

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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FINDING BIGFOOT

Kate Islay

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

FINDING BIGFOOT

By Kate Islay

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

A young man sleeps on a bed with white sheets, his arms curled above him, and his expression furrowed in dreams.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I always considered myself straight, had girlfriends in high school and a few here at college. But I'm taking this Sociology class and I'm in a group with a guy who's openly gay. The first time I met him, I felt like I'd stepped off a cliff. He has beautiful peach skin with a cute red blush on his cheekbones, a super lean tight body (smaller than mine), and the most beautiful eyes and smile. I've tried to ignore the attraction, but now I find myself dreaming about him—a lot. Like crazy, hot dreams. What should I do? I kind of want to explore this, but even if I worked up the nerve to say something, why would he want some clueless, supposedly straight guy like me?

Requests: No (heavy) BDSM or ménage. Light angst okay but not heavy/drugs/abuse, etc.—oh, and an HEA please!

Sincerely,

Eli

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college student, sweet no sex, coming of age, coming out

Content warnings: HFN

Word count: 9,280

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By Kate Islay

“Legends of wild men have been with us throughout human history, but it wasn’t until 1958, when loggers in Bluff Creek, California, reported footprints along the logging roads far larger than any human, that the name *Bigfoot* was coined.”

From this angle, I could see the neat trim of dark blond hair around his ear when he sat back, his lips tightening in a pained expression as someone recounted her cousin’s Sasquatch sighting in New Jersey three years ago. He’d looked pained a lot this semester. I wondered why he was in the class at all. Tully’s urban legends class was famous, or at least infamous, with a waiting list deep enough to discourage even the die-hard fans.

I wondered why I couldn’t seem to stop staring at him.

“...but what’s at the core of the legend of the Sasquatch, or any of the folktales we’ve been talking about, isn’t whether or not they’re true, but what they tell us about the human condition. Or so the folklorists tell us. What do you think?”

A few students offered tentative responses. Personally, I thought it mattered if it was true to the people who wanted to believe it, but maybe they didn’t count.

Tully wrapped up her lecture, letting loose a chorus of squeaking chairs and shuffling of notebooks into backpacks. Her voice carried over the noise. “Don’t forget that blurbs for your collaborative paper are due next week.”

Fuck. I’d been putting off even thinking about the joint paper. There were a few other guys from the team in the class, but for obvious reasons I wasn’t going to ask them if they wanted to partner up.

Tully’s next words froze me in the act of putting away my notebook and pen. “Mr. Romano. And Mr. Harper. Can you stay a moment, please?”

A few classmates gave me sympathetic looks as I forced myself to step up to Tully's desk, very much aware of *him* coming forward to stand next to me: a couple inches shorter and more slight, his tucked in button-down and gray slacks a sharp contrast to my jeans and hoodie.

Leigh Harper. I'd looked him up in the student directory the first week of class, going down the names on the class roster until I'd found him. Gray eyes, like an overcast sky. Senior. Political Science major. Phi Beta Kappa. President of the Gay-Straight Alliance.

I'd known the name, of course. Buchanan was a small campus, and Leigh was an active guy; probably most of the student body knew his name. He wasn't how I'd pictured. I'd expected an activist to have more flamboyance and style, not look like the boy next door. Apparently, I'd stereotyped the guy before I'd even met him.

Not to mention that my type usually had a lot more curves.

"Your group matchups were due to me last Tuesday. Unless you've made arrangements I don't know about, I think you know where I'm going with this."

"Actually," Leigh said slowly, "I was hoping to do the paper on my own."

I tried not to take that personally. I wasn't *that* bad of a choice. Plenty of people would've wanted to partner with me, if I hadn't alienated half of them.

And I had my own reasons for not wanting to partner with *him*. Just standing next to him made the hair on my arms stand up.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harper, but that's the assignment. Perhaps it will help you to see the benefits of collaboration." Professor Tully gathered up the rest of her notes. "Don't forget that your blurb is due next week, gentlemen." She left the classroom.

The silence that followed was deadening. "Uh, I'm Drew," I ventured. "Drew Romano."

"I know." Leigh didn't exactly sound like a fan. "This must make a change from screaming crowds and cheerleaders."

Ouch. Well, I'd known people were going to make assumptions. *You wanted the bicycle, now pedal*, as my grandfather would say.

Leigh grimaced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I—" His eyes flicked around the empty classroom as if looking for an unlikely rescue. Not finding any, he sighed. "I guess we're partnering, then."

"Guess so. So what's your excuse?"

Leigh shrugged. "I don't know anyone in the class. I was hoping she'd let me do it on my own."

"So you said." Maybe there was an edge to my voice, because Leigh gave me a look.

"What's yours?"

"Huh? Oh." I felt my face heat. "Same thing, I guess."

Leigh nodded. He took a breath, likely bracing himself for the inevitable. "So, we should get together to discuss it. Tomorrow night at the library?"

Tomorrow was Friday. Was that a test? Maybe Leigh didn't know that I had zero social life these days. "Sure. Eight o'clock?"

He hesitated, bluff called. "Eight o'clock."

I left first, as much to save my ego as anything else.

After the gloom of the classroom, the sky was overly bright as I made my way with the rest of the student body to the union building, the air clear and crisp. *Football weather*. I pushed the thought aside as I shouldered my way through the crowds in the cafeteria.

