

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

MAN OF THE MATCH

Lane Swift

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

MAN OF THE MATCH

By Lane Swift

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

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

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Photo Description

An athletic, tanned young man, wearing only boxers, sits on a sofa; his left hand is resting on a football. A second man, in a T-shirt, is kneeling down on the floor to one side of the first. His head rests on the first man's thigh, facing his erection, which he regards, as he holds it upright through the opening of the boxers. The moment appears tender and intimate.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“Since that moment we figured out we were alike in more ways than the other boys in the locker room would ever know, we were inseparable. We even shared most of our ‘firsts’ together. But as it sometimes does, life pushed us in different directions after high school. Grad school will be hectic enough, but his appearance back into my life just might change my plans!”

These two guys look to have just finished playing/watching a ‘rousing’ game of football. They may have had to overcome a few obstacles to get to their current point of intimacy, but of course it was worth it for these two.

—I would love for this scene to appear at some point in the story. A bit of hurt-comfort would be nice but no extreme violence, BDSM, or cheating. I do not believe that this needs any paranormal elements either. If they have miscommunication please let it be short and easily straightened out. I would like to require it to have a HEA, and I am not against epilogues with time jumps to the future.

Thanks,

Ale

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: high school, college, barely legal, first time, coming-of-age, sports

Word Count: 20,511

Acknowledgements

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Ale, what a lovely prompt this was to work with. Thank you for allowing me to set the story in the UK and to change the sport from American football to rugby. (No prior knowledge of the sport is required!)

MAN OF THE MATCH

By Lane Swift

Chapter 1

After a season of change, Laurence entered Year 10 with a place amongst the league of men. He had half a chin of stubble and the timbre of a tenor to prove it.

But his summer spurt wasn't restricted to his body. He'd been moved up a set for maths, which was why he was currently stood behind two dozen other fourteen-year-old blazered boys outside Room 43, jostling to see the seating plan that was pinned to the notice board. Laurence hung back. This was the top set, after all. Surely any and every seat was a good seat?

Except, perhaps, the one second row from the back, by the window, next to the inimitable Aaron Ford?

Laurence's only glimmer of hope, as the register was closed and the space beside him remained vacant, was that Aaron—

The classroom door swung open mid-way through the distribution of text and exercise books. Mr Hall didn't turn round from where he was writing on the board. "Nice of you to join us, Mr Ford."

"Miss me over the summer, did you, sir?"

"No, I can't say I did." Mr Hall glanced over his shoulder. "Tuck your shirt in. There's a good lad."

No arguments, Aaron thrust his shirt into his trousers as he crossed the room to take his seat.

Aaron Ford was one of those boys who'd started puberty before he left junior school. Already six feet tall, muscular and quick, he navigated the corridors of King's School for Boys like a great white shark. When Aaron was on the move, most people, including the teachers, had the good sense to step out of his way.

His pecs strained the button-holes of his shirt as he leaned back in his seat, knees wide apart, hands laced behind his head. He took up twice as much space as was necessary for someone his size, which was four times the space occupied by the average boy.

Laurence tried to wiggle his seat a fraction to the left without drawing undue attention.

“All right?” Aaron said, grinning, taking a biro out of his blazer pocket. His smile was wicked, like he was getting ready to do something he shouldn't. But it was also strangely infectious.

“Yes. Thanks.”

Laurence straightened his pencil box, which contained his Parker pen, his mechanical pencil, compass and protractor.

Mr Hall didn't waste time on the usual introductions. He launched into a recap of Venn diagrams and set notation. As shaded circles and unfamiliar symbols covered the whiteboard, Laurence's heart sank. He'd only just earned his place amongst the elite and already it looked like he might be on his way to losing it.

“Aren't you going to write anything down?” Laurence whispered to Aaron, as he frantically scribbled.

Aaron was doodling on the inside cover of his exercise book. “Nah. I've got this. I think I'll get straight on with the questions.”

Sprawled across the desk, his head propped on his right arm, Aaron flicked open the text book. While Laurence sweated over the first problems, Aaron appeared to be breezing along. He bit his bottom lip as he worked, his left hand scrawling messily over his page, oblivious to Laurence's snail-like progress.

After Aaron turned the page to the second section—*already*—he reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out a packet of Polo mints.

“Want one?” he said, nudging Laurence's leg with his massive thigh.

“No, thanks.”

Aaron shrugged and popped a mint into his mouth. He didn't crunch. He sucked, slowly and silently, his jaw working up and down, his cheeks sucking in and out. When the Polo mint was down to nothing but a tiny, thin white ring, Aaron poked it out on the tip of his tongue. Then, he moved it about from side to side, then sucked it back in again, leaving the faint, alluring scent of sugar and menthol in its wake.

A lot of boys wanted to be like Aaron. It was obvious from the way they acted around him: laughing louder than usual, flexing non-existent muscle, vying for his attention.

If Laurence had any envy, it was only for Aaron's ease with mathematics, not his hulking, heat-radiating body, his chocolate brown eyes or his thick, dark

hair. Those features were, however, undeniably, disconcertingly blocking Laurence's line of sight.

"You all right?" Aaron said.

"Yes. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You look stuck."

"I didn't do this work last year. I was in Set Two."

"It's easy, once you get the hang of it."

Without waiting to be asked, Aaron crowded further into Laurence's space, so that the scent of mint was replaced with the smell of *him*, his warm breath gusting over Laurence's cheek. Laurence blushed. The burn spread to the tips of his ears.

"Don't worry, I'll help you," Aaron said.

They may as well have been in the room alone. The quiet hum of studious boys in the background, the unobtrusive movement of Mr Hall pacing the rows faded to nothing as Aaron quietly explained the mechanics of intersection and overlap.

Initially, Aaron's size and ebullience had worried Laurence, but one lesson in his company and he was charmed.

If he'd had the guts to admit it, he might have called it a crush.

Four times a week, Laurence sat next to Aaron, watching in dismay as this carefree boy consistently outperformed him. Laurence didn't begrudge Aaron his success. How could he when he liked him so much? Nonetheless, he wished the secrets of the quadratic equation would occasionally reveal themselves to him as they did so frequently and easily to Aaron.

Laurence sometimes wondered if Aaron had similar success with girls; if everything he tried came to him as easily. He kept those sorts of thoughts to himself, though. Mostly they talked about school and sport. Every week, for PE, the choice was indoor or outdoor games. Aaron had tried for the last three months to coax Laurence away from the gym and onto the rugby pitch.

"Come on, Laurie. Just for this week," he pleaded, digging his elbow into Laurence's ribs, not enough to hurt but amply enough to be distracting. "Why don't you ever pick ruggger?"

“Because I prefer gym. That’s what I’m good at. Why don’t you ever pick gym?”

“Because I like rugby.”

Between equations, they went over the same ground again and again. Aaron was persistent. “I’ve seen you run. You won the 200 metres on sports day, didn’t you? You’d be great on the back line. You should try out for the school team.”

As far as Laurence was aware, rugby during PE was little more than sanctioned brawling. Playing for the school team might be marginally more civilised, but the Dynamic Theatre Christmas Production was a stressful three weeks away. Laurence didn’t have the time.

He wouldn’t have minded seeing Aaron, though, pushing through the mud and belting up the pitch. But that was a bit gay, wasn’t it, only being interested in watching your mate play? And the last thing Laurence wanted was to be accused of being gay. Even if it was true.

Laurence hadn’t told anyone. Not his parents, not his three older sisters, and he trusted them the most. He’d definitely never tell anyone at school. Not because he was ashamed or because he wasn’t sure. He just wasn’t ready to fend off the inevitable stares and whispers, or possibly worse.

“Laurie.” Another jab in the ribs. “What did you get for question eighteen?”

“x equals four, y equals seven. You?”

“Same. See? You’re catching up.”

Aaron patted his protégé on the head.

Laurence didn’t know if it was because of the rugby—all that grappling of sweaty boys marinated in testosterone—that Aaron had absolutely no concept of personal space. Every opportunity to prod, poke, tickle or nuzzle up to Laurence, he took it.

“Enough, all right?” Laurence’s irritation was half-hearted at best. (Okay, he quite liked it, but he didn’t want to appear to like it *too* much.) He batted Aaron’s hand away from his head, laughing. “Aaron! Get off!”

“It’s really soft. Like a puppy. And so curly.” Undeterred, Aaron grasped for Laurence’s wrist instead and brought it to his head. “Go on, feel mine. It’s like a Brillo pad.”

“A Brillo pad? What’s that?”

“*What’s that?*” Aaron’s jaw dropped. He looked appalled, in a fond, amused sort of way. “It’s the green scratchy side of a washing up sponge.”

“We have a dishwasher at home.”

Laurence cringed at how dreadfully spoilt that made him sound. He didn’t get the chance to add that Aaron’s cropped hair wasn’t scratchy, even as Aaron was nudging him, laughing and teasing, “Course you do. That’s why you won’t play rugby. You don’t want to get *dirty*.”

Dirt wasn’t the problem; it was the getting clean afterwards that had Laurence flustered and flushing. He couldn’t look at Aaron. Visions of his friend clad in nothing but steam rendered him speechless.

It was just as well that before things could get any more awkward, their conversation was halted by Mr Hall calling the class to attention.

Like many younger siblings, for practicality’s sake, most of Laurence’s childhood had been spent following along with his sisters’ choices of extra-curricular activities. In their case, it had been gymnastics and theatre. Laurence hadn’t minded before. Now though, a different something (*someone*) piqued his interest.

In the privacy of his bedroom, Laurence watched rugby clips on YouTube and fantasised it was Aaron hunkered down with the ball, not some muscled stranger. He bought a rugby magazine and spent long minutes gazing at pictures of Douglas Reynaud, the French full back with the come-to-bed eyes.

November, Laurence quit gymnastics and started running round the block of an evening instead. Then, after their final performance on Christmas Eve, he left the Dynamic Theatre Group.

“I wondered how long it would be, before you gave up,” his Mum said, not looking up from peeling carrots. “I know your heart wasn’t in the Christmas play this year, and you’ve got more school work now but it would be a shame not to have some extra-curricular activity.”

“There are clubs after school. I thought I’d try some of those.”

“All right.” She put down the knife, turned to look at him with her head tilted to one side. “This isn’t because your Dad was complaining about your sisters’ university fees? Because you know it was all bluster?”

“Yes, I know.”

She was appeased. Laurence's secret crush was safe. Not that his parents' financial concerns didn't cross his mind. When they'd had the first two of their four children, university tuition was still free. By the time Lisa trundled off to Manchester, tuition fees were £3000 a year, and if the government had their way, they were set to keep rising. Louise would be going next, in the following September, and in the years to come Leanne and Laurence himself would be on their way, too.

Their financial situation was comfortable, unlike Aaron's, whose Mum worked as a hairdresser and had to support the two of them alone. But it would be slightly more comfortable without the cost of Laurence's gymnastics and theatre fees. Of course, that consideration hadn't been on his mind at all when he decided to quit. Even if now it eased the sense of discomfort that he was quitting because of a boy.

On the first day back at school in January, Laurence sought out Aaron amongst the bike shed loiterers.

"Laurie!" Aaron threw his arms wide. "Come for a smoke?"

Laurence didn't smoke, nor did Aaron, though Aaron did own a bike. He liked to make a point of letting everyone know which one was his. And what the consequences would be if anyone tampered with it. Now that Laurence knew him better, he realised this was more to do with the effort it would have taken for Aaron's Mum to make such a purchase, rather than Aaron showing off his brawn.

"No," Laurence said. "I came looking for you. I was thinking, over Christmas, I might like to have a go at rugby."

"Seriously, man?" Aaron's face lit up like Father Christmas had visited a second time—and Laurence's face flushed with a rush of heat.

"Yes. But I've never played. I've hardly even played football."

No hesitation, Aaron replied, "You're a gymnast. You're fast, you've got good balance."

Laurence shivered with fluttery pride that spread warmth to his fingertips. When Aaron slung his arm around his shoulders, and left it there even as they began to walk, Laurence felt like his feet weren't touching the ground.

