do, but Seth made me feel wanted, and that was a new and wonderful experience for me.

It was close to seven by the time I crept into our apartment, quietly closing the door behind me. Seth and I had spent the early morning hours laughing and talking. I was still amazed that this guy had sat next to me in the locker room for three years, and I hadn’t once looked at him, or taken the time to get to know him.

“Where have you been? I’ve been texting for hours.”

My gaze flew to Jake’s. He was sitting on the chair facing the door, his back ramrod straight and his hands on his knees clasped tightly together. His voice was quiet, but I had known him long enough to recognize underlying anger when I heard it.

“Out with the team. We won tonight.” I tried to smile and lighten the mood. “Sorry I missed your text. I was out with Seth.”

He watched me carefully. “Seth, huh.” Hurt flashed across his face before anger regained control. “Did you let him fuck you?”

Stunned didn’t even begin to describe the shock I was in. In the three years since our kiss, Jake hadn’t once mentioned it or made a move to share another. Not once. What he *had* done was bring girl after girl to his bed, allowing my heart to break just a little more with each gasp and moan that came from his room, and now he thought he could have a say in my love life? *I don’t think so.*

“That’s none of your business, Jake.” I started towards my room. I was hurt by his outburst but confused too. I stopped halfway there and turned around to face him. “You turned me down, remember? Isn’t it about time I found my own happiness? I will always be your friend, Jake. But you need to remember that’s all you want from me and start acting like it.” I turned back around and headed to my door before offering my final words with a smile. “I’m seeing him again tomorrow night, so don’t wait up.”

Over the next few days, I avoided Jake, and I think he was probably avoiding me too. I got up early, hit the gym, and then went to class. When I came home at night after practice, he stayed in his room or made sure he wasn't even around. Whatever. Yet, I couldn't deny I was a little hurt, maybe even a smidge angry over his hypocrisy. But I would never let him know that.

Seth and I spent more time together, often meeting at the gym, and then again after practice. We kept things distant in front of the team since I wasn't ready to share our new arrangement with them, and I presumed Seth felt the same. I liked him, and I liked the hand jobs and blow jobs too. We hadn't gone any further than that. Things were progressing, albeit slowly, and I was okay not rushing into a relationship when my heart had belonged to Jake for so long. Nearly a week had gone by when I came home after class and found Jake lying on the floor watching the original *The Fast and the Furious*. He knew it was my favorite—who doesn't like Vin Diesel?—and I had to wonder if this was some sort of peace offering.

“Join me?” he asked quietly. He was subdued, lacking his usual confidence, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. “I've got pizza and beer,” Jake tried again, forcing a smile. Something was definitely up if Jake was bribing me with three of my favorite things.

I watched him for a moment, unsure if I wanted to accept this peace offering. I was still really mad at him, and wasn't sure if I was ready to let my anger go.

“Please, Ry, come sit.” His voice trembled, and that was my undoing.

I had never heard Jake beg for anything. I walked over and grabbed a pillow off the couch, plopping down on the floor beside him. I made sure to keep my distance. It had been some time since I had felt comfortable enough to pile up next to him like we had for years.

Jake grabbed another pillow and pushed it next to mine, scooting over till we were side by side.

I could see that his head was turned, watching me instead of the movie. I ignored him for as long as possible, but finally I caved and turned to stare back. I still wasn't sure what his game was, but I knew something was up. We both lay there watching the other, and I noticed things that in my anger and avoidance I had missed. Jake looked tired. Not just partied-too-hard-the-night-before tired, but bone weary. As if the weight of the world sat on his shoulders.

“You look like shit,” I said, reaching out to touch his face and trace the dark circles under his eyes. He didn’t respond, just reached up and took my hand in his, holding it to his face. We lay like that, facing each other, my hand on his face as the sounds of Vin and the boys racing played in the background. His eyes began to close, and I realized that I had been slowly moving my thumb across his jaw in soothing strokes. I continued caressing him, and it wasn’t long before his breathing evened out, and he was asleep. We must have lain like that for an hour or more before a text buzzed my phone, snapping me out of the strange cocoon that Jake and I had created. I reached down and pulled it from my pocket, knowing already who it was from.