Courtney had snagged our usual table, which was no small feat in this lunch crowd. Typically, she was flipping through a textbook as she ate. "I've got a draft paper due to my study group tonight, so I can't stay long."

I settled in the chair across from her with my tray. "Wow, Courts. Hey. How are you?"

She put down her fork with exaggerated care. “Hi there, Drew. I’m great. The weather’s wonderful. So chipper and fall-like. How’s everything in your corner of the world?”

“Crappy,” I said. It just came out. It wasn’t like I had a lot to complain about, honestly. I was a twenty-year-old junior at a decent college with a rosy future ahead of me, if the Dean’s office propaganda was to be believed. Though I’m not sure they believed it any more than we did.

Courtney’s face shifted to concern. “Are you still getting fallout from the team?”

“Just giving you a hard time. Everything’s good.”

Most of the team hadn’t said much of anything to me, aside from a few uncomfortable brushes in the mailroom and some strained conversations with my roommate, Andre. The funny thing was, it wasn’t like I’d been a star player or anything. I’d been an average wide receiver on a Division III team. Football wasn’t a career choice for any of us.

My coach had understood that just fine. So had my parents. Only my former teammates didn’t seem to understand why I’d want to spend my last two years of college doing something other than play football.

I leaned forward to steal one of her fries. “You seriously don’t need all of those.”

“And you don’t need any,” she said, flicking my hand away as I tried for another one. “And hey, do you mind?” She moved my water glass and tray from where they’d been slowly encroaching on her territory. She liked to complain that my stuff always ended up taking over her space. I didn’t mean it to happen; it just did.

Successfully diverted, Courtney settled back into her reading. I let my eyes roam. The cafeteria was packed, a good number of faces familiar. I’d seen them in classrooms, in the stands, in the halls giving me nods like they knew me because they’d caught the game the weekend before. I’d wanted to go to a small school, but it felt claustrophobic at times, too, all those people knowing who I was. Quitting hadn’t helped, either.

A familiar face stood out. I couldn't seem to escape him today. A few tables up, sitting across from a guy with streaked-blond hair, who leaned forward and said something that made him smile.

How cozy.

"Do you ever find yourself checking out other girls?"

Courtney stared. I think I'd actually thrown her, which is hard to do with Courts. "Are you asking seriously or because you're getting off thinking about it?"

"Hey. You've known me for two years. Am I like that?"

Heck, most guys I knew were like that. Two girls together, sure, I'd check that out. I took comfort in the knowledge. Maybe I wasn't a complete goner.

"I assume you are when you're with your male friends, but as long as I don't have to hear it, I can give you credit for not being like that."

"You, Miss Deveaux, are a cynic."

"I'm not actually forgetting about your question."

I wish she had. I wasn't even sure why I'd asked it. Man quits football team, turns gay. It was like a red state horror story.

If that's what was even going on with me. Part of me felt so turned around this year that I didn't know what was constant anymore. I'd thought my sexuality pretty constant. At least until Leigh Harper and his gray eyes and bleached-blond boyfriend.

"You've gone through a lot of changes this semester," Courtney said slowly. "I think it's a normal thing to think about and wonder."

Changes. Right. I took a few more of her fries. "So you *do* check out other girls. Let me know next time."

"Ass," she said, moving her plate away. "Get your own."

A normal thing to think about and wonder. It wasn't like I'd never checked out a guy before. It was a given that you'd compare yourself to your

teammates in the locker room, maybe offer up some healthy aesthetic appreciation. But I'd never had my pulse flip quite so unnervingly from the curve of another guy's neck.

Friday night, I threw on an ancient gray henley from high school that was one wash away from the trash can, and jeans that weren't much better. I'm not sure what statement I was trying to make, other than I didn't mind looking like a slob.

Leigh, when he found me in one of the library study rooms, looked like he'd never pulled a shirt to wear from the floor of his closet. He'd traded the button-down and slacks for crisp jeans and a blue polo that brought out his eyes and put some color in his skin.

I cleared my throat. "Hey."

"Hey," Leigh returned. He looked as awkward as I felt. Maybe he'd thought I wouldn't show. "So," he said, sliding into the chair across from me and pulling a laptop from his bag, "the assignment is to research a local legend through written and oral sources, then contextualize it within the surrounding culture and mores."

He actually made a class on urban legends sound dry. "Er, yes. At least I think so. I figured we'd come up with a topic then write up the blurb that's due next week."

"Right. Do you have any ideas?"

"Local newspapers?" I hazarded. "Either that or surfing online until we see something interesting."

"Online it is." Leigh was already typing into his laptop.

I pulled out my phone, but the page proportions were all off. "I'm just going to," I said, gesturing to the library computers in the main room. Leigh nodded, not looking up.

The library was deserted, so for once it was no problem getting one of the desktops by the windows. I opened up a browser and started searching. Professors hated when we did that, but it was easy enough to retroactively find a few boring tomes that said the same thing as Wikipedia.

It was dark on the other side of the glass, even with the outdoor lamps. That plus the subject matter and a large, eerily empty library meant that I jumped a little when Leigh sat down next to me.

“Jesus. Warn a guy.”