As the two of them sloped away from the motley group of tobacco users, Aaron didn't stop talking. With great and infectious enthusiasm, he went through almost the entire team list, checking which boys Laurence already

knew, telling him which positions they played, until the bell went and a sea of boys swept them off in their different directions.

Still, a channel between Aaron and Laurence had opened, and from then on they were rarely more than a text or a lesson away from each other.

The following week, on a bitter, bone-numbing Wednesday afternoon, Laurence took his place as a supporter beneath one of a row of giant oaks that separated the King's School for Boys' playing field from King's School for Girls'.

King's were playing the Catholic school, Our Lady, from down the road. Aaron was wearing the number three shirt: a forward position, tight head, front row. He waved to Laurence on his way onto the pitch, but it looked far from friendly. The grin pulled his face into a tight grimace over his gum shield. The whole look was made more ferocious by the thick black tape that circled his head, holding down his ears. If Laurence hadn't known him, he'd have been intimidated.

Laurence recognised most of the other boys, too. Encouragingly, not all of them were bigger than him; particularly the ones on the back line. If that was where Laurence ended up playing, if he ended up playing, at least he wouldn't be outsized. One thing all the other boys shared though, as they spread out for the kick off, was their stance, the aggressive set of their shoulders. Laurence wasn't so sure about how well he would fare with that.

The ref's whistle blew. Keeping his eyes fixed on the ball, he tried to give the game his full attention, which fortuitously also meant getting plenty of time to eyeball Aaron. With his height and strength advantage, the moment Aaron got the ball he didn't let it go. Our Lady's burly forwards were no match for his speed, the backs were no match for his size. Aaron was a machine!

By the time the second half was coming to an end, King's were forty points up. The backs looked knackered and frozen. They were covered in wet mud, and the Our Lady wing closest to Laurence was shivering from his head to his feet. He couldn't possibly have been expecting to get the ball again, let alone get a run out at this late stage. Which was exactly what happened.

After a kick rolled off pitch and Our Lady threw the ball in from the side, it went over the heads of all the forwards and straight towards one of their back line players. Stumbling at first, he picked up the ball and started running. To reach their try line and score, he had to cover seventy metres, nearly three-quarters of the pitch. Instead, as the opposition ploughed towards him, he passed to the wing!

The people spectating on the touchline started shouting at the scrawny runt to *kick it, chip and chase*. Either he didn't hear them, or he didn't know how to do it, or, for better or worse, he was determined to make the run.

He was fast; his skinny legs pistoned. When he was faced with his opposite number, he deftly side-stepped, and after that, he had a clear run for the last fifty. He looked surprised, that he'd got past everyone. Laurence watched his eyes widen as he flicked his head about to see if anyone was on his tail. The try was going to be his. It was really happening and Laurence could feel his excitement, he shared in it, no matter that the boy was playing for the opposition.

The exalted moment was short-lived, because from across the other side of the pitch, the King's fly half, a boy called Saul, and Aaron, were belting over the slippery mud and grass, after Our Lady's wing like the boy was carrying a stolen baby.

The wing mustn't have seen them. He was angling his run towards the posts, even as the coach was screaming, "No! *Run straight.*"

The boy didn't hear.

Laurence wasn't sure he could look. It was going to be carnage. He put his hands up to his face and peeked through his fingers. Aaron and Saul were closing in with ten more metres to go. Saul launched off the ground for the tackle, but the little winger kicked up, and, as if his feet had sprouted wings, he surged forward. Saul landed flat on his belly without making contact.

The winger was electrified and too fast for Aaron to get close enough to tackle. Diving through the air, arms out forward, ball held in both hands, he flew, and landed the ball over the try-line, right between the posts, with half a minute left to the final whistle.

Our Lady converted the try, to make the final score 43-10. But the try wasn't the only thing converted.

Laurence had never seen or felt anything like it. His decision was made before the fulltime whistle blew. It was made before Aaron was tearing off his tape and spitting out his gum shield, back to his old insouciant self, jogging over to Laurence and saying, "What do you think?"

"I think I'd better get some studs."

Aaron had a scratch on the side of his face, and his shirt was ripped down his left shoulder. Neither stopped him bouncing up on his toes, throwing his

arms wide and slapping Laurence heartily on his arm. "That's brilliant! I'm going to tell the others!"

Aaron jogged off the field with the rest of his teammates, leaving Laurence with a muddy hand print on his coat and a cold space in his chest only one thing (*person*) could fill.

Chapter 2

Like all new things, the practice was harder than the theory.

For the remainder of the season, Laurence played two matches on the back line and the rest standing on the touchline as reserve for King's. In Aaron's expert opinion, this was an oversight on the part of the PE staff that would be to their detriment. Or in his words, "Fuck 'em. I'm taking you to Hartnell."

Aaron should have gone to Hartnell Rugby Football Club without Laurence. He was the one with the talent. But it was pointless arguing with him.

The U16's practiced on a Sunday. On a dull morning in March, Aaron and Laurence took to the field, joining twenty or so other boys in running drills and one-on-one tackling.

At fifteen, both were relative latecomers to the town side. Most of the other boys at Hartnell had been playing since they were minis, under twelve, and some since they were seven or eight. Martin, the coach, made it clear from the onset they would get no concession. Hartnell fielded a league-winning team and while everyone was welcome to the practice sessions, and everyone would get a chance to play in the friendlies, not everyone got to play the league.

After the drills, the boys were split into two teams, twelve a side, for a short game. To Laurence's dismay, Aaron was placed on the opposing wing, while he stood almost opposite at outside centre.

The game progressed slowly. A lot of care was placed on positioning the boys correctly in the scrum, making sure their legs were angled so that they didn't fall over when their heads locked. Collapsing the scrum was, above all things except tackling around the neck, strictly forbidden.

Coach Martin paid close attention to the ball as the scrum half threw in. He shouted instructions and encouragement. "Stay on your feet, lads. That's it, Henry, scoop it back with your foot."

The ball never seemed to come to Laurence. The moment it left the scrum, it only went down the line as far as the inside centre. Otherwise, the inside centre passed the ball over Laurence's head, directly to the wing.

Laurence ran up and down the pitch, following the play, waiting for his chance that never came—all the while, partly relieved he didn't get the ball.

The other team were better. It didn't take long for them to realise Aaron was good. As soon as they did, they keenly passed down the line to him. In turn, Laurence's team kept hanging on to the ball in the forwards to avoid losing possession.

A few times, the ball skimmed through Laurence's hands. He passed on quickly, even when he could hear the calls of *run*. Thankfully, his passing was decent. His throw was sharp and accurate, and had pace. Laurence didn't want to run. He didn't want to face off with Aaron. So he did what he was meant to—supported and kept his place in line.

This strategy seemed to work, for a short while, but not for the duration of the match.

Perhaps Laurence's wing had been tackled one too many times, or perhaps he was tired, or perhaps he genuinely thought Laurence deserved a bit more play. Whatever his thoughts were, the end result was that, just as it had countless times already, when ball came out to the wing he didn't hang on to it or kick it forward. He ran a few paces, looked over his shoulder, made eye contact with Laurence, and passed the ball back to him.

Laurence had no choice but to make the most of it. He tucked the ball under his arm. Then, looking ahead as he was running, he realised the reason for the wing's decision. There was a gap! He ran for it, dodging an attempt at a tackle by his opposite centre and, as he did so, saw open field.

Just like when he took off over the pommel horse at gymnastics, like when he tumbled through the air, that split second that stretched out as his whole body left the ground, defying gravity, Laurence felt the thrill and exhilaration of having the try line in his sights.

It was close. He could see where the paint and grass had been scuffed away between the posts. In seconds, if he dug in, he could be there, over the line.

From the corner of his eye, Laurence saw a flash of a red bib and no sign of support from a fellow blue. He was on his own and had no choice but to keep running. He could hear his rasping breaths, the thud of his feet on the ground, and from behind, the rumble of a chase. Laurence ploughed on, sped by fear as much as exhilaration.

The line was so close. He was—

Hard as a punch, right to the kidneys, a shoulder pummelled into Laurence's back. The full, flying weight of the tackle sent him lunging forward. He knew

he was supposed to turn and set but didn't have a chance to manoeuvre. He plunged face first into the mud. The ball was lost and the hot, heaving body of his tackler rolled off Laurence as he spat grass and mud from his mouth, desperately trying to suck in air but unable to fill his lungs.

"Laurie, you all right? I'm sorry, I had to do it."

Laurence rolled over and Aaron was there, standing over him, arm out, with a look of terror on his face. "Can you breathe? Did I hurt you? Come on, Laurie, get up."

Sympathy was the last thing Laurence needed. "I'm all right," he choked out as he scrambled to his feet, turning his face away from Aaron so he wouldn't see his eyes brimming with tears. It was the shock of being winded, that's all. He didn't want anyone to think he was crying, least of all Aaron.

The coach blew the whistle for a knock-on and called for a scrum. Laurence's wing came up and patted him on the shoulder. "Never mind. That was a good run."

The side of Laurence's face stung, and he was having trouble getting his breath back, even as he limped to his place on the back line. It wasn't the worst he'd suffered in his short career. The most painful part of it was seeing Aaron, sloping off to the other side of the pitch. Every few steps glancing back at Laurence with a look of sorrow, like he was the one who'd lost possession.

The coach called Aaron and Laurence back after the last of the Hartnell regulars had disappeared towards the clubhouse. "Nice to see you boys down here. Aaron, do you usually play on the wing?"

"No, I always get put in the forwards at school. I prefer the back line though."

Coach Martin nodded with understanding. "You're tall for your age. In a year or two, it'll even out a bit. If I put you on the wing in the Colts now, I don't think you'd look out of place."

Unsurprisingly, the coach was less enamoured with Laurence. "With your size and speed I think you should carry on playing the back line. Of course, you need to work on your turning and tackling, and if you could kick... we can never have too many decent kickers."

Laurence was perfectly acquainted with his shortcomings. Coach Martin was only reiterating what had been spelled out by his PE teachers. Yet Aaron

didn't seem very pleased with the assessment. He hardly said a word as they changed out of their studs on the edge of the field. The silence continued as they crossed the footpath to their bikes, locked up outside the entrance to the clubhouse.

"You're going to get to play in the Colts," Laurence said, trying to sound upbeat as he unravelled the lock and chain that had secured their bikes together. "That's what he said, wasn't it?"

"No." Aaron abruptly pulled his bike away. "He said my size wouldn't look out of place if I was a wing on the Colts. There are loads of good players here. If they were going to move anyone up, it wouldn't be me."

Laurence didn't understand why Aaron was so angry. Maybe he felt he hadn't played well enough, which was just *wrong*. Laurence hated seeing him like this; he'd do anything, say anything to cheer him up. "I thought what he was getting at... he could see you playing for the Colts, one day. He really liked you Aaron."

"How would you know?" Aaron snapped. "What are you, some sort of expert? You can't even see what's in front of your own face."

The shock took Laurence's breath away. "What do you mean?" he asked, his voice a high tremble.

Like he was talking to an annoying imbecile, Aaron pointed his finger at Laurence's chest and enunciated slowly and viciously, "You had a player, out to your left. You could have passed, but you hung onto the ball and I had to tackle you."

Laurence balked at Aaron's tone. He'd seen him angry but he'd never been at the receiving end. Anyone else and Laurence's own temper might have flared. Anyone else and he might have pushed or shoved or spat a few angry words back of his own. But he couldn't, because disappointing Aaron had squeezed the last of the air out of him. Attempting, and failing, to sound like he wasn't crushed, he muttered, "Well, technically speaking, he was behind me."

"Yes, and that's why you're supposed to turn your head and *look*."

Aaron's voice cracked on the last word. Laurence glanced up just in time to see a pained look on his face before he pushed off through the car park. Aaron wasn't angry, he was upset.

Belatedly, Laurence called after him, "I'm sorry. I got the ball and I panicked." More quietly, he said, "Please wait for me," unsure if Aaron heard him.

Aaron stopped, head hanging, and waited for Laurence to pull up beside him. A lump had formed in Laurence's throat, and he wanted to say it didn't matter; it was part of the game, that's all. He would have told Aaron his face didn't hurt, but he couldn't draw in enough air to speak.

