



*Dreams
Come True*

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James

IT'S an undeniable (and utterly unavoidable) reality that—no matter how much we may love them, even in light of their obvious issues with sanity—at some point, we all manage to thoroughly disappoint our beloved families.

Me? I began disappointing mine at a very early age.

Six years old, to be exact.

My father, a natural-born athlete, fully expected his only son to follow in his lofty footsteps and, in gleeful anticipation, he enrolled me in every possible Little League activity known to man. But we soon learned that (a) I possessed no athletic ability whatsoever, and (b) I suffered from severe asthma, which would fortunately become less severe with time and the proper medication.

Tragically (to my father's great and never-ending dismay), time did nothing to change my complete lack of athletic inclination. I had two left feet, I couldn't catch a ball, throw a ball, or hit a ball, and when it came to basketball (my father's most beloved sport), I made the proverbial fish out of water look graceful and beautifully elegant.

Needless to say, my father wasn't happy. He couldn't understand how his son could be so "hopeless." My mother

tried to help, but I could tell that even she wondered what had gone so horribly wrong.

Luckily for Russ and Emma Truman, my sister, Ava, was everything any parent could want their child to be. She was beautiful, brilliant, outgoing—we're talking head cheerleader, homecoming queen, prom queen, track and field champion. There wasn't a subject she didn't excel at in school. Ava had the golden touch and naturally, she relished being Little Miss Perfect in our parents' eyes while I lurked in the background, wishing I could simply disappear completely, because I was fairly certain that no one would even notice.

I was extra baggage.

Nothing more.

Especially after *he* came into the picture.

Payne Rogan.

Being Little Miss Perfect, it was only natural that Ava would attract and begin dating the most perfect guy in our hometown of Bricks, North Carolina.

A junior like me, while Ava was a sophomore, I knew who Payne Rogan was before Ava brought him home and happily introduced him as her boyfriend.

Payne—or Pay, as he liked to be called by his friends, and I was most certainly *not* his friend—was Ava's ideal social counterpart in every possible way: he was popular, from a wealthy family, an only child, smart, clever, and

(because the universe hated me) Payne was the athlete my father had desperately wanted me to be.

Baseball.

Football.

Track and field.

Payne excelled at all of it.

Especially basketball, my dad's greatest passion.

Payne was the team captain, the MVP. College scouts began watching him during his freshman year, he was that damn good.

Naturally, my father loved him. For Russ Truman, Payne was like the second coming of Christ. He would sit with Payne for hours and discuss basketball and how it was supposedly the greatest thing ever, while I seethed.

My mother had failed to give my father the son he wanted, but my brilliant, oh-so-perfect sister rectified that horrible mistake (me) by bringing Payne into our lives.

Boy, did I hate Ava for that.

I hated Payne more.

Of course (again, because the universe hated me), Payne was simply stunning, and it was around this time that I came to the realization that I was gay. Having Payne running around the house nearly all the damn time made me painfully uncomfortable.

He was so damn pretty.

By our junior year, he was six-feet-one, all long limbs and muscles, with perfect skin, thick black hair, and darkly lashed cerulean blue eyes.

And his smile?

Dear God, help me, but his smile was stunning; he had the most amazing lips. They were naturally pink and so damn pretty. I wasted away many nights thinking about those lips and telling myself I was completely insane.

I hated Payne Rogan for being everything I wasn't, but at the same time, I couldn't deny (to myself) that I had a crush on my sister's boyfriend.

Pitiful, I know.

Granted, it seemed to me that pitiful was the theme for my life at that point; I was gay (which *no one* knew), I was the greatest disappointment my father had ever known (which *everyone* knew), I was an "oddity" (again, something *everyone* knew), and every time I turned around, I found myself face to face with the guy I loved/hated.

Payne was at our house every day; he was in the living room with Ava (and often, when our parents weren't home, he was in Ava's bedroom with the door closed), and for one agonizing hour each school day, I had to share English Lit with him.

It figured the bastard would be in my favorite class.

Mr. Perfect-and-Popular Payne sat in the front row, while I languished in the back, but anytime we were forced to bestow a presentation to the class, I had to face Payne while doing it, which only made me more nervous.

And I was already painfully nervous when it came to public speaking.

To make my life even more sadly cliché, I was somewhat (agonizingly) shy and, therefore, pretty much a loner. I kept to myself. I had a few friends, but I was most comfortable reading or writing. I was best when I was on my own; the bookstore and the library tended to be my favorite hangouts. I usually had my nose buried in a book and my only “physical” exertion came from swimming in the indoor pool my parents had installed.

I considered that exercise—it kept me in shape—but my father considered it a waste of time. But truth be told, he considered everything I did a waste of time.

Swimming wasn't basketball.

That was Payne's domain. He was the King of the Court, King of the School; he was my father's substitute son, Ava's boyfriend. The bastard had a starring role in my life, and while Payne seemed most content to ignore me the majority of the time, there were moments when he felt compelled to remind me that I was on his radar.

One such occasion?

The first day of our senior year, several of Payne's equally popular friends found me in my usual perch in the

library, which made me the ideal target for their harassing comments. Needless to say, this wasn't the first time they had thrown insults in my direction. I was deemed a "freak," a "dork," and a "zombie," but that particular day, a new slur was thrown into the oh-so-merry mix.

Fag.

Wide-eyed, terrified, I just stared at my tormentors, wondering if the insult was random, or if they somehow knew what I had never dared utter out loud.

I opened my mouth to try and stutter out a defense, but before I could, like some sort of avenging angel, Payne appeared and stepped between me and his friends.

"Back off."

His friends snickered and the ringleader, some prick named Bart, laughed. "Ease up, Pay. I don't intend to hurt the zombie."

"He's off limits, Bart."

"Are you serious with this, Pay? You're defending a fag?"

"He just might be a fag, but he's Ava's brother and that makes him off limits."

The thrill that came with Payne defending me died when I realized he wasn't defending *me*; he was defending Ava's brother, because he was a good boyfriend and, apparently, good boyfriends did things like that.

Without a word, I grabbed my books and almost ran from the library, not looking back. After that day, I made it my life's mission to avoid Payne Rogan whenever possible.

Not an easy task, but I did pretty well.

Occasionally, when Payne and I did end up in the same room together, I got the impression he was watching me, but I figured he was trying to decide if his friends were right about me being gay. A week before graduation, I decided it was well past time for me to admit the truth to my family, once and for all. I was sick of living a lie. My mother was constantly asking me why I wasn't dating. She pointed out her friends that had daughters and tried setting me up on dates on more than one occasion, and I had to come up with excuses why I wasn't interested. It was tiresome and exhausting and I decided that, whatever the fallout, I had to accept myself and take pride in who I was.

I waited until we were sitting down at dinner and then I very calmly explained the truth.

I told them I was gay.

My father stood up and walked out of the room without a word, but his reaction made it clear that I had once again disappointed him.

My mother sighed, but much to my surprise, she told me it would all be okay.

Of course, we both knew she was lying.

Ava chose that moment to announce she wasn't surprised. She had told Payne ages ago that I "played for the other team," and I decided I really hated her.

I hated Payne.

I hated my father, for thinking Payne was perfect.

I hated myself.

The days that followed were tense. My father attended my graduation, but I figured he was there for Payne, and while my mother did what she could to smooth things over, I felt more uncomfortable and out of place than ever.

A week after graduation, I decided to head to New York early. I was set to start NYU in the fall, so I told my mother I wanted the chance to familiarize myself with the city, maybe find a job. I figured I could live in a cheap apartment until the time came for me to move into my dorm room. Much to my great relief, my mother didn't try to stop me. She knew I was looking for an escape. I think she understood that it was too hard being around my father, who had taken to ignoring me even more than usual. It was my mother who drove me to the airport alone.

She hugged and kissed me, wishing me well, asking me to promise that I would call and write to her, and I did.

New York was wonderful. I was happy to tell my mother all about it; the city was so alive, there was an energy about it, and for the first time in my life I didn't feel completely out of sorts. I didn't feel a need to hide myself. I allowed some of the walls to fall away. I allowed myself to become more

outgoing. I actually made an effort to meet people and make real friends. By the time classes began, I felt like a new person.

I related all of this in my phone calls and letters to my mother. I told her I had decided to make use of my creative nature by majoring in English Literature and Theater. I was working part-time at a theater. My grades were excellent. I had shucked my glasses in favor of contacts, and I even admitted to her when I started dating.

She seemed genuinely happy for me, which meant a lot, especially since my father never wrote or talked to me when I called.

Ava spoke to me whenever she answered the phone. She told me about school, her new boyfriends, how she couldn't wait for her chance to graduate so she could attend college.

