

He Didn't Have To Be

Tracey
Michael



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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

HE DIDN'T HAVE TO BE

By Tracey Michael

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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HE DIDN'T HAVE TO BE

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Photo Description

A black and white photo accompanied my prompt. A blond man, early twenties, is being kissed by a taller, dark-haired man, also in his early twenties. Behind the men, there are small white festival tents and trees.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He didn't have to do it, but he did anyways. He's like that. It's one of the many reasons why he's my best friend. What did he do?

He kissed me.

In front of everyone.

They say actions speak louder than words, and with just one kiss... he silenced every one of his jock friends in true Griffin style.

The only downside now is that I can't stop thinking about his lips pressed firmly to mine, and just how right it felt. I've never really thought about Griffin in that way, after all, he's straight, but now I can't stop thinking about him period. And sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I catch him watching me in a way that makes me wonder if he can't stop thinking about me too.

Griffin is my past, my present... Is he my future too?

** I'd just like a good contemporary, friends-to-lovers, GFY theme. There can be as little or as much angst as you want as long as Griffin, the dark haired one in the picture, and unnamed blonde get their HEA, which is a must. The background appears to be like a town fair or something of that nature. You can use that setting as a part of your story or make one of your own; I'd just really like this moment to be the catalyst.*

Sincerely,

Runell

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gay for you, friends to lovers, violence, bullying, college, homophobia

Content Warnings: brief description of a violent attack

Word Count: 9,026

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One

The door to the dorm room crashed open, then slammed shut. “Griffin! Look!”

His best friend and roommate lay sprawled across his bed with his feet hanging over one side and his head over the other. A textbook sat open on the floor. Griffin rolled to the side with his eyebrows raised. “Must be something good if you’re smiling like that.”

“The music department is hosting a music festival!” Toby dove onto Griffin’s bed to kneel beside him, waving the flyer in front of his face. “And there’s a contest! Winner gets to be on stage with Dark Heart!”

“You know I can’t read that with you waving it around, right?” Griffin said.

Toby stopped throwing his arm around and handed the flyer over. While Griffin looked at it, he climbed from the bed to go to the mini-fridge in their room and pulled out a bottle of water. Excitement made it too hard for him to sit still. “Want one?” Toby asked, holding the bottle out.

Glancing up briefly, Griffin nodded. “Yeah, thanks.”

Tossing the bottle of water on to Griffin’s bed on the way by, Toby sat down and stretched out on his own bed before bouncing back to his feet. “I’m going to volunteer to help set up.”

Griffin handed the flyer back and rolled onto his stomach. He looked to be focusing his attention on the book in front of him, so Toby quieted. His best friend might not look like a nerd, but he hid it well. From the distance, it looked like he was reading his chemistry book.

“I’ll help. Sign me up, too.”

“What?” Toby had been zoning out, debating on doing his math homework or reading a chapter of his history book. Both were due in two days, and both were not what he wanted to be doing.

“I’ll help,” Griffin repeated. “The basketball season will be over and classes will be finishing, so... why not?”

“Sweet! Thanks.”

“No problem. Now get over here and quiz me on these vocab words, would ya?”

“Okay. Then maybe you can help me with my calculus.”

“We can start. I have to meet Wendy later,” Griffin said.

“Deal.”

“Griffin, you okay?” Wendy asked.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What are you thinking about so hard?”

“Maybe nothing.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know if anything did. I heard some of the guys in the locker room earlier, ragging on someone. They shut up when I walked around the corner. Toby would tell me if they were giving him shit, right?”

“I seriously doubt it, Griffin. Toby’s not the tattling type, and that’s what he’d call it. Why do you think they were talking about him, besides the fact that they shut up when you walked in?”

“They said blond, and something about a musical fairy.”

“That doesn’t mean it was Toby.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry for being distracted.”

“Then make it up to me,” Wendy said with a wicked grin.

“I think I can handle that.” Griffin rolled over to cover Wendy’s body with his own. His mouth melded with hers, putting an end to his worry and all conversation.

Chapter Two

After Griffin left to hook up with Wendy, Toby left for the pool. He was too restless to sit and study. There shouldn't be anyone else swimming that late, so he wouldn't be disturbed. Laps through the warm water always made him feel better, more centered.

He envied Griffin and Wendy. They were happy and a good match. Toby liked her. She let Griffin be who he was without trying to change him.

Toby wanted that. Someday, he told himself.

Stripping down to his swim trunks, he piled his clothes on the bottom row of metal bleachers then dove into the water. He kicked his legs behind him while his arms sliced through the water. He could feel the tension leaving his body with every lap he made.

After fifty laps, Toby swam to the ladder and climbed out. Surprise had him pausing mid-step. His towel and clothes were missing from the bottom of the bleachers. Resignation rounded his shoulders as he started moving again.

He looked around. Color floating on the surface of the chlorinated water caught his eye. His shirt, wind pants and towel were soaked. The shirt would be ruined, but the towel would survive. The pants, he didn't know. As soon as he got back to the dorm, he'd throw them in the washer. Toby slipped back into the water and fetched his things, then got back out. He wrung everything out, but even then, they were too wet to be any good.

Leaving the building, Toby trudged across the campus. "You look a little wet and cold, Simmons. I thought fairies flew everywhere," a voice sounded from behind him, a voice he knew all too well.