The corner of Leigh’s mouth quirked. “Sorry. I just wanted to show you this.” He put his laptop down to the right of my keyboard and leaned forward. His hand brushed mine as he reached for the touchpad and I went to angle the screen toward me.

He stared at me when I jumped again. “What?”

“Uh, nothing. What did you want to show me?”

He pointed at the screen. “I was wondering if we could use it. It’s local, or at least local enough to drive to, and some of the people involved may still be alive if we wanted to interview them.”

“Oh. Right.” I struggled to focus on the screen and not the neatly trimmed nails of his hand, or the way his fingers curled almost possessively over the touchpad. There was a precision about Leigh that felt deliberate, like he thought through everything he said and did before saying and doing it. So different from my usual sprawl.

I forced my attention back to the Web page. *Black Aggie*, I read. Demonic stone angel who’d frightened a local fraternity brother to death one night in a cemetery. Great. Leigh was right, though, it was a story based in some truth, if the site he’d found was to be believed, and was close enough to drive to. If Leigh had a car, that is. My parents lived close by, so I didn’t need one to get home; they or my grandfather picked me up for holidays and breaks and the occasional weekend home. And enough guys on the team had cars for off-campus trips to cover the ones who didn’t.

Leigh was still waiting for a response. “It sounds good. Let’s go with it.”

“Okay.” He sat back and propped his elbow on the table, chin on his hand, scrolling through the page with his off hand.

“Can I ask you something?”

Leigh's eyes flicked over warily. "Sure."

God knows what he thought I was going to ask. I wasn't sure myself. "So I noticed you're not keen on the class. You know there's a waiting list to get in, right? It's one of the most popular classes on campus."

"I'm sure it is," Leigh said dryly.

"So how'd you get in if you didn't want to take it?"

Leigh hesitated a moment before answering. "I did want to take it. Or rather, someone I was with wanted to take it, and I needed another elective in order to graduate. He talked me into that one."

"Oh." Now I was sorry I asked. I'd forgotten about bleach boy. "So what happened?"

"We broke up the end of last year, and he decided to withdraw. I still needed the elective, so I stayed in."

So maybe bleach boy was new? "Why don't you like the class?"

"I like the class. It's just—not what I'm into, I guess. Bigfoot, Bloody Mary, kidney theft—it's all pretty ridiculous."

"Well, yeah," I said. "But people believe in that stuff. Or at least want to believe. Well, maybe not in kidney theft, but the rest of it—Bigfoot, the Hook Man, demon angel statues."

That's what fascinated me about it, actually, the idea that there was more mystery in the world than what we could see, hear, and feel. All that collective belief had to give the stories some power, right?

"Is that why you're taking it?"

I shifted on the chair. One of the backhanded results of playing football is people often think you're thick, even though that's not true of most of the guys I played with. So you're not always asked about secret ambitions that don't have to do with throwing and catching a ball.

"My grandfather likes to tell stories. Stuff from Italy from before he and my grandmother came over here. I know half of them aren't true and the other half are exaggerated, but I always liked them."

“Oh. Makes sense, then.”

“Does it?” Leigh gave me a weird look, so I clarified. “I mean, it feels like a leap from that to an actual academic discipline. It’s just a bunch of stories.”

“Well, it’s not my field or anything, but the class we’re taking now is just a bunch of stories, and they’re offering it as a course here. I don’t see why you couldn’t specialize in something like that.”

A lukewarm endorsement, maybe, but it was still nice to hear. I’d actually been trying to get up the courage to ask Tully about becoming a history major. It was the kind of thing I’d imagined when I quit football: getting more serious about school, figuring out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life after I’d realized I had two years left of college with no idea at all.

Half a semester in, and I still hadn’t taken that step.

“So if you’re not interested in this, what are you interested in?”

I hadn’t intended it as innuendo, but by the way Leigh flushed, maybe he’d read some into it. “What do you mean?”

I said awkwardly, “Just, you know. Hobbies. Activities.”

Leigh’s index finger brushed the touchpad, scrolling down the site. His eyes were fixed on the screen. “I think you probably know some of my activities.”

“Uh, sure. I mean, I guess so.” Leigh didn’t respond. “What’s it like being out?”

I don’t know what I was thinking, asking him that. There was a long pause. “That’s a pretty personal question.”

I closed out the open tabs on the library computer, glad that my hand wasn’t shaking. “I know. Sorry. Should we start working on the blurb?”

Leigh said slowly, as if he couldn’t believe he was talking about this with me, “It’s... a relief, of course. Not having to lie. But it’s hard to live exposed. At least that’s what I tell the kids who join the GSA.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say to that. It would certainly scare the fuck out of *me*.

“But sure, we should start working on the blurb.” Leigh straightened, the shift in his face clearly stating that the subject was closed. “I’ll start copying over the information from the site.”

It was past ten by the time we’d haggled our way through the blurb and went our separate ways. Lights, noise, and music spilled out from dorm rooms onto the darkened, tree-shadowed quad as I made my way back to my dorm.

I thought about what he’d said, about how coming-out was a relief. In a way, it had been a relief to admit to myself that I didn’t want to play football anymore, like shedding a burden I hadn’t even known was there. Not that I was comparing football to leading the effort to ensure equal rights for an oppressed group on a mostly liberal but still insular college campus. Except I guess I kind of was.

