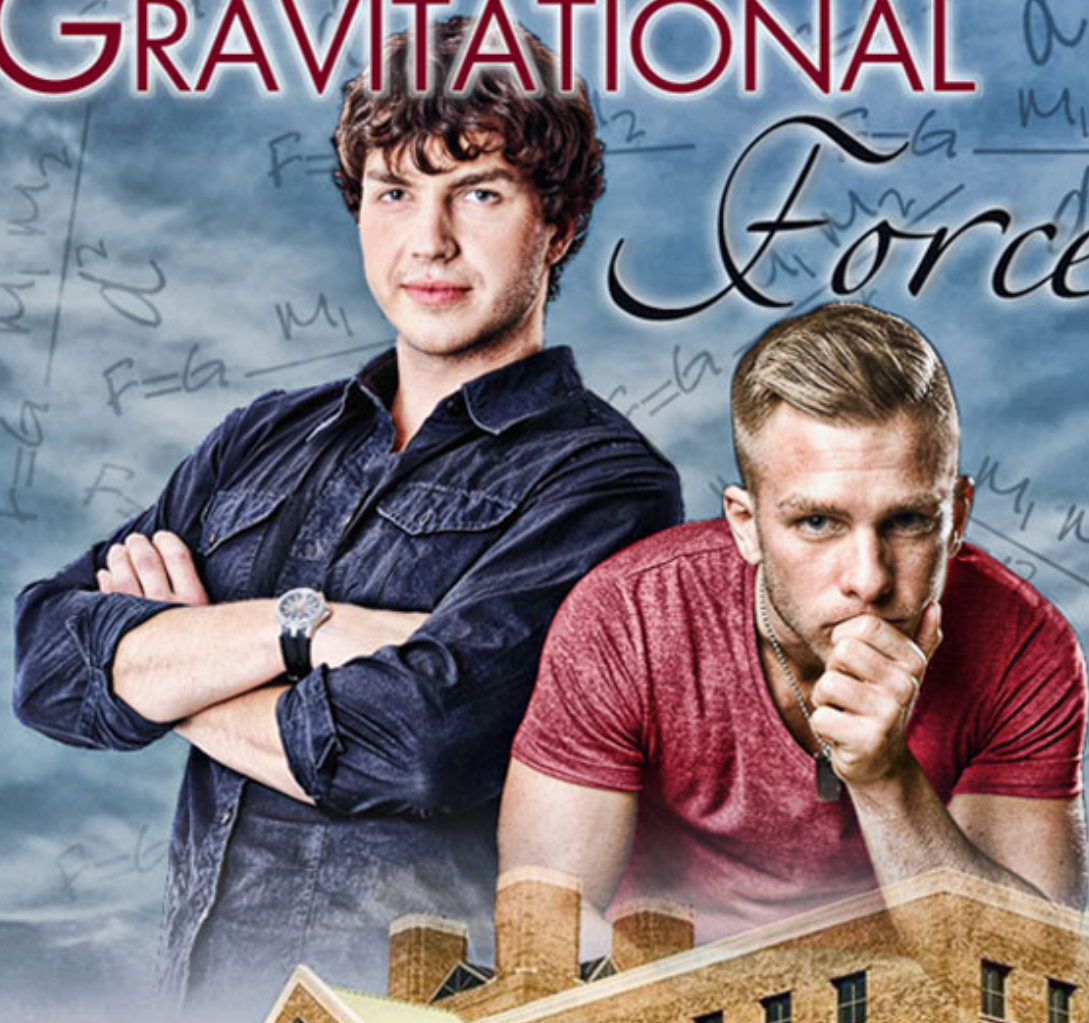


A Love's Landscapes Story

GRAVITATIONAL

Force



C.M. WALKER

GRAVITATIONAL FORCE

At six-foot-two of solid muscle, Luke's shyness is often mistaken for intimidation. He's fantasized about his roommate Nate since the day they moved into the dorms, but six weeks later, Nate has a boyfriend and Luke still struggles to have a conversation with him.

When Nate's boyfriend lets him down during a difficult time, Luke will have to work past his anxiety to be the friend he knows Nate needs. He may not be able to tell Nate how he feels, but can he show him?

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

GRAVITATIONAL FORCE

By C.M. Walker

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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GRAVITATIONAL FORCE

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Photo Description

A slim, dark-haired man pins a bare-chested, muscular blond man against the wall by holding his shirt above his head. The dark-haired man fondles the goods inside the blond's open pants and kisses his neck. They partially cover an Avengers poster that is hanging between a bookcase and a door.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I could get free in a heartbeat. I was strong enough and had the right training that should make it simple to break loose from my roommate's weak grip on the shirt trapping my arms to the door. So why couldn't I do it? Was it because I was trembling with the need for skin to skin contact? Maybe it was the fact that my brain had shut down the second my roommate had cupped my crotch through my pants. Or could it be those damned dreams that had been haunting me every day since I first set foot in this dorm room? Those dreams where my hands were roving over pale skin, where whimpers and mewls of pleasure came from between soft pink lips, and where the world fell away as I watched every inch of my cock disappear between ivory cheeks.

(I think it's sexy and sweet when the bottom takes the lead, especially when the top is too shy to make the first move. I want to know how these boys got to this point and just a little of what happens after, a HFN ending please.)

Sincerely,

Viv

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: college, barely legal, roommates, shy top, grief

Word Count: 10,371

Acknowledgements

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To Viv, who wrote the *Dear Author* prompt, planting the seed that grew into *Gravitational Force*, I thank you for inspiring me to tell Luke and Nate's story.

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For that beautiful cover courtesy of Janice, thank you for your time, your skill, and your patience.

A bottom-of-my-heart thank you to my husband and two children for their understanding, patience, and support while I work on this crazy little thing called a writing career.

And finally, last but absolutely not least, thank you to every single person who reads *Gravitational Force*. Thank you for letting me tell you a story.

GRAVITATIONAL FORCE

By C.M. Walker

My heart pounded in my chest. I rolled onto my side and opened my eyes. Across the room, just a few feet away, my roommate Nate stirred. That's when I noticed the sticky mess in my briefs.

Shit.

