

LETA BLAKE

The book cover features a dramatic, moody scene. In the foreground, a young man with short dark hair and light-colored eyes is shown from the waist up, shirtless, looking off to the right. Behind him, a figure in a dark hooded jacket is partially visible, their face obscured by shadow. The background is a dark, starry night sky with a large, bright full moon and wispy clouds. The overall tone is mysterious and suspenseful.

STALKING DREAMS

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

STALKING DREAMS

By Leta Blake

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, 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.

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Photo Description

Two young men sleeping while spooned together in each other's arms.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've been scared for so long. I have a stalker who's sent me threatening messages and I've heard the person following me around campus. Last night, the stalker chased me as I was running and I thought I was going to die. Then I ran into him, my TA from my favorite class, literally. I always thought of him as kind of a jerk but when I smacked into him, he saw how scared I was and he walked me home.

The rest of the night is a blur, but I just awoke and he's wrapped around me. I feel safe in his arms, something I haven't felt in months. But why did he appear right then? Is he my stalker? I don't think so but it's still an odd coincidence. If he's not my stalker, is he in danger, too? And what the hell happened last night?

[I'd like lots of danger and fear and near-death experiences ending in an HEA for these two boys. Please no great age difference or BDSM.]

Sincerely,

Kelly Maybedog

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: suspense, college, oral sex, rimming, fingering, established couples, PTSD, hurt/comfort

Content warnings: violence, possibly triggering descriptions for victims of stalking or similar violence

Word count:10,341

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By Leta Blake

My muscles ached deliciously under the rough water pressure of the gym's shower. Taekwondo had rendered me sweaty and tired. I'd been a student of the discipline for half a decade, in search of both self-protection and mental benefits, but since starting at Rose College a couple years back, I'd never found a Master who could truly challenge me. Until now.

Master Eun was demanding, exacting, and left my muscles feeling like limp spaghetti. I kind of loved it. If he wasn't a cranky straight man—old enough to be my grandfather—my boyfriend, Shane, might've had some competition for my complete and utter adoration. Though, come to think of it, pain and discipline weren't something I really got off on in bed. I was more of a gentle, fun, love-making kind of guy, which made Shane's style even more perfect for me.

Eventually I felt refreshed enough to soap up my hair and wash down my body. Taekwondo had made me lean and fit. I was slightly smaller than Shane, but my wiry muscles were just as strong as his bigger ones, and when wrestling in bed I almost always ended up on top. Unless I wanted Shane on top, which I did often enough to just give in and "lose". Which reminded me, I really did need to teach Shane more taekwondo just to keep things interesting.

I paused in front of the mirrors to run a towel over my hair, noticing the summer sun had added gold to the light brown, and I made some faces in the mirror. My brown eyes were dark-rimmed and I looked tired. The thought brought to mind all the very sexy reasons I'd failed to get a full night's rest, and I dreamily styled my short hair with my fingers and willed my dick not to spring a boner in the locker room. I must have lingered longer than I'd realized because, when I finally left the showers for the locker area, the room was empty. Hadn't there been a few guys still flipping towels at each other when I'd gone in?

Wrapped only in a wet towel, I stood and listened. The drip of water and the hiss of the air conditioner broke the silence, but otherwise it was entirely still. A feeling of foreboding settled into my bones, like the music of a horror film warning me that something was amiss. I cleared my throat and told myself it was nothing, but even so, I couldn't resist calling out softly, "Hello? Max?"

Max always waited for me before leaving since we took the same route. His *fiancée* rented a small attic apartment across the street from Shane's house, and while I wouldn't have called us good friends, we were something like pals. It seemed unlike him to leave without letting me know.

Not that you know him well, my ever-suspicious mind told me.

I know him well enough, I told it back.

Trust. It was something I was working on, and trusting Max as a new friend hadn't been too hard. I was getting better at realizing not everyone was a psycho. So, I was surprised he'd left without me. Surprised enough that sweat prickled on my forehead, a sure sign of an impending panic attack. Stupid PTSD. I took some deep, slow breaths.

It isn't a big deal. Nothing's wrong.

I whipped the towel from around my waist and threw it in the receptacle. A noise from the back of the locker room caught my attention, and I swung around. Maybe Max was still here after all? I saw no one, but I noticed the combination lock on one of the lockers swayed as though it had just been brushed. The hair on the back of my neck rose and my breath came fast and shallow. I whirled around again, catching a glimpse of a dark jacket disappearing around the corner.

"Hello?" I called. Spots swirled in my vision and my mouth went dry. My heart pounded. I went cold all over. "Is someone there?"

The air conditioner kicked off and I strained my ears in the new silence, but only heard the dripping water and the buzz of the fluorescent lights.

You're imagining things, I sternly told my PTSD.

Fuck you, it told me back.

The low creak of a door closing, the snick of the latch catching, and then the squeak of tennis shoes against linoleum forced the air out of my lungs, and I went dizzy as adrenaline zipped icily through my veins.

“Who’s there?”

No one answered and rage filled in the hollow center of my fear. I didn’t want to feel this way. *Fuck* the asshole who’d triggered the panic attack slicing through my consciousness, tightening around my chest like a band. Fuck him.

Calm down. It’s probably someone with ear buds.

Only assholes wear ear buds in the locker room, my irrational rage screamed.

I waited but there was no other sound. Angry and eager to get the hell out of there before I freaked myself out even more and ended up passing out from hyperventilation, I jerked open my locker to get my clothes on. My heart lurched into my throat and a silent scream froze in my throat.

The inside was covered in black and white photographs of me and Shane, photos obviously taken by someone who’d been following us. Cut in the shapes of hearts, every last one featured brutal alterations drawn in bright red marker. Shane’s throat slit with blood dripping to the ground or Shane’s gut sliced open and intestines spilling out.