The only bad part (aside from my father freezing me out) was my mother's compulsive need to keep me thoroughly updated on Payne Rogan.

Truth be told, I referred to many of her letters and e-mails as The Payne Rogan Newsletter.

Payne was doing wonderful at Duke; *Payne* was MVP of the basketball team; *Payne* decided to major in Sports Medicine; *Payne* spent his summer coaching basketball for underprivileged kids; *Payne* had recorded a public service announcement for The Humane Society; *Payne, Payne, Payne*. I wanted to scream that I got it already.

Payne was perfection.

Throughout the four years I was in college, I didn't see Payne (I never returned to North Carolina, not even for Christmas), but I knew all about his life, and when my mother and Ava finally came to see me, they showed me pictures of him.

This was during my senior year at NYU. I had changed a lot in the time since I had left home.

Not only had I shed my hated glasses, all the swimming I had done over the years (and still did) had finally paid off in the form of actual, noticeable muscles. My blond hair was much longer, a little unruly, and my skin was clear.

Much to my disbelief, I was considered “cute” by guys and girls alike.

I wasn't “Payne” handsome, mind you, but very few people are, and Payne's perfections were once again pointed out over dinner one night. I had taken Ava and our mother to one of my favorite pizza places, and my mother started dropping hints that Ava should consider dating Payne again. He was a real catch, and there was no doubt he would find great success. I sensed Ava had heard all of this before, and I sensed it annoyed her, hearing it again, but her reaction completely threw me, when (without warning) she dropped the *biggest* bomb ever.

“Mom, forget about me and Pay. I won't ever be with him again.”

“But he's a good boy—”

“Look, I know it’s not my place to throw this out there, but to get you off my back, here it is: Mom, Payne isn’t interest in getting back together with me because he’s gay.”

My reaction?

I started laughing.

I laughed until my stomach hurt and I had tears in my eyes, but Ava looked at me and assured me she wasn’t making some twisted joke.

Perfect Payne Rogan was gay.

“Why do you think he’s not close to his own family? His dad freaked. And he hasn’t told any of you, because... Well, he knows how Dad reacted when he found out about you, James, and I guess that bothered him, so he’s sort of still in the closet.”

I demanded to know how long Ava had known this, but she didn’t answer until later, when she and I were alone and I got the full story.

Apparently, Payne had known he was gay back when he and Ava were dating; in fact, Ava confessed, their entire relationship had been something of a front.

“Payne dated me to make certain no one had any reason to suspect he was gay.”

“Why would you go along with that, Ava?”

“Well, at the time, I was sort of really dating this guy I knew Mom and Dad would never allow me to date, so I played Pay’s girlfriend and he covered for me, so I could spend time with Matt Cassa.”

I was totally floored.

A classic (and once again, sadly cliché) bad-boy, Matt Cassa certainly wasn’t the kind of guy our parents would have reacted to well.

They would have forbidden Ava to see him; he wasn’t The Golden Child, like Payne. I couldn’t wrap my mind around it and I wasn’t certain what I was *supposed* to feel, but what I *did* feel was burning anger and undeniable hurt.

Payne Rogan, the guy whose shadow I had never been able to escape, was like me in more ways than anyone would have guessed. It really wasn’t fair! I knew my father didn’t know Payne was gay, but he did truly adore Payne and it made me wonder what would happen when my father did finally learn the truth. I was terrified he would happily accept Payne’s sexuality, because at least Payne wasn’t a disappointment on every other level, the way I was.

Was that the key? Had I actually been able to play sports with decent skill, would my dad have accepted me?

I didn’t have a single answer to any of my questions and I couldn’t deny that I was seriously pissed at Payne.

Allowing my anger to take charge, I got Payne’s e-mail address from Ava, and I fired off an e-mail to him, making my feelings known.

Needless to say, it wasn't a nice little note.

I called him a fraud. I told him he was a bastard, that he was a coward. I raged that he was just a walking lie and I made it clear how much he disgusted me.

I honestly didn't expect any reply from Payne (I figured he would decided he didn't owe me a explanation), but the next morning, there was an e-mail from him waiting for me.

James,

You're right. I am a fraud. And a coward. After my father's reaction to me, and your father's reaction to you, I just figured the best thing I could do was stay in the closet, but I know now that isn't an option. I don't want to be a fake anymore, which means telling everyone, your father included, the truth.

I get that you hate me, and I think I understand why, but for what it's worth, I never meant to hurt you, or anyone else.

Truth be told, I respect you, James. I always have. I wish we could have been friends.

Maybe one day, you and I can sit down and talk about this face to face.

Take care of yourself.

I couldn't deny that Payne's reply seemed sincere, but I didn't write back and I tried to delete the e-mail, but instead I ended up saving it.

Three days later, Ava called and told me that Payne had officially come out and people were shocked. Especially our father, who wouldn't even speak to Payne now.

It made me a massive bastard, but I was actually relieved by my father's reaction; it meant that even if I had excelled in all the areas Payne had, my dad would still have turned his back on me when he found out I was gay.

Not exactly the greatest comfort, but it was something, and with that knowledge, I made an effort to get on with my life, without worrying about my father, or wondering about Payne and what twists and turns his life had taken following coming out. I assured myself I didn't care. It wasn't my problem; I had my own issues, my own life. I was happy with my life. I graduated college and I found a job working as a theater teacher at a high school. I dated from time to time. I had friends. My mom and Ava stayed in contact with me, and while my mother's letters became less "Payne-Centric," she did still mention him from time to time.

He graduated from Duke. He was working with a minor league basketball team; he could have gone pro (despite being out) but he decided against it. He didn't want to live in the public eye. He and Ava were still friends.

He often asked my mother about me.

I didn't care.

Only I did. It was foolish and stupid and part of me did indeed hate Payne, for a host of reasons (some logical and a few not), but I didn't tell my mother that. I didn't even hint to

her that I had the slightest interest in Payne's inquiries about me. I had some pride, after all, and I was determined to hold on to that pride.

My crush on Payne was forced from my mind and locked deep inside my heart.

I intended for it to stay there.

I intended to never again see Payne Rogan.

However, as they say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Three years after I graduated college, my mother called and informed me that Ava was engaged to a wonderful man named Matt Cassa.

It seemed Matt had cleaned up his act. He was an investment banker, a respected man, and it was obvious he loved Ava very much.

Naturally, I was happy for my sister. She and I were closer than we had been growing up. I had come to respect the person Ava was, and I had finally realized it wasn't her fault that she seemed so very perfect. I guess I had matured (to some extent). When Ava called and personally asked me to come home for her wedding, there wasn't any possible way I could refuse. I didn't want to refuse. Being a good big brother, I really wanted to be there for my sister's big day, but Ava was kind enough to warn me that not only would Payne be attending the wedding, he was actually in the wedding party, standing up as Matt's best man.

Now, I really had matured during my years away from home, but I had to wonder once again if maybe the universe did indeed hate me.

My sister's gay fake-ex-boyfriend, and my never-spoken-out-loud crush, was my sister's soon-to-be-husband's best man. Seriously, I half-expected Jerry Springer to call and personally ask my family to appear on his show.

Ava asked if being around Payne would make me uncomfortable, but I assured her I would be fine, that I had no issue with Payne.

I was fairly certain she didn't believe me, but she was nice enough not to challenge me on my lie, and I began making plans to return to my hometown for the first time in nearly seven years.

Doing so would bring me face to face with my father, with Payne, with all the issues I had run from when I went off to college. I couldn't say I particularly looked forward to that. But it had to be done. I had to put my lingering issues with the past to rest, once and for all, and Ava's wedding left me with no more excuses to avoid reality.

The wedding was scheduled for June, so I had no work conflict. I made the flight arrangements and the rental car arrangements, which left me with only mental preparations: long-winded speeches, in which I assured myself that (a) I had built a great life, (b) I had no reason to be ashamed, (c) I didn't need approval from anyone, not even my father, and (d) I could and I would be civil when it came to dealing with

Payne, because I was a mostly-mature adult, and whatever crush I might have had on him was long dead and gone.

He was just some guy who would be at my sister's wedding.

Nothing more.

It was another lie (I was good at telling them to myself), but I held to it, needing to believe it, needing the comfort it gave me.

I was no longer the painfully shy, awkward kid I had once been and I didn't want to be him again. The last thing I wanted was to regress, and if I allowed Payne Rogan to get to me, I would be going back in time.

I wouldn't allow that to happen.

Plain and simple.

My walls were in place, my self-confidence reinforced. I was ready to go into battle, because it was a battle I knew I would win.

I had to.

My peace of mind was at stake, after all, and possibly my heart. Quite frankly, I couldn't afford to lose either.

Payne

WHEN Ava told me James was coming home for her wedding, I was instantly overwhelmed with a host of emotions.