"Yeah, but then who would the big, tough guys like you harass?" Toby shot back.

"Are you mouthing off? Someone's feeling brave tonight. Maybe I should teach you not to fuck with me."

"You could, but then you know Griffin would be pissed. Can't have your best center pissed at you, now can you? What if he quit the team? How would your season end then?"

"Fag, watch your ass. Sooner or later, Griffin will get tired of you holding him back," Brock said.

Toby kept walking, not bothering to respond. His friendship with Griffin was solid. No way would his best friend get tired of him. But, even as he thought it, a little voice in the back of his head nagged the question, was he holding the one person who meant the most to him back?

When Toby met Griffin, they were in middle school. Mr. Proctor paired them up as science lab partners.

“I’m Toby.”

“Yeah, I heard Mr. Proctor say that.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“Sure, sure.”

They didn’t talk to each other much those first few days. Toby had been shy, and a little intimidated by the guy sitting beside him, while Griffin had a loner personality. On Friday of that first week, Toby wore his Foo Fighters graphic tee. Griffin had eyed his shirt, curiously. He finally asked Toby if he was a fan. Toby had enthusiastically said yes. Dark, shaggy-haired Griffin had nodded in approval. They talked the entire period about bands they enjoyed and hated. The teens agreed on most of their choices and harassed each other about some of the others.

“My dad got me tickets to see Green Day tomorrow night. You wanna go?” Toby asked.

“Yeah, I wanna go. Let me check with the parents. You got a cell number?” Griffin said.

Toby wrote down his number on a piece of scrap paper and watched Griffin stuff it in his pocket. The bell rang and both boys stood up. As Toby stacked his books, one of the kids who sat behind them came by and swiped the books off the table. Papers went flying and books crashed to the floor with a thud.

“You’re such an asshole, Church,” Griffin said as he bent over to help pick up the scattered schoolwork.

“Thanks,” Toby said, averting his eyes from his new friend. “If you don’t want to be seen with me, I understand.”

“Don’t worry about me. I don’t care what other people think.”

“Okay,” Toby mumbled, his gaze still downcast.

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“Don't let them get to you. There's nothing wrong with you.” Griffin stood up and grabbed his backpack from the desk. “I'll call you tomorrow and let you know about the concert.”

They had a great time at the concert. Hanging out after school and during lunch became a regular thing. The bullies backed off Toby with Griffin around. Toby talked his buddy into going out for the basketball team when he saw how much Griffin wanted to. Barring sickness and swim meets, the blond sat in the stands for every one of the taller boy's games. Griffin returned the favor and attended all of Toby's swim meets that he could.

In high school, the two had most of their classes together, and when the time for college came, they applied to the same schools. Griffin was offered basketball scholarships to some schools they hadn't tried to get into, but he turned them down, not willing to leave his best friend behind.

Chapter Three

“Get up! We’re gonna be late!”

Griffin grumbled and pulled the blanket up over his head. “Go away. It’s too early.”

“I’m going to leave without you.”

A minute later, Toby left his roommate in bed and headed for the park where the music festival would take place. Excitement had his feet moving fast across the campus. Dozens of people were milling around the park when he arrived. A table was set up with the majority of the people surrounding it.

“Thank you all for coming!” A professional-looking woman stood behind the table with her hands waving in the air. “We’ve divided you into groups, some setting up, some fetching supplies and one floating group to assist anyone who needs it.”

The group leaders stood away from each other and started calling out names. Toby headed for the woman who called his name. He would be part of the supply runners.

Two hours later, sweat matted his hair against his skull as he hauled a tent across the midway. His shirt stuck to his back.

“Hey, it’s the swimming fairy,” said a familiar, unwelcome voice.

Not today. I’m too tired for this. Toby closed his eyes. Brock was nothing more than an overgrown bully.

“What are you doing here, Simmons? I don’t think Barbara is scheduled,” Brock said.

“Stereotype much?” Toby asked.

“You mean you don’t love Barbara. I thought all you fags loved her. Oh, wait. I know. You’re a Cher fan.”

“Beat it, Brock. I don’t have time for this today.”

“I don’t think so. I’m kinda enjoying myself.” Brock walked over and knocked the folded-up material from Toby’s hands. “Pick it up.”

Toby scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed. “Just go away.”

“I said, pick it up.”

Toby bent over, intent on getting the tent and walking away. *Don't react.* As soon as he had the bulky load picked up, Brock knocked it from his hands again. The group behind him laughed as if it were the most hilarious thing they'd ever seen.

“What’s going on here?”

Oh shit. Griffin.

“Nothing. We’re just talking to your buddy,” Brock said. “How can you stand to hang out with him, Griffin? He’s gonna make you gay, just being near him.”

“You know, Brock. I knew you were kinda dumb, but I didn’t think you were that stupid,” Griffin said.

“Who needs brains when you can play ball like I can? C’mon. Leave the fairy and come hang out with us,” Brock said.

Griffin walked up beside Toby. “I gave my word that I’d help here.”

Brock rolled his eyes and curled his lip. “Next thing you’ll be doing is dating him. You’ll see. If you don’t get away from Simmons, you’ll be kissing dudes like he does.”