He found me!

I looked down at my naked body, my cock and balls shrunken tight against me from cold and fear. My gorge came up and I somehow grabbed my track shorts and T-shirt, pulling them on as I scrambled to get my bag and house keys and stumble away from the locker. Then someone coughed.

I peeked around the corner of the locker.

There stood a hooded man in black blocking the exit. His left hand was loose at his side, but in his right was a knife.

It’s time.

How many notes had my stalker sent me saying I'd know when it was time? How many text messages from untraceable phones? He'd found me. There was no turning back now. My heart raced, my mind whirled, and colored dots obscured my vision. I sucked in a breath, trying to stay calm. I was a second-degree black belt, I reminded myself. I could fight him. I could take him.

In my mind's eye, I leaped around the lockers and landed solid strikes that sent the man reeling and the knife flying. But all of my training told me to first seek another way out. I slowly, carefully, moved to the opposite end of the lockers. I looked both ways. Public spaces required at least two exits, didn't they? Weren't there fire regulations? I made a move toward the back of the locker room.

But what if there isn't another exit? You'll die huddled on the ground, baby boy, awash in your own blood.

Shut up, I told myself. And don't spit his creepy bullshit at me. I can take him.

You can't.

"Show me," I heard and felt the heat of breath against my neck. I didn't turn around. I screamed and scrambled over benches, lunging for the front exit. Impossibly, he was there too. I whirled around to check my vulnerable back, but there was no one behind me at all. There was only the hooded man by the door, his knife shining in his pale fingers.

So here we are.

After notes and gifts, threats and violence, after slashed car tires, broken windows, poisoned bird seed in our feeder and a yard full of dead birds, after death threats, rape threats, long violent passages about the things he'd do to my body, after emails, texts, valentines full of vitriol, after evil that seeped into me and filled me with fear and ruined years of my life, after the three years of hell he'd put me through—I'd left everything. I'd turned my back on *everyone* to get away from him, moving six hours from home to keep my family safe. I'd given up everything.

And now here we were.

Finally.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I said, my voice shaking with every word. I moved into a fight stance and waited for him to make the first move. Another noise from behind me forced me to break eye contact and check my back. Again there was no one. I swung front again, crouching and ready.

My heart stopped at what I saw.

He held Shane—*my* Shane—by the neck, the knife pressed tight against his jugular.

“Shane, stay still,” I whispered, my throat tight and tears stinging my eyes. A rivulet of blood ran down Shane’s throat and his eyes bugged. Adrenaline like I’d never known nearly blew my head off, and I felt as though I might levitate from the rush of pure fear. “Please, you don’t have to hurt him. I’ll do whatever you want,” I said. “I won’t fight you. I’ll leave with you. I’ll go now. Please—just let him go.”

Shane struggled and the hooded man subdued him with a flick of the knife. I flinched as more blood cascaded down Shane’s neck and his terrified yelp echoed in the locker room.

“Please,” I said again. “I’ll do anything. I love him.”

The man’s grip tightened and my heart lurched. I’d said the wrong thing. Shane seemed to know it, too, his eyes going bright with terror.

“I love you, too,” Shane whispered.

And it happened as though in slow motion. Blood spurted from Shane’s neck, soaking me, splashing hot on my face, and I screamed, falling to my knees. Helpless, overwhelming grief and horror tore through me as he tossed Shane’s body aside and advanced on me. I knelt in Shane’s blood, still screaming. I lifted my arms out and closed my eyes, waiting for the knife—

“River, wake up! It’s a dream. C’mon, shh, it’s a dream. It’s okay. You’re here with me.”

I blinked in the semi-darkness of Shane's room, sitting straight up in bed, sweat pouring off me. I couldn't stop screaming. I'd just seen Shane die in front of my eyes. His arms around me, holding me as I thrashed and fought, and his voice in my ear were nothing compared to the reality of that moment when the stranger who'd hunted and stalked me for so long had slit the throat of the man I loved.

"No!" I covered my eyes, trying to block out the images.

"River," Shane said, and this time his voice was stern, almost angry. I wasn't sure I'd ever heard Shane sound angry before—not with me anyway. "It's a dream. Wake up."

I pressed a hand to my mouth to keep the horror in, and my scream lowered to a soft wail.

"That's it," Shane said, his voice soothing again. "Wake up, Riv."

The door to our room burst open and our housemate, Mike, charged in with a baseball bat, his hair askew, and his underwear low on his hips. The wildness in his eyes finally convinced my still traumatized mind to fully wake, and my wail shut off like a valve.

"What the hell?" he said. "What's going on in here, Gross?"

"Bad dream," Shane explained, rubbing my bare back. "Sorry. Go back to bed."

Mike stared at me until I nodded. "Jesus," he muttered. "Scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry," I whispered.

"You going to be all right?"

"Yeah. I'm awake now so, yeah."

Mike scrubbed a hand in his hair, yawned, and then said, "Okay, well, that must have been a shitty dream, man. I've never heard anyone scream like that."

My throat closed up a little and I nodded. I wanted to say more, but couldn't.

"It's fine, Ghast," Shane said, invoking Mike's nickname softly.

"Got it. Well, if you need anything—"

"Actually," I said, knowing that I was asking for something a little unusual, but also thinking that it would definitely help me calm down, or at least fill up the space in my head currently occupied with silent screaming. "Could you maybe play that song you keep doing lately?"

"Knew you liked that one," Mike said, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

"Yeah."

"Voice will be scratchy, but sure, buddy." Mike yawned and nodded. Then he left the room without another word, leaving our door open.

Shane kept on rubbing my back, and I sat in the bed with my knees up, staring down at the pattern of my boxer briefs in the dim light from the ever-glowing laptop screen. Shane said nothing, letting me get it together, and shortly the sound of Mike's fingers picking out the opening guitar riff of the song I'd requested drifted down the hall from his room.