Can u stay @ my place 2nite after game?

We had been talking about me staying over for the last few nights, but every night I made an excuse and came home before things could go too far. It wasn’t like I was a blushing virgin. But I wasn’t sure if I was ready to go any farther than mutual hand jobs or blow jobs, and staying over meant we would definitely be going farther.

“Don’t go.”

My eyes snapped up from my screen to find Jake watching me. I didn’t want to think about the emotions—the sadness and desolation—I could see in his eyes. It would only make me feel torn, and really, after the last few years, I couldn’t take much more.

“We have a game tonight,” I responded, untangling my body from his and releasing his hand. I hadn’t even been aware that he was still holding it. However, the minute I pulled away I felt the loss.

“That’s not what I mean, Ry. He wants you.” The grimace of pain that crossed Jake’s face stole my breath and made me angry at the same time.

“It’s nice to be wanted for a change.” The words were out before I realized just what they revealed about me. I didn’t want Jake to know how deeply he was affecting me, and with those words my insecurity was laid bare at his feet.

Jake rolled onto his feet, running his hand through his hair. “I’ve always wanted you, Ryan. Always.”

The step Jake took towards me pushed me into motion. I couldn’t do this again. Let his lips touch mine and feel my soul settle. I was starting to heal. I had moved on. Maybe Seth’s kiss didn’t feel like home, but it was still good. Still full of attraction, lust, and friendship, just not love. I wasn’t sure if I was capable of loving Seth—maybe in time—but right now I was under no illusion

that my heart still belonged to the man in front of me. A heart Jake had already told me he didn't want.

"I can't do this again, Jake. I told you the other night you made the choice, not me. As your dad would say, 'This is living with the consequences.'" I walked to the door and picked up my gear. I had planned on showering and changing when I came home, but now I just needed to leave. I would shower at the arena, and if I decided to stay at Seth's, I'd grab my shower kit from the locker room. I closed the door behind me, yet my feet wouldn't move. I took deep breaths, willing away the start of the first panic attack in years. I stood there, my head resting against the door, trying to find my equilibrium, when the sound of sobs reached me through the door. It broke me a little more inside to hear the sounds of Jake's anguish, but I couldn't turn around and go back inside only to be rejected again. I had known Jake a long time, and when he made a decision, he stood by it. Stubborn took on a new meaning when describing Jake Dixon, so if he said he wouldn't act on his feelings for me, then he meant it. Going back inside would only cause more grief for both of us. I straightened my shoulders and stepped away from the door. It was time to move forward.

The game against the Huskies was going well. We were up 3-1 with two minutes left in the third. A perfect pass from Seth, and I was on a breakaway. I hadn't been at my best tonight, and finally, I had a chance to make up for it. The hit took me by complete surprise. I remember taking the shot, then this weightless feeling, then blackness.

When I came back around, the doctors treating me told me it had been an illegal hit. The Huskie player had come from behind and clearly left his feet. He had been given a game misconduct for the hit, but that did little for my concussion. I was kept in the hospital overnight against my wishes. Ever since my mom had died, I was terrified of them. The smell always made me feel ill, and it was the last place I wanted to be. I tried not to panic, but it was too much, and in the end, I was sedated. It was not the evening with Seth I had envisioned. Seth stopped by to make sure I was okay, but he didn't stay long. My head was thumping, and I was groggy, drifting off to sleep midconversation.

I woke again when I heard the arguing in the hall. Visiting hours were long over, and I just wanted them to shut up. After a few minutes, things quieted down, and my door opened.

"Mr. Taylor, your boyfriend is here. He is quite adamant he sees you. Is it all right if he comes in?" The young nurse was clearly frazzled. I knew they

were busy, and I'm sure the last thing she wanted to deal with was a pushy visitor.

"It's fine, thanks," I mumbled. I couldn't understand why Seth was back, and being so aggressive. When he had left earlier, he said he would call tomorrow and see how I was, but that was it.

A body pushed by the nurse, muttering a "thank you" as he passed. The light made my head thump harder, so I was trying to avoid looking in that direction; even opening my eyes was more than I could bear.

Soft lips touched my forehead.