He shrugged. “I think it’s too late for me. Oh god! It’s bubbling up inside me!” Griffin’s eyes widened right before he reached for Toby. In the next second, their mouths were pressed together. Toby kept his body rigid, as his eyelids fell closed. He’d wanted to die laughing when his best friend started pretending to freak-out. Now he didn’t feel like laughing at all. The world had shifted on its axis.

“You are done on the team, Griffin. I always wondered if you were hiding being a queer. Now I know.”

Toby pulled back from Griffin and watched, horrified, as the jocks walked away. “Oh my god, Griffin! *What did you just do?*”

“Nothing, Toby. Forget about it.” Griffin looked pissed when he turned and left him.

He licked his lips and immediately wished he hadn’t. The taste of his best friend lingered. Toby could have gone his whole life without knowing Griffin’s flavor.

Okay. It doesn't matter. He was proving a point. Nothing more.

Toby shook it off and went back to work. Getting everything ready for the festival pushed the incident from his mind.

Chapter Four

Way to go. What were you thinking?

Pulling his cell from his pocket, Griffin sent a text to Wendy. *Have to talk to you.*

Her response was quick. *What's wrong?*

Something happened. I'll explain everything when I see you.

Okay. Love you.

He dropped his phone back into his pocket. Griffin stomped to the organizer's table and asked for his assignment. The girl manning it gave him directions to the group he was supposed to be in.

He fought for calm on the way over. It pissed him off when anyone messed with Toby. Teammates, people who were supposedly his friends, made it worse. How long had it been going on?

The group's leader put Griffin to work as soon as he walked up. Keeping busy meant he didn't have to think—think about what he'd done.

The tents and tables went up with everyone's help. Banners flew between posts and trees, blazing with colored advertisements and eye-catching pictures. At some point, enormous speakers, strategically placed, came to life with music. Toes tapped and booties shook while voices sang along. The atmosphere changed from arduous work to a party-like camaraderie.

The organizers sprang for pizza and sodas for the volunteers. As soon as Griffin could get away, he went to find Wendy.

“There you are.”

“What's going on, Griffin?” Wendy asked. “I've been worrying since I got your text.”

“Can we walk?”

“Sure.” Confusion dominated her face.

Griffin took her hand and started in the opposite direction of the festival site and the dorms. “Do you remember our talk the other night about Toby?”

“Yeah... Did something happen to him? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine, I guess. I caught the guys from the basketball team giving him shit.”

“Oh, no. What did you do? You don’t look like you’ve been in a fight.”

“No. Worse. I think I’m going to get kicked off the team. I mean, the season is over and it’s my last, but still...”

“Why? What did you do?”

“I kissed him, right in front of the entire team.” He watched as her mouth fell open. She was about to explode. “It didn’t mean anything, Wendy! I just got so pissed when they told me his gay was going to rub off on me. I didn’t think.”

He waited, but she didn’t say anything. She’d closed her mouth. Her face was carefully blank. “Say something.”

“I don’t know what to say, Griffin. I’m proud of you for taking care of your best friend. But I also don’t believe that it meant nothing.”

“I’m not gay. I don’t care about Toby in any way but friendship.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? That’s all you’re gonna say?”

“I told you, I don’t know what to say. What? You want me to scream and yell and break up with you?” She snorted. “I love you, Griffin. I really do. But I don’t expect us to last forever.”

Huh? That was news to him. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at her. He mentally made sure his chin didn’t drag the ground. “What do you mean?”

“Griffin, do you love me? Be honest,” Wendy asked.

“Well, I—Maybe?”

“Of all the times I have said the words to you, never once have you said them back.” She raised her hand, stopping him from saying anything. “I don’t want you saying them just because I called you on it.”

He winced. “Then why do you stick around?”

She shrugged and smiled. It wasn’t a forced smile. “Because I like being with you. We are good together.”

Griffin started walking again. “I like being with you, too. I wish I could say the words, ya know?”

Wendy hooked her arm through his. "I do know. That's why I haven't complained."

They walked in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. Griffin didn't regret his actions, but he didn't look forward to the fallout either.

Toby stood stock-still under the steaming hot spray of the shower. His hands were braced above his shoulders, against the slick tile, as his head hung down. Who knew tents were so heavy? The sticky, tight feel of his skin swirled down the drain as the water washed away the sweat and grime. Given the odd time of day, the showers were blessedly empty. Even so, he'd lingered as long as he dare. Straightening, Toby lathered his body and washed his hair to squeaky-clean. He shut the water off and grabbed a towel. With his tired eyes closed, he scrubbed his hair with the towel.

"Fag."

Pain exploded through his nose and the rest of his face as he fell backward. The back of his skull connected with the tile, the sound of it echoing through the shower. Black clouds drifted across his vision, like a gathering storm covering the sky. Toby fought not to pass out as he rolled onto his side and spit out the blood flowing from his nose.

I gotta get outta here.

Terror that whoever attacked him wasn't finished gripped his being. Toby watched the news. He saw the horror stories on the internet of gays being beaten to death, but he'd never had to deal with it. Griffin kept the haters at bay. *Griffin*. Toby couldn't let his best friend see him like this.

He managed to get to his hands and knees and started crawling across the floor. His vision wavered with the motion, making him sick to his stomach. Halfway to his pants, where his cell laid stuffed in the pocket, Toby couldn't hold back the nausea anymore, and threw up all over the floor in front of him. The violent retching was more than his head could handle, and he slumped to the floor.

