

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

THE MISSING PIECES

Wt Prater

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE MISSING PIECES

By Wt Prater

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.

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

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Photo Description

The photo appears to be a posed studio portrait. The man on the left wears a suit and tie, and has dark curly hair. His smile is slightly goofy and a little wistful. The smiling man on the right has on a patterned casual shirt and his arm is draped across the other man's shoulders. He is dark blond, with a narrow moustache and trimmed beard. In front of them, a young teenage girl smiles widely, her long reddish-brown hair pulled up and allowed to fall around her shoulders.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been friends for as long as we can remember, but time and misunderstandings have meant that it's been almost a decade since we last spoke. It wasn't until our other best friend, our third Musketeer died and left her daughter to us to raise, together, that we saw each other again. What separated us and where do we go from here? I'm not looking for a fanfic, I want something original. I would like a HEA and if possible at least one sex scene. Otherwise I'm pretty much open to anything.

Sincerely,

Shanna

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: grief, hurt/comfort, homophobia, transphobia, men with children, high school, family drama, cliffhanger ending

Content warnings: This story is an emotional rollercoaster.

Word count: 9,649

THE MISSING PIECES

By Wt Prater

Prologue – Midnight, October 28, 2013

Death. Kicking the bucket. The Great After After. Whatever it was called, Joanne Dragoste wasn't going. Joanne had no memory of dying, but she felt gone. It may have been because she was in a forced sleep when it happened. All she knew was that she could see herself floating over the table looking down at the people rushing about, trying to save her. But she knew it was useless.

And overall, she felt happy and peaceful. Sure, she was a little pissed that even in the afterlife, she still hadn't shed her extra pounds, but she had to admit... she looked good, even perfect. She saw herself in the mirror, floating there with her multi-colored hair, her pale skin, and long white gown. She felt almost ready to continue her journey into the next realm. But something nagged at her. Everything had happened so suddenly. She had told everyone she loved them, but she didn't want to leave without saying good-bye, without making sure that both Shannon and Nicole were taken care of. She needed this, and even as the light formed before her eyes, she fought. She absolutely refused to go without this. She dug her nails into the fabric of life and held on. And even against death and the order of the universe, her stubbornness won.

She heard the whisper, "Four days." So she floated down the hallway and into the waiting room to begin the process of making sure all of her loved ones were taken care of.

Piece One – October 31, 2000

Joanne had never been a popular girl. She knew it. But what was more was that she had no desire to be one. She had seen how the popular girls in her school acted and she would be damned if she ever wanted that. She felt that her outcast status was by choice, not by decree. As she got ready for school, she stood fixing her hair in front of the mirror. She had been dyeing her curly, naturally reddish-brown hair black since she was twelve because she felt that looked more natural on her. And the blue streaks she had redone last night brought out the blue in her eyes. Her red shirt was tight in all the right places, reading “Kiss me” across her breasts and underneath, slightly hidden, it continued with “and die”. She didn’t care that other girls called her fat, she was curvalicious.

Within the last few years, she had learned that she didn’t care what anyone thought of her. By the time she had gotten into high school, all of the boys in her class were either afraid of her or hated her, which suited her just fine. She had never found a need or want for the lot of them. All of the boys she had dated had dumped her when she wouldn’t let them get into her pants. So to ease her heartache and keep loneliness at bay, she decided all of them were worthless.

She had decided that she needed to keep her friendship circle small. She had only found a few males who she trusted enough to even let become her friends. Martin Freeman, one of that few, was a boy who had been endlessly tormented by the other guys because they thought he was gay. That was how Jo and he had met.

One day, trying to escape the masses of people heading to a pep rally, Jo had entered what she had thought was an empty science room to find that Tony Pine and his jock friends had decided to torment a boy. She watched as Tony took the Teen Bop magazine and began to rip it into shreds while the other two football players held the boy.

“Hey Martin, need some fiber?” sneered Tony as he tried to force-feed the pieces to the boy.

So, this was the kid she had heard about, she thought as she looked around for something to use. Joanne picked up the broom in the corner and ran at the boys, swinging the broom and hitting both of the boys who were holding Martin with it. Martin took the opportunity and kicked out, hitting Tony in the crotch. The two kids who had been holding him tried to shield themselves from the hits, looking to Tony for direction. Getting nothing back because he was bent over holding himself, they quickly fled when they couldn't figure out what else to do. As Tony collapsed to the floor in pain, Joanne started to walk away herself. Martin chased after her, asking her why she stopped to help. He stopped in the hallway as she called over her shoulder, "I had some aggression to get out."

The next day Jo was sitting in the library at a table by herself. She was reading a Sherrilyn Kenyon novel when she heard the boy behind her bragging to his friends about "the queer he had tortured", and how he couldn't believe that that sicko was even allowed on school property.

"You little asshole!" Joanne said as she stood up and turned around. The boy's face turned pale when he saw who it was. "The next time you decide to pick on someone, why don't you even the odds instead of three to one? Ya think you're so big and bad, picking on a kid half your size? You know what you are? A judgmental jerkwad who's never gonna get laid by anything other than Rosie Palm and her five sisters. And if I hear of you laying another hand on that kid, I will personally hit you so hard your daddy will feel it."