I'd have thought I was too old for *those* kinds of dreams, but apparently not. The images rushed back to me: Nate, on his knees in front of me, sucking down my dick like he was starving; his green eyes staring up at me; my hand buried in his dark hair, pulling through the strands.

These dreams about my roommate needed to stop. They were like torture. Especially since he was right there, living in the same cramped space.

I sat up in bed; the dog tags around my neck slid into place between my pecs. The jingle of their movement reassured me every morning that they were still there, that I would never forget. Taking them off felt like betrayal, so I only took them off when I absolutely needed to.

I shoved the covers off, hoping to escape the room before Nate woke up, but as I was about to stand, he stretched.

"Mornin'," he drawled sleepily.

I yanked the sheet back over my lap, glancing down inconspicuously to make sure there wasn't a wet spot on the sheet, too.

"Hey," I said weakly, waiting for him to turn away before daring to stand.

Why did dorm rooms have to be so damn small? Had he seen anything? Probably not. Nate seemed to have a comment about everything, so I felt safe.

For now.

He flopped over on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. I took the opportunity to get out of bed, quickly rearranging my sheet to cover the spot. I grabbed my towel and held it casually—I hoped—in front of me.

"So there's a party tonight," he said. "We should go."

I stopped rummaging through my drawer for a fresh razor blade and looked over at him. "We?"

"Yes," he declared as he sat up. Every morning, his dark hair stuck up in all directions, begging to be touched. "After six weeks, you haven't been to a single party. There's something very wrong with that."

Nate, it'd turned out, was not the quiet nerd I'd assumed he was when we first met. Very quickly, he'd made lots of friends, joined several clubs, and even found a boyfriend.

"Not really into parties."

"Maybe you just haven't been to the right one yet. With the right person."

Like you? That's what my troublemaker of an inner voice wanted me to say. What I managed to choke out was, "I'm just gonna hop in the shower now."

"So think about it, okay?"

"Sure," I agreed as I casually bolted from the room.

Once I was under the hot, hammering water, my thoughts drifted to my dream, the vision of Nate on his knees in front of me. Now his words twisted themselves into it.

"You just haven't been with the right person yet," he'd say, just before taking me into his wet mouth.

I squirted some body wash into my hand to work into a lather over my rising dick and leaned my head against my arm on the shower wall. My eyes closed, and with the steam swirling around me, I could almost feel the heat of his mouth surrounding me as I stroked.

He'd look up at me with those green eyes, and I'd have a hand twisted into his thick, dark hair, controlling his speed and depth. And he'd take it all with the hottest sounds because he'd be unable to speak with my dick shoved down his throat. Moans and hums and grunts and even whimpers.

I let out my own groan, so ready to explode. I imagined pulling his head to me, until his nose brushed my skin, forcing him to swallow every drop. Not that he'd resist. He'd wrap his arms around me and clutch my ass as I empty into him. I stifled my shout into the crook of my elbow as my jizz swirled down the drain.

I opened the door to my room and was greeted by the wet, slurping noises of Nate and his boyfriend Justin going at it. They still had their clothes on, thank God. Justin's bony ass was not what I wanted to see, especially not after wanking to the idea of Nate blowing me. And, yes, I knew Justin's ass was bony, because last week I'd walked in on them grinding away.

I tried to ignore the sloppy sounds. Jesus, didn't Justin know how to kiss a guy properly? And what the hell was he doing here so early in the morning?

Nate sat up and separated himself from Justin. "Shit. Told ya he'd be back. Sorry, man."

Justin eye-fucked me, right in front of Nate, without the decency to even try to hide it. Nate was about four inches shorter than me, neither fat nor muscular, just perfectly proportioned, and he could probably snap Justin in half. Despite my six-workouts-a-week build, I tightened the towel around my waist to keep his greedy little eyes out and didn't say anything.

"Hey, so what about that party?" Nate asked.

I suppressed my grimace at the return of the "party" subject. "I gotta study. Physics midterm."

"I'll help you study," he offered. "I took AP Physics in high school. Got college credit for it and everything."

"Better idea," Justin singsonged. "You could join in with us right now."

I glared at his waggling eyebrows.

He puffed out his lower lip and half-hid behind Nate. "Or not."

Nate shoved him playfully. "C'mon, let's go. I don't think Luke's into that kind of thing."

Justin petted the Avengers poster. "Later, Thor. Nate will miss you *so much* while he's gone."

Nate laughed and opened the door. "Shut up."

And then they were gone, Justin smacking Nate's ass as they went.

What did Nate see in that asshole, anyway?

I grabbed the toothbrush and toothpaste I'd forgotten to take with me when I escaped for my shower and headed back to the bathroom. Nate and Justin were down the hall, walking away from me.

“Goddamn, sweet thang, I thought your roommate was gonna kick my ass. One scary mo-fo.”

“Nah, Luke’s just a big pussy cat.”

“Rawr,” Justin replied.

Their laughter died off as they turned the corner.

In the bathroom, I ran my toothbrush under the water. Like most people, Justin found my size intimidating. The truth was, lifting weights was like yoga for me. The burn of my muscles, the concentration, the solitary focus to push my body harder each set... it was all a form of meditation. And something I desperately needed after the previous summer.

Let Justin think what he wanted about me. Maybe he wouldn’t come around as much. But did Nate not realize I was gay? The day we’d moved in, he’d asked me point blank if him being gay was going to be a problem.

“Of course not,” I’d replied. What I should have said was, “So am I.”

Why hadn’t I? I wasn’t in the closet. And now that conversation felt so long ago, I didn’t know how to bring it up again.

If Nate thought I was straight, and if he’d ever noticed the... effects... of the dreams I had, at least he wouldn’t realize they were about him. That was the good news. The bad news?

Nate thought I was a pussy. I might not be a fighter, but I sure as hell wasn’t a pussy.

I sighed at my reflection. Toothpaste foam outlined my lips. Physics would have to wait, and parties would have to become my thing. I had a roommate to impress.

When I got back to my room after class, Nate was on his phone, his back to the door. I tried to quietly grab my books and leave to give him privacy, but he heard me and turned around. Something in his face made me stop. He looked younger, like a kid. Scared?

He shook his head at me and waved his hands, which I interpreted to mean that I could stay. I didn’t mean to listen to his conversation, but it mostly consisted of “Mm-hmms.” Then he said, “I’m coming tonight. I’ll catch a bus.”