Chapter Five

The sharp, burning scent jerked him from the dark oblivion. With the waking, came pain radiating all over his head.

“Don’t try to move, son. An ambulance is on the way.”

Toby peeled his eyes open. The shadow above him wouldn’t come into focus. He blinked once, twice, and waited for his vision to clear.

“Coach.”

Toby recognized the man kneeling over him from going to Griffin’s basketball games.

“Do you know your name, son?”

“Toby Simmons, sir.”

“That’s good, Toby. You just lay here until the ambulance arrives. Do you remember what happened?” The older man turned away, speaking to someone over his shoulder.

“Someone punched me while I was drying my hair. I remember falling backwards, and my head bouncing off the tile.”

“Did you see who it was?”

“No. My towel was covering my face.”

“Okay, then. The ambulance is here.” Coach said.

A rattle and the sound of plastic wheels on tile killed Toby’s head. He cringed as the noise grew louder before stopping beside him. After the EMTs settled him onto the gurney, they wheeled Toby to the ambulance and took off for the hospital.

Griffin and Wendy were heading back toward the dorms when his phone rang. He groaned when he saw his coach’s name on the display. “I guess I don’t have to wait to get kicked off the team. It’s a good thing this is my final season.”

Wendy slipped her hand into his and squeezed.

“Hi, Coach,” Griffin said.

“Hey, Griffin. I need the emergency contact for Toby Simmons. Do you have it?”

“Why?” Griffin’s wide eyes met Wendy’s as he frowned. He started walking faster, dragging Wendy along with him. “What happened to Toby?”

“I found him unconscious in the showers. Someone broke his nose. I’m pretty sure he’s got a concussion, too.”

“Shit! Where is he?” Griffin asked. The burn of anger and panic spread through his chest almost doubling him over.

“On the way to County. Son, do you have a number for me?” Coach said.

“I’m his family.” Toby’s family turned him away once he became legal. Griffin’s family treated Toby like he’d been born to them, so the impact hadn’t bothered him much. When they were accepted to the same college and had to fill out the forms, Toby put Griffin’s name down as the emergency contact. “I’m almost to my car, sir. Thanks for calling,” Griffin said. He hung up and shoved his phone into his pocket. “I gotta get to the hospital. Toby’s hurt.”

“What happened?” Wendy asked.

“Someone broke his nose, and Coach says he has a concussion,” Griffin said.

“I’m coming with you,” Wendy said.

“It might be late when we get back,” Griffin said.

“I don’t care.”

Griffin and Wendy picked up the pace to get to his car. They climbed inside, started it up and peeled out of the parking lot. Thankfully, the hospital was close by.

The two hurried into the emergency room and straight to the nurse’s station. “Toby Simmons,” Griffin said.

“Are you family?” The nurse behind the desk asked.

“Yes.”

“Just a minute, please.” She left the desk and walked down the corridor. A few minutes later, she came back and pointed Griffin in the direction of the curtained off area.

“I’ll wait out here,” Wendy said.

“Okay. I’ll be back,” Griffin said.

“Take your time, Griffin.”

The more steps he took toward Toby’s room, the angrier he became. This was his fault. If he hadn’t kissed Toby in front of everyone, they might have left him alone. *Please let him be all right.*

Griffin pushed the curtain out of the way and looked at his battered best friend on the bed. His eyes were closed, so Griffin tried to be quiet. He sat down in the hard plastic chair beside the bed.

About thirty minutes after Griffin sat down, a nurse ducked inside the curtain. “I need to wake him up.”

“Why? He’s hurt,” Griffin said.

“He’s got a concussion. He has to be awakened every hour for the next twelve hours,” the nurse said. She touched Toby’s shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. “How many fingers do you see?” She held up three fingers.

Toby blinked a couple times. “Three.”

“Do you know what year it is?”

“2013,” Toby answered.

“Good.” She turned to Griffin. “We’d like to keep him overnight, unless he has someone to watch him during the night.”

“I’ll watch him.” Griffin offered.

Toby rolled his head to the side where Griffin was now standing. “What are you doing here?”

“Coach called. How are you feeling?” Griffin asked.

“Like someone used my head for a piñata,” Toby replied.

“You’ll have to wake him up every hour and ask him questions,” the nurse said.

“No problem,” Griffin replied.

“I’ll get the papers and something for your friend to wear home.” The nurse disappeared behind the curtain.

“Who was it, Toby? I’ll kill ’em,” Griffin gritted out.

“I don’t know,” Toby said.

“Why are you protecting them?”

“I’m not. I didn’t see who it was. I had a towel covering my face,” Toby said.

Griffin’s temper seethed under the surface. If he ever found out who... “All right.”

“How bad do I look?” Toby asked, reaching up for his face.

“Well, you won’t be as pretty anymore,” Griffin joked.

The hospital released Toby a while later. They put him in the front seat while Wendy climbed in the back.

“We’re here. Wait there. I’ll come around and get you,” Griffin told Toby. Wendy crawled out of the backseat and stood beside the passenger door of Griffin’s car.

“Okay,” Toby agreed.

Wendy opened the door for Griffin.

“I can walk, you know,” Toby told them.

“I know. But your eyes are swollen, and I’d hate for you to trip over your own feet. I don’t want to take you back to the hospital for a cast.”