With each sentence, she stepped a little closer. And as he tried to sit there and act brave, she continued until she was in his face. "If there's a next time—" She paused for dramatic effect, and the aggression seemed to roll off of her in waves. "You'll wish there wasn't. Got me?" she said, glaring into his eyes as the other kids backed away, showing that he was on his own with this girl. He nodded yes, his eyes showing his fear as the yellow puddle collected around his shoes.

Piece Two

As she exited the room, she glanced over to where Martin was hiding down the aisle, and Martin could swear that she winked at him. The other kids were so busy noticing the puddle and laughing at the boy, that no one noticed Martin watching. He hoped the shelves and the books blocked them from seeing him. When his best friend, Shannon Krieger, came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder, he almost screamed.

“What are you doing?” Shannon asked, glancing over Martin’s shoulder. Martin put his index finger to his lips, and led Shannon in the opposite direction, down the aisle away from the rest of the kids. Shannon followed him, continually looking over his shoulder trying to figure out what all the fuss was about. As Martin retold the story, Shannon nodded, looking excited and more than a little happy, probably because Tony had gotten a bit of his own. As he finished talking, Martin dabbed his eyes, obviously fighting the urge to cry.

“I’m so sick of this school. Every time I turn around there is someone who wants to beat the hell out of me. The only one who will stick up for me is Mr. Cobain, and he can’t follow me around all day. I just want out of this crappy-ass town,” Martin said, turning his head a bit and wiping his face. Shannon reached out to try and hug him. But Martin pushed him away, knowing that being hugged would just make him cry harder.

“Well, at least you got a couple guardian angels. Even if they ain’t all hot guys, which I know you would prefer,” Shannon said, finishing the statement with a little chuckle before continuing, “I want to meet this golden goddess. I’ve been back three weeks, and everyone else has told me to steer clear of the girl, and now you’re making her sound like a saint. I need to know for myself what to make of her.”

“Well, I know where she’ll be tonight. She runs with the Wiccan crowd, and they have a gathering of some kind for All Hallows Eve. My mom told me I’m absolutely forbidden, so of course, I’m going.”

“Correction... we’re going,” Shannon said.

Piece Three

As Shannon and Martin approached the clearing out in the middle of nowhere, they could see lots of people in various states of undress. Martin nudged Shannon, and pointed as he spotted Joanne standing naked before a small bonfire with the full moon shining down upon her. Her large breasts bounced as she moved around the circle, and he could hear her giggling, sounding as if she were drugged with the freedom of comfort and the power of her circle. He asked Martin to make sure he was looking at the right girl, and Martin responded, "Yup, that's the untamed horse that will never settle down."

Shannon stared at her as she moved around the fire and whispered, "Even her silhouette is beautiful."

Jo glanced over, noticing the two of them. And she grinned. She made no attempt to cover herself nor did she act even a little uncomfortable with the fact that both of them were staring at her. She smiled a little more and continued to move around the fire, her black hair with its blue highlights floating and landing as if she moved in slow motion.

Shannon's face changed as though a decision had been made. He proclaimed to Martin, "That is my soul mate. And I will do anything to get her. And keep her."

Piece Four – October 31, 2013

Shannon felt a shiver crawl down his spine and he couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching him. He had been in the waiting room of the hospital for over two hours trying not to jump out of his skin. He tried pacing a path in the floor but that hadn't helped. He had been assured many times that procedures like this were not generally risky, but for some reason, crazy negative thoughts kept popping into his mind. He had fought them off fairly successfully for the first hour. Unfortunately, they were coming more frequently and he was getting weaker trying to fight them.

As the doctor came out the double doors and crossed the floor to him still dressed in his surgical gown, Shannon had watched enough *Grey's Anatomy* to know by his face the news was not good. He stood as the doctor approached him and the man in the puke green gown and matching paper shoes stood there telling him things like “we did all we could” and “these situations are one in a million chances.” Everything sounded like a generic excuse. The doctor continued babbling, but Shannon heard very little of what he said. Time seemed to slow down and speed up simultaneously, and as every muscle in his body tightened in pain, Shannon found it hard not to collapse to the floor. He wanted to scream at the gods for taking the only person he had truly ever loved.

“Mr. Krieger, we have grief counselors on hand if you would like me to set up an—” the surgeon was saying even as Shannon got up and walked out the giant glass doors that led to fresh air. Sadly, it also led to the beginning of a world without his best friend and partner. Having not brought an umbrella, he walked to his green Nissan Leaf in the pouring rain. What amounted to a few hundred feet seemed to take an eternity to cross, mostly because his mind was lost in memories of the past. How perfect it was that the water showering down was cold and uncaring, as if helping him to understand the ways of the universe. He controlled nothing, and everything—including love, even true love—washes away. This glass was not half empty or half full. This glass was shattered, smashed to bits, and ground into every part of him.

Part of him wanted to rebuke himself for focusing on all the negatives. He wanted to tell himself to break out of the funk and stop being so morose right now. Alas, he felt justified in being upset, enraged even. At least for a little while. He couldn't believe that life could change so quickly with a look, a few words, and such little actions.

He felt himself getting violent again. He wanted to hurt someone, even if it was himself. He wasn't paying attention when a hand reached out and grabbed his shoulder. He swung out, punching the person in the chest before he even knew who he was hitting.