He clicked his phone off, and I pretended to look busy with homework.

“Rain check on the party tonight?” His voice sounded off without his usual happiness.

“What’s wrong?”

He sat at his desk, staring at his phone. “My grandpa. He had a heart attack last night. He didn’t...” He sucked in a breath. “He was so healthy.”

“I’m so sorry, Nate.” My throat closed as the dog tags resting against my chest seemed to freeze to my skin. I wanted to say more; sorry wasn’t enough. It didn’t mean anything. It was just something people said because they felt like they had to. You could only hear it so many times before it made you want to scream.

He opened his laptop. “I gotta figure out when I can catch a bus.”

I stepped up behind him and leaned on the back of his chair to study the schedule with him, like he couldn’t possibly figure it out on his own. “I’ll give you a ride to the bus station.”

“You don’t—”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “I want to.”

He looked up at me. “Thanks.” His voice was barely above a whisper, and our eyes locked.

I squeezed.

He sucked in his bottom lip against his teeth, slowly releasing it before turning back to the screen. “There’s a bus at three. Think we can make that one?”

“No problem.”

Nate stared out the window as we drove off campus. I mostly kept my eyes on the road, glancing sideways at him from time to time. He twisted and untwisted the strap of his bag. Watching the turn of his wrist and those long, thin fingers tangling in the strap, I couldn’t help imagining what they’d feel like on my body. I took a steadying breath. This was *not* the time to be thinking about Nate in that way.

He hadn’t said anything since we left our room, which felt strange because Nate always had something to talk about.

Just say something. Anything.

I had the words, but no sound to say them with. My voice felt like it had been stripped away.

If you need to talk, I'll listen.

You can cry. You don't have to be strong.

Things won't be the same, but I promise you'll be okay again.

"How long of a bus ride is it?" I finally asked, after having to clear my throat.

"Six hours or so," he said, still facing the window, in a voice that sounded far away. I missed the Nate I knew, the one that would chatter on about how the first hour was the best and the middle ones were boring but the last hour was the absolute worst because it seemed to take the longest.

Since he didn't want to talk, I didn't try again. After several more minutes of silence, he said, "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I just... wish there was something I could do for you."

My face was burning hot by the time I finished the sentence, so much so that I wish I hadn't said it.

He finally looked at me. A few tears had rolled down his cheeks. "Giving me a ride to the bus station is enough. I really appreciate it."

I nodded. My throat tightened at the tears on his face. If only I could take away his pain instantly. Grateful for the excuse of driving, I focused on the road.

Silence filled the rest of the ride, but at least Nate didn't turn away again. As we neared the bus station, I headed towards the parking lot.

"Oh, you can just drop me off out front. You don't need to wait with me."

I glanced at him. "You sure?"

"Absolutely. You've done more than enough already."

I switched back to the right lane, having to cut off a minivan to do so. The horn blared behind us. Nate looked sheepish.

I pulled over to the curb and stopped. Nate opened the door, grabbed his bag, and climbed out. He popped his head back in. "Thanks, man. Really."

I glanced at his lips that looked so red compared to his pale face, momentarily frozen by the desire to kiss him good-bye. I looked back to his eyes quickly. "It was no trouble."

"Later, Luke."

He shut the door, and I watched him walk away. When I couldn't see him anymore, I merged into traffic and headed back to campus.

The dorm room was too quiet without Nate around—completely ridiculous because half the time he was out at some club meeting anyway. I should have welcomed the silence, but I couldn't concentrate on formulas and theories. Even my workout didn't erase the feeling that I was a jerk for dropping him off at the bus station. For all I knew he was still sitting there. No, no, that's what he wanted. Hell, he hadn't even wanted me to drive him to the station in the first place.

When my phone buzzed with a text message, I welcomed the distraction.

Nate: *Made it here. Thx 4 the ride.*

I had a moment of illogical panic when I saw it was from Nate, like he could somehow tell that I was thinking about him. But then warmth filled my entire body. Nate was thinking of me too, even if it was just for a minute.

I was still staring dumbly at the phone when a second message came in.

Nate: *Sorry I didn't txt u b4. Crazy here w fam.*

Realizing I should reply, I took the time to spell out everything.

Me: *How are you?*

I pressed send and immediately wished I could unsend. Would he think I was being pushy? Annoying?

Nate: *:-)*

Me: *I want to do something for you.*

No response.

Me: *I mean I wish I could make it better for you.*

Was I helping or making it worse? I wasn't sure.

Me: *I know nothing can make it better. I just wish I could.*

I should have stopped then. Turned the phone off and pretended it didn't exist. But it buzzed again.

Nate: *Thank you*

Me: *But I haven't done anything. I feel helpless here.*

Nate: *I appreciate your words, they do make me feel better*

Me: *I'm glad.*

Nate: *This is the most you've ever said to me ;-)*

I chuckled. He was probably right.

Me: *Sorry. It's not you.*

Nate: *Are you breaking up with me?*

Me: ?

Nate: *Its not you, its me?*

Nate: ;-)

Me: *Haha*

Nate: *I know your shy but 6 weeks! I wanna be friends, I don't bite. Unless you want me to ;-)*

Like I needed more material for my spank bank. So lost imagining Nate's teeth nipping at my neck, chest, thighs, it wasn't until my phone buzzed with another message that I realized I hadn't replied.

Nate: *Sorry if that made you uncomfortable*

Me: *It didn't.*

No response for a few minutes.

Nate: *I have to go*

Nate: *I mean it about being friends*

My inner voice replied, *What about boyfriends?* But I couldn't even dare to say that out loud in the solitude of my room, let alone in a text message.

Me: *Ok. Good night.*

Nate: *Night*

I was once again glazing over my Physics textbook Sunday afternoon when my phone buzzed with another text from Nate.

Nate: *Distract me*

Me: ?

Nate: *What's Newtons 1st law of motion?*

Me: ??