He was right. His voice was scratchy and sleep-laden, but the song was still soothing. I took a deep shuddering breath. I leaned against Shane and let him pull me down next to him. Shane wrapped his leg around my waist and dragged me as close to him as possible. I felt protected and safe in his arms, as we both listened to the song until it was over. The silence following was broken only by the thump of Mike setting his guitar down and calling out, "Now go to sleep, fuckheads."

However I was wide awake and the thought of dropping back into another dream of Shane's throat being slit wasn't something I could handle.

I thought Shane had fallen asleep and was trying to figure out how to extricate myself from his grip so I could go take a piss, when he spoke.

"It's about the wedding, isn't it? You're dreaming about him because Reed asked you to come home for it."

“I said I would,” I replied, irritably. “And I will. It was just a shitty dream.”

“Okay,” Shane said, but I could tell he didn’t believe me. He was letting me be stubborn because he was always kind to me that way.

I sighed and squirmed out from under his leg and arm. Of *course* it was about going home.

Home to my stalker.

Sixteen hours earlier

“Hey Gross,” Mike called from where he’d set up his project in the shade under the sycamore tree. “You going to plant some of those cherry tomatoes I like?”

“Yep, Ghastly,” Shane answered. “Already planted two.”

I shook my head and grinned at the nicknames. Gross and Ghastly, former frat brothers, roommates, and best friends. I didn’t entirely understand their relationship, but I really didn’t have to and I truly liked Mike, even if he was a weirdo.

“Good, man, good.” Mike let out one of the massive farts which had earned his nickname back when Shane had actually shared a small room in the frat house with him. Shane told me that he’d become immune to Mike’s gas, which was good, or else he’d have been forced to murder his best friend in his stinky sleep.

I’d become pretty immune to them, too, since I’d moved in with Shane and Mike for the summer. Ostensibly the move had been to cut out the expense of staying in a dorm room between semesters, but I was pretty sure Shane’s offer and my immediate acceptance had a lot more to do with all the smoking-hot sex. Of which, I admit, I really couldn’t get enough.

But, beyond that, there was genuine and real love between us. I felt it every time Shane looked my way with his warm, blue eyes, and every time his lips curved into his beautiful smile. The cherry on the Shane-is-awesome sundae

was that I hadn't had a single incident of PTSD-related hyper-vigilance since moving in with him. I felt more like my real self than I had since before my stalker started making my life hell almost six years ago.

Mike joked that Shane and I were playing house. We were the parents, and he and Delphie Ann were the bratty kids—and while I laughed when he said it, he wasn't too far from the truth. Today was a perfect example. We were all out in the backyard working on a kind-of-late garden. Or rather, Shane and I were. Delphie Ann was running around in spazzy doggie circles, excited that we were all home and in her territory. And Mike was hot-gluing rocks to Papier-mâché, futilely attempting to construct a river-rock-studded replica of the Millennium Falcon to go with his beer-can Death Star.

Shane and I'd both suggested that using beer cans for this project would probably work better for him, but Mike had just waved his hand dismissively saying, "When river rocks call you to make a Millennium Falcon, you make a Millennium Falcon out of river rocks, got it?"

Not really, but I didn't usually argue with Mike's harmless insanity. He'd never listen anyway.

Meanwhile, Shane and I wore dirty shorts and T-shirts, working our asses off to put in a garden. Though it was likely I'd spent more time enjoying the view of Shane's ass as he knelt on the ground, digging holes for the small plants we'd picked up from the nursery, than I had actually working.

His dark blond hair glistened in the sun and his blue eyes reflected the light like sparkling mirrors. I kind of adored him and his face. And his arms. And his thighs. And his smile—God, his smile! Big and wide like Texas or some other vast sunny land! And his hands! Oh, the size and shape of them were amazing, and they were capable of doing so many nice things. With the sweat glistening on his forehead, and his forearms flexing with each shove of the trowel, I considered taking him into the house for a little snack of my cock and ass, because our morning orgasms seemed far too long ago.

I brushed sweat out of my eyes and bent down to the job of straightening the railroad ties around the edges of the big square area we'd cleared with the

help of a neighbor's tiller. I glanced toward Delphie, rolling on her back gleefully in the sunshine. "We'll need to add a few layers of that chicken wire I got, so she doesn't get in the garden. Otherwise, all our efforts will be solely to make Delphie Ann here a very healthy doggie, which of course we want. But I want some of the veggies too."

Shane grunted, listening to me. This was a joint project I'd concocted in part as a test of our compatibility. If we could overcome all my PTSD issues, it might seem we could manage basically anything together. My dick sure thought so anyway. It highly disapproved of my scheme to further test our compatibility with gardening. It was pretty sure I should just keep on testing it with sex.

But my mother had always said that a good relationship was built on three things—respect, friendship, and attraction—and the best way to make sure you had all three in full enough measure was to take on mutual responsibilities for something bigger than yourselves. Delphie was Shane's dog, so there was no true sharing when it came to that, even if I did help him out by feeding her when he was at class, or walking her after he'd left in the morning so he could get some extra shut-eye. No, I decided a garden would be a fantastic thing for us to do together—with the bonus of the fresh vegetables I'd been missing since I left my hippie parents' home two years ago.

"We definitely still have time for cucumbers since we sucked it up and bought plants this year, but next year we really need to start the seeds." I realized what I'd said and bit my lip. Shane and I were boyfriends and exclusively so, we'd worked that out early on, but we'd never talked about the future farther than a month or so ahead. The plan was for me to move back to the dorm in the fall, and I didn't know what he'd make of my assumption that we'd be doing this again a year from now. I glanced over to see his face, but he seemed unconcerned, digging yet another little hole with his trowel.