"Ouch!" his friend Easy exclaimed, his eyes expressing surprise but also incredible pain. "I just left long enough to go to the bathroom but when I came back, you were gone. Everything ohh—" he stopped as he looked at Shannon's worn-out face. Without words, Easy seemed to understand things were not as they should be and he wisely chose not to press for information. He handed over Shannon's cell phone, saying, "The Dragostes called your phone just as you were walking out. I didn't tell them anything. They were just calling to let you know that Nic is sleeping, and they asked that you or Jo call them before you come by to get her."

Oh dear Gods! Shannon screamed out in his mind. *I was so caught up in thinking about myself and how her*—he stopped because he couldn't say it yet, not even to himself in his mind. He hadn't thought about how her parents—or much more importantly, their daughter, Nicole—was going to respond to this.

Universe, please grind a little more of that glass into my heart. I'm not hurting near enough, he thought, cursing out loud. Even during the eight years they hadn't talked, Shannon knew he loved Jo, and Jo loved him. Sure, the last three years had been wonderful, but it wasn't enough. He just wished he could go back and save some of that lost time. If only Joanne hadn't been so stubborn. And closed-minded. For some reason *that* night flashed through his mind. The night of the party.

Piece Five – March 2002

For a year and a half, the two of them, Shannon and Jo, were best friends. They shared everything—secrets, crushes, and hopes. They spent so much time together, many people assumed they were a couple, which didn't bother either of them. But it had caused some stress for Joanne and her relationship with her parents. They even tried to forbid the two from having sleepovers or even hanging out. But they remained Super Glue-bonded to each other. Joanne tried to explain that they were just friends, but the Dragoste's made it clear that they didn't believe it. But Shannon and Joanne found ways to spend all the time they wanted with each other. Even if that meant using dates and other people as distractions. Ultimately, her parents told her that they wanted her to be happy, so if she wanted to be with Shannon, they understood.

Until Shannon's secret came out one night, during a secret sleepover at Jo's while her parents were out of town. Jo invited her two closest friends and the boy she had been crushing on, and the four of them were playing Truth or Dare. Joanne was sitting on her bed having Martin braid her hair, and Clifton Prescott was in the hot seat after having chosen Truth rather than Dare. Martin, who was also crushing on Clifton, had asked if Clifton was a virgin.

Even with his tanned skin, Clifton blushed bright red as he nodded his head yes. He glanced at all of them through the shaggy brown hair that covered half his face and smiled, showing his gleaming white teeth. Two of them were just slightly crooked, making him look even more natural, and adorable to Jo and Martin.

“Martin, your turn.” Joanne exclaimed, leaning in to whisper something in his ear.

“I take Dare,” he said proudly.

Jo grinned, “I dare you to take Clifton in the bathroom and find out who's bigger, you or him.” Martin glowed and jumped up, ready for the challenge. He reached out for Clifton, offering to help pull him up as well.

“Wait a minute. I didn't agree to this Dare,” Clifton answered, crossing his arms in defiance.

“So when we started this game, you said there was nothing you were afraid of. But now, now your true colors are showing,” Shannon said, looking at Jo and grinning mischievously.

“Fine, whatever,” Clifton said, grabbing Martin’s still extended hand and allowing the boy to pull him to his feet and toward the bathroom.

As the boys disappeared, Joanne looked to Shannon. “Okay, truth or dare?”

Shannon declared, “Truth.”

“Is there anything you ever wanted to tell me, but you couldn’t? And if so, what is it?” Joanne asked, looking intensely at Shannon.

And after a minute of silence, Shannon began to talk and reveal his darkest, most confusing secret. Trying to be brief, but babbling for what felt like forever, Shannon glanced at Joanne, who sat silently staring at her bed. She did not curse, much. But the only words that came out of Jo’s mouth for the next few minutes seemed to be expletives.

“What the hell does that mean, transgendered? Like you’re a boy trapped in a girl’s body? Bullshit,” Joanne said, waiting for Shannon to tell her it was all a joke. After a few moments of silence, Joanne continued. “You’re kidding me, right? I mean, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” she said, staring at Shannon. Joanne pointed to the door and said, “Get your shit and get out of my house.”

Shannon grabbed the sleeping bag by the door and walked out, head hung low. Joanne slammed the door so hard that everything in her bedroom shook. She could not remember a time when she had been so furious. Being gay was one thing, but this, this was too far. She was worried about Shannon’s soul and eternal damnation, but at this moment all she could feel was anger. She could almost feel Shannon standing outside the door, waiting, hoping that the door would open. But Joanne couldn’t bring herself to open the door. Or accept this “revelation”.

Piece Six

In the bathroom down the hall, what had started as a “measuring challenge” became something more. Martin and Clifton agreed that they both should be hard if they wanted to truly see who was the biggest. But as the boys stood there masturbating, they were both so nervous that neither of them could get hard.

Martin looked at Clifton, trying to concentrate, and then asked, “So, Clifton, ummm, you said you were a virgin. But have you ever had a blow job?”

Clifton looked at him, puzzled and slightly scared. Martin was sure that Clifton had heard he was gay, so the fact that Clifton was here was a step in the right direction. Without another word, Martin got on his knees, penning the other boy in between him and the vanity. Clifton placed his hands on the counter behind him as Martin licked his lips and then began to play with Clifton’s cock using his tongue. Martin licked his body, creating sensations Clifton had never felt before. The tongue against his crotch, his sack, caused his dick to stiffen, giving Martin more to lick. Next, using one hand to hold Clift’s sack and the other at the base of his cock, Martin slid just the head in and out of his mouth.