"Hey, babe, I was so worried when you were hurt. Don't open your eyes, I'm not going to leave. I'll be here all night." *Jake?* His fingers slowly slid through my hair, relaxing me. I never wanted him to stop, but my mouth wouldn't work to form words. He continued whispering to me, reassuring me, telling me I would be okay, and that he wouldn't leave me alone. "Ry, I know you hate hospitals, but I've got to talk to the doctor. Then I need to phone Beth. I called her on my way here to let her know you wouldn't be alone."

I reached for his hand, gripping it as tight as I could. I could feel the drugs dragging me down. The underlying feeling of panic had subsided since he had arrived, and I finally felt safe.

Lips gently pressed to mine, and as he pulled away, I heard him whisper, "Love you, Ry. Sleep now."

My filter was gone, the medications and my muzzy head preventing anything but the truth from tumbling out. "Love you too, Jake."

I was released from the hospital early the next morning. I was a lousy patient, and when I woke up to find Jake by my bed, I was confused and elated. I couldn't pretend I didn't remember our conversation from the night before, because even in my drugged-out state I remember exchanging I love yous. But I wasn't sure who Jake had been when he said them, my best friend or the man who owned my heart. His actions this morning were anything but telling. He varied between being a joking best friend—offering jabs about my hard head—leaving me convinced he wanted nothing from me but friendship, to looks of such longing they made my heart stutter.

"I'm going to go lie down," I told him, walking to my room. I could still feel my heartbeat in my head, and it was making me nauseated. I hated vomiting, so if sleeping helped me avoid doing that, I was all for it.

“Good idea. You need anything?” Jake was suddenly by my side, fidgeting like crazy. Something was on his mind, but frankly, I felt too sick to care.

“I’m good. Maybe you should sleep too? I doubt you got much rest in that chair last night.”

He watched me for a minute. Then lowered his eyes to look at the floor. “Can I sleep with you?” At the sharp intake of my breath, his eyes flew back to mine.

“I guess, but why, Jake?” My whisper was one of shock. Yes, we had slept together side by side many times in our youth, sharing his double bed, or while camping together—even piled on the floor. But his words seemed different this time, and I knew the implication was different. Jake knew I loved him, and I didn’t believe he would toy with my emotions. He’d never been cruel that way. But right now, with my damaged brain, I wasn’t able to work out a logical reason.

“Please, Ry, I just need to be near you. I need to know you’re okay.” His voice was softly reverent. Then he reached for me and pulled me into his arms. “When I saw you take that hit last night, my heart stopped. I thought I’d lost you... you were so still...” He was trembling against me.

I wasn’t prepared for the depth of emotion coming from him. Confused and lost for words, I stepped away and walked to my bed. I stripped to my boxers and climbed under my covers. Still standing in the doorway, Jake watched me intently. He was obviously unsure if he was welcome, so I reached across my bed and flipped back the covers on the other side.

“Get in,” I mumbled, rolling to my side. I could hear the shuffling of clothes as he stripped, then moments later I felt the bed dip as he positioned himself beside me. The tension was palpable, both of us unsure, each resolutely on our own side. We lay like that for several minutes before I finally cracked, unable to take another minute. I reached behind me and tugged his arm. Jake didn’t need much encouragement and rolled onto his side, pulling me into him. His arm tightened protectively across my chest as he snuggled against my back, bringing us flush.

“So much better. Get some sleep, Ry. I’ll be right here when you wake up.” His words offered me the security and protection I so desperately wanted, and quickly I drifted off to his warm, steady breath against my neck.

Pounding on the door dragged us both to a muddled consciousness.

“What the hell?” Jake muttered, untangling himself from around me. He threw back the covers and headed off to answer the door.

“Hey, Jake. I stopped by the hospital, but they said Ryan was released this morning.” Seth’s questioning voice reached me from the front door. Shit, this was so not good. How was I going to explain why I was in bed with Jake? Better yet, how do I keep Jake from throwing our night in Seth’s face?

I started to rise from bed, hesitating on the edge of the bed until my head settled, and the room quit spinning.

“Yeah, we were just having a nap after the long night in the hospital,” Jake responded, sounding smug. He really could be such an ass. I finally struggled to my feet and headed out to see Seth.