Fear.

Excitement.

Dread.

Anticipation.

I hadn't seen James in nearly seven years; I hadn't had any contact with him beyond our single e-mail exchange, and that hadn't exactly been warm and fuzzy with friendship. I knew James hated me. He had justifiable reasons. Everything he had said about me in his e-mail was undeniable, but I was ready and willing to admit my mistakes.

To some extent, I already had.

I was no longer lingering in the closet; I was officially out. Everyone in my personal life and almost everyone in my professional life knew I was gay and, after coming out, I

learned who my true friends were. Ava and Matt were among them.

My family, however, was a different story. My dad had already made it clear that he had no use for me and, while my mother did talk to me, she only did so in secret so my father wouldn't find out. As I had expected, Russ Truman pretty much ignored me.

That hurt.

During my so-called relationship with Ava, Russ had become a father figure to me; he took an interest in me that my dad never had, not even before he found out I was gay. I enjoyed feeling like someone gave a damn. I had a lot in common with Russ. It was nice having someone to talk to about the sports I liked; I enjoyed feeling like I had made a father proud, even if it wasn't my father, but it wasn't until much later that I realized my being around had distracted Russ's attention from the person who had truly deserved it.

James.

I suspected the bond I had once shared with Russ was one of the reasons James hated me, but I knew it went beyond that.

Of course, once I came out I became as unimportant to Russ as James seemingly was, which pissed me off, but not for myself.

I was pissed that Russ couldn't seem to see what an incredible man his son had become.

I had kept tabs on James over the years. I knew he had graduated NYU with honors, and that he taught theater. He seemingly had a good life, but that didn't surprise me. I had always suspected that James could and would excel. I had always sensed something intense lurking beneath his quiet and shy exterior; I know he spent most of our dreaded years in high school trying to hide away from the rest of the world. He didn't want anyone to notice him, but I certainly had, in more ways than James had ever realized and in ways I couldn't dare acknowledge to anyone.

Having a crush on your fake girlfriend's brother was complicated (to say the least) and I didn't dare act on what I felt.

How could I even consider it?

I was Payne Rogan and Payne Rogan couldn't be a closet case because Payne Rogan was The Big Man on Campus. I was the guy all the girls were supposed to want and all the guys wanted to be. I told myself I had a reputation and I had no choice.

I had to protect that reputation.

I had to be what everyone believed me to be.

It was like being a character in some play or book or movie and it didn't matter that I didn't like the plot, because I saw no escape.

I kept my mouth shut, I played basketball, I won awards, and only Ava knew the truth, because she was my best friend and because by playing her boyfriend, I didn't

have to worry about dating other girls and Ava got to see Matt on the side.

A win-win situation, or it would have been, had I not found myself drawn to Ava's brother, the shy and intense and enigmatic young man with cornflower blue eyes that reflected a deep intelligence and deep emotions.

Feeling what I felt for James terrified me, which prompted me to avoid him as much as I could, even when I was around his house supposedly seeing Ava or talking with Russ. I wanted to talk to him, to offer him friendship, but I didn't dare because I was a coward. I was afraid if someone saw me around James, they would somehow be able to see what exactly I felt for him, which I couldn't allow to happen, especially after I defended him from Bart's verbal attack.

I said it before and I'll say it again: I was a coward. I was too afraid to take a chance, so I played my part. Ava and I eventually "broke up," but I still saw Russ often, which allowed me to watch James from a distance until we graduated.

Ava told me exactly what happened when James came out and I wanted to go to him, to do or say something comforting.

Of course, I didn't.

The next thing I knew, Ava was telling me that James had gone to New York early, to get away from his father's silent treatment. Russ wouldn't even acknowledge him, according to Ava, and I hated Russ for that. But I didn't say

anything to him. Not about James. I was still too afraid. I was locked inside the closet. My father had made it clear he wouldn't react well should I admit to anyone else I was gay, and once I was in college, I was still far too nervous to come out. As a result, my first years in college weren't that different from high school.

I was the campus superstar, shining on the basketball court, rolling through life, until the e-mail from James.

It was like a sucker punch to the gut.

His anger, his disgust: it was all justified, because he was right; I was a fraud and a lie, and after reading that e-mail I knew I couldn't continue lying to myself and everyone around me. James gave me a serious push to do the right thing—he made he want to be true to myself—and the day after the e-mail came, I stopped the lies once and for all.

I called my mother first, telling her that she should warn my father that I wasn't hiding a moment more .and after that I proudly, albeit nervously, admitted the truth to anyone else who needed to know. It felt damn good.

I felt truly free, for the first time ever, and I had James to thank for that, but he didn't e-mail me again and I didn't have enough nerve to contact him, because I was pretty certain he would reject me if I did. Which was what I deserved.

So I did the only thing I could do.

I went on with life.

I graduated, got a job, dated. I built a pretty good life, but I could never escape the feeling that something was missing.

Someone was missing.

And then Ava and Matt announced they were getting married, and Ava said James would be there, and something inside of me clicked.

I knew instantly that this was the chance I had been waiting for.

I was going to see James again; I was going to actually be in the same room with him. I could talk to him and apologize face to face, maybe even make him understand that I hadn't meant to cause him any pain when we were kids.

I think Ava sensed how excited I was at the prospect of seeing her brother. She offered me the use of one of her parents' guest rooms and, naturally, I accepted. If I was under the same roof as James, the odds that we could have a real conversation increased. I knew I was getting my hopes up. For all I knew, James could be involved with someone, and even if he wasn't, he might not be willing to give me a real chance to show him how much I had changed.

But I prayed (pleaded) that he would.

I returned to Bricks the night before James was scheduled to come home and had dinner with Ava and Matt. When we returned to Ava and James's childhood home,

Emma welcomed me with a hug and Russ grunted something in my general direction.

Ava flashed a glare at him.

I knew, via Matt, that Ava had warned her father to be on his best behavior where James and I were concerned and, while I was touched by the gesture, I wasn't worried about myself. If Russ wanted to hate me, that was fine. My own father had already rejected me. Russ had made it clear he was an asshole, but I really didn't want the man doing or saying anything that would upset James. I knew about James's life, and he had no reason at all to be ashamed. No one had the right to make him feel like less than what he was, and I knew I would step in with my opinion if Russ said anything negative about his son.

I didn't sleep much that night. I was too on edge and anxious. I knew James was arriving the next day and, at six o'clock sharp, I was out of bed, showered, and sitting downstairs on the front porch with a cup of coffee.

No one else was awake. It was peaceful and calm, and I enjoyed the time to myself.

After sitting there for about half an hour, the sound of a car pulling into the drive caught my attention and I looked up to see a red Jeep parking behind Ava's sports car.

My heart kicked so hard against my chest, I was afraid I was having a heart attack, because I knew who was in that Jeep.

The man I had been waiting to see.

For a long time after he killed the engine, James sat in the vehicle and I could see him staring at me, despite the darkened tint of the windshield.

My kicking heart sank.

Clearly, he wasn't happy to see me; even if he knew I would be there, he likely hadn't counted on me being the first person he would find himself faced with.

Finally, the door opened and with casual grace James slipped from the Jeep, and I found myself facing a vision of perfection.

Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, his blond hair looked disheveled, like he had repeatedly run his hands through it, and he hadn't shaved the day before. I could tell he was a few inches taller than he had been in high school, making him about 5'11", and the muscles in his arms and chest were evident, but not overly bulky.

I wanted to push him against the Jeep and kiss him until neither of us could breathe.

Somehow, I suspected doing so would earn me a punch to the stomach, so I forced myself to not act like a complete dork as I walked down the drive.

"Payne."

I nearly winced; he said my name like doing so made him ill. "Hi James." I stopped a few feet from him, my hands in my pockets to refrain from reaching out to touch him. "I didn't think you would be here until later today."

“Figured I should get here and help out as much as I can.” He looked down at his feet.

“Everyone else is still asleep, but I made some coffee.”

“Coffee?”

I had to smile at the obvious longing in his eyes, and while I wished it was me that he was longing for, I was willing to take what I could get.

At least he was talking to me.

“Come inside.”

It felt a little strange, me inviting him into what was his childhood home, but I suspected if I didn’t he would stand in the drive all day.

“Yeah. I can come back for my bags later.”

I smiled, and we walked back to the house together, each of us moving cautiously so as not to awaken those that were sleeping.

I didn’t want anyone cutting in on this surprise alone time with James, and I didn’t think James was quite ready for a family reunion.

We slipped into the kitchen and I found another coffee cup, while James looked around the room that was no longer familiar to him.

“I had forgotten my mother remodeled.”

“Well, she didn’t have a choice, after Ava nearly burned down the room.”

“I heard about that.”

