

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

ALL I EVER WANTED

Lauren Lewis

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

ALL I EVER WANTED

By Lauren Lewis

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

[Poollicht](#), [Perfect white beach](#)

[Sunset in Prague](#), [Purple mountain sunset](#)

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ALL I EVER WANTED

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Photo Description

Two men, both dressed in tuxedos, are standing alone around the back of a church. They are kissing and holding each other close. The taller man has his arms wrapped around the smaller man's waist, while the smaller man is leaning into the kiss and reaching out for his partner.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

There is a man that I've longed for, for a really long time. Growing up I saw him constantly, and even throughout college he has been part of my life. Why have I not approached him? Well, he's my older brother's best friend. And I think he's been in love with my brother for as long as I've been in love with him. Now, on the day of my brother's wedding to a woman, my love interest will have to stand by my brother and watch him start a life with someone else. How can my brother not see what he's going to be losing? What can I do to help my crush?

Please HEA and include the scene depicted in this photo somewhere in the story (whoever the characters are). Lot of fluff is preferred (and sex scenes if you want).

Sincerely,

Kat

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, sweet/no sex, fluff, weddings, set in England, HEA, brother's best friend

Word Count: 16,681

ALL I EVER WANTED

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I heaved myself and my luggage off the train and down onto the busy platform. I was only going home for four days, but with the amount I'd packed, it looked like I'd made plans to move back home for the next few months. I was moving slowly and other travellers were pushing past me in their hurry. I stumbled and swore under my breath after a particularly violent shove. I was *so* ready to get back to Mum's house, where I knew a cup of tea and a hug would be waiting for me.

My backpack weighed me down as I struggled to walk in a straight line, desperately trying to pull my suitcase along behind me. One of the wheels kept getting stuck and was looking rather worse for wear, and I was pretty sure it was only minutes away from falling off completely. It was as if the suitcase wanted to go anywhere but forward and was deliberately trying to pull me in every other direction.

"Come on, you useless bloody thing, hang in there for five more minutes," I muttered, the wheel getting stuck once again and causing the suitcase to fling itself to the side. I stopped and scowled back at it, giving the handle a sharp tug before turning back to face the throng of people ahead of me. No one seemed to have noticed the crazy guy talking to his suitcase, which was a relief.

I scanned the crowd at the front of the station, searching for that familiar smile. My brother, Warren, had called me last night to tell me that it would be his best friend—and best man—Joel who would be picking me up. Warren had also apologised, again, for not asking me to be the best man at his wedding. He insisted that it had been a really tough decision and that, in the end, it had all come down to the toss of a coin. In all honesty, I was kind of thankful that he hadn't picked me. I'd tried to reassure Warren, to let him know that I really hadn't taken it personally, but I wasn't sure he believed me. I loved my brother and all, but I already had so much going on with my studies and my part-time job at a bar back in London, and best man duties would have just added too much to my already pretty hectic life.

Joel was much better suited to the role. He and Warren had been best friends since their school years, and by some miracle they had stayed friends

for the two decades that followed. Joel knew much more about Warren than I ever would. The seven year age gap between Warren and I hadn't helped matters. We had become much closer as we'd grown up and moved into adulthood, but I was still the kid brother.

It was pretty clear to everyone that Joel was also a better candidate in terms of, well, brains. No one thought I was stupid or anything, but it was a well-known fact that I had always been pretty useless when it came to organisation and planning. I wasn't entirely sure how I had made it to my final year at University, especially without failing at least one of my modules. I mostly put that down to the dedication of a handful of good friends who seemed to have made it their life's mission to keep me on the right track. Someone had once said that I couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery, and that wasn't too far from the truth.

It was the Mohawk that caught my eye first. As soon as I saw it, my heart jolted in my chest and then started to pound frantically. Joel was tall and his Mohawk was usually the first thing you saw when you searched for the man in a crowd. I found him leaning against a wall near the entrance to the station and he smiled when his eyes found mine. His beautiful, sky-blue eyes. *Fuck, I've missed this man.* When I'd been living back home with Mum, I'd seen Joel on an almost daily basis. He'd been a good friend over the years, especially when I'd needed someone to talk to or ask for advice when I didn't want to speak to my brother. Warren hadn't always seemed like the most approachable person in my life, but I'd always known that Joel would be there for me. I'd always trusted that he would listen, that he'd offer advice without judgement and that he wouldn't share anything I said with Warren unless I wanted him to. He'd always had my back.

"Hey, Titch!" Joel called out as he spotted me. I rolled my eyes, and his smile grew wider. I hated that nickname and he bloody well *knew it*. It made me sound like a child, which was something I definitely didn't want Joel seeing me as. Besides, I wasn't even that much shorter than he was anymore. I'd caught up as I'd gotten older and I was actually a lot closer to Joel's height now. The nickname had started when I was about eight or nine, though, and it seemed to have stuck.

I took deep breaths and tried to calm myself as I made my way over to where he was standing, looking over at me with that infamous smile. It was only Joel. I'd known him almost my entire life and I'd seen him a million times before, but every single time he smiled at me like that, my insides turned to

jelly. He didn't even need to smile at me. Just being around him made my insides melt. It was like torture. Sweet, beautiful torture.

Pull yourself together and stop being such a sentimental prat, I chided myself. I lifted a hand to wave, calling out a greeting. Joel pushed himself away from the wall as I got closer, walking towards me and pulling me close for a hug. I closed my eyes and savoured it, feeling the loss of his warmth when he let go.

"It's great to see you, mate." He automatically took the handle of my suitcase and started pulling it along behind him. He seemed to be having less trouble with it than I had. Joel glanced over his shoulder to check that I was following, before laughing and shaking his head.

"Christ, Harry. How much stuff did you bring with you?" He eyed my backpack, plus the two overflowing carrier bags hanging from my arms.

"I'm going to my brother's wedding! I needed to come prepared!" I said in mock annoyance. I looked down at the bags hanging from my arms and sighed. "Plus, I brought some books with me. Jon reckons I need to make time to study, and he wouldn't shut up about it until I'd packed a few. It's crap really. It's not like I'll even look at them while I'm here."

Joel nodded but remained silent as we approached his car in the car park. He opened the boot and threw my suitcase inside, then moved over to let me shed myself of all the bags that had been weighing me down.

"So is Jon your... boyfriend?" Joel asked, somewhat reluctantly. His reluctance confused me.

"Um." I stumbled over my response. Joel's question had taken me by surprise. Jon definitely *wasn't* my boyfriend, but he had been my closest friend since we'd met during our first week at Uni. I chuckled to myself as I thought about what it would be like to actually date Jon. I loved the guy, but he drove me crazy most of the time. I sometimes wondered how Aaron, his boyfriend of two years, managed to put up with him. But, despite Jon's constant mothering and nagging, he really was a great guy with such a big heart.

I shook my head as I climbed into the passenger seat and put on my seatbelt. "Nah, he's just a friend. He's one of the guys I share the house with. I think you met him once when you came to visit with Warren. Tall? Blonde? Anyway, he's kind of made it his aim in life to see me pass my degree."

"Oh." Joel didn't say anything else on the matter. He started the engine and headed out of the car park. There was a CD playing but the volume was low,

and Joel reached out to turn it off. Once he was on the road, he started talking again.

“So, how is Uni going? You getting on alright?”

“Yeah,” I smiled. “I’m surviving. I’ve only got a few months left now, which kind of makes me feel a lot better. The end is in sight, you know?”

Joel frowned and glanced over at me briefly. “Is it really that bad?”

“No! I don’t mean it like that. I love Uni, I love my friends and most of my classes. It’s just been a lot of hard work. I’m not the most academic person on the planet, and I’ve had times where I felt like I was getting nowhere, you know? But now I’ve got the dates for my finals and graduation is getting closer. I finally feel like I’m actually *getting* somewhere.”

Joel nodded. “I guess it’s a busy time for you, then?”

“Really busy,” I replied with a nod. I thought I could sense where this conversation might be leading and I really hoped I was wrong. I already felt guilty enough for bailing on my brother’s stag do last weekend and I didn’t need Joel to make me feel even worse.

“Still, it’s a shame you missed Warren’s stag do,” Joel commented. I grimaced, and he shot me a look that made me feel about two inches tall. “I know you’re busy and all, but he would have really liked you there, Harry. *I’d* have liked you there. It wasn’t the same without you.”

My cheeks flushed under Joel’s scrutiny. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I just had a really important exam the following Monday and I had to cover a shift at work. I couldn’t get out of it.”

That was a blatant lie. I *had* wanted to go to Warren’s stag do, but I hadn’t felt like I’d fit in. I had always found that I had very little to talk about with most of Warren’s friends. They’d never really bothered to talk to me, and I’d completely fallen out of the loop since I’d moved away to study. Joel had always been the only person in Warren’s friendship group who’d ever given me the time of day. I knew I’d just end up standing around like a spare part, waiting for Joel or Warren to come and talk to me. Having said all that, the biggest reason for not attending had been Joel himself.

