

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

THE OTHER SIDE

MA Jackson

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....	3
The Other Side – Information.....	5
Author’s Note.....	6
The Other Side	7
Chapter One	8
Chapter Two.....	18
Chapter Three.....	34
Author Bio	47

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE OTHER SIDE

By MA Jackson

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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Photo Description

A cropped shot focusing in on two men with their hands clasped together.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Could you please write a story about two young high school boys who fall in love. Only one of the boys is out to the whole school and the other is just figuring out who he really is. I would love the story to be based on the song "The Other Side" by Jason Derulo. [Here are the lyrics.](#)

Thank you for the consideration!!

Tracy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: high school, barely legal, coming out, first time, public sex, mechanic, family wedding, military family

Word Count: 15,627

Author's Note

To the M/M romance group mods, CC, Elaine, Astrid and everyone else that helped to make this the best story it could be; my heartfelt thanks and gratitude are given freely and without end. Tracy, I hope you truly enjoy the tale I've spun for you.

THE OTHER SIDE

By MA Jackson

Chapter One

“Senior year,” Cameron McDonald began as he looked out over the sea of faces staring back at him. He grinned as a cheer rose up. He listened to the noise, basking in the approval and wildness. The energy from his teenage peers and a little bit of the invincible pride that came from being eighteen shined from him, just as much as the health and vitality did.

“Class of 2014!”

The applause was deafening. It was amazing what popularity and an elected office could do to an ego. Cam knew it wasn't all for him, but he was a popular kid, in spite of being out and proud in a small southern town in Texas.

Cameron held up his hands, and the noise volume rose instead of falling. His mouth curled into an even wider smile, showing off the results of his parents' hard-earned money in a straight and even smile sans the braces he'd worn for nearly all his high school years. He searched the crowd, finding the one person he knew would be paying attention to him instead of screaming like a fool.

Nathaniel Brown was shaking his head, his green eyes amused by Cameron's antics. He nodded, giving Cameron a short bow and conceding the bet Cameron had forced on him. Nate owed him now, and Cam was going to collect. He wasn't certain what assorted tortures he was going to level on his best friend, but it would be epic. Nate might have the brains, but Cam had intuition on his side.

Nathaniel had written his speech for him, adding in the information bits that were needed to get across, but Cameron had skimmed it and discarded most of the speech, stating that this close to the end of the year, no one would sit still long enough to listen. He'd plucked out the most pressing and first-to-happen details and improvised. It was what he did best, after all.

“Listen up, seniors!”

His classmates roared their approval, and Nathaniel waved a hand at Cameron.

Cameron threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing through the microphone and drowning out the yells. He watched as Principal Ryan Mays just shook his head, and Cameron decided he'd better wrap things up before the rest of the teachers decided the shenanigans had gone on long enough.

“Settle down,” Cameron began again. “It sure would suck to end the year we ruled the school in detention.” He cut his eyes over to Mays once more, and Mays arched a brow at him. He winked at Mays, and the man just shook his head again, so Cameron continued, waiting for his fellow students to quiet down enough to actually hear what he had to say.

“As senior class president, I was going to speak about going out into the world and making something of ourselves...”

The boos and hisses sounded out, and Cameron plowed through them.

“However, since I’ve had a bad case of Senioritis all year, we’ll save it for the Baccalaureate and Commencement.”

Whistles and shouts nearly drowned him out, but with his eyes on Nathaniel, who nodded at him encouragingly, Cameron continued.

“Principal Mays wants me to remind you all that the pre-events for Project Graduation begin next week. As you know, we’ll be on lockdown inside the school after graduation that night. This offers a safe, sane and sober way to celebrate graduation. There’s still a few chaperone positions open, so have any inquiring family members ready to donate to the cause, email Counselor Blaine.”

Blaine stepped forward, waving a hand at the students, and received a cheer.

Cameron grinned at her then turned back to his audience. “The theme, Take a Gamble on Your Future, has been given a green light. The PG committee has arranged for several activities including movies, card and video game room and putt-putt golf in the corridors, as well as making certain the pool is ready for our use. Also, our breakfast will be catered in by McDonald’s.”

His classmates roared their approval then quieted down to listen to the rest of his spiel on the activities for Project Graduation.

“Senior fundraiser picnic for next year’s graduates will be the weekend before graduation, weather permitting. We’ll get an email out to all of you if something delays it, but check the Facebook page for updates, as well. Last but not least, make certain you have all submitted your contact numbers, email addresses, social media information, and student ID numbers to be included on the alumni newsletter.”

He paused for effect and got another cheer. “And I think that almost concludes this senior meeting, except for one last thing...” Cameron grinned at his audience, and the noise began to rise once more.

Nathaniel shook his head, grinned that crooked smile at him, and clapped his hands together softly.

“We’re going all the way!” Cameron let out a whooping sound that was echoed by several classmates. He left his spot by the podium, pumping his fist to the chant echoing in the auditorium before grinning at Nathaniel. Nathaniel’s eyes widened, and he looked horrified for a second before he covered his face as Cameron cackled and leapt from the auditorium stage. He landed, feet first, in the orchestra pit to hoots and shouts and then climbed out using the railings.

Cameron could hear stamping feet and glanced back over his shoulder to see Mays, Assistant Principal Shane Black, and Senior Counselor Patsy Blaine charging the stage where he’d just been. Mays and Black looked astounded, but Blaine was shaking her head and finger at him, a huge grin on her face.

Cameron winked at her, and she laughed before turning to Black and Mays.

Several hands reached up and pulled Cameron down from the railings as the students milled about after the meeting. Cameron shouted and slapped backs, hugged friends and searched the sea of people for Nathaniel.

The soft green eyes he looked for could not be found, and Cameron pushed his way out of the crowd, looking for his longtime best friend. Nathaniel was quiet and didn’t like crowds, and Cameron was certain he’d find his friend outside the room, waiting for Cameron. Nate always waited for Cam. He was reliable as the sun setting and always on time. Cam counted on Nate to be predictable, only Nate had been acting odd lately, and Cam was determined to find out what was happening with him.

The summer was coming on fast, and while Cameron had always been secure in himself, Nathaniel wasn’t. However, it was do or die time now, and Cameron wasn’t certain he’d survive if Nate went off to college not knowing how he, Cameron, really felt.

The auditorium doors fell shut behind him, and Cameron stood out in the hallway, looking around for Nathaniel. Class was still in session for the rest of the school, or he’d have raised his voice to shout for Nate, because Nate was nowhere to be found. He had a bad habit of disappearing like that. It had started their sophomore year, when Cam had embarrassed Nate during one of their classes.

He’d spent a month in detention for shouting in the hallways, and Nate had made certain Cam had learned the lesson well by refusing to pick him up

afterwards. It brought a smile to his face to remember the incident as he walked down the hallway.

Cam had done something stupid, he couldn't even recall what it was now, but it had upset Nate. All he'd wanted to do was apologize, but Nate had taken off like a shot once the bell rang. Even with the noise of changing classes and hundreds of students in the hallways, Cameron's voice had rang out, Nate's name clear as a bell over the din.

To this day, Cameron still remembered the way Nate had cringed and shoved his way through the hall of students, trying to escape his crazy friend. Cam had continued to holler and laugh, projecting Nate's name until Assistant Principal Black parted the wave of kids and pointed at him.

"Go back to where you started and make the return trip silently. We'll speak about detention when you get back here."

Cam had sighed and turned around, heading back to the Fine Arts corridor where he found Nate waiting for him.

Nate had glared at him. "You are so walking home if you get detention this afternoon. I have to work."

Cameron nodded. "I'm sorry."

Nate chuckled. "Well, I knew that, asshat. Now, when are you going to apologize?"

Cameron grinned. "Shit-for-brains." He leaned in and kissed Nate's forehead. "I apologize to my best bro for embarrassing him."

Nate's face, red as a beet, had been warm under his lips, and Cameron knew he could unsettle Nate even further by kissing him again but hadn't just then because he really had been sorry about teasing Nate. He recalled what that teasing had been about now as he walked the same route he had then, and Cameron continued to search for Nate.

"Carolee is a bitch for dropping you like that just before the Military Ball. I would never do something like that. We can go together 'cause, you know, I won't have a date either."

"Don't, Cam. Just don't go there again. Even in jest," Nate sighed. "It's bad enough you are the poster boy for gay pride around here and popular to boot, I don't need a pity date."

Cam draped an arm over Nate's shoulders and steered him out of the hall. "Look, ditch work tonight and we'll game. Forget about the Brainless Boob Wonder, we'll find someone else to take you."

Nate pulled out from under Cam's arm and shook his head. "No, thanks though. I can't not show up. My uncle is expecting me."

Cam sighed. "Fine. You're coming over tomorrow, and we are talking. All afternoon. Danny is home on furlough, and he'll sneak us beer."

Nate laughed. "I'll think about it."