“A cooking lesson gone very wrong.” I turned and handed him his coffee, earning an actual smile from him, and again my heart began to race as our eyes locked briefly.

The moment ended too quickly, with James turning away to find the cream and sugar I had left out. I held back a sigh.

This wasn’t going to be easy.

Feeling nervous (and not liking it one bit, damn it), I stood, searching my mind for something to say, something clever and charming, something that would make James realize I wasn’t the same cowardly asshole I had once been.

“How was the flight?” *Lame*, yes, but at least it was a starting point.

“Fine.”

Oh yes, one-word answers were always such fun. “Your parents should be up soon.”

He said nothing to that, and my gaze fell to his ass—his utterly mouth-watering ass—and I nearly moaned out loud.

Naturally, he chose that moment to turn around, and I felt my face flame as I brought my eyes to his, and I could see he was surprised.

“James—”

“Look, let’s just stop this now.” He set his coffee on the table. “There’s some strange history here, with you and Ava and you....” He gestured between us. “I know we’re stuck together for the next week, but... the past is the past, and I think we can act like civil adults.” It was an impressive speech, but I knew he was nervous, and while what he had said wasn’t exactly what I wanted to hear, it was an opening and I was willing to jump on it.

“There is some strange history, James, I can admit that, but I...” I drew in a breath, wincing when I heard the sound of a door closing upstairs and, expectedly, James tensed, because this meant he would soon be facing someone from his family.

“Shit.”

“It’s gonna be okay.”

Those beautifully blue eyes fired a look that said otherwise and I wanted to take him in my arms and hold him.

“Have lunch with me today?”

“What?”

I drew in another breath and forged ahead. “We have an appointment, a final fitting for the tuxes, but afterward Matt has to head back to work, and Ava and your mom are meeting with the caterer for some last-minute changes

and....” *Stop rambling, Payne.* “Anyway, I really want to talk to you, so why don’t we have lunch?”

“Payne—”

“We could go to Albert’s.” It was a popular pizza place, and I remember Ava having once said James loved it.

“That place is still open?”

“Yep. How about you let me buy you lunch?” Please. Please. Please.

“I don’t know. ” He glanced upward at the sound of another door closing. “Fine.” His eyes met mine again and I smiled, considering that a small victory, but I knew I had a long way to go before we were comfortable around each other.

There was more I wanted to say, but before I could Ava came bouncing down the stairs and threw herself into James’s arms.

Damn, but I hated her in that moment.

“James! You’re already here!”

“And you’re gonna wake up the rest of the house.” James laughed, pulling back to smile at her.

“Who cares?” She hugged him again. “I’m so glad you could come.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss your wedding.”

There was an obvious affection between them. It was nice to see, but it made me feel like an outsider, especially when Emma came downstairs and had the same reaction to James as Ava, before she began fussing and insisting that she cook breakfast.

It was something of a warm family moment—something James needed, I suspected—but it didn't last long.

The moment Russ came downstairs, something in the air shifted. I could feel a tension settle over everyone in the room.

I watched as James forced a smile, despite his tension, as he addressed his father.

“Hi Dad.”

Russ simply looked at him for a long moment, before he finally nodded and turned his attention to his wife.

“I have to get to work.”

“Russ—”

“I'll see you later, Emma.” His tone left no room for argument and James's eyes fell. He obviously had no desire to watch his father stalk from the kitchen, but Emma recovered quickly and again began chattering about breakfast.

I wanted to follow Russ from the room and call him an ass, but I didn't.

Fuck him, I decided.

Maybe I looked up to Russ when I was a kid, but that was over now. He could kiss my ass, because I didn't give a damn about him.

James was my concern.

James had already been hurt enough by his father, and because of me, but I wouldn't stand for him to be hurt again.

As if he sensed I was thinking about him, James looked up, and our eyes locked and held.

Again, I wanted to reach out to him, but I didn't.

I couldn't.

Not yet. I had to earn his trust first, and once I had that, I would push for more and pray James could maybe feel something for me.

All we had to do was officially put the past in the past.

Far easier said than done, but I was determined and I had James in my sights.

I was going to win his heart and once I did, I would spend the rest of our lives protecting it.

James

I QUICKLY decided that I liked Matt, after spending fifteen minutes with him over breakfast and witnessing firsthand how much he truly loved my little sister.

Whatever mistakes he might have made as a teenager, he had clearly become a different person. I knew he and Ava were right for each other, and beyond that little else mattered. I was happy for Ava. I liked seeing her smile, and she and my mother did everything possible to make certain I felt welcome in the home where I had grown up, but it wasn't easy. Not after my father's reaction. I hadn't expected him to show any affection, or even shake my hand, but his walking out of the house without a word to me hurt, and it didn't help that Payne Rogan was there to witness the exchange.

Try as I might to ignore him, I couldn't; I couldn't forget that Payne was in the room, I couldn't ignore the tingling excitement I felt each time I realized his eyes were on me, and I couldn't stop kicking myself for agreeing to have lunch with him.

What the hell?

Hadn't I told myself I would avoid him?

Hadn't I told myself not to allow old feelings to resurface?

Why, yes, I had indeed promised myself I wouldn't get flustered where Payne was concerned, but that promise went right out the window the moment I saw Payne (wow, that name was fitting) sitting on the doorstep.

He was so damn beautiful.

I had thought he was stunning in high school, but now... now, he was a study in perfection, tall and lean with a body that radiated strength and confidence, and those full, naturally pink lips were, quite simply, lust-inspiring.

God, but I wanted to hate him, I wanted to give him the cold shoulder, but I couldn't because he was being nice, and it was a seemingly sincere nice that made me want to be nice to him in return, which was simply annoying.

Throughout breakfast, I looked up several times to find Payne watching me, and the few times our eyes actually locked, I felt oddly reassured.

Of course, that made no sense whatsoever, but I couldn't deny it, and when I ended up at a local tailor with Matt and Payne, I felt myself relaxing even more. I was letting my guard down. Matt was nice enough and he seemed genuinely happy that I had come home for the wedding. Payne stayed closed to me at all times.

It was unnerving.

It was exciting.

All the promises I had made to myself seemed to crumble, and by the time the fitting was over and Payne and I walked the short distance to Albert's Pizza, I felt oddly at ease with him, even when silence stretched between us.

It wasn't until we were seated at a small corner booth and our order for a large pepperoni pizza was placed, that Payne looked at me with something serious in his eyes. I felt my stomach flutter, which I silently cursed. I couldn't recall the last time I had felt "fluttering" around a guy. Hell, I couldn't recall the last time I had gone on a date. Not that I considered this a date, because it most assuredly wasn't, and quite frankly, no one I had ever dated compared to Payne. That was unsettling, to say the least, but what was more unsettling was the realization that my old love/hate crush was still very much alive and kicking and demanding attention.

I was pretty sure that made me pitiful.

And insane.

I decided to blame it all on Payne and his unshakable perfection.

Watching as Payne rested his arms on the table, his eyes again locked on mine, and even if I had wanted to look away, I couldn't have.

"You don't live in Bricks, do you?" I asked, needing a nice, safe subject.

"No, I live in Charlotte. I work as a physical therapist for a minor league basketball team."

“Sounds nice.”

“It’s not too bad.” He half-smiled. “But I don’t want to talk about me, James.”

“Payne—”

“I want to apologize to you.” He forged ahead, as if I hadn’t tried to interrupt, which told me he was determined. “I know I was something of a jerk to you when we were kids, and for that I want you to know I am so very sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Maybe. But when you sent me that e-mail—”

“I had no right, Payne. I was acting like a jerk. I just... I was pissed.”

“Because I had always been close to your father?”

“Partly.” What the hell? He obviously wanted honesty; I’d give it to him. “I mean, the fact that my dad was crazy about you wasn’t your fault and I... well, I know you didn’t just show up to make my life miserable.”

“But I did.”

“Not really. I did that myself. I just blamed a lot on you.”

“James—”

“I know I’m a disappointment to my father.”

“If Russ is disappointed in you, that’s his problem, and it makes him a fool, because you are remarkable, James.”

Blinking, I stared at him, more than a little surprised by that outburst, which Payne obviously sensed because he blushed.

“Russ was nice to me when I dated Ava, and after, because we had bonded over sports and shit like that, but I... James, I just need you to know I didn’t mean to take your father’s attention away from you, because you deserved it.”

“The truth is you didn’t take anything, because even if you hadn’t been around, things between me and my dad would still be exactly what they are.” It wasn’t a pleasant truth, but it was a truth I had come to accept over the years. “Me being gay just sort of killed what pitiful excuse of a relationship I did have with my father, and that certainly isn’t your fault, and I know he hasn’t been very welcoming to you since you came out.”

“He does what my father does, which is ignore me.”