The truth was that I had been harbouring a pretty big crush on Joel for, well, a heck of a long time. I had never made a move before because he’d been Warren’s best friend for nearly twenty years. But there was more to it than that. I knew Joel’s secret, and it killed me a little inside every single time I thought

about it. It made me feel helpless and hopeless and completely fucking *heartbroken*.

Joel was in love with my brother. He'd never actually told me, and he'd never exactly confirmed it. But I'd caught the way Joel looked at Warren too many times not to realise how he felt. All the signs were there, and it baffled me that Warren couldn't see it. Given my own feelings for Joel, I just hadn't been able to go to that stag do. I knew I wouldn't be able to spend the evening in close proximity to them both, watching as Joel stood by my brother and wished him well, knowing that inside his heart was shattering into a thousand pieces. It would be difficult enough to see that happen on Warren's wedding day.

The car was silent. I wasn't sure what else to say, and I was pretty sure that Joel knew I was lying. I prayed that he didn't call me out on it, because I didn't want to have to keep lying to him. Joel said nothing more about the stag do or the wedding, for which I was eternally grateful. After a while, he started filling me in on some of the stuff that had been happening at the sports centre. It was a deliberate attempt to change the subject, but I liked listening to him talking about his work.

Joel worked as a fitness instructor at the local sports centre. He loved his job and he took great pride in it. His enthusiasm was clear in every word he spoke, in the sparkle of his eyes when he talked about the people he worked with, and the clients that he helped. He chatted away and I felt like I could relax again. I stared out the window, taking in the familiar scenery of my home town as he spoke, smiling to myself as I absorbed his words and the comforting sound of his voice. It felt good to be home, and even better to be in Joel's company once again.

Mum was waiting for me at the doorway as Joel pulled into the drive. He parked next to Warren's car, so I knew I'd find my brother inside.

"Here we are," Joel said with a smile. "I'll bring your bags in later. Go say hi to your mum before she spontaneously combusts with excitement."

To say that Mum was happy to see me would have been an understatement. She pulled me close and I swear I heard my spine crack. For someone so small, she certainly had a lot of strength. She pulled away after a few moments, a frown on her face. *Crap, what have I done wrong this time?*

“It would be nice if you bothered to make it home for more than just Christmas and your brother’s wedding. I miss you! I don’t see you enough these days, and you’re my baby boy!”

I groaned and put on my best whining voice. “Mum! I’m not a baby! I’m sorry. I just have so much going on with studying and working. My manager keeps asking me to work overtime, and it’s not like I can afford to turn the extra shifts down.”

Mum lightly patted my cheek. “I know, sweetheart. You work so hard. I’m so proud of you. I know your father would have been, too.”

We didn’t talk about Dad all that much these days, despite how we all missed him. Warren and I always worried that it would upset Mum to hear it, and for the first year or so after he had passed, even the slightest reference to him would have brought her to tears. It had been six years now since he’d died, and Mum was finally in a better place. She spoke about him a lot more, and she never forgot to remind Warren and me of how much he had loved us and of how proud he would have been to see where we both were today.

I walked into the front hall and headed towards the kitchen at the back of the house, where I could hear two familiar voices. Warren and his fiancée, Ashley, were sitting at the kitchen table, flicking through a magazine and drinking coffee. Warren looked up as I walked into the room, a huge grin on his face. He put his mug down and jumped up from his seat.

“It’s my baby brother!” he exclaimed. Before I had a chance to tell him, quite deservedly, to *fuck the hell off*, he pulled me into a tight hug. He patted me on the back hard enough to make me wince. I heard Joel’s chuckle from somewhere behind me.

Physically, Warren and I were completely different. I had brown hair, dark brown eyes, and stood at around five foot ten, all of which I had inherited from my mother. Warren was taller, at close to six foot four, and he had much fairer hair—not quite light enough to be classed as blonde, but pretty close—with pale grey eyes. He had inherited his looks from our dad’s side of the family. Warren was much more built than I was, too. He had muscles without even having to work out. He seemed to forget his own strength at times, and he had enough energy to rival a child or a puppy. I envied him sometimes. I’d never be muscled or strong. I wasn’t exactly scrawny, but I wouldn’t be on the cover of Men’s Fitness any time soon either.

Warren pulled away and grinned down at me. "Christ, I think you got taller. Would you look at that! He's almost as tall as you, Joel." He ruffled my hair before pushing me away.

Warren always did that. He treated me like a child. Even though I knew he meant no harm by acting that way, I still hated it. I hated it even more when he treated me that way in front of Joel. I didn't want Joel to be faced with the constant reminder that I was Warren's kid brother. I wanted him to see me as the man I had become, rather than the kid I used to be. I glanced over at Joel, who was standing just inside the doorway, watching the two of us. There was a smile on his face, and I noticed the hint of something in his eyes. Something I couldn't quite place. When he caught me staring, he winked. I quickly turned my face away to hide my blush.

Ashley stood next and, with much more grace, pulled me into a hug. "It's lovely to see you, Harry," she spoke softly.

There were no two ways about it, Ashley was a stunner. She had wavy, shoulder-length brown hair and a gorgeous hourglass figure. She was the kind of woman that made heads turn. If I hadn't been one hundred percent gay, I'd have totally fallen for her too. To top it all off, she was a really nice person and super smart. She'd studied Law at University, and now she worked for some big law company in the city. Warren and Ashley made a very beautiful couple, and it was easy to see how much they loved each other. They had met at a mutual friend's birthday party a little over five years ago, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Ashley walked back over to the table and picked up her handbag, slinging it over her shoulder. "I've got to head out, but I just wanted to be here to see you." She turned her gaze to her fiancée and laughed. "And to wish you luck with this guy."

"Ashley gets the house for all the bridal things, and she's basically kicked me out until after the wedding, which means you and Mum are stuck with me until then," Warren said with a wink.

"Well let's be thankful that the wedding is the day after tomorrow," our mother commented, walking further into the kitchen and putting the kettle on. I snickered and Warren held his hand to his heart, a mock expression of pain on his face.

"Mother! You wound me!"

"You'll be fine," she replied dryly.

"I can stay with Joel if you don't want me here," Warren said casually, a slight twinkle in his eye as he shot me a look.

"Don't be so ridiculous, Warren! You're staying with your mother, and I won't hear another word about it."

Joel and I both chuckled as Warren laughed and stood to pull our mother close for a hug. "I was kidding, Mum."

I watched as Mum reached up to pat Warren's cheek affectionately. I'd missed this while I was in London. It hit me like a tonne of bricks just how much I missed my family. My mum, my brother, and Joel. Ashley, too. She'd been a part of Warren's life for so long now, and she already felt like an important part of our family.

Ashley kissed Warren goodbye and then hugged me, Mum, and Joel on her way out. Mum made us all cups of tea, and Warren and I sat around chatting while she prepared the dinner and Joel brought my bags in from the car. I was starting to feel a little tired, so I made my excuses and headed up to my room. I smiled as I noticed the 'Harry's Den' plaque on the door that my dad had made for me when I was five or six years old. I'd never had the heart to take it down.

It had been three months since I'd last been home. My room was exactly as I had left it. It hadn't changed much at all in the three years since I'd moved away. The pale blue walls were still covered in band and film posters, and there was a notice board on the far wall that was decorated with photographs and tickets from various gigs I'd attended. The only thing that had been changed were the sheets on the bed, which Mum had obviously provided in preparation for my arrival. I threw my bags on the floor by my desk, then hauled my suitcase onto the bed and started unpacking. I was only going to be back for a few days but I hated living out of a suitcase.

This had been my room for most of my life, yet it always felt strange for a while when I came back here, as if I was in somebody else's space. I knew it was silly, but it took me a while to adjust. I threw my clothes into drawers and then walked over to the window, looking out at the back garden. It was getting dark and I couldn't see all that much, but I could make out the old greenhouse at the bottom of the garden where dad had grown his vegetables. It was mostly just used as storage now. I turned back to my room and looked over at the notice board with all my photos and little pieces of memorabilia from the various places I'd visited.

One particular photo caught my eye. It was one of my favourites. It had been taken on my fourteenth birthday and was of me, Warren, and Joel. My dad had taken it, all of us standing together in the front garden. I'm standing in the middle and I look like a midget in between those two giants. Joel has an arm around my shoulders and Warren and I are laughing, although I have no idea what was so funny. My head is turned away from the camera and I'm looking up at Joel, who's staring at the camera with one eye closed because the sun was shining in his eyes. Even back then, I was hopelessly in love with my brother's best friend. I think my dad knew. He was the first person I came out to, and also the only person I came out to until after his passing.

