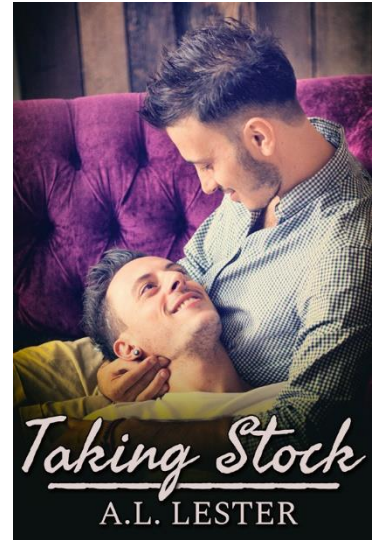


Taking Stock - A. L. Lester

- **Tag line:** *A gentle story about two people who are hurt and angry and tired, finding their way toward each other and healing.*
- **Genre:** MM, gay, romance, historical, nostalgia, 1970s
- **Length:** 40,000 words
- **Publisher:** JMS Books
- **Release Date:** Sept 2020
- **Buy:** <https://allester.co.uk/takingstock/>
- *It's 1972 and Laurie is a farmer with a problem. He's had a stroke and he can't work his farm alone any more. Phil is running away from London and the professional suspicion that surrounds him at his City job. They're both alone and unsure what the future holds. Can they forge a new life together with their makeshift found family in Laurie's little village?*



Blurb

It's 1972.

Fifteen years ago, teenage Laurie Henshaw came to live at Webber's Farm with his elderly uncle and settled in to the farming life. Now, age thirty-two, he has a stroke in the middle of working on the farm. As he recovers, he has to come to terms with the fact that some of his new limitations are permanent and he's never going to be as active as he used to be. Will he be able to accept the helping hands his friends extend to him?

With twenty successful years in the City behind him, Phil McManus is hiding in the country after his boyfriend set him up to take the fall for an insider trading deal at his London stockbroking firm. There's not enough evidence to prosecute anyone, but not enough to clear him either. He can't bear the idea of continuing his old stagnating life in the city, or going back to his job now everyone knows he's gay.

Thrown together in a small country village, can Phil and Laurie forge a new life that suits the two of them and the makeshift family that gathers round them? Or are they too tied up in their own shortcomings to recognise what they have?

A 1970s historical gay romance peripheral to the Lost in Time universe. Stand alone, not paranormal.

Excerpt

Phil found his feet turning up the lane toward Webber's Farm a couple of days after his meeting with Laurie Henshaw almost without thought. He had got in to the habit of walking regularly early on in his sojourn in the cottage. Some days he took sandwiches in the knapsack he'd bought and just went up the footpath at the top of the lane and headed off into the winter woods. It was quiet and peaceful and he found that if he could get in to a swinging rhythm, one foot in front of the other, the swirl of anger and betrayal that seemed to accompany him like a cloud quieted, gradually draining down in to the earth as he walked.

Today though, rather than his feet taking him up the hill in to the burgeoning spring, they took him down toward the farm. Henshaw...Laurie...had grabbed his interest in a way that nobody had for months. The man had been on his last legs sitting in the Post Office and his frustration with himself had been obvious. Phil had enjoyed coaxing a smile out of him. Sitting in the farmhouse kitchen with the quiet warmth of the Rayburn at his back, he'd spoken more about his personal life to a complete stranger than he had opened up to anyone since that awful day when Adrian had got him out of the police station.

It would only be neighbourly to pop in and see if he was all right. That's what people did in the country, didn't they? Phil had been here months now, apart from a brief visit to Aunt Mary over Christmas and New Year, and if he was going to be here much longer he should probably make an effort to get to know people properly.

That made him pause for thought. Was he going to be here much longer?

He didn't know.

He walked through the farmyard cautiously. He knew enough to go to the back door, not the front. The two sheepdogs who had cursorily examined him earlier in the week shot out of the open porch and circled round, barking and wagging cheerfully. No need to knock, then. He did, regardless. And called out "Anyone home?"

"In here," Laurie's voice answered, distantly. "Come in, whoever you are!"

He stepped in to the porch, past a downstairs bathroom and through the scullery with its stone-flagged floor, and pushed the door into the kitchen fully open.

Laurie was washing up. His stick was hooked on the drainer and he was resting against the sink with one hip. He turned as Phil came in, propping the final plate on the pile beside the soapy water and reaching for the tea-towel flung over his shoulder to dry his hands.

"Mr McManus! Phil, I mean," he corrected himself, "what can I do for you?"

Phil paused. He hadn't got this far in his head. He had just...walked.

"Erm. I was just passing?" he tried. His voice lifted at the end, in a question.

