

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

IN A WHOLE NEW LIGHT

Marie L. Nickett

Table of Contents

Love's Landscapes.....3
In A Whole New Light - Information.....5
Acknowledgements.....6
In A Whole New Light7
Author Bio35

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

IN A WHOLE NEW LIGHT

By Marie L. Nickett

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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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

[Poollicht](#), [Perfect white beach](#)

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Photo Description

In the first picture, a brown-haired young man is stretched out on a couch, his hands resting on his belly. He is wondering aloud if his best friend—who is sitting on the floor, propped up against the couch—could turn up the heat in the room. In the second picture, his black-haired best friend is now lying on top of him, cradling his head in one hand, and holding a book in the other.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The picture says it all. Please give these boys a sweet story. All I ask is they are roommates and this scene included in the story. The rest I leave up to you.

Sincerely,

MsMiz

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, gay for you, college, sweet, no sex, young adult characters

Word Count: 12,233

Acknowledgements

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IN A WHOLE NEW LIGHT

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Nathan March couldn't wait for his terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day to be over.

As he walked home from his second three-hour, "write-no-less-than-250-words-per-answer" exam of the day, all he wanted was to face-plant on his bed, and sleep for the next, oh, fifteen hours or so. Maybe he'd eat three grilled-cheese sandwiches and a bowl of Cocoa Puffs before letting his exhaustion take over, though, because he hadn't had time to eat more than a Mars bar and some Skittles in between exams, preferring to cram in some last-minute studying for the second one instead of eating lunch.

Ah, the healthy eating habits of college boys.

To make his day even better, he felt rain beginning to pelt down his face. He couldn't help thinking that the rain was most likely helping to wash away the brain cells leaking from his ears because of intense overuse. He laughed to himself at the thought, and started to jog the last block separating him from his Holy Grail of the day: the warm, exam-free, *dry* comfort of the apartment he shared with his best friend, Derek.

As soon as Nathan opened the door of the apartment, the smell of just-out-of-the-oven chocolate-chip cookies greeted him. Putting his wet coat on a hook and dropping his book bag on the floor, he let himself breathe in that delicious scent, and finally allowed himself to relax. He was home, exams were over, and Derek had apparently taken it upon himself to cook for them both tonight. What more could he ask for?

With that thought in mind, he walked down the entrance hall to the small kitchen, where he leaned on the doorjamb, a grateful grin gracing his lips as he greeted his best friend.

"You do know you didn't have to go to all this trouble for me, right?"

Derek stopped cutting bacon slices into smaller pieces and turned to look at him with a raised brow.

“Who said I was doing this for you? Maybe I’m cooking for a hot date, and you won’t even get to eat one bite of all this excellent food I’m preparing from scratch.” Derek turned back towards the counter, but Nathan could clearly see the dimple in his left cheek making an appearance as he struggled not to smile. That little dimple, coupled with Derek’s teasing tone, filled Nathan’s still-cold body with warmth. He couldn’t help using his patented old-school detective voice to answer Derek.

“Isn’t it a happy coincidence, though, that you happen to be making carbonara pasta and homemade cookies, two of my very favourite foods? My Spidey senses are tingling at your feeble attempt at covering the truth, my dear Watson.”

Derek let out a chuckle, and threw a tablecloth that Nathan barely had time to catch before it hit him in the face.

“No shit, Sherlock. Now that you have me all figured out, be a good boy and set the table while I finish up here, please. The pasta’s almost ready, so this bacon’s all that’s standing between us and a damn good meal. Let’s wrap it up so we can enjoy it as soon as possible, all right?”

Nathan gladly did as asked while Derek was putting the finishing touches to their home-cooked meal. He dressed the table and took out two Coronas from the fridge. Then he took care of the cooling (but still smelling-like-a-slice-of-heaven) cookies, putting most of them in their big cookie jar and setting the rest of them on a plate on the table. He couldn’t stop smiling as he did all this, his intention of sleeping like the dead postponed indefinitely in the face of such a great treat from his roommate.

Once he was finished, Nathan took a seat at the table, and took a moment to look at his best friend, who was now serving the pasta in two big bowls. Just being in the vicinity of Derek’s presence put a balm on the strain and stress that his worse-than-average day had put on him. At last, he could put his finals (which had gone well, but had drained all of his energy), his lack of sleep, and every other thing that had gone wrong today behind him.

Sometimes, he wondered what he’d do without Derek there to make days like this better. He hoped he never had to find out.

Derek Johns mentally patted himself on the back while bringing the hot bowls filled with pasta to the table. Nathan’s good spirits were all the reward he

needed to make his decision to cook his best friend's favourite foods tonight worth it. He knew how much time and effort Nathan had invested in this particular semester of his civil engineering degree (the first one of their fourth and last year of college), and he had witnessed first-hand this morning how his day had gone from bad to worse. Not only had Nathan spilled milk on his T-shirt at breakfast (he'd then promptly woken Derek up to put on one of his, since it was apparently his last clean one), he had also nicked the side of his cheek while shaving (the resulting shout of *Can't one fucking thing go right today?* convincing Derek he'd better get up to do some damage control), and he'd had to come running back to the apartment to get his study notes for his second exam before taking the bus to go take his first final of the day.

Needless to say, even though it had screwed up his plans to sleep in on his first exam-free day of the end of semester, he couldn't hold it against Nate. More than that, he wanted to make sure his friend had a reason to smile once he finished his last two exams of the semester. Hence, all the cooking that ensued.

He gave a bowl of pasta to Nathan and sat down in front of him. After clinking the necks of their Coronas, they dug in and ate their (very tasty, if he did say so himself) pasta in companionable silence.

Once they were finished with the main course and nibbling on chewy cookies, Nathan started up the conversation.

"Thank you so much for this, buddy. I know I've said it before, but your food is just... Wow. I hope you know I'm totally investing money in your hypothetical future restaurant, should you have a mid-life crisis and decide architectural design's not what cranks your shit up anymore. Just sayin'," Nathan told him with his trademark toothy grin.

He let out a laugh and shook his head. "How I even manage to stay modest with you around, I'll never know. But seriously, don't worry about it, Nate. At least your day's going to end on a good note, right?"

"No doubt about that," he replied, looking directly into Derek's eyes with a more sincere smile on his lips. "All thanks to you, as usual," he added softly, before clearing his throat a little and forging on. "There's one thing wrong with your statement, though."

"And what would that be?" Derek asked calmly, to mask how the way Nathan was looking at him like he just did always affected him a little. He also wanted to err on the side of safety, because he had a feeling he knew where

Nathan was going with this. His best friend had often had crazy ideas on how to celebrate the end of their semesters in the past...

“My day—*our* day’s not over yet, my friend. It might be the great food and the sugar high talking, but suddenly I feel like we have to go out and cel—”

“I knew it. I knew this was coming,” Derek muttered.

