Fickle Fortune

by robron_til_the_end

Summary

Completely 100% AU. Robert Sugden moves back to Emmerdale after ten years away, now rich and famous. He wants to reconnect with his sister and his home, but finds himself hung up on a certain mechanic instead...

COMPLETE.

Notes

Total escapism to write (and I hope read). Not sure it's going to be everyone's cup of tea. In this version of events, Chas has never met Robert before he moves back to Emmerdale, and Aaron's history with Jackson never happened.
“You heard about the new posh sort up at Home Farm?” Chas asked.

“No,” Aaron said dully as he pulled himself out from under the car he’d been attempting to fix. He took the coffee his mother was offering him, grateful for the break. Even if that break came with a side helping of the latest village gossip.

“He’s Vic’s brother apparently,” Chas said.

“Oh,” Aaron said, frowning. “The one who's in all those films?”

“That’s the one,” Chas said. “Katie says he’s a right user.”

“Does she?” Aaron said, trying to show with his tone that he wasn’t interested in the slightest. “Bet Vic’s glad her brother’s closer to home though?” Aaron was very close with Vic and Adam, and anything that made her happy was good with him. They were his best friends. God forbid they ever got divorced, he had no idea whose side he’d be pulled down on.

“Yeah, she’s not stopped going on about it at the pub. She can’t believe he’s really coming back.”

“Mum, I’m really not interested,” Aaron said. “Some rich famous git buying Home Farm? What does it really matter?”

“Fine,” Chas said.

“You're just spreading gossip.”

“Fine,” Chas repeated. “I’ll take that coffee back then.” Aaron pulled out of her reach, making her smile. “See you later when you’ve finished.”

“This might take me all day,” Aaron warned, nodding at the car. “More complicated than I thought and I promised Cain I'd have it done.”

“Okay,”

“And mum? You don’t have to keep checking on me, I’m fine.”

“Aaron, you’ve just got your suspended sentence, I’m allowed to worry.”

“I’m an adult, I can look after myself, remember? Managed in France, didn't I?” Chas didn’t say anything else and left him to it.

When Aaron got to the pub that evening, Chas had a burger and chips waiting for him. Which
was great, as he was ravenous and hadn’t eaten all day. What he hadn’t counted on was the buzz of gossip in the pub about Robert Sugden, famous movie star having bought his country retreat. Everyone had obviously known he was Vic’s brother, but he hadn’t been home in ten years, so it was almost too easy for the villagers to forget. Aaron didn’t really mind the gossip. If they were talking about this new stranger, or the return of him for those who’d been around long enough to remember him, it meant they weren’t talking about Aaron any longer. The fire, running away to France, Adam actually making bail. It had all been sorted, but lately it had been the main topic of village gossip. Aaron was glad they’d moved on.

“Hi.” Aaron looked up and smiled at seeing Adam. He still hadn’t quite got used to having Adam around all the time now, it had been a while. “I need a break.”

“From?” Aaron asked, sliding his pint over to Adam who downed what was left of it in one.

“Vic,” Adam said. “If I never hear Robert Sugden’s name again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Trouble in paradise?” Aaron teased. Adam elbowed him and stole a few chips from his plate.

“And that’s the lot,” one of the removal men said. “If you could sign here, that’d be great.” Robert looked around his new house, life in boxes and sighed. He wanted to live here, it felt right to come home finally, but he wasn’t one for actually unpacking. It was going to be a lot of work until the house was exactly the way he wanted it. Robert signed the paperwork easily, wanting the place to himself.

“Er…” the man said.

“Yes?” Robert asked.

“Could I have an autograph? I mean, I know I’m not supposed to, but my daughter will kill me if I don’t so much as ask.” Robert groaned internally, but obliged anyway. They were a discreet business, which is why Robert had used them, but sometimes there really was no escaping his fame. He couldn’t complain too much though, otherwise there’d be no way he could have afforded this house in the first place. Or his pretty decent lifestyle either. Well, very luxurious lifestyle honestly.

Once he was alone, Robert almost threw himself down onto his sofa, checking his phone. Ten missed calls, and a dozen texts. Not too bad, but he ignored all of them in favour of texting Vic, telling her he was settling into the new house.

Ever since he’d been in the financial position to buy this building, he’d been keeping an eye on it. But it hadn’t come onto the market, and Home Farm had been standing empty for a long time. As soon as the owner put it up for sale, Robert snapped it up, overpaying for it actually.

“Come and say hi, I’ve just finished work. Meet my husband? x.” Robert read the text from his sister and debated it. He could. Would get the village gossip over and done with at any rate. He couldn’t imagine that had improved over the last ten years, and what with his fame it would probably only have got worse.

“On my way.”

Robert walked into the pub and smiled at his now grown up sister who was at the bar. She had a wide grin on her face and she looked so different now. Robert hugged her, ignoring the whispers and the buzz from everyone else. “Hi,” he said, pulling back from her and looking at
“God, you grew up.”

“That happens when you don’t check in with me for so long,” she said, punching his arm in a friendly way. “Come and meet Adam.”

“Sure he’s good enough for you?” Robert asked, narrowing his eyes. Vic slapped him playfully again and grabbed Robert’s hand, pulling him to the booth in the corner, ignoring the villagers who were buzzing at having someone so famous here. Except for Andy and Katie at the other side of the pub. who looked distinctly less than pleased.

