



MAKING IT  
HAPPEN

S.J. ELLER

## **MAKING IT HAPPEN**

Small town farm boy Garrett Delroy has always known his future lies on the fields of his father's farm. When life's circumstances further confirm his belief, Garrett is forced to consider that perhaps the silly "romantic notions" he's always heard and brushed off have some value. After all, he's in love with his best friend, Liam Johnson, and Garrett would do almost anything for him.

Liam Johnson, on the other hand, is anything but a farm boy. He's got big dreams and the drive to make them all come true. He also has a reason to stay in his small town and settle for a local college. But Garrett's not about to be the reason that Liam doesn't achieve all his dreams. For once in his life, he decides to listen to those romantic notions—let Liam go and hope for the best.

But as Garrett finds out, life isn't anything like a romance novel, and sometimes you have to make things happen.

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

By **S.J. Eller**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

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

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

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## Photo Description

A black-and-white photo displays two young men. One of the men is standing, holding his shirt up to expose a toned chest. His “artistically” ripped jeans are opened, and the second man kneels in front of him, his hands reaching to pull the pants down. He too is toned, his hair cut close to the head and some scruff lining his jaw. He looks up at his companion who is holding the back of his head, anticipation palpable from beyond the screen.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*We’ve been best friends forever, and I feel like I’ve loved him for just as long. He told me he’s leaving because he’s afraid he’s holding me back from finding my true love—how can I convince him that I already have?*

*Thank you for telling our story,*

*Laura*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** farmer, college, established couple, family, grief, reunited, tear jerker, a dab of wit and a touch of humor (to make the world go ’round)

**Content warnings:** brief mention of past animal abuse (not by the MCs—and one of them puts a stop to it ASAP), death of a secondary character

**Word count:** 13,857

*Acknowledgements*

I am so incredibly grateful to each and every member of the LHNB team. You all rooted me on throughout this, and for that, I thank you. A very special thanks goes out to my beta, Barb, who worked tirelessly with me and put up with my momentary freak-outs, as well as to Melanie, who along with Barb, let me know that this story was worth writing (and not a total train wreck). This wouldn't have been possible without you two!



*Dedication*

To the LHNB team for all your hard work and to Laura for providing such a lovely prompt.

# MAKING IT HAPPEN

By **S.J. Eller**

## PART I

Garrett Delroy had never bought into the whole romantic notion of loving someone enough to “let them go and see what happens.” To him, waiting around to see if someone comes back and then suddenly knowing it’s “meant to be” was always just a load of bullshit—until he started kissing his best friend of twelve years.

Liam Johnson was the exact opposite of him in every aspect. Where Garrett had dark brown hair that he kept close-cropped, and a face that spoke to the fact that he always woke up too late to shave in the mornings, Liam had blond hair that curled around his ears and a smooth face. When they held hands, Garrett’s were rough from work and latched tightly around Liam’s, soft in his clasp. Their skin contrasted just enough to make the connection of their fingers stand out—Garrett’s body tanned and lined from the early days and late nights on the farm, whereas Liam was sun-kissed, but in the way that a hard-working athlete got from hours of practice outside. Liam was darker in the areas his football uniform didn’t cover—his skin an odd gallery of light and dark, rough and soft.

The starkest difference, though, was in their personalities. Garrett had always admired Liam, who seemed to never be deterred by life’s little roadblocks. Liam had aspirations that reminded Garrett of his four-year-old cousins, determined to accomplish what they wanted, even if being Santa Claus when they got old enough wasn’t exactly plausible.

Liam was going to go to school for physics and, as Garrett liked to tell him, “become a certified smartass.” Garrett, on the other hand, knew that while Liam’s future was bright and big, that he himself belonged on his papa’s farm, working in the fields just as he was raised to do.

Therein lay the problem and the point where that stupid romantic notion came into play. Garrett did love Liam—enough to let him go.

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“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Liam had asked Garrett a few summers back.

At the time, they were fifteen years old and Garrett already thought of himself as grown up. He didn't see many little kids working from five a.m. 'til school and then five p.m. 'til eight p.m. on their father's farm, and he figured that had to count for something.

“I want to be... a cowboy.”

Liam had laughed lightly at his response but smiled and nodded like it was the most natural thing in the world to want to be something so silly.

“Well, Cowboy, I want to be a physicist.” Liam went on to tell Garrett all about his dreams of teaching physics and doing all these crazy experiments. Garrett couldn't even begin to put into pictures the words Liam had said. It was admirable, and Garrett would do what he always did for Liam—make sure all his dreams became reality, no matter how long or hard that task may be.

This was also the start of a new nickname that earned Garrett some pretty interesting looks from his mother. After all, while Garrett was certainly a strong farm boy, hearing him called “Cowboy” had to have been a little strange, given that the most contact he'd had with the cows was to milk them, and that he had been afraid of horses since he was a little boy.

Garrett was just glad she wasn't around to hear Liam moaning the nickname when Garrett blew him behind the barn later that night and many more nights to follow.

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For years, Garrett listened to Liam talk about his hopes and dreams. Sometimes they would talk about getting an apartment together just a few blocks from the University of Colorado, Liam's dream school.

Garrett never had the heart to tell Liam that while that all sounded wonderful, he doubted he'd actually be there, or that he wasn't so sure about going to college after high school. Garrett always preferred the farm life and working with his hands. He did okay in school, but he'd rather be working in the fields, making his papa proud. There was something magical about watching crops grow after putting so much time and effort into them, and he

likened it to how Liam felt when he received his grades and found out that, *yes, of course*, he was on the honor roll again. Garrett knew that *that* life just wasn't for him; it wasn't where his heart was.

Unfortunately, Garrett never actually *had* to tell him. They were sixteen when Garrett's father had his first stroke, a particularly bad one with several smaller ones to follow.

Liam's father worked with Garrett's mom at the local bank, and when Olivia had gotten the call and rushed to the hospital, she had asked Mr. Johnson to pick up Garrett from school.

As usual, Liam was at Garrett's side when Mr. Johnson came to the office to get Garrett. Together, they traveled to the hospital, and Garrett was pretty sure he shook the entire way, partly out of fear and partly from holding back the tears that threatened to fall.

Liam's hand stayed tightly wrapped around his throughout the entire day, even when Garrett was finally able to go in and see his father.

Later that night, when they went back to Liam's house, Liam held him, curled tightly in the twin bed, while he cried. It was the first time in Garrett's life that he had ever felt so completely weak, powerless against the cruel world surrounding him.

As time went on, it became apparent that his father would never regain complete control of his muscles, and Garrett spent longer days and nights on the farm doing the work that his father had once done so easily.

They didn't talk about that imaginary apartment near campus again after that.

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The thing about Liam that had always attracted Garrett to him was his tenacity. He never gave up, and, in a way, that reminded Garrett of his own father—he was stubborn as hell and sometimes really unpredictable.

There was a time in middle school when they had been “helping” his father paint the barn. In his father's words, though, they were “creating a holy-hell mess” and “Dammit boys, unless your face is a piece of the barn, *stop painting it.*”

Liam viewed Tucker Delroy much as his own father, and like the little devil he was at thirteen years old, he actually went up to Garrett's father and said, "Hey Mr. Delroy, can you help me pick this up?" He was referring to the bucket of paint and the nearly empty tray next to it. And then, because Liam was *really* a little devil, he slapped a shit-ton of bright red paint across Garrett's father's face when he bent down to pick it up.

It turned out to be an all-out paint war that Garrett's mom was very unhappy about, and because Liam was so much a part of their family by then, he even had chores to do to make up for the red stains that were never going to come out of their clothes.