"Harry! Dinner's on the table!" Mum's shout snapped me out of my thoughts. I glanced towards my bedroom door, then back towards the notice board. My heart ached with longing, a longing for so many things. For Dad to be alive again. To be back in that moment right there in that picture, with all of us together and so *happy*. I longed for Joel. I longed for him to love me, to look at me in the same way that I saw him look at Warren sometimes. I shook myself, trying to clear my head and stop myself from being so hopelessly sentimental, and then turned and headed down for dinner.

Everyone was already seated at the table when I got downstairs. Joel was sitting next to Warren, chatting about one of their friends who had just got back from a holiday abroad. Joel glanced over at me as I took my seat next to Mum, then thoughtfully filled me in on their conversation. Joel was like that, always making sure I felt included. Warren changed the topic of conversation to the wedding, and I mostly tuned him out as I started eating.

I hadn't realised how hungry I was until that very moment, and I had definitely missed Mum's cooking. She had made cottage pie, which was one of my absolute favourite meals. It smelt delicious. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a proper home-cooked dinner. My life at University consisted of microwave food, pizza, or the occasional pasta dish or curry whenever Jon agreed to cook.

"Seriously, I can't believe how crazy the wedding planning has been, but Ashley has loved every second of it. I know it makes me sound like a total chick, but it's just so good to see her happy." Warren paused to eat, and then started talking again. "But you never know, Joel. It could be you next! You'll find some guy and you'll fall head over heels like I did, and then you'll be the next to settle down."

Joel was silent for a moment. I looked up at him, watching for his reaction. He nodded his head slightly. "Yeah, maybe," was his only response.

"Mate, it's gonna happen. You just wait," Warren laughed. "You can't be alone all your life, one day you'll realise that."

Our mum shot Warren a look, but he carried on talking regardless. "I'm serious. You must realise what you're missing, right?" Warren shot me a quick glance, and then looked over at Joel again with a smug grin. "Some guy is going to come and sweep you off your feet and you won't know what hit you."

Warren didn't mean any harm with what he was saying, but it was just like my brother to speak before he actually thought about the damage his words might cause. He was hurting Joel, that much was obvious. I could see the pain in Joel's eyes at Warren's words, and I was almost certain that Mum could see it too. But while we might have been able to see the hurt that was so painfully obvious, Warren was apparently oblivious to it. He kept on talking, unaware of how much he was hurting his best friend. He eventually stopped ribbing Joel about his love life and moved back to wedding planning, but that wounded look never left Joel's eyes. I couldn't get over it. I couldn't let Warren's words or the hurt he was causing go. I looked down at my plate, my appetite suddenly gone.

"This is complete bullshit."

I hadn't meant to say the words out loud. I'd taken myself by surprise just as much as everyone else. I supposed it was the look on Joel's face that had finally made me snap. That look of sadness was breaking my heart. Joel was pining over my older brother, and I knew he would never feel that way about me, no matter how much I wished otherwise. I wanted to punch Warren square in the jaw. I wanted to scream at him for letting Joel fall for him, for not seeing how hopelessly in love Joel was and for being such a smug prick about *everything*. I wanted to hurt him the way he was hurting Joel. I wanted to tear him a new asshole for breaking the heart of the man I'd been hopelessly in love with for years. Most of all, I wanted Joel to see how much I loved him. I would *never* hurt him like that, and I just wished that he could see it. I wished I had the courage to tell him, to shout "Love me instead!" and make him realise that, yes, I might be a few years younger than him and I might be Warren's brother, but I was here and I was an adult now and I fucking *loved* him with every single molecule of my being.

I took a deep breath. The silence that followed my outburst was almost painful. I wanted to take back the words. This wasn't Warren's fault, not really.

I looked around at the three sets of eyes that were staring at me, wary and confused. Warren looked offended. Mum was frowning and shaking her head.

“Watch your mouth, young man. You don’t swear at my dinner table, and you certainly don’t say such things about your brother’s wedding.”

“I didn’t... it wasn’t about—” I wasn’t exactly sure what to say. How could I even begin to explain what my problem was? My hands began to shake, and I felt my cheeks heat with embarrassment and shame. I stood and pushed away from the table. Without another word, I turned and left the room. I headed out the patio door and into the back garden. The outside light clicked on as it sensed my presence, and I started to pace.

I heard the patio door slide open several moments later, and I turned my head slightly to see Joel walking towards me. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to talk to him right now, but perhaps it was time to be honest. Perhaps it was time to say whatever it was that I needed to say, and let the chips fall where they may. Joel stopped a few steps away, his hands in his pockets. He didn’t say anything. He just looked down at his shoes.

“I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have snapped like that,” I mumbled.

“Warren’s pretty upset. He thinks you’re mad because he didn’t ask you to be his best man.”

I sighed and ran a shaky hand through my hair. “That’s not what this is about, Joel.”

There was an awkward silence. I was getting pretty sick of awkward silences, so I let myself ask what I needed to ask. I just needed to hear Joel say it. I needed to hear the truth so that I could get past this.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

Joel’s eyes snapped to mine, but he wasn’t quick enough to hide the pain that reflected in them. “No,” he replied.

“Don’t lie to me, Joel. We’re supposed to be friends. Can’t you at least give me the truth?”

Joel sighed and shrugged his shoulders, looking back down at the ground. “I’m not lying, Harry. I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

I turned to face him. I was confused. I knew that I hadn’t misread all the signs. “But you looked so sad back in there. You look sad every time Warren talks about Ashley, every time Warren talks about how much he loves her. I’ve

seen the way you look at him.” *The way I wish you’d look at me*, I thought. “You don’t date anyone for longer than a few months, and you’ve never been in a serious relationship. I know it’s because of Warren, so please don’t stand there and lie to my face.”

Joel shook his head. “It’s not what you think, Harry.”

“Then what is it?” I asked. I needed him to explain what was going on. I just needed to understand.

“I’m not in love with him, alright?” Joel looked back at the patio door, checking that we were still alone, before continuing. “I thought I was, once. He was my first crush, he was the one who was always there for me, the one who helped me come to terms with who I am. He was my shoulder to cry on when shit got bad, the one who helped me pick up the pieces after my dad rejected me. I love him for that. I’ll always love him for that.”

Joel paused and rubbed at his eyes with his palm. “But you’re right, I *am* sad. I’m sad because I want what he’s found with Ashley. I want to find a love as strong as that. In an ideal world, I’d have liked to have found it with Warren. But he’s straight and his heart belongs to someone else. I accepted that a long time ago, and I’m fine with it.”

Joel took a deep breath after he’d finished speaking. I noticed that he wouldn’t look at me and that his face was flushed. I felt like a complete asshole for making him spill all his feelings, for pushing him to tell me. I’d been so hung up on how much I needed to hear the truth that I hadn’t put enough thought into how difficult this might have been for Joel. I’d made this all about *me*, about how *I* felt, and I’d had no right to do that.

Joel closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. His shoulders sagged. He opened his eyes and looked up at the night sky. “Don’t tell Warren about any of this, okay? I’m over it, I really am. It’s just... it’s hard to let go sometimes. I know that one day I’ll find someone, someone who’ll love me back.” He blushed a bit more at that, although I wasn’t entirely sure why. He still wasn’t looking at me. “It’s just that Warren was my first crush, and he’s been my best friend for so long. He’s had a place in my heart since I was a kid and that’s not something that just goes away.”

I nodded and reached out to rest my hand on Joel’s arm. I wanted to pull him in for a hug but something stopped me. We’d never been afraid to hug before but suddenly something felt different. I felt like I’d crossed a line with Joel, and I didn’t want to step too far over it in case he pushed me away.

“Is that why you snapped at Warren back there? Was it because you thought he was hurting me?” Joel raised an eyebrow and looked down at me curiously. I felt my cheeks flush slightly.

“I snapped because you’re my friend, Joel. I care about you, and I couldn’t just sit there and watch him break your heart without saying *something*.”

Joel sighed and lifted his arm to rest it across my shoulders. The warmth of his body at my side was comforting. “My heart isn’t broken, Harry. Bruised, maybe. But not broken. Most of the guys I’ve dated all proved themselves to be complete pricks after a month or two, which is why I’ve never been in a serious relationship. I don’t know, maybe I *was* comparing them to Warren. Either way, it never ended well.”

I sighed and rubbed a hand over my eyes. I buried myself closer into his side, treasuring the warmth and comfort of his body. I looked up at him. “Joel, any guy would be lucky to have you.” *I’d be so lucky to have you.* “You’re the nicest, funniest, most genuine person I’ve ever met. If a guy doesn’t see that, then he’s an idiot.” *I see that. Every single day, I see how perfect and wonderful you are.*

Joel flushed and laughed. “You really think so?”