"When do we start seeds?" he asked.

"February or early March."

“First things first, assholes,” Mike said. “Why don’t you see if you can even keep the garden going this summer before you start in on next year?”

The idea that maybe Mike was talking about more than the garden crossed my mind, but then again, Mike was never subtle. If he meant me and Shane and not the garden, he would have said so.

“We can handle a garden, can’t we, Riv? And even if we can’t, it’ll be a learning experience, something to grow on, and we can try to get it right next year if we fuck it up.”

“Definitely, HP.”

The nickname had been inspired from the skinny jeans he wore while TAing for the class my best friend, Hayley, and I’d taken the prior fall. Or more specifically the way his perfect ass had looked in them. Hayley and I had called him T.A. Hottie-pants for months, and when we started dating, I just never stopped. Though, I’d quickly realized Hottie-pants wasn’t something I could call him in public, so I’d shortened it to HP.

Most people, even Mike, didn’t know the true reference. Sometimes, when Shane and I were being especially moony over each other, Mike would bat his eyes and croon, “Oh, Hewlett-Packard, I love you so much, smoochy-smoochy-smoochy!”

Hewlett-Packard. That always made me snort. And no one, not even Hayley, had ever corrected him. And given how obnoxious it is to be around people who were newly in love, I couldn’t blame Mike for his very occasional jabs at us.

In the bright sunlight, I skimmed my eyes over the T-shirt stretched tight over Shane’s shoulders and chest, down to the loose-fitting track shorts he’d worn pretty much every day since it first got warm. I missed his skinny jeans, but the elastic waist of the track shorts did allow for easy access. I didn’t have to work hard to get my mouth around his dick when I wanted to suck him off.

“When a garden gives you dead things, you figure out how to make it give you living things,” Shane went on, digging into the dirt with a look of determination. “You don’t just give up so easily.”

I smiled at him and sat back on my heels, wanting to crawl over to him, grab his face, and kiss the hell out of his lovely lips. But Mike was there. It wasn't that we hadn't kissed in front of Mike plenty of times, but the rest of my fantasy involved rolling around in the dirt together, maybe crushing some of the baby plants with our bodies, and ending up with a load of Shane's jizz in my face—and that seemed like it was probably not really something Mike should witness. Or the neighbors. Or Delphie Ann. Really, I needed to get my libido under control, but why should I when Shane was more than eager to share his equally healthy libido with me?

“I like broccoli,” Shane volunteered, holding up a baby broccoli plant.

I grinned. “We totally have time for some good broccoli. It even gets a second wind in early fall. It's a true giver once it gets started.”

“Like someone else I know,” Shane said softly, giving me the eye, and I bit my lip, looking back flirtatiously. Maybe I should suggest we go inside to get some water and a Popsicle. It was kind of hot out and I could think of some fun things to do with a Popsicle.

My phone buzzed. I dusted the dirt off my hands and pulled it out of my pocket, fully expecting it to be Hayley texting me with questions about the gardening soil and organic fertilizer I'd sent her and her latest girlfriend off to Lowes to buy. Hayley was many things—brilliant, feminist, lesbian, matter-of-fact, honest—but a gardener she was not.

I was wrong. It was my older brother, Reed. He texted me once a month or so, usually to insult me. I loved it.

Dude, ur ugly.

Just seeing his name and message pop up on the display made me grin so big that Shane asked, teasingly, “Who's that?”

“It's just Reed being his own special self,” I said, using my thumbs to quickly type in a response.

You're adopted.

But u'll still be my best man, right?

Your what????

Getting hitched. Need someone ugly next to me so I look extra good.

I made a fairly unmanly sound—though Hayley would tell me that was misogynistic to even think that there were sounds that were ‘female’ or ‘male’ by nature—and threw my arms up in the air, shouting, “Yes!”

I’d yelled loud enough that Mike turned to look at me and Shane tilted his head obviously eager to know what I was so excited about. I punched the air a few times. “This is so awesome!”

“What is?” Shane said, grinning.

“Hold on, hold on. I’ll tell you in a sec.”

Delphie interpreted my enthusiasm as a sure indication that I wanted to play. She trotted over and dropped her ball at my feet, performing a play-bow with her tail wagging to and fro. I picked it up and threw it to the other end of the yard, hurriedly replying to Reed when she ran after it.

*Of course! Hell yes! Congrats! Tell Molly I send my love! So excited!
So honored you asked!*

Knew you’d be a girl about it.

Does Molly know you’re incapable of expressing actual human emotion?

Yes.

Does she know you’re adopted?

She knows ur ugly.

Does she know you pee sitting down?

Does Shane know u ate ur boogers until you were ten?

Does Molly know you peed in the bed at summer camp when you were fourteen?

She knows u busted ur first nut at same summer camp, while staring at ur counselor (her brother) all snugged in his bed.

You told her that?

No.

Good. Don't tell her that.

Okay.

“So? What’s up? You look so happy, I can’t wait much longer to know,” Shane said still grinning. He leaned against the shovel he’d brought out to loosen the dirt even more. “Besides, you’re typing so fast your thumbs are going to fall off.”

I did a little dance as I said, “He’s getting married.”

Shane laughed and gave me a high five. “Awesome. Tell him congrats from me.”

“And me,” Mike called even though he didn’t know Reed from Adam.

Shane and his roommate say congrats.

Cool. So, here’s the thing. U might not like it.

I never like it when anyone says that. From you it’s terrifying.

Molly wants to get married at home. Back in Sewanee.

I didn’t know what to say. I stared at the text for a long time and then turned my back on the garden, going to sit on the stoop that led in to the kitchen from the backyard. Shane eyed me from where he knelt with his trowel.

Ah. Okay. Let me think about that.