Another time, still during that middle school "little devil" phase, their science teacher, Mr. Filmore, thought it would be oh-so-hilarious to joke about dissecting a cat. He went so far as to bring in an actual, live barn cat.

While the joke wasn't funny at all and neither was what happened directly after, some parts of the incident made him chuckle when he thought back on it.

That cat, old with patchy black fur and a piercing gaze, seemed like she would've been snappy or had some kind of bad-cat-attitude issues. Instead, she curled comfortably in Mr. Filmore's hands, purring when the teacher rubbed behind her ear.

Somehow, in the midst of the completely ridiculous situation, Mr. "I'm going to scratch your ears, pretty kitty" Filmore turned and, after setting the cat down, literally kicked her, and she flew across the room into the paint chipped wall.

All the students sat in shock—well, all but one. Liam had turned red instantly, his face flaring with an anger that Garrett had never seen before nor wanted to see again.

Liam got up from his desk at the front of the room, walked directly up to Mr. Filmore, and kicked him *hard*, square in the back of his leg. "How do you like being kicked, huh? Not so much, do ya?" Liam had said in a voice that was oddly calm, given the stare he was giving their teacher. (This is the part that made Garrett chuckle, seeing Liam go right up there and tell that teacher just how little he appreciated his assholiness and dish it out as good as Mr. Filmore gave that poor cat.)

Liam was taken to the principal's office after that, and the whole class sat in a silence that was completely uncharacteristic of a middle school classroom.

As it was, Liam wasn't in the office for long. When Garrett asked what had happened, Liam explained that when Liam's mother, a force to be reckoned with and a respected county judge, came into the office, she told both Mr. Filmore and the principal just how much *she* appreciated Mr. Filmore's grotesque display of inhumanity. Liam had said that he was pretty sure she would've done more than kick Mr. Filmore if given the chance and, instead of having to apologize for the already blooming bruise on Mr. Filmore's calf, Mr. Filmore had to apologize to Liam, and then the entire class, for his actions.

The look on Mr. Filmore's face throughout the entire incident made it clear that he was glad parent-teacher conferences weren't required, and he barely looked Liam in the face after that.

With all their history together, it should've made sense to Garrett that Liam wasn't going to just let Garrett not fill out a few college applications.

"No pressure," Liam had said, with that stupidly handsome smile on his face.

"Liam, you know I'm not going to any damn college." Garrett's voice had a slight southern twang to it; one that just curled around the edges of his words; one that Liam claimed was like melted butter (which, *yuck*, Garrett wasn't so sure how he felt about that description).

"For me?" That smile, and those bright-blue eyes that did the wounded puppy look so well, caused Garrett's resistance to fall. They both knew that anything that came of these applications wouldn't actually matter, but to Liam, it was the principle of the whole thing or some other weird Liam-like-thing that meant something to him.

"Fine. For you." And for the blowjobs that Liam promised would come that night.

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Garrett ended up applying to two schools, both within a thirty-minute drive from his home.

Liam made him promise that they'd open them together when the letters arrived. Liam had made it sound like it'd be some fun bonding experience and not the anxious torture Garrett imagined it would be.

Liam's stack piled high and was obviously much more substantial than Garrett's was, and the thick envelopes spoke volumes for Liam and his achievements. As Garrett predicted, and would always tell Liam, he was too good for any of them to pass him up.

Garrett was accepted to the community college, a point that excited Liam and Garrett's mother much more than it excited him.

There was something missing, though, something that seemed off and should've been like bright red warning flags to Garrett the minute he noticed.

"Where's the letter from University of Colorado?"

The look Liam gave him was like that of an unsure child, and it looked odd on such a grown-up face. "It hasn't come yet."

Liam was never good at lying, and Garrett didn't understand why he would lie unless he was ashamed or something silly, and so completely Liam-ish, like that. He thought maybe Liam was rejected and didn't want Garrett to know that he blew it, his dream school.

The next day, when they ate at Liam's house for dinner, Garrett learned otherwise.

He was sure he wasn't supposed to hear the raised and sharp tones of Liam's father yelling at his son, something that had become a foreign concept since Liam had grown out of his "little devil" phase.

He tried not to listen when he let himself into the house, but it was just one of those things he couldn't help.

"Liam, you are not turning this down. What the hell has gotten into you?" Mr. Johnson sounded tired, like he was fighting a battle he'd fought before.

"Nothing, Dad. I just don't want to go there anymore." Liam, on the other hand, sounded completely cool and calm, rehearsed even.

"*Liam,*" the way Mr. Johnson spoke his name was like venom, "What are you afraid of, huh? You've always wanted to go to Colorado. There was never

another school for you and now suddenly ‘you don’t want to go’? I don’t buy it.”

Mr. Johnson left the kitchen and went directly up the stairs, clearly angry and likely not done with the conversation.

Liam was leaning, arms pressed up against the counter, hair in his face and covering his eyes when Garrett walked in.

Liam’s eyes were a crystal color, bright from tears that left his eyes rimmed in a deep red.

“I thought you didn’t get the letter yet...”

“It came in the mail last week,” Liam sniffed, a sound that Garrett wasn’t used to hearing from his normally poised lover.

“And you got in? That’s *great*, Liam.”

“No. I’m not going, Garrett. I don’t want to go.”

Garrett probably looked as confused as Liam’s father had felt, totally perplexed by the thought of Liam ever not wanting to go to the University of Colorado.

“Why not?”

Garrett stepped forward, closing his arms around Liam in a hug. Liam melted against him, the tension from his shoulders noticeably dissipating slowly.

“I can’t leave you, Garrett. You need me.”

It was in that moment that everything Garrett had heard about love suddenly made sense. They had never said the “L” word to each other, never actually had to, but Garrett knew that Liam loved him just as much as he loved Liam. He remembered hearing from the girls at school, all this stupid bullshit about how romantic it was to love someone enough to let them go, and up until now that had been *all* it was, bullshit.

Garrett said nothing as Liam rested against him, just tightening his arms around Liam’s broad shoulders as if Liam was going to disappear then and there, and probably partly because Garrett knew what he had to do. If he was the reason Liam wasn’t going to his dream school, wasn’t going to have all his



hopes and desires come true, then he was going to have to take himself out of that equation and hope for the best. If he was going to do what he had promised himself and Liam he always would do—give him everything he could—he was going to have to let Liam go.

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Dinner that night was a lot like sitting in a car that's stuck in the middle of train tracks, and all Garrett could do was listen to the loud whistle of the oncoming train approaching closer and closer to him. The feeling of dread settled deep in his gut, twisting his insides into some sick knot that he couldn't seem to unravel.

Any other day, Liam would've noticed his lack of appetite, or the way that he picked at the lasagna on his plate as if it wasn't his favorite food. Instead, Liam was busy pretending not to be affected by his father's chilly exterior, while Mr. Johnson was just trying to get through the meal without touching the topic of Colorado.

Liam's mother tried to make small talk, a stilted attempt that Garrett appreciated. It went without saying that she agreed with her husband when it came to Colorado and college, but she'd never actually tell Liam what he should or shouldn't do. Liam had gotten his stubbornness from his father, but he'd gotten his independence and determination from his mother, and Garrett had a feeling she knew that once Liam made up his mind, it would be *nearly* impossible to tell him otherwise.

Garrett's mom had once told him, "It's best to let you boys boil on your own. You'll either eventually realize that that thick skull of yours got in the way, or you'll fall. In which case, as your mother, I'll be there to pick you up... as long as you admit that mother knows best." He would bet that with the tight-knit friendship Mrs. Johnson had with Garrett's mom, she operated under similar principles.

When Liam seemed unresponsive to his mother's attempt at breaking the tension that surrounded the small table, she turned to Garrett, her lips tight in an almost pained, thin smile.