“I do. You’re amazing, Joel.”

Joel bit his bottom lip right then, and it took all my strength not to groan. He didn’t seem to realise just how perfect he was, just how much I *wanted* him. Joel looked into my eyes and I heard his breath catch. In that moment, I was so sure he was going to kiss me. He reached for me with the arm that wasn’t already around my shoulders, resting his hand gently on my neck and smiling down at me. My heart was pounding so hard and so fast in my chest that I was sure he’d be able to hear it.

“Thank you,” he spoke softly.

He lowered his hand, but I wasn’t ready for him to pull away. I’d seen something in his eyes, I was sure of it. I reached out to grab his hand and trap it in my own, then leaned forward and pulled him against me so that our chests were touching. I looked up into his eyes. His perfect, beautiful blue eyes that were staring down into my own darker ones.

That’s when I kissed him. I wanted him to know he was not alone. I wanted him to feel the warmth and comfort of another person. At first he didn’t respond, but after a few seconds he began to kiss me back. His lips pressed

gently against mine, and the moment was so perfect that I could cry. I opened my mouth to let him in and lifted my hands to cup his face.

After a few more seconds, Joel pushed me away. It was a gentle push but it was enough for me to get the message. Joel didn't want me. I panicked and looked away.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry."

Joel cupped my chin and turned my head so that I was facing him. "Harry, it's fine."

"It's not fine. I've wanted to do that for so long but you're sad, you're confused, and you don't think of me that way. Fuck, you pushed me away. *Oh shit*. I shouldn't..."

Joel cut me off with a gentle hug. Thankfully my mouth and my brain caught up with each other and I stopped speaking. The hug took me by surprise and stopped me from making such a fool of myself. My thoughts all muddled together as I tried to understand what this hug might mean. Was it my consolation prize? Was it Joel's way of getting me to shut the hell up?

"Really, Harry. Don't be sorry. It was nice. It's just that I'm not sure this is the best timing in the world, and you're Warren's kid brother. I don't think he'd like this. I don't know whether I should—"

I pulled away from Joel and stumbled backwards, nearly tripping. Joel shot me a look, and his eyes flashed with what appeared to be remorse. Fuck, he regretted kissing me. I couldn't look at him. I couldn't bear to see the regret in his eyes. I took a few steps back. My heart felt heavy and my body felt like lead. "What, so that's all I am to you? *Warren's kid brother*? I thought I was supposed to be your friend, too! And in case it escaped your notice, I'm hardly a kid. I'm twenty-one years old!"

"Harry, you know that's not what I meant, I—" Joel reached for me, but I took a few more steps back. I was close to tears and I just wanted to go back inside and hide for a while. Joel looked like he was going to say something more, but I didn't want to hear it.

"We should go inside," I mumbled. "They'll be looking for us, and I think I'd better apologise for being such a prick." I made my way to the patio door without another word.

"Harry, please, let's talk about this," Joel said, desperation clear in his voice. I carried on walking and didn't look back.

I lay in bed that night and thought back over the last fifteen or so years of my life, trying to pinpoint the exact moment when I fell in love with my brother's best friend. I'd been in love with Joel Clarke for almost as long as I could remember. There seemed to be no defining moment or epiphany where I suddenly realised "Hey, I totally love this guy!" It had been a gradual thing, a slow burn that had grown and grown until it had completely taken over my heart and I couldn't possibly imagine ever loving another person in the same way.

I first met Joel when I was four years old. I can't actually remember the day I met him, but Mum once told me about it. She said that Warren had come home from school shouting about the new kid in his class, and the next day Warren had invited him over for dinner. All I can really remember is that, from the moment the other boy had walked through our front door and into my life, I had been fascinated by him. Warren was a popular kid throughout his school years, and he'd always had lots of friends over to hang out. The difference with Joel was that he hadn't ignored me like all of Warren's other friends.

Warren and I had always gotten along just fine, for the most part. We argued and fought like most brothers do, but there were never any doubts as to whether we loved each other, and Warren had always looked out for me. I'd been a pretty small child, but with Warren and Joel watching my back, I barely ever got picked on. The age gap had been the biggest issue. Seven years might not seem like a huge difference in the grand scheme of things but, as children, Warren didn't always want his little brother hanging around. Like on his sixteenth birthday when he had yelled at me for interrupting him when he'd had a group of friends over. I had been really upset that day and had ended up running off in tears. Joel had been there, and he'd left Warren's room to watch TV with me until I'd cheered up. He'd always been nice like that, and it was just one of the many reasons why I loved him.

Joel had been an amazing friend to Warren and me after our dad passed away. He had been instrumental in helping us to cope and move past it as best as we could. I was fifteen when Dad had a heart attack, and he died almost instantly. None of us had seen it coming, and it very nearly tore our family apart. Mum was a wreck for a while, but she'd tried her best to stay strong for her boys. Joel was a shoulder to cry on for both of us. But he had also been much more than that. He was the one who held our hands at the funeral, who came over to the house to help Mum and Warren with tidying and clearing out Dad's belongings, who had listened and given advice when all any of us wanted

to do was scream and shout or punch our fists through a wall. While my heart still breaks for the dad that I lost and the years I have spent, and will spend, without him in my life, Joel helped ease that pain. His friendship and his kind words helped me to move past my grief.

I came out to Joel not long after my dad had passed away, the day before I told Mum and Warren. I told him about a boy from my class that I'd shared my first kiss with, and he'd high-fived me, hugged me and promised me that everything would be okay. He had even offered to come with me when I told Mum and Warren. They both already knew that Joel was gay and had been completely fine with it, so I wasn't really too worried about their reaction. I just didn't want my mum or my brother to feel like I'd let them down. Joel had been really supportive, which had only served to deepen my feelings for him.

I was about sixteen or seventeen when I started to notice the way that Joel looked at Warren, as well as the looks of jealousy that he sometimes shot in Ashley's direction once she became a part of Warren's life. In hindsight, I think Joel had been looking at my brother that way for some time, even before then. I imagined it was probably the same way that I looked at Joel, and from that moment forward I tried really hard to control the way I looked at him when there were other people around. I was scared I'd give myself away and he'd find out how much I wanted him. I thought that he'd stop being my friend if he found out how I really felt. I was worried that Warren would realise that I was crushing on his best friend and call me out on it.

I managed to control my feelings, for the most part. I mean, up until today when I'd kissed him. *Fucking hell*. I'd left for University at eighteen, and I'd had this crazy thought in my head of how I'd find some amazing guy who'd be my boyfriend and I'd finally get over all these feelings I had for Joel. Clearly, that hadn't happened. If anything, the distance had only made my feelings stronger. I still spoke to Joel on Facebook and through texts, and he'd even come down to London to see me a few times. He had always visited with Warren, though.

I cringed at the thought of what might happen when I next saw Joel. He'd want to talk about what had happened, probably to tell me that it could never happen again. Probably to remind me that I was *just Warren's little brother and nothing more*, and that nothing would ever happen between us. But for tonight, I let myself imagine that he wouldn't say those things. I let myself imagine that he would pull me close and kiss me, that he'd tell me he loved me. It was with those thoughts in my head that I finally fell to sleep. I dreamed of Joel, of his

body pressed against mine, of his hard cock as it slid inside me, of his perfect blue eyes as they gazed down into my own when we made love. I woke just as my orgasm hit me. My body shuddered and my back arched. It felt amazing, right up until I realised that I was alone.

I got out of bed early the next day. I could hear sounds from the TV downstairs, so I made my way to the living room wearing only the thin t-shirt that I'd gone to bed in and a fresh pair of boxer shorts. I found Warren sitting on the sofa, dressed in a suit, with an Xbox controller in his hand. I glanced over at the TV for a moment before raising an eyebrow and snorting out a laugh.

"You brought your Xbox with you?" I asked incredulously.

"Of course I did. I wasn't gonna stay here for two days without it, was I?" Warren didn't look away from his game.

"Are you being serious right now?" I flopped down on the sofa next to him and pulled my legs up so they were under me. I was cold, but I couldn't be bothered to head back upstairs to get dressed. I shivered a little then kicked my legs back out so that my cold toes were resting against Warren's warm thighs.

"Eurgh! Get your disgusting feet away from me," he laughed, pushing them away with one hand while he tried using his controller with the other.

"My feet are perfect, you asshole!" I laughed and kicked him lightly, then pulled my feet back. I sighed and rested my head against the back of the sofa. I was still feeling a little tired since I hadn't had a particularly good night's sleep.

Warren paused his game and turned to face me. "Are you alright?" he asked.

I grunted. "Yeah, I'm fine. What's with the suit?" I tried changing the subject. I didn't really feel like talking about my problems right now and I didn't want Warren to start worrying about me.

Warren looked down at himself. "This is what grown-ups wear when they go to work," he replied.