“I’m sorry.” And I was. I knew just what he was feeling.

“You have no reason to apologize to me.”

“That e-mail—”

“Made me face reality.”

Much to my surprise, he reached across the table, covering my hand with his. I sucked in a breath, because his innocent touch was electric.

“I needed a kick in the ass, and you gave it to me, and I’m grateful for that, James. I was living a lie. I was tense and nervous all the time, but your e-mail made me realize I needed to grow up and take control of my life.”

Again, our eyes locked, and I felt myself getting lost in those beautiful eyes. It frightened me, but it was thrilling at the same time, and I was almost disappointed when the waitress delivered our pizza, effectively breaking the moment and the tension.

We set about eating, and I used the silence as a chance to gather my thoughts, to remind myself that I was an adult, not a teenager, and I couldn’t get caught up in some lingering crush just because the man of my dreams was being nice to me.

Right?

Seeing Payne again had put a lot of things in perspective for me.

I had blamed him for a lot of things that simply weren’t his fault. He wasn’t some arrogant jerk; he hadn’t set out to cause problems for me when we were kids. Things must have been just as complex and confusing for him as they had been for me, and that meant we had far more in common than I had ever allowed myself to believe.

I didn't realize I had stopped eating until Payne touched my arm again, and I looked up at him, heart racing.

"I'm sorry if I ever made you feel badly about yourself, Payne."

"I'm sorry if I ever made you feel badly about yourself, James."

And, just like that, the lingering resentment and anger faded away and I felt freed from a burden I had carried for far too long.

I sensed it was the same for Payne.

We finished eating, keeping the conversation light. We talked about our jobs, the cities we lived in—basic information, nothing heavy—and I found I enjoyed talking to Payne. He was smart and clever, and he had a great sense of humor. By the time lunch was over, I was completely comfortable around him, which was surprising but nice.

After we finished eating, we walked back to Payne's car, and the casual conversation continued and I felt at ease.

Until we pulled up to my parents' house.

My father wasn't home yet, but I knew he eventually would be; I knew I had to face him, and even if he wanted to, he couldn't walk away every time we were in the same room.

I realized Payne had killed the engine and I looked at him, only to find he was watching me with concern in his eyes.

“How stupid is it that I still want my father’s approval?”

“It’s not stupid, James, because... hell, I would love my father’s approval.”

“Think you’ll ever get it?”

“I’m pretty sure Hell will freeze over first.” I could hear the hurt in his voice, but he smiled.

“I know I really shouldn’t let it bother me because my dad and I were never close, but it would be nice if he could at least acknowledge me.” I shook my head. “I spent way too much time feeling sorry for myself; I spent too much time trying to blame people for my issues.... I guess I just need to focus on getting through this week.” As soon as the wedding was over, I could go back to New York and my life. I could get back inside my comfort zone, feeling good about myself and the progress I had made when it came to my complex feelings for Payne.

I started to get out of the car, but the feel of Payne’s fingers wrapping around my wrist stopped me and I looked back at him.

The desire in his eyes was undeniable.

“Payne—”

“I need a chance to prove myself to you, James.”

“You don’t—”

“I think I’m close to obsessed with you and I... Damn it, I told myself I would take this slow, and not make a complete ass of myself, but I can’t seem to think very clearly or logically around you, so I just want you to know: I like you.”

I couldn’t help but smile at him. “You don’t know me.” Yet his words thrilled me, because they were words I had dreamed of hearing.

“I know enough to know I really want to know more.” He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it, and I felt a wave of heat. “It’s complicated and messy, but how about we take some time for ourselves, as much as we can this week, and see what happens?” He made it sound so simple and his eyes were so very sincere. I felt drawn to him, which made me want to both run away and run to him, at the same time, but I had already decided I was thoroughly done with running away.

Taking in a deep breath, I nodded. “I guess we could do that.” God help me! Hadn’t I told myself I would be careful? Hadn’t I promised myself I would protect my heart and my sanity? Yet here I was, my first day back home and I was laying everything on the line. But try as I might, I couldn’t make myself see the danger when Payne looked at me like I was the only man in the world.

And his smile....

The way he smiled at me sealed the deal.

Payne Rogan had gotten past all of my defenses and walls, and at the rate he was going he would thoroughly work his way into my heart.

Yet I wasn't running.

I was standing still, ready to accept whatever may come, and for the first time in my life—be the ending good or bad—I wouldn't harbor regret.

Payne

I HAD prepared myself for a tense dinner with Russ at the table, but everyone was even more on edge than I expected.

Emma fussed, trying to make sure everyone was comfortable. She prepared a wonderful meal, and Ava and Matt made every effort to keep the conversation flowing, while I sat beside James. He was mostly quiet. He answered Matt's questions, he joked around with Ava, but he didn't attempt to talk to his father or even make eye contact.

Russ set silently at the head of the table, his attention focus on his food, as if the conversation and the people around him were meaningless.

In that moment, I truly hated him and I hated myself for having ever respected him; he was just as closed-minded as my own father.

And his silence was hurting James.

For me, that was simply unforgivable and I wanted to tell Russ that—I was sure I would, before the week was over—but for the time being, I held my tongue and when no one was paying attention, I slipped a hand under the table and rested my palm against James's leg.

He tensed slightly at the unexpected touch, but he soon relaxed, and I glanced at him feeling my breath catch in my chest. I had been walking on air since our conversation earlier in the day. I tried to caution myself against getting my hopes built up, but James had agreed to spend time with me; he had agreed to get to know the person I was now. That excited me; this was a dream finally come true and I was determined to make the most of it.

Of course, I wasn't sure yet how we would work this, when we would find time to be alone, as the wedding was fast approaching and we all had a lot to do.

As Matt's best man, there was a list of tasks I needed to handle, not the least of which was Matt's bachelor party, already scheduled for the following night. I had most of the details ironed out, but I had allowed Matt's cousin to deal with certain jobs, such as hiring the stripper he had insisted we need, even though I knew Matt didn't really want one. It just seemed tacky. Having a stripper at a bachelor party was so sadly clichéd, but I figured James and I could sneak away for a few minutes to ourselves while she did her little dance number.

I smiled to myself as I wondered what it would take to convince James to strip for me.

I immediately regretted that line of thought as my cock swelled in my jeans, and I had to shift to find a more comfortable position.

“So, James, Ava tells me you teach theater.” Matt’s comment to James drew my attention back to the conversation.

“I teach at a high school.” James smiled as he answered, and I watched him, not caring that I was staring because I loved seeing that smile.

“I could never be a teacher.” Ava grinned. “I don’t think I could deal with that many kids in one room at the same time.”

“Well, the kids I deal with are great. I guess it helps that they have an actual interest in what I’m trying to teach.”

I could hear the affection in his voice when he talked about teaching, about the kids he taught, and it made me melt even more.

“It would help if you were teaching them something that actually had some damn use in the real world the rest of us are living in.”

It was the first time Russ had spoken since we had sat down to dinner, and he hadn’t even looked up. He just threw out the harsh comment and continued eating, as the rest of us sat there, clearly stunned and undeniably uncomfortable.

“Russ.” Emma hissed his name, but he didn’t acknowledge her.

“Dad, please,” Ava appealed. “You promised.”

“It’s okay, Ava.” James forced a smile he didn’t feel, for his sister’s sake, but I was seething as I glared in Russ’s direction.

“I’m sure James is a wonderful teacher.” I spoke in a tone I knew held ice, and Russ actually had the nerve to look at me.

“What’s this about? All you fags stick together?”

“Dad!”

“Shut up, Ava,” Russ snapped as Matt tensed.

“Don’t you dare speak to her like that.”

“I’ll speak to my kids any damn way I damn well please.”

“Everyone, stop it!” Emma’s attention was focused on her husband. “Russ, please... Can we act like a family for a few days without you being like this?” I sensed she was close to crying, and I was sorry for her. She only wanted her family to be happy, but Russ was making that impossible.

Calmly, James stood. “I think I should leave.”

“No! Please, James, I want you at my wedding.”

“I’ll be there. I swear it, Ava. But I can’t stay here. I can’t stay in this house.”

“This is your home.” Emma reached for his hand, but James shook his head.

“Not anymore. It hasn’t been for a long time.”

“James—”

“Let him go, Emma.” Russ pushed back from the table. “He’s right; this isn’t his home.”

“You made damn sure of that.”

“Emma—”

“Come on, James.” I stood, drawing Russ’s attention. “Let’s go.” If James wasn’t staying, I sure as hell wasn’t. I had no idea where we would go, but I wanted to get James as far away as possible from his father’s ignorance.

“I guess you guys do stick together.”

I ignored Russ’s smirk.