“Hey, Seth.” My voice was quiet, and I’m sure it made me look guilty. How do I explain to my boyfriend that Jake and I were no more than friends?

Seth studied me for a minute before stepping past Jake and into the apartment. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, still got the headache,” I replied. “Want a drink? I need one.” I turned and headed for the kitchen. I really didn’t want to have the upcoming conversation in front of Jake, who had planted himself conveniently on the sofa.

We entered the kitchen, and I felt Seth reach for me, pulling me into his arms. “You scared me last night when you didn’t get up, and they had to take you out on a stretcher. You weren’t moving...” Seth paused and swallowed. “At least you got the goal.” He offered up a smile. *So the shot went in. Good to know.* “I’m glad your boyfriend was able to stay with you last night,” Seth said without a hint of malice or anger. He sounded relieved more than anything. “I’m glad you weren’t alone, Ryan.”

Those words stopped me cold. *My boyfriend?* What was he? Were we hiding? I turned towards Seth and looked up into his eyes.

“My boyfriend? I thought you were filling that role?” The words came out harsher than I intended.

Seth’s look of confusion said it all. Obviously, we were not on the same page.

“I thought you and Jake had an open relationship. I mean, every time I see him he has some chick hanging off him.” He was watching me intently, trying to figure out what he missed.

“Jake has been my best friend since we were kids, but...” Understanding dawned, and anger bubbled up. “So, let me get this straight. I was nothing more than a friendly fuck to you? And I’m going to assume you never had any intention of telling the team you’re gay? Our little rendezvous are to stay firmly in the closet?”

I knew we couldn’t rainbow the locker room, but I also had no intention of denying who I was, or whom I was with. I didn’t like watching the guys pawing their girlfriends, and I presumed no one wanted to watch me paw my man. Therefore, I tended to keep PDAs to a minimum. Not because I was hiding, but because it was no one’s business.

Seth stepped back. “Come on, Ryan, you know we can’t be out. What would the team think?”

I turned my back on him, filling my glass. “I’m getting really tired of people using the team as an excuse. I really don’t care what they think.”

“So, you’re saying if we’re together we need to let the team know? ’Cause I’m not sure I can do that, Ryan.” Seth’s face was clouded over, frustration evident.

My head was thumping hard again, and I had had almost as much as I could take. “Well, I think I’m worth more than just being a fuck buddy. Too bad you don’t think so.” I knew my voice was sarcastic, but I really didn’t care.

“I don’t think of you that way. More like friends with benefits, because I do care about you.” Seth looked at me for a minute before shaking his head and starting towards the door. “I’m just not ready to risk everything I’ve worked for.” He paused to look at Jake still sitting on the couch, then to me, propped at the entry to the kitchen, before fixing his eyes back on Jake. “Maybe as his best friend you could talk some sense into him. He’s certainly not going to listen to me.”

He left with a bang, literally, slamming the door behind him. My head wasn’t the only thing thumping now. My heart hurt too. Had I just lost my boyfriend—or as he put it, my friend with benefits? Did I want to lose him? And if not, was I willing to go back in the closet for him?

“Thank God, he’s gone. You haven’t had near enough rest. Come on, I’ll tuck you back in.” Jake began leading me towards the bedroom before I was really aware of what was going on.

“Stop, Jake, stop!” I pulled my hand from his, refusing to take one more step. “Have you even told your dad that you’re bi, or that you want me?” His

look of mortification said it all. Apparently, I was only good for being kept in someone's closet. Neither Jake nor Seth intended to openly acknowledge me. And that was one helluva blow to an ego.

"You know I can't. I can't lose my dad and mom, Ry. I need my family."

Well wasn't that just a kick in the gut. Shaking my head, I turned and started walking towards the bedroom. The words were boiling inside me, and in a way I wanted to hurt him as badly as he had just hurt me.

"I am nobody's dirty secret. No one's! Not even yours!" I could feel the tears running down my cheeks, and for once I didn't care that Jake saw. Let him see just how badly he hurt me. "I can't do this anymore... I'm not a yo-yo you can yank back to you whenever someone takes an interest in me. I'm a person whose heart breaks just like everyone else's." The fight left me suddenly. This was as much my fault as his. I had been the one hiding my feelings to just be near him, hoping he'd throw me a few scraps of affection. I'd been an idiot, and obviously, I needed to grow up and put some distance between us.