“—ebrate! Come on, Derek, you can stop imagining the worst right now. All I’m saying is, we could go to Addiction and have fun, all right?”

Addiction was the go-to dance club for the college crowd, and happened to be within walking distance of their apartment. Drinks were cheap, people were a-plenty and nobody cared exactly *who* you were dirty-dancing with. In other words, this was about the only place they could *both* find potential hook-ups, him being gay and Nathan being straight.

Derek faked a long-suffering sigh, but they both knew this was perhaps the least insane idea of a celebration that Nathan had had in a long time... Which meant he couldn’t *not* go.

“Fine, fine, we’ll go. But kitchen duty is all on you, you hear?”

“Yes, sir! Reporting to duty, sir!” Nathan replied with a mock salute while starting to gather dishes. As he stood up to bring an armful of bowls and plates to the sink, he used his free hand to lightly tap the back of Derek’s neck. “Sorry for being so difficult to resist,” he added with a wink, tugging Derek’s hair a little before making his way to the kitchen sink.

Well, Derek thought, you have no fucking idea how true that is.

As he rummaged through Derek’s drawers to find the dark green sweater he wanted to borrow for the night (more like steal forever, because damn did that sweater look good on him), Nathan wondered what the evening would bring.

Derek and he had perfected a kind of routine, when it came to partying together. When either of them decided to hook up with someone they’d picked up at the club, they always went to their fuck-of-the-night’s place. It was a rule of their own unwritten version of a “roommate’s agreement” (thank you, Sheldon Cooper) that they didn’t bring home any of their one-night conquests.

When he thought about it, it was kind of funny how they treated their apartment as a sacred sanctuary. Sure, they often had friends or study buddies over, but when it came to sex, unless one of them truly had feelings for

someone they wanted to get lucky with, they didn't want to taint their living space with less-than-meaningful memories of mostly anonymous sex.

At least, that was how Nathan interpreted it, and he had always liked it that way. Not only was he able to make sure the girls he hooked up with were safely home, safe with minimal effort; he could also leave before any morning-after awkwardness settled in or any attempts at getting his full name or phone number were made.

Damn if that routine didn't make him seem like a heartless and selfish bastard, though. The thing was—he was very clear with the girls he had one-night stands with that their fling was just that: a one-time thing. He wasn't looking for anything more than sex when he hit the clubs, because he was absolutely sure he wouldn't find his... (dare he think it?) soul mate in these places.

And therein lay the true dichotomy of Nathan March's psyche: yes, he'd had plenty of meaningless sex with faceless girls from clubs (which he was at least honest about), but what he truly wanted and waited for was to find that one perfect person for him, the one who'd get under his skin, the one he'd do anything for. And more than anything, the one he'd finally want to open up his home and, most importantly, his heart to.

Shaking his head at his hopelessly romantic musings (and pointedly ignoring the almost physical ache he could feel somewhere close to his left pectoral), Nathan finally found the sweater he wanted and put it on, folding the one he'd needed to borrow from Derek that morning and leaving it on his bed.

Still a little lost in thought, he walked through the door of Derek's room, only to collide with a wet, half-naked body with a loud thump. Derek's hands immediately gripped Nathan's forearms to get some balance.

"Shit! Sorry man, I didn't even know you were out of the shower," Nathan said, suddenly a little out of breath. He quickly squeezed Derek's hands, before letting them go and stepping back to let Derek go into his room.

Derek readjusted the towel around his hips, then took the smaller towel hanging on his shoulder and started drying his hair with it. "No problem. At least this time, we didn't almost knock each other out, right?" he replied, a crooked smile appearing on his face.

Nathan chuckled as he remembered a similar incident from a few weeks ago. Derek being only an inch taller than him, they'd banged their heads pretty hard the last time they'd accidentally collided into each other.

Good times.

“Which is fortunate, considering we couldn’t possibly get a good buzz while staying sober to make sure we weren’t concussed or something,” Nathan added, rubbing the left side of his chest absentmindedly.

“Amen to that. You’re welcome for the sweater, by the way,” Derek replied, indicating his (soon-to-be-Nathan’s) dark green sweater with a nod. “Suits you better than me, anyway.”

Derek was now picking out clothes from his dresser, taking out a pair of black boxer briefs and socks from the top drawer. The movement made Derek’s muscles stand out, and beads of water traveled down the planes of his tanned back to disappear under the towel around Derek’s waist. For some reason, Nathan couldn’t look away. His hazel eyes were glued to the view that Derek’s glistening skin and towel-covered ass presented.

Wait, what!?

Nathan rubbed a hand over his eyes vigorously, and his next words came out of a very dry mouth. “That’s, ah, settled, then. Thanks. I’ll just... leave you alone now, so you can... um, get dressed and stuff. Yeah.”

Derek turned to look at him, little creases appearing between his blue-gray eyes as he frowned. “You okay, Nate? Are you sure you still want to go out?”

“Yes, I’m just... um, eager to go, that’s all,” Nathan stammered, cursing inwardly as he felt the blush coloring his cheeks. “I’ll be waiting in the living room, but you can... you know, take your time.”

Nathan only took a second to wave at his best friend before he fled the room, closing the door behind him.

Once he was in the living room, he sat down heavily on the couch, tilting his head back and covering his eyes with his right hand. Unfortunately, blacking out his vision couldn’t erase what he’d just seen. And not only seen, but looked at. *Noticed.*

He had totally just checked out Derek. His undoubtedly *male* best friend.

Sure, he knew Derek was... attractive. He was straight, but he wasn’t blind. But it was the first time he’d had such an irrefutable physical reaction to the sight of his underdressed best friend. For God’s sake, he had been so fucking flustered he’d had to literally leave the room before things became decidedly embarrassing for him. Because the blood in his body hadn’t just flooded his cheeks, if the bulge in the front of his black pants was any indication.

He couldn't allow himself to linger on what this meant or where this was coming from right now, though, because Derek normally didn't take long to prepare before going out. All he could do was take a deep breath to calm down, and pray that his dick behaved as he thought of dead fish, road kill, and the old lady two apartments over...

Derek adjusted the hood of his coat as Nathan and he hurriedly walked the block separating their apartment from Addiction. The rain had turned into a drizzle, but they'd still become uncomfortably wet if they didn't walk faster than usual to get to the club.

Stealing a glance at Nathan, Derek wondered what had happened to make him so quiet. Once he'd finished getting ready to go out, Derek had found Nathan sitting in the living room, as expected. What was unexpected was his subdued mood, especially since he was watching a hockey game with his favourite team playing, which usually involved lots of whooping, cursing and fist-pumping.

Derek had asked him again if he really wanted to go out, and Nathan had insisted that he did, and that it would be the best way to let off some steam and completely let go of the stress of his demanding semester.

Despite this, Derek knew something else was bothering his best friend. He also knew not to push Nate, as this was the best way of making sure he'd clam up and refuse to talk about what was on his mind. He knew giving Nathan space and being patient paid off, as proven by more than ten years of successfully getting Nate to unburden himself of his problems using this strategy.