“Dad, stop.” Ava sounded close to tears, and I was sorry for her too. She didn’t deserve this; this was supposed to be a happy time for her and her father was ruining it. “Leave James and Pay alone. God, do you even realize the things you’re saying?” Sadly, Russ did know exactly what he was saying, but he was too much of a bigot and a jerk to realize or care that his words were causing everyone around him pain, not just the people he was intending to hurt.

How had I ever respected him?

I looked at James again. “Let’s get out of here.” I spoke softly, and he looked at me, nodding, and I glanced at Emma. “We’ll come back tomorrow and pick up our things.” It went without saying that we would come back long after

Russ had left for work, and Emma nodded, clearly too upset to try to say more.

“Pay—”

“It’s okay, Ava.” I looked at her, offering a weak smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She looked from me to James and back again, and I easily understood. I knew she was trusting me to make certain her brother was okay, and I would., But I didn’t have to tell her that, because knowing Ava, it was likely she already sensed exactly what I felt for James.

Almost in a daze, James let me take his hand and I walked us from the house to my waiting car, and the question of where we should go.

My parents’ house certainly wasn’t an option, which left us with selecting a motel. Luckily, I had my wallet on me, so it wouldn’t be a problem.

It wasn’t until we pulled out of the drive that James seemed to come back to himself, as he dropped his head back against the seat and groaned out loud.

“I’m pathetic.”

“James—”

“I couldn’t even stand up to him, Pay.” Part of me gleefully noticed it was the first time he had called me “Pay”. Maybe that meant he was at least willing to see me as a friend. But I knew I couldn’t let myself focus on that now.

“You did stand up to him, by walking away.”

“I ran. I always run. I ran when I went to college early and I haven’t stopped running.”

“That isn’t true.” I chanced a glance at him before returning my attention to the highway. “You’re true to who you are. I admire that about you. I admire that you... you don’t apologize for being who you are, and the fact is, you have no reason to apologize or feel badly about yourself. Don’t let Russ make you question who you are.”

“Oh, I know what I am, in my father’s eyes.”

“Don’t.”

“I’m just a useless fag.” He laughed, but it wasn’t a pleasant sound.

“I hate that word.”

“Can’t say I’m too fond of it.”

“It hurts, to have your father reject you.” I knew this from firsthand experience. “I won’t tell you it shouldn’t cause you pain, because it does and... well, it’s not something you can easily get over, but the fact is, Russ’s inability to accept you is his problem, not yours, James. He’s a bigot. He doesn’t understand the concept of unconditional love.”

“He didn’t love me before he knew I was gay.” James lifted his head, opened his eyes, looking over at me. “I should be past it. I want to get past it, but I...” He slowly shook his head. “I thought I had myself prepared for being here, for his possible reactions, but it hurts and I hate myself for allowing him the power to hurt me.”

Taking one hand off the steering wheel, I reached out for his hand. “I’m sorry. I wish I could take that pain away.”

To my relief, he didn’t pull away from my touch. “Thanks, by the way.”

“For what?”

“For standing up for me back there.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that.” I squeezed his hand. “I could have said a lot more. I wish I had, actually.” Russ and I would still have words; I intended to tell the man that he was an ass. I knew it wouldn’t do any good, wouldn’t change his skewed views, but I was beyond pissed and disgusted with the man, and I wanted him to know it.

We drove in comfortable silence for a while, until I came across a motel that looked clean and didn’t have a “Norman Bates” feel about it.

I pulled into the parking lot and turned to James. “Wait here, and I’ll get us a couple of rooms. If it turns out this place is a dump, we can find something better tomorrow.” For now, we just needed a place to crash, where we could unwind, but James—still holding my hand—shook his head and gave me one of his smiles that made my heart race.

“We just need one.”

“One?”

“You said a couple of rooms, but we just need one.”

“James—”

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, Pay.” His eyes told me he was teasing, and I grinned at him.

“Shouldn’t that be my line? I mean, I’m the one dying for a chance to kiss you.”

“Maybe I’m dying for you to have a chance to kiss me.”

I nearly *died* when he said that—I was rock hard and afraid I might come, right then and there—but somehow, I managed to exert control I didn’t know I possessed. Drawing in a deep breath, I reluctantly pulled my hand from his, telling him again that I would be right back.

I was a bundle of nerves and emotions; I couldn’t believe this was really happening. I was about to check into some random motel with James Truman, the man of my dreams. James’s flirting and his teasing had made it clear he wanted me, and I had to say I was thrilled, but I was nervous. I didn’t want him to feel rushed, and I didn’t want him to do something he would regret, come morning light; I didn’t want some meaningless one-night stand with James. I wanted a chance at something real, something that we could build into an actual relationship that had a future.

Of course, if James wanted to have sex tonight, I honestly didn’t think I could refuse him, because I had wanted him for so damn long.

Pushing aside my conflicting thoughts, I checked into the motel, accepted a room key from the clerk and went back outside to find James standing beside the car, looking like a

walking wet dream, and I knew then with utter certainty I was officially toast.

I was in love.

One night—a thousand nights—wouldn't be enough, because I wanted forever and, somehow, I had to find a way to make James want the same thing.

Our room was on the ground level, just a short distance from where I had parked the car, and James was quiet as I unlocked the door and we walked inside.

The room itself was nothing spectacular; just an average roadside room with a double bed, a television, and a nightstand. The walls were an uninteresting beige that matched the carpet, and a plastic ice bucket and plastic cups sat on the sink.

“Not too bad.”

“At least my father isn't here, insulting us.” I could tell he was trying to be flippant, but the hurt was still in his voice.

Closing and locking the door, I tossed the key onto the nightstand, and turned to face the man I wanted more than I wanted my next breath.

“James—”

“I was teasing, in the car, Pay.”

“Were you?”

“Sort of.” His smile was adorable. “I didn’t come here expecting this.” He gestured between the two of us. “I know I’ve always been attracted to you. It made me crazy. I wanted to resent you, but I felt something for you. God, I was a mess back then, and I’m pretty much a mess now, but if something happens here, it’s not because I’m upset, or somehow not thinking clearly.” He was saying exactly what I wanted to hear, what I needed to hear. He was reassuring me, letting me know this wasn’t a decision he had made lightly or under duress.

His words, the way he looked at me, it was more than I could resist, and suddenly without any real conscious thought, I crossed the short distance between us, gathering James in my arms and claiming his mouth with heated desperation.

James’s arms went around me. His body melted into mine and I backed him against the wall, pressing against him. I could feel his cock straining against his jeans, brushing against my leg. It was a wonderful feeling. Kissing James was intoxicating. I actually felt light-headed when his tongue snaked into my mouth, offering and demanding at once.

Needing more, needing everything, I reached for the hem of his T-shirt, untangling from him long enough to tug the garment from his body and toss it haphazardly to the floor.

God, he was perfect.

Smooth, ivory skin, lean but defined muscles, and the most perfect nipples I had ever seen: he was sexy beyond my wildest dreams.

He was my dream come true.

Wordless, I pulled him back into my arms, kissing him again, savoring the feel of his soft lips yielding beneath mine.

I loved the way he felt.

I loved the way he tasted.

I was starved, for more and more of him; my hands were everywhere, moving over his back, up his chest, cupping his oh-so-perfect ass. I wanted to take my time, but I was on fire. I had never felt such all-consuming desire and it aroused me even more.

Any remaining trace of logic went out the window. We were both controlled by need and longing, and our hands shook as we undressed each other, leaving a trail of clothing in our wake as we made our way to the awaiting bed.

Naked, we fell onto the mattress, on top of the ugly comforter. His skin was warm and smooth, and he made the most delicious sounds as I kissed my way down his neck, over his chest. He gasped and tangled his hands in my hair when my lips wrapped around one already-hard nipple, and I eagerly licked and sucked the tantalizing nub until he writhed beneath me. I was driving him crazy with desire and I loved it; I loved knowing he wanted this as much as I did. His legs wrapped around mine and he rocked against me,

pushing me closer and closer to the edge, the edge I wanted to tumble over, but I wanted to take him with me.

We didn't have any condoms or lube, so as much as I wanted to sink into his perfect ass, I couldn't, but I could make him feel good.

I could give him the pleasure he deserved.

Sliding a hand between us, I wrapped my fingers around his cock, savoring the way it felt in my hand, as his beautiful eyes snapped open. I smiled, taking in the sight he made with his skin flushed and his lips slightly swollen.

“God, you're beautiful.”

“Pay—”

“Let go, James. Just let go.” I leaned down and kissed him again, and he opened to me eagerly as he reached for my cock. I nearly died. Nothing in my life had ever felt as amazing as his perfect hand wrapped around me.

Thrusting into his grip, I kissed him again and again, and between kisses, I whispered his name, telling him over and over that he was beautiful.

And he was.