Cameron made his way outside to the front of the school, still hearing Nate's laughter in his mind, and then the deep sound rolled across the quad. Cam closed his eyes and listened to the laughter, then turned toward the sound. It called him like a guided missile, and Cam found Nate standing in a huddle with one of Cam's older brothers, Danny, and Laurie, Danny's fiancée.

Nate was laughing, his hand on his stomach as Danny chuckled, too. Laurie's head shook at whatever antics the two guys had been up to. Cameron was struck by the late spring sunshine when it glanced off Nate's blond hair. The normally platinum strands had darkened, just like they did every winter, and shone honey-colored right now in the Texas super-sun. He knew, though, it wouldn't be long before the silver white was back, looking even brighter against Nate's golden and tanned skin.

Nate turned and looked at him, and Cameron sucked in a breath. Nate's green eyes were hard and hot. He looked upset, but there was also something else underneath the anger. Cam filed the expression, contemplating and adding it to the list of other odd things involving Nate, until Nate slugged him.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"You crazy fool! You could have broken your leg."

Cameron chuckled. "Nah, been practicing bouncing off the trampoline at home." He nudged Nate, who glared at him then relaxed but not before giving a parting shot.

"I wouldn't have taken you to the ER, so it's a damned good thing Danny showed up."

Cam turned and looked right at Nate. "Yes, you would have." Nate's cheeks filled with color, only this time it wasn't anger, of that Cam was certain. "You *lurve* me too much not to."

Nate looked away from Cam, his blush rising to tint his ears pink, and *what the hell was that all about*, Cam wondered before Nate muttered, "Asshole."

Cam chuckled, then he deemed his brother worthy of acknowledgement. He inclined his head to Danny. "What are you doing, bonehead?"

"Had to make certain you didn't end up in detention and reassure Nate here, there was someone to bail your ass out."

"Jerks. I haven't been in detention in forever." Cameron slid in next to Laurie and hugged her, pressing a kiss to her cheek. Her chocolate-colored eyes danced as she grinned at him. "At least Laurie still loves me."

"Jeez, Cam." Laurie giggled at him and sighed. "You and Nate, seniors already. I remember when you started school. Gods, I'm old."

"Watch it now; you aren't too much older than we are." Nate chuckled. "Well... except Danny."

Nate ducked the swing of Danny's arm, grinning, finally, at Cam, and Cam was glad to see it. Nate's odd behavior was beginning to worry him. It was and wasn't like him. Most of the time, he was serious and stoic, but lately, Nate had been moody and secretive as well; something was going on with him, and if he didn't talk soon, Cam was going to harass him until he spilled his guts.

That Danny had seemed to put Nate at ease was the only reason Cam hadn't antagonized him more. Nate had always relaxed around his family, and it was good to see him do so now. All five of his brothers and his parents loved Nate like he was one of their own. He'd been around long enough that he could have been a sibling, and Cam was going to make certain he was going to stay that way. Nate might never return his attraction, but he was Cam's regardless. They were going to be just like Danny and Laurie; maybe not lovers but inseparable all the same.

Laurie laid a kiss on Cam's cheek, and he wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her gently. Laurie, the same age as Danny, was six years older than he and Nate and she had been part of their family as long as Nate had. "When are you gonna leave this jerk and come marry me?"

"Back off my woman!" Danny pretended offense and grabbed Laurie, dragging her closer to him as her light laugh tinkled out.

"As soon as you jump back across the fence, Cam, darling." Laurie waved at Cam as she snuggled into Danny's side.

“Never gonna happen. We like the same things.” Cam shook his head and moved over to Nate’s side, leaning against the hood of Nate’s car. He smirked at Nate, nudging him with his shoulder, and then turned back to Danny. “So, really, why are you here?”

Danny reached into his back pocket and pulled out two envelopes, passing them to Cameron. “Your life pics for the vid, and the tickets Mom and Dad promised to donate for Project Graduation.”

Cameron tucked the thick bundle of lottery tickets under his arm and withdrew the shots for the senior video. He grinned down at his four-year old self, dressed in nothing but a pair of shorts and a hunter’s orange ball cap. Nate stood next to him, an oversized hunter’s vest covering his tiny frame. Their dads stood behind them, the little .22 squirrel guns Cam and Nate had just taken out last week in the adults’ hands.

The next shot was of him and Nate, squeezed into a photo booth with Danny and Laurie. Cam recalled the shot with fondness. He’d been twelve when Danny had left for the Marine Corps, and his entire family had spent the weekend on Galveston Island, bringing Nate and Laurie along for the ride. The photo strip showed all of them making different faces as the camera flashed.

The last one was of Cameron and Danny, taken just a few days ago, both dressed in tuxes for the wedding. That night he’d missed Nate something fierce as he, Danny, and his other four brothers: Derrick, Stuart, Kelley, and Eric had all been fitted for their tuxes. Danny and Laurie were to be wed just after graduation. Nate hadn’t been able to make the fitting because he’d had to work, but he’d promised both Cam and Danny he’d be at the wedding.

The progression of the pictures showed just how much Cam had changed, and how long Nate had been part of his life. Yes, it was going to kill him when Nate left to go to A&M, and Cam still wasn’t certain where he wanted to end up. He tilted the photos, so Nate could look at them fully and was more than curious when he heard Nate’s intake of air as he looked at the last picture. Nate turned to him.

Nate’s eyes were wide, and he met Cam’s gaze, something unreadable in the fathomless green. “When was that taken?”

“Friday night at the fittings. Everyone was there.”

Nate looked away from Cam and focused on Danny. “Sorry I missed it.”

Danny shrugged. “You’ll be there on the date, and that’s all that counts.” He dug out a second set of envelopes and passed them to Nate. “Your mom sent

these for you. You should have heard them cackling like hens, then clinging to one another as they cried while they sat at the computer. I am so glad Derrick put all of the family photos on digital media.”

Nate's face flushed with color, and he held out the tickets to Cam. He took the tickets, angling his head to see which photos Nate's mother, Diane, had chosen as Nate pried open his photo envelope. The first shot was of Nate and Cam, a recent one. Both boys were laid out side by side in a hammock, grins a mile wide on their faces.

Cam laughed. “I remember that! It was just this last summer when we had a cookout before school started.”

Laurie leaned in, looked at the picture and nodded. “I remember that, too. Stuart surprised us all because he burst into the house, shouting that Kristen had gone into labor.”

Nate grinned at Laurie. “Yeah! We all trudged to the hospital to see her, and she'd already had the baby.” He turned and glanced at Cam, that odd expression on his face again. Then he grinned. Cam was hard-pressed to hold back a gasp at the punch to his gut which came from the impact of Nate's smile.

“She let us help name the baby.”

“Jason Allen McDonald,” Cam and Nate said together.

“I think it was cool that she made me an honorary uncle,” Nate offered and flipped to the next shot. He frowned, then looked up at Danny. “Really, she wants this one in the video?”

Danny nodded. “That one was the tears I told you about. Your mom insisted in spite of the fact that the reporter ambushed y'all.”

Cam looked down at the image then wrapped an arm around Nate's shoulder. In the picture, Nate and Cam stood together, both dressed in suits, a solemn look on their faces. Behind them, Diane, looking as though she was sleep deprived and dead on her feet, was tucked between Cam's parents, Brenda and Sterling. All five of them stood outside of a church, the day around them overcast and cloudy. In the top left corner of the image was a smaller inset picture of Nate's father in his uniform.

A pang of sorrow rolled through Cam's gut as he recalled the day with perfect clarity. It was the day they had buried Nate's father, and they had been thirteen. A local paper had sent out a reporter to the funeral because Nate's dad,

Forrest, had been a firefighter. His entire squad had been present, and the funeral was heavily attended. The paper had covered the services for local color and sneaked in a camera. His parents had been livid at the image when it had appeared in the paper, and Diane had been too lost in her own grief at that particular moment to do anything other than try to make it through the event. Cam hadn't realized the shot had been saved anyplace else other than the paper archives.

"He would have been proud of you both, Nate," Danny said softly.

Cam hummed, remembering the man that could have been his second father, and wondered if Forrest Brown really would have been proud of him and Nate, knowing what he'd known about Cam, and that Cam had fallen for Nate. Cam had gone to Forrest before his own parents when he realized that boys were his first choice.

After grilling him for several minutes, Forrest had finally wrapped Cam in his arms and told him he'd be honored to stand next to Cam when he talked to his mom and dad. A month later, Forrest was gone, the victim of a drunk driver, and Diane had been in the hospital. They'd just dropped Nate off for a sleepover and were going away for the weekend for their anniversary when the accident happened.

He shook off the memory and squeezed Nate to him, surprised when Nate's arm circled his waist, and his fingers dug into his side, holding on to Cam just as tightly. Cam looked at Nate and smiled to find him watching Cam's face.

"Bonehead's right. Forrest would have been proud of us both."

Nate grinned as Cam pressed a kiss to his forehead and closed his eyes. *Good man*, Cam thought. Nate didn't even blush any longer when Cam did things like that. It had only taken a year for Nate to get used to the fact that Cam tended to be touchy-feely affectionate with people he felt safe with. This was why his current bout of blushing had thrown Cam for a loop. Best to get them back on an even keel. Cam licked Nate's cheek for good measure, and Nate sputtered, pulling away and howling as he wiped his face.