To my surprise, Andre was in the room, one of his psych books propped open on his chest. Andre wasn’t a partier, but the guys usually had something going on the night before a game.

“Exam next week?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You go out to dinner?”

“Met someone at the library for a paper.”

Andre nodded, turning back to his book.

I hated how polite we were with each other now. It had never been that way with Andre. I could see why he’d be pissed. We’d been roommates since freshman year, and I’d never even mentioned to him that I was thinking about quitting. I don’t know why I hadn’t told him. I hadn’t told anyone, though, not until the night I’d knocked on coach’s door and his wife had let me in.

I sat on my desk chair to take off my shoes. “Who’re you playing tomorrow?”

His eyes flicked up. We didn’t talk about football. Not these days. After a pause he said, “Shipps. Away game. They’re putting us up for the night, so I won’t be back.”

“Shipp has always been a breeze.”

“Yeah,” he said. “We’ll see.”

I hadn’t even been to any of the home games, not even to cheer the guys on. I guess I’d figured they wouldn’t want me there.

It surprised me what I missed about it—not the endless practices and drills, or even the games, but just hanging out with people with whom you’d just shared an experience. Going to the games wasn’t going to bring that back; it would just remind me of what I’d chosen to give up.

And would still choose, if I had the chance again. I might not have told anyone what I was thinking before I did it, but it hadn’t been spur of the moment.

Don’t make a step longer than your leg, as my grandfather would say.

I was sitting on a couch in an open, light-filled room, familiar in that hazy way that places in dreams are familiar. I think it was the living room of my best friend from fifth grade. Bobby Jenkins. He wasn’t there, though, it was just me, my arm slung along the back of Bobby’s brown and orange plaid couch, relaxed and easy, and Leigh leaning back into it, turning to me with a smile.

I woke up, heart pounding. It took a second for it to sink in that it had been a dream. The emotions in it had felt real.

Though you’d think if I was going to have an erotic dream about someone, there’d at least be sex.

Likely it was just a by-product of the cafeteria’s mystery meat the night before, I told myself as I waited for Leigh at the curb outside my dorm. We’d made plans to drive down to Baltimore to check out the Black Aggie story. The statue, apparently an unauthorized replica of one in D.C., had originally been in a cemetery outside the city until repeated visitors and nightly vigils had driven the owners to remove it and ship it off to the Smithsonian and out of the public’s morbid eye. The original caretaker had retired, but his

replacement had kept in touch with him, and said he was willing to take us to see him when Leigh had called last week.

A gray Focus pulled up to the curb, brakes squeaking a little.

“You should get those looked at,” I said, when I let myself in the passenger door. The car was tidy, which didn’t surprise me, but was neither new nor a parent’s hand-me-down BMW, which did. I’d pegged Leigh as coming from money. Most of the kids at this school did.

“Yeah, I know,” Leigh said absently. He checked his mirror and pulled away from the curb. “I brought some of the notes we took at the library. They’re on the back seat.”

I retrieved the notes and skimmed through them. There were different variations of the story, but the short of it was, the Agnus family had commissioned the statue of a grieving angel for their family plot in a cemetery outside Baltimore. The angel was creepy enough that stories around it started to form: that if you sat on her lap at night, she’d come to life and crush you; that the spirits of the cemetery would rise up to gather around her; that at midnight her eyes would glow red. A local fraternity forced their pledges to spend the night with the statue as part of their initiation rites, which culminated one night in one of the initiates actually dying of fright.

Likely the caretaker would have his own spin on it.

“Thanks for driving,” I said, glancing over. Leigh was wearing jeans and a gray zip-neck fleece. He drove with his left knee bent at a casual angle, right hand at two o’clock, left arm resting on the window frame.

The image of him from my dream flashed through my head. I looked away.

“Sure,” he said. “It should only take us an hour and a half or so to get there.”

Saturday morning, the roads were nearly deserted. Early morning light refracted off the few cars we passed and filtered through trees already starting to turn. The college station murmured on the radio.

“You must have gone to some of the games.” Apparently, that had been on my mind since Tully’s classroom.

Leigh glanced over. He looked embarrassed. “Uh, that guy I was with. He had a thing for... football. Or, you know,” another sideways glance, “football players.”

“Really.” I wondered if Leigh’s ex had checked me out. I looked out the window, feeling oddly self-satisfied.

“Actually,” Leigh said slowly, “I wanted to talk about what you asked me in the library.”

My stomach flipped warningly. “Oh?”

“I shouldn’t have brushed you off like that.” He resolutely studied the road. “Or made assumptions about how open-minded you’d be. It’s the Gay-Straight Alliance. If you were interested in being an ally, you’d be welcome.”

“Oh. Sure. I mean, I’d support you and all.”

Pretty weak for an ally, much less someone who was starting to feel less and less *straight*, but Leigh didn’t seem to mind. “I can send you some information about the group. Don’t feel obliged to join if you’re not interested.”

“Sure,” I said, staring at the back road scenery sliding by outside the window.

My parents had been into road trips when I was a kid, taking us out west to see all the national parks and making us camp in sleeping bags in one of those old-fashioned tents. When we got into our teens, my sister and I bitched enough about the conditions that they’d eventually stopped, but I still remembered the first day of driving, the early morning excitement and anticipation with all that empty road in front of us.