Clifton had no doubt Martin had experience. Either that or he was just really fucking gifted.

As Martin’s throat relaxed, he took more and more of the other boy’s cock until his face was buried in the brown hair that sparsely covered Clift’s crotch. Then he backed off, and using the saliva that covered the shaft as lube, Martin wrapped his fingers around Clifton’s cock and moved his hand up and down, up and down. And with his mouth covering the rest of Clifton’s dick, the two worked together to titillate every sensitive spot he could find.

Clifton had never thought of himself as gay, but at this moment he didn’t care who was doing it. He was enjoying every movement made. Martin sucked harder and used his tongue on the underside of the head, and Clifton breathed even harder. Clifton knew he was close, so he urged Martin to speed up,

driving him over the edge. Clifton felt every muscle in his body seize and then relax as he came so hard he could see stars.

The door to the bathroom opened and Shannon stood in the doorway, seeming to be paralyzed by the sight. Clifton pushed Martin away hurriedly, and pulled up his pants.

“Please don’t tell Joanne. Please. I really want to ask her out, and I’m afraid she’ll never—” Clifton said, rushing all his words together.

“I doubt Jo will ever speak to me again,” Shannon said, trying to keep the tears from falling. “Martin, can you give me a ride?”

Piece Seven

“Shannon, do you need a ride?” Easy asked, snapping his fingers in front of Shannon’s face, waking him from the memory. Shannon slowly shook his head, trying to clear it of the cobwebs of memories. Easy stood there, with the umbrella slightly covering both of them.

“Hey, you okay?” Easy paused, his face showing that he realized the stupidity of his question. “Okay, I know you’re not... *okay*, but can I do anything for you?”

Shannon knew that if he opened his mouth, it would signal the opening of his tear ducts, so he simply shook his head again. He looked at Easy as he leaned in to hug him before Easy left, and he thought that Martin would have really liked him.

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride?” Easy asked once again. Shannon shook his head no. Handing him the umbrella and leaving him to his thoughts, Easy shook his head in sadness and walked to his vehicle. He glanced back at Shannon who stood lost in thought as Easy got in his big truck and slowly drove away.

Shannon stood there a few minutes before he noticed the breeze had shifted again. Shannon realized the rain had stopped and the moon shone down on him brightly. He could feel the air move, and the energy around him became very comforting, as if magical.

He could swear he heard his name being whispered on the wind.

“Jo... Jo, are you here?” Silence. Nothing. Then the car beside him went wild, lights flashing and signals going off. “Jo, I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t leave me like this.”

“Sorry, bud. Didn’t mean to scare you,” a man in a brown hat and large glasses said, as he got into the car he had just unlocked with his “magical” clicker.

Shannon stood there as the man reversed out of the space, and drove away. He felt stupid for thinking that—He stopped. Jo’s necklace, which had hung

over his rearview mirror for the last five years, was gone. Shannon quickly unlocked his door and saw the necklace with its silver cross was now hanging around the passenger seat headrest. He knew he hadn't moved it, and no one else but Jo had a key to his car. Shannon walked around the car, and written on the dirty passenger side door was a name: Clifton.

Outside of the last few minutes, Shannon had barely thought of him, or his relationship to their little group, during the last three years. Jo had never broken off her relationship with Clifton, even after the two of them divorced. Even after Shannon and Jo had gotten married, she had stayed close friends with Clifton. And most of the time, Shannon hadn't cared. But this, this pissed him off. Of all things she could "say" to him, he couldn't understand why Clifton was the one word she would choose to use. As he got into his vehicle and headed toward the shop that Clifton owned, he hoped he would find out for sure.

Piece Eight

The next time Shannon saw Clifton Prescott's face, it was covered in blood. He lay on the floor bleeding by the time the principal broke up the fight. His tormentor, Tony Pines, stood over him, kicking the boy he had defeated before the first punch was thrown.

"What did I tell you about talking to my girl? Huh, faggot? I told you, one more time and I was gonna whoop your ass, didn't I?" Tony said, with an evil gleam in his eyes that announced to the world he was ready to go the distance in terrorizing anyone he could. His girlfriend, Mitzi, stood on the sidelines, looking like she felt a little bad that she had instigated a conversation, but not really.

Shannon tried to get through the crowd, but it seemed everyone was locked in place, watching Tony go crazy on the kid. Trying to get Tony's attention, Shannon shouted, "Leave him alone, you jerk!"

"Yeah, you coward, pick on someone your own size!" Joanne added, standing on the other side of crowd. The two watched each other and Tony as he picked Clifton up to punch him again.

"All right, all right. Break it up," the principal said as he pushed through the crowd. Tony immediately released the boy and stepped away. Clifton crumbled to the ground. Mr. Cobain grabbed Tony just as he started to leave with the rest of the crowd. "What is going on here, Mr. Pines?"

"Nothing," Tony said as he glared at Clifton and dared him to deny this.

Clifton scrambled up and off the floor, looking like he had been caught in a paper shredder and then put back together. He tried to control his body as it shook in a mixture of fear, humiliation, and anger. It looked, for a moment, like he was going to blurt out everything that had happened, but when he opened his mouth to speak, all he mumbled was, "Nothing. I just tripped."