I swallowed hard, the happiness of the previous moments dissolving like the clouds in the sky, becoming all formless, shapeless, panic-laced disappointment. Obviously, I’d have to let Reed know one way or the other, but I was on the verge of tears now, sucker punched by the past I just couldn’t seem to shake. I rubbed the heel of my hand over my eyes and cleared my throat, trying to shake it off for now at least by forcing my mind back to the garden.

“I should call Hayley and have her get a hoe and a rake while she’s at Lowes,” I said, rubbing sweat out of my eyes, and fending off a wet nose in the ear from Delphie. I took her ball from her mouth and threw it for her, but she didn’t leave my side, looking up at me with her big, golden eyes. Great, if Delphie Ann knew something was wrong, then Shane was going to notice too.

Sure enough, after a few more half-hearted digs with the trowel into the tilled earth, Shane threw it aside and strode over to me. “Okay, what’s with the mood swing, Riv? I thought you were happy your brother is getting married.”

“I am.” I swallowed and confessed, “It’s just I was a lot happier about it when I thought it’d be in Chicago.”

Shane sat down on the stoop next to me, our legs touching. I rubbed mine against his just to feel our leg hairs catch. It was scratchy and distracted me from the mild sense of panic threading through and trying to take hold.

“Because they’re both at Northwestern,” he said, following my train of thought.

“I mean, not that I really ever thought *that* much about Reed and Molly getting married, but I’d just assumed they would one day and that it’d be easier for them to plan a wedding there.”

“I understand that. But what? It’s going to be somewhere else?”

“Home. It’s going to be at home.” I ducked my head down to my knees, curling in on myself. Delphie snuffled my ear and neck until I reached out to pat her head reassuringly. Shane did the same to me, his hot palm resting on the nape of my neck and squeezing.

“So you think he’s still there?”

“Beats the hell outta me. If I’d known for even a second where—or who—my stalker was...” I trailed off because the wet sound of my voice and the anger mixed in wasn’t for Shane. I didn’t want to take it out on him. I sighed, sat up straighter dislodging his hand, and rubbed my face.

We'd caught Mike's attention again, and I saw that he was listening, but as soon as I met his eye he went back to his work, although he didn't glue a single piece of rock, just fiddled with the placements.

My phone buzzed again.

"That's Reed," I said, pulling the phone out of my pocket. "Probably telling me to man up or get over myself." The wounds of those old comments still went deep. After the stalking had escalated to a point that Reed couldn't deny it anymore, he'd never exactly apologized for the asshole things he'd said. Things like, "Who'd want to stalk *you*?" or "It's just assholes at school trying to scare you because you're queer. Get over it." I'd forgiven him long ago, but forgetting wasn't something I'd accomplished yet.

Riv, I want you to be my best man. But I understand if you won't be there.

I stared at his words, the letters running together in a way that pissed me off. I dashed my hand against my eyes.

That said, it's been over two years, Riv. Are you really never coming home again?

Shane read it over my shoulder and he made a sound that I couldn't interpret. Another text came through.

Are you going to let him take even more things from you? For all you know he's dead, gone, or past it. Just think it over.

I sat with the phone in my hand, watching Delphie roll in the yard, getting her dark coat dirty and then standing up to shake it off again. Minutes passed, and Shane shifted restlessly beside me.

"Are you going to reply to him?" he asked.

"Yeah. In a second."

I wanted to ask why Molly didn't understand, why her desire to have a wedding day that was exactly as she'd dreamed it her whole life should trump my physical and emotional safety, but then the selfish absurdity of that

question was so entirely obvious that I just simply texted what I knew was the right thing to say.

I'll be there. I wouldn't miss it.

Really?

Yeah, even if you are adopted and no one's favorite.

Well, it's hard to compete with ur shiny, Riv. Give a guy a break.

JFC, that's the nicest thing you've ever said. Someone might think you love me.

Ugh. I know. I have to go vomit now.

I love you too.

This is Molly, Reed had to go puke up his entire life.

Shuddup Reed.

I'll tell Mom you'll be there. She'll be happy to see you.

I'M HER FAVE.

I know. It's why I hate you.

We signed off with our customary *No Love* and I stuffed my phone back in my pocket with a heavy sigh.

“You guys are cute,” Shane said. “Makes me wish I had that kind of relationship with any of my siblings.”

My words were true, but I sounded as distracted as I felt when I replied, “What? Are you kidding me? The way those kids look up to you is adorable.”

Shane had four younger siblings from his father's second marriage, and they all thought he'd hung the moon. Unfortunately, they also lived in Hawaii and Shane rarely saw them in person.

Several long moments of silence passed before Shane said, “So, that's that.”

“Yeah. Guess I'll need to get fitted for a tux.”

It'll be nice to die in a tux. Fashionable at least.

I gritted my teeth against my traitorous mind. I was going to do this for Reed and it was going to be fine. I wasn't going to let my stalker take away everything anymore. It wasn't fair.

Since when is life anything like fair?

Shane put his arm around me and pulled me close. He was stinky from sweat and I didn't care at all. I just wanted to roll into his arms and snug my face up to his neck to breathe him in. He asked, "Are you sure about this?"

I looked into his blue eyes and nodded, though my heart had yet to calm down. The very thought of going home filled me with a mix of emotions so strong it took my breath away.

Turning from his gaze, which always demanded so much honesty, I followed Delphie's sniffing perusal of the fence line. Homesickness was something I dealt with occasionally and the thought that I might set foot on Sewanee soil shot me through with elation. The idea that Shane would probably be with me—because he'd surely be with me, right?—only added to the buzz of good anticipation.

My folks had met him on Skype and we'd talked about the possibility of Shane joining us on a family vacation in August if my father's freelance work paid timely and fully. But the idea of showing Shane my childhood bedroom, or the tree I'd climbed trying to get away from Reed's Nerf Ball assault (and then fallen out of breaking my collarbone), or the park where I'd learned how to pop a wheelie on my bike, or introducing him at the old dojang where I'd found intense support from my Masters—despite being obviously gay—was a new kind of thrill.