"Jeez, Cameron! Keep that thing in your mouth; I *know* where it's been."

Cam wiggled his eyebrows at Nate. "I've never had a complaint yet, *Nathaniel*."

"You two get a room... later." Danny rolled his eyes. "Hurry up and look at the last picture. Some of us have to be somewhere soon."

Cam jerked Nate to his side and waved a hand at Danny. "Go on. I'll catch a ride with Nate."

"Are you certain, Nate?" Danny asked.

Nate nodded, and Cam grinned. "Of course he is. He sits back and actually lets me drive."

Laurie giggled. "Oh, Nate. I am so sorry. Should I have some motion sickness tabs ready for when you drop Cam off later?"

Nate laughed. "Thanks, Laurie. I might need them."

"Hey! It's not my fault that the dog ran out into the road."

Danny and Nate snorted.

"No, but it was your fault when you chose the ditch over running down the dog, breaking the back axle on your truck in the process. You could have just stopped instead of jerking the wheel. Your fault because it forced the rest of the family to take up being your chauffeur while Mom and Dad debate on the merits of replacing your truck." Danny teased Cam and reached out to ruffle Cam's hair. Nate shoved him toward Danny.

Cam backed away, ducking Danny's fingers. He stuck his tongue out at both of them and reached out, jerking the pictures out of Nate's hand. He turned to the last photo and sighed. "The moms did good." He showed them the last one.

Nate and Cam, six years old, stood hand in hand in front of the elementary school. Nate's face was screwed up as if he were going to cry, but Cam stared back at the photographer, a huge smile on his face.

Nate grinned. "Yeah, they chose well."

Chapter Two

Nate wrestled with the Bluetooth headset in his ear, snarling a greeting when it beeped repeatedly and finally managed to get it on to receive the call. "I am trying to drive, so make it quick."

Cam's laugh was tinny in his ear, but Nate smiled. "Please tell me your mom isn't having another crisis, or the wedding is off."

"No, she's fine, and the wedding is still on," Cam answered. "Laurie is the one freaking out now. Apparently, Sheila decided it would be a good idea to accept a last minute assignment before the wedding. They went to a water park yesterday, to take pictures of a company picnic. Well, Laurie got burnt despite her cover-up, and Sheila slipped on some wet cement, fell, and dropped her camera into the wave pool..." Cam paused.

"And?" Nate asked, wondering if maybe Laurie had gone in after her and hoped neither woman was hurt. Laurie's dad, Darryl Gossage, owned Perfect Memories. Laurie worked with him, and Sheila did, too. She was also one of Laurie's bridesmaids along with Cam's sisters-in-law and Laurie's little sister Amanda. The wedding party was going to be fairly large, and if all the mishaps were anything to go by, Nate hoped everything was going to go well tomorrow night. All Diane had said, when he'd mentioned the problems before, was if the rehearsals are filled with strife, the marriage would be a good one.

Nate decided women weren't meant to be understood, and then he'd tuned her out since she'd started talking about his dad and their nuptials. He was having a hard enough time wondering how he could get the image of Cam in his tux out of his mind, without hearing about how ALL men looked good in formal wear.

Not to mention, that some of his other classmates, both female *and* male, had also started starring in some of his daydreams. It was downright embarrassing, though, that Cam was featured more than anyone. Take the senior shots for instance.

Perfect Moments had taken the senior shots, and Laurie and her girlfriends had cooed over how attractive he and Cam had looked. Nate thought they looked a little foolish, walking around in white tux jackets and red clip-on ties paired with summer shorts. He couldn't get past the fact that Cam and several other guys had looked quite interesting as they changed clothes. He'd constantly had to fight off confused arousal the entire time the shoot ran.

Laurie had helped wrap the girls in drapes of bright red material that only covered their chests. The end result appeared like half a strapless formal gown, and they had looked even odder in full face make-up and updos, trailing long bits of cloth behind them as they walked around in flip-flops. Long legs, bouncing cleavage, and strong bodies everywhere. It was a wonder anyone graduated from high school with all the changes going on.

His hormones had pulled him in numerous directions that day while he watched, keeping back on the sidelines while Cam and his friends joked. The girls crowded together in an impenetrable cluster of giggles and squeals and tears. Not the place for a guy if he wanted to keep his masculinity in check. It had been a little piece of hell, and Nate had only ended up more confused. The shots, though, turned out great, and the school colors, scarlet and white, were brilliant in the digital images up on Perfect Moments' web site.

“You still there?”

“Yeah,” Nate answered, shaking off the memories. He drove through the light at the intersection then made the turn to find the little side street that ran parallel to the highway. “So, what happened?”

“Well...”

Exasperated, Nate sighed. “Dude, just tell me. Please say Laurie is all right. Forget it, I'm pulling into the parking lot now. I see her through the window.”

“Right,” Cam said then rushed on. “She's gonna ask you to walk down the aisle with me because Shelia broke her leg when she fell in and is still in the hospital. Don't tell her I told you. Bye!”

Stunned, Nate parked his car then watched as Cam exited Brenda's SUV, tucking his phone into his pocket. He jogged across the parking lot, opened Nate's driver's side door and grinned at him. “Wanna share a brownie sundae with me?”

Nate glared at him as he pulled the headset from his ear and tossed it into the console between the seats. “No, I want my own damned ice cream. And you're buying it this time since I have to act surprised when Laurie springs the question on me.”

Cam chuckled. “All right. What do you want?” He stepped back and allowed Nate to leave the car.

Nate stood up, moved in toe to toe with Cam and looked him right in the eye. He ordered his favorite flavor without even thinking about it. Something

that Cam always teased him about, though he'd agreed the raspberry and dark chocolate was, indeed, perfect together. "Love Potion #31. The two scoop sundaes, both scoops the same and with extra cherries."

Cam repeated the order with him and then licked his lips, his eyes darting over Nate's face. Nate watched him and followed the path of Cam's tongue along his mouth, waiting to see if Cam was going to say or do something to him. He'd been licked more the past week than he ever had before, and it was doing something to him on the inside. He was tempted to return the assault just to see what Cam would do.

The thought of tasting Cam's skin, to see if his cologne added bitterness to his flavor like perfume did on a woman, made his heart pound, and his body throb. Something must have showed on his face because Cam suddenly grinned and nodded. "All right. Go in and sit, and I'll get our orders. Laurie and Mom are in—"

"I saw Laurie," Nate reminded Cam before he gave into the temptation to lick his friend.

Nate tugged open the door to the ice cream shop and stepped into the air conditioned room, sighing in the coolness as Cam brushed against his back then moved over to the counter. The scent of Cam's cologne and clean sweat drifted back to him, and he breathed it in. Nate watched Cam's backside, admiring the way his ass moved under the shorts, and he noticed how much darker Cam appeared. He must have gone to the water park with Laurie, too.

Nate envied him that little vacation as he'd been stuck working in his uncle's garage. Hot, over a hundred degrees in the summer heat, in the tin-sided building as they wrestled with a transmission on an old Volkswagen van. God, he'd been miserable, but the tip the woman had given him was generous, and he'd slipped most of the money away into his college savings account. He shook his head and focused on Cam once more.

Yeah, a day spent in the sun and water with a half-naked Cam. He liked the thought of that, even though he felt his face burn. He shook it off as Cam talked with Devon Maybree from their JROTC class.

She glanced over Cam's shoulder at Nate and smiled, giving him a shy little wave. Nate wriggled his fingers at her and walked slowly to the table Brenda and Laurie were sitting at, his eyes half on his path and half on Cam.

Cam's shaggy, brown hair was tousled like he'd just gotten out of bed, and the sun was already beginning to bleach reddish highlights into the chestnut

locks. Nate could see where his sunglasses had been with the white patch across the bridge of Cam's nose and the side of his face, disappearing at his temples where the arms had hooked over his ears. The lighter rings of skin under his browned arms showed through the holes in the A-shirt tucked into khaki cargo shorts. Tan lines marked his ankles where his sockless feet were strapped into the ugly sandal Crocs he wore.

Cam looked handsomely male and attractive to Nate in a familiar way, and never in a million years would he ever consider his best bud as a partner. Nate's blood ran south with that thought, and again he wondered where it had come from. Just like the other myriad of thoughts he'd been having for a while now, this one had snuck in out of nowhere and kicked him in the balls. He could only imagine what Cam would say to that. He didn't want to contemplate it for too long because he never knew what path his mind would take.

All he knew was that he was attracted to Cam and was having a bit of trouble adjusting to that. Because Cam was his friend, and because he still thought Natalie Wilson had a primo set of breasts. Could he be *just* gay or was he bi? All the different labels were confusing and honestly, did he want to go there? What happened if he went up to Cam and said, *kiss me. I need you to use your gaydar to feel me out.* Nate was certain that statement and action would do something to them. And would their friendship sink like a lead balloon, too, if he mentioned to Cam that he'd been thinking about him in a new way? Did he even want to contemplate changing his and Cam's friendship because of a *feeling*?