In the meantime, it didn't mean he couldn't do his best to distract Nathan.

"Hey, Nate?" Derek took his arm, stopping their fast walk to the club momentarily. "First one at the door of the club gets to choose first batch of shots!"

Derek only allowed himself an evil grin in Nathan's direction before taking off at a run towards their destination.

"Wha—You didn't even count to three, man!" Nathan exclaimed, his fake outrage and returning good humour making Derek's grin widen.

After that, all Derek heard as he took off were Nate's rapid footsteps echoing on the asphalt as he sprinted off, and his best friend's gasping laughter as he began to shorten the distance between them.

Mission accomplished.

The end-of-semester party was in full swing in the club, judging by the heaps of people having fun on the dance floor, or sitting and talking animatedly at one of the many tables surrounding it.

Once he and Nathan were seated at their favourite spot by the bar, they waved at their friend Amy (whom they'd known almost as long as each other), who was bartending that night. Derek watched her work for a minute, before turning to Nathan. He leaned closer to his friend, speaking louder than usual to be heard over all the noise in the club.

"So Nate, since you won the race out there... What's it going to be? Tequila, vodka... Broken Down Golf Carts, maybe?"

Derek started to snicker, and he didn't duck quickly enough to avoid Nathan flicking his cheek. He never missed an occasion to tease Nathan for his hatred of the drink. At their first college party at Addiction, shots of Broken Down Golf Carts had been half-priced (go figure out why), and Nathan had accepted a dare from a girl he'd been hanging around that night to drink as many as he could in a row. He'd then proceeded to leave with said girl, only to throw up on her designer shoes as soon as he'd set foot outside the club. Derek had ended up taking him home, and Nathan had spent most of the night in the bathroom, being sick and cursing Broken Down Golf Carts up and down.

Nathan narrowed his eyes at him, a "I'm-so-getting-you-for-this" smirk forming on his lips.

"Very funny, Derek. So funny, in fact, that I think we're going to start this celebration with... jello shots."

Nathan's eyes sparkled with mischief, and Derek found he didn't even want to argue about Nathan's choice of shots. Sure, he absolutely loathed the tongue acrobatics needed to actually consume the damn shots, as Nathan was well aware of. However, Nathan seemed to have put his worries aside for the moment, so Derek would comply, if only to help his friend focus on celebrating instead of ruminating the night away.

"Bring it on, champ."

Amy finally appeared before them, tying her long blond hair in a ponytail as she smiled at them.

“Hey, guys! What can I get you to get the party started?” she asked knowingly.

“A round of jello shots, please, and your glorious presence, of course,” Derek replied, winking at her. “Seriously, we’ve barely seen you these last few weeks, Ames. We’ve got some catching up to do, young lady.”

Amy nodded in agreement, and started getting jello shots from the bar fridge.

“You’re right. This semester just totally kicked my ass, you know? Honestly, I’d love nothing more than to be able to sit down and chat with you guys, but I barely have time to breathe right now. Rain check?”

“Definitely. We’re not going back home before the twenty-third, anyway, so just call me or Nate whenever in the next week, and we’ll hang out.”

“Awesome! I’ve missed spending time with my favorite boys. I’ll text you this week, and we can figure something out. I’ll get Ash to come, too, just so he can tell you all about my many end-of-semester meltdowns, which he was lucky to live through, let me tell you. Gotta go, but have fun tonight, guys, you deserve it,” Amy finished with a smile, setting a plate of jello shots down on the bar. Derek and Nathan thanked her, and both of them took a small cup before turning to each other.

They raised their shots and bumped them gently together in a toast, both sporting identical grins as they did so.

“To the end of this semester, and a whole lot of doing not a fucking thing until we go home for Christmas. Cheers,” Derek said, raising his cup to his mouth, laughing as he tried to slurp his shot as gracefully as possible.

“Cheers, my man,” Nathan answered, and Derek could only admire his technique as he squeezed the bottom of the cup above his open mouth, the whole shot falling into it neatly and quickly being swallowed. He did look a little red in the face as he did it, though, so Derek figured it must have been more difficult to do than it looked like.

Derek couldn’t help himself; he shamelessly watched Nathan’s throat work, and when his best friend licked his lips as he finished his shot, the burning sensation in his belly had nothing to do with alcohol. He had to look away to try and get a hold of himself before he did something he’d sure as hell regret.

Because it was one thing to have decidedly-more-than-friendly feelings for Nathan, but it was something else entirely to even imagine doing anything

about it. Which he'd never allow to happen, because he couldn't bear even the thought of losing Nathan as a friend if he took that risk.

His stupid heart be damned.

Nathan was definitely enjoying a pretty good buzz at the moment. Derek and he had taken about five jello shots each, before going out to the dance floor to join a group of friends. This was how they'd ended up dancing (more like jumping around and randomly pumping their fists in the air), letting their figurative hair down and having fun with some of their college friends.

As he swayed to the music and laughed with pretty much everyone around him, Nathan found that even the haze of alcohol couldn't stop him from constantly thinking about his best friend. Or, more accurately, about his newfound and totally inappropriate sexual attraction to Derek.

After racing to the bar, Nathan had decided that it must have been the anticipation of the evening, or the fact that he could suddenly relax and let go of all the accumulated stress of the semester, that had made him react the way he had to his half-naked best friend.

How fucking delusional of him. Because only one look at Derek *fucking licking* the jello out of his cup had made his blood boil, and his imagination had been running wild ever since. Wondering what that tongue would feel like on *his* skin, what it would taste like...

In other words, he was going fucking crazy.

It was as if a dam had broken open in his mind, and thoughts he'd never dared to consider before were now free to roam in his brain and torture him.

Nathan knew these thoughts could lead down dangerous paths, especially as he was even more of an impulsive fucker than usual when he drank. Therefore, he needed to find a distraction. A leggy, long-haired and pouty-lipped distraction, to be exact.

He tore his eyes away from Derek (who was thankfully oblivious to his inner turmoil, and who looked so carefree and relaxed and *fucking hot* as he danced), and looked around the dance floor until he met the eyes of a girl who seemed interested, judging by the come-hither smile she threw his way.

Perfect timing.

He headed her way, and she didn't waste any time when he got close enough to touch. She put her hands on his hips, and looked up at him as they

swayed to the music. Long black hair framed her gorgeous features, and the look in her eyes definitely told him she was looking to have some fun.

As he was taking her hands in his own to put them around his neck, he felt his spine tingling with the sensation of being watched. He turned his head slightly, and caught Derek's gaze across the dance floor. His best friend gave him a thumbs-up and wiggled his eyebrows comically at him, which was his usual way of silently saying "way to go". Nathan could only smile weakly in response.

Nathan felt a hand on his cheek, and before he knew it, the girl in his arms had angled his head down for a kiss. Her lips were soft, and as she pushed up to deepen the kiss, he felt something in his chest constrict more and more.