"Mr. Prescott, are you sure?" Mr. Cobain asked, looking suspiciously at everyone. Clifton nodded. "Well, do try to be more careful. I swear, you kids think everything is a spectacle. Instead of watching, why don't you try helping

once in a while?” Mr. Cobain asked no one in particular as the kids continued to drift away, knowing that the entertainment was over, at least for now.

“This ain’t over, pretty-boy,” Tony hissed as he walked past Clifton, glancing back to see that Mr. Cobain was watching him very carefully.

When he had gotten farther down the hall, Clifton, Joanne, Shannon, and Mr. Cobain worked together to collect all of Clifton’s papers and books, which were all over the hallway.

“I don’t understand, for the life of me, why you kids don’t confront him. Or at the very least, tell the truth so I can suspend that little punk,” Mr. Cobain said, looking directly at Clifton. “One day, you will look back and see that a bully can’t bully those who do not give him power.”

“You’re right, Mr. Cobain. The only problem is that I would really like to live long enough to have that reflection on my past,” Clifton said, as he sat down on the floor and tried to reorganize one of his reports that was due next period.

“So, what was this one about?” Mr. Cobain asked, handing Clifton the rest of his papers.

“It was another stupid rumor about me and Martin. I swear, sometimes I feel like I’m gay by association.”

Shannon handed him his history book and then placed a hand on his shoulder. Joanne passed him his geography textbook and sat down, trying to help him organize his papers. They both looked like they understood, but neither spoke a word.

“What the hell?” Martin asked as he ran up to his friends.

“It was nothing, Mr. Freeman. Now, I suggest all of you head to class as you are already late.” Mr. Cobain reached in his pocket and pulled out a small pad. “Here are hall passes, as well as a tardy slip so that you don’t get in trouble with your next teachers,” he said, handing slips to all four of them. They all looked at him, wondering why this generally cranky man, who delighted in punishing the kids, was being so nice. As they stared at him, he

looked back and that familiar “about to be in trouble” look returned to his face, as he pointed and shouted, “Go! Now!”

The four teenagers hurried down the hallway, talking quickly about what had happened. Because Jo and Shannon were in class together, Clifton and Martin went down one hallway and the other two down another.

“Can I talk to you?” Shannon whispered to Joanne as they walked. She acted as if she hadn’t heard anything.

“Hey, wait,” Clifton said, pointing at Jo, whom he had just started dating. She stopped, and he ran up to her and kissed her gently, but passionately, on the lips.

“Can you give us a minute, Clifton?” Shannon asked.

“You don’t need a minute. You don’t need anything, except to stay away from me,” Jo said, not looking at Shannon. Shannon looked shocked and backed away from Joanne.

Clifton turned to Martin and said, “Go ahead to class. I’ll catch up with you. I gotta clean up first. You wanna help?” he asked Jo suggestively. She nodded, and giggled. They headed off together to the nurse’s office.

“What was that all about?” Martin asked, looking at Shannon.

Shannon shrugged and walked away, not knowing that was the last interaction he would have with them for the next eight years.

Piece Nine

“What do you need?” Clifton asked as Shannon entered the store. In the last five years, the two of them barely spoke. Of course, being dumped for another guy rarely helped two people get closer. In some ways, Shannon could understand why Clifton was upset: after eight years of marriage, Clifton’s wife had left him for another man. *But he had to have known that Joanne wasn’t in love with him, right?* Sure, Clifton was in love with *her*, but from what Jo had told Shannon, she had never been in love with *him*.

So when Shannon re-entered the picture, it shouldn’t have been a total shock—it was only a matter of time before they would get together. And they had tried to be patient. They hadn’t even started dating until after the divorce was finalized. But all that didn’t seem to matter to Clifton, he had still lost his wife to the person he referred to “as the trans freak”.

Shannon stood in the doorway, unsure of how to even begin to tell Clifton that Jo was dead. Sure, they weren’t best friends, but Shannon knew Clifton considered Jo the love of his life.

“What do you want?” Clifton asked, feeling even more annoyed than usual.

“Umm... I... uhuh,” Shannon stammered.

Clifton looked up from his books, and could tell from Shannon’s face that something was wrong. “What is it? Is it Jo? Is something wrong with Nicole?” Clifton asked, swallowing hard.

Shannon whispered, “It’s Jo. She’s gone.”

“What? What do you mean, she’s gone? Where did she go?” Clifton asked, trying to remain calm and failing.

“She was in the hospital, and the doctor came out. And...”

He kept rambling, but Clifton grabbed his chest and whispered “How is it that I wasn’t even told she was even in the hospital?”

He glared at Shannon, looking as if he were ready to kill him, but as he saw Shannon’s transformation into a crumpled mess, his eyes and his heart

melted. Shannon leaned against the window for support, as his face completely distorted into a blubbered mass, mumbling through the tears and heaves about the doctor and everything he said. Clifton crossed the room still unsure of whether he wanted to punch Shannon or hug him. But as he reached the sobbing puddle of a man, he grabbed Shannon and pulled him into a tight embrace.

With his other hand, Clifton reached out and locked the door and flipped the open sign to closed, because he knew Shannon would not want anyone to see him like this. The two men held each other and cried for their loss of the woman both of them loved more than life itself.