Nate: *I promised to help you study*

Me: *You don't have to.*

Nate: *Yes I do. Newtons 1st law*

Me: *Inertia*

Nate: *Which is?*

Me: *Body at rest stays at rest. Body in motion stays in motion.*

Nate: *With no outside force. What's Newtons law of universal gravitation?*

Me: $m_1 \times m_2 / r^2$

Nate: *You forgot to multiply the gravitational constant*

Me: *The what?*

Nate: $G=6.67 \times 10^{-11}$

Me: *Right.*

Nate: *What does it mean?*

Me: *Idk*

Nate: *Its the amt of force 2 objects attract each other with*

Me: *You know all this by memory?*

Nate: *Got my old physics book. Even I'm not that good. ;-)*

Nate: *Don't let anyone steal my posters. Especially Thor*

Me: *I'll guard them with my life.*

Me: *How are you doing?*

Nate: *Better. You made me smile. Thank you*

So much I could have said. *I want to make you smile all the time. I love your smile. You have the best smile. I could jerk off to your smile.*

I shook my head at that last one and typed out, *You're welcome.*

Besides, I wasn't the one who should be cheering him up. It should be Justin. Had Nate even called Justin? He left in such a hurry. If Nate were my boyfriend, I'd want to know what was going on.

I sighed and tossed aside the textbook. Physics wasn't my best subject even when I could concentrate completely on it. Absently, I scrolled through my Facebook feed. I realized I could find Justin through Nate's friends list. I scrolled through and clicked on the Message button.

Me: Thought you should know Nate went home. His grandpa died.

A moment later, I got a reply.

Justin: he called me from the bus station

Of course Nate had called him. Duh. A friend request from Justin popped up. I rolled my eyes.

Me: Sorry, it happened so fast. He should have called you 1st in case you wanted to go with him.

Justin: he's a big boy. but maybe not as big as u. ill cum and tell u whos bigger

My fingers flew over the keyboard before I had a chance to reconsider.

Me: You don't deserve him. He needs some moral support even if he doesn't ask for it.

Justin: u could be the one to support him if you think its so important

I could picture the sneer on his face as he typed it.

Me: I'm not Nate's boyfriend.

Justin: no your not. wonder why?

My fists clenched. Asshole. Did he have a single redeeming quality? He must, hidden somewhere. Nate wasn't an idiot.

I clicked "deny" on his friend request and closed the chat window. When my screen refreshed, a status update from Nate appeared with a link to his

grandfather's obituary. I skimmed for the important part. The funeral would be held tomorrow afternoon.

I put the address into my phone. Five hours, six with traffic. I could leave in the morning and make it there in time for the service. I'd flunk the Physics midterm, but some things were more important.

Thank you, Justin, for being the outside force to my inertia.

I didn't exactly have funeral wear in my closet, so I hoped I wasn't too underdressed. It was bad enough I'd be a wrinkled mess from driving all morning. Thankfully, my only non-jeans pants were black, and I had a white dress shirt. I didn't have a jacket, so I settled for a maroon sweater over the dress shirt. It would have to do.

The funeral home was stuffed with people I didn't know. I closed my eyes and took three deep breaths. What was I thinking? As I searched desperately for Nate, I realized what a bad idea this was. Nate would have to be with family; he might have obligations. I couldn't cling to him the whole time.

Another deep breath. *This is for Nate. I can do this.* I could stay for a little while, and then drive back to campus. I could handle this.

I finally spotted Nate off to the side, surrounded by people. What looked like a confusing mass of people resolved itself into a receiving line. I found the end of the line and took my place. What was I doing here? I felt like an impostor, crashing the funeral of someone I didn't even know. I started to sweat.

For Nate.

I considered leaving, but then Nate saw me. His eyes widened, and he blinked slowly.

I smiled weakly. Would he be angry that I came?

As the line of consolors moved forward, he spoke with the short, dark-haired woman next to him and moved to the end of the line so he'd be the first person I'd come to.

My body relaxed. I didn't know how he knew, but somehow he did. I felt guilty for his effort to make me comfortable when I should be the one comforting him. He looked good—very handsome in his suit, of course, but also holding up well.

“Hi,” I started awkwardly when I reached him. “I’m sorry if you didn’t want me here—”

Nate pulled me into a hug. His arms wrapped around me so tightly I thought I wouldn’t be able to breathe. I folded my arms around him and squeezed back. Our chests pressed together. I couldn’t tell if the heartbeat pounding against my skin was mine or his.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he said against my shoulder.

His arms didn’t loosen from around me, and all at once I could sense the line of people behind me, waiting their turn to see the family. My shirt felt damp.

“Nate,” I choked out.

He released me and stepped back. “Sorry.”

I shook my head and was about to tell him he had nothing to be sorry for, but I realized his family was staring at us. My face warmed.

Nate turned to the woman next to him. “Aunt Jenny, this is my roommate, Luke.”

Aunt Jenny held out her hand and I stepped over to shake it. “Very pleased to meet you, Luke.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, ma’am.” I didn’t cringe outwardly as I said it, but I sure did on the inside. Now I was just another jerk spouting the same well-meaning-but-useless words at a person who deserved more.

“Thank you.”

I looked down the line of people I didn’t know, then glanced back at Nate. He smiled and gave me a small nod. Somehow just that tiny gesture gave me enough strength to move to the next person.

It got easier as I went down the line. Shake hands, “Sorry for your loss,” and continue. To those that introduced themselves to me, I introduced myself simply as “Nate’s roommate.”

The second-to-last person in the line, the woman Nate had been standing next to when I arrived, pulled me into a quick hug before I could say a word.

“You must be Luke. Nate’s told us so much about you. How wonderful of you to come. I know Nate appreciates it. Oh, I’m Nate’s mom, by the way.”

It was easy to see who Nate took after. She seemed so genuinely pleased to meet me, like we were meeting at a restaurant, that I almost forgot my line. I didn't even know if this was her dad's funeral or her father-in-law's and, again, felt that awkward sense of panic. She patted my hand as if I were the one mourning.

Next to her, the last person in the line, was Nate's father, who was as tall as I was and much more stoic than his wife.

I'd made it through the entire line. I'd survived. I considered leaving, but I really wanted to talk to Nate more before I left. I watched him move back to his original place in line, next to his mother. She smiled warmly at him. I found a chair in the back of the room, away from everyone else.

Once everyone had been through the procession, Nate walked over to me. He stayed by my side, introducing me simply as "Luke" to everyone who came to talk to him.