This wasn't what he really wanted. And while that freaked him the hell out, he wasn't quite drunk or stupid enough to completely deny that simple fact, and give in to the easy out that another meaningless one-night stand would provide him.

He broke the kiss, and gently pushed back the now-confused girl in his arms. He quickly bent down to apologize to her, and he told her that he wasn't feeling well and had to go. She watched him with a puzzled look before telling him to get lost, and walking away without looking back.

He was such an asshole. But at least, he was an *honest* asshole.

That didn't make him feel any better right at this moment, though. Because the second his eyes finally found Derek in the thick crowd, he felt like a giant fist was squeezing his already weakened heart. He tried to dispel the ache a little as he rubbed his left hand over his chest, but to no avail.

Derek was closely entwined with another guy, and clearly enjoying himself, if the predatory look Nathan recognized in his blue-gray eyes was any indication.

His right hand tightened into a fist at his side, and he knew that he had to leave right now, or he'd end up punching the other guy's lights out, or something equally screwed up.

As if on cue, Derek raised his head, and Nathan could only meet his gaze and hope like hell that his best friend was too busy with the motherfucker in his arms to notice his own anguished state of mind.

Even from a distance, Nathan could see a small frown of confusion forming on Derek's face. He quickly waved to Derek, and then shook his head when

Derek started to let go of his dance partner to come over and see him, before turning around and getting the hell out of the club.

Nathan ran his hand through his damp hair as he took off his coat. It had still been raining when he'd left Addiction, so he had jogged all the way to the apartment. He had hoped the physical effort would help him gather his thoughts and calm the fuck down, but he still felt like a volcano about to erupt, or something equally damaging. And God knew he didn't want to push the metaphor further, because leaving only ashes in his wake would undoubtedly mean hurting Derek, as his best friend happened to be the focus of his restless state of mind.

Intent on steering clear from trouble for the night, Nathan headed to his room and fell heavily on his bed. He looked at the ceiling without moving for a minute, before deciding that shooting things in a video game sounded like a good way to try to relax and concentrate on something other than his muddled thoughts.

He made it a whole two minutes before the memory of how Derek had looked at the club appeared unbidden in his mind's eye. Just thinking of the lust in Derek's gaze as he had danced with another guy (which was *not okay anymore*), of the way his short black hair had looked like fucking sex hair (thank you, rain water)... It all just made him... want things.

He knew he shouldn't, but the liquid warmth he could feel pooling in his belly made it clear that his body had made its own decision. Besides, the fact that it was *Derek* who incited all of these new feelings in him, and not just a random stranger who happened to be a man, somehow... made all the difference.

The fact still remained that Derek was probably closing the deal with that guy from the club at the moment, just as Nathan was kind of... figuring things out (or, more accurately, having the biggest of all wake-up calls/epiphanies/whatever-the-hell-this-was *ever*).

Nathan heaved a sigh, and tried to ignore the ache settling in his chest as he adjusted the controller in his hand and put his attention back to the game.

However, his best intentions couldn't hold a candle to the sound of the front door opening.

Nathan knew he had only seconds to react. He also knew the best course of action would probably be to close the door of his room as noiselessly as

possible and pretend to be asleep. This way, he wouldn't have to face Derek while he was, for all intents and purposes, a fucking emotional wreck.

Unfortunately, Nathan wasn't known for making the best life decisions when he was exhausted, and most importantly, still a little under the influence. Which was why he got up from his bed and walked to the living room, where he leaned on the back of the couch as he waited for Derek.

As Derek came through the doorway separating the kitchen and living room from the entrance hall, he did a little double take upon seeing Nathan, as if he hadn't expected him to be waiting there.

"Hey man. I wasn't sure you'd still be up when I got here," Derek said with a quirk of his lips, propping his back against the wall to face Nathan.

Nathan rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants, and he could only manage a strained smile in his best friend's direction.

"I'm not feeling sleepy at all at the moment, to be honest," Nathan answered, lifting a hand to rub the back of his neck as he looked at Derek. "What about you? Why are you back so early? I mean, you seemed... pretty busy when I left."

"Oh. Um. That wasn't... Well, it didn't work out, that's all. No big deal, you know?" Derek bit his lip, and Nathan could swear his cheeks were looking a little red. "Anyway, I'd had enough fun for the night, I guess. And Ames was still working, and you were gone, so... yeah."

Derek cleared his throat, and raised an eyebrow in Nathan's direction before continuing.

"Enough about me, though. How're you? 'Cause you looked kinda... pissed when you left, you know?" Derek frowned, a little crease appearing between his eyebrows. Which was... fucking adorable, dammit. "Was that girl mean to you or something? 'Cause if she was, I can totally spill a drink on her next time we're at Addiction."

Nathan chuckled, looking fondly at his best friend. He could feel his initial nervousness slowly fade away as Derek's words infused warmth in his body. Because Nathan wasn't so oblivious as to not notice Derek's flustered state as he explained his presence at the apartment. Which probably meant that Derek had actually come back home to check on him, leaving behind a pretty-much-guaranteed hook-up.

That realization boosted Nathan's confidence, and his inhibitions were still lowered enough that he was willing to take a risk on it.

“That definitely won’t be necessary, Derek, because honestly? It was kind of an asshole move on my part to even dance with her in the first place. You want to know why?”

“I’m guessing it has to do with whatever’s been bothering you since before we left the apartment, right?”

“Yep. And just the fact that you could tell—that you can *always* tell when something’s up with me, and that you’re here right now just to make sure I’m okay...” Nathan took two steps forward, his hazel eyes meeting Derek’s blue-gray gaze as he did so. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

The few feet of air between them became electrified as Nathan spoke. Derek’s throat worked as he swallowed hard, his uncertainty at the serious turn in the conversation written clearly on his face.

“Friendship’s a two-way street, you know. You’ve always been there for me, Nate, so I’m pretty damn lucky to have you, too.” Derek tilted his head, searching Nathan’s gaze. “You ready to tell me what’s wrong, now?”

Nathan took a deep breath and nodded.

“Back at the club, I left because I was about two seconds away from punching the guy you were with.”

“Oh, come on,” Derek rolled his eyes, but when he saw that Nathan wasn’t laughing along, confusion clouded his features. “As if... I mean—what are you saying here, exactly?”

“I’m saying that seeing that guy touching you kind of made me crazy, Derek.”

“But... why?” Derek narrowed his eyes at him, apparently still puzzling over Nathan’s answer.

Nathan took another couple of steps forward, putting him directly in front of his best friend. He felt hot all over, and he made sure to keep their eyes locked as he put his hand on the side of Derek’s neck, his best friend’s racing pulse thrumming under his fingers.

“Because he wasn’t me,” Nathan whispered, before crashing his lips on Derek’s.

It took only a second for Derek to respond to the kiss, his hands bunching up the material of his own dark green sweater on Nathan’s chest. They kissed greedily, like the world would stop turning or something if they slowed down.