"So Garrett, how about you? Any plans for college?"

Garrett knew that she had likely talked with his mom, who probably conveyed the “oh so exciting news” that Garrett was accepted into the local college.

“No, ma’am.” The slight twang in his voice curled around the letters as he tried to bite down the still painful mess sitting idly in his gut. “I’m going to stay and help Papa with the land. The way I see it, I’m a born-and-bred farm boy. I think I came out of the womb with a farmer’s tan.”

Both Liam and his father shook their heads while Mrs. Johnson let out a soft laugh in response. She had the look of a delicate woman, though those who knew her understood that she was anything but. Her calm expressions gave nothing away, an asset Garrett was sure she found helpful in the courtroom. Her hair was the same shade of blonde as Liam’s, bright and with a slight curl that framed her face. Even in her mid-forties, she had a sense of youth and vibrancy that Garrett knew she had passed down to her son.

“Well, your mother tells me you got into the state school. Sounds like a wonderful opportunity,” she replied. And, *ah*, there was that damned determination again.

She, thankfully, let it drop after that, and went on to other topics. When dinner was finally finished, Garrett realized that he had hardly even touched his food, and while Liam may have been too out-of-it to notice, his mother gave Garrett a look of concern, but said nothing.

They helped clear the table and clean the dishes before being excused. Garrett thanked them for the dinner, and lied, saying that it was great. “The best, as always, Mrs. Johnson.” He couldn’t actually remember even tasting anything but a sense of dread.

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Liam’s bed was too small for the two of them, both with their broad shoulders and muscular builds—Garrett’s from his work on the farm and Liam’s from football season, when he played for the high of running down the field and dodging bodies that came his way.

Still, they made it work, their legs tangled together, bare skin touching bare skin, as they lay naked on top of the baby-blue sheets, Garrett’s feet hanging

off the end and occasionally kicking the desk that sat just beside the bed. “Shh, you noisy asshole.” There was no sense of venom in Liam’s tone as he tried to further wrap his legs between Garrett’s, “My mom’s going to think you’re trying to learn how to juggle again.”

Liam’s light, playful nature nearly made Garrett forget all about his choice and how he was going to have to break-up with the only person he’d ever had eyes for. *Nearly.*

“Sorry,” Garrett couldn’t bring himself to bite back with another joke as usual. This time, unlike at dinner, Liam was undistracted and caught on, his eyes softening with the same concern Garrett had seen in his mother’s earlier that night.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, baby. Nothing at all.” Liam smiled at the name. He’d once told Garrett that hearing him call him “baby” made him melt like a puddle of goo, which Garrett thought sounded pretty shitty, not to mention sticky, and had said as much, but now he just wanted to make Liam feel good and to feel good himself while he still could.

He was a selfish bastard in that regard, wanting to get one last taste before he decided to gamble—with their relationship as the stake.

Garrett never knew if Liam actually believed him when he had said “nothing”. He didn’t give him much of a chance to analyze the words, to pull apart the lies that were buried just beneath the surface of his words. Instead, he untangled himself from Liam just long enough to crawl down the other boy’s body.

He’d long ago memorized all the curves, all the little things that made Liam so perfect and right for him. He knew that when he kissed Liam just *there*, right above his navel, the younger boy would always suck in his breath and shudder when he finally released it, trying to force himself to be in some sort of control. Garrett knew that if he licked at the small spot right in the curve of Liam’s left thigh, Liam would spread his legs wider, open himself to Garrett, allow himself to be swallowed whole.

Garrett had once thought that this, licking at Liam's weeping cock, tasting the pearl of pre-come that dripped from its tip, would be awkward, too bizarre for him to ever actually do. But Liam had been patient, showed him how he liked it, using his hands to aid the rise and fall of Garrett's head. Liam had taught him to cover his teeth and hadn't scolded Garrett when he occasionally forgot in the heat of the moment, eager to please and to taste.

He licked at the underside of his lover's cock, rolling the heavy balls in his hands and letting Liam thrust in a slow, quiet rhythm, into the back of his throat. Fingers grasped at his scalp, brushing against smooth, short-cut hair.

The rhythm stuttered, faltered slightly, and two sharp thrusts punctuated the change. Hands pulled him up, lifting him to meet Liam in a heated kiss, his lips a deep red from where they'd been wrapped tightly around Liam's erection.

"You gonna ride me or what, Cowboy?"

They moved together, Garrett spreading the lube across Liam's cock while Liam scissored his fingers inside Garrett, their moans cut off between mouths and kisses. They hadn't used condoms since the year before when Liam had driven them to a small clinic on the outside of the nearest city to get tested. It was a freedom and closeness Garrett loved, feeling Liam literally inside him, no barriers holding them back.

Finally, when Garrett couldn't take it anymore, he lowered himself over Liam, his knees shaking where they pressed against Liam's sides, taking Liam in for what might be the last time in a long while.

He refused to think of that now though, not with his best friend, his goddamn *lover* inside him, their bodies thrusting together in the quiet room, the sound of their skin meeting, their spit-slicked kisses, and desperate, throaty moans the only noises breaking the air.

It always felt so good, so new and right when Liam came inside him, his hand pumping Garrett to completion, and his soft voice telling him how good, how wonderful he was.

He collapsed against Liam's chest, sweat and come mingling, as he panted heavily and closed his eyes tight. He didn't feel so wonderful, not with what he was about to do.

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The first time Garrett had met Liam wasn't the most poetic. They were both just little kids, just barely reaching their parents' waists. It was a hot day in the middle of July, and the small park had been thriving with life. At least a dozen of the bank's employees had brought their families to the annual summer picnic. Garrett had been nervous, much shyer than he was now.

His mother had just started working at the bank a few months prior and seemed so excited to introduce her own little family to her co-workers. She'd always been a woman proud of her independence but also very proud of the family she possessed.

Liam was actually bigger than him back then, just an inch or two taller and probably ten pounds heavier.

"Hello, Olivia," one of the men had said, turning to Garrett's mother with a bright smile on his face and his arm wrapped around his wife.

"Ben!" Garrett's mother hugged the man quickly, turning to her own husband, who looked out of place in a social situation that involved so many people and so few farm animals.

"Ben, this is my husband, Tucker, and our son, Garrett."

Garrett had been just barely paying attention to the exchange, his eyes focused instead on the boy in front of him who, for some reason, stared right back at him as if they were playing some silly game of "you-better-not-blink-first".

"Liam, why don't you go show Garrett around. Introduce him to some of the other children."

Liam never actually did introduce him to any of the other children. They somehow managed to get into a fight over who would push who on the old, rickety swings, worn down from years of use and rust. Garrett had, in mock defeat, allowed Liam to climb aboard and quietly told him to brace himself. Of course, never one to give in, instead of pushing Liam forward, into the sea-

breezed air, he pushed him off the swing and face first into the woodchips at their feet.

It was pretty much a big, ridiculous mess, and Garrett's mother had pulled him aside, her eyes full of disapproval. "Garrett Quincy Delroy, what on earth has gotten into you?"

He wanted to tell his mother how mean Liam had been, how damn demanding (Garrett would come to find out that some things would never change). She, of course, would have none of it, and before he could get too much into his story of why he should've been the one on the swing, because, *yes, it was his turn*, she did that weird mom thing, where she looked him right in the eye, and the look alone spoke more than any words ever could.

"Now, I did not raise you to be a coward. You go over there, and you apologize to him. Oh, and tell him that you would love to go over to his house for a play date next Tuesday."

His mom had been right, as always. He had been a coward back then, and there was no way he would allow himself to be one now.

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The days to follow were some of the worst in Garrett's memory. It was a week of forced smiles, a week of pretending not to feel an ache that rumbled deep inside his chest and all the way down into his gut.