His heart sped up as he thought about what Cam would do or say if he thought Nate had been teasing him about his sexuality, and he wouldn't do that. Being an ass like that was just not on. Nate sank down into the bench seat next to Brenda in a daze, his thoughts still mired in his own personal angst party.

Brenda pressed a kiss to his cheek, and Nate struggled out of his shock as he returned her greeting. "Hey, Mom Two. Laurie."

"Nate," Laurie replied then tilted her head to look at him. "You okay? You look like someone hit you with a baseball bat."

"Tired, but I'm okay. Bagged a helluva—sorry, MT—tip yesterday at the garage." He grinned as Cam sauntered over to the table and set down drinks for everyone. Nate took his time in peeling off the end paper of his straw then carefully shot it over at Cam with a puff of air. "And I just made Cam pay for my ice cream, too."

Cam shook his head, batting at the straw paper, and instead of it floating away, he knocked it right into Laurie's Diet Coke. "Cam!"

Cam pointed at Nate. "Yell at him. It was his fault."

Brenda wrapped an arm around Nate, and Nate chuckled at the expression on Cam's face. "Shame on you, Cam. Leave my other baby alone. He's been working hard."

"Mom!"

"Yeah, Cam. Be nice to Nate for once in your life."

"Laurie!"

Nate straightened at Brenda's side. "Thanks, ladies. Knew I could count on you to protect me."

Cam narrowed his eyes at Nate. "See if I buy you ice cream anymore."

Nate gave him a smug smile. "Mom Two will share with me, but you know you'll always do what I want."

Cam rolled his eyes when Brenda nodded, and Nate turned to Laurie. Just because he was feeling vindictive, Nate said, "And yes, I'll walk down the aisle with numbskull there because it's for you."

Laurie squealed and then turned and slapped Cam's arm. "You told him before I could butter him up!"

Cam rubbed his arm, growling at Nate. "Someone's got a big mouth."

Nate waited until the waitress dropped off their treats to respond. He scooped a big spoonful of ice cream and whipped topping, then plunked a cherry down on top and offered it to Cam. "You're just gonna have to wait to get your hands all over me." He winked at Laurie then waved the spoon under Cam's nose. "Wanna share my ice cream?"

Cam's mouth twitched, curving into a sensuous smile, and he leaned forward. Curling his tongue over the top, Cam stole the cherry first, sucking it inside his cheek. He then wrapped his mouth around the spoon. His eyes shut, the heat of his breath caused a bit of fog to escape from his lips as he closed them around the spoon.

Nate's throat went dry as Cam moaned with his mouth still wrapped about the pink plastic spoon. He opened his eyes, meeting Nate's, and slowly slipped the ice cream from the spoon as Nate pulled it away.

“Holy shit,” Nate breathed, completely unprepared for his reaction to Cam’s antics.

Perhaps he’d been wrong about Cam not wanting to tango with him, and he wasn’t certain how he felt about that, but it made his jean shorts tight to think about what Cam could do to him with that evil mouth.

“Nate,” Brenda warned, then narrowed her eyes at her son. “Cam. There’s no need to disturb the public peace. Both of you behave like the gentlemen I know you can be.”

Cam waggled the cherry on the tip of his tongue at her then pointed the cherry at Nate before sucking it back into his mouth and chewing. He smiled as he ate the fruit. “Nate, we can be naughty in private, okay?”

“Don’t threaten me, Cam,” Nate drawled. “We aren’t friends anymore.”

Cam leaned forward, licking his lips, and offered Nate a bite of the warm brownie and vanilla ice cream from his own sundae. Nate watched the chocolate sauce run down to the underside of the spoon and moved forward, licking it away.

“That’s for sure,” Cam whispered and brushed his leg against Nate’s when he took the bite completely from the spoon, his eyes never leaving Nate’s.

Piped-in music, some classical selection Nate didn’t recognize, underscored the chattering of the guests as they made their way into the church. Nate could hear laughter floating over the music and up through the large church to the Sunday school rooms where they’d been given leave to get ready. He scowled at his reflection in the mirror as he tried to fold the slip of material at his throat into something that resembled a bow. “Why in the hell do I gotta wear this stupid thing?”

Diane laughed. “Come here, baby, and I’ll fix it for you. Just like your father. He could never get his ties straight either. I always had to loosely knot them before any special events we attended.”

Nate grinned at his mother in the mirror instead of rolling his eyes. She was almost as emotional as Cam’s mom, and both women had been using endearments more often, the closer graduation day came. He turned and crossed the room to her, letting her tsk and fuss. Diane twisted his blue bow tie into shape then she pinned the boutonniere into place at his lapel while he tried not to fidget. “Nathaniel, be still. I don’t want to stab you with the stick pin.”

"I'm nervous, and I can't help it. Laurie's entire church and family is out there, and I am going to be escorting a man down the aisle. No, wait... *he's* taking me to the altar since I am technically a bridesmaid."

Diane arched a brow, and her mouth twisted as she tucked the cap on the end of the stick pin. She patted her son's chest and looked into his eyes as if studying him for a moment. The stormy, gray color began to swim as she watched him, and Nate panicked for a moment. Wedding or not, there was no way he could handle tears even if she was his mom. He stuck his tongue out at her, and she sniffled as she laughed again.

"Well, let's hope you're a bridesman, otherwise you've got the wrong clothes on, baby."

Nate rolled his eyes. "Not funny. You know what I mean."

Diane shook her head. "I don't. You act as if you are making a commitment to Cam, baby. It's just a spot to be filled. I don't understand why you are so worried. Everyone knows Cam is out."

"Yeah, everyone knows Cam is out, but people in the South aren't known for their kindness to those of us that are different.

"Are you worried about people thinking you might be gay too?" Stepping back, Diane eyed Nate, and he squirmed under the scrutiny. "Is there something you want to tell me, Nate?"

"No! I don't know. Well, maybe. What if there was?" Nate bit his lip and looked away from her, his insides tied in knots.

Diane turned his face back to her. The smile she gave him made him breathe a bit easier even though he was still tense with the direction of the conversation. "Sweetheart, we had this conversation when Cam came out to your father. Remember?"

"Yes, Mom, I remember."

"Then you know that it doesn't matter what other people think. I love you. Be true to yourself, baby. Cam's always done that and you can, too."

Nate nodded. Her support of him, of them both, released the tension in his body, and he spilled out his fears to her. "Yeah, I know, but I can't help but wonder if maybe it's me. Maybe I'm just slower than everyone else. I haven't had much luck with the girls lately and *Gods!* Do I ever want to be lucky again, but Cam's been on my mind. I can hardly be around him without getting a—"

He gasped when he realized what he'd been about to say and clamped his mouth shut, shocked that he'd said so much to his *mom!*

Diane laughed. "Honey, I imagine you have an inappropriate reaction every time the wind changes direction."

"Mom!"

"Hush and let me finish. Now, despite your worries, and I don't think you have anything to fear, really, you and Cam are friends. It's entirely acceptable to have those thoughts because you boys are so close. You'll know when love happens, baby. You'll know when or who is the right one. I can't explain it any better to you than that except to say that you'll know when you've made your choice." Diane wrapped her arms around Nate, and he breathed in her perfume, the homey scent of vanilla and lavender. Comforting mom smells that almost made him want to be a little kid again where there weren't so many difficult choices.

"And it is a choice this time, Nate, because while you can't help who you fall in love with, you do make the choice to love them in the first place. Whatever you decide, remember I will love you no matter what. You are my baby, sweetheart."

Nate sighed and let her go. "Love you too, Mom."

Diane grinned and pointed a finger at him. "Now, if I find out that you two aren't safe about it with each other, Brenda and I both will be taking a piece of each of your hides."

Color rose in Nate's cheeks, and they burned as he imagined the things he and Cam could get up to, especially if they were similar to what he and Natalie Wilson had done after the Junior prom last year. He cleared his throat and sidestepped Diane, wriggling his legs as he attempted to make more room in his trousers.

"So it's alright to like both? At least, I think I still like both."

"Yes, baby, it's alright. It's a hard row to hoe, but it's all right." Diane laughed at him. A knock cut through her giggles, and she walked across the room to open the door, moving out of the way to allow Cam entrance. She leaned in, once Cam had closed the door, and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Look at you two; such handsome devils."

"Thanks, Mom Two," Cam offered, leaning down to hug her, and then he turned to Nate.

Nate stared at Cam in the mirror; he'd been watching the door, Cam, and his mother the entire time but couldn't see anything other than Cam. He swallowed hard as he took in the sight of Cam in his tux and resisted the urge to adjust himself. Cam, live and in person, dressed in formal wear was better than the image he'd seen. His mother waved at him and left him alone in the room with Cam. *Shit!* He turned, facing Cam, and stuck a finger in the collar of his shirt, hoping to loosen the tightness at his Adam's apple.