They stood there, a foot apart, for what felt like forever, neither quite daring to look at each other for more than a split second at a time. Until, reaching out, Aaron brushed his knuckle gently over Laurence's cheek. "You're going to have a bruise."

Aaron looked sad and sorry. Laurence had to blink hard to push back the prickling in his eyes. "That's all right. I'll put some ice on it."

Cycling home, beside Aaron when the road was clear, behind him when they got onto the busier main roads, Laurence couldn't help thinking about that touch. He'd liked it. It was—oh, God, it sounded so pathetic—it was tender. But it also made Laurence's chest clench around his thumping heart.

Besides that, as unsettling as it was, the thrill of the game persisted. Laurence had always thought he could never really enjoy rugby. He played mostly because Aaron did. Before today, he hadn't enjoyed it much. Today, he'd enjoyed it a lot.

That final run up the pitch stuck in his mind. If he'd been able to kick, he might have been able to try for a drop goal. He might have been able to chip the ball with his toe, chase it up the field. He might have been able to make the dive and score a try before Aaron got to him.

At Green Cross Corner, they were due to go their separate ways. They stopped on the pavement. Laurence studied Aaron. His shoulders looked less hunched, and his frown had eased.

Laurence asked tentatively, "I want to go back, to play for Hartnell. Do you?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I'm really glad. But if I'm going to play, I've got to get better at kicking."

"We could go on the school field and practise. I've got a ball."

"You'd help me?"

"Of course I would." Aaron perked up. His usual open smile, the one that made Laurence's heart skip a beat, lit up his grubby face.

Straddling their bikes, out on the street, they could only part with a nod and a "See you tomorrow."

Not that Laurence would have given Aaron a hug, for goodness sakes.

He pedalled off slowly, pausing to look behind before he crossed lanes to turn right into Jessop Road. Aaron was already out of sight.

It was then Laurence remembered the bruise on his face, now throbbing with pain.

All spring and summer long, Laurence kicked and Aaron returned. He kicked for touch; he practiced drop kicks, goal kicks, chips and chases. When his kicks got better, Aaron got him tackling. Laurence was already strong, but he had to get harder, tougher; he had to get used to taking and getting knocks. Aaron was relentless, and Laurence was motivated. He had the bruises to show for it.

When the summer holidays started in July, there was nothing to stop them spending the best part of their free days together. Many, many days, filled with computer games, music, TV; Aaron and Laurence could while away the hours effortlessly, doing nothing except being friends who liked being friends.

If there was a certain prickling under Laurence's skin when Aaron was near, not like when they were out on the field, bruised and aching, but when it was quiet enough he could hear his own breathing, Aaron's breathing, well...

They were in Laurence's bedroom the first time it happened.

Laurence was lying on the bed, scrolling through his Twitter feed on his phone. Aaron was spread out on the floor, flicking through a rugby magazine.

"Who's your favourite player?" Aaron said. The 2007 World Cup was a couple of months away; the magazines were seeped in model-style photo coverage of the up-and-coming players.

"Douglas Reynaud."

"Really?" Aaron turned up his nose.

"Who's yours then?"

"Jonas Jones, obviously."

"Why obviously?"

“He’s a legend. Youngest player to ever reach a hundred caps, fastest flanker on record—”

“Yeah, but his face looks like he walked into a bus.” Not to mention the cauliflower ears and the hideous tattoo over his neck and face.

“Oh, I see. You like Douglas Reynaud because he’s *pretty*.”

Yes, that was the reason. Reynaud bore more than a passing resemblance to Aaron.

Laurence had dug a hole he wasn’t sure he could get out of. Not now Aaron had sat up and was prowling over the carpet towards the bed.

“I do not think he’s pretty,” he said weakly.

“Why do you like him then?”

“I just *do*. He’s fun to watch. He’s got personality.”

Aaron howled with laughter and slapped the magazine down on the bed next to Laurence. It didn’t help matters that Douglas, the lovely Douglas Reynaud, was the centrefold for *The Rugby Herald* this month. The Gallic charmer was posed leaning against a goal post in a tight shirt, biceps busting, with a rugby ball clasped in one of his large and capable hands.

Kneeling up, leaning in, with the magazine open, Aaron shoved Douglas close to Laurence’s face. Aaron got closer and closer, teasing, “Go on, Laurie, give him a kiss since you love him so much. Go on, I’ll kiss Jones if you kiss Reynaud.”

“You’re a twat, you know that?” Laurence said.

Then, for reasons unknown and possibly regrettable, he kissed the picture (*in a manner that might have looked uncannily like he’d done it before*).

Aaron’s eyes went wide, his mouth wider. He snatched the magazine away, leapt up onto the bed, pinning him to the mattress with his forearms on his shoulders. His eyes were dark and serious, his body solid and heavy. Laurence was trapped.

Very quietly, Aaron said, “Are you a homo?”

Laurence closed his eyes as his guts turned to mush. Aaron’s breathing was harsh and loud, and Laurence didn’t dare look at him. All the same, he nodded.

Aaron’s breath drew closer, so that Laurence could feel its warmth. He could push Aaron off. He could deny everything. If he wanted to, he could.

Seconds stretched like countless hours...

Before Laurence felt the press of Aaron's lips. The kiss was soft, gentle, over too quickly.

"Open your eyes, Laurie."

Laurence wasn't expecting the sweet affection in the kiss to be so plainly expressed on Aaron's face, or in his words.

Reaching up, clutching at Aaron's t-shirt, Laurence asked, though he already knew the answer, "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"No, not if you don't want me to. You do trust me?"

"Yes."

Aaron shifted to Laurence's side. Propped on his elbow, he draped his other arm across Laurence's chest. "Was that your first kiss?"

"Yes."

"Want to do it again?"

Laurence smirked, because, yeah, first kiss. With Aaron.

He kept his eyes open when he nodded again, searching for something more in Aaron's eyes, something that would explain what this was, what they were doing. There were no answers. Only Aaron, sort of being just like he always was, but closer.

Aaron pressed forward. Laurence opened his mouth, to taste and feel Aaron with his tongue. They moved against each other, working out a rhythm, breathing around it, through it.

With a hand behind Aaron's head, keeping him in place, Laurence ventured to kiss his jaw, along the thick tendon in his neck. When Aaron grunted, a quick, low, animal sound, Laurence felt electricity coursing through his body.

They kissed and kissed, until Laurence's Mum shouted up the stairs that dinner was ready.

It was another couple of minutes, before they gathered themselves enough to bound down the stairs, casual as could be.

"Look at the state of you two," she said, as she put a piled-high plate down in front of each of them. "Have you been wrestling up there?"

She took her glass of wine and went out the back door to sit on the patio, seemingly uninterested in an answer. Which was just as well, really.

Laurence's cheeks were burning. Aaron hooked his ankle around Laurence's under the table and grinned like the devil he was, even as he was shovelling spaghetti into his mouth.

Chapter 3

Year 11 moved fast as lightning. Aaron turned sixteen in October, Laurence in February. It meant nothing much, except that certain things they hadn't spoken about or entertained were now legal. Most of the time, other things were more pressing.

It was inevitable, though Laurence hadn't wanted to think about it, that Aaron wouldn't choose to spend his days toiling at a desk any longer than he had to. Long before their final GCSE examinations, Aaron had decided he wouldn't be staying on into the sixth form. The local college offered more vocational courses and Aaron had decided he had a thing for wood—cabinet making. Laurence was staying on at school for A-Levels.

Close to two years of friendship. Come September, Laurence would feel the loss keenly. But it was still only May. Aaron was stretched out on his bed, his science revision guide propped on his chest. With Laurence prone on the floor, a pillow under his head, the two of them filled Aaron's tiny bedroom.

"I should probably be testing you," Laurence said. He watched Aaron shift his hips into the bed, his foot slide up his shin. Aaron was getting restless.

"I'm bored of revising."

Laurence was hot all over with anticipation, well before he pushed up onto his elbows to get a look at what he already knew he was going to see. Aaron was pawing at his crotch.

Letting his book fall flat to his chest, Aaron tilted his head to look at Laurence. "Just a short break, Laurie? While my Mum's not home."

Laurence didn't need to be asked twice. He flung Aaron's book to the floor and took its place, lying on top of his chest, legs and tongues tangled while their hips rolled in perfect counter time.

Aaron held Laurence tight, one hand across his backside, the other possessively behind his neck.

This hip-grinding was a recent development, quite possibly borne of revision boredom and burgeoning hormones. The flash of new sensations was bright and vivid. Neither of them would last long, once they got going.

Laurence slid to Aaron's side, his thigh pressed up between Aaron's legs and kept rubbing against him. He'd come like this, in his pants, especially since Aaron had discovered his nipples.

Aaron's hand snaked up Laurence's T-shirt as if on cue, and—oh, oh, oh, *now*—he shuddered and gasped with his hand gripping the front of Aaron's jeans.

“Stay like that,” Aaron panted into Laurence's neck, as he rolled his hips up.

When Aaron came he did it with a sigh, not very loud, but enough to light Laurence up with another jolt of arousal.

Next time, he kept saying to himself, maybe I'll undo his jeans and look. Maybe I'll undo mine and Aaron will toss me off.

He wanted him to. At least he thought he did, if Aaron wanted to. Laurence didn't want to push it, just in case, just in case Aaron was only gay for him and if he pushed things too far they'd stop. He'd rather have this than nothing at all.

Just as they'd done before, they alternately snuck down the landing to the bathroom, cleaned up and returned to Aaron's bedroom.

Aaron settled on his side, his arm tucked under his head, his eyelids heavy. The room was warm, from the sun and their exertions. The smell of their sweat made the air thick and soporific. Laurence snuck in for a cuddle, tucking his back against Aaron's chest, pulling Aaron's arm around him, and closed his eyes.

Aaron's breath was warm on his neck, his body a wall of heat at his back.

“The alkali metals, Aaron. Names and properties.”

“Potassium.”

“In order, top to bottom.”

“Don't talk dirty. I'm trying to think.”

Laurence laughed into the pillow and Aaron recited, from lithium to caesium. Softly, his hand caressed the downy hair that covered Laurence's arms.

Laurence started drifting. If Aaron finished, he didn't hear it.

Azalea Gardens was a small cul-de-sac of terraced houses. The kids playing football in the middle of the road waved, moving to the pavement as Laurence's Dad drove by looking for a parking space.

When Laurence got out, a couple of junior school kids ran over. “Whew! Where are you going?”

“Year 11 Prom.”

“With Aaron?” said the girl. Her name was Molly, or Polly. Laurence couldn't remember.

“Yes.”

“Aren't you supposed to take a girl?” she asked, looking somewhat disgusted.

“No. That's what the Americans do. Here you just go with your mates.”

“Nice car,” said the boy with her. “Is that your Dad?”

“Yes.”

“You must be minted.”

“It's his company car.”

This inquisition could have gone on all night. Aaron was popular with the little kids on the street, which meant Laurence was too. After disentangling himself from the entourage, Laurence made a dash for the Ford's front gate. Aaron's Mum was already on the doorstep, waving to Laurence to come into the front garden so she could take his and Aaron's picture by her hydrangeas.

Both boys were wearing hired tuxedos. Laurence looked like a boy pretending to look like a man. Aaron, however, could have passed for an arrestingly handsome man of twenty, or James Bond.

Laurence's cheeks flooded with warmth as Aaron bounded down the front steps and threw his arm around his shoulders. “Looking fine, Coleman,” he said, his grip tightening.

Inhaling deeply, Laurence was assailed by Aaron's aftershave, the one from the black bottle. Even the tiniest whiff of it gave him a semi. Thankfully his trousers were on the loose side. Laurence stepped in closer to Aaron for the picture—how could he resist?—and smiled a genuine and happy smile.

“That's it, boys. Stay close together,” Mrs Ford said, capturing them forever with her pocket digital camera.

Laurence's Dad stood by his brand new Mercedes, watching over the privet hedge (though he was probably keeping a side-eye out for the football). He

gave an approving nod as Aaron and Laurence strode towards him, and in true chauffeur style, ushered them onto the back seat.