As Clifton continued to hold Shannon, he asked softly, “What about Nicole? Does she know yet?”

Piece Ten

“Fuck you, life,” Joanne Dragoste said as she watched the plus sign appear on the stick. She had a week left of high school, and apparently now a baby on the way. She knew instantly whose baby it was, but she also knew she couldn’t tell him. He had already accepted a full scholarship to a college four states away, and if she told him, he would do “the honorable thing” and stay there with her. There was a small part of her that wanted that, but she knew neither of them would be happy after a while.

She had a brief conversation with herself in the mirror.

“One time, one lousy, drunken time and you get this.” She paused. “You know you can’t raise this child by yourself. It’s not even a question. And there is a good likelihood that Mom and Dad will be willing to help, as long as you do everything they tell you to, exactly as they tell you to. So that leaves you with one option. Sell it to the highest bidder,” she said, trying to make herself laugh, but failing. “He’d marry you. You know he would. Despite, or even because of this. His parents are scared to death that he’s gay. So if you offered to lie and say the kid’s his, I’m sure he would love that. Not to mention his parents. The guy’s barely eighteen, and they are already pressuring him to have kids. So it’s your call, Cinderella. Who are you taking to the ball?”

As she stared at herself in the mirror, at her bright blue hair and deep blue eyes, she noticed that her acne was getting smaller. Yippee, I’m growing up, she thought. She noticed the circles under her eyes and wondered how long those had been there. She pulled her cheeks down, trying to figure what she could do to make her skin flattering and more lifelike. “Shouldn’t I be, like, forty or something before I start worrying about bags and sags?” she wondered.

“Fuck you, life,” she said again as she started to pack things into her purse and figure out who she was going to tell first.

Piece Eleven

Shannon was standing outside smoking when he saw Martin's car pull into the funeral home parking lot. He had been dreading this moment, not because of Martin, but because this made it all real. He had been praying the earth would end in a giant explosion, anything that would get them out of having to walk into that building and see her in the coffin. As Martin got out of his car, Shannon put out his cigarette and checked his hair in the mirror of a nearby car. He tried to position his short dark-blond hair so it looked styled instead of unkempt. He was still working on it when Martin approached. They awkwardly hugged and walked inside together.

The first thing to greet them was a giant picture of Jo smiling, with her almost-straight teeth shining against the deep red lipstick she had worn especially for that picture. Her hair was pulled back, but the blue streaks accentuated her face as she had purposely left those parts down. As the men walked into the building, both of them seemed to relax as they felt her spirit surround them. Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You" played softly in the background. It had been one of her favorite songs.

As they moved farther down the hall, a man stood greeting people, an employee of the funeral home. Shannon didn't recognize him at first, but then he saw his name tag, *Tony Pine*. When he saw them, his face lit up, and he walked quickly toward them.

"Hey, guys. How are you? Doing okay?" he asked as he pulled Martin into a hug.

"I'm fine. Thanks," Martin answered, his voice muffled by Tony's jacket.

"The family is already inside. They asked me to bring you guys in when you got here," he quietly told them as he released Martin and put his arm around Shannon, guiding them to the door of the room where Jo lay. "If you need anything, anything at all, let me know," he whispered as he ushered them inside and closed the door behind them.

Shannon stood next to the door, afraid. Afraid to run. Afraid to move forward. But mostly, afraid of interrupting. Sitting on one of the benches along

the far side of the room, Martha and Patrick Dragoste, Jo's parents, noticed them standing awkwardly by the door. Martha got up slowly, as if every part of her body was mourning, and she needed to move slowly to accommodate it. When she reached them, she pulled Martin into a hug and cried softly on his shoulder. He rubbed her back while Shannon tried to identify how to feel.

He felt like Data or Spock trying to analyze and understand human emotion. He had always seen dying as a celebration of life. The next step. He had studied many religions, and found that cannibalizing them all and taking small parts of each was his path. While he waited to be acknowledged, Shannon looked around the room and saw Patrick and Nicole sitting on one bench, and Clifton sitting a few feet away on another. Martin looked to Shannon, but all Shannon seemed to notice was Nicole, who seemed to be crying or sleeping on her grandpa's shoulder.

Martha finally released Martin, but she continued to ignore Shannon. She grabbed Martin's hand and led him up to the coffin. Unsure of what to do, Shannon followed them. Although he believed death was a celebration, looking down at Jo's body he felt a flood of sadness unlike anything he had ever felt in his life. Her face was lightly painted with make-up, and her hair was curled up as if it had been done by a professional. She wore a beautiful black gown with sparkles gathered in various designs. She had never looked more like a beauty queen than she did just then.

Shannon didn't know where it came from, but that was the thought that broke him. A sob poured out of his throat, and he began crying uncontrollably. He didn't want to, but this was the death of his first true friend. The first person who ever really knew him. His soul mate. She had meant so much to him, and he wasn't sure she knew.

As Shannon bent over and kissed her cold cheek, he heard Martin kissing her hand and whispering, "I'm so sorry I left you. I should have stayed in contact. I should have been here for you. I'm sorry."