He was pretty sure Liam had noticed something was off, something different in the way he held tension in his mouth, his lips, when they kissed, the way that Garrett's eyes didn't crinkle when he smiled, or that his dimples were nowhere to be seen.

The sky was a deep blue, nearing a shade of black that Garrett hadn't seen the night possess in quite some time. The stars were few and far between, an erratic pattern across the horizon, and the air so hot it almost strangled him with each breath he took.

They were sitting behind the barn, their backs leaning against the tree they'd first kissed under. This place held so many good, fond memories, so many firsts and seconds and thirds. Garrett hated himself for dirtying it with what he was about to do, but somehow it felt right—fitting to do this *here*.

“We need to talk.” It took Garrett a moment to even realize that it was his voice that had first hit the air, an almost unrecognizable foreign sound.

The tension in Liam’s shoulders was tangible, his entire body and face closing off to Garrett and the rest of the world.

Garrett could’ve waited for Liam to speak, but he would’ve been waiting for days, and they both knew that.

“Listen,” his voice caught in his throat, “I don’t think this thing—*us*, is going to work.”

“Wait, what?” Liam turned to him, his eyes wide and wild, the shock painting his face a horrifying shade of fear.

“I—I just think that we’re too different. We’re not right together.”

“What the hell, Garrett? I thought you were mad about me making you apply to the damned colleges. What is this? You’re joking, right? It’s not fucking funny.”

Garrett had expected this to be hard, to be the most difficult thing he’d have to do, but even then he hadn’t been anywhere near being prepared to rip out Liam’s heart.

“I’m not joking. I’m *so* sorry. I didn’t mean to string you along, and it was great while it lasted, but I think you need to go your way, and I should go mine.”

The words sounded like lies, each syllable wrong in every possible way, even to Garrett’s ears.

“So after everything we’ve been through, that’s it? We’re too different? Fuck you, Garrett. Fuck you.”

Liam looked at him like he was seeing a complete stranger, not the person he loved, and perhaps that was one of the most painful parts of all of this, watching Liam fall apart and look at him like *that*.

He could see the tears swelling in his lover’s eyes, the way that his face scrunched up just slightly, and his cheeks turned an almost violent red. Garrett had seen him cry before, he just never thought he’d be the one causing it, or that he wouldn’t be the one to make it all better.

Liam stood, his body rigid and his fists curled at his sides, so tight that his knuckles were visibly white. Garrett watched as he took two steps away before stopping, turning, and looking past Garrett. Liam's voice was barely a whisper when Garrett heard him say, "I hope you're happy."

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Garrett wasn't sure how long he'd sat there, underneath that tree that had their initials carved deeply into the wood, surrounded by a shitty heart and the word "forever", barely noticeable but there.

For what seemed like hours, he brushed his fingers across the rough bark, tracing the words that had been there for years, words that *he* had carved in the wood with his pocketknife as Liam had kissed his neck, laughing and smiling against his skin.

"Garrett." His mother's voice startled him out of his memories, her presence at his side a mystery to him until she spoke.

"Hey, Mom." His voice was rough, a scratchy sound from tears he'd forced back, and some that had escaped against his will.

"Oh, sweetie." Her arms wrapped around him tightly, and he buried his face against her chest, tears welling at the base of his eyes and threatening to fall, and fall they did, desperate and heavy in their release.

"Mom, I did something really stupid."

She continued to rub his back in short, calming circles, rocking him just slightly in her arms. "I know, baby. I know."

Garrett pulled back from her warmth at that, his eyes searching her face for answers, for disapproval.

"I saw Liam leave about an hour ago. Was going to ask him over for dinner tomorrow night, but the look he gave me was like he'd seen a ghost."

The pain in Garrett's gut rose, guilt soaring through his body.

"I don't know what you said, but it doesn't take a genius to know that things didn't go so well. And his eyes were broken, like I imagine his heart is right now, like I imagine *your* heart is right now."



Garrett prepared himself for angry words, for her to tell him she didn't want a gay son, but instead she cupped his cheek, smiled, and shook her head, as if knowing that darkness had crept into his thoughts and made itself home there.

“Baby, I've known about you two for a long time. I'm your mother, and it's impossible to miss the way you look at each other... What happened?”

The words spilled from his lips before he even realized he was speaking, flowing and breaking when he spoke of things that hurt just a bit *too* much.

And that's when he got *that* look, the disapproval and unhappiness.

She smacked him upside his head, just enough to cause a slight sting, but certainly not enough to replace the pain he felt inside his chest.

“Boy, I never pegged you as stupid, but *dammit*, Garrett Quincy Delroy, that was really damned dumb.” She paused, her lip set in a tight expression of disbelief. “But I understand why you did it. I just wish you hadn't.”

They sat there together for a while longer, looking into the darkness while his mom continued to comfort him the best that she could.

“Let's get you inside, yeah? It's getting chilly out here.”

She pulled him up and guided him into the house, the *creak* of the screen door a familiar, comforting sound.

For the first time in a long, *long* while, she kissed his forehead when he was settled in his bed—the scent of Liam on the pillows, soaking his sheets, painting the goddamned walls—inescapable.

“Tomorrow we move on, you hear?”

He heard. Tomorrow would be the start of the waiting game—waiting for Liam to go off and achieve his dreams, and to see if maybe, just maybe, he'd come back, and it was all meant to be.

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## PART II

Time stretched on like some proverbial torture device. It was strange, going to school for those last few weeks and feeling awkward whenever he saw Liam, avoiding eye contact and having to remind himself that he did this for “the best”, whatever that meant anymore.

The summer was even worse, but somehow his parents managed to distract him with work on the farm. Suddenly the barn roof needed to be redone, and some of the rooms in the house could “use a fresh coat of paint.” By the end of summer, Garrett was sure he’d pretty much repaired everything that needed to be fixed in the house.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson still came over for dinner once in a while, but now without Liam, who was also absent from the bank’s annual summer picnic. All he knew of Liam, since the day he’d pushed him away, came from them. And it was only the information they were willing to share. He knew they didn’t tell him everything, especially since he’d heard his mom talking to Mrs. Johnson on the phone just weeks after the breakup. Apparently, Liam hadn’t been doing so well either, and Garrett had to push down his inclination to go and fix that too.

Oddly enough, Liam’s parents didn’t look at him any differently, even though they had to have known something had happened. They were still family, even if a bit fucked up.

But, just like Garrett had wanted, had hoped, Liam had changed his mind. He was going to attend the University of Colorado come fall, and Garrett didn’t fail to notice the glint of pride that came to Mr. Johnson’s face when he talked about the school and the great things Liam was going to do there.

In the end, Liam slipped away without even a whisper. The only way he knew that Liam had left was because his father had asked Liam’s parents if Liam had arrived at school safely. Somehow, time had come and gone, and he’d missed the fact that it was August and that the other kids he’d graduated with were starting their new chapters in life, just as he was.

Garrett had heard that losing someone could feel like losing a limb, but no, losing Liam didn't feel like that. Garrett could work and live without a damned limb, but life without Liam... he couldn't even remember what that looked or felt like; it felt so foreign and wrong. No, losing Liam was more like losing the air in his lungs, or the steady pulse that threaded throughout his body. It was more than losing a physical or even emotional part of himself—it was like waking up one day and trying to breathe without such a fundamental part of life being there. Liam was that part of his life, and now he was gone.

But Garrett didn't know how to sulk, not without Liam there to hold him and make him feel like it was okay to cry a little. So, instead of letting himself feel the overwhelming, gaping hole inside his chest, he worked, forcing the air in and out through his lungs—without Liam. Though he couldn't remember it, he had lived without Liam at one point in his life, and he would do it again. He'd do it for Liam.