The Year 11 Prom was a joint boys' and girls' school affair. Two starched staff stood on the steps of the Bellhouse Hotel, greeting the students as they arrived with trays of orange juice and lemonade.

Mr Jaffrey and his sidekick Mr Poole were right behind them, checking pockets for alcohol and tobacco. A couple of teachers from the girls' school searched bags. While he sucked fervently on his mint, Laurence shuffled in quietly behind Aaron. The taste of the cranberry vodka shot Mrs Ford had given him 'as a warm-up for the evening' was still repeating.

Inside, decorated dinner tables were arranged around the dance floor, rather like at a wedding.

"I don't know how I let you talk me into this," Aaron complained immediately. "It's all the swots at this do."

"I never thought I'd hear you complain about free food."

Not actually free. Knowing Aaron would never sign up, not least because it would have been a stretch for his Mum to fork out for the ticket and the suit hire, Laurence had given Aaron his ticket as a school-leaving gift.

"You're right," Aaron said, as he accosted a passing waiter carrying a tray of cocktail sausages. He took a polite six, shoved them one after the other into his mouth and deposited the sticks in his breast pocket. "Where's the bar? I need a coke."

They were about to head over to what looked like the drinks table when Laurence caught sight of a girl in a peach satin dress coming towards them. Her long, auburn curls were unmistakable. "Heather! You look gorgeous."

Many a play date ago, Heather Smith had clashed with Laurence over swords and tiaras. They were the tagalong siblings; their older sisters' best friends. At the sixth form open day they'd reconnected, to discover they had both opted to do an AS in History.

"Thanks. So do you. And this is?" she looked expectantly at Aaron.

"Heather, this is Aaron, my best friend."

With a flourish, Aaron took Heather's hand and kissed her knuckle.

She laughed, hooked her arms through both boys' and said, "I've put you on my table. Come over and I'll introduce you to everyone."

Heather sat next to Laurence, with Aaron on her other side and her friend, Jasmine, after that.

While Laurence and Heather caught up on the years they'd missed after primary school, she also confided that Jasmine had a massive crush on Aaron, and had begged Heather to sit her next to him.

Every so often, Aaron looked across at Laurence and rolled his eyes. If he didn't immediately grab his attention when he wanted it, he launched a bread roll, then his place card and, finally, the tomato wedge that garnished the smoked salmon starter.

For the first hour and a half, the Year 11 prom-goers sat through three courses, drank coffee and endured a dull speech from their Head of Year. Apart from the projectiles, and their fresh faces, they could have almost passed for adults.

By the time the dancing started, Aaron seemed to have warmed to his unexpected companion and was throwing her gracelessly around the dance floor to a Katy Perry song. She was wearing flat shoes, like ballerina slippers, which was a mercy given Aaron's enthusiastic twirling.

"Do you think he likes her?" Heather asked. "I mean, they look like they're having fun, but it's hard to tell."

Laurence liked to think that the way Aaron looked at him, the way his eyelids dropped, half-closed when they were alone, before they kissed, was the look of someone who liked someone else. He liked to think the way Aaron's eyes lit up the day Laurence handed him a burned CD and said, "I made you a playlist. It's some of the old stuff I like," was because he liked him.

"He's definitely flirting. But that's Aaron. I couldn't say if it means anything."

As Laurence spoke those honest words, for the first time it occurred to him that Aaron might really, genuinely like girls. He might like them as well as boys. He might like them *more* than boys.

"Shall we join them?" Heather said.

Shaking off his concern, Laurence stood and held out his hand.

Heather took it, but before they stepped out, she leaned in and said, "I meant to mention it earlier. I didn't sit next to you because I... you know? I just wanted to catch up. I'm seeing this boy from Stokebridge."

“Sure. No problem. He won’t mind if I dance with you though?” Laurence said, slipping his arm around her waist, all the while keeping a sneaky eye on Aaron and his antics.

“No.” She shook her head as she smiled, and her red curls shook like a cascade of flames over her shoulders.

If I was straight, Laurence mused, and strode out to shake his hips with the rest of them.

Later, over another sickly, non-alcoholic cocktail, Laurence sat shoulder to shoulder with Aaron, staring out onto the dance floor.

“Do you fancy Jasmine?”

“I might.” Aaron shrugged.

“Oh.” Laurence cast his gaze down between his knees.

“I might ask her out.”

Laurence didn’t dare look up at Aaron, let alone make a remark. He couldn’t have faked a smile if he’d wanted to, and he didn’t want Aaron to see his face, all prickling and numb at the same time. So he kept his head down, staring into his drink.

“Yeah. I wonder if she’ll fancy coming down the pitch with me and kicking some goals.”

“Kicking some goals?” Laurence’s head snapped up, because his heart might be breaking but if his best friend really liked this girl he ought to be supportive and seriously—

Aaron slapped his thigh, threw his head back and laughed so loudly people on the dance floor, blanketed by decibels of music, turned to look at him. “You should have seen your face.”

“So you’re not going to take her to the rugby pitch?”

“I’m not taking her anywhere. Idiot.” Aaron nudged Laurence’s shoulder. “What do I need a girlfriend for?”

Once again, Aaron was saying something, which might have meant one something or quite another something and Laurence wasn’t able to pin him down to which one it was.

The night was close to an end. Some kids had paired up for slow dancing. Some were just dancing in small clusters. There hadn’t been any alcohol, but

some of the boys looked drunk, arms over each other's shoulders, swaying from side to side.

It wouldn't have looked out of place, for Laurence to pull Aaron to his feet, to dance with him if he was cool about doing that. But it was impossible. Laurence couldn't touch Aaron without electricity sparking over his skin. They'd never be able to dance together tonight, like the straight kids did.

Laurence didn't get the chance to get sadder or riled, because Heather saved him. Or snatched him, depending on how you looked at it.

Colbie Caillat was singing "Realize". Laurence went with her. When he caught Aaron's eye, he wanted so much to tell him, I shouldn't be dancing with Heather, not to *this* song.

They turned slowly and by the time the place where Aaron had been sitting came back into view, Aaron was gone. Laurence tried not to be obvious. He scanned the heads, the peppering of black jackets between the rainbow of fancy frocks.

"Room for one more?"

It was Aaron! He ducked his head under Heather's arm and grabbed them both.

"Sure," Heather laughed.

At which point, Jasmine skipped over and wedged herself between Aaron and Heather.

Still, Aaron's left arm was hooked tightly around Laurence's waist.

Laurence wished more than anything that Aaron knew the meaning of the song lyrics he was singing; that he meant the words to be for him as he sang, top of his voice, while the four of them turned slow circles to the last song of the night.

Chapter 4

In the sixth form, Laurence's social circle expanded to include new boys and girls. They were at that in-between age where common room conversation could go seamlessly from which university was top of their list to the relative merits of Cocoa Pops over Lucky Charms.

The milestones came and went as first Laurence learned to drive, then, by virtue of his date of birth, he earned the right to vote, to buy alcohol and to run with the big boys.

The weekends were, as ever, all about Aaron. And Aaron, when he wasn't chiselling or planing or regaling Laurence with the properties of cherry wood, was all about rugby.

"Got your lucky boots on, Coleman?" Harry shouted across the changing rooms.

"Yeah, his dog pissed on them. Want a sniff?" Aaron said, snatching Laurence's stud and slinging it in the direction of Harry's head.

One might have supposed that as Laurence and Aaron moved from U-16 to U-18 and then, every now and then to the Colts, the talk in the changing rooms would have matured accordingly. If so, one would have supposed wrong.

The game was a friendly. This didn't actually mean that it was friendly *per se*. Only that the score didn't count towards the league.

Both teams played hard and fast for ninety minutes. The score stayed level until a rogue try, scored by Hartnell's hooker, no less, from a fast-rolling maul, tipped the score in their favour.

The home team, Fendon Rangers, stood behind their try line with faces like rabid beasts. They didn't howl or call out, but Laurence could feel an imminent rumble. As soon as he moved, they were going to storm out.

It shouldn't have mattered. The kick was a gift—straight in front of the posts. Laurence lined up the ball, took three steps back and one to the side, just as he always did. He lined his sight from the ball to the posts, to the space between. Then he bent his knees and elbows, clenched his fists and loosened them.

He'd made kicks like this hundreds of times, and he wasn't going to miss, whatever distraction Fendon had in store. He blocked out everything except the ball and the posts.

At last, centred, Laurence moved, one step forward, swung his leg back and followed through with the kick.

The toe of his boot hit the ball. It rocketed, low and fast. Laurence had given it an almighty belt. It took off at such speed that the opposition were barely two steps over the try line as they watched the ball sail between the posts, hands falling in unsurprised dismay.

The elation was short-lived. Time slowed. The remainder of the ball's trajectory played out in front of Laurence's eyes in horrific certainty.

The old man was walking his dog on the footpath that edged the grounds. Everyone was shouting. Laurence could hear the noise though he couldn't hear exactly what they were saying. The man turned as if he saw it coming. Laurence wasn't sure if the way he lifted his arms was a belated attempt at self-defence or an attempt to catch the ball. Whichever it was, it failed.

The ball smacked the old man squarely on the forehead.

He was instantly felled. And he didn't get up.

The game was abandoned as players, parents, the ref and assorted passers-by rushed to the end of the field. Someone was already there with a phone as Laurence pushed his way forward, through a closed circle of people, to where the man was lying on the ground.

"I've got his dog," a lady shouted from somewhere to Laurence's right.

The old man was clutching his head. He looked up at Laurence, his milky eyes unfocused. He wasn't dead. He wasn't unconscious.

Thank goodness, thank goodness, thank goodness. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you. I never meant to..."

A frail old hand, cold and dry and rigid, reached up for Laurence's sleeve.

"So you're the bugger with the boot?" He grinned, wheezed and coughed.

"Yes, sir. I'm so sorry."

A male voice from behind said, "Give him some air."

Laurence was guided away and amidst slaps and laughter. Coach Martin fell into step alongside Laurence. "You all right to play the last seven minutes?"

Since he'd got over the fear of the early days, Laurence had dished out his fair share of hard tackles. He'd seen the results, of players being floored, winded and shaken after one of his flying takedowns. But he'd never really hurt

anyone. Not like Aaron. With his extra weight and indefatigable aggression, he'd had players his size limping and crying, or worse still, flat out on their backs waiting for the first aider.

Some kids enjoyed hurting people. They went out of their way to do it unnecessarily. Not Aaron, and definitely, not Laurence. Just like that, as the recollection of the old man toppling resurfaced, Laurence's vision went blurry.

He reeled and had to take a step back to steady himself. "I'm fine, Coach." *If I don't throw up.*

Aaron was behind him. "Legend, Coleman. You are a legend," he said as he dug his fingers in Laurence's ribs and pushed him back onto the pitch.

The last minutes passed in a blur that extended into the changing rooms and on into clubhouse bar, where players, parents and club members were convening. Laurence wasn't the only one leaving for university after the summer, and everyone wanted to send the boys off with some good cheer.

After a hearty home-made chilli, the bar was called to silence for the awards.

Thanks were given to coaches, parents and players, as Laurence and his friends sat huddled around two crowded tables. Usually they didn't pay much attention. Today they were all ears. The end of an era deserved the hush.

The Fendon Chairman's rousing speech was mercifully short. As he came to a close, the Hartnell boys looked at each other in anticipation.

"All that remains for me is to ask you all to raise your glasses for the Man Of The Match."

Man Of The Match was an honour conveyed to a member of the away team by the home side. The Fendon Chair continued, "This player was a consistent and unflinching asset to his team today, unfazed in the face of a rather unfortunate accident."

It was going to be Aaron. He deserved it. Laurence was glad...

"Laurence Coleman, many, many congratulations." He raised his glass and the whole room cheered.

"To the Man Of The Match!"

In two years, Laurence had never won the auspicious title. But today, at last, he'd finally done it. He took his cup with nervous pride, not sure if he deserved it, not after sending a pensioner off the grounds in an ambulance.

On the way home, sitting next to Aaron in the minibus, it occurred to Laurence that this wasn't just his last time playing for Hartnell, for a long time at least. It was his last time playing on the same side as Aaron. They'd hardly see each other once the season was over.