"Says the guy who's playing Xbox at his mum's house at seven o'clock in the morning," I responded.

"Touché," Warren laughed. He threw his controller onto the coffee table and then looked over at me intently. "You sure you're okay, Harry? It's just

that you've been acting weird since you got here. Is it because I didn't ask you to be my best man? 'Cause I thought we discussed that. I thought you were okay with it."

"No, it's not that. It's nothing, I'm sorry." I didn't want to ruin the next few days for Warren. I felt like a total prick for being miserable and for making him think that I was mad at him.

"Is it..." Warren looked down for a moment. "Is it Joel? Has something happened between you two?"

"No!" I exclaimed, probably too quickly. Warren raised an eyebrow. "No, not really," I mumbled lamely.

"You know what?" Warren asked. "I've been thinking it for a while now, and I reckon you and Joel would be pretty great together. Even when we were kids, you two got on so well. It pissed me off most of the time. I wanted you to go away, but Joel was always happy to let you hang around. It drove me *insane*."

"Well, nothing will ever happen," I snapped.

Warren gave me a knowing look. "But you want it to, right?"

I nodded. I couldn't believe I was actually admitting this to Warren, but I realised that I needed to share what I was feeling with someone. I really wanted my big brother to support me, and it seemed like Warren wasn't completely against the idea.

"If he can't see how awesome you are, he doesn't deserve you."

"That's probably the nicest thing you've ever said to me," I said with a smile.

"Yeah probably," Warren grinned for a moment before he turned serious again. "Joel is my best friend, but you're my brother. I can kick his arse for you, if you want."

I smiled. "Nah, it's cool. But thanks."

"Alright then. Is there anything else that's bothering you?"

I shook my head. I wasn't about to tell Warren what Joel and I had discussed last night. *Oh yeah, there is one more thing. Your best friend used to have this super mad crush on you and it's tearing me apart.* "No, that pretty much covers it."

“Okay.” Warren didn’t sound convinced but he let it go. I really appreciated it. “Well, I have to go into work today. No rest for the wicked. Joel is gonna pick you up and take you into town so that you can both get your tuxedos sorted, plus Ashley has asked him to pick up the flowers and drop them off at the house this afternoon. You okay with that?”

I rolled my eyes. “Do I really have a choice?”

“Nope.” Warren grinned and jumped up from his seat, picking up the Xbox controller and throwing it in my lap. “He’s working an early shift so he’ll be here at about twelve. I’d better head out. I’m showing two houses this morning, and I’ve got a fucking mountain of work on my desk. Bring on the honeymoon!”

I smiled over at my brother as he grabbed his jacket and his keys and headed for the door. I loved seeing him so happy, and it was hard to hate him for what he’d been putting Joel through. It’s not like Warren had led Joel on all these years, was it? Warren checked his hair in the mirror by the door, then turned and waved.

“Catch you later, Titch.”

Nope, scrap that. It was pretty darn easy to hate him.

Joel turned up at 12:21, not that I’d been counting down the minutes and seconds or anything. He’d texted me about an hour beforehand to say that he might be a little late, since he was planning to grab a quick shower at the end of his shift. I heard Joel’s car approach from my spot on the sofa, where I was watching a day-time television show that I found strangely addictive. I jumped up from my seat and glanced out the window, confirming that it was Joel. Once he’d parked and climbed out of his car, Joel walked straight through the front door without even knocking. I forgot that he did that, that he treated this place like his home. It brought a smile to my face.

“Hey, Claire,” he called out to Mum, who was busy tidying the kitchen and singing along to the radio. Mum poked her head out into the living room and smiled. She was always so pleased to see Joel and treated him like one of her own.

“Hello sweetheart, how are you? Would you like a cup of tea before you head out?”

Joel shook his head and told her he was fine, and she went back to whatever she’d been doing in the kitchen. Joel finally turned to face me. He looked

unsure of himself, which wasn't something I was used to seeing. He was a fairly confident man, someone who seemed to know how to deal with almost any situation. Except, perhaps, when your best friend's younger brother had kissed you the night before. Yeah, I could see how that might make things more difficult for him. I felt bad, though, because I really didn't want Joel to feel uncomfortable around me. Things had never been awkward between us before, and I was starting to hate myself for ruining that.

Perhaps the best course of action would be to act like nothing had ever happened. He could choose to go along with it, or he could choose to say something. I wasn't sure which of those options I'd prefer, but at least this way the decision would be his. I grabbed my jacket from the back of the sofa and pulled it on, then nodded my head in the direction of the door. "I guess we'd better get a move on, yeah?"

Joel took a deep breath, as if to steady himself. There was a look of determination in his eyes as he took a few steps towards me. "Just wait a second, Harry."

"Yeah?" I asked. My hands began to shake a little, so I folded my arms across my chest to try and hide it. I tilted my head to the side and really *looked* at Joel. He seemed tired. No, scrap that. He looked absolutely *knackered*. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just tired. I didn't sleep well last night." He paused and I could see that he was looking for the right words. "I wanted to say sorry for what I said yesterday, after we kissed. You're not a kid. Trust me, I know that. And you *are* my friend. I'm sorry if I made you think otherwise."

"Oh." I'd expected him to scold me for kissing him, or say that Warren was never to find out about what had happened, or maybe even ignore me altogether. I hadn't really expected an apology. I didn't really *want* an apology. I certainly wasn't sorry for kissing him. I shook my head in exasperation. "You don't need to apologise to me, Joel. I probably shouldn't have snapped or come on to you like that, I guess."

"It's fine, Harry." Joel glanced over at the kitchen before he continued, making sure that Mum wasn't listening in on our conversation. "That's what I was trying to say to you last night, but you wouldn't let me finish. All that stuff you said, it was really sweet of you. And the kiss... the kiss was nice, too." The last part was spoken so softly that I could barely hear it.

"Nice? Seriously?!" I laughed. I couldn't help it. It wasn't even funny, not really. "You pushed me away!"

Joel raised an eyebrow at my outburst and took a few steps in my direction. "You just took me by surprise, that's all. I needed a moment to process, but then you bailed on me. Harry, we need to talk about what happened."

"No, we don't."

My hands were still shaking and I suddenly felt terrified. Not of Joel, but of this whole situation. I didn't want to talk anymore. What the hell was there to talk about, anyway? At the end of the day, he'd been the one to break the kiss. He'd been the one to push me away and tell me that it was a bad idea. He'd said the kiss was nice, but so what? That didn't mean anything. We had been talking about his feelings—or at least his past feelings—for my brother mere seconds before the kiss, so please forgive me if *'nice'* didn't exactly fill me with hope.

Joel sighed and reached out to rest his hands on my shoulders, then gently pulled me toward him. We were standing so close together, almost embracing. He leaned in to brush a quick kiss on my temple, then another on my cheek. I hadn't seen that coming. My heart was pounding and I didn't move, afraid of what might happen if I did. Afraid that Joel might let me go and I'd never feel his hands on me like this again.

"We really need to get moving, but we're going to talk about this later," Joel spoke the words into my ear. "And you're going to let me speak this time."

I nodded and took a step back, then took a deep breath as I tried to calm myself. "Alright, fine. But not now, not here."

I extricated myself from Joel's arms, despite how much I'd wanted to stay wrapped up in them. I could still hear Mum moving around in the kitchen, so I called out to her, letting her know that we were heading into town. Once we were away from the house and on the road, Joel started up on his questions about my classes and my friends. It was like nothing had changed at all. He asked me what music I was listening to these days, what new films I'd seen, and what TV shows I was watching. Despite everything that had happened since I'd been back and just minutes ago back at the house, it was surprisingly easy to chat with Joel.

We were busy for the rest of the day, right up until late afternoon. Picking up the tuxedos hadn't been much of a problem, but the flowers had turned out to be something of a nightmare. There had been a lot more than either of us had expected, and it had been tricky getting them all into Joel's car. We didn't want them getting damaged, so we were wary to put them on the back seats in case they fell down. I ended up riding with some of the flowers on my lap. The smell

drove me mad, and I started to think that I might be allergic. The desire to sneeze was like nothing I had ever felt before. My nose kept twitching and my eyes were watering, and Joel thought it was the most hilarious thing ever. I was less than amused. I was extremely grateful when we finally dropped them all off with Ashley, and when she hadn't murdered us for destroying them.

"Do you fancy dinner at my place tonight?" Joel asked as he reversed out of Ashley and Warren's driveway.

"Really?" The question took me by surprise. It was only five, but we'd both skipped a proper lunch in favour of a packet of crisps and a Kit Kat. The idea of having dinner with Joel gave me butterflies. *Fucking butterflies*. I felt like a twelve-year-old girl with a crush. "Just us?"

Joel smiled. "Just us."