"I'll find somewhere else to crash till the end of the semester." With those words, I shut the door to my room. Jake knocked, but I ignored him and crawled into my bed. Jake's scent still lingered on the pillow we had shared such a short while ago. As long as I stayed here, I knew I'd never stop loving him. I couldn't help wondering if I ever would. My tears continued to fall, until exhausted, I slowly drifted to sleep.

I phoned student housing first thing the next morning. The girl answering the phone said she would see what she could do, but it would be Monday before she would know what was available, and would contact me then. Not ideal, but a start.

I didn't want to leave my room, as I didn't feel up to facing Jake this morning. So I decided a half-eaten bag of chips and a flat pop would be a perfectly good breakfast. I was sitting in bed eating when my phone went off just before nine. It wasn't any of my preset ring tones, so I let it go to voicemail, really not in the mood to speak with anyone. Within minutes, it rang again. Again, I let it ring out, but when it rang a third time I was curious. Obviously, someone wanted to speak with me pretty badly.

"Hello?"

“Ryan, it’s James Dixon. Do you want to tell me what’s going on or do I need to drive up?” He seemed worried, and for the eternally calm Rev to be distressed in any way was never good. For him to leave before Sunday service was catastrophic.

“Sorry, I’m not sure I’m following you, Rev.” I was sure Jake hadn’t called to fess up about being gay or bi or whatever, so I wasn’t sure what else was going on.

“Ryan, when was the last time you saw Jake?” His voice took on that quiet, controlled tone he used in emergencies, and quite frankly he was starting to freak me out.

“Last night.” I stood and started towards the door. “Why?” I headed out to the main room. The lights were off, but daylight shone through the front window. The room was empty, with no sign of Jake having been there this morning. I started towards his room, dread pooling in my gut.

“Rev, what’s going on?” I knew I sounded frantic, but I couldn’t help it. I threw open Jake’s bedroom door and breathed a sigh of relief. Jake was on his bed, his arms hugging his knees tightly against his chest while his head rested on his knees. He didn’t acknowledge me when I entered the room. Every line of his body screamed abject misery.

“He’s here. I’ve got him.” I couldn’t understand why the Rev had been concerned enough to call me. “Now please, tell me why you’re so worried?” I walked to the bed and reached for Jake, needing to see his face, so I knew he was okay. As my fingers brushed his shoulder, he snagged me, wrapping his arms around my middle, and pulling me towards him until his face was pressed against my stomach. I looked down, placing my free hand onto his head. His shoulders shook, and I knew he was crying.

There was a deep sigh of relief from the Rev. “He phoned here a bit ago and said good-bye. He told me he knew we wouldn’t want him anymore. And that he loved us, but he loved you more, and he couldn’t give you up. Then he hung up, and wouldn’t answer his phone.”

My stomach dropped. *Oh my God, what had he done?* “Sir, he didn’t mean it. He needs you, please.” I had never begged for anything in my life, but for Jake, I would beg. I knew the pain of losing a parent you loved, and I would do anything to keep Jake from living through that. “Please, don’t leave him.”

“Ryan, put your speakerphone on. I think you both need to hear this.” Growing up as Jake’s best friend, I had learned all his father’s moods and tones,

and the voice coming down the line was the authority figure we both knew not to cross. I glanced down at Jake. He hadn't moved since he'd grabbed me, but I could tell he was listening. I just hoped that whatever the Rev needed to say wouldn't finish destroying the man clinging so desperately to me.

"Go ahead, sir, we can both hear." I held my phone down so that Jake wouldn't miss what his dad had to say.

"Jake, your mother and I have known you boys belonged together for a few years now. I admit you threw me off with all the girls in high school, but after your first year at the U of A we were sure you and Ryan were finally together, and we've been waiting for you to come forward and tell us."

"Why, why did you think that?" I stuttered. What made the Rev think we were together?