Griffin and Wendy walked with him back to the dorms, and settled in Griffin and Toby’s room. Wendy kissed Toby’s forehead, and then Griffin’s cheek before she left them alone.

Every hour, on the hour, Griffin woke Toby up and asked him basic questions. By the time dawn arrived, both men were grumpy and exhausted. At the twelve-hour mark, they passed out in their beds to sleep most of the day away.

When he woke, Griffin called the coach to let him know what was going on. Relief appeared to roll through the coach when he asked about Toby. He even offered help, should him or Toby need anything.

“You sure you’ll be okay?” Griffin asked, picking up his duffel.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Toby said from his reclined position on the bed. His chemistry book lay open across his lap, and a tablet beside his leg. “I’m just going to work on the vocab, and then maybe I’ll make myself something to eat.”

“Okay. I’ll be back after class,” Griffin said.

“Cool. See ya later,” Toby said.

Griffin walked out of their room, and Toby watched him until the door closed. This scenario had happened hundreds of times over the years they’d been friends. So why did this time feel different—off? Five minutes passed before Toby realized he was still staring at the closed door. His nose ached, as did the lump on the back of his head. He reached for the bottle of pain reliever and took three. Studying for his chemistry test didn’t seem to be a good idea when he couldn’t focus. He ditched the studying for a nap.

A few moments later, Griffin walked into the room and dropped his bag by the door. His long strides brought him to Toby’s bedside within seconds of the door closing. The look on his face was hungry, a look Toby never expected to see meant for him.

“I forgot to kiss you good-bye,” Griffin said softly. His mouth pressed against Toby’s in the next second.

Toby’s heart started to pound in his chest. He sat straight up in bed, his pulse still racing, and memories of Griffin’s kiss still lingering on his mind. He couldn’t help but compare dream Griffin’s kiss with the real one from a few days before. What could have possessed his best friend to lock lips with him in front of the basketball team?

He lifted his hand to trace along his lips. Toby swore they tingled from the visceral contact. He sighed. Why did he have the feeling his life was about to become more complicated? Because his best friend’s scent still lingered in his senses. Because he couldn’t stop thinking about how sexy his best friend’s ass looked in his wind pants when he left.

Over the years they’d been friends, Toby could count on both hands the times he’d seen Griffin without clothes. Then, it hadn’t fazed him. He didn’t see Griffin as anything but Griffin, his best friend, and that included never checking out his ass.

Wrong. On so many levels. My best friend’s ass is off-limits.

Chapter Six

“You want me to order us a pizza tonight?” Griffin asked from behind him.

Toby sat at his desk, poring over some make up work from the classes he'd missed. He turned in his chair to look at the other man. *Did Griffin just look away?* “Do you mind? I'm struggling to get through this calculus.”

“Do you want some help? I will, after I order our dinner,” Griffin offered.

“Yes.”

Griffin laughed, and picked up his cell to call for pizza.

Had he always had that dimple?

Toby took a minute to watch him talk. Griffin smiled at something the person at the pizza shop said, and Toby's heart gave a little flutter.

Stop staring. You have homework up the ying-yang.

Toby turned back to the open book on his desk, and picked up his pencil. He wrote out the example, trying to make sense of it.

“Okay. Pizza will be here in a half hour to forty-five minutes.” Griffin dragged a chair across the small room, and flipped it around to straddle the seat. “Whatcha got?”

Sliding the book over so Griffin could see, Toby pointed to the example on the page. “This.”

Griffin started explaining, and Toby listened. Toby learned better when hearing a lesson, as well as seeing it worked out repeatedly on a whiteboard. With him missing a week's worth of classes, he couldn't make heads or tails out of the assignment in front of him.

The patient voice, soft and close to his ear, made concentrating more difficult. A whisper of hot breath glanced off his cheek, and Toby shivered. If he turned his head, just a little bit...

No, no, no.

Pay attention!

Griffin's hand touched his forehead.

Toby jerked back. “What are you doing?”

His best friend frowned. "You shivered."

"I did not."

"Is your head hurting again?" Griffin asked.

"Calculus always makes my head hurt." Toby gave Griffin a lopsided grin.

"Let's take a break. Pizza should be here any minute."

"I'm gonna hit the bathroom before it gets here."

"Okay."

Toby slid from the chair and circled around the back to head out of their room. Just before the door closed, he looked back over his shoulder. He shouldn't have lied to Griffin. No, not a lie, more like a half-truth. Toby needed a minute to get his body back under control. Going to the bathroom was the best excuse he could think of.

Griffin forced his head not to turn and watch Toby leave the room. Watching his best friend was becoming alarmingly frequent. He told himself worry was the cause of his rapt attention.

He heard the door close, and his rigid body relaxed. He stood up and stretched out his stiff muscles. The scent of Toby's cologne lingered in his nose.

His cell rang from across the room. Racing over to grab it before his voice mail picked up, Griffin cleared his throat before answering. "Hello?"

"Pizza guy is here asking for you."

"Thanks. I'll be right down."

Griffin welcomed the distraction from things about Toby he should not be noticing. Snatching his wallet from the dresser, he left their room. He ran downstairs, paid the delivery driver for the pizza, and dodged eager, hungry looking faces on his way back up to his room. Food, then more calculus—the fun-filled night of a college student.