"Hey, Laurie, look."

Coach Martin's wife's video camera was doing the rounds. Aaron, Laurence and two boys sitting behind them crowded around the tiny screen and watched the kick that was already being hailed as the Coleman Killer.

The boys whooped and gasped as the old man fell. But for a few seconds afterwards, as everyone flocked towards the fallen man, Laurence wasn't bothered about seeing himself, running to the scene of the accident. His eyes were transfixed on Aaron, who was right behind him. Even when Laurence didn't see him, Aaron was covering his back. Always.

As the camera left their hands, on its journey to the back of the bus, Laurence nuzzled in to Aaron's shoulder, though not close enough for anyone else to notice.

"Let me see your trophy," Aaron said.

With it being a farewell, Fendon had splashed out.

"You should have won it," Laurence said. "You set the play up more times than I did." He'd played well, for sure, but the trophy was an unpleasant reminder he played 'so well', he'd nearly killed someone who wasn't even on the pitch.

"Rubbish. You totally deserved it." Aaron turned the trophy reverentially in his hands and said seriously, "Make sure you get this engraved. With the date and everything."

When he handed it back to Laurence, his hand lingered, his fingers stretched into a tender touch. When he settled back into his seat, he pressed his thigh alongside Laurence's, where it stayed for the rest of the drive home.

The summer was filled with parties and good-byes.

Laurence's family were hosting a barbecue, on the last weekend in July, before the A-Level results came out.

Along with neighbourhood friends, Laurence's sisters were going to be there, including Lisa and her husband, Louise and her latest boyfriend, as well as the ever-single Leanne.

Aaron's Mum was invited but had to work, so Aaron came on his own before the arrival of the other guests.

Mr Coleman was attempting to put bunting up around the garden. "Come and help me with this fence, Aaron."

"He's a cabinet maker, not a general dog's body," Laurence's Mum said.

"I don't mind, Mrs Coleman."

"All right. But, Frank, don't you go getting his nice shirt dirty, or yours for that matter. Laurie, love, would you help me with the potato salad?"

It might have irked Laurence that his Dad had automatically asked Aaron, but he and his sisters had all proved equally useless and dangerous with a hammer. Laurence went into the kitchen and started chopping chives. Aaron loved this type of food.

Aaron.

Exeter was far away. Two and a half hours in the car, longer by train because of the change of lines and the Tube across London.

Aaron said he'd get a car. At the moment, on top of his cabinet-making course, he was working part-time hod carrying for a builder friend of his Mum's and was saving everything. Once he had an apprenticeship, he'd be earning more money, and once he was qualified, once he had a job... Aaron's eyes always lit up when he got to that part.

Meantime, they could Skype, email. It wouldn't be the same, but it would do.

"Laurence! You're mashing up the potatoes."

"Sorry, Mum. I was miles away."

"Go on outside. Enjoy the sun. And Laurie, love, try and stay with us, just for the next couple of months."

After the food, the Coleman girls provided the entertainment with a guitar and some song. Laurence and Aaron stretched out on the grass on a picnic blanket. Side by side, to the old tunes that had been a part of Laurence's childhood and for the last four years, Aaron's too, they hummed along.

The sun had disappeared behind a cloud. Laurence opened his eyes and turned to look at Aaron. His eyes were closed behind his sunglasses. He might have looked like he was asleep, only Laurence knew the cadence of his

breathing when he slept, knew just how far his chest rose and fell when his autonomic nervous system took over.

Aaron's little finger brushed against Laurence's, his cheeks tightened against a smile.

The music and voices faded into the background as a wash of different emotions consumed Laurence with overwhelming intensity: fear, desire and possessiveness. Another two months and he would be gone. He was looking forward to it, but every time he set his sights on Exeter, thoughts of Aaron weren't far behind.

University wouldn't be the same without Aaron there. Just like school. Laurence wouldn't know what Aaron was doing or who he was spending his time with. They wouldn't be an everyday part of each other's lives anymore.

More than ever, Laurence wanted every minute he had left with Aaron to count. He turned his head to whisper, "Do you want to get out of here?"

"Sure."

"Mum," Laurence pushed up to call out, "can I give Aaron a lift home?"

"How much have you had to drink?"

"Nothing. Just half a shandy before lunch."

"Go on then."

As they drove, the rosy hue that had coloured Aaron's cheeks when he was lying in the sun didn't subside. When they reached his house, his eyes looked heavy, dark, like he was ready for bed, though not sleep.

"Come upstairs." Aaron took Laurence's hand. "I've got something for you."

Aaron's home was as familiar to Laurence as his own. The smell of Mrs Ford's potpourri in the bowl in the hall, the creak of the fourth stair, the pictures of Aaron lining the wall, of when he was small, before Laurence knew him.

Laurence had thought about this moment for a long time. They needed to talk about the way they were with each other, what they'd been doing in their bedrooms the last few years. Laurence wanted to know what was going to happen between them when they were so many miles apart...

Aaron dragged Laurence into his room. "Come *on*, Laurie."

Laurence sat on the bed. On the windowsill, in a wooden frame, was the photo from two years ago, of him and Aaron in front of Mrs Ford's hydrangeas. On top of Aaron's wardrobe were trophies and the silly souvenirs Laurence had brought him back from Cornwall and France and Italy—places Aaron had never been to.

When Aaron handed Laurence his gift, Laurence was already choked.

"You can't tell me you don't like it. You haven't even opened it yet," Aaron said, kneeling in front of him, closing his hands over Laurence's knees.

Laurence took the package out of the paper bag and tore off the white tissue paper to reveal a dark, polished wooden box.

Reaching out for Aaron's jaw, closing his hand around it, Laurence said with wonder, "Aaron, did you...?"

"Yes. I made it, at college. It's a humidor, except mine doesn't have the humidity thing inside it so it's just a box really. But the outside's Spanish cedar wood and the inside is mahogany. I thought you could put stuff in it, like cufflinks."

"It's brilliant. I love it."

For someone about to study for an English degree, Laurence was pitifully at a loss for better words to express his gratitude. So he put the box carefully down on Aaron's bedside table, put his hand behind Aaron's neck and drew him up from where he was kneeling to kiss him.

They'd done this a thousand times before, and yet, there was always something, up to now that had held them back from doing everything. Not anymore.

"Have you gone all the way with anyone yet?"

Aaron almost growled. "No. I've only... only you."

"Do you want to? Now?"

Laurence wasn't sure if it was uncertainty or desire that pulled at Aaron's face. He turned away, unable to face the rejection if Aaron said no.

"I want to," Aaron said with a kiss to the tip of Laurence's ear.

Then he opened his bedside drawer and reached into the back, pulled out a white tube that looked like hand cream. When Laurence looked more closely, he saw it was lubricant.

It wasn't like Laurence had lived under a rock his entire youth, nor Aaron. He'd read enough here and there to know what he needed to do, how to be safe, how to prepare himself. He'd tried it with his fingers.

Like the first time he'd kissed or the first time Aaron had put his fingers around his cock, Laurence knew his imagination was no comparison to the real thing. There was no way to imagine the minute details that brought an experience to life, that made neurons fire at a smell, at a look, at a caress. As much as he was excited, Laurence was nervous.

They undressed more hesitantly than before, where the removal of their clothes had come in fits and starts between kisses and touches. Carefully, Aaron laid out Laurence's clothes on the chest of drawers, and when he was bared himself, his cock hard and jutting out in front of him, he looked shy.

Laurence waited on the bed, his rigid shaft pointing upwards on his belly from the thatch of bronze hair on his groin. He held out his hand for Aaron, and Aaron came to him, pressed up to his side, sliding his leg between Laurence's thighs as they kissed.

"Should I turn on my side?" Laurence asked, his voice hoarse and unsteady. "I need to get the lube inside, and um..." He didn't want to say 'loosen my hole'.

"I can do that," Aaron whispered, "if you want."

Laurence did want, even if he was worried about it being the most private part of him and what if he hadn't cleaned well enough? He closed his eyes and nodded.

Turning on his side, his face to the wall, with Aaron beside him, Laurence rested his head on the pillow and drew his knees up slightly. When Aaron slid in a single finger, when the cool slide stretched him full, he gasped, "I'm glad it's you. I always wanted it to be you."

Aaron made a whimpering noise and kissed the back of Laurence's head. "Me too."

Slowly, Aaron worked in two fingers, then three, as each time Laurence wasn't sure he could take the breach. Yet he did and as the dull ache receded, it was followed by a release, a relief that he was almost there. This was really happening.

"Are you ready?"

“Yes.” Behind him, Laurence could hear the rip of foil, and the jerking motion of Aaron rolling the condom over his cock. “Aaron?”

“Yeah.”

“If I can’t come, you don’t have to try to hang on or anything. Just do your best.”

Aaron’s whole body shook with laughter. “Do my best? Okay, babe. That’s what I was aiming for.”

Aaron had never called him babe. He’d only ever called him Laurie, and it sent a new flood of heat through him, a deep sense of comfort that had, up to now, only skirted the periphery of his senses.

Some of the tension eased. Laurence laughed and when the head of Aaron’s cock stretched him—slowly, slowly then, *oh*, it was in—it wasn’t nearly as painful as he’d anticipated. Aaron was slightly longer and thicker than Laurence, not massive, but more than enough. The feel of his shaft sliding in, in the smallest of increments, filling him, took Laurence’s breath away.

“I’m all the way in,” Aaron said, his voice high and tight.

“You can move.”

The rest happened quickly, in a blur of anxious nerves and fearful, tender love.

Aaron didn’t last long enough for Laurence to come. However, the spasms and jolts as he came, groaning loudly, buried balls deep inside Laurence was the most intimate feeling he’d ever experienced. In all their years of being close, it was the most special.

Laurence reached behind to hold Aaron in place after he’d stilled, while his breathing slowed. “Don’t pull out yet.”

Taking his cock in his hand, Laurence was going to finish himself off, but Aaron reached around him and said, “Let me.” His rapid strokes were firm, determined. With Aaron’s cock softening inside him, Laurence reached his climax quickly.

In wonder, Aaron said, “I can feel it. I can feel you coming,” as Laurence clenched and shuddered through the aftershocks.

Wrapped in Aaron’s arms, Laurence didn’t know what to say. They were all right with the silence, they always had been, but Laurence’s imminent departure was a black cloud hanging between them.

At last, he ventured, "When I'm in Exeter..."

"I know. It's all right. What goes on in Exeter, stays in Exeter."

Laurence didn't get the chance to say *likewise*, as Aaron flipped him over onto his back. Wriggling his way down between Laurence's thighs, Aaron bit down gently on his nipple. Down and down, he bit and licked. Well before it was enveloped in the heat of Aaron's mouth, Laurence's cock was hard again.

Chapter 5

Laurence came out to his family a week before he left for university. Once he got to Exeter, he joined the very quiet LGBTQ Society and even more quietly involved himself in writing their newsletters. Exeter, it appeared, was not the university to attend if you planned on a flamboyant coming out—which suited Laurence fine.

Despite the low key presence of a 'society' on campus, there was no shortage of talent if you knew where to look. During the first term, Laurence had sex with Artie, then CJ.

Being away from home was like letting out a huge exhale: Laurence was free to breathe all the way out and all the way in again. Sometimes, though, he would think about the newfound gay abandon he had in Exeter and then he would think about Aaron, and how he missed him.

No matter what they'd promised or what they'd thought a year ago, Laurence and Aaron weren't close like they used to be. It was impossible; staying in touch long distance wasn't the same as being close.

So it was out of the blue, unexpected, at the start of an unseasonably warm summer term that Aaron asked if he could visit for a weekend. Laurence didn't hold back on his enthusiasm. A weekend with Aaron, no parents, no sneaking about in deserted lanes in the back of Laurence's Mum's car. Not to mention, Laurence was, well—he thought it was fair to say—more worldly-wise, more of a man these days.

Aaron called when he was ten minutes away from campus. Laurence ran down to the car park to meet his treasured friend, who was driving all the way to Exeter in his newly purchased secondhand car. It was nothing flashy, a little Peugeot, but as Aaron said, a few years of safe driving and no claims and he'd work his way up to something with 'more poke'.