"You were all he talked about, Ryan. How your grades were, what scouts were saying what, the funny things you said or did. It wasn't hard to see you're his world." He paused, allowing his words to settle. "Then when you two would come home for holidays, it was impossible to miss. You look at each other the same way I look at my Clare. We've been married almost twenty-five years, and in truth, I figured it wouldn't be long until we were planning a wedding."

Jake started to laugh. Not a funny laugh, more of a hysterical *I'm coming undone* laugh.

"Rev, we aren't an item. You're right. I do love Jake." I took a breath. *In for a penny, in for a pound*. "And I'd like to think he cares for me too, but, he has never acted on those feelings—too afraid you would disown him if you thought he was gay."

The Rev's voice lowered into his ultra-controlled angry voice. "You both listen, and listen good. I don't know where you came up with the idea that I'm some sort of homophobe who would disown his son." He paused and took a breath, his agitation palpable across the line. "It upsets me that you would think that of me. Have neither of you heard a word of my sermons?" He was building steam, and I wasn't brave enough to step in. "Love thy neighbor as you would love thyself, I say. God created love, I say, but neither of you heard me? Tell me, if I'm such a bigoted ass, why do I accept gay parishioners?"

Jake's gaze finally lifted to mine, confusion clearly on his face. "Who... Dad, who?"

“Not that it’s any of your business, but Ms. Miles, and her partner Ms. Scott.” He sighed then added, “Or did you think they were just elderly roommates?”

Jake and I stared at each other, stunned.

Our silence must have been answer enough, as he continued on. “They have been partners for fifty-three years. I married them in a private ceremony three years ago with only their close family present.”

Jake and I both blurted at the same time, “But they both have kids.”

“Are you boys seriously this small-minded? They each had a child when they met. They hold hands at church for goodness sake, and you’ve never noticed?”

I started to laugh. For the first time in weeks, maybe years, I was starting to feel hope again. “I thought they were just nice old ladies holding their friend’s hand. I had no idea they were lovers.” I was still laughing. To think of those nice old ladies, who always wore their best Sears suit to Sunday service, as trailblazing small-town lesbians struck me as funny.

The Rev’s voice was serious. “Don’t laugh, Ryan. They have quite the story, and for years they did hide, pretending to be best friends. The sixties might have been about freedom of expression, but small-town Alberta was very narrow-minded. Still is. Five years ago they came and saw me after another member came out. Said they were sorry they had lied about who they were, but that they would do it again in a heartbeat to be together. Those women jumped hurdles that the two of you will never have to.” The Rev got quiet, and when he started to speak again the pain in his voice was obvious. “I’m sorry if I ever made the two of you feel like we wouldn’t love you for who you are.” His voice trembled, and the sincerity coming from the Rev was palpable. “We love you, Jake. When your mom and I decided to be parents, we did so with no strings attached. Our love is unconditional. Always has been, and always will be. Nothing will ever change that. For you too, Ryan. Regardless of what you boys decide.”

I wasn’t sure when the tears had started, but they flowed down both my and Jake’s faces. I had cried more in the last twenty-four hours than I had in the last four years. It took a minute for Jake to compose himself enough to answer. His eyes never left mine, and for once his feelings were plainly written across his face for me to see.

“Thanks, Dad, I love you too.” He hiccupped a breath before continuing. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust in your love for me. Tell Mom the same.” Jake paused. “Hey, Dad?” The look on his face left me wondering what was coming. “I’m gay, and I’m in love with Ryan.” The growing smile brightened his tear-stained cheeks. “And God willing, I’m going to stay that way for a long time.”

The Rev cleared his throat, his own emotions evident over the line. “About time.”

We ended the call, promising to attend next week’s service and pay more attention to the actual sermon. We were still in the same position with Jake sitting on the bed, his arms around me. I was looking down into his beautiful brown eyes, and for the first time I saw my love openly reflected back at me with no hesitation or evasion.

“Guess we need to talk,” Jake said. I nodded, unsure where to start. Jake took my hand and pulled me down to sit beside him on the bed.

“I love you, Ryan. When you said you were going to leave, it became very clear that I love my family, but if I had to, I could live without them. I can’t live without you. Not by choice.” He took a deep breath. “Don’t leave, Ryan. I love you, and I’m willing to come out for you.”