But if my stalker, so persistent and terrifyingly unknown, wasn't dead, gone, or past it, as Reed had suggested, the entire horror show could start up again. I managed to escape town the first time undetected, but that had been a miracle. And if I had to give up everything again? I looked at Shane, the sun kissing his skin and illuminating new freckles on his nose. Well, I just didn't know if I could do it.

Even now my folks and Reed took evasive procedures if they were going to see me. Family vacations included odd convolutions of travel arrangements to throw my stalker off base. And Reed was the only one who came to Rose College specifically and when he did, he always got off the highway a few times to perform the typical procedure of four right or left turns to make sure he wasn't being followed.

Still, the fact remained, if my stalker was out there and I took Shane home, not only would I be exposing myself to madness again, but I might be exposing Shane too. Given the fact that my first boyfriend ran off without looking back after the first threat from my stalker, it wouldn't be ridiculous to expect the same from Shane.

Yet that wasn't what scared me the most. *If* my stalker managed to get back into my life, he might focus on Shane. He could hurt him or worse. Maybe it would be best if Shane *didn't* come home with me for the wedding. That way, if the stalking began again, I could find a way to leave him out of it, even if it meant not returning to Rose. Even if it meant leaving him.

"Look at me, darlin'," Shane said quietly enough that Mike might not have heard him. It was his private name for me, something special for intimate times, unlike the nickname I used for him all willy-nilly no matter the audience. If he was pulling that out then he thought I was falling apart here.

I squared my shoulders and turned to him, trying to look confident, calm, and maybe flirty. A lot of stupid shit, like unwanted terror, can be covered up with flirtation. "Yeah, HP?"

"I'll support you whatever you choose to do, but I care a lot more about keeping you safe than about your brother's wedding. You can watch a video or see photos, or hell, watch it live by Skype, but if *he* gets into your life again..."

"I know," I said. "I can't let him take everything forever though. At some point, I have to be brave, don't I?"

"River, you've been incredibly brave. Don't you know that?"

I called Delphie to me to keep from having to answer right away. I patted her head, admiring her weird face—half wolfhound and half poodle. She looked so much like a sea lion she could have won a prize for best sea lion impersonator. All I needed to do was convince Shane to host a party with a sea lion impersonation theme, get Mike to agree to be the judge, and maybe build a small stage for it in the backyard so everyone would show off their sea lion costumes. Delphie Ann would win hands down.

“Riv?”

I reluctantly forced myself to answer. “I know. It’s just that I ran away.”

“After three years of constant harassment and threats. You were brave, River.”

“Sounds brave as hell to me,” Mike called out from across the lawn where he wasn’t even pretending to place rocks anymore.

“Ghast,” Shane said. “This is a private conversation.”

“Then take it somewhere private. Otherwise it’s just another show in the great carnival of life. The River’s Stalker Ruins Everything show. And wow,” Mike scratched his groin, “it’s kinda a shitty show. I like the River & Shane Are In Disgusting Gay Love show better. Or the River & Hayley Are Up To No Good show. Or the Shane Cooks Something Edible For Dinner show. Or the—”

“Shut up,” Shane and I said at the same time. “Not the time,” Shane added warningly.

“Time’s the one thing that’s never on your side,” Mike crooned softly. “But I’m on your side, yes, I’m on your side...and it’s a very good side.”

It was a cover song he’d been practicing over and over—loudly—while drinking beer alone in his room. I wasn’t sure of its significance to Mike personally, but I’d heard it so much over the last week and a half that I’d found myself walking around singing it a lot lately. I kept meaning to ask him about the original, but it never seemed the right time. And now wasn’t the right time either.

“C’mon,” Shane said, standing up and dusting off his shorts, and motioning toward the kitchen.

I shook my head and stood up determinedly. “No, it’s okay. Hayley will be back with the stuff we need before long and I just want to get the garden done today. We’re late on it as it is.”

Shane’s eyes grew dark with frustrated concern, but he nodded and joined me when I strode over to the square of dirt. I wasn’t going to let my stalker ruin my life anymore—not when it came to my brother’s wedding, or my peace of mind, or my stupid relationship-test garden. If nothing else, hopefully we’d manage to grow some tomatoes or squash before I returned to my hometown and possibly walked right back into my stalker’s sights. It’d be good to eat some homegrown broccoli before he destroyed my life again.

After the nightmare, I pulled out of Shane’s arms to take a piss. My sleep-addled legs stumbled as I walked to the bathroom we shared with Mike. Shane followed, and after I finished, he took his turn while I washed my hands. I hesitated when it came time to go back to his bedroom. I suddenly wished I *had* kept my dorm room over the summer so that I had somewhere I could escape to just to be alone. Not that I wanted to get away from Shane. It was just the image of what I’d seen in my dream came back to me every time I looked at him. And I loved him so much. So damn much.

Shane didn’t go through the door leading to his bedroom though. Instead he exited out to the hall and headed toward the kitchen. I followed him. Maybe a drink of water or some food would break me out of the dream completely and it would be safe to go back to sleep.

I sat down at the kitchen table, head in my hands, and waited for him to break out some midnight munchies that would be tasty enough to wipe away the memory of his eyes going wide when the knife sliced into his throat. When I saw Shane open the cupboard and pull out chamomile tea and honey, a smile spread over my lips effortlessly. He’d gotten me a cup of chamomile and

honey when he'd taken me to Joe's Coffee House the night he'd helped me finally manage to mostly shuck the burden of my virginity.