Laurence paced and craned his neck, looking out for the silver 206. When at last Aaron turned into the drive, Laurence jumped up and down. He waved and signalled to an empty space, unable to temper the grin that had broken across his face.

Pulling in with a screech, Aaron leapt out of the car and, no hesitation, wrapped his arms around Laurence in a crushing hug. He smelled of Noir and

his arms felt like home, and Laurence, without thinking, pressed a firm kiss on Aaron's cheek. Aaron didn't flinch away and he didn't let go.

"No boyfriend, then?" Aaron said, pulling back a fraction, giving Laurence a long, assessing look.

"No."

"So I've got you to myself for the weekend?" Aaron's eyes lifted and his hold tightened a fraction more, if that was possible.

"You sure have."

"Good. But what happened to all my curls?"

My curls. Laurence's heart jumped. "I had my head shaved for charity. You should have seen how long it had got before—I hadn't had it cut for six months."

"I bet it was gorgeous," he said with affection. "I'm glad I didn't see it go. Would have killed me."

Having Aaron with him again, it hit Laurence hard how much he'd missed him. Only for an instant though. Then it was like they'd never been apart because Aaron was here, large as life, grinning like a fool and holding on like he couldn't bear to let Laurence go.

This was going to be the best weekend ever. Laurence would make sure of it.

They walked, Aaron with his bag in one hand and his other arm over Laurence's shoulder, Laurence carrying the crate of beer Aaron had thoughtfully brought with him.

"You'll like Marv," Laurence said. "He plays second row for the rugby team. His girlfriend plays for the women's team. If you like, we can go and watch. They've got a match this afternoon."

"In April?"

"Yeah. It's just a practice I think, against the town side. But they're pretty good. They move the ball around a lot more than the men. And Marv says there are a couple of their forwards he wouldn't mind having on the men's team. I wasn't sure if that's because they're good, or so he could grab their arses in the scrum."

Aaron looked amused, or enamoured. Laurence wasn't sure. Whatever it was, it already felt good and right having Aaron here, to show him where he lived, his new life.

The communal area of the flat was empty. Ten thirty on a Saturday morning was obscenely early, after all.

"This is nice." Aaron did a full turn, took his time looking at the sofas, the scattered newspapers, the takeaway boxes on the dining table, the kitchen sink piled high with dirty dishes and a dozen coffee cups.

Laurence grabbed the Sharpie from the top of the fridge and scrawled his name over the box of beer before shoving it onto the top shelf. No one in the flat had any respect for claims on milk but they never touched anyone else's alcohol.

"It's Sid's turn to tidy up," Laurence said. "He'll be up by lunchtime, but we'll get something to eat at the Student Union." He added, "Everyone's around this weekend, except Julian. He's gone home for the weekend. Family party, I think."

The lads in the flat weren't in each other's pockets, but they kept their eyes out for each other. It was easy to lose your way in the first year.

Aaron nodded and followed Laurence to his room. Once the door was closed, Laurence was half-expecting Aaron to pounce on him.

Maybe it was being in a new place that was completely familiar to Laurence that held Aaron back. He was quiet. He put his bag on the floor at the end of the bed and surveyed Laurence's room as he had the living area of the flat. He looked along the bookshelf, ran his fingertip over the spines: Marlowe, Milton, Homer and Pope.

Laurence couldn't tell what he was thinking, whether he was disappointed with where he was living, pleased or simply taking it in. The elation they'd shared in the car park, on the walk up to the flat, had evaporated faster than summer dew. And the air between them had cooled.

Gazing out of the window, over an uninspiring view of some shrubbery, Aaron asked, "What time is the match?"

"Not until two, I think."

"You want to show me around Exeter, then?"

Of course, Aaron had never been here. Laurence just needed to show him around, let him know he was settled. There were the underground passages, the castle and the cathedral. He brightened at once. Aaron was going to love Exeter; it was so different to the boring little commuter town they'd grown up in.

"Let's get a bus in. That way we can have a pint."

"Just us?"

"Yes, sure. Just us."

Exeter Cathedral was unequivocally one of the most impressive buildings Laurence had ever seen. He'd visited with his parents when he was choosing a university, on their insistence, and had afterwards reluctantly admitted he was awed. That didn't mean he would subject Aaron to the day-eating grandeur of the full tour. They were young and carefree. The pub beckoned.

Except Aaron, upon taking one look at the outside, blew out a long whistle and said, "We're going in?" like he actually wanted to.

"Sure. But you have to pay."

Reaching into his back pocket, Aaron pulled out a sleek black wallet Laurence hadn't seen before. "I've got it. And lunch after."

"You don't have to. I've got money."

"I *want* to."

He meant it, and Laurence felt that familiar warm tingle at the gesture. No one else made him feel special in the way Aaron did. No one. The pub could wait. "Prepare to be impressed," Laurence said, and for an unselfconscious moment he almost, *almost* took Aaron by the hand before leading the way.

By the time they got back to campus and over to the sports ground, the rugby match was into the second half.

Marv was cheering from the touchline. When he saw Aaron and Laurence approaching, he looked pleased for the company. "Hey, you must be Aaron. Laurence said you were coming. Nice to meet you."

He held out his hand, and Aaron reached out immediately to shake it. "You too."

They talked rugby, and Laurence earned a pointed look from Marv and Aaron when it was revealed he hadn't joined the men's side. But he was in luck. At that particular juncture, the women's game was of more interest to both of them.

Aaron asked, "Which one's your girlfriend?"

"Number twelve." Marv pointed over to Elise, just as she was slammed by the shoulder of an oncoming opposition player. She stayed on her feet, unsteadied but not grounded, and turned as three of her teammates ploughed into the maul. Marv winced.

"Do you hate it," Aaron asked, "when she gets hit?"

"It's all I can do not to run over and pick her up. But when she takes someone down... She's a firecracker." Marv was smitten. It was written all over his face.

"She looks it," Aaron remarked, in obvious admiration. "I've seen blokes twice her size topple over after being pummelled that hard."

Marv puffed up a little more at the compliment, as if it had been paid to him. "We're going out in town later. Why don't you join us?"

"Sure. If Laurie doesn't mind."

"No, I don't mind. You definitely shouldn't pass up a night out with this lot. They're good fun. They make the men's team look like saints."

The sun was shining down in fullest spring glory and by the time they'd strolled back to the flat, sweat prickled the length of Laurence's spine. Aaron must have felt the heat too because once they were back in Laurence's room, after he'd helped himself to a beer from the kitchen fridge, he peeled off his shirt and kicked off his shoes. "I'm parched," he said, swigging back a long mouthful.

At last, he looked more relaxed. Laurence could breathe again. He'd wanted to touch Aaron, explore him, take him apart like he used to—except for now, with the benefit of more experience, more confidence. The thought made the hairs on the back of his neck bristle, his nipples tighten.

"They were pretty good, weren't they?" Aaron said, face quirking up into a smile.

"You sound surprised."

“Not really. I’ve seen women play before. Never enjoyed it as much as that, though.”

“Oh? Something you want to tell me?”

“No. What about you? Why aren’t you playing anymore?”

“I don’t know. Too many other things going on, I suppose. I’m doing some theatre this term—”

Just then, Aaron spotted something of interest behind Laurence. He reached past him. “You’ve still got the ball?” Aaron extracted the old Gilbert from where it was wedged between the top bookshelf and a row of paperbacks.

All the Under-18’s that had left Hartnell for university had been given a rugby ball signed by all their teammates. Aaron’s name was there, pride of place, over the ‘Gilbert’ logo. His fingers dawdled over the stitching, staring intently at the writing as if spellbound, until he looked up and said quietly, “Are you happy here, Laurie?”

Laurence took a step closer and placed his hands over Aaron’s, around the ball he was holding. “I love it here. But I’ve missed you.”

“Even with all the brainy talent you’ve got to choose from?”

Was that it? Was that why Aaron hadn’t visited before? It had never occurred to Laurence, not for one second, ever, that Aaron, *his* Aaron would be worried about—

Laurence moved closer and put his hand behind Aaron’s neck. For the first time, Laurence felt like he could envelop him in his arms, hold him safe like Aaron used to do to him, when he was smaller and less sure of himself. “Do you remember how you got me through GCSE maths?”

“I didn’t have to do much. You were a fast learner.”

Laurence pressed in close enough he was able to speak softly against Aaron’s lips. “I still am.”

Pushing Aaron backwards, nudging him with baby steps until his legs bumped the edge of the bed, Laurence eased his friend down. He took the ball from his hands and set it beside him, taking Aaron’s mouth urgently, as if he could impress a year’s worth of love and affection into a single kiss.

Aaron groaned, succumbed at once, and fell back. Dropping to his knees, Laurence undid Aaron’s jeans and pulled them down, over his hips and off with

his socks, throwing them aside. Then, kneeling between Aaron's legs, Laurence surveyed this beautiful man. "You've lost weight." Laurence ran his hands down the bumps of Aaron's abs and squeezed the sparse flesh on his waist.

"You've grown."

"Beer, weights and the Coleman late-bloomer gene."

"You're not done yet, then? Are you still growing?"

"I might be." Laurence winked.

"*Oh...*" Aaron didn't say any more as Laurence skimmed his fingers over the thin cotton of his boxers. Aaron was hard already, the ruddied line of his cock peeped through the gaping slit in the front.

Laurence could have taken him in his mouth like that. But he wanted to kiss him first, feel him in his arms, his hot skin and breath. Settling on the bed next to Aaron, Laurence touched his nipples and felt him tense, heard his breath catch.

"I'm going to take good care of you," Laurence said.

Aaron didn't reply, except with a nod, put his arm around Laurence and leaned back, letting him lick and taste, breathe in the scent of fresh sweat and arousal.

When Laurence had worked his way down, had mouthed kisses and blown breathily over Aaron's boxers, while his rigid cock twitched beneath, Laurence paused. He rested his head on Aaron's thigh and looked.

It was broad daylight. Aaron was tanned, back from his first holiday abroad to Tenerife. He looked well on it, seasoned.

Laurence slid his hand beneath the hem of Aaron's boxers, kneaded his fingers through the coarse hair on his balls while Aaron bucked and gasped like it was the first time.

"Soon, love. I want to look at you."

"You've seen me before."

"Shhh."

Laurence had seen all of Aaron, just about. But he hadn't *seen*. Not like he was seeing now. From inside Aaron's boxers, Laurence closed his fingers around the base of his cock and lifted it up, exposing it to the air through the opening at the front.

He kissed away the bead of fluid shining from the slit, rested his head down once more to memorise the thick vein that meandered its length. With his fingertips, he soothed the velvety skin that covered Aaron's solid erection, while breathing in his musky scent, Aaron's essence. He would taste him, drink him down, all in his own good time.

Aaron's hand, the one resting on Laurence's back, gripped at his T-shirt, and his thighs alternately tensed and relaxed beneath Laurence's chest. Laurence slid his left hand under Aaron's lower back, cosseting him in as close to an embrace as he could give. Then, only then, did he slide his lips firmly around the head of Aaron's cock.

"Laurie. So good, so good." Aaron's voice was a plea, and Laurence couldn't help but smile. He'd hardly even got started.

Using the weight of his shoulders to hold him in place, Laurence teased Aaron's cockhead with the tip of his tongue, dipping into the slit to taste the steady rise of emerging fluid. Glancing up, Aaron was flushed with arousal, across his shoulders, over his cheekbones, and his eyes fluttered open and closed, as if no longer under his control. If he was this gone already, he was going to lose it completely when—

Laurence pulled his lips over his teeth and slid down Aaron's whole length, his tongue pressing forward, until he almost gagged. Aaron cried out, and Laurence ignited. Sucking relentlessly up and down, he intensified the attention he was giving Aaron's cock with his hand, synchronising the rhythm of his mouth at the top with his hand at the bottom.

"Laurie, I'm gonna come."

Laurence didn't stop. He hummed his approval around Aaron's cock until, on a long, low groan, Aaron jerked then stilled, and Laurence's mouth was filled with the warm, salty tang of Aaron's release. He swallowed and held Aaron in his mouth until he began to soften, and wriggle. Then they kissed, the taste of Aaron's semen still fresh on his lips.