“You live around here?”

“Huh?” Leigh gave me a startled look. “Oh. No. Massachusetts.”

“Must be hard. Going to school so far away, I mean.”

“No.” Leigh’s eyes were fixed on the road. “Not really.”

There was too much in that loaded statement to untangle. I realized how much I didn't know about him or his situation. I turned back to the window when Leigh didn't offer up anything more.

It was eleven by the time we'd reached Baltimore and met up with the current caretaker, Malik. He was a young guy who only vaguely knew about the legend, but he seemed pretty fond of the old caretaker. "Some visitors will be good for him," he said, directing us to a house only a few miles from the cemetery.

Leigh pulled up to the curb in front of a porch and a bit of scraggly grass. The siding was new but the house itself was old, I noticed, as Malik led the way through to the screened porch out back, complete with creaking hardwood floors and peeling wallpaper. It reminded me of the houses in the neighborhood I'd grown up in, until my parents moved outside the city.

A balding man in his eighties sat at a patio table in khakis and a white button-down over a tending-to-stocky frame. He peered at us over wire-rimmed glasses and put a folded *Baltimore Sun* on the table. "Are these the kids?" he asked Malik, who nodded. "You're not from that fraternity, are you?"

"We're from Buchanan College, Mr. Perry," Leigh said, holding out his hand. Perry ignored it. "We're doing some research on the Black Aggie story for a class on urban legends."

Perry shook his head. "Doesn't take much to get a degree these days, does it?" He made a gesture toward the remaining chairs around the table, which I took as a sign to sit down. Leigh and Malik followed. "Call me Gus, by the way. No one calls me Mr. Perry. So what do you want to know? I was around when that kid died, but you'll be disappointed if you think a statue had anything to do with it."

"Actually," I broke in, "We were wondering what you thought about the statue. Why you thought it had such appeal."

Perry—Gus—zeroed in on me. “I wouldn’t exactly call it *appeal*.” He shook his head. “Who am I kidding. The thing was creepy. If it actually had been some minion of hell, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Why is that?”

“The family had meant it as a kind of guardian. An angel to look over their family. Sometimes irony’s just too rich to pass up. Or maybe it’s easier to see something as evil than good.”

“Do you think that’s how other people saw it?”

Gus shrugged. “How do I know what goes on in folks’ heads? But they used to come here in droves, just to see that statue. They’d drive by Sunday afternoons and camp out at night, making up stories about what happened. I don’t know what they were looking for, but it was something. There was one group who was convinced it was the spirit of a nurse who’d been hanged by a mob some years back, come back to haunt us. A newspaper reporter came by about twenty years ago asking about that, but he never did find any facts to back it up.” He snorted. “I went to go see her once. After.”

I perked up at that. “I thought she was in some museum basement?”

“That’s what they all think, but no. In the eighties she was transferred to the courtyard of some Federal building.” He shook his head. “None of them have any idea of the stir she caused here. I’ll tell you what, though. That kid dying was real enough. Folks sure get themselves worked up about a thing.”

I got a few more stories from him, but that seemed to be the extent of what Gus had to share with us. Pretty soon Malik had to get back to work and Gus was clearly fading.

“Used to be, I’d get four or five calls a month asking about Black Aggie. Then they started to peter off. Like anything, people’s interest fades. Kind of nice, talking about her again.” He stood up to see us out, despite Malik’s protest. “You boys take care now.”

Leigh dropped Malik back at the cemetery. We parked and wandered around a bit, Malik showing us where Black Aggie had once held court, but it

was just a cemetery. It was hard to imagine it had once swarmed with curiosity seekers.

Leigh glanced over at me when we got back in his car. “You were really good with him.”

I thought back. I guess I’d kind of hogged the conversation. “Sorry. I should have let you get a few questions in.”

“Why? You were doing great.”

A highway sign flashed by with food and fuel options ahead. For reasons I wasn’t going to examine too closely, I didn’t want the day to end. Besides, I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. “Want to stop for lunch?”

I was sure the last thing he wanted was to take more time on a Saturday to spend with the guy he’d been saddled with for a class he hadn’t even wanted to take, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to ask.

Leigh’s eyes flicked over. “I could eat.”

“So what happened with that guy you were with?” I said, as we settled into one of the diner’s booths. The place was clean if not fancy, the prices cheap enough to fit a college budget. “Your, uh, boyfriend.”

Leigh clearly hadn’t expected me to ask that by the few seconds it took him to regroup. “It’s not an exciting story.”

I shrugged, picking up one of the laminate menus the waitress had dropped off. “I was just curious.”

He had to start wondering where all this curiosity was coming from. “I got an internship offer in D.C. for after I graduate. Seth’s planning to go to Michigan for grad school. He wanted me to go with him, give up the internship.”

Leigh was right. As reasons went that was a pretty standard one. “You didn’t want to try the long distance thing?”

“He didn’t.” Leigh shrugged. There seemed to be a lot caught in that shrug. “And we thought it better to quit now and stay friends than start to resent each other for the decisions we’d made.”

“That sounds like someone trying to rationalize something they don’t agree with.”