"Don't do that. I can't tie the damned bow tie for shit. Danny had to do mine," Cam said and grabbed Nate's hand. He tugged Nate's fingers free, squeezing his hand gently. Nate returned the reassuring gesture, trying hard not to blush as Cam studied him for a long moment.

"You know, you could have told Laurie no if it makes you that uncomfortable to be seen on my arm."

"Just worried about the reaction, Cam."

"Whose?"

"Everyone's! Laurie's family. The guests."

"Fuck 'em."

"Cam."

"I'm serious, Nate. I can't live my life in hiding or in shame because some three-thousand-year-old book says it's wrong. Their God made me if the book is to be believed. He made me the way I am, and if people have a problem with that then they need to take it up with their God. I am not afraid to love who I want."

Nate wondered how Cam could have such conviction, especially when the daily news was full of reports about the prejudices in the world. And not just ones about the gay community either. Nate and Cam both knew homophobia and hate happened. Their town wasn't a bad place, nor had Cam ever really been a target, but still, living where they did, being different wasn't always appreciated. And yet, each advance, each time a state approved same-sex marriage, he'd cheered with Cam. For Cam.

Nate finally realized that he could, and would, take the chance if Cam was with him. He loved Cam. Decision made. It felt good, even if he was uncertain of Cam's reaction. All he could do was try.

"I'm not either," Nate whispered.

“Not what?”

“Uncomfortable. Afraid,” Nate answered finally and dropped Cam’s hand. He took a deep breath and stepped closer to Cam. “Or embarrassed either, if truth be told.”

“What are you doing, man?” Cam asked, his eyes wide and nervously darting from Nate’s eyes to his mouth and back again.

“Making a choice.” Nate reached up, placed a hand on Cam’s chest and leaned closer.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Tease me,” Cam whispered. “I can take it from anyone else but you, Nate.”

“And if I said I wanted to do it? Wanted you? To see if sparks fly when we kiss, what would you say?”

Cam stared at him as if Nate had struck him. It was a bit gratifying to shock Cam into silence even though it also worried him. Cam finally blinked and shook his head before giving Nate his brilliant smile. Nate felt his body relax; he hadn’t even realized he was so tense waiting for Cam’s answer.

“That as much as I might enjoy that, I don’t want to be your experiment. Not now and not at Danny’s wedding.”

“I respect that,” Nate said and stepped back.

Cam sighed then leaned towards Nate’s face, and Nate bit his lip at the look in Cam’s eye. “If we walk down this road, I play for keeps.”

“You can’t have it both ways, Cam. Either I get my experience with you or someone else.”

Nate watched Cam consider his words, then he nodded. “I just don’t want it to seem like I am pushing for something you don’t want, nor do I want to be the reason you can’t be around me any longer if this isn’t something more to you.”

Nate shook his head. “No, it won’t happen that way.”

“You don’t know that. If this isn’t what you truly want, Nate, then we won’t be friends anymore.”

“No,” Nate said, stepping back towards Cam. “We’ll be lovers and friends, like it should be. Like Danny and Laurie. Like our moms and dads.”

Something flashed in Cam's eyes, and Nate swallowed again, watching Cam's face. There was something almost predatory about his expression, and Nate liked that. He liked the way it made him feel because he felt possessive about Cam too.

"Do or die, bro," Cam said.

"Death before dishonor," Nate answered.

Cam nodded and straightened. He offered his arm to Nate, smirking when Nate frowned. "We do this right, all the way, for Laurie's sake."

"Just remember, I'm not really a girl."

"No confusion on my part, Nate. I know you are all male."

With a deep breath, Nate took Cam's arm. "Let the sparks fly."

"Fourth of July, dude," Cam answered and led Nate out of the room.

"Fourth of July?"

Cam nodded as they walked down the stairs and into the waiting area for the procession. "I'm giving you until the Fourth of July to think things through and decide what you want."

"Okay," Nate answered as they stopped, and Cam opened the door. Danny and the rest of Cam's brothers, Stuart, Derrick, Kelley, and Eric, all turned to look at them. Peter, Danny's best friend and best man, grinned. "About damn time, Nate."

Nate blushed as every one of Cam's brother's gaped at him. "I..."

"Leave him alone, Pete. He's standing up for Laurie," Cam snapped. "I didn't want to leave him with a bunch of giggling girls in skirts."

Pete's face fell. "Oh. Sorry, dude, didn't mean to out you." He looked confused for a moment then spoke again. "Even though I'm not really outing you?"

Nate looked at Cam then at each of Cam's brothers. "I'm being escorted by Cam tonight. If that's outing me, then I'm out."

Cam blinked and opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something about Nate's statement. Nate waited on tenterhooks for his reaction, but Cam never got the chance to say a word as Sterling opened the door. He stared for a moment at Nate and Cam, made note of their hooked arms then shook his head. "It's time, boys."

Danny stood at the altar with the priest while the wedding party paired off behind the closed doors of the narthex. Peter and Laurie's maid of honor, Stephanie linked arms when the processional music began. Nate and Cam were the first to follow them along with Laurie's sister, Amanda on Kelley's arm, since he was the only McDonald brother not married and Amanda was Laurie's only sibling.

To make things easier, and to accommodate all of Danny's brothers, each man walked with their respective wives. Rachel, Laurie's mom, corralled the flower girl while Derrick's son, Gavin the ring-bearer held hands with his grandmother, Brenda. Behind them, Laurie waited with her father, Darryl.

The music swelled, and the doors to the nave opened. Peter and Stephanie entered on cue, and Nate and Cam stepped forward. At the signal from the wedding coordinator, Cam and Nate entered the aisle a few steps behind Peter and Stephanie.

Cam had a smile on his face, matching the one Danny shot them, and Nate heard a couple of gasps over the music. His body tensed, and Cam murmured in his ear, "Relax. I've got you."

Nate breathed deeply and exhaled, smiling when they stopped for the photographer and then nearly turned to stare at the four people he saw rise. He caught the glares they directed at him and Cam as they hustled out of the pew then made their way toward the exit.

Cam squeezed his arm. "Keep smiling and ignore the rude bastards."

Nate nodded and stepped off when the wedding coordinator waved at them.

The rest of the party entered, and when the music changed for Laurie's appearance, everyone stood. Nate watched her walk down the aisle with her father then glanced around the church. No one else, it seemed, had left, and Laurie's smile could be seen through the veil she wore.

That surprised him because the guests that left had to exit out the same door where Laurie was waiting to enter. What assholes. He wondered what Laurie and her father had done. Nate didn't dwell on them for long, however, because Laurie had made it to Danny's side.

Once Daryl had given Laurie over to Danny, the priest cleared his throat. "If anyone else feels the need to leave, please do so now before this day can continue for our happy couple. This is God's house and *ALL* his children are welcome."

The man nodded and smiled at Nate and Cam, waiting but a moment before starting again. "Dearly beloved..."

"That bitch is off my Christmas card list forever," Laurie snarled, "I can't believe they got up and walked out."

Danny patted her hand. "Forget it, babe. It's over and done with, and Father Carmichael addressed it and moved on."

Nate listened to the conversation flow around him in the car. Laurie had been livid over the ill-mannered guests and had ranted the entire ride from the church. It made Nate a bit uncomfortable until she reached over and placed a hand on his knee. "Thank you so much for putting yourself out there like that for me and for Cam."

Laurie looked like she was going to cry, and that made Nate even more uncomfortable. Danny took pity on him by kissing Laurie silent. After the display, Danny gave him a sheepish look that said he was the one to inform Laurie about what Nate had said in the narthex.

"Here, *wife*, have some champagne."

Laurie laughed, and Danny passed out small glasses to everyone in the limo.

Brenda and Sterling eyed both Nate and Cam, so they each had only one glass to toast the happy couple as the car stopped in front of the Veteran's Hall for the reception. They filed out of the stretched truck and into the building. Nate stared around at the finished product of the coordinator's work.

Danny and Laurie were going to Hawaii for their honeymoon, and so Laurie had wanted to try the traditional cuisine. The Veteran's Hall was decorated for a luau with a buffet of Hawaiian food. A DJ held court in one corner, mixing island music with more popular hits from the radio, both country and rock. There were also areas marked off for the cakes, gift table, and dancing.

Cam patted Nate on the back and pulled him inside to eat and mingle.

Nate tried the laulau and liked the pork and chicken versions but wasn't impressed with the fish laulau. He also enjoyed the kalau pig and some rice. There were glistening pineapple chunks, bananas, limes, lychees, mangoes, papayas, and several other fruits he didn't recognize but decided to try. However, Nate wasn't going near the poi.

Cam kept offering him some of the purple-gray pudding-like substance, but he wasn't having any of it. It reminded him too much of baby food, and other

things that weren't considered polite dinner conversation. Not even when Cam had put some lomi-lomi salmon on it to add taste and texture, did he relent from his stance.

"Laurie, honey, dance with me."