"First class," Aaron said, voice husky and low, pulling Laurence down over him.

He looked softer now, pliant, like Laurence could wrap him around his body and assimilate him into his own skin. How Laurence's cock ached; his whole body ached for one thing. And he hoped, so much, that Aaron would let him, would want him to. "Have you ever...?" Laurence ran his fingers through Aaron's hair and kissed him fleetingly on the lips. "Can I...?"

“Do you want to fuck me?”

“Yes.”

Looking wrecked and irresistibly flushed, Aaron said, “I want you. I want you to do whatever you want.”

Laurence stripped himself, then Aaron, and opened him slowly with his fingers and his tongue. He entered him with Aaron's ankles over his shoulders and came with Aaron's legs wrapped around his waist.

They didn't make it out that evening. Not out for drinks with the women's rugby team, not out of Laurence's flat, not out of his room, not out of his bed. No one called, texted or knocked on the door. And barely a minute passed where they were more than a breath or a kiss apart.

On Sunday, as the balance of hours they'd spent reconnecting surpassed those they had left together, Laurence felt at once peaceful, happy and desperately sad. He hated good-byes, no matter how temporary. Aaron must have been feeling the same. He got quieter and quieter as the hour hand turned from single to double digits and back to singles again. Only his unfailing touch assured Laurence he hadn't regretted spending almost an entire weekend in bed.

Aaron left in the late afternoon. Before he got into his car he said, “I'm glad you like it here. I'm really proud of you.” He held Laurence too tight, and he wouldn't look at him once he was in the driver's seat.

At the time, Laurence hadn't realised it was more than a 'see you again in the summer' kind of good-bye. Maybe that hadn't been Aaron's intention. It wasn't Laurence's. But the summer came, with bar work and travelling and too much reading, and then it was gone. The Skyping stopped, the texts dwindled to nothing and the emails went from weeks to months apart.

Aaron had a job, a car and was well on his way to becoming a fully qualified cabinet maker. Laurence was a student of the arts—the antithesis of the working man. Yet despite their differences, Laurence thought they'd always march to the beat of the same drum.

As he occasionally took pause to remember fondly their weekend in April, he couldn't tell which of them had fallen out of step. Only that one or both of them had.

Chapter 6

During his second year at university, Laurence spent some of his free time working backstage for a local amateur production of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. He also wrote a short play based loosely on his experience growing up with three older sisters, which was performed to mainly positive reviews by a group of final year drama students. Then, when this busy and successful academic year had come to an end, he went to America for ten weeks to work at a residential summer camp on the west coast of Michigan. Upon his return home in September, he vowed never again.

For his final year, Laurence moved from the off-campus shared house of his second year back into university-based accommodation. If he knuckled down, he'd stay on track for a first class degree, and he could only do that without the distractions that were an unavoidable aspect of living in a shared house.

In the evenings, he kept the door to his room closed. It was a given that a closed door meant 'do not disturb' which his flatmates, also in their final year, adhered to and respected. Two years before, a lifetime ago, a closed door could as easily have been a signal of distress, a challenge, a dare, far more than a request for privacy. Those halcyon days were a nothing but a memory now.

Lying on his bed, nose deep in a book, or trying to find sleep, Laurence often thought of Aaron. He wondered if he'd met someone; if that was why he never heard from him anymore.

Rather than pick up his phone, because Laurence wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer, he invented an ever-growing list of reasons for the lapse in their friendship: they'd grown apart, they'd ruined it by sleeping with each other, they'd never really had anything in common except rugby, which Laurence had only ever played because of his stupid crush.

Every excuse Laurence made left a bad taste in his mouth. Bullshit in that quantity was difficult to swallow. Easier to put Aaron out of his mind and focus on studying.

When the term finished in early December, Laurence stayed an extra week in Exeter before taking the train home to Kent, partly wishing he could have stayed there a week longer. Not so much because he was overloaded with degree work, but because three weeks at home with his parents, now both retired, was going to be a bore.

Two days at home and Laurence was twitching from too much tea and unwanted attention. He went for a walk, covering ground that used to be as familiar as the back of his hand, and in many ways still was: the gnarly tree that had warped and splintered the Harris' side fence at the end of the street, the neglected burgundy Morris Minor on the driveway in front of number 36.

Other things, however, had changed in subtle ways that weren't at first noticeable. The bridge over the railway was painted the same grey it had always been. But how many fresh coats overlaid the graffiti from five years ago, when Laurence had crossed it daily on his way to King's? Declarations of love and insults still decorated its length. The sentiments were the same as ever. Only the names had changed.

On the other side of the bridge, the old lumber yard had been demolished. The iron framework was in place for a new building. It could have been anything at this stage. Only an artist's impression on the board attached to the fence heralded the arrival of a new garage.

Without really thinking about it, Laurence walked the two miles to the gates of his old school. The term hadn't yet finished and the harried movement of teenaged boys danced in the windows like glimpses into the past.

What had happened to the boys he and Aaron used to be? Most of the time, Laurence still felt the same as he did when he was fifteen. The years had added some bulk, a thicker skin and a certain confidence. But beneath he was still Laurence, who had always felt more than himself, better than himself when he was with Aaron.

If there was a chance that even the tiniest part of Aaron felt the same way...

Before he had a chance to overthink it, before his finger stopped hovering over his phone and he shoved it back in his pocket, Laurence sent a text. It had been a long time—too long. He shouldn't have felt this anxious, or guilty; the lack of communication went both ways.

I'm home for Christmas. Was hoping I could see you.

Aaron's reply was almost instantaneous.

Can you come out tonight?! Coach Martin is having a retirement party at the club. He'd love to see you. So would I.

Laurence ran home, his elation keeping him going when his stamina no longer could. After dinner, a shower and long deliberation over what to wear, his Dad gave him a lift and a twenty.

“Have a good time, son,” he said. “Give our regards to Aaron. Tell him he’s welcome to pop over any time.”

“Will do. And thanks, Dad.”

He hated taking money from his parents, especially now they were living on a pension, but his Dad had insisted. “Christmas treat,” he’d said as his Mum gave him the wrapped box that should have been for his nephew.

“I’ll get him another one when I go to Tesco’s this week,” she said.

Laurence was their youngest, and their most absent. He was the only one who’d never brought someone home, except Aaron. But that didn’t count, not in the way it should. Not yet.

It had been two and a half years since Laurence set foot in Hartnell’s clubhouse. Except for the additional trophies in the glass cabinets that lined the reception area, and a few more photographs between them, nothing had changed. The double doors to the bar were wide open to the blare of Christmas music. A sprig of plastic mistletoe hung from the centre of the doorframe. Beyond, multi-coloured fairy lights framed the windows and bar top, and to one side of the bar a large tree stood with presents beneath it. They weren’t fakes. The club always collected donated gifts for local children in need.

“That for me?”

Laurence wheeled around at the familiar voice, not quick enough to grab Aaron before he was grabbed and twirled off his feet.

“Mind! You’re crushing the present,” Laurence huffed with laughter. Then, after one delectable whiff, “You still wear the same aftershave.”

“Is that a good or bad thing?”

“It’s good. And no, this isn’t for you. Unless you’re a needy kid who likes Lego.”

Aaron released him and he looked... so pleased to see him. The feeling was absolutely, definitely mutual and Laurence immediately wished he’d come home a week sooner.

When Aaron smiled, Laurence’s eyes were drawn to the dimples in his cheeks. They were deeper than Laurence remembered them being. Perhaps because Aaron’s face had matured, lost some of its baby roundness. These new lines and contours had sharpened and accentuated his features, reminding Laurence with startling clarity how good-looking Aaron was. One smile, he

could have anyone he wanted. Tonight, he was Laurence's, whether for old time's sake or something more, Laurence wasn't sure. But he wanted to find out.

They walked into the bar, shoulder to shoulder, as if not a day had passed since they'd seen each other last.

"What are you drinking these days?" Aaron asked.

"Beer. Any draught."

Aaron's eyebrows went up. *Really?* Laurence took a pause for breath. "What? Did you think it would be some glitzy cocktail?"

Aaron shook his head. "I don't know. It's been a while. People's tastes change."

Laurence got the feeling Aaron was talking about more than drinks but he didn't get the chance to dwell on it. A couple of men at the bar that Laurence didn't recognise were greeting Aaron, and by the time they found a seat, at a small table in the corner, they'd had to stop by and say their hellos to at least a dozen people.

Aaron was at home here. It was his space. Laurence didn't belong anymore. As if to drive the point further, Aaron said, "How's university?"

"Good. I'm glad to be getting towards the end of it though."

"Any plans for after? I don't suppose you'll be coming back here?"

Waving to someone else who'd caught his eye from across the room, Aaron asked like he didn't care. Laurence hadn't expected that, not minutes into seeing him again after all this time. Guilt flared, sharp and hot in his chest. He couldn't lie.

"I'm thinking about doing a Master's degree. Not in Exeter. Somewhere more lively, like London. It's another year of education, but it should improve my paltry chances of finding a job."

Aaron looked him in the eye, intently, like he was searching. "The world's your oyster. I expect you'll be able to do anything you want, once you're done."

That was unlikely but it was nice to get the encouragement. "What about you?"

Their knees bumped together beneath the table, and Aaron flinched. He took a big mouthful of beer before he answered.

"I've got six months of my advanced apprenticeship left then I'll be able to look for a job. Although I'm hoping I can stay on at Warwick's. I've still got a lot to learn, and the owner's all about passing on skills, proper skills, not just having someone to do all the boring work."

"That's great. What sort of things are you doing?"

"Mostly kitchens. Bespoke ones. We make everything in the workshop but sometimes I go out on site to help with the installation. You should see some of the houses these cabinets go to."

Finally, Aaron was back to his old self, in his element. It was plain to see he enjoyed his work, which was pretty amazing. Not many people could say they loved their job.

"I wouldn't mind coming to the workshop while I'm back, to see what you do."

"Really?"

"Yes."

And there it was, that sparkle and glow. Aaron was gorgeous, handsome as ever. Laurence wanted to reach out and take his hand. Aaron was rubbing it on his thigh, presumably to dry it where his beer glass was wet with condensation. The tendons that ran from his fingers to his wrist looked stronger, more sinewy and his first two knuckles were scabbed. Thoughts of being held down, of rough calluses scraping over his skin had Laurence blushing. Hopefully it was too dark for Aaron to notice.

There was so much that Laurence wanted to talk about. Since the conversation had reached a natural pause, and he was already hot-cheeked, he dived straight in. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"No," Aaron said bluntly. "What about you?"

"No. I'm single. There have been a few flings but never anything serious."

Aaron looked... pleased. He said, "I'm not celibate, don't get me wrong, but I'm busy. I haven't had time..." He trailed off and circled the rim of his beer glass with his forefinger. "You've grown. Again."

"I think I stopped last year. Six foot on the nose."

With what felt like fondness, Aaron squeezed his bicep. "Been weight training?"

“A bit.” Laurence grinned. “What’s the matter? Worried I’m stronger than you?”

“No.”

“Hey! Laurence!” It was Coach Martin. At least, it sounded like Coach Martin. This man looked ten years older and three stone lighter, and he’d lost his hair.

Laurence stood up and shook his hand. It was bony and his grip was weak. The man was ill, very ill. Laurence glanced over at Aaron, who shook his head, almost imperceptibly, and Laurence knew at once it was something serious.

“Looks like college has put some meat on your bones,” Coach Martin said, either ignoring or oblivious to Laurence’s shock. “What position are you playing now?”

“I’m not. I haven’t played since I left here.”

“Well we can put that to rights. You qualify for the Vets, now you’ve been gone two years. We could do with some young blood.”

“I’m only back for Christmas.”

“Perfect. There’s a charity match on the twenty-first, Saturday before Christmas, against Brent. You can’t have full back, but there’s a spot on the flank.”

“Are you playing?” Laurence asked Aaron.

“Yeah. But not for the Vets. We’ll be on the next pitch.”