I blushed at my question. I hadn't actually intended to say it out loud. I tried to think of something witty to say to cover for the needy and somewhat pathetic question that had left my mouth before my brain had decided to kick in. "Um, are you going to cook? 'Cause I'm not sure that's such a great idea."

"Fuck off," Joel said, without any real force behind the words. Then he shook his head and grinned. "Nah, I can order take-away if you want. Probably safer that way, right?"

We decided on Chinese from the only decent take-away restaurant in town, and then headed back to Joel's place. Joel lived in a small two-bedroom house on the outskirts of town. I'd only been there a couple of times before, but very little had changed. The small front garden was tidy and colourful—most probably the result of my own mother's handiwork—and as Joel pulled into the driveway, I couldn't help but notice how much this place stood out from the rest of the houses on the street. Perhaps it was all in my head, given my feelings about the person who lived there, but the place looked so much more homey and comforting. The place suited Joel, especially with the trendy, modern appliances and warm colours that I knew were inside.

Joel unlocked the front door and stood aside to let me through first, the bags containing our dinner in his hand. "Age before beauty," I joked, signalling for him to head inside.

He snorted a laugh as he rolled his eyes and stepped into his home. I followed him into the front hallway, glancing up at the framed photographs that hung along the entire length of one wall. They hadn't been there the last time I had visited. There were several of them—a couple of his parents, a few from

nights out and parties, but it was the one at the far end that caught my eye. It was a bigger copy of the same photo I had pinned to the notice board in my bedroom back home, the one that had been taken on my fourteenth birthday. Joel had framed this?

I couldn't hide my smile when Joel turned to face me, and shot me a wink that made my heart melt and my smile widen. He glanced over to the picture and laughed, walking up to my side and looking at it too.

"I love this picture," he commented, glancing down at me with a smile of his own. "I've got loads of pictures of us all together, but this is my favourite. It was such a perfect moment, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it was. I just can't believe you framed this."

Joel wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me gently to his side. "Of course I framed it. This picture means a lot to me. *You* mean a lot to me."

I nodded my head but said nothing. It wasn't often that I was lost for words, which Joel knew all too well. He grinned as he let me go, turning to head into the kitchen. He grabbed plates and cutlery before we sat at the dining table and ate in companionable silence.

Once he'd finished, I watched as Joel walked over to the sink. I couldn't take my eyes off of him while his back was turned, admiring the view and feeling my cheeks burn with lust. I managed to tear my eyes away from his arse just as Joel turned to lean against the counter. "So," he began. "I can give you a ride home after this, or you could stay and watch a film. We could have that chat."

"Yeah, I'd like to stay." I couldn't hide the fact that I was nervous. My voice sounded weak and shaky. I wanted to stay here with Joel, and I knew that we needed to have that talk, regardless of whether I'd like the outcome. I was afraid that Joel would break my heart, but I was also afraid of what would happen if he didn't. What if we *did* decide to take this further? What then? Could it really work, or would I always be compared to Warren? And what if it didn't work out? What if I ended up losing Joel as a friend? My thoughts turned to what Warren would think of all this. He'd practically given me his blessing this morning, but there was much more to this than Warren would ever know.

"You're thinking too much." Joel's words snapped me back to reality. He was watching me, smiling, with the hint of something else in his eyes. It looked like affection, and he'd looked at me that way for years, but there was

something else there now. Something I couldn't quite place. Maybe he was nervous too?

I laughed as I stood up from the table, taking my own plate to the sink. "Well I've never been accused of that before."

I caught Joel rolling his eyes at me once again before I turned and headed into his front room. Joel had a huge DVD collection, and I looked through it for something decent to watch. Yes, I was also looking for an excuse to put off our conversation just a tiny bit longer, enough for me to actually catch my breath. Joel and I had always had a very similar taste in TV and films, mostly because he'd been the one who'd gotten me into science fiction and fantasy when I was a kid. Warren and Joel would watch *Star Wars*, *Buffy*, and even *Star Trek* re-runs, and they'd let me sit and watch with them if I promised not to talk through it. They had both been pretty diehard TV junkies, and talking through anything was a definite way to get my arse kicked. It had all been good fun, though, and I knew that Warren had loved introducing me to all his favourite films and shows. I chuckled to myself at the fond memories.

"What are you laughing about?" Joel asked. He was right behind me, the words spoken softly into my ear. I spun around, his copy of the original *Total Recall* in my hands. He was so close that I could feel his breath on my face. *Fuck, he's gorgeous.* My dick was in agreement, and I was mortified by my reaction. I didn't want to embarrass myself again like I had the night before. But there was definitely something in the way he was looking at me... it was different, new, and it filled my heart with fear and hope in equal measure. I hadn't seen that look on his face before. At least not while he'd been looking at me, anyway.

"Um, I was just remembering when you and Warren used to let me watch TV with you. Um, let's watch this." I held the DVD up in front of us like a shield. "Or we could watch *The Hobbit*. I haven't seen that one yet."

Joel nodded but didn't move away. He took the DVD from my hands and put it down on the shelf behind me. "Either is fine. But could I... could I kiss you first?"

I shook my head. "I don't think that would be a good idea." *Liar.* I thought it would be a *brilliant* idea. "Maybe we shouldn't."

Despite my words, I leaned forward and my eyes fluttered closed. Joel's lips met mine in a kiss that started out gentle but quickly developed into something much more passionate and needy. I couldn't believe it, this was really

happening. I was kissing Joel, and he wasn't pushing me away this time. *He* had kissed me. Joel wrapped me in his arms and pulled my body against his own. My erection rubbed against his denim-clad thigh and brought me back to my senses, if only for a moment.

"That's not... we shouldn't..." I felt lightheaded. I couldn't find the words I needed, mostly because I didn't really want to say them. Why was I trying to ruin this moment? *Shut up, Harry, for fuck's sake.* I felt like I should push him away this time, but I didn't *want* to. Joel didn't let me go, but he pulled back a little to look down into my eyes.

"Why not?" Joel wasn't trying to push me, but he sounded genuinely curious. "Harry, tell me what you're thinking. Please."

"You don't want this, not really. You pushed me away last night, Joel." My mind was whirling and screaming at me to stop talking. *Just take what you can get, Harry. Don't ruin this.*

Joel brought a hand up to gently cup my cheek. "I know, and I'm so sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have kissed you until we'd talked about whatever this is, I just... I couldn't help myself. Can we talk about this? Please?"

"I don't know what you want me to say, Joel."

"I want you to tell me what you're thinking. Something happened between us last night, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it since. There's something here between us, isn't there? I'd really like to explore it, but I need you to talk to me, Harry."

Joel was still cradling my face in his hand, and I liked that. His thumb moved softly against my cheekbone in a tender caress. I let out a low whimper. I should have been embarrassed by it, but I was too busy trying to process exactly what Joel was saying, replaying his words to make sure I'd heard him correctly. "Really? You want to explore this? Us? You want to... what? See where this goes?"

He nodded and rested his forehead gently against my own. I closed my eyes and sighed. "I care about you Joel, but I don't want to be a stand-in for my brother."

Joel backed away from me then, although he didn't let go of me entirely. His hands moved to rest at my waist. "Are you being serious? You're not a stand-in, Harry. How could you even think that?"

"I'm just going by what you said last night. You loved him for so long, how can I be anything else? How could you feel anything real for me?" I suddenly

sounded like a whining child and I hated it, but I couldn't stop myself. "You do love him. You don't need to lie to me, Joel. Just don't pretend that you love me for me."

Joel reached out and brushed a strand of hair from my forehead. "What I feel for Warren doesn't matter! I care about you, I always have. And this, right here. It feels really good. It feels right, you know? That's all I've been able to think about since last night. How *right* it felt when we kissed."

It felt right for me, too. It felt like forever, it felt like happiness, it felt like fate and love and every other mushy romantic cliché in the world. Of course, I wasn't about to admit to any of those things out loud. Joel pulled me towards the sofa and gestured for me to sit down. He sat down at my side, our thighs touching, and grabbed hold of my hand.

"Do you remember when Warren and I drove down to London to surprise you for your twentieth birthday?" I nodded. "And do you remember that you had that guy over when we turned up?"

"Uh, yeah." I blushed. It's not like I could forget that. It had been mortifying to find your brother and the guy you'd been crushing on for years at your bedroom door while you had a guy, a one-night bloody stand from the night before, sleeping in your bed.

"I swear, I'd never felt jealousy like it. Not even when Warren and Ashley started seeing each other. It was... fucking *hell*. It was so intense. I wanted to drag him out of your room by his hair." Joel shook his head. "I didn't want to think about it too much at the time. I guess I was scared of what it might mean."

"That was a year ago," I said. Probably not the most relevant thing in that moment, but it was the first thing that had popped into my head. He'd thought about me that way a year ago?