One elderly woman looked from him to me. "Is this your... oh, dear, what do you people call it? Partner?"

"Luke's my roommate," Nate replied quickly.

"Roommate," she repeated as her hands fluttered around her pearl necklace. "Oh. Well. Okay."

I opened my mouth to assure her that roommate wasn't some gay slang for "boyfriend," but she was already moving on.

"Sorry about her," Nate said.

"You people?"

"Yeah, well,"—he gave a little laugh—"you know, she's from that older generation."

Although I'd originally planned to only stay a short while and then head back to campus, I found myself relaxing as the day wore on. Nate almost never left my side. So many people came and went. Apparently, Nate's grandfather was well-known in this town.

The crowd had died out considerably when Nate touched my arm. "Come with me?"

I agreed, of course, although it wasn't until he walked toward the front of the room that I realized where we were going.

We stood in front of the open casket. The last funeral I'd attended required a closed casket, so this was the first time I'd ever seen a dead body. Nate's grandfather looked peaceful, like he was sleeping. That's how people should look in death.

His grandfather had been tall, like Nate's father was. I could see the resemblance to Nate's father, though not much to Nate.

"Grandpa was a basketball coach," Nate explained. "He really wanted me to play. Bought me one of those adjustable hoops for my first birthday."

He let out a laugh that sounded choked at the end. "I never was very good, no matter how hard I tried. Dad would spend hours practicing with me. When Grandpa came over, we'd shoot hoops, and I'd pretend to love it, and he'd never ever say anything about the fact that I couldn't make it in the basket to save my life."

I watched his face as a few tears slid down his cheeks.

"When I was a freshman in high school, he asked me if I'd made the team. I said, 'I've got a confession, Grandpa. I suck at basketball, and I really don't even like it all that much.' I thought he'd be angry for lying to him all that time, but he just laughed and said, 'I wondered when you were finally going to admit that to me'."

I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and held him against me. We stayed like that for a long while. His shoulders jerked against me until his sobs subsided. I rubbed his back. The rest of the world had melted away, and it was just him and me and his Grandpa.

This was why I was here. To be the one Nate could lean on as he mourned, to give him the strength he needed because he didn't have to comfort me in return. I didn't have to say anything; I just had to be here. I gave him everything I'd needed last summer but denied myself because I'd closed myself off to every friend I had.

"Thank you for coming," he whispered, looking up at me, not at all ashamed of his red eyes.

"You're welcome." I squeezed his shoulder, wanting so badly to kiss him, even if just on the forehead.

I stayed through the entire service and burial, and still longer as Nate's family and friends slowly trickled out from the cemetery. This was the most

time I'd ever spent with Nate, even though we lived together, because he always had somewhere else to be.

Reluctantly, I told Nate I had to go and he nodded. "It'll be a late night of driving for you."

"I know."

"You mind some company?"

"You're coming back already?"

Nate shrugged. "Why not? There's nothing really left for me to do here. I don't want to keep missing classes and have more work to make up."

I nodded.

"Come back to my house. I'll pack my stuff real quick, and then we can be on our way."

He told his parents the new plan, and then we drove back to his house.

Nate went upstairs to change out of his suit and pack his bag. I took off my sweater and dress shirt and untucked my undershirt. Waiting in the kitchen with a glass of water, I studied the pictures of a younger Nate on the fridge. He was a photogenic child, always smiling. I recognized his grandfather in some of photos. It was easy to see the two of them had a special bond. When I heard Nate's footsteps on the stairs, I sat at the table and tried to look nonchalant.

"All set," he said as he poured himself some water. "I just want to wait 'til my parents get back before we take off."

"No problem."

He sat at the table across from me. "I grabbed my physics book so we can go over it in the car."

I looked at him quizzically. "That sounds fascinating."

He laughed. "I still owe you some tutoring, remember?"

"Oh. That. Don't worry about it."

"No way. I promised."

"Doesn't matter. The midterm was this afternoon."

Nate set his glass down and stared at me. "You missed it? Why would you do that?"

I looked at the table, sure my face was turning red. Why did he have to ask those hard questions?

“Luke,” he prodded when I didn’t answer. “Why would you skip a midterm to come visit me?”

I slowly raised my head. His eyes caught mine, and he seemed intent on holding my gaze, refusing to let me look away again.

A drop of sweat trickled down the back of my neck. I swallowed. *I wanted to be here for you. I like you. I want to be your boyfriend.*

The words were there, in my mind. I could hear myself say them, but I couldn’t get them out through my mouth.

“Just tell me,” he whispered.

“I...” I swallowed again. Another drop of sweat. Was my whole face sweating? I felt so hot all of a sudden. I wanted to look away from him, but somehow he still had me trapped. “I just—”

The sound of the front door opening managed to break the hold his eyes had on me. I sat back in the chair. I hadn’t realized I’d been leaning forward. I closed my eyes and raked my hand down my face. *What an idiot.*

By the time Nate’s mom reached the kitchen, Nate and I were drinking our waters in silence, and I was avoiding his eyes. We said good-bye to his parents, and his mom hugged me again. I tried not to be too awkward when I hugged her back.

“Drive safely. And let us know when you get back, no matter how late.” She waved from the driveway as we set out.

I didn’t say anything in the car. I wanted to, but I wasn’t sure what to say. I was afraid that if the silence between us lasted too long, Nate would bring up whatever had happened between us at his kitchen table. I wasn’t ready to open up about that yet.

It was stupid, I know. How would I ever get what I wanted if I refused to do anything about it? But what did it matter anyway? Nate was with Justin, and I had to respect that, even if Justin was a jerk. Even if Nate didn’t see it. If they broke up, though, then I would make my move. Yes. I would suck it up and just do it. And if Nate turned me down, it didn’t have to get weird between us. Not any weirder than me jerking off while thinking about him. Maybe if he did turn me down, those fantasies would stop, and I wouldn’t have to worry about him finding out. That was probably the best outcome of all of this.

Nate pulled out his phone and started texting. Justin, I assumed.

He chuckled, and I glanced at him. He was staring at something on his phone.

I turned on the radio and hit scan until I found a pop rock station. My fingers tightened on the steering wheel. This was going to be a long drive.