Danny's words pulled Nate out of his thoughts, and he turned to watch them. Laurie smiled at Danny and placed her hand into his outstretched palm. Danny pulled her to her feet and kissed her gently. Their open affection made him a bit uncomfortable, like watching your parents be sweet to one another, but Nate supposed they were entitled to be gushy. He wondered if the same thing would happen at a reception for two men and if he'd ever get to see that event. Glancing over at Cam, seeing the same embarrassed but pleased reaction on his face, made Nate grin.

Laurie's dress flowed out behind her as Danny led her toward the dance area. The lights in the hall dimmed, and Danny and Laurie were spotlighted as they reached the floor. He spun her around then took her in his arms as the music swelled from the speakers.

They danced alone for a moment or two before Peter and Stephanie joined them. Nate watched, shoveling pineapple and rice into his mouth, then nearly choked when Cam spoke, "Dance with me."

Nate grabbed the bottle of Hapa Brown Ale and drank down a large swallow to clear his throat. "What did you say?"

Cam smiled and stood up, offering his hand to Nate as Danny had done to Laurie. "Dance with me, Nate. Everyone else is out on the floor except us."

Nate turned his head toward the dance floor and saw that not only was the entire wedding party out on the floor, but Sterling and Brenda and Rachel and Darryl were dancing, too. Even his mom was out there and having fun. Nate nearly choked again as he watched her laugh and be twirled around by some relation of Laurie's.

Nate looked back up at Cam and blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. "When two men dance, who leads?"

Cam laughed. "I do because I asked." He grinned and reached down to take Nate's hand. "And because I'm taller."

Nate stood, scowling at Cam. "I already told you I'm not a girl, Cam."

"I know, Nate. Believe me, I know."

Nate followed Cam to the dance floor, their hands entwined, and Nate, though nervous, didn't feel that it was out of place. Cam circled him around as Danny had done with Laurie, and he nearly opened his mouth again to protest at being the girl. Then Cam gripped his hip.

That one gesture felt more right than when he'd held Natalie during the dances at the prom. Strong fingers held him securely, and Nate automatically reached up and placed his hand on Cam's shoulder. Nate knew what to do as he'd danced before, but it was a bit different being on the other side.

Cam pulled him closer and whispered in his ear, "Just relax and follow me."

Nate shivered and nodded then stepped back as Cam stepped forward. The music stopped almost immediately after they started, but it swelled again. A sultrier, slower tune than before floated across the room, and Cam pulled Nate even closer.

Nate wrapped his arm around Cam's waist as Cam's arm encircled Nate's back. Their steps shortened, and Nate sucked in a breath as his hips aligned with Cam's. It felt odd being nestled next to Cam but good. Right. He willed his cock to behave and looked up at Cam.

"Relax and let me drive," Cam whispered.

Nate sighed. "Lay on, Macduff."

Cam chuckled. "I've wanted to do this since we went to the Military Ball."

"Sgt. Major Arwin would have had our asses."

"True, but can you imagine the expression on everyone's face to see us dancing together in our uniforms?"

Nate rested his head on Cam's shoulder and laughed. "Oh hell. I'd forgotten about that. We went together but not together. And then when Carolee showed up with the captain of the football team from Kingdale, I thought everyone in the room was going to boot them both."

Cam hummed and ran his hand down Nate's back. "Yes, she was a stupid bitch."

Nate adjusted his hold on Cam to look up at him. "You've always been there for me, Cam."

Cam nodded, staring into Nate's green eyes. Nate continued to look back at him. "You've always been there for me too, Nate."

Nate bit his lip then leaned in and whispered in Cam's ear. "I don't need to wait until the Fourth, Cam."

Nate grinned as he heard a small sound escape from Cam, and Cam's fingers tightened against his back.

"You bastard," Cam whispered.

Nate chuckled and rested his head on Cam's shoulder once more. "Wasn't my idea to wait so long to kiss."

"You wanted fireworks, you'll get fireworks. We wait, so you can think."

"Whatever you say, dude."

Cam laughed and twirled Nate around the dance floor again. Nate held on for the ride, letting Cam lead and ignoring the indulgent looks the mothers sent their way.

Chapter Three

Cam hauled out bags and bags of hot dog and hamburger buns to his dad's truck. The sun was high in the sky, the heat of summer beating down on the grass and ground. Thankfully, a water ban hadn't been instituted yet. It was still in the realm of possibility, though. May had been a really hot and dry month, and so had June. But several thunderstorms in late June had paved the way to allowing fireworks. Even their graduation ceremonies had taken place during the evening because the weather had been so bad. In fact, the Project Graduation committee had postponed this fundraiser for next year's seniors until the break in the heat wave had occurred.

Cam had checked just this morning to make certain the city hadn't canceled the planned fireworks display when one of the moms on the PG committee had called to see if they were still on despite the holiday and weather. A few more calls confirmed it, and the preparations began.

July Fourth, his deadline to Nate and the day of the Senior Barbeque. The date had been marked on his calendar for longer than he could remember even if the reasons behind it had changed. Somehow, the fact that Nate had made a decision about what he wanted seemed to make the time stretch. It would have been nice if Nate had even bothered to call him after the wedding.

Granted, they had both been busy, but it had been the longest time Cam and Nate hadn't spoken on a daily basis since the summer before Nate's dad was killed. The Browns had gone on a camping vacation in West Texas. Nate's mom had banned phone calls, and Cam thought this time was actually much worse than before. The past three weeks had been extra hard on him because he had wanted to give Nate time to change his mind. He hadn't wanted to pressure Nate to make a decision.

He thought back to the wedding, and how he and Nate had danced. Just the reminder of Nate pressed flush against him made his body ache pleasantly. Too bad Nate hadn't been around to enjoy the sensations with him. More carnal thoughts invaded his memories, and Cam reined his emotions in when he heard the house door open.

"This stuff isn't going to load itself, Cam. Get a move on," Sterling shouted as he exited the house, a huge bag of charcoal under each arm.

“Slave driver,” Cam murmured and trudged back into the house. He found his mother icing another of the hundreds of cupcakes she’d baked for the barbeque.

Brenda looked up and smiled at Cam when he grabbed a stack of bakery boxes. “Careful, Cam. Please don’t drop those. I don’t have time to bake new ones.”

Cam sighed. “I thought I’d just toss them out on the lawn, Mom. Yell at Dad to go long and use them for target practice on his face.”

Brenda frowned at him. “Don’t get lippy with me, young man. You aren’t too big to end up with a boot across your ass or missing out on the event entirely for your smart mouth.”

“I think I know better than to drop the damned cupcakes.”

“Cam, what did I tell you about your mouth?”

Cam rolled his eyes, missing Sterling coming back into the kitchen. Cam gave her a long look, his blue eyes shining with insincere contrition. “If you can’t say anything nice...”

Sterling smacked Cam on the back of the head. “You’ll still get an ass whipping once I find out what the hell it was you said to your mother.”

“Ow! Dad!”

Brenda shook her head at them. “Take it outside, Sterling. I really don’t have time to referee today.”

Sterling nodded and took half the bakery boxes from Cam. “March, soldier, now.”

Cam sighed and took the boxes out the door to the truck, Sterling right behind him after he stopped to give Brenda a kiss.

Cam placed the boxes on the truck’s tailgate then gently pushed them into the bed. He climbed up on the truck and scooted the boxes next to the bags of buns. He began to rearrange the boxes of chips and condiments, coolers, and lawn chairs they were taking to the park where the barbeque was being held.

Sterling settled his load of boxes onto the truck bed and looked up at Cam, shading his eyes with one hand. “You want to tell me about the bug that crawled up your ass and died?”

“No bug, sir,” Cam answered. He paused then turned to look at Sterling. “Dad... never mind.”

Cam felt Sterling's eyes on him as he continued to fiddle with the items in the back of the truck.

"Is this about you and Nate?"

Cam spun around and sat down on the largest cooler. "He hasn't spent much time with me since graduation, and we haven't even spoken since the wedding."

Sterling arched a brow. "That's where you are going with this?" Cam just continued to stare at his dad. Sterling sighed. "All right. Cam, you and Nate are extremely busy right now. You are finishing up the senior year activities, and Nate's working for college."

"I know!" Sterling glared at Cam, and Cam tried to calm down. "I know that, Dad," Cam answered in a more controlled voice when Sterling gave him another look. "But he said nothing was going to change."

"Cam, you know better than that. Life is change, bud, you can't stop it. It happens on a daily basis. Besides, I'm not quite certain the time apart won't do you good."

Cam looked up at Sterling, shock clear on his face. "You don't approve?"

Sterling sat on the tailgate. "I didn't say that. I said the time apart was good for you both."

Frowning, Cam nudged one of the coolers with his foot. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Sterling reached out and ruffled Cam's hair, and Cam pulled away from him, glaring at Sterling. Sterling chuckled and patted Cam's arm. "It means you are young, and that's all, Cam. You and Nate have been attached to one another for so long. You're good friends, and a bit of time to evaluate what you want is good for both of you."

Cam just stared at Sterling, not knowing what to say. He supposed it was the same things he said to Nate that night. Only it sounded like a load of bullshit from his perspective now, and he wondered if Nate had thought the same thing.