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Garrett had never thought that time could be so inconsistent—forward and back, fast and slow. The three years since Liam walked out of his life, or more accurately, since he'd forced Liam out of it, proved him wrong. There would be days that would go so fast, *too* fast. Days when he just needed another hour or two of sunlight, and yet the night always came too soon, blanketing him in darkness, mocking him in his desperation to finish whatever was on the workload that day.

Then there were other days, days that felt like suffocating in fear, days that he wished would just *end*. Days like the Monday, about a year back, when his father had another stroke. He thought the first had been bad, the second smaller but still not pretty, and the third and fourth manageable. The fifth, though, was like being hit repeatedly with a metal baseball bat.

When he was younger, his father seemed like a mountain, large and immovable, with a strength that Garrett had grown to admire. Each day watching his father, seeing the ever-dimming glimmer of life in his eyes, made his father appear less like a mountain and more like a road, continuously traveled on and abused.

Shortly after that episode, his parents decided to sign part of the farm over to him, something he'd always dreamed of but never thought would happen under circumstances like these.

There was a stretch of time when they hired a middle-aged man to help them around the farm. Leo was a hard worker, the single father of a beautiful two-year-old girl. With his help on the farm, Garrett was able to attend classes in business at the local community college; classes that his father had insisted would help him run the farm one day. And he was right—they did.

When Garrett received his associates degree, all he could think of was calling Liam, telling him that he did it—this rusty ol' cowboy went and got a fancy sheet of paper—made his mama proud.

He didn't call Liam though, and like many times before, he leaned against *their* tree and dialed a number without ever hitting "call".

Liam, as far as he knew, was doing great. His mom had said that college suited him well, which came as no surprise to Garrett. If Liam ever came home on the holidays, Garrett never knew about it. He did know, however, that Liam was near the top of his class, excelling in all of his classes, and working during the summers in the university's physics lab, doing some of the very experiments he had once told Garrett about.

The worst day of Garrett's life came late on a Thursday, the night cold with December's chilly kiss. The roads had been slick with black ice for the past week, and the small town surrounding the farm had seen an uncharacteristic number of accidents due to the brutal winter.

The memory was like a film on endless replay—the very moment when he answered the phone after coming in from feeding the animals.

He was sure that the voice at the end of the line was that of a friendly nurse, that her voice had been calm, and that she was attempting to be soothing with her words—a futile attempt as soon as she told him why she was calling.

The hospital was sterile, the waiting room a shocking white that he'd seen so many times before with his father, but suddenly today, it was so much more haunting than it had ever been back then.

The surgeon who came out to meet them looked at Garrett, and he knew then that his mother had passed. In a sympathetic voice, the doctor told him and his father, who sat stiffly at his side, that they had done their best, that she was too far gone, and worst of all—that he was *sorry*. Fucking *sorry*. For what, Garrett didn't know—for not being able to save her? For the asshole who blew through the red light and crashed into his mother's car head on? For the way Garrett just wanted to crumble into pieces and never pick himself back up again? Sorry was just a word and it did nothing to bring his mother back.

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He planned his mother's funeral while his father sat nearly comatose, a shell of the man Garrett once knew, only occasionally nodding his head in agreement at Garrett's choices. *Pink and white carnations, Mom's favorite?* Nod. *How about this casket?* Nod. *Would you like Reverend James Bishop to officiate?* Nod.

Her sister came down from Maine to help, her eyes tearstained and looking as tired as he felt. Aunt Vivian was great, she was, but Garrett was never so relieved as when Mr. and Mrs. Johnson came to his door, a large plate of food in hand. Mrs. Johnson could never replace his mother, but she'd always been like a second mom to him. The minute she walked in the door and took in his grief-stricken face, her arms had wrapped around him, her warmth covering him like a welcome break from the cold winter that mocked him in his despair. Her voice was soft in his ear, reassuring and calm despite her own loss—the loss of her best friend.

It was late in the morning, but she'd taken him to his room, still baby blue from his youth, and insisted he sleep, promised that everything around the house would be taken care of, that it was okay for him to rest—to mourn and not be so strong.

The funeral was beautiful, and he'd made it through the eulogy without breaking down, a feat he would be forever proud of. The spread of flowers looked great, especially when the pink and white carnations were laid across the deep brown of the casket. And his mother, well she was always a very pretty woman, and they'd done well to make her look her best, make her look like the woman everyone remembered her to be. She almost looked at peace,

as if she were sleeping. But the makeup was too white, her cheeks didn't have her usual light pink flush, and her lips were not covered with the hideous shade of red lipstick she so loved.

They buried her in the family plot, right next to her parents. The casket had been lowered carefully into the near-frozen ground, and with it a little piece of Garrett went, lying next to his mother in her final resting place.

Later, when everyone had told him how sorry they were for his loss for what felt like the tenth time, words that he wished would just stop—he didn't need them to be sorry, they didn't do this, and none of them could bring her back; he helped his father into the now too-empty king-sized bed. He closed the door and pretended he didn't hear his father weep through the walls.

It was later that week, a week of the same routine—eat leftover cake and lasagna and whatever else their neighbors had cooked, work, listen to his father cry through the paper thin walls, the sound torturous to his ears. The sky was a bruised-shade of black and blue, and the knock on the door startled him from where he stood in the kitchen, wrapping up cookies from Mrs. White, his seventh grade science teacher. The last person he expected to see on the other side of the door was Liam, handsome, and somehow taller, more muscular than when Garrett had last seen him.

He looked as if he had been crying, his eyes rimmed with a violent red, bloodshot around the edges. Most of all, though, he looked angry.

“Lia—” Garrett could barely get his name out before the other boy, now a man, connected his fist to the hard edge of Garrett's chin.

“You selfish bastard.” Liam's voice was deep, a welcoming velvet tone that Garrett wished he could just melt into.

“How could you *not* tell me? How come I had to find out from my fucking father when I got home for winter break? *You* should've called me, not him. Not that way.”

Garrett stood in a shocked stillness, the pain rearing at the side of his face warm and blossoming into what he was sure would be a vibrant bruise.

“I’m sorry, Liam. I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me.” In truth, Garrett didn’t know how to do *this*. To call his once best friend, now ex-lover, and grieve with him.

“Bullshit, Garrett.” Liam took a step back, then two more, his body vibrating with a swelling anger. “She was my family, too. She was my mom, too. I loved her, Garrett, just like you did—*do*.” Liam looked at him once more before turning his back and walking toward the car parked at the end of the drive. He climbed in the passenger side, and the car backed out and disappeared—much like Liam had done the first time he walked away—quietly, and with Garrett’s heart in tow.

Strange as it may have been, Garrett had never actually thought about what would happen if Liam *didn’t* come back, if it wasn’t actually meant to be, and the thought of that now, so fucking tangible, haunted him.

He walked into his parents’ room, the sounds of his father’s cries now quieted, the room blanketed in the stillness of the night. Garrett knew his father was still awake, and like a child fearing a thunderstorm, he crawled in the bed next to his father and wrapped his arms tightly around the old, fragile body.

“I love you, Papa,” he whispered into the thick silence, resting against the sheets that still held his mother’s scent, and slept.

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Before the incident with Liam, Garrett had held a sense of hope, something to help keep him going. Hope was wearing thin though, as another year passed like a whisper and Liam didn’t come home. The ice-brushed silver ground melted back to green, the chilly winter bleeding into an early spring. Mrs. Johnson had asked him if he’d like to come to Liam’s graduation, her voice so easy and sweet that it nearly made him sick when he had to tell her no.