“You could probably get a retake of your exam,” he said later, after sending a zillion texts. “Just ask your professor.”

“Doubt it.”

“Doesn't hurt to ask, right?”

I shrugged.

“If you don't, I will.”

“You don't have to do that.”

“I want to.”

Before I could argue further, Nate's phone rang. I turned down the radio as he answered it.

“Luke came to the funeral. We're driving back now... Of course not...! Ugh. Justin, you're an ass... Oh. My. God. He's not interested. Give it a rest... Bye, dickface.”

He shoved his phone back into his pocket. “Un. Fucking. Believable.”

“Justin?” As if I hadn't just overheard everything.

“Yeah.”

“He seems like kind of a jerk.” And that was being polite.

“You don't know him.”

“That's what people always say about relationships they know deep down aren't working.”

“It's not like I'm planning to marry him or anything.” He shook his head and squeezed his forehead.

“Look, I'm sorry I said anything.” The last thing I wanted was to fight with Nate. I was supposed to be making him feel better, not worse. “It's just... he should be here with you, not me.”

Nate jerked his head up to stare at me. "I didn't ask you to come. You don't have to feel obligated to be here."

"That's not what I meant at all. Forget it."

I returned to my regular quiet self. Opening my mouth only caused trouble.

Nate sighed and leaned his head against the window. Sometime later, it sounded like he was snoring lightly. I glanced over and sure enough, he was asleep. He probably needed the sleep, and I didn't mind losing myself in my thoughts while I drove.

We were within an hour of campus when Nate jerked awake. His gaze darted around the car before he finally stared at me with big, not-quite-focused eyes.

"You okay?" I watched him as closely as I could while still keeping one eye on the road.

He seemed to remember where he was and nodded. He pressed his fingers against his eyes. "Just dreams."

I returned my focus back to the road.

"I came out to Grandpa while I was in high school," he said quietly. "The first person I ever told."

I looked over to see him staring at his hands in his lap. In the passing streetlights, I could see a tear in the corner of his eye. "What did he say?"

"Same thing he said about basketball: 'I wondered when you were...'" His voice broke then and he swallowed back a sob.

"Finally going to admit that to me," I finished softly.

He looked up at me with a sad smile as the tear fell from his eye. I brushed my knuckles over his cheek to wipe it away. He swallowed tightly, and realizing what I'd just done, I withdrew my hand and clutched the steering wheel.

My own tears stung my eyes as I remembered coming out. I blinked them away.

"I told my brother. Michael." My voice was thick.

I could see out of the corner of my eye that he was watching me. "Was it okay?"

I smiled despite the heavy mood. “Yeah. He was cool with it.”

It was after midnight when we finally made it back to our room. Between the driving and the crowd of people at the funeral, I was exhausted. Although Nate had slept in the car, the emotional day must have taken its toll on him as well. I wondered if he'd really be ready to go to class in the morning.

He called his mom to let her know we arrived safe and sound, but instead of heading to bed afterwards, he planted himself in front of me and said, “You never answered my question.”

“What question?”

He looked me directly in the eye. “Why did you skip your Physics midterm?”

So much for him forgetting.

“I'm just going to keep asking,” he threatened. “So you might as well give me a straight answer right now.”

“I...” I looked down at the floor. How to explain without sounding like a creep? “I know what it's like to lose someone important. And to feel like you have to be the one to hold everything together because everyone else around you needs you to be strong. Sometimes you just need an outsider to be there and say, ‘Yes, it's okay’.”

My voice broke, and I swallowed down the rock that had risen in my throat. “It's okay for you to cry too. I wanted to do that for you. To be there for you, in case no one else was. That's more important to me than any grade.”

Nate stepped closer to me and cradled my face between his hands. “Thank you.”

Before I could reply, moist, warm lips touched mine, capturing my bottom lip with the lightest amount of suction. Sparks shot down my spine and ended at my dick, which jerked into life. His fingers reached around to the sides of my neck, tickling the tiny strands of hair there.

Nate pulled back just enough for me to see him grin, then he kissed me again. Harder this time, licking at my lips with his tongue. I opened to him, and when our tongues touched, my dick twitched again, growing harder. He stepped closer, one hand reaching into the longer strands of my hair in the back. Our noses bumped, and we both giggled like little girls, but we reattached

immediately, no hesitation in bringing our tongues together again and again, exploring, tasting. I needed as much as I could get before I woke up from this very cruel dream that would surely leave my sheets soaked in the morning.

His hands slid down my chest, and he fingered the bottom of my undershirt. As he reached under the fabric, I quivered—fucking quivered—anticipating his fingers on my skin. The light scrape of his nails traced the line of hair just below my belly button that led down into my pants.

He broke the kiss off suddenly, and I prepared to wake up from this awful, wonderful—awfully wonderful—dream. His breath rasped, and his eyes stared intensely into mine. He pressed his hands more firmly against my stomach, and I let him push me. A thrill shot through me, and I grunted as my back hit the wall behind me, right against one of his treasured Avengers posters.

One of his legs shoved between mine as he popped open my pants and slowly slid the zipper down. My knees nearly buckled when his hand cupped my balls inside my pants. My dick pulsed with need for him, need for his hand to wrap around me, as pre-cum leaked out.

He scrutinized my face until he seemed convinced that I was one hundred percent okay with everything he was doing to me. More like three hundred percent. The stroking and occasional squeezing of my sac continued as his other hand slid my shirt up my chest. When his knuckles grazed my skin, I cursed through clenched teeth, trying not to squirm.

As he pulled the shirt over my head, I raised my arms, expecting him to pull it all the way off, but instead he clutched the shirt, trapping my hands against the wall. I could break his grasp easily if I wanted, but he'd pinned me to the wall with his look and his touch. In that moment, I was so completely his; my insides melted into jelly.

The hand down my pants glided over my dick with just enough pressure for the pre-cum to seep into my briefs. Over the taut ridges of my abs, his smooth hand swept upward to the dog tags hanging around my chest. He read the embossed words, and I saw the realization in his eyes as he worked it all out. He didn't have to ask why I was wearing my brother's dog tags and Michael wasn't.

I drew in my breath, resisting the urge to break his hold, turn away, and hide what I was feeling. This was Nate, who had cried openly in front of me earlier today without shame or embarrassment. He reverently laid the tags against my chest, and then he leaned forward and pressed his lips to my neck.