That got a startled laugh. “Yeah. Probably. But sometimes life takes you in different directions, whether or not you want it to.” Leigh leaned forward. “But now it’s my turn.”

I forced myself to say casually, “Ask away.”

“Why’d you quit the football team?”

I could tell he wasn’t asking as a fan—mostly the fans had been bewildered, the few who’d said anything to me. A couple had been angry, as if I had no right to throw the opportunity away, as they’d put it. There were opportunities everywhere, I’d wanted to tell them.

“I knew it had to end sometime, right? It wasn’t like we were all going to keep playing football the rest of our lives.”

“Sure, but you still had a couple of years.”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I guess it’d become more habit than anything else. It would have been easy to keep going with it, but it just didn’t feel like me anymore.”

I couldn’t help wonder if, unconsciously or not, I’d known there was more going on with me than a need to experience life outside the football team. Because *I think I may be gay* would have been a considerably more complicated conversation than *I want to quit the football team*.

“Quitting must have taken a lot of guts, then.”

Most people thought it had been cowardice, not bravery. “I don’t know about that.” I played with a crease in the laminate menu, folding it back and forth. “But my coach was cool with it. Surprised, but supportive.”

“How about everyone else?”

“Oh, they’re fine. The people who matter, anyway.”

Which were my parents and the friends who'd stood by me, like Courtney. I think for the rest of them, it wasn't that they disagreed with my decision, though I'm sure most of them did: it was that they felt like they didn't know me anymore. I'd become unpredictable. We'd ended up more awkward with each other than confrontational.

The waitress came by to take our order. I ordered a burger and a Coke. Leigh got the grilled ham and cheese.

When she'd gone, I asked him, "So what's the internship? The one in D.C.?"

"My uncle works for the political action committee of the Human Rights Campaign. He got me a spot for the summer. It's mostly lobbying and fundraising, organizing HRC groups for local issues and elections. Hopefully making the world a safer place for people who don't fit someone else's mold of normal."

"Sounds like that takes a lot more guts than quitting a football team."

"Yeah, maybe." Leigh smiled. "I like to think it won't always have to."

"So your uncle, he's...?"

"Gay? Yes."

The waitress dropped off my Coke and topped off Leigh's water. "Your parents, then, are they cool with, you know?"

Leigh took longer to answer. "I wouldn't go that far. Though sometimes I think it has less to do with me being gay as me being... me. My father doesn't have a lot of tolerance for what he perceives as weakness."

"Why would he think that about you?"

Leigh smiled. "Thanks for the vote. But I was... bookish as a kid. My brothers were the outgoing ones. I preferred reading to sports, and in my dad's eyes that made me weak. My mom pretty much follows his lead in most things, though it's her brother who got me the internship, so she's more tolerant than a lot of people. Cool with it, though? I wouldn't say that." He took a sip of water, looking at me over the raised glass. "Your turn."

“Me? There’s not much to tell.”

“Come on, you must have some dark secrets lurking beneath that perfect surface.”

Perfect surface. Huh. Our eyes met. He raised an eyebrow at me as if in challenge.

“I had a pretty normal childhood, I guess,” I said, feeling my pulse speed with the effect of that challenge. “I was more like your brothers as far as sports went. Though my sister liked to dress me up in our mom’s clothes, too, so I can’t say I was the butchest guy around.”

“Now there’s a picture.”

“Oh, she’s got plenty of them. But we get along okay. She’s a few years older. My parents aren’t actually that into sports. They let me play football, but they weren’t upset when I quit.”

“What about your grandfather?” I must have looked surprised. “You, uh, mentioned him. In the library.”

“Oh. Right. He lives with my parents. My grandmother died a few years back. He’s your typical cranky old man, except when he’s telling stories. He’ll tell them to anyone. I take him to church when I’m home. He’s infamous there.”

“It sounds like you’re all pretty close.”

Leigh didn’t sound envious, exactly, but it made me think about how easily rifts could form in a family. The kind of distance and gaps in understanding he’d had to deal with.

I couldn’t imagine my parents ever not being proud of me, or being ashamed to call me their son. Whatever was going on with me, I couldn’t imagine not sharing it with them once I’d figured it out.

But I knew there were no guarantees, either. I liked to think my parents were tolerant, that they’d love me no matter what, but the possibility that I might be wrong scared the hell out of me.

The waitress came by with our food. Leigh moved his water glass at an angle to his plate, unfolding and refolding his napkin. Apparently, he was as precise in eating as everything else. Halfway through lunch, he started eyeing my Coke like it was a stray dog he was trying to determine was friendly or not, and I realized it was nearly at his elbow.

“Oh, God. Sorry.” I moved it back, along with my plate. I’d taken up three-quarters of the table. Courtney was right, I really did intrude on everyone’s space.

“It’s okay.” Leigh sounded surprised to hear himself say it. He cleared his throat. “I don’t mind.”

He changed the subject, though, to the details we’d gotten from Gus. We spent the rest of lunch hashing through them before hitting the road again. It was late afternoon by the time Leigh pulled up to the curb in front of my dorm. “I can do some more research into the secondary sources, but we should get together soon to start working on the draft.”

“Sure,” I said.

There was a pause. “Everything okay?”

I realized that I’d been sitting there the last few minutes. “Sorry, just spacing out.” I opened the door.

“Drew.”