She had nodded her head knowingly and hugged him for a solid minute, as if her arms around him would make his world of hurt go away. It didn’t. He had to lay off Leo the next day, the income from the farm too thin at that point to support the friendly man who had done so much for Garrett’s father.

It was another three months, nearing the end of August, before he heard any more news about Liam. Mr. Johnson had come over to help him work on a tractor that didn't seem to want to start, and he was practically beaming from the minute he entered the old shed.

Eventually, he let it spill. Liam had accepted a job about a half hour away. He was going to be doing research with some corporation that had a pretty fancy name Garrett could barely pronounce. Garrett was proud, and a little weight lifted from his heart for a moment only to be dropped back down heavier than ever.

Liam was coming home, but what that meant for Garrett, he didn't know. Pretty soon after that it became clear that it meant nothing at all. Liam had rented an apartment near his workplace, and apparently went to his parents' house once a week for dinner. Garrett's hope grew thinner, shredding more with each passing day that Liam stayed away.

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The second anniversary of his mother's death wasn't as bad as he had imagined it might be, but in some ways it was worse—knowing that time went on, even when his mother didn't. He ate a quiet breakfast with his father, much like he did every day with the aging man, and then worked around the farm for most of the afternoon.

Garrett finished early, as planned, and took his father down to the gravesite. The snow dusted the ground and covered the top of the granite. He brushed it off, running his finger over the words engraved in the stone. *Olivia Marie Delroy. Loving wife & mother.*

It seemed impossible that she had been gone for a whole two years, that the seasons had come and gone and the world had moved on without his mother, time passing in a way that Garrett barely noticed. He recalled a time when, as a little boy, he'd had nightmares about waking up and finding that his mother wasn't there anymore. He'd run to his parents' room, shaken her shoulders and woken her up from where he cried at the edge of his parents' bed, his shoulders just barely reaching the mattress. There, she'd held him, whispered in his ear, and promised him she'd always be there with him every step that he took.



“Garrett.” His father’s voice sounded like leather, aged and rough.

“Yeah, Papa?”

“Since she’s not here to tell you this,” he didn’t have to say who *she* was, “I’m going to.”

It was probably the longest string of words his father had put together at one time since the year before, usually answering Garrett’s questions with a grunt of monosyllabic words.

“Get your head out of your ass, boy.”

Garrett turned at that, staring at his father who appeared perfectly calm. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You ain’t deaf. I said get your head out of your ass, and now. Before it’s too late, ya hear?”

Oh, he heard all right, but what his father was talking about was beyond his comprehension.

“Wha—?”

“Liam, Garrett. I’m talking about Liam. You think your mother didn’t tell me what happened? I’ve been waiting for you to man up and go see him. Lord knows you owe that boy an apology for being such a damned fool.” Garrett waited, his eyes growing wider as he took in his father’s words.

“Now you know your mama loved you, and I love you, but you’ve got to stop this. This is where I have to come to be able to see the love of my life, but you? All you have to do is take the truck to the next town, and what are you doin’? A whole shit-ton of nothin’. Your mama and I didn’t raise you to be stupid, or a coward. So, I’ll say this again—get your head out of your ass before it’s too late. Do you hear me, boy?”

“Yes, Papa. I hear you.”

“Good. Now give me a minute with ya mama, and grab me my coat from the truck, will ya?”

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Garrett knew better than to ignore his father's words. Still, he bided his time, the nervous curl making itself at home in the pit of his stomach an unyielding reminder each day of what he needed to do.

Every meal was like a firm smack upside his head, sometimes more literally than figuratively, when his father would walk in and give him a tap. And Garrett swore he thought *that* look was one that only mothers had, but apparently fathers had their own version of it too. Garrett would have to sit there and try to choke down his scrambled eggs without fearing the burn of his father's eyes on him, or hearing the inquisitive, sometimes accusing, tone in his father's voice when he asked, "So what are you doing today?"

The conversation pretty much went the same way every day. "Oh, you know, working around the farm," Garrett would answer, and his father would grunt and excuse himself and walk out of the kitchen. The heavy pounding of his father's work boots would signal his retreat and leave Garrett at a lonely table with cold scrambled eggs, mourning with his burnt bacon over his damn stupidity.

And apparently his father was somehow becoming less of a recluse and more of a Chatty Cathy nowadays, because when Mr. and Mrs. Johnson came over for dinner a week later, every damned word they said was like a poke directed at him.

*"Oh, well, Liam is doing such and such."*

*"You know, it's hard starting a new job. I think Liam would like to have a friend right now."*

*"I worry about Liam, don't want him to be lonely in that apartment."*

"Goddammit, guys. Stop it. I get it, I do. I'll go see him next week. Just let me eat my casserole in peace, okay? Jesus."

"Well why didn't you just say that in the first place?" Liam's mother smiled his way, that ridiculously pretty smile getting on his last nerve, as he shoved the casserole in his mouth and avoided conversation for the rest of the dinner that seemed to go on *forever*.

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Mrs. Johnson made damned sure he kept his word, too. She would call Garrett every morning about eight a.m., her voice a sickly, sugary tone when she would ask if he was going to see Liam that day.

As it turned out, sweet Mrs. Johnson had about as much patience as a kid on crack, because one day, a week after the dinner, the pretty “G-rated” phone conversation took a turn for “PG-13”.

“Honey, will you go check my tea?” Garrett heard her speaking to Mr. Johnson in the background and the rustling of newspapers.

“Eh-hem, Garrett.” That was the last of her sweet tone. “Now you listen here, you little asshole. I love you like my own—I do, but if you don’t get your ass in gear and go see my boy, I’ll ma skin your hide. Ben seems to think you’re just nervous, and well, guess what? I don’t give a rat’s ass. If you don’t get *your* ass over there soon, I’ll be setting up a little dinner date, and you will be coming, whether you choose to or not.” She hung up the phone after that, leaving Garrett shocked and staring at the phone as if it had grown a head or something.

This time, when his father asked him what he was doing today, he answered with a firm, “Going to see Liam and saving my ass from being skinned.”

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The apartment building looked nice, covered in a creamy-colored siding and surrounded by green communal areas where a couple of kids were playing when Garrett pulled into a guest parking spot. The doors were facing outward, two floors of the same door and window pattern stretched across the front of the building. He’d had to call Mrs. Johnson again to ask her for Liam’s apartment number, and he’d nearly shit himself when she answered him like nothing had happened. *Of-fucking-course.*

The stairs to the second floor were a steady climb, and Garrett gazed at the number on the apartment door for what felt like a good hour, but couldn’t have been more than five minutes.

“Garrett? What are you doing here?” Garrett jumped at the sound of a familiar voice, his heart pounding in his chest, and his eyes open wide like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Oh, hey there, Liam. What brings you around these parts?” He bit his tongue as soon as the words came out, his deep-red face speaking volumes for the *what-the-fuck-did-I-just-say* thoughts coursing through his mind.

“I live here. But something tells me you already know that.”

“Oh, yeah.” Garrett forced a laugh, his hands nearly shaking with nerves. He could barely fight the tension that clawed its way into his back and shoulders, which shook with his laugh like bricks in a thin sack.

“So? What are you doing here?” Liam didn’t look angry, but he sure didn’t look pleased either, his eyebrows raised in a curious, almost confused expression.

And, dammit, he looked good. He was wearing a pale-green shirt, one that matched his eyes in the most remarkable way and made Garrett’s throat dry. The black slacks fit tightly around his sculpted thighs, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to reveal the muscular arms that Garrett desperately wanted to feel around him again. His skin was paler than the last time Garrett had seen him, probably a product of the time spent indoors working on experiments instead of outside tossing around the football, or helping Garrett on the farm. He’d somehow grown more into his broad frame, his hair an almost dirty blond, the curls cascading against his cheeks and down across his neck.