I wanted to stop him, to push him away, and stalk off somewhere alone. Somewhere I could focus on the ache inside my chest because I shouldn't be feeling this good when Michael never could again. Too bad the gym wasn't open this late.

Except... Nate was mourning, too. Maybe he needed this, to be close to someone, to be in control. I closed my eyes and let him soothe away the pain with his tongue and his hot breath on my skin.

I leaned my face down into his hair and breathed in the clean, sharp scent of his shampoo. I'd sniffed traces of it in our confined room, especially after his showers, but this concentrated form, this assault of pure Nate on my senses, hardened my dick again. I nuzzled his hair until my lips found his rough, stubbly cheek to kiss.

"God, I want you," he said against my neck as he slipped his hand back into my pants to fondle my balls through the soft cotton of my briefs.

Yes, I wanted to shout. But all I could do was nod and hope he felt it.

He kissed the hollow under my Adam's apple and then looked directly in my eyes.

"Undress me," he whispered as he pulled my shirt off my arms and tossed it aside.

I undid the buttons one by one, from the top of his dark blue shirt all the way to the bottom. My hands smoothed over his chest and pushed the loose, open shirt off his shoulders. It landed in a heap behind him. I'd seen him shirtless before, but this was different. This was permission. Now instead of admiring from afar those dark patches of hair surrounding the pink nipples, I could brush my fingers against them. He shivered.

Trailing down his stomach again, I began working his jeans open. I pushed them halfway down his thighs and then I hooked my fingers beneath his boxers' elastic and slid them down. I squatted in front of him, and he lifted each leg for me to remove his pants.

He was naked, hard, and mere inches away. I wrapped my hand around the bottom of his dick and my lips over the head. Focusing on wetting his shaft with my spit, I went down once, twice on his length, and then stood up. I stroked him, slowly at first, from all the way down to the tangle of dark hair and up until my palm glided over his sensitive head.

He moaned and rested his head against my shoulder. "Tha... gah..."

I'd reduced him to syllables instead of words. I grinned as a surge of bravery coursed through me. "Like that?"

He hummed, and then his hands were working my pants the rest of the way off. He stepped back to look me up and down. "Your body is perfect. Just perfect."

My hand ran through my hair, and I had to look away.

"Hey," he said softly, taking my chin and turning my head gently. "It's just me. No need to be shy. Okay?"

I nodded. "I heard you the other day with Justin, what you said, about me being a pussy."

"I definitely would not say that." His forehead creased as the thought back, and then recognition flooded his face and he chuckled. "I called you a big pussy *cat*."

His fingers trailed down my arms, across my abs, up over my pecs, and behind my neck where he laced them together. "You're strong and powerful, like a tiger, but you're gentle, like a kitten. That's one of the things I like so much about you."

"Yeah?"

"You're like my own personal Thor." He grinned.

A laugh escaped my lips, part amusement, part incredulous.

"Did that sound too dorky?"

"What I like about you is that you just say how you feel. No hesitation. No fear."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I hear myself speak, and it just sounds stupid. Wrong. Not what's in my head at all."

"Words are overrated sometimes."

"Like now."

I stepped closer to him, fisted my fingers in his hair, and latched my lips onto his before I could second-guess myself. Rather than soft and gentle like his kiss had been, I poured every ounce of desire I had for him into that kiss, delving my tongue deep into his mouth. Our chests crashed together as I slid

one hand down his back. His arms wrapped around my waist. My dick poked the soft flesh of his stomach, and his heavy, solid rod pressed against my thigh. We rocked against each other, trying to find that perfect friction while standing.

My hands palmed his ass. He whimpered into my mouth and didn't resist when my finger trailed along his crack. I wanted to fuck him so bad, needed to be buried inside of him.

I broke off the kiss but held his face close to mine. We panted into each other's mouths.

"I want you." I didn't even sound like myself.

Nate pulled me towards his bed. My hands closed around the dog tags, and I thought about Michael. About the way he'd always gone for what he wanted, how we were so different in that way. He'd be honored that I wore his tags, but he'd also understand if I took them off sometimes. He'd want me to. For the first time in fifteen months, I lifted the chain over my head because I wanted to, not because I had to.

Nate sat down on his bed and watched me place the tags gently onto his desk. He took my hand and squeezed gently, rubbing his warm thumb over my fingers. I sat next to him on the bed. He kissed me again, deeply, and then laid me down on the bed as he continued his kisses from my lips to my neck down my chest. His hands constantly stroked my skin, like he was exploring every inch of my body.

He worked down to my abs, licking with his tongue. I squirmed. He laughed. His hands caressed my thighs as his lips moved lower and lower. His chin brushed against my dick, and it pulsed upwards, poking him. When his hands slid around to my inner thighs and his thumbs gently ran up my balls, I thought I was going to melt into the mattress.

When he licked my dick, the entire length to the head, I cried out. He took me into his mouth, still playing with my balls.

No fantasy I'd ever had about Nate sucking me off lived up to the reality of his lips and tongue working my dick. My hips thrust up to meet his strokes, my fingers clutched at his hair.

Abruptly, he pulled off with a *smack*. He kissed me, sharing my taste. "You still have to fuck me."

Our cocks rubbed against each other as he reached under the bed and groped around for something. My hands slid down his sides, grabbed his ass, and squeezed.

“Yeah, baby,” he encouraged. He sat back on his knees and triumphantly shook the bottle of lube he’d found.

He took my hand from his side and squirted some lube onto it. Then he reached behind himself to position my hand where he wanted it—at his hole. I massaged the puckered skin, letting just the tip of my finger breach his entrance. A constant stream of moans and “yeahs” and “right theres” flowed from his lips. In another situation, this might have annoyed me, but it all mingled together to make the best sound I could have possibly heard: Nate wanting me.

With each stroke, I pressed my finger inside him further and further. I added a second finger as he lubed up our dicks. My moans joined his.

His hips rocked, pushing back on my finger and sliding our dicks together in his hand. Flattening against me, he reached under the bed again, this time returning with a condom. He leaned back, burying my fingers inside him as he ripped open the foil packet. I watched him roll it down my rock-hard dick.