I touched and teased and stroked him endlessly, wanting the moment to never end.

“Pay...” My name sounded like music on his lips as his body convulsed, and mine followed as I came with a strangled cry.

Warm, wet heat splashed between us, coating our chests and stomachs as I collapsed beside him, chests heaving and breathing ragged.

I felt drained and exhausted. It was a wonderful sensation, and once again I knew with utter certainty that one night with James wouldn't be enough.

I wanted forever.

Somehow, I knew I would find a way to make him want the same thing.

James

I SPENT the following day with Payne, first going to my parents' house, where we both quickly packed while my mother tried not to cry and Ava cursed our father. I don't think I had ever seen Ava that angry before. She was devastated by the things our father had said the night before, and she swore she would never forgive him.

Pulling her aside, I told her not to ruin her relationship with Dad over me. I had lost my father; I didn't want Ava to lose hers as well. But she was thoroughly disgusted, and I couldn't say I blamed her for feeling what she did.

My mother apologized repeatedly, but Payne and I both assured her she had no reason to be sorry. I knew our decision to stay in a motel upset her. She wanted us all together in the days leading up to the wedding, but my dad was making that impossible; he was too ignorant and angry to put aside his issues, even for Ava's sake, but as Payne had said, that wasn't my problem. There was nothing I could do to change my father's views.

With our bags packed, we dropped them off at the motel and then I tagged along as Payne handled the final details for Matt's bachelor party.

He had rented out a room at a local bar for a private party, and he laughed when he told me about the stripper Matt's cousin had hired.

There was a natural ease between us; we were comfortable with each other. I felt relaxed around him, something I would have never believed possible before this trip home. I really had come a long way in putting past issues to rest. I hadn't truly faced down my father yet, but the anger and the resentment I had once felt for Payne were long gone.

Of course, that made me nervous.

I had always had a crush on Payne, but now... now, I was really getting to know him, learning more about the man beneath the physical perfection, and I couldn't deny that I liked him. Payne was kind, clever, and understanding. He was filled with a deeply rooted passion, and he was genuinely a good guy with a lot to offer.

I again remembered my worries about my heart being at risk, and it was. I was in danger of falling hard, but truth be told, I had already started falling and I wasn't certain I would be able to stop myself.

I wasn't certain I wanted to stop.

Maybe, just maybe, dreams could come true.

Maybe, just maybe, a childhood crush could turn into real love.

I told myself it was foolish—I was setting myself up for a fall—but the hope was there and it flared and grew each time Payne looked at me and smiled.

I wanted to drag him back to the silly little motel and fall into bed again; I was still humming from his touch the night before and I wanted more.

While Payne made the final arrangements with the bar owner, I went to the drugstore and happily purchased protection and lube. I knew what I wanted, I knew what Payne wanted, and tonight I didn't want anything standing in our way. I actually hoped we would have some alone time before the bachelor party. Just thinking about Payne naked and aroused sent blood rushing to my cock in eager anticipation.

Smiling, I carried my selected items toward the checkout counter, but my smile faded and I felt my heart freeze when I rounded the corner and came face to face with my father.

“Dad....”

“James.” He seemed genuinely surprised, but the surprise faded and his expression became chilled, especially when he saw the items clutched in my hands.

For a moment, I felt about two inches tall. No one wants their father to come across them buying condoms, but I felt especially exposed and somewhat foolish, considering how my father felt about me and my sexual orientation.

“You’re kidding me, right?” I was snapped from my thoughts by the harsh tone more than the words my father spoke.

“Dad—”

“Save it. It’s damn obvious that you and Payne....” He waved a hand. “God, the two of you make me so damn sick! I should have known you’d turn out to be a fuckin’ fairy, but I can’t deny that Pay came as a real surprise, with his being a jock.”

Was he really saying this? Here? Now? In the middle of a drugstore? People were around us. I knew my dad’s voice carried, but it seemed he didn’t care and, suddenly, I wondered exactly why I did. Why did I care what he said or who heard him say it? He was the one with the problem, not me, and I wasn’t going to allow this man (my father or not) to make me feel badly about myself.

“You don’t know anything about me or about Payne.”

“I know enough.”

“And what is that, exactly? Aside from the fact that we’re gay, what do you know? You don’t have a clue about the person I am, the person I’ve become, and you certainly don’t know anything about the man that Payne is.” I faced him fully, meeting his eyes. “I’m done feeling badly about not being what you wanted your son to be, and I sure as hell am not about to apologize to you for being who I am. I really do not need your approval. I’ve done just fine without it.” Stepping around him, I placed my items on the counter, well

aware that the clerk was hanging onto every word of the conversation I should have had with my father years ago.

Turning as the clerk began ringing up the items, I faced my father one last time. “You know, you’re so ashamed of me, but has it occurred to you that maybe I’m ashamed to have to call such a closed-minded bigot my father?”

He said nothing to that (I hadn’t expected him to). He simply turned away, and I paid the clerk and quickly left the store.

Hardly the ideal encounter, but I had said what I needed to say and I felt better, like a weight had been lifted from me.

I really was putting the past to rest, once and for all.

Walking back to Payne’s car, I found him waiting for me, and I smiled when I saw him.

Not caring who might be watching or what they might think, I didn’t hesitate to walk into his open arms and accept his kiss.

When we finally broke apart, I smiled. “I just had a run-in with my father.”

“James—”

“It’s fine. I mean, it wasn’t pleasant, but I said what I needed to say.”

“And?”

“And I think you should take me back to the motel now.” I held up the bag from the drugstore.

“Have something in mind?” His eyes danced with desire and I nodded, loving the way his arms felt around me.

“Several things.”

“In that case....” He opened the car door for me, and I laughed, sliding inside, deciding to throw all caution to the wind.

I wanted this.

I wanted this man—regardless of what the future held. I wanted Payne in whatever way I could have him, for as long as I could have him.

It took us roughly ten minutes to get back to the motel and once we were inside with the door closed and locked, we fell into each other’s arms.

I was exactly where I wanted to be.

Bag tossed onto the bed, we stripped each other quickly, teasing and kissing. I had never felt so free with a lover. I didn’t feel the need to hold back. My reactions were honest. I wanted Payne to know I wanted him. He was everything I had ever wanted in a lover. The man was the personification of sex and sensuality: the sounds he made, the strength of his hands, the aggressive thrust of his tongue in my mouth had me clinging tightly to him and begging for more.

Tangled together, we fell eagerly onto the bed, and I arched against Payne, loving the weight of his warm, wonderful, body covering mine, enveloping me, surrounding me with heat and strength that fueled my desire.

I poured everything I felt into our kisses. His mouth was amazing. The way he kissed seemed to consume me completely, and I whimpered with unabashed need when he captured my wrists with his hands, holding my arms pinned effectively over my head.

“Feel how much I want you.” Payne pressed against me and I gasped.

“Pay—”

“Gonna fuck you, baby.” Still holding my arms in place, his lips attacked my neck and I cried out, begging for more.

“Please, Pay, please... want you so badly....”

“I want you too. Have for so long. Need you so bad.” I shivered in delight when his teeth sank into my shoulder, just hard enough to cause a sting that sent an electric jolt right to my cock. “You’re so freakin’ perfect. Never wanted anyone as much as I want you.”

It was intoxicating, the words he said, the way he touched me; everything seemed raw and powerful and I loved it. I didn’t want the feeling to ever end as Payne kissed me again, and I happily devoured his mouth, wanting him so badly I was afraid I would never again be complete without this amazing man.

I tugged my hands free, needing desperately to touch Payne; I loved the *feel* of him, his skin, his hair, his lips.

With each touch, the need became more and more intense. It was a sensual haze of incredible sensations that only intensified at the feel of Payne slipping a hand between my legs, touching his slick fingers to my already aching opening.

“Pay—”

“Relax, baby.”

“Need you so much....” It was exhilarating, and I eagerly opened my legs, making what I wanted undeniably clear.

Nothing could have prepared me for how perfect it felt, his fingers easing inside of me.

Stretching me.

Filling me.

My back arched again, hips thrusting, *begging*. I felt like my entire life had been leading me to this very moment.

I knew in that instant that this one moment wouldn't be enough.

I wanted forever.

LEAVING the motel room—leaving the bed—to attend Matt’s bachelor party wasn’t high on the “want to do list” but it was something we couldn’t avoid.

As the best man, Payne had to be there, and I figured as brother of the bride I needed to make an appearance.

I knew my father had received an invitation, but I didn’t expect him to show. It wasn’t really his scene and he wouldn’t want to face seeing me. And I doubted he was eager for an encounter with Matt; I had seen Matt’s reaction to how our father had spoken to Ava during the disastrous dinner. I had to admit, I was thoroughly impressed with his protective instincts and I felt certain he would be good to my little sister.