I looked back. He had a strange look on his face. Probably I was just baffling him with my straight-boy crush and inability to articulate any of it.

“Do you...” Leigh trailed off. “Sorry. Never mind.” He laughed a little, though it seemed rueful. “I’ll see you in class.”

“Let’s say you wanted to ask someone out, but you weren’t sure they felt the same way.”

Courtney eyed me over her coffee. The sound of running washing machines and dryers hummed in the background. I’d always liked the sound. It reminded me of Sunday mornings at home.

“Isn’t that every dating dilemma ever?”

“Is it?” I said.

“Drew,” she said, disbelieving. “Wait. Are you telling me you’ve never been turned down by *anyone*?”

“It’s not like that,” I said defensively. Except I guess it kind of was. The girls I’d dated in high school and college had all seemed enthusiastic to be asked, though dating at Buchanan mostly amounted to meeting up at parties, having a few too many drinks, and making out in the room of whoever could get their roommate to leave for the night.

It was how I’d met Courtney. Not the making out part, but the roommate part. Hers had been crazy, as I’d discovered after a few weeks of seeing her, which had been enough of an experience to bond us since freshman year.

“You, my friend, are too gorgeous for your own good.”

I grinned. “I know, right?”

Courtney didn’t seem to think it the bonus I did. “It’s completely unprepared you for rejection. I can’t believe there’s never been a girl with the good sense to turn you down.”

As pop-psychoanalysis went, this was starting to suck. “Hey.”

“I’m serious. I mean, Drew... you’re charming. You’re good looking. You care about people, and you make them *feel* cared about.”

That was better. “So where does good sense come in?”

“I don’t know.” She seemed to take the question seriously. “You do it so naturally that I wonder if you register any of it.” She took a sip of coffee. “So tell me about *them*.”

Apparently, that hadn’t slipped her notice. “Uh, *they’re* someone I just met recently, but I’ve been, uh, checking them out a while.”

“Uh-huh. So what makes this person different from the others?”

Aside from the obvious, I wasn’t sure. Was it just because Leigh was a guy? Was that the missing key to my previous relationships? If so, I’d buried it pretty deeply.

“He’s—” Her eyebrows shot up, but coyness only went so far. Even though my voice had shaken on the word, because *fuck* that had been scary. “—an unknown, I guess. A mystery. It’s hard to describe.”

“So ask him out. If he turns you down, then at least you’ll know.”

I snorted. “Know what?”

She grinned. “That you’re not completely irresistible.”

Just ask him out. Right.

I was starting to feel some sympathy for all the people trooping to the cemetery to see Black Aggie, or the ones combing the woods of New Jersey searching for Bigfoot. All that fear and longing for the unknown.

He’d sent me an e-mail with an attachment when we got back from Baltimore. *Hope everything’s okay. Here’s some info on the GSA, if you’re interested. No pressure.*

I hadn’t been to any of the meetings. I’d read the attachment, though, and I could see why Leigh was so active in the group. He seemed like someone who cared about other people. *Making the world a safer place for people who don’t fit someone else’s mold of normal.* I could see why he was so passionate about it.

Despite what Courtney thought, I could imagine rejection just fine. I couldn’t think what Leigh, who seemed to know exactly who he was and what he wanted from life, could possibly see in *me*.

At least there was one thing I could get up the nerve to do. “Professor Tully?”

She looked up from where she’d been taking notes from a book held open with the weight of another one. Stacks of books and papers surrounded her, making the office look even smaller.

“Sorry for bothering you. Do you have a minute?”

“These are my office hours, so yes.” She gestured to the chair next to her desk. I moved a pile of books from it and sat down. “What did you need, Mr. Romano?”

I took a breath. This couldn’t be nearly as hard as I was making it out to be. “If I wanted to become a history major, say, what would I have to do?”

I’d surprised her. Maybe she’d pegged me as the non-serious type, though I was doing all right in her class, or at least I thought I was. But I could see a gleam of interest peeking through her surprise. Every department wanted more majors.

“I would say that you should set up a time to talk, or we can talk about it now. I can tell you about the courses we offer, and you can tell me why you’re interested. Any particular field in mind?”

I still had a hard time shaking the feeling that if I told people what I really wanted to do, they’d just laugh. “Oral history.”

A little more interest peeked through. She gave me a contemplative look, as if sizing me up. “Then let me tell you about our courses.”

It was past three by the time I left her office. She’d had some good advice and a few book recommendations that I stopped off at the library for. If I did go with oral history, then she’d be my advisor, so it had felt as much like an interview as an information session. But I thought I’d done okay.

Back at my room, I flipped through one of the books, and then through the course catalog she’d given me.

“Heads up.”

My hands went up reflexively as a football flew past my head. It bounced off my palms and hit the closet door behind me.

“Hands are gettin’ soft, son,” Andre said.

“Not as soft as your defense.” I retrieved the ball from the space between my desk and the closet and tossed it back. Andre rolled it back and forth in his hands.

“We’re heading to the quad for some catch. You in?”

I stared. “Er.”

Andre gave me a look. “It goes both ways, you know.”

That took a second to sink in. I hadn’t realized Andre had been feeling that way. I guess I hadn’t exactly made myself available or approachable to the guys on the team, either. Maybe I’d been pushing them away as much as I’d felt they did me.