It was unreal, and intense, and messy, and it felt so fucking good that Nathan wondered how he could ever have wanted anything else.

Which was why he couldn't hold back a whimper when Derek seized his shoulders and pushed him away. Derek's left hand fell to his side, while he passed his right hand through his hair, looking shell-shocked.

"Nathan, this is—I just—I can't deal with this right now. We'll... We'll talk in the morning, okay? When we're both calm and sober."

"Derek, I'm—"

Derek held up a hand, heaving a sigh as he walked past Nathan.

"Just get some sleep, Nate. I'll see you in the morning."

Nathan could only look at his best friend's back as he went in his room, closing the door behind him.

If his vision was slightly blurry as he finally moved his feet to get to his own room, well, he was the only one to blame. And the only one who'd ever know.

After getting up around noon, eating some cereal and taking a shower, Derek still hadn't seen Nathan around the apartment. He knew Nathan was awake, though, as he had heard him use the shower, rummage in the fridge and start a load of laundry a couple of hours ago.

Derek generally wasn't one to push when it came to Nathan, as he knew that most of the time, pushing his best friend to talk about how he felt had the opposite of the desired effect. At this point, though, he found that he didn't give a flying fuck about Nathan's usual M.O. when things got rough. Even he, Derek Johns, usually the most understanding and patient best friend in the world, had his limits, and he sure as hell had reached them as he tossed and turned in frustrated confusion during the night.

As he put on a white undershirt and jeans in his room, he couldn't help replaying in his mind everything that had happened once he'd gotten back to the apartment. Feeling Nathan's lust-filled gaze on him, and then hearing words he had never in a million years thought that his best friend would ever say to him had thrown Derek for a loop. Adding a kiss (more specifically, *The Kiss He Had Fantasized About For Years But Never Dared Hoped Would Actually Happen*) to that equation... It had been more than he could handle all at once,

especially since he was certain Nathan wouldn't be all that thrilled about it come morning.

In other words, to say he had obsessed about that kiss during his sleepless moments of the night before would be an understatement. He simply couldn't wrap his head around the fact that it had even happened in the first place. It was a punch to the gut, pure ecstasy in his veins and a fucking mystery to solve all at the same time.

This was why he had decided to take the bull by the horns once he got to talk to Nathan. He just couldn't handle not knowing exactly where he and Nathan stood. Therefore, he'd have to take action, for once, instead of waiting for his best friend to muddle his way through his feelings.

One way or another, even though he was scared out of his mind of the outcome, he had to know what the events of last night meant for their friendship. With that thought in mind, he ran a hand through his spiky black hair and down his face, before putting on his reading glasses and reaching for the book he'd started a few days ago.

He left his room and went to the living room to wait for Nathan to make an appearance. As he sat down in his favourite reading spot (on the floor, at the foot of the couch), he took a deep breath and briefly closed his eyes before opening his book, trying to distract himself with its storyline while he waited.

His hands still shook a little as he turned the pages.

Half an hour later, Derek was about to just go barging into Nathan's room when his roommate's door finally opened. Nathan walked out of his room, wearing gym shorts and a green T-shirt, his tousled brown hair framing his hazel eyes. Nathan's gaze immediately sought out Derek, whose breath caught in his throat as he met his best friend's eyes.

Nathan shot him a hesitant smile, before putting his hands in his pockets and slowly walking over to the edge of the couch. Then, in true Nathan March fashion, he threw himself unceremoniously on the couch behind Derek, rearranging himself until he was lying on his back.

Derek could feel Nathan's body heat as his best friend lay only inches away from him, his spine already tingling at the proximity. He turned his head slightly, until he could see Nathan's features from the corner of his eyes.

“Hey,” he said quietly, examining his best friend’s profile. Nathan’s hands rested on his belly, but the way he absently rubbed the little finger of his right hand belied his otherwise relaxed attitude. “How’d you sleep?”

“Same as you, I guess,” Nathan answered, turning his head towards Derek, who raised an eyebrow. “I mean, I got up around six to have a drink, and I heard you kicking off your covers or something. Paper thin walls, you know.”

“Right.” Even though he felt like he was walking in a minefield, and one wrong move could potentially blow up their entire friendship, Derek knew he had to force the issue and address the elephant in the room. “Nate, about last night—”

“Did you play with the thermostat again? ’Cause I know you have enough body heat to last forever, but unfortunately, I do not... I’m cold... Could you maybe turn up the—oomph!”

Nathan’s next words were completely muffled, because all of a sudden Derek couldn’t handle Nathan’s attempts at diverting his attention with nervous babble one more second.

Which is why he climbed on the couch himself and laid down. Right on top of Nathan.

As in, they were now in full-body contact, from head to toe. Derek’s right hand now cradled Nathan’s head on the arm of the couch, and he was still holding onto his book with his left hand.

This was probably the dumbest and boldest move he’d ever made on anyone (let alone on his *straight best friend*), but Derek wanted to know for sure how Nathan felt about the whole situation, and well... This was a sure-fire way to find out, wasn’t it?

Derek let out the breath he’d been holding for the last few moments, and, without looking at his best friend yet, he focused on how Nathan felt against him (*too fucking good to be true*, he thought, before *really* focusing). Nathan was still as stone, and his whole body had tensed the moment Derek had dropped on him.

That’s it, I’ve screwed everything up, fuck fuck fuck—

Nathan’s warm breath against the side of his neck stopped his train of thought as his best friend let out a sigh. He felt Nathan’s body finally relax against his, and when Nathan’s left arm actually *hugged* him closer, Derek almost let out the one word that resounded in his head at the moment: *Haaaallelujah!*

“That’s, um, definitely a way to warm me up I can get behind,” Nathan whispered in his ear. Only a slight tremor in his voice belied his joking tone.

Derek let his book fall to the floor, and he pushed his upper body up with his left arm in order to finally look at Nathan.

“Nate, are you serious about this? Because the things we did that we’d have to put under the rug and forget if this isn’t what you really want are kinda piling up, and I’m...” Derek sighed, and he made sure he could see every tiny gold fleck in Nathan’s hazel eyes before continuing. “I’m scared, man, and I don’t understand a whole hell of a lot of what’s going on, to tell you the truth.”

If Derek thought last night’s kiss had been too much to handle, he now realized that kiss had nothing on the present moment. Nathan was holding his gaze steadily, and his expressive eyes were alive with emotion. There was an undeniable current of... something between them, and Derek truly felt like they were about to fall together off a goddamn precipice, or simply fall apart if they didn’t hold onto each other.

“I don’t—I don’t really know how to explain it, but...” Nathan’s right hand snaked up from between them, and it came to rest on the side of Derek’s throat, Nathan’s thumb gently caressing his jaw line. “I really do want this, Derek. I’ve thought of little else since I saw you in that damn towel last night, to be honest. And I almost feel like I should be confused, and probably try to deny it, but do you know what I realized after I kissed you last night?”