Garrett shook himself from the thoughts and visions of Liam and that body threatening to make their way into his mind, and tore his eyes away from Liam. “Can we go inside?” Garrett was prepared for rejection, and for the briefest of moments his heart stopped when it looked like Liam seemed reluctant to let him in.

“Yeah, okay.” Liam opened the door, stepping in and toeing off his shoes, before looking back to Garrett who couldn’t seem to make his feet move.

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Garrett. Are you coming in or not?”

In it was. Garrett looked around the apartment at the beige furniture and ridiculously colorful blanket that had been thrown over the back of the couch. Yep. Still Liam.

“Look, Liam, I came here to apologize.” Liam looked like he was listening, but then again he had mastered that look from the time he’d said biochem was boring and too easy for him to pay attention to in high school.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you when—when my mom died. I just... I wasn’t really in a good state of mind then, you know? And I thought you’d still hate me.”

“Hate you? Garrett, you’re an asshole, but I could never hate you.”

“Really?” The hope in his heart had to have come through with his words, his twang heavier than usual. He could feel the touch of hope spread across his face, his chapped lips parting in a hesitant smile as he stared at Liam’s amused, but beautiful, expression.

“You’ve been my best friend for as long as I can remember. You’re practically family.”

“Well, I’m still sorry. You see, back then—God, I was so stupid, Liam. You remember when the girls in school would talk about how romantic it would be if a guy let them go, to see if it was ‘meant to be’ and all that shit?” Garrett paused, his breath catching in his throat as he saw the understanding cross Liam’s face. “Yeah, I know. I’m so fucking stupid.”

“Wait, what? You’re kidding me, right?” Liam laughed bitterly, the sound much harsher than the playful laugh Garrett had heard in the past. “You dumped me because of some ‘romantic notion’?”

Garrett nodded, unable to look Liam in the eyes.

“So tell me, Mr. Knight-in-Shining-Armor, why did you decide you had to ‘let me go’?”

“I was holding you back from your dreams, baby.” The nickname sounded weird as soon as it hit the air, but the hard look in Liam’s eyes softened with it, a small semblance of a smile touching his lips. “I couldn’t do that. You wanted to stay here for *me*. I couldn’t let you do that, not when you had wanted to go to Colorado since we were fucking thirteen.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I’m a big boy? I can make my own decisions, Garrett. I don’t need anyone to make them for me.”

“I know. I do. But I loved you, Liam.”

Liam looked startled at that, frozen in his spot across the room. The only visible movement was the bob of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed, almost painfully slowly.

“So what now? Do you expect me to come crawling back to you now that you’ve told me all this?”

Garrett could feel the panic rise in his chest, the throb of his steady heartbeat increase. He hadn’t thought about the “what ifs” like what if Liam had found someone else, someone who loved him and would never leave him for some bullshit romantic move they’d heard about from girls in middle school. For Garrett, there was never anyone *but* Liam. He was a fool to assume the same for Liam. Still, he had to try.

“No. I mean—I used to think that. But *some* people saw fit to let me know shit doesn’t work that way. Apparently *I’m* the one who needs to do the crawling.”

“And why should I give you another chance, huh? Give me one good reason.” Liam’s voice rose a bit, not quite loud enough to be called yelling, but loud enough for Garrett to know that Liam was pissed. The shock had worn off, anger left in its place.

“Because I *still* love you, Liam. And I’d do anything for you, even now, even if you ask me to leave and never come back. Though you might want to tell your mom if you don’t want me to ever come back, ’cause she’s got some crazy dinner plans where I think she may be serving my ass as the first course.”

Liam’s laugh was smooth and sweet, not the hateful, harsh sound that Garrett had heard earlier. He stepped toward Garrett until they were just inches apart, their breath mingling in the space between them. His face moved closer, and Garrett closed his eyes. The sudden feeling of a fist against his face was a familiar one, a fresh swirl of pain arching up his chin and into the soft area on

his cheek. He'd barely had time to process the punch and open his eyes before Liam's lips touched his, soft yet firm at the same time.

The kiss grew harsh, a complete fucking mess, much like the past five years of their lives. But it was also wonderful, sweet, and when Liam's tongue entered Garrett's mouth, battling hungrily with his for a moment, it felt like the pain in his chest had been lifted, like he could breathe again.

Liam pulled back, a soft look in his eyes, as he cupped Garrett's bruised cheek.

"You've gotta stop doing that, baby. It fucking hurts."

"Good. I'll stop doing it when you stop being an asshole."

"Getting right on that." Garrett smiled and pulled Liam close, holding his body tight against his chest like the time in the kitchen before all this mess happened, but this time for a different reason. This time because he knew Liam was his to keep and to cherish, and he'd be damned if he ever listened to another romantic notion again in his life.

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## EPILOGUE

Whoever claimed that love comes easy was a masochistic liar. Garrett soon learned that words like “easy” had no place when it came to rebuilding a friendship, let alone a relationship that had been severed for five years. Not unless easy was actually a synonym for hard with the subtext of *really fucking hard*.

Liam was no pushover, and as much as Garrett had dreamed they would just walk into each other’s lives and it would all just click back together, it didn’t quite happen that way. Their lives had pieces that fit together perfectly like an intricate puzzle, but it was all just a matter of situating the pieces the right way again and putting them back where they belonged to form the whole.

For the first time in his life, with the exception of one disastrous occasion with Lucy Wilson in eighth grade, Garrett went on a date. Well, more like many dates.

Once they had finished kissing on that first day back together, catching up on the years of missed chances for their breaths to mingle and their tongues to battle, Liam had sat Garrett down on the couch, and instantly went into serious mode. His face was so perfectly silly that it had nearly made Garrett burst out laughing at the way his best friend’s light blond eyebrows furrowed together on the slightly freckle-dusted face, his kiss-swollen lips pursed together in thought.

“There are going to be rules,” Liam had said at last, poking his finger against Garrett’s chest.

“Rule number one—you are going to take me out on a date—no, not just one, many. You, Garrett Quincy Delroy, are going to *date* me.” Liam paused, long enough to allow Garrett to nod in understanding and agreement. “I’m a classy man. I deserve to be treated right. So you’d better make it good, or I won’t put out.”

“Rule number two—I swear to God, Garrett, if you take any more advice from preteen girls, I will wring your neck. So don’t. Got it?” Garrett nodded, and Liam smiled, seemingly pleased with himself and his rules.



“Rule number three—I reserve the right to add rules as I so please. You may want to take notes on this...”

Garrett didn't. Instead, they spent hours sitting on that couch, talking about their lives and everything that had happened in the past five years away from each other. Liam had co-written and published two papers in research journals, he loved his job and the people he worked with, and in a confession that pained Garrett to hear—he had dated a few men, slept with a couple, but never really had anything serious—not serious in the way that he and Garrett were.

Garrett shared bits of his own life with Liam, telling him about going to college, accomplishing so much, and going through hell and back. He talked about his mother, about how much he missed her and still set a spot for her at the dinner table, sometimes even waited to hear her call out to him and tell him to hush when he was being too noisy around the house.

Their time together that night had been good, great even, but just one small step in a line of many that needed to happen for them to find what they used to have, and allow it to flourish and grow.

Dating Liam was fun but never predictable. On the bright side, Garrett would never have to go through the awkward parental introductions or worry that his father wouldn't like Liam. Hell, sometimes he wondered if his father preferred Liam, especially when it came to watching football on TV together and how much of a better cook he was (and Garrett agreed—Liam clearly missed his calling when it came to being a chef).

It was the start of something new and old all at once, something that should have never *not been*.

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A year later, a year of ridiculous conversations and getting back the friend, and eventually the lover, that Garrett so treasured, he finally worked up the nerve to ask Liam to move in to the farmhouse with him and his father.