“You must be pretty desperate for a decent receiver.”

Andre snorted. “Right.” He tossed me the football again. This time I was ready for it. “Let’s see how out of shape you are.”

“I separated out what we gathered from secondary sources, what we got from the interview with Perry, and then miscellaneous notes from the Web,” Leigh said, after he’d let me in and led the way up to his room. It was midterm season so all the study rooms were booked, and Leigh had a single.

He stepped over three piles of books and papers on the floor and sat on his bed, indicating his desk chair for me. I took the chair, surveying the piles at my feet. They were as neat as the rest of the room. “It’s, uh, very organized.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That sounded suspiciously like mockery.”

“Oh, no. No mockery here.”

“Anyway,” he said, giving me a look, “I thought we could work through them and pick out a few themes to focus on for the paper.”

My usual approach to paper writing was to read as much as I could on the topic, let it marinate a few days, then start writing.

Phi Beta Kappa. Maybe we should try it Leigh’s way.

I retrieved a notebook and pen from my backpack before putting it on the floor behind the chair. Reaching down, I grabbed the pile of notes from our interview with Gus. “Okay if I start with this?”

“Sure,” Leigh said, taking the one on secondary sources.

I read through Leigh's notes, both from the interview and from our conversation about it after. I had no idea he'd been recording all of that in his head. His notes were scattered with references to me: *D. thinks we should look into the story about the nurse*, or *D. mentioned that all the sources talk about the angel's red eyes*.

I had to admit that I liked the thought of him thinking about me. Even if it was just in this context.

Leigh had made a few observations that I'd missed, and I mentally slotted them into place with my own memory of the conversation. I wasn't sure what Leigh meant by themes, though. We had a lot of information, sure, but I didn't know how to categorize it.

"Do you think place had anything to do with it?"

Leigh looked up from his pile. "What do you mean?"

I thought through what I'd meant by that. "It just seems very place-oriented. People go *to* the cemetery. Like an event, or a spectacle. But it doesn't just happen anywhere, it has to happen there. A lot of the urban legends we've been talking about in class could happen anywhere—the stories around them just mention some generic rural or urban landscape. But this one is very specific to that cemetery."

"I hadn't thought about it that way, but I like it. Write it down."

I grinned. "Bossy, aren't you?"

Leigh gave me a startled look. There was a flash of warmth, of unfolding interest, and then it faded into bemusement. "You're flirting with me."

My hand tightened around my pen. It was either that or let him see how much it was shaking. "Maybe. Is that okay?"

I couldn't tell by Leigh's expression. "I don't know. It depends on what you mean by it." He took a breath. "If you're confused about... how you're feeling, I'm more than happy to talk with you about it, or refer you to someone. There are some people at the GSA you might want to talk to."

As far as responses went, that was a fairly deflating one. “I’m not confused.”

It was becoming clear, however, that any interest of Leigh’s was purely professional. I closed my notebook, trying to ignore the sick feeling in my stomach. “Maybe it would help if we each took a stab at the draft separately. See what we come up with, then merge the versions together.”

“Drew.”

Something in his voice made me pause. He’d sounded as scared as I felt.

“I’m usually a pretty good judge of people,” Leigh said slowly. “Or so I’ve always thought. But so far I’ve been lousy with you.”

I’d thought he’d read me pretty well, actually. It wasn’t his fault he wasn’t interested.

“It would be easy to take what you’re saying at face value. Scarily easily.”

Now I was confused. “Isn’t that what you’re good at, though? The scary stuff, I mean. Standing up for what you want.”

Leigh laughed a little shakily. “Is that how you see me? That’s—” He paused. “Okay, that’s flattering, actually. I wish I were that fearless. But I’m not.”

I guess part of me had figured it would be easier with guys. No pesky emotions getting in the way, just mutual need. I guess it was never like that when you were dealing with other people’s hearts.

I got up from the desk. Leigh watched me warily as I approached, but he didn’t stop me from sitting on the bed next to him, and he didn’t pull away when I leaned in and touched my lips to his.

Nothing crashed down around us. A pit didn’t open up to swallow me whole. I could feel my heart beating like crazy, but it hadn’t burst out of my chest.

Leigh put a hand behind my head and pulled me in deeper.

That was a revelation. I didn't know kissing a guy could feel like this. I realized my hand was in his hair and his was burning a brand on the side of my ribs through my shirt, and we'd scattered his notes to the ground.

"I have a confession," Leigh said, his voice a low thrum against my ear. "It wasn't Seth who wanted to go to your games."

That sank through even my hormone-addled brain. "Good to know."

"I have to say, I was a little disappointed not to see you on the team this year."

I groaned, burying my face in his neck. "Don't do that to me." But I could feel a grin tugging at my mouth. "What if I made it up to you?"

Leigh's lips brushed the underside of my jaw, and I shivered. "You know where to find me."

THE END

Author Bio

About Kate Islay: I'm still getting my feet wet in the original m/m genre, but I've written fanfiction and slash, and I'm slowly finishing up some original writing projects. My upcoming works include the revision and publication of In Allegiance, a pseudo-historical m/m romance about a war captive taken as a slave, and the novella version of By Design, my short story from last year's Love Is Always Write event.

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