I laughed. “I think you just did—to the people who matter anyway.” I turned so we were facing each other. “I don’t need to shout it from the rooftops. With the team, I’m going to have to keep it on the down low, but I’m not going to hide. I refuse to hide you. I’m proud to call you mine.” I stopped then because, through everything, we really hadn’t discussed how this was going to work. We had been here once before, and he shredded me, but life was about chances and choices, and I was willing to take this one.

“That is, if you want me to?” I waited.

Jake smiled and leaned forward, his lips meeting mine as answer. Our kiss was everything I remembered it to be, full of love and the sense of home. His lips started moving down my neck, each kiss a connection to my cock. I tipped my head to the side, giving him free rein. I had dreamt about this so many times, yet nothing could beat the reality.

“Ry, I want to make you mine.” He murmured against my skin, “Let me?” His hands were under my T-shirt, pushing it up towards my shoulders. He lifted his lips off my skin just far enough to push the shirt over my head before once again returning to the task of learning every inch of me.

“Mm ’kay.” I was too far under the spell of his touch to be articulate. His lips continued on their descent, eventually covering my nipple, the lick and gentle bite just about my undoing. His lips continued assaulting my flesh, pushing me closer and closer to oblivion. I was beginning to think I was going to come just from having my nipples played with when Jake gave them one last lick and pulled away. His eyes roamed my naked upper body, appreciation evident on his face. I wasn’t a gym rat, but hockey had given me long, lean muscles, and I was vain enough to know I was easy on the eyes.

“God, Ry, you’re amazing.” He leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on my abdomen. “I want to see all of you.”

I gave a quick nod and reached down to push my sweats off.

Jake gently grabbed my hands, stopping me. “Let me.”

It took him seconds to have me naked and stretched out before him. I hadn’t been in this position before. Seth and I had always been half clothed, never really needing the intimacy of being skin to skin. Jake’s gaze was hungry, and in return, I ran my gaze over his clothed body.

“I need to see you too, Jake.”

It took him seconds to have his shirt and shorts off. He was amazing, his golden skin and sandy-blond hair curling over his chest. I had seen him without a shirt many times, and admired the view, but this was so different. My gaze lowered to his cock jutting out from a nest of trimmed curls. He wasn’t long, but his cock was thick, and I wondered if I was going to be able to do this. I had several toys, and played with them often, but none were as wide as Jake.

“We’ll go slow.”

His words surprised me, and I realized I must have spoken out loud. A soft laugh left me. “I think we’re going to have to. I haven’t played in a while.”

Jake’s whole demeanor changed, and I could feel him pull away. “I don’t want to hear about Seth or anyone else. I can’t stand the thought of them touching you.”

I reached for his hand, and pulled him till his body was tucked against mine, lying side-by-side. I reached up and stroked his face, needing eye contact for this discussion.

“I’m not even going to start on how hypocritical that statement is. I had to lie in the room next door, listening to you with girl after girl, knowing they

meant nothing to you. You can't begrudge me the affection I did find with Seth or anyone else." I took a breath, needing him to understand. "I'm not going to lie and say I've never played with other guys; I have." Jake's eyes dropped away from mine, and I could feel the anger start to build. "But I've never let anyone fuck me. It has always been hand jobs or blow jobs with others, and the occasional toy when I'm alone."

I was pinned to the bed so quickly by 180 pounds of man, that I didn't even have time to tense up. The heat in Jake's gaze was incredible, and knowing it was there because of me, well, that fired my fuse as well. Our lips met in a brutal, and somewhat punishing, kiss. Each of us trying to lay claim to the other, it didn't end until we were both breathless.

"Someday I'm going to watch you with those toys, but today it's going to be just me." His growl was possessive and only served to make me hotter. He reached over and opened the top drawer of his nightstand. Reaching inside, he came back with lube and condoms.

"I want to have you with nothing between us, Ry, but until I'm tested, we need to use rubbers." He looked disappointed, and as well as I knew Jake, I knew he felt he was letting me down.

"Jake, it's okay. I need to get checked too." Even though I'd never had intercourse, I had experienced sex in other ways, and I would never put him at risk.