Cam had been happy admiring Nate from afar, and despite his conviction that he and Nate would be inseparable, he knew, realistically, most people didn't just turn gay. He also knew that some people had a hard time reconciling with a part of themselves that wasn't the accepted norm. He'd never had the

cause to be... fearful, he supposed was the right term, but he knew it could be a frightening thing to decide to be true to yourself when you were different.

Nate had done that all in one night. Cam never even had the time to properly explain his feelings to Nate. All he'd had to say was a stunned yes. He should have expected Nate would need some time to himself to sort everything out, even if it did make him nervous to think that Nate would change his mind. Especially since he'd done nothing but brood about this situation since then.

Except having Nate to himself at the wedding—the way they'd danced, and how Nate had held his hand through the reception—had seemed like a dream come true. His dream come true, in fact, and he hadn't considered what that might mean for Nate.

It wasn't as if Nate had had an older brother he could confide in. One that took him out to a gay club for the first time, nor one that had been there for him when Cam had snuck out to go back to said club to rid himself of his "condition". Kelley had held him as he had gotten sick from drinking too much as well as when he'd realized what he'd done in the back alley beside the club.

As much as they had talked about their sexual experience, Cam had tuned out much of Nate's story about his night with Natalie Wilson. He was certain Nate had done the same thing with the story about the twink Cam had sucked off.

Finally, Cam pulled his thoughts together to speak. "You think he's confused?" He frowned. "Or that he's using me?"

"No, I don't think he'd use you." Sterling shook his head. "I don't actually know what Nate's thinking. I've never been in his position. Or yours for that matter, but it can't be all that different when lust is involved."

"I love Nate, Dad." And as if saying the words made them true, Cam realized he did love him and was *in* love with Nate. He'd loved him for a long time as a friend, and that had grown into a romantic love. It wasn't the instantaneous love of the stories, but a slow, warm, and lingering affection that ran deeply through him. He knew Nate inside and out. Knew he was surly in the mornings if he didn't get his full night's rest, just as Nate knew Cam was a morning lark and cheerful.

Cam had been there for Nate when Forrest had died, and Nate had been there when Cam had come out. They supported one another in just about every aspect of their lives. He knew he was right about the fact that he was in love with Nate, his age be damned.

Their relationship had evolved into something more than just friendship. Something he had to try and find out if it would work.

“I know you think you do, Cam, but like I said, y’all are young. So very young and you are trying to grow up so fast. It’s a scary world out there, nowadays. All I know is that I care about both of you, and I don’t want either one of you hurt if the equation changes. That’s all.”

Cam crossed his arms over his chest. “You could be happy for us, you know.”

Sterling chuckled. “Who said I’m not? I just want you safe as well as happy, Cam.”

Cam took a deep breath, threading his hands together and looking away from Sterling’s face. His thoughts on gay rights, safety, and sex wasn’t something he’d ever discussed with his father. His mother, on the other hand, knew about Cam’s fears and desires. She was a huge supporter of both him and their local PFLAG group. However, other than coming out, Cam had never really broached this subject specifically with Sterling and was wary of his reaction.

His father was a former Army Ranger, and one of the reasons Cam had stuck with JROTC. He felt it had been one way to return the love and support he’d had during the time when he’d announced his sexuality. He knew he wouldn’t be welcomed in the service regardless of the DADT recall, but it gave him something firm and structured as well as something in common with his father besides going hunting.

Despite all that, there had been a sort of distance between him and his father for quite some time, and now it was coming to a head, and Cam had to deal with it. Cam supposed that was the reason his mother had forced this conversation on the two of them; that or she was getting tired of Cam moping about the house. He sighed because, dammit, he knew it was time for this conversation. He hated when he realized he was making adult decisions, and his mother had shown him the way again without ever saying a word. Growing up really rather sucked, and not in any fun way that he could see at this particular moment in time.

Lifting his head, Cam looked right at Sterling. “Is a straight relationship a guarantee of safety, Dad? ‘Normal’ people marry and divorce every day, and yet it’s a cultural taboo for two men or two women to attempt the same thing.”

He held up a hand to forestall anything Sterling might have said until he was finished. "I'm not saying this to start a battle, but like you told me, change happens, and if I am going to get anywhere in life, I need to see this through. It's not like I can put up a sign and say 'Marry me. We'll love and live together forever', because even straight people can't say that, Dad. I have to take a chance to find out if Nate does love me in that way, and we can attempt to make a go of a relationship."

Cam smiled. "I'm going to be hurt. In fact, I already have been, but that's neither here nor there. But the rewards, Dad, the rewards I will get from trying with Nate more than make up for any pain inflicted in trying to find love. Or so I believe, and in today's society I need to believe in that. Nate will be there for me because I love him, am *in* love with him, and I'm certain he feels the same way about me."

Spreading his hands, he came to the right conclusion all on his own as he finished speaking to his father. "Nate just needs a bit more time to connect the pieces."

Sterling stared at him for a long moment, and Cam wondered whether or not he'd said too much. "Dammit, Cam. You've gone and grown up to be a helluva man on me when I wasn't looking." Then Sterling chuckled. "Your mother was right when she told me I should just listen to you. That I was going to be..." He shook his head. "I *am* so proud of you."

Cam smirked, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from his chest in spite of his father's surprise. "Well, don't tell her that, she's already got a big head. I think she gets up in the morning and puts on the top of her to-do list that she will be right about everything."

Sterling threw his head back and laughed out loud. The rolling, rumbling sound made Cam grin even wider, and he joined in because, inevitably, Mom was *always* right no matter how her men tried to make things difficult for her.

"Are you two finished? Please tell me there's no blood to clean up." Brenda stood in the doorway, shielding her eyes as she looked out into the yard for them. Cam felt a rush of love and appreciation for both of his parents right then and hoped like hell Nate had been right in saying that their relationship would be just like their moms and dads'.

"I still have things that need to be in the truck before we leave and don't have time to hose the two of you down." Brenda smiled and waved at them, turned to go back into the house then dragged out another box full of things

she'd deemed necessary to burn meat at the park. "I've got more cupcakes done too, gentlemen. Let's get this show on the road since you played nice and all."

Cam groaned, and Sterling laughed even harder as he stood. "I'd say it's the men's job to be bossed by the women, but things are a bit different in your situation. At least Nate will be able to pull his own weight when it comes to killing the bugs and taking out the trash."

Standing, Cam glared at him. "That's right, Dad, because Nate's a dude. There are no girls in a gay relationship." He grinned. "And because I'm going to make him kill all the bugs."

Cam swore he'd never worked as hard as he had today. He'd hauled coolers, bags, and totes. Boxes, chairs, and towels. He'd lit grills, pulled tabs on cans, and opened bottles, and after all that he still wasn't done.

Cam greeted the parents of the PG committee, waved to friends and helped set up game booths. Marshmallows, chocolate placed in coolers to prevent melting, and a thousand graham crackers. The sights, smells, and sounds of summer burst into the air with greetings, yells, and the ever present air horns.

In spite of the blazing Texas summer sun, sparklers crackled. Black Cats exploded with the rat-tat-tat-tat like gun fire, and sulfur filled the air with colored smoke from the round bombs tossed about like balls.

Water guns, girls screaming about being targets while sunning, and the scent of smoked meat joined in the fun of the day of celebrating. Through all of the chaos, Cam looked for Nate. He saw many people, but not the one he truly wanted to see. Once he saw Diane with principals Mays and Black. Counselor Blaine chatted with his mom and dad and several other parents. But still no Nate.

In fact, it was late in the day before he caught a glimpse of Nate. Cam found him at a booth with Natalie Wilson and Kurt Hudson, tossing large softballs at a target, trying to dunk the head football coach of the varsity team. Cam left them to it as he made his rounds through the booths area though Nate had caught his eye and smiled at him.

Crushing down the jealousy he felt, Cam watched Natalie throw her arms around Nate when she tossed the winning ball to knock Coach Sheets down from his pedestal. His heart ached at the sight, but he was gratified when Nate pried her loose and draped her over Kurt. Nate turned and met his gaze again

and smiled at him. Cam lost sight of him again after that and decided to wait for Nate to come to him.

Cam slapped at a mosquito then snarled as more seemed to spring up from out of nowhere. He stopped by their chairs and dug through the bag his mother had prepared, looking for something to fight back the insect horde. He already had a bug bracelet wrapped around one wrist and a second around his ankle, but the scorching heat proved no match for the “state bird” of Texas. Finding the bug wipes and taking a deep breath, he scrubbed his face then down his arms. The scent of citronella and chemicals blossomed around him and mixed with the coconut smell of the sunscreen like a wayward cologne. He coughed, making a face and sticking out his tongue at the inhaled taste, and then turned when he heard laughter.

“Sexy, Cam. Redneck sexy.” Nate grinned at him, looked around then held out a hand to him.

Cam hesitated only for a second then took Nate’s hand, twining their fingers. He squeezed Nate’s hands and grinned at the returned affection before letting him go. “About time you showed.”