Martha handed Martin some tissues, and he, in turn, gave some to Shannon. They stood, looking down at Jo's body again, when Shannon noticed toward the back of her head, almost hidden, was a clip of blue hair strung in

with the rest. He nudged Martin, and pointed discreetly. Shannon smiled. *Still a rebel even in death*, he thought, and kissed her on the cheek again.

As they walked toward the benches where Patrick, Nicole, and Clifton were sitting, other people started to enter the room. Clifton nodded at Shannon, acknowledging him, but Shannon sat down on a bench by himself. The service was short and led by a preacher who obviously did not know Jo, or Shannon assumed so, by the way he kept referring to his notes and mispronouncing her last name. When he asked if anyone wanted to share, Martha went up, but barely made it through a full sentence before breaking down again. Patrick went to her, finishing her short speech.

Shannon watched Nicole, wishing he could be there for her. But he had agreed to let her spend some time with her grandparents. As he watched her bond with Martin while the Dragostes spoke, he found himself getting jealous. He just sat watching, fearing that he had lost his daughter, his last link to Joanne. Shannon was so lost in studying them together he didn't notice Clifton walked past him until he heard the voice coming through the microphone.

"I'll keep it short and sweet, sorta like Jo was. This was her favorite poem, it's actually a song, but I'm not gonna sing cuz I want to have mercy on y'all's ears. So..." he said, pausing for a moment, breathing, and holding back his emotions as best he could as he read "I Sing the Body Electric" from Fame.

He finished reading the lyrics, and he folded up the piece of paper he had been reading from, and walked back toward his seat. As he walked by, he handed the paper and an envelope to Shannon. The service ended, and Shannon, Martin, and Clifton all smiled, knowing that Jo was with them in her own way.

Piece Twelve

Joanne looked at herself in the mirror and cursed. More than anything, she hated her dress. It was beautiful with its frills, ribbon, and pearls, but she didn't want to wear a white wedding dress. It just wasn't her. Her mother stood behind her in the mirror, her smile almost as bright as the dress. Joanne twirled around looking for any flaw, any reason at all she could give her mother that she couldn't wear it. But she had to admit it was gorgeous. Unfortunately, that didn't change the fact that she felt it was not for her, and to wear this particular garment on a day that was supposed to be her special day would be wrong. She decided to try the honest approach, but she had a feeling an argument was in the very near future.

"Mom, this dress is gorgeous. Really, it is, but it's not me. I don't think I should wear this for my wedding," she said, as she looked her mother in the face and tried to see how she was reacting.

Her mother looked into her eyes for a moment before turning away and collapsing into the nearest chair in true "drama queen" fashion.

"Three generations of Dragostes have gotten married in this gown," Martha said, sobbing into the soft red fabric of the chair.

"Mom, please stop it. You forget that I was with you when you bought this dress for when you renewed your vows to Dad."

Miraculously, tears gone and makeup perfect, her mother sat up and looked at her. She blinked a couple of times and sat there silently for a few seconds. And then, patting her dress down flat against her legs, she looked to Joanne and smiled. "I was just kidding," she said, adding a weak laugh afterward.

The door vibrated as her father knocked on it. "How are my girls doing?" he asked as he cracked the door. "Everyone decent in here?" He pushed the door farther open. Martha pulled him into the room and pointed toward Jo, asking "Doesn't she look marvelous?"

“Wow, honey, you do. It’s still a beautiful dress. But, umm, are you sure that dress is you, Josie?” He asked, looking to both women for some kind of response. Martha’s face went to various shades of angry, while Jo just breathed out and looked relieved.

Piece Thirteen

The Dragostes had insisted on a second ceremony, a second funeral, in their church, the one Jo and Shannon had refused to get married in. Shannon couldn't understand why they needed a second funeral. Except they wanted to control everything. As he sat in the pew, he glanced at Nicole sitting with them, and then at Clifton and Martin, who were sitting together. For the first time in days he was alone with his thoughts, and for the first time it hit hard—he was going to lose Nicole. That thought tore him to shreds.

Shannon had never considered himself a Christian, but he believed he had seen Satan in his truest form. His name was Patrick Dragoste, a man completely hell-bent on his destruction, and that was before Jo had died. Now that she was no longer around to be a calming influence on him, Patrick seemed to have gone completely crazy in his attempts to get Shannon out of his life, their lives. In the last few days, he had locked Shannon out of the house he and Jo shared, using the fact that Shannon's name was not on the mortgage. He had also tried to take Shannon's car, but luckily that at least was registered in his name.

Shannon would have walked away, mourning on his own time and finding a new space, but there was one huge issue—Nicole, the eleven-year-old girl that was tied to both of them. Nicole had called him “daddy” for years, but Patrick refused to acknowledge their connection. Nicole was related to them by blood, what chance did he have?

Shannon sat watching her interact with the Dragostes from across the church. It was obvious she loved them very much, and they loved her. He just wished that love, or at least that mercy, was extended to him. As Patrick and Martha in turn glanced his way, he could see in their eyes that nothing he could do would ever be enough for them. Even as he smiled in their direction, Shannon thought about Jo and wished she were here to calm the storm.

He held the envelope that Clifton gave him in his hands. And in his nervousness, he flipped it over and over. He was scared to open it, but finally curiosity got the best of him. He tried to open it as quietly as possible. He

unfolded the document that was inside, and read it as quickly as he could. He didn't understand a lot of the legalese, but toward the bottom of the second page, he saw something that made him want to start dancing, even though they were at Jo's funeral. He continued to keep his composure and waited for the ritualistic, boring funeral (that Jo would have hated) to be over. He understood that this was the same church Nicole had been baptized in, but neither he nor Jo had been here in years.