(Whatever that means, Hayley said in my head. Virginity is a flawed concept that's really about keeping women in their place and defining them as chattel. I rolled my eyes and apologized to her mentally. If there was sarcasm in my mental apology, Hayley in my head didn't seem to know or care. Still, I dutifully replaced the thought with the night I got laid for the first time.)

"Calms the mind," I murmured when Shane finally handed me a steaming mug and the big honey bear.

"Hayley left her jacket-thingy," Shane said, sitting down across from me and sipping from a glass of water.

Apparently, his mind wasn't in need of calming. That was the story of our relationship to a large degree.

I glanced over at the patchwork madness that was Hayley's latest fashion accessory. Her kinda-girlfriend, Lisa, made it in some Art of Design & Sewing class she was taking over the summer. I usually saw Lisa on her way to the art building on my way to the gym for the taekwondo class I'd been taking, and which now seemed tainted after my dream. How was I ever going to set foot in that locker room again without imagining a pool of Shane's blood by the exit?

I shivered.

"So, wanna tell me about it?"

I didn't. I really truly didn't, but I did anyway. As I relived the dream moment by moment, the tea did nothing to stop my heart from racing, the tears from stinging my eyes, or to keep a sob from hitching in my throat as I described the final moments.

Shane moved around the table and shifted down to the floor, kneeling between my legs, his arms around my waist, trying to get as close as possible. "Darlin' it was an awful dream, but it was just a dream."

For now.

“I love you,” I told Shane, gripping his face. I needed him to know and understand that much at least. “I love you so much. I could tell you every day for a month and you wouldn’t know how much. I could say it endlessly from now until next March, only stopping to sleep, and to chew up bites of food, and maybe swallow some water, and you still wouldn’t know how much I love you.”

It wasn’t the first time I’d admitted how I felt for him, but it wasn’t like we went around saying it all the time, and I’d never put it quite so vehemently.

Shane kissed the tops of my thighs, then my stomach below the navel at the edge of my boxer briefs. He kissed along the crease that pointed in a V down toward my now-stirring dick. He pulled me closer to him and rubbed his scratchy face all around, tickling me with his whiskers until I was laughing helplessly.

“Love you,” he whispered before pressing wet kisses to my nipples, and then reaching up to pull my head down for a deep kiss.

My ever-eager dick was already ready to go. I could almost hear it cheering as it snapped to attention so fast I felt light headed. The kissing grew messy and desperate. Shane got his hands under the elastic of my underwear and jerked them off. He sucked down my cock, taking me deep and fast into his throat before I could bring up the question of whether or not we should take this somewhere more private.

Still, it lingered there on my tongue, a taste of restraint for just a few moments and then evaporated completely in the wet, eager suction of Shane’s mouth. He pulled my briefs off entirely, tossing them over his shoulder, and spread my legs in the chair far enough to get access to my asshole. He rubbed it with the pads of his fingers while he sucked me, and I moaned, forgetting about private and just wanting somewhere close and comfortable.

“Couch,” I said, gripping his hair and pulling him off my cock. “On the sofa. Now.”

Shane followed me into the living room, looking down the hall toward Mike’s room. “What if he wakes up?” I asked.

Shane shrugged and muttered, “He won’t,” as he tumbled me to the sofa. Mike’s broken chip crumbs stuck to my back but the discomfort didn’t last longer than it took for Shane to get his mouth on my dick again. Lying back, I dropped one leg off the side, making more room for his fingers to explore my hole. I toyed with his short hair while he sucked, concentrating on the feeling of his mouth, so alive and warm and busy on my cock, blotting out worry and fear.

Shane pulled off my dick to push my legs up, licking my ass with a fervor that made my legs tremble under his big hands. I held his head in place, moaning into a sofa cushion to stifle my noises. He shoved a few fingers in his mouth, and then pressed two inside me, slowly twisting them so that he could get in far enough to hit my prostate. My legs kicked a little whenever he rubbed against it, and he sucked on my balls as he worked.

Finally, he slid up my body, fingers still hooked into me, and kissed my lips. I grabbed my own cock and jerked myself as he took hold of his dick and worked to get off too. Kissing, nuzzling, smelling his sweet neck, I found myself moving quickly toward orgasm.

“I’m going to come,” I murmured and he redoubled his efforts in my ass with his fingers.

I spread my legs as far as I could on the narrow sofa and his fingers moved inside me a little roughly with only spit for lubrication. Orgasm—a hot, gripping pleasure starting in the base of my cock, impossible to ignore, commanding my attention and then ripping through the rest of my body—exploded from my dick.

“Fuck,” I cried out, arching toward Shane, shooting my come on his stomach, my chest, his arm, and a little on the back of the sofa.

“So hot, darlin’,” Shane moaned and then I felt a volley of spurts, his jizz landing hotly on my abs and pecs. One large glob covered my left nipple completely. Shane shuddered through small aftershocks, and then bent to kiss and lick the come off my nipple before teasing it lightly with his teeth.

We kissed tenderly for a long while, a sense of peace descending on me. I knew we should get up, clean the come off the back of the sofa and get back to Shane's room, but it was too perfect half under Shane's weight and shivering through small aftershocks in his arms.

"Mike might come in," I whispered.

"Let him. I promise he'll turn around and walk right back out."

I chuckled. Shane was probably right, but still. I didn't really want to be seen.

"It's the middle of the night," Shane reminded me. "I'm pretty sure unless you start screaming again, he's going to sleep through everything and anything."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Why be sorry? I just want you to be honest with me."

"Okay."

"Are you in danger? If you do go back?"

"I don't know. I might be." I ran my fingertips up and down the small hairs on his forearm. "I don't want you to go, though. I can't risk you. I need to do this for myself, but I can't put you in the position of—"

"I'm going with you, River."

"It's just...Shane, it might be dangerous and remember how much I love you? More than I can say? And I just can't risk your safety by exposing you to the possibility of him. I just can't do that."