"You were?" Laurie looked at him, one side of his mouth twisted up in a little smile. Or was that the side affected by the stroke? He didn't know. Didn't matter, anyway.

"Yes. I was." He made his voice firmer. "Sally is at my place this morning, so I thought you might let me hide here."

“Only if you’ll let me retreat to your place when she’s cross with me,” Laurie replied. “Although that will probably mean I have to move in, at least for the moment.” He pulled a face.

“Have you upset her?”

“No. Yes. Sort of....” He turned toward the Rayburn and dragged the kettle on to the hotplate. “She wasn’t very happy about me over-doing it the other day. Patsy told tales on me.”

“Ah. Yes, I can see that. She obviously cares about you a great deal. She talks about you all the time when she comes up to do the cottage.” He paused. “Have you been together long?”

Laurie choked and dropped one of the tea-cups he was moving from the drainer to the table. He fumbled for it and at the same time Phil stooped to catch it. They both missed and it smashed on the stone floor into a thousand tiny pieces. “Shit!” Laurie said, trying stifle his coughing. “That was one of the good ones, too.”

He bent to pick up the pieces, still choking and Phil said, “Stop it, you bloody fool, let me. It’s everywhere.” He put his hands on Laurie’s shoulders and pushed him upward from his bent position and then back and down, in to one of the kitchen chairs. Laurie’s leg gave as he sat and he made the final descent with an unglamorous wobble.

He was still coughing. “Sally!” he got out, around between coughs. “Bloody hell!”

“Where’s the dustpan?” Phil asked, ignoring him.

Laurie gestured to the cupboard under the sink. “Under there.”

It was the work of moments to sweep it all up, on his knees at Laurie’s feet. Thankfully it had been empty. He rested back on his heels with with full dustpan. “Where does it go?”

“Put it in one of the flower-pots on the window-sill,” Laurie said, gesturing. “I’ll stick in the bottom of a pot for drainage when I plant the new ones up.”

Phil nodded and got to his feet. He lurched as he did so and steadied himself on Laurie’s knee as he rose. *Warm*, he thought. The man smelled nice. A mixture of soap and fresh air and woodsmoke. “Ooops,” he said, pushing himself upright. “Sorry.”

Laurie grinned at him as they briefly made eye contact. Something flickered in his eyes. “Not a problem,” he said. He pointed at the window-sill behind the sink. “Knock those dead chives in the middle pot out the window in to the yard.” He grinned again, but it was a different sort of smile this time, with slightly too many teeth. “I can’t really balance to water them properly at the moment anyway.”

Phil opened the window and emptied the dead plants outside and then tipped the pieces of crockery in as instructed. He replaced the dustpan under the sink and stood up and leaned against it, crossing his arms. “Doesn’t Sally help with that sort of thing?” he asked, looking down at the other man.

“No. Yes. Sometimes.” Laurie wouldn’t meet his eye and started to stand. “Sit down, let me get a new cup.”

Phil put his hand back on his shoulder and gently but firmly pushed him back down on to the chair. “What do you mean?” he asked, in a voice that matched his grip, “No-yes-sometimes covers all the wickets.” He removed his hand and turned round to collect another cup and saucer, moving past Laurie to put it on the table beside him and then reaching to pull the kettle off the Rayburn and put both tea-leaves and the boiling water in the teapot.

He brought the teapot over and put it on the cork table-mat in the middle of the table before opening the pantry door and rummaging in the fridge for the milk-jug. Laurie sat and let him, watching him slightly warily.

As Phil sat down and folded his arms again, waiting for the tea to brew, Laurie muttered, "I told her not to do it."

"You told her not to do it?" Phil repeated. "Ah, I see." And he did, in a way. He wouldn't be in Laurie's shoes for anything.

Laurie worked his thumb over and over one of the whorls of wood in the table-top. It was smoothed from long use. "I hate it, Phil," he said in a low voice. "I hate not being able to do all the simple things. It makes me feel useless, having them all run round after me."

"You'd rather let the plants die than accept help?"

Laurie bit his lip and continued to worry at the knot in the table. "It sounds daft when you put it like that," he said.

Phil didn't say anything.

"Okay, I know it's daft." He looked up and met Phil's eyes, his own anguished. "But I hate it," he said, vehemently. "I hate it, Phil."

About A. L. Lester

Writer of queer, paranormal, historical, romantic suspense. Lives in the South West of England with Mr AL, two children, a badly behaved dachshund, a terrifying cat and some hens. Likes gardening but doesn't really have time or energy. Not musical. Doesn't much like telly. Non-binary. Chronically disabled. Has tedious fits.

Links

All my links are gathered here (this is by far the easiest!): <https://lnk.bio/gjD5>

Or pick and choose:

Webpage: <https://allester.co.uk>

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