Playing for the same side, but not on the same team. Laurence couldn’t expect it to be otherwise. Not when he’d been gone so long. Probably for the best, anyway, given how out of shape he was.

The moment Coach Martin hobbled out of earshot, Aaron said, “Cancer. His bowel, I think.”

“So that’s why he’s retiring. Poor man.”

“I know. It won’t be the same here once he’s gone.” Wistfully, he added, “Nothing stays the same, does it?”

Laurence didn’t answer. The shock of seeing Coach Martin had derailed him. He’d been on his way to asking Aaron, out and out, once and for all. Was he gay? Bi? Out, in?

He didn't want to sound like the Inquisition, but he deserved to know. Taking another gulp of Dutch courage, Laurence braced himself—just as a group of his old teammates turned up. One of them, Paulie, went straight to the bar while Harry and Jed came over.

Once again, Laurence stood up, held out his hand and went through the usual greetings and updates.

Harry sat on the stool next to Aaron and said, "Mind if we join you?"

Aaron replied, "No. Why would we?"

Harry smirked. "Your boyfriend's back. Maybe this is a date. I don't know. Stupid place for a date, but then you two are the only gay rugby players I've ever met. What do I know?"

Laurence's heart missed a beat then caught up, as a fresh rush of blood pounded in his ears. So there was his answer. And he was pretty damned happy about it. If only he was in a position to show Aaron...

For two hours, Laurence had to sit through reminiscences and dirty jokes. Until, looking like he was teetering past tipsy, Aaron leaned over, put his head on Laurence's shoulder and said, "Come home with me?"

"Are you still at your Mum's?"

"Yeah."

"Won't she mind?"

"I don't think so. So long as we're not too noisy."

"All right. It'll be good to talk in the quiet, no interruptions."

"Talk?" Aaron looked like he was going to throw up.

Not caring who saw, Laurence closed his hand around Aaron's knee. "Yes, talk."

Not so many years ago, Laurence would have gone home with Aaron, no questions, and talking would have been the last thing on his mind. And he might have been up for some no-strings fun tonight, if it had been anyone else. But it wasn't anyone else. It was Aaron, his dear Aaron. They needed to talk.

It was time to step up and be a man. It was time to ask him. Ask him what, though? Couldn't they do better than this? Didn't Aaron want more than this? Because Laurence sure as hell did.

Seeing Aaron again, sitting beside him for these few short hours, it was crystal clear. There was no one else for Laurence, no one came close. And if that was too much for Aaron, well, they would always be friends. But Laurence couldn't do this casual hooking up thing, this not committing, not verbalising or sharing each other's lives.

They needed to talk about this together, both of them, because this pitiful one-sided conversation in Laurence's head was going nowhere.

Aaron made the call for a taxi, Laurence put on his coat and together they made their retreat. Or was it an advance? Laurence wasn't sure yet.

The cold night air crept over his collar and clawed at his back as they waited outside. A jarring shiver shook down the length of his spine. Aaron didn't hesitate to put his arm around his shoulders, like that was the normal and most natural thing to do. In turn, Laurence took a step closer to him and slid his arm around Aaron's waist. He didn't slot in beneath his shoulder like he used to. If Laurence moved to face him, he wouldn't have to tilt his face up to kiss Aaron. He'd only have to move his head to the side, lean in—

The taxi rolled in five minutes ahead of schedule. Given the sub-zero temperatures, Laurence ought to have been more grateful.

They rode back to Aaron's in silence, while Laurence pondered the events of the night so far, trying to work out how the balance of facts left him feeling.

All this time, Aaron had been out and hadn't told him. Laurence didn't know whether to be hurt or angry. It was hard to feel either with Aaron pressed up beside him, his fingers twisting knots in his coat.

Aaron's house was dark. "Mum's in bed. She's got a cold. Dosed up with Night Nurse, so don't worry, we won't disturb her."

They went straight to the kitchen, where Laurence discovered the addition of a small conservatory on the back of the house. Aaron put on the kettle then went out there, switched on a table lamp and the electric radiator. The room looked cosy even if Laurence felt the chill of night whoosh through the open door into the house.

Aaron looked nervous, like he was stalling. Sometimes it was hard to shut him up. He could natter on incessantly when the mood took him. Now was not one of those times. He put a teabag in each cup and angled around Laurence to get to the fridge for the milk. "It'll soon warm up. We'll have more privacy in the conservatory."

“It’s glass.”

Aaron seemed to miss the lightness in Laurence’s tone.

“Only one side is overlooked and they’re in bed. No lights outside, see? But I’ll pull the blinds down.”

Laurence kept his jacket on as Aaron finished making their brew. He held back any hint of accusation from his voice to ask, “How long have you been out?”

Aaron didn’t look up from the two mugs of tea, still on the worktop by the kettle. “My Mum said she knew before I did. I suppose when I started bringing you home it confirmed it.”

Laurence didn’t have the chance to show his surprise as Aaron went on, “After you left for university, I told Coach Martin. I was worried about how the other team members would take it. He said he’d always known, too. I don’t think we were as good at hiding it as we thought we were.”

“And it’s been all right?”

“Yes. Mostly. Nothing I couldn’t handle. Anyway, people at college knew as soon as I went there.”

When Aaron was sixteen. Laurence was the last to know, then. He’d shared about every first with Aaron that counted, yet he was the last person to be told, officially, he was out. And by the sounds of it, proud. Finally, anger surfaced and it wouldn’t subside. “Why did you never tell me?”

“You asked me once, not to tell anyone about you. Because you weren’t ready. I didn’t tell you about me because I didn’t want you to follow me into coming out. It had to be when you were ready.”

Aaron had been more mature than Laurence back then. It wasn’t just Laurence’s hair that had been like a puppy dog’s. He would have followed Aaron anywhere, and where coming out was concerned, maybe resented him for it later.

And Aaron always said Laurence was the clever one.

It was a mistake, getting angry with Aaron. He’d done nothing to deserve it.

Relieved, because Laurence hadn’t wanted an argument, far from it, he followed Aaron into the conservatory. It was heating up already and with Aaron next to him on the sofa, it was warm enough for Laurence to take off his coat.

This time, he was the one to put his arm around Aaron, to pull him to his chest and hold him close.

“At the end of my first year at uni, when you came to see me, you knew I was out. Why didn't you tell me then?”

Aaron turned away and drew his knees up. Laurence didn't tell him he could see his reflection in the window, see his face drawn into a sad frown. He held him tighter and closer and kissed the back of his head until Aaron drew in a shaky breath and responded.

“It seemed pointless. I'd already lost you. Once I saw you there, I knew it was over. That I couldn't have you anymore.”

“Why would you think that?”

Aaron sighed. His head dropped to his knees. “All those years, I'd been waiting for you to catch up with me. Then when I came to see you, I realised you'd moved on, past me. I felt left behind. You didn't need me anymore.”

“Isn't wanting you enough?”

Aaron tightened in on himself further. It hurt to see him like this. Laurence couldn't bear it. He took Aaron by the shoulders and turned him around, even as he resisted, and pulled his legs over his lap so he could hold him properly. Kiss his mouth, his cheeks, his eyelids.

With Aaron's face in his hands, between kisses Laurence said, “I love you. I've loved you since, I don't know, since I was fifteen. And I know I've been away, but there's never been a day I didn't think about you. You're my best friend and you always will be. But I want you to be my boyfriend, too. Mine and no one else's. I don't want to fuck you, then say good-bye not knowing when I'm going to see you again.”

Aaron looked like he was going to cry. He screwed his eyes shut and tried to cover his face with his hands. Laurence prised his fingers away and saw his eyes wet with unshed tears.

“Aaron? Please? Don't you want that too?”

Upset, vulnerable, he looked like a boy again, but not the boy Laurence remembered. Or maybe he did. Maybe Laurence just hadn't seen him that way then.

“I'm just a chippy. I've never read any fancy books.”

“And I’m just a bloke who’s about to get an English degree, which means I’ll either be unemployed in six months, or I’ll be delaying it another year while I get myself into more debt. I’d say, if you’re looking for someone with prospects, I’m not your man.”

“You’ve always been my man,” Aaron said before his face crumpled completely and the tears fell.

They stayed there all night, curled up on the sofa in the conservatory with the radiator on, Aaron cradled in Laurence’s arms. They didn’t do anything but hold each other, kissing and whispering endearments that meant only one thing—mine, mine, mine.

Epilogue

The Coleman house was in chaos. Pulling him up the stairs by the hand, Laurence retreated to his room with Aaron.

“No shenanigans, you two. We’re leaving in half an hour,” Lisa said, bustling down the hall in pale pink silk and strappy heels. Laurence doubted she’d make it as far as the reception without changing into plimsolls.

He shut his door and took a long, lingering look at Aaron, dapper in dove-grey.

“You look stunning. Here, just let me straighten this.” Laurence took the pin out of Aaron’s buttonhole and moved the pink carnation until it lay in line with his lapel.

Louise had insisted that Aaron join the men in morning suits, and that he usher at the church. She’d pointed out to Laurence over two bottles of Pinot that he and Aaron had been together longer than any of them, on and off—seven years. In her infinite wisdom as bride-to-be, she’d also predicted they would be next tying the knot, now it was legal.

Laurence didn’t know about that. It was early days yet. Early, new, good... amazing.

His phone rang as Aaron was running his fingers through the curls he’d let lengthen over the last six months. Aaron had asked and Laurence wouldn’t refuse him anything, not when he asked for so little but needed so much.

“Don’t get it, Laurie. I want you to myself for a few minutes.”

Okay, he’d refuse him nothing except this, because, “I have to get it. It’s Marv’s friend—”

Laurence didn’t explain further and took the call. When he hung up, he took Aaron in his arms and was gifted a beatific smile. If it stayed sunny, if Louise got to the church on time, if his Dad didn’t stammer during his speech, still this day wouldn’t be more perfect.

“What?” Aaron looked away, fiddled with his flower—which explained how it had got crooked the last time.

“Do you remember I said that Marv’s friend’s brother has a design studio in Notting Hill, making kitchens, bedrooms, dining furniture and all that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I sent him pictures of some of your work and he wants to meet you.”

“Hang on. I said I’d think about it. I told you, I’ve only just finished my apprenticeship. I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Laurence remembered what it had cost Aaron, when *he* hadn’t been ready, but this was different. “I know. I told him all that. And all he wants you to do is meet him. You can look around the studio, see if you like what they do. It’s worth a look, surely? You could be in London with me. We could rent a shitty studio and live like paupers and I’ll make you potato salad while you go carve fancy corbels.”

“Corbels? Since when did you know what a corbel is?”

“I don’t know. You pick it up, when you have a boyfriend who’s a master craftsman.”

“I’m not—”

“Not yet. But you will be.”

“Will you come with me?”

“Like you needed to ask.”

Aaron pulled Laurence close and kissed him. There was noise downstairs, the busy noise of love and laughter. It echoed all around the house.

Laurence had thought he would wait but he couldn’t. Kissing Aaron, in his old bedroom on his sister’s wedding day. This was the right moment. “Before we go, I’ve got something for you.”

When Aaron opened the bag, he laughed. When he looked at the engraving on the plaque of the trophy that Laurence had won after the last game he played for Hartnell, his face softened into a tender smile.

Aaron Ford, Man of the Match

Laurence looked into Aaron’s soft brown eyes. “I always thought it should have been yours.”

Aaron brushed his thumb over the engraving. “We could put it on the mantelpiece of our shitty bedsit.”

“What if we don’t have a mantelpiece?”

“Then I’ll make us one.”

There was a call from downstairs. Something about having a wedding to go to. They straightened out their jackets and regarded each other for a long moment.

Aaron's carnation had slipped again. But this time Laurence left it exactly where it was.

The End

Author Bio

Lane Swift currently lives by the sea in Hampshire, England. Aside from looking after her family, she writes stories with romantic happy-ever-afters.

Over the years, she's worked as a waitress, a lab technician, a science teacher and a telecommunications consultant.

When she was younger, she played field hockey then rugby. Nowadays she's a fair-weather runner though she's more likely to exercise by cycling or walking, preferably via the pub.

Lane also likes to make stuff, especially knitted stuff, and potter about in her garden.

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