Liam agreed, and Garrett learned that his mother had been right about many things, including the whole “you don't know someone 'til you live with them” bit. Garrett learned that Liam did not like to be interrupted at work, unless it was at lunchtime and as long as Garrett came armed with Liam's

favorite sandwich from a little deli at the center of town. He also learned that Liam was the biggest baby ever when he was sick, and insisted that the bed was his fortress of germs, not to be penetrated in any way—“and no, Garrett, don’t get any ideas about penetration, you perv,” —and that the couch wasn’t as uncomfortable as he had imagined it would be.

On their first anniversary of moving in together, Garrett grilled a few steaks and invited their families over. He was pleased when Mrs. Johnson didn’t mention his ass once, especially when it had once come so close to being served up on a silver platter. It was a nice night of family and laughter, and once everyone had gone home, they took a walk to their special spot—the tree that still had their names carved deep in the old bark.

Their fingers were entwined down at their sides, Liam’s back pressed against the tree, while Garrett leaned in and kissed from his lover’s cheek to his lips and down across his neck.

“I’m so lucky to have you,” Garrett whispered hotly against Liam’s ear, his tongue darting across the shell before sucking the lobe into his mouth.

Liam was purring against him, his fingers loosening from Garrett’s, exploring underneath the thin fabric of Garrett’s T-shirt and rubbing the smooth skin of his toned stomach.

“I love you, Garrett.” Liam’s voice was barely a whisper, the crickets louder in Garrett’s ears, the night a thick veil around them.

Garrett drew back, the shock plainly written on his face. In all the years, all the ups-and-downs, Liam had never actually said it back, never let a word that seemed so serious and strange hit the air between them, seep its way into their lives. Garrett always knew he loved Liam, always hoped Liam had loved him too, but to hear it was a different beast all together.

For the smallest moment, Liam looked nervous—afraid even. “I love you, too. More than anything.” Garrett wanted to wipe the look of fear from where it marred his lover’s face, from where it sat across the full lips that were pressed so tightly together.

Time felt heavy, as if a tangible thing sitting on their shoulders. It weighed on Garrett for only a second before he laughed, and Liam joined in, the sounds of their voices a light dance in the night.

They loved each other. So what else was new?

Liam tangled their fingers back together as they walked quickly toward the dark house where Garrett's father was fast asleep.

Garrett allowed himself to be led to their bedroom, a room that they had painted together just the week before—painted being a loose term that encompassed splatter across their clothes and faces as if they were kids painting the barn again.

They undressed each other slowly, fingers crossing paths on skin that they knew so fondly even in the deepest areas of darkness. When their clothes were long forgotten, spread across the old wooden floors, Liam laid Garrett out across the bed, his tongue tracing an intricate pattern in the center of Garrett's chest.

A warm mouth closed around Garrett's nipple, teeth toying carefully with the small nub before pulling back and blowing a stream of air across the heated, red skin. Liam kissed the abused skin, licked it in slow, caring strokes, then moved to Garrett's other nipple and repeated the process.

His fingers danced over Garrett's side, tickled the smooth skin there, and edged down in the same movements as his tongue that had slid across Garrett's navel, dipped inside and swirled around, before continuing its travel downward.

Garrett moaned, the quiet disrupted by their movement against the sheets and the pleas that escaped his lips and grew louder as Liam inched closer to his cock, already dripping with pre-come.

Liam took Garrett's cock in his mouth, his hand at the base as he moved his head up and down, occasionally pulling off just long enough to dart his tongue across the tip and curl around the head of his lover's erection before taking it back in his hungry mouth.

The blond took him to the very edge, Garrett's calloused hands buried deep in his thick curls, and finally pulled back with a smile that Garrett could only describe as wicked spreading across his face.

He reached across Garrett's body, digging into the nightstand and pulling out the bottle of lube that was resident there. He spread the liquid across his fingers, rubbing them slowly together before reaching down and circling them around his lover's hole.

Garrett arched up, his body electrified as his lover took him back into his mouth and the first finger pushed in. They'd been sleeping together on a regular basis, but no matter how much time had elapsed since their last lovemaking, Liam still prepared Garrett with the utmost of care, digit by digit, slowly entering and stretching Garrett.

The world could've collapsed around Garrett, and he wouldn't have noticed, not with Liam between his legs, practically worshipping his body, spelling out his dreams and desires with each touch.

“You ready, Cowboy?”

Liam's voice was rough, his lips spit-slick and looking perfectly fucked.

Garrett, not trusting his voice, just nodded his head and reached back toward the nightstand for the condoms they kept there. He was surprised by the hand that caught his wrist and the most amazing light of life in Liam's eyes as he shook his head.

“Not tonight.”

They both had been tested again, but had used condoms as per rule twelve or so on Liam's Rules to Dating... well, Liam.

“If that's okay with you?” Liam seemed reluctant, his voice more fragile than Garrett had ever heard it—and Liam was anything but fragile.

Garrett didn't respond verbally, instead pouring more lube into his palm and jacking up and down Liam's cock, spreading the lube and then his legs.

Liam pulled Garrett closer so that his long legs wrapped firmly around Liam's waist and carefully, tortuously slow, Liam pushed in, allowing Garrett to accommodate to him, with deliberate pauses until he was finally pressed tightly against Garrett, their bodies entirely connected as one.

“Fuck me, baby,” Garrett shifted his hips, humping up against Liam, frantic for movement.

Liam pulled out at a snail’s pace before delving back in quickly, his strokes solid and sure. Garrett pulled his lover down, their lips meeting in a sloppy kiss, just as desperate as the thrusts between them, growing with each inward stroke until the bed began to shake with their movement, rattling loudly against the old, freshly painted wall.

“God, Cowboy. You’re so fucking tight.” He paused, his voice breaking with each thrust. “I love this—Jesus, I love you.”

Their moans tangled until Garrett couldn’t tell who was saying what, which hungry cry belonged to him and which to Liam. It felt right, again, to have Liam buried so far inside him that he didn’t know how anyone could ever get closer, ever touch him so fucking deep inside.

Then Liam shifted, lifted Garrett’s leg a little more, and thrust forward like his life depended on it and hit the spot that set Garrett’s insides afire, burning and sizzling until the heat became too much to stand, the sensation so unbearably profound, and he came with a scream that turned into Liam’s name.

Their sweat mingled, Garrett’s come smearing between their bodies as Liam moved to kiss him and thrust inside once, twice, three times more and came, his mouth open against Garrett’s lips, breath so warm and heavy that it made Garrett shake.

“Rule number eighteen—” Liam’s breath caught in his throat, a smile playing across his face, glowing in the moonlight that seeped in from the window. “Never leave me again.”

The path they had taken to get to this point, to Liam lying against his chest, to the most perfect fitting of pieces, and life suddenly making sense, was less than clean. It was difficult, full of potholes and fuckups that neither of them could have ever seen coming. There was loss, and gain, and everything in between. It was never anything like what is written in fairy-tale books, never some picture perfect moment that magically happens. No, it was much more than that.

You see, what they don't tell you in those bullshit romantic notions is that sometimes you gotta do things yourself; sometimes you gotta get up and *make* it happen. And yeah, a lot of times it's really messy, and you may get a strong uppercut (or two) to the jaw—but it's also completely worth it to see that look of love in someone's eyes and know, just *know*, it's for you.

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*S.J. Eller is a young, first time author. She is from a small town but has big aspirations in the field of psychology and has a love for sociology and history. In her (not so spare) spare time, she enjoys reading, spending time with her family (especially her two dogs), and having a good laugh. She is also adept at graphic design and various forms of coding and enjoys a challenge.*

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