"I know," Joel smiled. He must have seen where my thoughts were taking me, because he squeezed my hand gently before lifting it to his lips so that he could place a soft, tender kiss against my knuckles.

"But... you were in love with my brother. Can't you see how that might make me feel like I'm not enough for you? I'll never be Warren, and you know what's really pathetic?" I laughed humourlessly. "Sometimes I wished I was."

Joel reached for me then. He didn't say a word, just pulled me close and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I buried my head against his chest and

took a deep breath, inhaling his scent and finding comfort in the feel of his body wrapped around my own. He kissed the top of my head and whispered softly to me.

“Let it go, Harry.”

I turned my face up towards his then, our lips so close together. *Let it go*. Joel had said it himself the night before; it was hard to let some things go. But I was getting my chance to show Joel how I felt about him and how great we could be together. I was getting my chance to be with Joel in all the ways I'd been dreaming of for what felt like my entire life. This was all I had ever wanted, at least since I was old enough to realise that I was attracted to guys this way. I needed to leave Warren out of this. If I couldn't do that, then I would lose my chance to be with Joel. *Let it go, Harry*. I looked up into Joel's eyes and smiled. I could do that. For him, I could definitely do that.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Okay?”

“I'm letting it go. I want you, Joel. I've always wanted you. If you say that you're over my brother, then I believe you. Let's forget about that and move on, yeah? I want to see what's between *us*. I want that so much.”

Joel didn't respond in words, he just closed the gap between us and kissed me soundly on the lips. I lifted an arm to wrap a hand around Joel's neck, pulling him close and losing myself in the feel of his soft lips pressed firmly against my own. Joel tilted his head to deepen the kiss, and I sighed as his tongue met mine, elation and pure joy bursting from my chest and making me dizzy. Joel pulled away for a moment, a moan on his lips.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

I wasn't exactly sure what he was thanking me for and I didn't ask. I felt like I should be the one thanking *him*, considering all the times he'd been there for me in the past, and for giving us a chance to be together now. I pulled him up against my body and let out a breathless chuckle as he pushed me down so that I was lying across the sofa. I spread my legs to make room for him while he lowered his body on top of my own and began grinding against me ever so slowly. He kissed along my jaw and my neck, his hands gently sliding under my T-shirt and across my chest. I was sensitive there, and I couldn't stop the embarrassingly feminine giggle that escaped my lips as his fingertips brushed against my sides. Joel pulled back and beamed down at me.

“As much as it kills me to say this, I think we’d better get you home. We have a pretty important wedding to attend tomorrow.” Joel placed a wet kiss on the side of my neck and then moved up to nibble on the spot just below my ear. I nodded my agreement, glad at least one of us was thinking clearly. “We can pick up where we left off tomorrow night,” he whispered into my ear.

It was getting late by the time I got back home. We’d made out for a little longer, but Joel had been right. It was important that I get home, since we both had to be up early tomorrow to start getting ready for the wedding. Joel gave me a lift back to the house, as well as a kiss goodnight in the car. The place was in complete darkness so I knew that Warren and Mum must have already gone up to bed. I made my way upstairs as quietly as possible, trying desperately not to wake either of them, particularly Warren. I knew he’d have questions if he saw me sneaking into my bedroom at this time of night. Once I was in my room and I’d undressed, I fell back onto my bed with a smile on my face and was asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Warren woke me up early that morning with a surprisingly gentle tap on my door. I wasn’t really asleep anyway, just dozing. I looked over at the clock on the bedside table. 5:09 a.m. I groaned.

“You awake?” Warren whispered as he opened the door.

I snorted. “I am now.” I sat up and ran a hand through my hair. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t sleep.” He bounded into my room and threw himself across the end of my bed. “It’s crazy, right? I’m twenty-eight years old and I’m acting like a fucking five-year old on Christmas morning. I’m getting married to the most amazing woman in the entire world today! Holy fucking *shit!*”

“You’re such a chick,” I laughed and playfully punched my brother on the arm. “But I’m happy for you. Seriously, you and Ashley are going to be really happy together. I can tell.”

Warren nodded and smiled. “I think so, too. I mean, we’ve already been together so long, but after today she’ll finally be my *wife*. She’s it for me, you know?” He tilted his head and grinned. “So how come you were out so late?”

“I was with Joel. We had dinner. It was... good.” *Good? Really?* That was the best thing I could come up with? I think it was the stutter at the end that gave me away, and Warren started cackling with laughter. I felt my cheeks heat and lifted my pillow to smack Warren around the head with it.

“Shut up, nothing happened!” I wasn’t sure why I had chosen to keep the truth to myself, especially since I knew that Warren wouldn’t be upset. I could tell that my brother wasn’t fooled.

“Sure thing,” he laughed, jumping from the bed and taking my pillow with him. “This is mine now, Titch. If you want it back, you’re gonna have to fight me for it.”

I snorted at his childish words, but as soon as his back was turned and he was heading towards the door, I jumped up and grabbed him around the neck. I reached to pull the pillow away from him, both of us shouting and laughing. I eventually managed to pull free, the pillow in my arms, and fell back onto my bed, my sides aching from laughter. Warren stood and leaned against the doorframe, a knowing smile on his face.

“Alright, you don’t have to tell me anything. I’ll leave you be. Everything’s okay with you though, yeah?”

I nodded and grinned at Warren’s protective older brother thing. It reminded me of my school years and brought back just how much I missed Warren while I was away. All our joking and arguing aside, we were brothers and we loved each other.

“Hey, Warren?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you, you know.”

He nodded and laughed lightly, moving into the room to slap me on the shoulder. “Love you too, little brother.”

Warren turned and left, and I listened as he made his way downstairs. I didn’t bother getting up, I just flopped back and lay there on top of my covers with a smile on my face, thinking about Joel and Warren and just how blessed I was to have them both in my life. I fell back to sleep listening to the faint sounds of Warren killing zombies in the living room.

The wedding itself was only a small affair. Ashley and Warren had both wanted a traditional ceremony, with only their close family and friends in attendance. The service was held at the village church, a charming and beautiful old building with a gorgeous view of the countryside surrounding it. It was also the same church where our parents had gotten married thirty years ago. It was

fair to say that our mother was feeling rather emotional. I sat with her for the ceremony and held her hand while she shed a few tears. Ashley looked amazing in a simple, but elegant, white dress. Warren had tears in his eyes as he watched his bride walking down the aisle towards him. Seeing them stand there together and hearing them say their vows made my heart ache, but in the best way.

We all headed outside after the ceremony, where pictures were being taken by a professional photographer. He made us pose in various groups—Warren and Ashley together, Ashley with her parents, Warren and myself with our mother, another with just Warren and Joel, and so on. The photographer was a good friend of Ashley's, and I couldn't help but notice that he kept sending flirtatious glances in Joel's direction. I didn't like it. Joel seemed rather reserved, and I wasn't sure if it was just because he was on his best behaviour for the wedding, or whether it was something more. When I knew that he was no longer needed for photos, I grabbed Joel's arm and pulled him aside. I took him to a quiet spot around the back of the small building.

"Are you okay?" I asked, my words meant to comfort him. It was the first chance I'd had all day to be alone with him, and I needed to make sure that he was alright.

"Honestly? I'm... I'm fine. There was a time when I didn't think I would be, but I really am."

"That's good." I reached for his hand and laced our fingers together. "I'm really glad, Joel. I was worried about you. I know what you said last night, but I still didn't think this would be easy for you."

Joel smiled down at me. His eyes gazed into mine and I stopped talking. That look in his eyes was so beautiful. He was looking at me the way I'd always wanted him to, as if I was everything he could have ever wished for. The elation and love I felt in that moment was like nothing I had ever felt before.

"It's because of you, Harry. You've given me something to hope for, something to hold on to. You've made me so happy, not just today, but for years. I don't know why I didn't realise it before, but now that I've got you, how could I ever want anything else?"

"You really mean that?"

Joel kissed me. His arms wrapped around my waist as I reached out to rest my hand on his hip. I felt Joel's lips curl as he smiled, and I growled a little in

the back of my throat, which only made him smile more. My hand strayed to rest on his arse, and I leaned further into him to deepen the kiss, my heart soaring as my dick stood to attention.

“Harry! Joel!” It was Warren’s voice. It was getting closer, but Joel didn’t push me away. He didn’t let go of me, even when I pulled away from the kiss to rest my head against his shoulder. His arms stayed firmly wrapped around my waist.

“Harry! Where the hell—” There was a pause. I turned my head to see Warren standing a few feet away. His mouth was opening and closing, but no sound escaped. He cleared his throat and looked around.

“Oh. Um. Hi. I’ll just... I’ll leave you guys to it.” He was flustered, which only served to make me chuckle against Joel’s shoulder. Warren might have known that something was going on between Joel and me, but he clearly hadn’t expected to find us making out at his wedding. He recovered quickly, taking a few steps back before breaking out into a huge smile and glancing my way. “Nothing happened, huh?”