Nate cocked his head. “You told me to think, Cam. Did you actually think I wouldn’t do so?”

Cam opened his mouth then shut it. “No, I didn’t. You said you didn’t need to think any more.”

Nate rubbed the back of his head with his hand. “Yeah, that was my dick talking, and really how often do you listen to it?”

Cam laughed. “Not as often as you might think.”

Nate nodded. “Can we talk?”

Cam looked around. Almost their entire class had turned out for the barbeque in spite of the holiday. There were other parents and siblings running around, grandparents and toddlers all over the park. He turned back to Nate. “Let’s mingle some, keep it low, and play some games. Once it gets dark would be a better time. It’ll cover anything you don’t want seen.”

“Cam, I don’t care if anyone sees,” Nate said and stepped closer. “I won’t force you back into the closet when you never hid before.”

Cam swallowed. He’d known Nate would be considerate, and after his conversation with his father he was trying to be the same for Nate. “Thank you.”

Nate reached for Cam's hand, sliding their palms together once more and holding onto him tightly. It made Cam's heart race to do this right in the park in front of all their peers and family, but he pulled Nate close and wrapped his arm around his shoulder.

Nate's arm encircled his back, and Cam felt every one of Nate's fingers dig into his shirt as Nate clung to him.

Both of them ignored the cheers that rose up around them while they stood wrapped up in each other.

The fireworks continued to launch, the booms, whistles, crashes, and pops a background to the intimate embrace Nate was wrapped in. Cam sat at his back, their legs stretched out in front of them as they watched the colors and designs burst upon the purple-black darkness.

Many times he'd been this close to Cam, but none of them had made him aware of Cam like tonight's hold did. He could feel the heat of Cam's groin against his ass and snuggled closer to Cam despite the warm night.

"You'll want to quit that if you want to finish watching the show," Cam murmured in his ear.

Nate shivered, turning his head to look at Cam's face. "And if I've had enough of these kinds of fireworks?"

The slow smile that appeared on Cam's face stirred something in his gut. He leaned in and pressed his mouth to Cam's. It was a hard mash of their faces, and Nate backed off and tried again, this time closing in slower and softer. He nibbled at Cam's lip, silently hoping he'd not screwed it up.

Cam gasped, and Nate took advantage of that, quickly sliding his tongue inside Cam's mouth. A quick taste of sweetness, and Cam caught up with him. He grabbed Nate's head, fingers curling into his hair and holding him in place as Cam took over the kiss.

As first kisses go, the mash was nothing. The next instant, though, redefined Nate's life. Nips of teeth and lips pulled at him, tugged on his heart, stomach, and groin. More tongue and wetness and heat. Delicious, extremely distracting heat. Now he knew why some people did this all the time.

Cam groaned, and Nate understood what the words "swallowing sound" meant. The vibrations he'd taken from Cam traveled down his throat and into

his belly. He tasted the soda and sweets Cam had eaten, and then underneath all of that was Cam. Nate squirmed, trying to turn around to face Cam fully.

Cam drew back long enough to help Nate straddle his lap, their hands fumbling. "Easy," Cam whispered. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I know," Nate breathed. "But I have to touch you."

Cam moaned. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say that."

Nate chuckled and leaned in to kiss him again. "Show me. Take me to the other side."

Cam wrapped his arms around Nate and drew in a deep breath, the hold pressing them tightly together. "We'll get there. Just slow down, I want to do this right."

Nate slid his hands down Cam's back and slipped his hands into Cam's pockets, squeezing him hard and thrusting against his stomach. "Still wanna do this slowly?"

"Not really but I don't want to scare you off either."

Nate glared at Cam in the darkness. "I'm not a girl."

"I know!"

"Then show me what to do."

Cam took another breath and leaned away. "Out here in public?"

"No one's watching the 'us' show, they're looking at the fireworks." Nate closed his eyes as Cam's hand brushed against his cock. He arched into Cam. "Just show me how."

Cam laughed and bent to lick Nate's throat. "It's a cock, man. Touch me like you touch yourself, and we'll adjust." His palm brushed over the outline of Nate's prick once more then dipped inside the waistband of his jeans. The tips of his fingers glanced over the top of Nate's prick, forcing a shudder to shake Nate's body and soul.

"Jesus, fuck. I didn't know you were a cock tease," Nate breathed as he leaned closer to Cam's face.

"Bite me," Cam whispered, his other hand soon joining in the battle with Nate's jeans.

Nate gasped when Cam pulled his shorts and briefs out of the way. The night air around them was still warm and humid from the sun, but the

difference between that and Cam's fingers encircling his cock was like the blast of a furnace. He bucked up into Cam's grip as he laid his head on Cam's shoulder, and he sank his teeth into the juncture of throat and shoulder.

Cam writhed under Nate and let go of his prick. With a moan of frustration, Nate pulled away, looking down to see Cam undoing his own jeans. Cam's cock spilled out of the zip, full and firm. Cam met Nate's eyes, and Nate watched as Cam pressed both of their dicks together, his hand cradling them close. He squeezed, and Nate thought he just might die from the sensation alone—until Cam stroked his hand up the length. Friction-induced heat skated up his prick, causing Nate to buck and shudder at the same time. Cam's thumb grazed over the head of his cock then over onto Nate's, spreading the fluid around. Never had Nate felt anything so fantastic. Not with Natalie Wilson, nor when he pulled one off on his own. He wanted more, and he wanted it now.

“Oh, God,” Nate breathed, and Cam laughed before he tugged Nate close again. Closing his mouth over Nate's, Cam moved his fist faster, and all Nate could do was hold on for the ride as Cam drove them toward completion.

Nate clenched his fingers in Cam's shirt, twisting the material between his knuckles as he nipped and bit at Cam's mouth. He canted his hips, rubbing up against Cam's dick and his fingers as best as he could.

Nate closed his eyes, the cracks and bangs of the fireworks continued in the background, hiding their pants and grunts. Cam's moans and groans came to Nate through the distraction, and he drank them down, committing them to memory.

Cam's other hand pried one of his from Cam's shoulder and guided it between them. Nate circled his hand around Cam's, the heat of his movements rubbing at his sensitive skin.

“With me,” Cam murmured against his mouth before kissing him again, and Nate twined their fingers, tugging on their cocks.

The sensation was too much, and Nate gasped, coming in hard, fast spurts. Cam chuckled then bit his lip, adding to the mess Nate was making. Nate rested his head against Cam's, sharing breaths with him.

Grimacing as the warmth of their release cooled rapidly on their skin and became sticky, Nate drew back. The lights from the fireworks highlighted Cam enough, so Nate could see him as he wiped away their release with the ends of his T-shirt and straightened their clothing.

“Hey,” Nate whispered, but Cam didn’t answer.

Nate had a moment of panic that Cam hadn’t felt the same things he had, and that’s why he wouldn’t look at him. “Look at me.”

Nate watched Cam swallow. His Adam’s apple bobbed, and the panic nearly threatened to boil over and out of him. “Please look at me.”

“I don’t want to ruin anything,” Cam whispered, finally looking up at him. His bottom lip, swollen from Nate’s kisses, was held between his teeth, apprehension apparent in every line of his body.

Nate smiled at him then gently pulled Cam’s lip free. “You didn’t. *We* didn’t.”

Cam breathed out a sigh and closed his eyes.

“Never imagined it would be you, but I am damn glad we went all the way.”

Cam nodded.

“So what happens now?” Nate asked.

Cam opened his eyes watching him for a long moment before laughing. “You go off to college and meet someone new.”

Nate shook his head. “Never gonna happen.”

Cam arched a brow. “You won’t ever meet anyone else again?”

“Smartass.”

“I’m serious.”

Nate narrowed his eyes at Cam, watching for the moment that Cam would break and grin at him. He didn’t, so Nate shook his head. “I’m not going off to college to find a boyfriend—God, that sounds so weird—because I have you.”

Cam did smile then, and Nate returned it. “Galveston isn’t all that far away, and, you know, we could get an apartment or something there. Together while you decide on what you want to do next, be it college or just a job.” He felt his cheeks fill with heat as Cam’s eyes widened. “Or not.”

Cam leaned in and kissed him. Nate pressed hard against his mouth, desperate for any kind of reaction from Cam that would let him know everything was going to be fine between them. That Nate hadn’t screwed up by asking too soon or needing reassurance.

“Yes,” Cam breathed against Nate’s mouth. His arms pulled Nate against him tightly, and Nate finally relaxed as Cam spoke again. “Yes.”

The End

Author Bio

MA Jackson has written speculative, fantasy fanfiction under the nom de plume unbroken_halo for almost ten years and is now working toward publishing her original works. She likes to try and focus on realism in her stories as well as spinning a yarn.

A career in homemaking led her to the brink of insanity. Or—depending on whom you ask: her best friend, her husband, or her daughter—past the brink. Her hobbies include violating the rules of good writing and grammar simply because she can, playing games on her tablet, and telling strangers to chill the hell out. Please deposit an additional twenty-five cents for more bio.

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