Derek could only shake his head in response, momentarily rendered speechless in the face of Nathan’s confessions.

“I realized that nothing I ever did before has ever felt this right. And even though it’s sudden, and it’s not what I’m used to, above all else... It’s *you*, Derek. It’s as simple and as complicated as that, I guess.”

Derek carded his fingers through Nathan’s hair with his right hand, trying to anchor himself before he spoke up. Because hearing a sober Nathan say things like this was making his thoughts take crazy leaps, to say the least.

“Wow. This is... kind of a lot to take in, you know? I mean, correct me if I’m wrong but... you’re not gay. ’Cause I’m pretty sure I’d have noticed otherwise.”

“I kinda dig knowing that you’ve been looking,” Nathan said, his heavy-lidded eyes telling Derek exactly how much the thought pleased him. “And you’re right. I’m not into guys in general, and never have been. You could say I’m... Derek-ally inclined?”

A second passed as Derek was stunned into silence, and in the next, both of them burst into laughter. Trust Nathan to say the most ridiculous things at exactly the right time.

“Or... wait, you’re gonna love this one... I’m Johns-ing for you—”

Derek couldn’t hold back anymore. Hearing Nathan tease him as he had always done, with the added bonus of Nate being okay with his burgeoning feelings for him, made his heart swell ten sizes in his chest. It also made him tighten his hand in Nathan’s hair, and lower his head until his lips touched Nathan’s.

This kiss was definitely different from their first, and not only because they were now more or less on the same page as to where things stood between them. His lips gently brushed against Nathan’s, their noses bumping together before they angled their heads in opposite directions to accommodate them.

They spent long moments kissing unhurriedly, before Derek broke the kiss to rearrange his body so that he was now fully on top of Nathan. His hands now cradled his best friend’s smiling face, and Nathan’s arms were wrapped around his waist, his fingers caressing the small of his back through his undershirt.

“Want to know what I’m thinking right now?” Nathan asked him, his husky voice sounding like a siren’s call to Derek’s ears.

“Yeah, I do.”

“I’m thanking my lucky stars for making me get my head out of my ass, because being with you like this? Feels really fucking nice. It feels like... everything I ever wanted, but never knew I could just reach out and grab, you know?” Nathan said quietly, his questioning gaze giving Derek the courage he needed to truly come clean to his best friend about his feelings.

“I know exactly what you mean, believe me.” Derek took a deep breath, and he stroked Nathan’s cheek with his thumb. “I’ve been... feeling this way about you for a while, to be honest with you. I’m not sure I can quite wrap my head around it yet, but knowing that you feel the same way... It means a lot to me, Nate.”

Nathan looked up at the ceiling, and his arms hugged Derek closer as he sighed. He focused his gaze on Derek again before he spoke.

“God... I’m a fucking idiot, aren’t I?” Nathan shook his head, before leaning up to kiss Derek’s cheek. “I’m sorry it took me so long to straighten shit out in my head, with all these fucking one-night stands... Because looking

back? I've never felt even an inkling of what I feel now, of what I've always felt around you really, for... anyone else."

"Fuck, Nathan," Derek breathed out, before meeting Nathan halfway in a scorching kiss. Derek parted his lips eagerly as he felt Nathan's tongue lick his bottom lip, silently asking for permission. After that, it was a clash of lips, tongues and teeth as they both surrendered to the overwhelming desire coursing through them. It was wet, and hungry, and fuck if it wasn't the hottest kiss of his *entire fucking life*.

Derek pressed open-mouthed kisses from Nathan's cheek, down to his jaw, until he could finally bury his face against the side of his throat. As he licked and nipped his way down to Nathan's collarbone, he felt Nate's hands trail up his back under the fabric covering it, setting fire to Derek's skin everywhere he touched.

When he heard Nathan moan in pleasure, Derek thought he was about to explode from the sensory overload. But when Nathan's hips jerked upwards, and Derek actually felt his best friend's arousal press against his own, he knew things would get out of control really fast if they didn't slow down right away.

And, Nathan's obvious appreciation of what they were doing aside, Derek knew that they both weren't really ready for anything more than some heavy-duty making out at this extremely early stage in their... whatever this was.

"Nate," Derek said, as he lifted his head to look down at his best friend. Nathan looked fucking gorgeous, his cheeks stained red and his lips puffy and wet from their kisses. *Enough ogling, get a hold of yourself, Johns!* "Nathan, we have to slow down a little bit. I mean, not that I wasn't, um, totally into this or anything... Quite the contrary, in fact, as you've probably noticed, but... Wow, I'm really rambling on, aren't I?"

"That you are, my friend," Nathan replied with a smile, before furrowing his brows a little. "Or, considering the last, um, twelve hours or so... would 'my boyfriend' be more accurate? 'Cause I'm sure as fuck not sharing you with anybody, Derek, I hope you realize that."

Derek's heart skipped a couple beats at Nathan's words, and he could only smile down at his best friend and imagine what Nathan saw in his eyes as they locked gazes.

"That sounds pretty damn perfect to me, Nate."

Since Derek's door was still closed, Nathan made sure he was quiet as a mouse as he tiptoed out of his room and walked to the kitchen. Once there, he took out the ingredients to make pancakes, which so happened to be Derek's favorite breakfast food.

Who knew I was such a romantic? Nathan thought, a slight smile upon his lips.

As he started to mix the ingredients in a bowl, he thought about how the last few days had managed to completely blow out of the water everything he'd thought to be true about what he expected for himself. Until the moment he had finally allowed himself to see Derek in a whole new light, he'd been sure his future included the whole white-picket-fence package: two kids, a dog, a house he and Derek would have designed together, and, most importantly, a wife to complete the picture. The ease with which they'd spent the past three days discovering new things about each other (like how Derek made the sexiest little purring sound when Nathan paid particular attention to that spot below his ear, or how Nathan himself had kind of a lip-biting thing and how a simple press of Derek's fingers to his skin made his heart race) made it pretty clear that the seemingly picture-perfect heterosexual future he'd envisioned for himself before wasn't in the cards anymore.

Now, the mere thought of going back to the way things were before he and Derek started this being-together thing was completely unacceptable to him. Because being with Derek in this new and unexpected and *fucking perfect* way was quickly becoming something he couldn't imagine living without.

Damn if that wasn't equal parts completely amazing and totally fucking scary. Because while he had no doubt that being with Derek was the missing piece of his life puzzle, there were still some things he would have to get used to that he'd never considered having to deal with before now. Like being with Derek... outside the apartment. "Out" in every sense of the word, for the whole world to see.

Well, he would make time to process and take care of his misgivings, because disappointing Derek was one of the things he tried his very best not to do at any given time. He nodded decisively to himself, and took a deep breath to try and appease his quickening heartbeat.

Then he promptly jumped about a foot in the air as he felt strong arms go around his waist. He had been so deep in thought that he hadn't heard Derek approach at all.