Chapter Seven

Knock, knock.

"Can you grab that, Toby? It should be Wendy," Griffin said from between the open closet doors.

"Sure." Toby slid from the bed to walk across the room. His eyes widened as soon as he opened the door. He let out a wolf whistle. "Damn, Wendy."

"You're so sweet," Wendy said, stepping inside their room. She twirled in a circle, grinning from ear to ear.

"Griffin's gonna swallow his tongue." Toby grinned back.

The closet doors closed behind him. He turned his head to look over his shoulder. His best friend dressed in a suit happened at funerals and weddings, and once a year, the basketball banquet. Toby's mouth went dry. He blinked and shook his head. "Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?" Toby teased.

"I saw that," Wendy whispered, close to his ear.

Toby jerked his head around to flash wide eyes at her. The lack of anger on her face was a confusing afterthought. "You didn't see anything. Please, Wendy?"

"What are you two whispering about?" Griffin asked.

"Nothing." They spoke in unison.

"No. That didn't sound guilty at all." Griffin chuckled as he neared them. "You look beautiful, Wen."

"You guys better get going. You don't wanna be late," Toby said.

Griffin held his arm out for Wendy to take and steered them toward the door. "I don't know what time we'll be back, but I have my key."

"Have a good time!" Toby shoved his hands into his pockets and watched them leave.

Walking to his desk, he sat down and opened his World History book. After ten minutes of reading, and realizing he had no clue what he'd read, Toby stood up.

Maybe a walk will clear my mind.

Grabbing a light jacket from the end of his bed, he left the dorm room. He pulled it on as he made his way down the unusually quiet halls. Many of the students in their dorm had to attend the banquet, so less people roamed about. He stepped outside, smiling as the breeze hit his face. It was refreshing after spending hours in his room catching up on homework. The bandages had come off of his nose, and the bruises were mostly faded.

He took off through the quad, towards the area set up for the music festival that coming weekend. Toby was beyond excited. He and Griffin had been to countless concerts in their high school years, and they always had a blast. With the new awareness of everything Griffin, those memories took on a new look in his mind. As hard as he tried, Toby couldn't beat the feelings for his best friend back, the emotions inside him were stronger than his will. He didn't want to fall for the brunet basketball player who'd been with him for every major event in his life. Complications, awkwardness, and resentment would ruin their friendship eventually. He'd lose the person who meant more to him than anyone else in the world.

The soft strumming of an acoustic guitar caught his attention as he neared a group of trees. Curiosity drew him closer to the sound. His eyebrow raised when he recognized the song as one of Dark Heart's most popular ballads. Whoever was playing had some serious talent. Toby wandered quietly across the grass and through the trees. He found a dark head bent over the guitar, playing, oblivious to everything around him. The man had one long leg stretched out in front of him, and the other bent at the knee.

Toby lowered himself to the ground beside the man, and closed his eyes to listen. So absorbed in the music, his eyes popped open when it stopped. Striking blue eyes met his, and Toby gave a small smile. "I apologize for intruding. I couldn't help myself."

"It's cool."

"You can keep playing. I won't bother you. I'd just like to stay and listen, if that's okay with you," Toby said.

"I'm Drake. You're welcome to hang," the other man said.

Toby's smile widened. "I know who you are." He blushed and looked down.

"You weren't going to say anything?" Drake's tone was dubious.

"I assumed if you wanted to be recognized, you'd be playing in the middle of the quad instead of hidden among the trees."

“What’s your name?”

“Toby Simmons.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Toby Simmons,” Drake said, with a smile. “You look like a man with a lot on his mind.”

“I do?”

“I saw you sit down. What were you thinking about?”

“How my life is balancing on the edge of a cliff, and with just one stiff breeze the wrong way, I’ll lose everything I hold dear?”

“That’s pretty heavy for someone so young.”

“You aren’t much older than I am,” Toby said.

“Tell me about him.”

“How do you know it’s a him?” Toby laughed, but the sound held more surprise than humor.

“Are you going to keep dodging my questions?”

Toby sighed, and pulled a blade of grass from the ground in front of him. “My best friend, Griffin, did something a couple of weeks ago that threw me into chaos.”

“What did he do?” Drake asked, laying the guitar beside him.

“He found some guys harassing me, and he kissed me in front of them to shut them up.”

“Whoa... Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve never thought of Griffin that way, but now it’s all I think about. I notice everything—the way he smells, what he’s wearing, and the sound of his voice. I remember the taste of him whenever I close my eyes,” Toby confessed.

“Is he gay, too?”

“No. Absolutely not. He has this really great girlfriend, Wendy. They’ve been together for a couple of years now.”

“You need to turn your feelings off before you don’t have a best friend anymore,” Drake said.

“Yeah. How do I do that, though?”

“You find a distraction.” Drake suggested, moving closer.

Toby swallowed hard. “What kind of distraction?”

Drake lifted his hand to mold it around Toby's neck. He added a little pressure, pulling Toby closer. “The hot, available kind.”

Drake angled his head, and pressed his lips to Toby's. Feather-light touches grew to sips until he felt the slick, hot tongue seeking entrance into his mouth. His heart raced in his chest as he leaned forward for more. His hands landed on Drake's thighs for balance.

This is all wrong. The taste is all wrong.

Toby sat back, ending the kiss with Drake. “I'm sorry. I can't.”