He scooted forward, and my fingers slipped out of him. I rubbed my dick against his crack, finding that sweet spot. Slowly he sank down on me, squeezing his eyes closed. I clutched at the sheets to keep from bucking up against him as that heat surrounded my shaft, letting him control the speed and depth. Finally, an agonizing eternity later, his ass was flush against my hips. When he was ready, he opened his eyes. He raised himself up and then came back down. Again and again, increasing the speed, until he threw his head back in sheer pleasure as he rode me.

I supported his thighs, tracing circles on them with my thumbs. He reached down and started stroking himself. Watching him jerk off while he fucked himself on my dick was the hottest thing I’d ever seen, and I’d watched my share of porn.

The slap of our skin, the coolness of the sweat that trickled down his face and landed on my abs, his ass swallowing my dick over and over... I slammed my hips up against him as the waves of pleasure rocked through me and exploded. I was still coming inside him when hot drops splashed on my belly and chest, his hand slick with cum as he stroked himself the rest of the way.

When he was spent, he gingerly lifted off me. I removed the condom, tied the end in a knot, and threw it into the wastebasket.

“Show-off.” Nate chuckled. He swirled his fingers in the drops of cum on my chest. “I made a mess on you.”

I grabbed his hand and lifted his fingers to my lips. Very thoroughly, I licked and sucked each one clean of the salty moisture.

“Jesus fucking Christ. You’re gonna get me hard again.”

I grinned. “Oh yeah?”

“Mm-hmm. We have a high gravitational force.”

“A what?”

He gazed at me through heavy eyelids. “You already forgot Newton’s law of universal gravitation?”

“Something about two objects and... something.”

He shook his head like I was hopeless. “The closer the two bodies are, the more attracted the bodies are to each other, and the greater the gravitational force.”

I must have still looked hopeless because he sighed and said, “Forget it. Physics jokes lose something when you have to explain them.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure physics jokes are only funny to nerds.”

“Hey!”

“C’mon. You took college physics in high school and offered to tutor me. You’re a nerd.”

He pretended to look offended. “I prefer the term ‘geek’, thank you very much.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Of course there is.” He yawned. “If I wasn’t so damn tired, I’d explain it to you.”

I laughed. “Sure. It’s been a long day. Let’s get some sleep.”

He snuggled in next to me, practically on top of me because the beds were so narrow. “Sounds like a good idea.”

He grabbed the sheet to cover us with. His hand absently played with the hair at the base of my cock. Good thing I was too tired to get it up again, or we might not have gotten any sleep.

“If you hadn’t noticed,” I said in his ear. “I happen to like nerds.”

His body shook with a soft laugh. “Hope you like geeks, too.”

It was easy to ignore the pounding on the door while Nate was kissing my neck. I could get used to waking up like this. The kissing, not the banging on the door.

The noise finally stopped. "Thank God," Nate murmured against my skin. His breath tickled.

The pounding resumed. Nate and I groaned at the same time, then chuckled. He kissed me once on the lips before dragging himself from his bed.

"This had better be important," he called as he hopped into his boxers.

"Oh, it is, sweet thang," came the response as Nate opened the door.

Shit.

"Um, morning?" Nate said as Justin pushed past him to eye me in Nate's bed.

"Well, well, well, what *do* we have here?" Justin turned back to Nate and wagged his finger. "You naughty boy, you!"

I shot out of bed and jumped between them before Justin could take a step towards Nate. "Look—"

Justin glanced down my body and hummed his approval. I'd forgotten I was naked. My face warmed, and I could already feel the sweat starting to gather on the back of my neck.

He licked his lips. "What do you say all three of us hop back in that bed?"

Nate pushed himself in front of me. "Hell no. He's all mine."

I thought we were fighting over Nate, but they were fighting over me?

Justin grinned. "You are hella sexy when you get all possessive like that."

"You're not... upset?" I asked.

"Psh! I've been trying to get you and sweet thang together *forever*. About damn time you boneheads got over yourselves." He rolled his eyes.

"You what?" Nate asked.

Justin waved his arms towards the bed. "Please, carry on with what you were doing. Just forget I'm here."

Nate glanced at me. "No thanks. We prefer privacy."

Justin sighed dramatically. "Can't blame a guy for trying." He kissed Nate quickly on the lips and then headed for the door.

"Hey, what was so important?" Nate called as he walked out.

“Never mind,” Justin sang from the hallway before the door closed.

Nate laughed and shook his head.

“What about you and Justin?” I asked.

He shrugged. “We’re not dating. More like friends with benefits.”

I considered that as I picked up Michael’s dog tags from the desk. I sat down on the edge of Nate’s bed, turning the tags over and over in my hands.

Nate crouched in front of me so we were face-to-face. He balanced himself with his hands on my knees. “What’s wrong?”

“What about us? Was last night just...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. I didn’t want to hear out loud what I already knew... that sleeping together was only a distraction from the pain.

His hands covered mine. “No. Gravitational force doesn’t just exist one night and go away. The attraction is constant. There’s even a gravitational constant in the equation.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at how pleased he was with himself for bringing physics back into it.

“Furthermore, the attraction exists between every point mass to every single other point mass.”

I tried to make sense of that. He was really optimistic about my understanding of physics. “So when you said I was all yours, you meant it literally?”

“Something like that. Was that okay?”

I envied the way Nate could be so direct, without hesitation or nervousness. I knew that wasn’t in my nature, but I could make an effort now and then. I met his eyes and told him the truth. “I’ve been yours since day one.”

He let out a soft chuckle. “I wondered when you were finally going to admit that to me.”

I brushed away the tear that slid down his cheek and pulled him close to me.

“I’m sorry about Michael,” he said against my neck as I stroked his back.

The dreaded s-word... but somehow, coming from Nate, it meant everything.

The End

Author Bio

C.M. Walker lives in Maryland with her husband and two children. She read her first M/M romance story out of curiosity, decided that books were better with two men instead of one, and hasn't looked back since. When C.M.'s not reading or writing, she's either next to a bright light cross-stitching with fancy thread, at the computer digi-scraping, or at the sewing machine making cute clothes for her daughter.

Download C.M. Walker's debut novella, Pledge Number Seven, for free at the [M/M Romance website](#).

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