"If it's so dangerous that you don't want me to go, then you shouldn't be going either. No matter what Reed wants."

"He's my brother."

"You need to talk to your parents about this. They might not want you risking this guy taking over your life again."

“It’s not about them, Shane. This is my choice. My stalker and my life and my home and my brother. My everything. And you’re not going with me. As much as I want to show you my home, it’s just—”

Shane put his finger on my mouth and helped me up. He stepped into the kitchen, returning with my underwear, and a rag to spot clean the sofa. After, we walked down the hall together to his room.

“Shane, here’s the thing,” I started, but he didn’t let me go on.

“I’m going.” He climbed into the bed and patted the space beside him. “You can’t stop me any more than I can stop you. So, together we’ll go and we’ll deal with whatever happens because of it.”

I got in next to him, dissatisfaction with his words cutting through me, but he tugged me to lie down with my head against his shoulder. In the near-darkness he whispered, “You’ve got me. I’ll be your secret weapon.”

I came out of the showers, a towel wrapped around my waist. A sense of déjà vu filled me as I realized I was alone. I walked quickly, sparing little thought for Max or anyone else. I knew what this was. This was the dream again, and while my heart thudded wildly in my chest, I had come prepared. There was no way I was going to see Shane killed again.

I opened my locker, ignored the horrific decorations inside, all designed to terrify me and lock my mind up so that I couldn’t think. I grabbed my jeans and T-shirt, pulled them on, and zipped open my gym bag. I heard the creak of the door as I reached inside.

The cough was exactly the same as before—a low rattle in the chest and then a violent explosion at the end.

I wrapped my hand around the handle and pulled out the knife. It was just a kitchen knife, but recently sharpened. I made sure of that by touching my finger to the edge. It sang sharply against my skin.

I took a deep breath, slowly in and out, and I nodded to myself. My mind whirled madly. I’d trained for years but I’d never hurt anyone beyond a bruise

or two. This was new. I knew I had to stay ahead of my dream, or else it would change on me, and my plan would be destroyed.

I came around the corner of the lockers, head held high, and the knife behind my back. There he was by the exit, just like last time. His dark hood hid his features, his left hand dangled, and in his right he held a knife.

“Hi,” I said, calmly as I could muster, and the cold chill of my voice shocked me. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

He stepped forward and I tucked the knife into the back pocket of my jeans. I spread my arms wide. “I wondered if you’d forgotten me, but I knew you’d never forget your baby boy.”

The words were like acid in my mouth. The endearment had been in almost every note, no matter if it was filled with creepy declarations of love or ruthless, horrific descriptions of the torture he was going to visit on my body.

“Because you love your baby boy, don’t you? And I’ve waited a long time for you to come and make me love you too.”

His hooded head dipped to the side, and I didn’t dare look away to see what he was doing with his knife. I needed him to come closer, to come forward to me. If he went out the door, he’d be back with Shane and I couldn’t live through that dream again.

“Slut,” his voice echoed in the locker room. “Filthy slut.”

“I am filthy, it’s true. I need you to clean me up. Show me who I belong to.”

He took a step closer to me and then, like so often happens in dreams, he was right there, in my face. The cold of his blade tore through my shirt and bit into my skin. But I didn’t hesitate—a quick step back on my right leg, and then a big step back with my left. My powerful crescent kick landed on his wrist, knocking the knife out of his hand and sending it skittering. Executing a series of moves that had been drilled into me during my years of training, I twisted his arm behind his back, and pulled the knife from my back pocket with my left hand.

“This is where it ends,” I said in his ear, my knife tucked up against his throat. “Because I’ll never let you take him from me. Never.”

I slit his throat in a quick move. It was fast and terrible. Blood arced onto the floor of the locker room, and gurgled as it poured out of him. I felt the connection between us sever deep inside like a line snapping. I lowered his body to the floor, blood soaking through my sneakers, and splashing on the floor. The scent of iron filled the air. My trembling fingers went to his hood. I had to know—who had done this to me for so long? Who’d taken my home, my family, my friends, and my life from me?

The hoodie was soaked with hot blood. My breath stopped in my lungs. I jerked the hoodie back.

I bolted up in bed, my heart wildly thumping. I’d woken before I’d seen my stalker’s face. After all that, I was still no wiser as to who had stalked me for three years than I was before. I rubbed a hand over my face, and looked down at Shane sleeping beside me. His lips were parted and his eyes moved rapidly beneath his fragile lids. He was strong, with Midwestern handsomeness inherited from his father.

I took a steadying breath and turned my attention inward. Where before there had always been a taut thread of fear running from me, across the country back to Sewanee, to the mystery stalker, there was now a loose sensation of a cord cut. I wasn’t his puppet anymore. I’d killed him.

Shane shifted and I lay back beside him, putting my head on his chest. I listened to his strong heartbeat thumping in my ear. I closed my eyes, imagining his heart beating steady as a drum. The sound of his life reached into me like a living thread and wound itself around that loose cord, binding us even more firmly together. Strength to strength. Heart to heart. Love to love. Here in the safety of his arms, I was certain we could overcome anything. And if we couldn’t, there was still the truth that love was forever stronger than fear.

THE END

Author Bio

While Leta Blake would love to tell you that writing transports her to worlds of magic and wonder and then safely returns her to a home of sparkling cleanliness and carefully folded laundry, the reality is a bit different from that. For as long as Leta can recall, stories have hijacked her mind, abducting her to other lands, and forcing her to bend to the will of imaginary people. This absence from reality results in piles of laundry and forgotten appointments. In between abductions, Leta works hard at achieving balance between her day job, her writing, and her family. When not spirited away by demanding imaginary people, Leta lives happily with her husband, her kid, and one too many dogs in the Southern United States.

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