Derek wasted no time in snuggling up to Nathan and dropping a kiss on his cheek.

“Morning. Sorry for sneaking up on you, but I do recall you telling me when we were, like, pre-teens or something, that your latent mutant power was super-acute hearing. I’d be really bummed if it wasn’t true.”

Nathan snorted with laughter, and reached back with his free hand to pinch Derek’s side. He then promptly turned his head to give Derek a quick good morning kiss.

“Come on, Derek, you know I’d never lie to you about something so serious,” Nathan stated with a cheeky grin, letting go of the whisk in favor of looking at his best friend. “Besides, why exactly would you be so bummed about me not having X-Men-worthy hearing?”

Derek cocked his head, and his blue-gray eyes filled with heat as he appeared to consider his next words. Damn if that gaze didn’t make Nathan feel as if his blood was suddenly boiling in his veins.

“Ask me again when it’s not ten in the morning, or when we’re, ah, in a more... physically involved situation, maybe? ’Cause I could always say I’d be bummed about you not having super hearing if it would mean you couldn’t hear a serial killer trying to pick our lock in the middle of the night, but... We’d both know that wasn’t really what I was thinking about when I said it...”

Nathan was dying to know what Derek’s real answer to his question would be, because it had to be pretty fucking hot and dirty if he didn’t dare say it in the light of day... Aaaannnd he absolutely had to get his mind out of the gutter right now if he didn’t want his pyjama bottoms to tent right this instant.

“You...” Nathan shook his finger at Derek, who leaned down and bit it lightly before he grinned at Nathan. “You are a fucking tease, Derek Johns.”

“And you...” Derek’s arms tightened around his hips, Nathan could feel the air Derek breathed out as he whispered in his ear. “You fucking love it, Nathan March.”

Derek let him go, and went to the fridge to take out the chocolate milk. Nathan could only stare at him with his mouth hanging open, and try to control his sudden need to push Derek against the kitchen counter and...

Who said he had to restrain himself?

A slow grin graced Nathan’s lips as he stalked towards his best friend. Derek was leaning on the counter, reaching up to open the cupboard to get a

glass. *Perfect positioning, really*, Nathan thought, as he put his hands on the counter, effectively caging Derek in the V of his arms.

Nathan leaned forward, pressing the length of his body against Derek's back. Just hearing Derek's sharp intake of breath at the contact sent a jolt of pure heat through his veins.

"You're right, Derek, as usual. But you know what?" Nathan reached for Derek's hands, and tangled their fingers together before resting their joined hands on Derek's navel. "I think I'm not the only one who enjoys being teased."

He punctuated his statement by kissing a trail from Derek's throat to that infamous spot below his ear. He gently nipped at Derek's earlobe, eliciting a sigh of "Nate" from his best friend that made the now ever-present butterflies in his stomach do fucking cartwheels.

Apparently of one mind, they turned their heads towards each other at the same time. Just seeing Derek's blown pupils peering at him from under dark lashes was enough to make him loosen his hold on Derek's hands, allowing him to twist in Nathan's arms.

Derek didn't waste a second. He kissed Nathan hungrily the moment they were face-to-face, bringing their bodies in full contact as he wrapped his arms around Nathan's neck. Nathan's hands roamed up and down Derek's back under his T-shirt, enjoying the feel of the muscles—the same ones that had first caught his eye a couple of nights ago—under his fingers.

At this point, all Nathan could focus on was the non-stop assault on his senses—hearing Derek's quiet moans and the sounds of their kisses, feeling all the ridges of Derek's body pushed against his own, inhaling Derek's distinctive (and addictive) scent—so this was probably why neither he nor Derek heard the door of the apartment open.

However, they definitely couldn't *not* notice a very high-pitched cry of "Oh my fucking God!" and a surprised "Woah!" coming from the entrance hall.

They abruptly let go of each other and simultaneously turned towards the kitchen doorway, where Amy and Ashley were standing.

Nathan would have laughed out loud at their friends' faces if he hadn't been so utterly in shock, and painfully aware of the enormity of the moment. Amy's eyes were about to pop out of their sockets, and one of her hands covered her mouth, while the other gripped her boyfriend's arm. Even Ash, who was one of

the most imperturbable guys Nathan knew, looked astonished at what he was seeing, his eyebrows almost reaching his hairline and his mouth opening and closing in a fish-like way.

They all looked at each other in stunned silence for a few seconds, before Amy apparently came to her senses and ran up to Nathan and Derek. She hooked one arm around each of their necks, so that suddenly the three of them were squished together in a hug.

“I love you both like brothers, you know that, right?” Amy said, her voice muffled by their T-shirts. “And that’s never going to change, you hear me?”

Trust Amy and her almost-finished psychology degree to know exactly what to say in a moment like this. Nathan let out a shaky breath, and he squeezed Amy’s shoulder with his right hand as he closed his eyes briefly in sheer relief at her words. They stood there for a long moment, before Amy loosened her hold on Nathan and Derek, giving them a watery smile as she gave them some space.

Ash came forward, his usual aura of calmness back in place.

“I guess congratulations are in order, then?” he said with a quirk of his lips, putting an arm around Amy’s shoulders, and fist bumping each of them in turn. “Good for you, guys.”

Nathan had trouble wrapping his head around the fact that Amy and Ashley were reacting so well to stumbling upon two of their best guy friends making out, and he glanced at Derek to see that he appeared to be in the same frame of mind as he was. Nathan figured they both needed something to hold onto right at this moment, so he took his hand, squeezing it in reassurance.

“Thanks, guys. So... you’re both okay with this? With Derek and I... being together?”

“Sure. I mean, even as just friends, you two have always seemed like a perfect fit, you know? And what you guys get up to behind closed doors is definitely no one’s business but yours, so who are we to judge?” said Ashley, in his usual logical and no-nonsense way.

“That’s... really good to hear, actually,” Derek let out, his voice tinged with relief. Nathan nodded in agreement, a grateful smile gracing his lips as he rubbed his thumb over Derek’s hand.

“How could I ever not be okay with it,” Amy started, her shining eyes fluttering between their locked hands and their faces, “when I’ve spent the last

two and a half years seeing both of you go through one-nights stands, looking for love in all the wrong places, and thinking that you both deserved so much better... I couldn't be happier that you've finally found it."

Amy's blinding smile almost made Nathan miss the tear that ran down her cheek. Ash caught it with his thumb, just as Amy let out a little laugh.

"It's a tear of happiness, I swear! And I'm entitled to it, because this is incredible and awesome and everything I've ever wanted for you both," Amy said, her gaze wandering to the bowl full of pancake mix on the counter with a raised eyebrow. "Could that be your infamous pancake mix, Nathan? Because we did come here to see if you wanted to have brunch with us, so... Please say yes?"

Derek chuckled, and put his chin on Nathan's shoulder. "How about it, Master Chef?" he asked Nathan, his breath tickling Nathan's ear as he spoke.