I grimaced. “Yeah, that might have been a lie. Sorry.”

Warren chuckled. “Just make it quick, yeah? We want to head to the reception. I can’t tell the guests that we need to wait while my brother and the best man are getting down and dirty round the back of the church.”

We could still hear Warren’s laughter after he’d rounded the corner and disappeared from our sight.

The reception was a much bigger affair than the wedding itself. Warren and Ashley had hired out the function room at a hotel in town, and the whole place was full of family and friends. After I had stuffed myself with buffet food, I made my way over to a deserted table away from the crowds of people to play a game on my phone. Crowds got to be too much for me after a while, and I was starting to feel a bit fidgety and agitated. A slow song started to play, and I realised that everyone was pairing off onto the dance floor. I snorted a laugh at a few people’s awkward attempts at dancing and then looked back down at my phone, grateful to go unnoticed. I glanced up hesitantly when I saw someone approaching and gave a sigh of relief when I realised it was Joel.

“Dance with me?” Joel asked, holding out his hand. I raised an eyebrow and looked over to Warren, who was dancing close by with Ashley. They were both looking our way with smiles on their faces.

“Really? You want to dance with me?”

“No, I want to play tennis with you.” Joel rolled his eyes. “Yes, Harry. I want to dance with you. Are you going to say yes, or are you going to let me stand here like a lemon while everyone is watching us?”

“I think I’ll go for option B,” I said with a laugh. Inside, my heart was beating so fast that I thought it might just beat out of my chest.

Joel grabbed my hand and hauled me out of my seat. “Hey!” I mock protested, even as I wrapped my arms around his waist. “I can’t believe you’re daring to manhandle me in front of my entire family. The cheek of it!” I needed to shut up some time soon. I was babbling.

“I’m sure you’ll get over it,” Joel laughed. He kissed me then, right there in front of everyone. I felt the heat in my cheeks, but I kissed him back. I stumbled a little, but he was holding me up and he didn’t let me go. It was perfect.

“I’m going to risk ruining the moment by saying something,” I started. Joel rolled his eyes, as per usual, but I forged on. “You were my first crush, Joel. I’ve loved you since before I even knew what that really meant. I don’t expect you to say it in return, but I want you to know what you mean to me. I want you to know that you’re all I ever wanted.”

Joel leaned down to kiss my forehead. “Harry, you’re such an amazing person. I’ve always known that. These feelings I have for you now might be new, but they’re strong and they feel so right. You’re all I want, and I’m going to do my best to prove that to you every single day from now on.”

“I’m going back to Uni tomorrow,” I commented. I didn’t want to leave. Now that I finally had Joel the way I wanted him, I never wanted to let him go. I knew that Joel could hear the worry in my voice.

“I know. I’ll still be here when you get back. I’ll come and see you, I promise.”

I nodded. “It’s not that long until I graduate. I’ve only got a couple of months left, and then I’ll be back.”

Joel smiled. “I’m not going anywhere, Harry.”

I could feel my cheeks heating as I blushed. “Good, that’s good.”

Joel took me to the train station the next day. *My boyfriend, Joel.* It was official, and we had sealed the deal the previous night after Warren and

Ashley's wedding reception. He held my hand as we walked into the station together, and then kissed me goodbye after promising to visit in two weeks. He knew that I didn't want to leave, but he had promised that he wouldn't be going anywhere and, best of all, he had told me that he loved me too. That was all I had ever wanted to hear, and it was what gave me the strength to let him go and to get on that train, knowing that when I finished my studies and moved back home in a few months, he'd be right here waiting.

Epilogue

One Year Later

"You're going to be the death of me, Harry."

I let out a breathless laugh as I crawled back up Joel's body to kiss him on the lips. His moan was like music to my ears. I pulled away to lie down at his side, tucking myself in under his arm and resting my head on his shoulder. "Yeah, but you love it."

"I really do," he said with a smile. He turned to kiss my temple. "I love you, so much."

My phone rang then, and I sat up and leaned over Joel to reach it. Warren. I answered the call before dropping back down onto the bed, half resting across Joel's chest, where he started running his fingers gently through my hair.

"Harry, you up yet?"

I couldn't help myself. I laughed, shooting a wink at Joel, who pushed me away to climb out of bed. I watched his perfectly sculpted arse as he walked across our bedroom and towards the bathroom. "Are you sure you really want me to answer that?"

"Eurgh! I didn't mean it like that, you perv. Way too much information, thanks."

I could hear the sounds of a baby crying in the background, and I chuckled softly. "Oscar sounds happy this morning," I commented.

My nephew was only two months old, and he already had one hell of a set of lungs on him. I was pretty sure he was going to grow up to be one of those screamo-type rock stars. Warren sighed. "Yeah, he's having a bit of a tantrum

this morning. Ashley is trying to calm him down, and I'm keeping my distance."

"Real nice, brother."

"So, you'll be at Mum's for midday, yeah?"

Mum was cooking a special first anniversary meal for Warren and Ashley. We would also be meeting Mum's new boyfriend, which would be an interesting experience. Joel was the only one of us who had already met the guy. It had been a complete accident, but he'd run into Mum and Stuart in town last week. I figured it made sense that Mum would want to keep him from meeting her two protective sons as long as possible. I almost pitied Stuart, just thinking about the grilling he'd be getting from Warren.

Joel walked back into the room as I sat up and leaned against the headboard. I watched as he pulled on a pair of boxer shorts and then sat cross-legged at the end of the bed.

"Of course, we'll see you in a couple of hours."

"Good, and don't be late. Stuart is going to be there, and I want you two to keep Mum busy while I talk to him," Warren said.

"Seriously, Warren? Leave the guy alone! Joel said he seemed nice enough, and I trust Mum's judgement."

Warren huffed but said nothing more on the subject. I could still hear Oscar in the background, his cries getting louder. "Hey little man, what's up?" Warren was obviously talking to his son. "Look, I've really got to go. I'll see you later, baby bro."

I hung up with a laugh, placing my phone on the bedside table, then kicking my legs out to rest my feet in Joel's lap.

"That godson of yours is a nightmare. I swear, when we have kids, you're gonna be the one who deals with the poop and the screaming."

"Wait, what? You want children? With me?"

"Yeah, of course I do. I thought you knew that." Joel looked shell-shocked. "Oh, fuck. I just completely put my foot in it, didn't I? Are you freaking out? Oh shit, you're totally freaking out..."

"No! No. I'm not freaking out. I just... I want kids too. With you." Joel smiled then and shifted himself on the bed so that he was sitting beside me.

Joel didn't say anything for a moment. He just sat there, watching me. "What? What is it?"

"So, I have a question that I wanted to ask you." He leant to the side and reached into the top drawer of his bedside table. He rummaged for a moment before pulling something out and turning back to face me. *Holy crap, is that what it looks like?* I glanced up from the box in Joel's hands. He was smiling at me, but he looked nervous.

"Harry, I've known you for so long and this past year has been the best year of my life. I never thought I could be this happy, and it's all down to you. You're the most important person in my life and I love you with everything that I am." He held the box out and opened it, revealing the platinum band inside. "Harry Jacobs, will you marry me?"

I didn't need to think about it, I already knew my answer. "Yes! Of course, yes!"

Joel let out a noise that sounded like he was being deflated, and then he laughed and kissed the side of my head. "I love you, babe," he whispered. My heart pounded as Joel removed the ring from its box and lifted my left hand to gently place the engagement ring on my finger. I couldn't look away from it. Joel and I were going to get married. Joel was my fiancé. He was going to be my *husband*.

"Holy shit, I can't wait to tell Mum. Warren and Ashley are gonna *die*," I squealed. Actually squealed. I'd have been embarrassed if I wasn't so ecstatic. Joel laughed again and pulled me close for a kiss.

I couldn't help but laugh back. This moment was perfect. The love of my life was holding me in his arms, and he wanted me there for the rest of his life. Joel was mine. *My fiancé*. I liked the sound of that. It seemed fitting, too. This whole thing had started off with a wedding, and now we'd be getting one of our own. I couldn't wait to spend the rest of my life by Joel's side. He was my other half, and he was all I ever wanted.

The End

Author Bio

Lauren is a new author from the East Midlands, England. She mostly writes M/M themed stories and, as a hopeless romantic, absolutely adores a happy ending. Lauren loves reading, writing, comic books, fangirling over all her favourite films and TV shows, and generally just having fun. She is a geek and proud! Her favourite colour is green, she has a MASSIVE tattoo fetish, loves sparkly nail polish and bearded men (although not necessarily together), and enjoys nothing more than curling up on the sofa with a cup of tea and a good book. You can contact her via Email, Goodreads, or Twitter.

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