Piece Fourteen

Joanne lay screaming on the table. Her mother was holding her hand, and trying to get her to breathe. They had taken Lamaze together and while her mother tried to hold to the teachings, Joanne just wanted to strike her mother repeatedly as Martha repeated instructions over and over again. Everything sounded like babble as another wave of pain kicked in, and she found herself regretting refusing all the drugs they had offered until the last few minutes. She wanted to believe it would be worth all this, but right now as she felt crushed by overwhelming pain, she just wanted it over with.

“We are almost there. Keep pushing,” the doctor said, his head disappearing into her crotch again.

“Almost?” she tried to say through gritted teeth, and set her head back down on the sweat-drenched pillows.

Her mother, obviously taking advantage of the break in the waves of pain, tried to distract her by asking, “Have you decided on a name, honey? I still think Elizabeth is a wonderful name. So is Barbara.”

“Mom, I already told you I am not naming my kid after Barbra Streisand. I can’t stand her music,” Jo said, ready to snap. “Or her face.”

“Okay. So what are you leaning toward?”

“I’m thinking Satine from Moulin Rouge. I think it has a very exotic feel to it.”

“You want to name your child after a prostitute? You think that sends a positive message to her?” Martha asked, frowning down at her.

“Ok, how about Nicole? After Nicole Kidman?”

“Well, aside from marrying that psycho in the cult, I think she is a very strong woman. So I guess that would be fine.”

Jo rolled her eyes, and laughed for a moment before it turned into another moan and then a scream.

“Push, Joanne. Push,” the doctor said urgently, looking very intently at her.

And then it happened... She felt the pain subside as the sweat rolled down her forehead and her mother rushed to wipe it away. The doctor held the baby up, and even with her eyes closed and her skin covered with the various birth liquids, Nicole was the most beautiful thing that Jo had ever seen. Ever.

The doctor handed her to Jo, and Jo looked down on this tiny life that she was now responsible for. She was in love as she had never been before in her life. She looked to her mother, so grateful she had been there. But that did not change her mind about her decision.

“Mom, I need you to make me a promise. I need you to swear that you will never tell Martin that this is his baby. I need you to swear, or you can’t be a part of Nicole’s life. Even a little. Promise me, Mom.”

Her mother looked at her with tears forming in her eyes. Jo knew her mother adored Martin, and wanted him involved in the picture regardless of his... preference. She could see her mother waffling back and forth on this decision. So she spoke again, “I know you. You can’t imagine not helping raise this child.”

“You’re right, but I can’t help to hope that you change your mind,” her mother said, looking as if she was resigning herself, but then she added, “I promise. I promise as long as you promise to marry Clifton Prescott. I don’t want to think about you as a single mother. And I know he will be happy to support you. Deal?”

When Joanne said nothing, her mother spoke again. “You and I both know this is a difficult decision to agree to and I sincerely hope one day you would feel differently. But until then, I will hold up my end of the agreement as long as you do. So do we have a deal?” Sticking out her hand as if this were a business arrangement, she waited for Jo to take it.

Not seeing any other options, Jo took her hand, nodded her head, and said, “Deal.”

Piece Fifteen

Shannon beckoned to Nicole that it was time to go. As she started to run to him, Patrick stopped her, and for a moment Shannon thought he was going to start a scene right there in the church. Instead Patrick walked over to him, reached forward, and surprisingly pulled Shannon into a hug.

In the eyes of everyone watching, it looked heartfelt. It looked like a family together still grieving the loss of one of their own. In reality, Patrick pulled Shannon forward to whisper in his ear. “I know you are just a giant freak of nature. I also know all your little dark secrets, and if you fight me for custody of Nicki, the light will shine on all of them. All your shadows will consume you and I will watch you be devoured by it.” Patrick finished speaking and stepped back; giving Shannon a maniacal grin that only he could see. He patted Shannon on the back while shaking his hand to finish “the show”.

Shannon stood there enraged, trying to decide what he should say or do. As Patrick walked away, Nicole walked forward and reached out for Shannon. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. Shannon found that Nicole had that same effect on him that her mother once had. He held Jo’s will, in which she had left the guardianship of Nicole to Martin and him, in one hand, and Nicole’s hand in the other. And as he walked out of the church, he smiled. He felt focused, and righteously angered as he whispered “Game on,” and prepared himself for war. For his daughter.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This puzzle is not fully assembled. When I began this story, I plotted everything out and planned to do it all in five thousand words. However, there is a lot more that Shannon, Clifton, Jo, the Dragostes, and, of course, Martin, want to say, so I decided to stop here for this part and continue this story as other projects. So this is not the end for these characters, this is merely the beginning. Stay tuned for more!

Author Bio

Wt Prater is a writer who spends most of his time either on Facebook or updating the Just Write and SO Gay blog. He is a host with Blog Talk Radio, partnering with Writers Online Network and WON Radio. He is also the organizer of the GLBT Blog Hop and Mini-magazine for Marketing For Romance Writers and an Assistant Organizer with Nashville Writers Group

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