Drake shrugged and turned to pick up his guitar again. “It's all right. You're a good looking guy, Toby. I had to try.”

“Well, I can cross one thing off my bucket list, anyway,” Toby said, ruefully.

“Oh? What's that?” Drake asked, positioning his fingers on the neck of his instrument.

“Kissing a really hot lead singer.”

Drake laughed, as Toby hoped he would. “So, what are you going to do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You're in love with your best friend, your straight best friend.”

“Pretend. Hide it.” Toby sighed. “Die a little inside.”

They talked between random musical segments played on Drake's guitar. Toby sang along with the songs he knew.

“You have a decent singing voice,” Drake said.

“Thanks.” Toby blushed.

The moon hung high in the sky as he walked back to his dorm. He'd made a new friend tonight, complete with a cell number loaded in his phone. It turned out to be a good night.

Chapter Eight

Hundreds of people wandered around the festival. Music pumped through the speakers, and voices sang along. Toby followed behind Griffin and Wendy, weaving through the sea of bodies.

“The concert will be starting soon. How close do you want to be?” Griffin asked them.

“As close as we can get,” Toby said.

“What he said,” Wendy agreed with a grin.

Griffin nodded. “Okay.”

Griffin tried to ignore the nagging in the back of his head telling him something was wrong. Toby had changed in the last few weeks, but even more so in the last few days. On the other hand, maybe it was he who had changed. His relationship with Wendy had certainly become different. Affection still remained, but neither of them pushed for more than hand holding and chaste kisses. They spent most of their time these days talking... usually about Toby.

“How’s this?” Wendy shouted over the music, stopping about ten yards from the stage.

“This is good,” Toby yelled back, grinning.

Griffin bounced on the balls of his feet. The group on stage now played rockabilly, amping up the excitement in the crowd. He took Wendy’s hand and twirled her around, dancing with her in the small area they’d claimed for the three of them. The band finished up, leaving the stage to clapping, cheering, hooting and hollering.

“Everybody welcome Dark Heart!”

The emo-rock band strutted out under a thunderous applause. They wore huge grins, and waved to the gathered fans.

“All right! First thing. We’ve got a winner to announce!” the lead singer said into the mic.

The audience went wild for a half a minute before quieting again.

“Toby Simmons, come on up!”

Griffin turned to grin at his best friend. “Go!” He cheered louder than anybody as Toby made his way through the bodies in front of him. His grin

turned down into a frown when Toby walked across the stage and got a hug from Dark Heart's lead singer.

That was weird.

Even stranger was the way he leaned in to Toby's ear. Griffin watched his friend nod, give him a flirtatious smile and walk to the mic.

What the hell?

The song began, and Griffin recognized it as their most popular ballad. People all around him began swaying with their significant others, but he stood mesmerized. Toby sang along with the band. He could have been one of them; he sounded so good.

Across the expanse, his eyes met Toby's. Every word his best friend sang was like a sucker punch in the gut, stealing the air from his lungs.

When the song ended, Griffin shook from head to toe. Toby hugged the singer again, and got acknowledgment from the other band members.

"Give it up for Toby!"

The crowd erupted into cheers and applause. Toby exited the stage, but didn't rejoin Griffin and Wendy. Griffin watched him go.

He turned to Wendy. "I have to go. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for. Go." She smiled. "Good luck."

Griffin kissed her cheek and took off running, weaving through the people blocking his way. Somewhere along the way, he lost sight of Toby. Moving in the direction his best friend appeared to be heading, Griffin looked around. He spotted him entering their dorm and began running to catch up.

Thank god for being in shape!

"Hey!" Griffin said when he burst into their room. He stomped across the floor to wrap his hands around the smaller man's biceps. "I don't know what's going on with you and that lead singer, but he can't have you. You're mine."

"Wha—"

Griffin slammed his mouth to Toby's. He thrust his tongue between the slightly parted lips, and kissed Toby for all he was worth. He poured all the mixed-up emotions flowing through him into the kiss. He relaxed his hands and moved them up to cradle the back of Toby's head.

A moan, and then a whimper broke the spell, and he pulled his mouth away. Griffin leaned his forehead against the other man's and attempted to catch his breath.

Seconds passed before Toby shoved him away. He looked furious. "What the hell is wrong with you? Are you insane?"

Yep. He was pissed.

"No. Maybe. Probably." Griffin lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck. "I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?"

"How I felt about you. Not until I saw you making eyes with that guy," Griffin said.

"Drake? I wasn't making eyes with him. He's just a friend. What business of yours is it anyway?" Toby asked.

"You were. I saw you. I was there, remember?"

"Your imagination was working overtime. I love you, idiot!" Toby's eyes went wide as he slapped a hand over his mouth to mumble, "I didn't just say that."

"Oh yes, you did. And I'll be shit if you're taking it back." Griffin grinned. He couldn't help himself.

"Stop smiling! It's not funny!" Toby sank down on his bed.

Griffin walked over and knelt on the floor in front of his best friend. "You've been my best friend since the day we met. I've loved you all these years as my best friend. Today, seeing you on that stage, hearing you sing those words to me... I felt every single one of them, right here." He lifted his hand to pat his chest.

"What are you saying, Griffin?"

The look in Toby's eyes broke his heart. He had to fix this.

It's now or never.