Still, when we arrived at the party, I sort of lingered in the background. I didn’t know a lot of people and, admittedly, I felt a little out of place.

But Payne was there.

It amazed me, how quickly things had changed; I had always had a crush on him, but I had never expected him to feel anything for me. I certainly hadn’t come home expecting that we would fall into bed together, and I knew that for me it was about more than sex. A lot more. I was falling for Payne. Hell, I was past falling; the man was in my heart, he was everything I could possibly want, in a lover and a friend, and I strongly suspected that Payne’s feelings mirrored mine.

The way he touched me, the way he held me; it was more than lust, but I wasn’t sure what he wanted from me or

how he wanted to proceed. I had a life in New York. He had a life in Charlotte. I had no idea if we could make a long-distance relationship work or if we should try. I only knew what I felt and what I suspected Payne felt, but I wasn't certain how to start a conversation about a possible future for us.

I decided to put the questions from my mind for the night.

The party was in full swing by the time the stripper arrived, and once she began her number, Payne found me perched at the bar.

Grinning, he grabbed my hand, and I wordlessly followed him down a semi-darkened hall, wondering what exactly he intended.

I soon found out when he opened the door to what was obviously an unused storage closet. I laughed when he pushed me inside, turning on the overhead light as he did.

"Pay, what on earth are we doing?" I couldn't help but laugh as he pressed me against the wall, his hands resting on my waist.

"Stealing a few minutes for ourselves." His lips went to my neck and I shivered, tilting my head to the side to allow him access. "Did you really think I could keep my hands off you?" His breath was so wonderfully warm against my skin, it made me shiver again. I looped my arms around his shoulders to hold on tight.

"Pay—"

“Don’t worry. No one will find us in here.”

Before I could protest, he kissed me and I melted into him, needing him, eagerly accepting the thrust of his tongue into my mouth.

Needing more, I slipped one hand beneath his shirt, fingers instantly moving to tease a nipple until he gasped, grinding his hips against mine.

“God, James....” I loved it when his voice was rough with passion.

“How long before we can get out of here?”

“Another half-hour. Not a second more, baby.”

“Good, ’cause I really want to feel you inside of me again.” His lips brushed over mine, before he pulled back and looked at me, and I could see something serious reflected in his eyes.

“James....”

“What is it?” I prompted, when he trailed off.

“What would you say if I told you I don’t want this thing between us to be a fling?”

“Pay—”

“I know it seems sudden, but I know what I feel for you and I know there is something really amazing between us.”

“Something lasting,” I whispered, and he nodded.

“I know it’s a risk, and I know if we try and make this work, it will require some adjustments by both of us, but I’m willing to do whatever necessary, if you are.” It was obvious he was nervous; the way the words spilled from him made that clear, but it was wonderfully endearing, and I think it made me love him even more.

“It is sudden, Pay, I’ll grant you that, but nothing in my life has ever felt as right as this.”

“You mean it?”

“Whatever adjustments we have to make...” I shook my head. “I want this. I want us.” More than I had ever wanted anything. The past with its resentments and insecurities suddenly seemed so very meaningless. This moment, this man, and what we felt for each other was all that really mattered, all that would ever matter.

Reassured, having heard the answer he needed, Payne swept me in his arms again. His kiss was instantly hot and hungry, brimming with desperate emotion. It was a kiss that seemingly sealed the bond between us.

When Payne pulled back, he buried his face in my neck. “I love you, James.” His voice was muffled, but I heard the words clearly.

The words I had always longed to hear.

The only thing sweeter than hearing those words?

Being able to say them back.

Payne

THE wedding went off without a hitch—much to my relief—and Ava made a beautiful bride. The love she and Matt felt for each other was obvious, and by some great miracle Russ managed to behave in an appropriate manner.

He didn't speak to me or James directly, but he hadn't insulted us either, so I considered his silence a blessing.

I really didn't care what the man thought about me, and after their encounter in the drugstore, I knew James had come to terms with his father's issues. He finally understood that Russ was ignorant and he couldn't see past his bigoted views. It was sad, but there was nothing anyone could do—and as long as James was at peace, I was fine.

We had made a lot of progress in a few days; we had decided we would work our relationship long distance for three months, and after that we would reevaluate what to do next, but I had already made it clear I had no problem moving to New York. I could easily get a job there. Hell, I suspected that I would start looking for a job before the three months passed. I wanted James, I loved him, and I didn't want to waste time starting our life together.

I hadn't had a chance to discuss it with Ava, but I suspected she knew something serious was going on between me and James.

I had no doubt she would be happy for us.

The reception went as smoothly as the wedding. Ava and Matt made a beautiful couple and Russ actually danced with his wife. I was tempted to drag James onto the dance floor, but I decided against it. I didn't want to push our luck around Russ. I did, however, pull him into the coatroom after dinner, and he laughed, his beautiful blue eyes dancing with love and desire.

"Pay, there is no chance in Hell we are having sex in here."

"Oh, come on." I mock-pouted. "If we're really, really quiet—"

"As if that's possible!"

"Fine. But as soon as Matt and Ava take off, we're out of here."

"No argument from me." He pressed against me, allowing me to feel his arousal, and I moaned, wanting him even more. "By the way, I called this morning and I pushed my flight back a few days, so if you're not in a hurry to get back to Charlotte...."

"Or you could come to Charlotte with me, for a while." It was an idea I loved. "We can get out of that ugly little motel and I can get you where I really want you."

“And where is that?”

“In my bed.”

“Hmmm....” He pretended to consider it, and I pinched his ass, causing him to yelp in surprise as I laughed.

“If we leave as soon as Ava and Matt get out of here, we can be at my place in a few hours.”

“I don’t know if I can keep my hands off you that long.”

My cock jumped at that, and, quite frankly, I wondered if I could go a few hours without feeling his hands on me.

And feeling my hands on him.

God, but I wanted this man now and forever, and judging from the path we were on, it seemed that I just might get what I wanted.

Dropping my lips to his mouth, I kissed him, gently and slowly, allowing everything I felt to flow into the kiss.

Against all odds, my dream had come true. James loved me, he wanted me, and I already knew—in my heart and soul—that we would be together forever.

“Maybe we can make a few pit stops between here and Charlotte,” James suggested, with a classic smile.

“I think I could go for that.”

“Good.” He stroked a hand through my hair. “Now, as much as I hate it—”

“We need to get back to the reception.” I sighed dramatically. “But once I get you alone, I plan to have my very wicked way with you.”

“Promise?”

“Count on it, baby.”

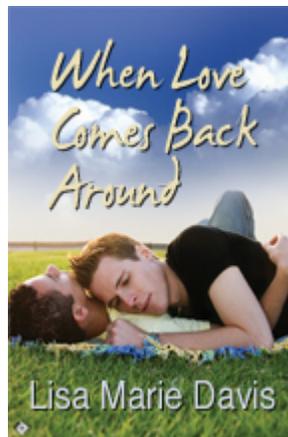
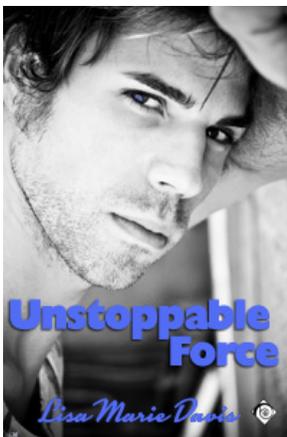
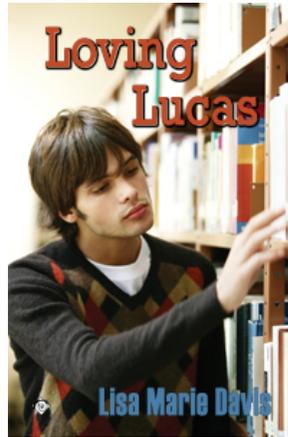
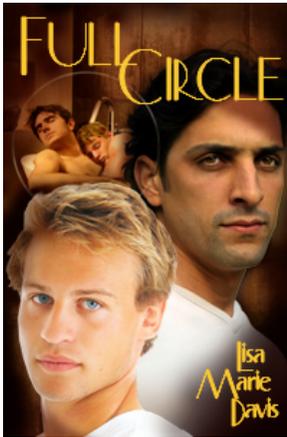
To my delight, he kissed me again, melting into my arms, and I knew again, with utter certainty, that in three months—if not sooner—I would be happily moving to New York, because with James was where I wanted to be.

Always.

Sometimes, dreams do come true.

Born and raised in Florida, LISA MARIE DAVIS spends her time writing and babysitting her nearly three-year-old nephew, Zach. A night owl, most of her writing gets done well after one in the morning when the rest of the world is happily sleeping.

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