Nathan tapped his finger on his cheek, scrunching up his face as if he was truly considering the question.

"Well... I guess that could be arranged," Nathan stated with a grin, extending his arm towards the kitchen table. "Sit down, guys. Y'all are in for a treat."

Nathan nuzzled Derek's cheek before letting go of him to start making pancakes for everyone. As he busied himself with the task, he couldn't help looking at Derek, Ash and Amy as they talked and joked at the kitchen table.

Maybe he and Derek hadn't ventured out of the apartment as a couple yet, but having two of their closest friends not only find out about their new relationship, but also accept it without reservations... It made him feel like he was flying pretty fucking high.

If that wasn't a good omen for their future, well, they'd just deal with the bad and the ugly, and enjoy the hell out of the good. As long as they did it together, he knew they'd be okay.

Derek groaned as he loaded up the last suitcase in the trunk of his car. You'd think they would be away from their apartment for more than a couple of weeks, from the amount of shit they'd packed.

As it was, Derek and Nathan were going home for the holidays, after spending a whole week not doing much more than hanging out with Amy and

Ash, cuddling up to watch their favorite movie classics, and making out like the randy twenty-one year olds they were whenever the mood struck. Which was, admittedly, more often than not.

In other words, life was pretty damn good from Derek's point of view.

However, Derek wasn't naïve enough to think that the honeymoon phase of their relationship would last much longer. Being away from the sheltered comfort of their apartment involved some important decisions being made, like how and when they would tell their families about them being a couple. They had discussed the subject at length, Derek analyzing every possible scenario, and Nathan playacting everyone's reactions to work out his nerves and make Derek smile. In the end, though, only time would tell how their parents and siblings would take the news.

Until then, they had about a three-hour car ride to enjoy each other's presence without worrying about people's reactions, and that was exactly what Derek intended to do. That, and the one thing he had been putting off since that fateful morning of confessions on the couch.

A ball of tension settled in his stomach just thinking about it as he sat down in the driver's seat to wait for Nathan, but Derek wouldn't back down. He wanted Nathan to have all the facts as they took this important step of telling their families about the change in their relationship, but most of all, he needed Nathan to understand that he was in it for the long haul, no matter what.

Derek put a lid on his thoughts as Nathan got in the car. His best friend was grinning like the cat that ate the canary as he handed him a thermos full of... something.

"Here. I prepared a little something to keep you warm, since it's kinda cold out today and stuff," Nathan explained, his cheeks coloring slightly as he spoke.

A soft smile appearing on his lips, Derek unscrewed the cap of the thermos to reveal steaming hot chocolate. With a simple and earnest gesture, Nathan had done it again; he had unknowingly made Derek relax, and had thus allowed Derek to enjoy the moment to the fullest.

Putting the thermos in the cup holder, Derek lifted his gaze until he was looking right into Nathan's hazel eyes. He scooted as close to his best friend as he could, before raising a hand to cradle Nathan's cheek.

"Thanks, Nate, I really appreciate it," Derek replied, caressing Nathan's skin with his thumb. "You make it really easy, you know?"

“What exactly do I make so easy?” Nathan wondered aloud, one of his hands coming to rest on Derek’s knee as he leaned a little closer.

“To just know that you’re the best fucking thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Nathan let out a breathless gasp, and he lifted his other hand to join Derek’s against his cheek.

“Derek...”

“You—You don’t have to say anything. I just... I need you to know how much you mean to me, now that you’re so much more than just my best friend.”

Nathan’s eyes widened, the start of a smile forming on his lips. Derek bit his lip and locked his gaze on Nathan’s before forging on.

“I love you, Nate.”

Time seemed to stop for a second, the both of them just looking at each other in wonder. The next moment, Nathan’s beaming smile was all Derek saw before Nathan threw his arms around his neck, hugging him as best as he could across the car’s center console (which was as uncomfortable and as fucking wonderful as it sounded).

Nathan’s lips were so close to his ear that Derek literally felt every word that came out of his mouth all the way to his toes.

“I know,” Nathan said, dropping a kiss to the skin below his ear before ducking back to look at Derek with a grin.

Derek smiled uncertainly, before his mouth dropped open as he realized exactly what Nathan meant.

“Did you just... Han Solo me?”

“If by that, you mean: did I just fulfill one of your favorite Han Solo fantasies, then the answer is yes,” Nathan answered cheekily, before bringing one of his hands in front of him to grasp Derek’s chin. “I’m going to do you one better, though, because I’m not enough of a nerf herder to wait a whole movie before saying it back.”

“I’m so fucking in love with you, Derek Johns.” Nathan leaned forward to kiss his left cheek tenderly, and Derek was officially melting in a puddle of feelings, thank you very much. “In the most non-biblical sense of the word.” Nathan’s lips brushed the tip of his nose. “Since eventually getting in your pants is pretty much all I think about.” Derek barely stifled a groan as Nathan

chuckled and pressed his mouth to his right cheek. "But most of all, I can't imagine what my life would be like without you in it, and I'll do everything in my fucking power not to screw this up, so that I never have to find out," Nathan finished, before pressing his lips to Derek's in a slow kiss that warmed Derek from the inside out. Derek's tongue traced the seam of Nathan's lips, and Nathan opened his mouth to let Derek in. Their tongues caressed each other as the kiss deepened, but still they maintained a languid pace.

After long minutes of enjoying the hell out of their unhurried kisses, Nathan and Derek parted to breathe in some much needed air.

As Derek opened his eyes, the sight of his best friend simply took his breath away. Nathan's dark pink lips formed the brightest smile Derek had ever seen on his face, and his hazel eyes shined with utter happiness as he looked at Derek. It was definitely a vision Derek wanted to remember for years to come. He could only hope his own beaming expression conveyed the same things to Nathan, because Derek was undoubtedly in a state of blissful contentment himself.

Derek leaned forward for one last kiss, before settling back in his seat. As he put the car in drive, Nathan's fingers grasped his, resting their joined hands between them. They shared wistful smiles, knowing things were about to change as they took the road to go back home for the holidays.

"You ready to roll?" Derek asked, squeezing Nathan's hand.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Nathan replied, stroking his thumb over the back of Derek's hand.

Derek couldn't help but feel like they had just exchanged a sort of promise, and damn if that didn't make the challenges ahead suddenly seem much less daunting. It gave him a renewed sense of hope for their future, and he couldn't ask for anything more at the moment.

Certainly not when he felt like he had everything he'd ever wanted, anyway.

The End

Author Bio

As an avid reader and a hopeless romantic, Marie L. Nickett undoubtedly has a soft spot for heartfelt love stories and happy endings. She has always wanted to give voice to the characters inhabiting her imagination, and she will always be grateful that her muse finally decided to cooperate with her when she discovered the wonderful world of m/m romance. She lives in Canada, and yes, she does love hockey and maple syrup.

Contact & Media Info

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