He leaned down to kiss me once more, and I was so lost in our kiss, it caught me off guard when I felt lubed fingers trail across my shaft, down my sac, across my taint, and then around my hole. That single trip took me to the edge in seconds.

"Breathe, babe. You need to hold on till I get inside. Then we can both shoot like rockets." Jake's words were delivered against my lips, allowing me to take advantage and devour his mouth once again. When we pulled apart breathless, I realized that his finger had never stopped exploring my pucker.

Slowly, he pushed inside. My breath caught, and the moan that escaped was one of such need that with anyone else, I would have been embarrassed. However, it didn't take me long to realize that with each vocalization, Jake leaked more and more precum against my thigh.

"More." I was writhing on the bed as he gently massaged me from inside. "Jake, give me more." He pulled out and slowly breached me with two fingers.

He began scissoring his fingers, loosening the muscle to accept his thick cock. I was so hard it bordered on painful, and there was nothing I needed or wanted more than Jake inside me.

“One more finger, then I think you should be stretched enough.” Jake glanced up, holding me with his gaze. “I want this to be good. I don’t want to hurt you.”

He shifted to his knees between my legs, quickly rolling on a condom before adding more lube to his hand and pushing three fingers inside me. It was a tight fit, but I was determined to relax and take him. He moved slowly in and out several times before speeding up and giving me a true finger fucking. I had become accustomed to the thrust of his hand when suddenly he crooked his fingers and ran them over my sweet spot. I responded with a tortured groan as the pleasure was intense, and it took everything I had to not shoot that instant.

“Oh, you liked that. Let’s see how it feels with my cock.” His fingers left my entrance, and he pushed my knees to my chest. I felt his hard crown at my hole, and I wanted nothing more than to thrust back onto him.

“Hold still, Ry. Let me go slow.” He breached me slowly, the pressure intense, but he didn’t stop until he was completely hilted. “Breathe, babe.”

I let out my breath and stared into his eyes. God, it felt like I was split in two. I had always heard people say pleasure and pain walked a thin line, but I had never understood it until this second, when I was unsure if I wanted him to stop or start. He stayed still for several moments until my body adjusted and decided it most definitely needed him to move.

“I need you, Jake, please.” That was all he needed to hear before pulling almost all the way out and thrusting back inside, setting up a pounding rhythm. When he said he wanted to make me his, neither of us truly understood the impact that making love would have on us. But with each stroke our love solidified, tying bonds between our hearts and souls.

“Harder, Jake, please.” I was begging, and with each thrust in and graze of my sweet spot, my moans intermingled with pleas, begging him to take me higher.

“Jake, I’m going to come.” The heat was traveling up my body from my balls in a blazing fire, and I knew I was seconds away from release. I leaned forward, clamped my teeth around Jake’s nipple and bit down as I began to come. I felt my hole spasm hard around his cock. I heard his cry of release

seconds before I felt him release against the condom, wishing he were bare and truly leaving his mark on me.

As the spasms began to slow, Jake collapsed against my chest. Needing just a few more seconds of our intimate connection, I wrapped him in my arms, wanting him to feel as secure and safe as he made me feel.

“Love you, Jake,” I whispered against his ear. “Thank you for being willing to give up everything for me.” I was choked by emotions, still deeply touched that he was willing to choose me over his family.

He rested quietly against me for several more seconds before speaking. “You know how my dad always told us ‘this too shall pass’ whenever things didn’t go well, or we had a bad day?”

I nodded my head. “Yeah, it’s his favorite saying.”

Jake rose up on one arm so he could look me directly in the eyes. “Well, this is one of those things I never want to pass.” He took a deep breath, leaned down, and kissed my lips. “All the little trials in our life may pass, but my love for you is enduring, Ry. You’re my other half.”

I had no response to adequately describe how that comment made me feel. I had waited a long time for this moment, and so with a throat clogged with emotion, I reached up and pulled his head down to mine until our lips were once again joined.

Jake was right; life was made up of little moments that all passed, but it was who we passed them with that counted.

The End

Author Bio

This is the second DRITC event that Isla has participated in. She has written several stories but has not been brave enough to submit them to publishers. She is an advocate for LGBTQ rights and believes that people should be free to be themselves and love who they want, no matter where they live. Even small town Alberta.

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