"I love you as more than a friend, now." Griffin swallowed. "I think I have for a while."

"You can't. You're not gay."

"No, I'm not. But yes, I do."

“You do?”

Griffin saw a glimmer of hope in Toby's eyes. He lifted his hand and cupped his soon-to-be lover's jaw. “Mhmm. I just need you to be patient with me.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “I'm sorta new to all this. I've never been in love with a guy before.”

“What about Wendy?” Toby asked.

“Wendy wants to be a bridesmaid or best woman at our wedding.” Griffin smirked as Toby's eyes widened.

“W-wedding? She's getting a little ahead of herself, isn't she?” Toby snorted. It was the cutest sound Griffin had ever heard.

“I think it's a chick thing.” Griffin laughed. “But I told her she could, if, and when, you marry me.”

“Um. Okay.” Toby smirked. “Maybe Drake can sing at our wedding.”

Griffin growled and leaned in to be nose to nose with him. “No.”

Toby laughed and fell back on the bed. “This has to be the weirdest day ever.”

Griffin pushed his knees apart and straightened to lean over him. Beautiful brown eyes looked down at him with something Toby never thought he'd see from the man he'd known most of his life. “Weird good, or weird bad?”

“Weird good, definitely.” Toby stared into the eyes of the man above him. “Are you sure about this?”

“I think so. Maybe I should kiss you again, though. You know, just to be absolutely sure,” Griffin said.

Toby nodded. “I think that would be a good idea.”

Griffin lowered his body on top of Toby.

Toby could feel the hard lines of Griffin's body against him, and forgot to breath. It was even worse when Griffin's warm lips brushed over Toby's and coaxed them open before his tongue swept in for a taste. His hands rose from the bed to weave through Griffin's hair as his hips pressed up. A soft moan rumbled in his chest at the contact. He could feel Griffin's cock rubbing against his.

Oh god...

Griffin rocked over him, causing warm friction against Toby's shaft. Toby couldn't hold back an eager whimper, or stop his legs from closing around the hips pressed to his. Griffin's steady rocking, and the rise and fall of his own body, brought him to the edge of orgasm. He curled his fingers in the other man's hair as his body shuddered hard.

Griffin's groan vibrated against Toby's chest as he, too, climaxed. Griffin lifted his head, panting for breath. He looked down at Toby with a slow, lazy-looking smile. "Can we do that again?"

Toby's body relaxed as he started to laugh. "Anytime you want."

Griffin rolled off Toby, pulling him into his side. "That was incredible."

"I love you, Griffin." Toby closed his eyes and sighed happily. Now that he could say the words aloud, he planned to say them often.

"I love you, too."

Epilogue

Toby's arms were crossed loosely over his chest as he leaned in the doorway, staring at the man he shared his bed, apartment and life with. Griffin's towel-clad hips swayed back and forth. He hummed Dark Heart's song under his breath while he dug through his sock drawer. One year later, and the sight of his mostly naked body could still stop Toby in his tracks.

He turned his head in Toby's direction, a smile lighting up his face. "What are you doing?"

"Staring."

"Like what ya see?" He gave his hips a dramatic shake.

"It's okay." Toby shrugged, hiding his smile.

A rolled pair of socks bounced off Toby's chest. "Ass," Griffin said.

Toby chuckled and straightened from his position. He strode across the room to stand in front of Griffin. "I love everything about you. The package has definite perks, though."

Toby lifted his hand and slid his index finger down the center of Griffin until the towel blocked his way. He watched Griffin shudder, and his smile widened.

"You're such a tease," Griffin said.

"If your parents weren't going to be here any minute, I'd show you how much of a tease I'm not," Toby said.

Griffin grinned. "Later." He leaned in and took Toby's mouth in a scorching hot, toe-curling kiss. When he pulled away, Toby knew his eyes were dazed as he struggled for a ragged breath.

"Maybe if we're quick..." Toby suggested.

"No. Later." Griffin stepped back. "Go. Get. I need to get dressed."

"Oh. I came up to tell you the steaks are on the grill."

"Okay. I'll hurry."

Toby turned to walk back out of the bedroom. "I'll wait for you downstairs."

“Toby,” Griffin said.

“Yeah?” Toby looked over his shoulder with an eyebrow raised.

“I love everything about you, too.”

Toby's heart thudded hard against his ribcage. Griffin was his past, his present and his future. “Hurry up, or we'll be ordering pizza, and then your mom will move in to feed us.” He shot a wink over his shoulder as he disappeared around the corner. His life was damn near perfect now, and would only get better with Griffin by his side.

The End

Author Bio

Tracey Michael is the pen name of Tracey Steinbach. Her three children call her Mom or Mama. Tracey has been married for over twenty years to a man who's broadened her horizons. He introduced her to NHRA Drag Racing in 1997. She's been a fan ever since.

Tracey has an eclectic taste in music, enjoying everything from country to hard rock. Def Leppard is her favorite rock band.

Tracey enjoys watching Disney cartoon movies, action/adventure, and romantic comedies. Castle is her favorite TV show.

She loves watching NFL Football. Go 9ers and Saints!

Tracey has been an avid reader since her teen years. She started writing, seriously, after her first short story was accepted for an anthology in 2011. Reading books for a living had always been a dream of Tracey's. She often jokes that she writes to fund her reading habit.

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