“This is my husband, Adam,” she said, looking at the open cheerful man on the right. “And our friend, Aaron.” This Aaron seemed sullen and most definitely grumpy, looking at the table and not so much as glancing in Robert's direction.

“Hi,” Adam said, a wide smile on his face, standing up to shake Robert’s hand. “Vic’s told me a bit about you.”

“I’m sure it’s all lies,” Robert replied easily. “Are you good enough for my sister then?”

“Er…” Adam said, the smile slipping as his eyes flicked to Vic.

“He’s having you on,” Vic said easily, sitting next to Adam.

“I should go,” Aaron said darkly. “Don’t want to interrupt the family reunion do I?” Aaron got up and Robert sat down where he had been, watching him leave around the back of the bar and through the back.

“He seems cheerful,” Robert said sarcastically.

“That’s just Aaron,” Adam said with a shrug. “He takes some time to warm up.”

“Anyway,” Vic said quickly. “Life goes on here the way it always does. What’s been happening with you?”

“Vic…”

“Come on,” she urged. “Give me a little bit of gossip. The most I see of you is in those trashy celebrity magazines these days. You never call and you never come home.”

“Isn’t it enough that you’re going to be seeing me a lot more now?” Robert asked.

“Can’t you tell me anything about your world?” Vic asked, fluttering her eyelashes.

“No,” Robert said. “They serve pints in here?”

“I’ll get this round,” Adam said, leaving both siblings alone. Rationally, Robert knew she was married, but seeing her so in control of her life was… different. Good. It was hard to reconcile this to the young teenager he’d left behind when his dad kicked him out all those years ago with nowhere to go.
Robert got up the next morning, feeling good. His sister was happy. Privately Robert wasn’t sure if this Adam really was right for her, but they both seemed completely smitten and he wasn’t about to argue it. After everything, it was good to see her doing so well. Robert went into the kitchen and sighed when he realised it had nothing in it besides a coffee machine. When he’d had his place in London, he never had to worry about keeping the kitchen stocked, one of his assistants did it for him. Usually because he’d been so busy with PR and filming that he was rarely home anyway. It had totally escaped his attention that he wouldn’t have cereal or bread for toast in the house for breakfast. One reason he’d come back to Emmerdale was that he wanted a bit of normal now, out of the insanity of the spotlight. He wasn’t totally stupid, he knew that he’d never escape the press completely, but that didn’t mean he had to live with it constantly. The middle of the Yorkshire dales was as good a bolt hole as anywhere else.

“Idiot,” Robert said to himself, closing the door of the empty fridge. He was hungry and he had three missed calls from his agent. Sighing, Robert returned the calls as he went to his car. “What do you want Steve?”

“Checking you hadn’t vanished off the planet entirely,” he replied.

“I’m in Yorkshire, not on Mars,” Robert countered briefly as he sat behind the wheel of his car, waiting for this mundane conversation to finish. “What do you want?”

“It’s going to come out in the press about Sara’s heroin addiction,” Steve said. “Wondered if you want to make a comment?”

“No,” Robert said briefly.

“You’ve costarred with her in seven films.”

“Yeah, and she’s been injecting that stuff into her body for at least four of them. Difficult to film with someone who’s high ninety percent of the time.”

“Robert, don’t be difficult,” Steve said exasperated.

“I’m no longer associated with her,” Robert said coldly. “Spin it, isn’t that your job?”

“You know, you sound really sympathetic to someone with a drug addiction,” Steve said.

“I tried sympathetic for years,” Robert said. “She didn’t want to hear it.”

“Fine, I’ll spin it,” Steve said. “God, she’s giving me hell.”

“Not my problem,” Robert said, though his tone was light this time. “Aren’t you glad you have someone as easy to manage as me?”
“Don’t push it,” Steve said. Robert laughed and hung up the phone and started driving into the village for supplies. Or that was the plan. By the time he got down there, he realised his pride and joy, namely his car was squeaking at him, a slightly alarming noise coming from the engine. Clearly the drive up from London didn’t agree with it.

But first things first, he needed feeding, so he ordered a breakfast from the café. Bob remembered him from when he was an errant teenager, so treated him normally enough. Though he did notice the other customers were not so willing, he picked up a paper he had no interest in reading and tried to put people off talking to him. When Bob brought his breakfast over, he asked if there was still a garage in the village.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Debbie and Cain own it, across the road. Lost your touch?” Bob asked with a grin.

“I’ve not touched an engine in years,” Robert said. “And I wasn’t a brilliant mechanic as a teenager either. I’d rather not experiment on my car and make the situation worse.”

“Fair enough,” Bob said with a wink.

Robert drove up to the garage, unfortunately noticing that the engine noise had become even louder. He parked in what looked like a queue and went to look at someone to take a look at his car. Much to his surprise, the man with the clipboard in the blue overalls was Aaron, who he’d met only briefly the night before.

“Hi,” Robert said, making him look up.

“What do you want?” Aaron asked bluntly.

“Man of few words,” Robert tried. When that got no reaction except a stare, Robert sighed. “My car needs looking at today. It’s making a noise from the engine, don’t think the two hundred mile journey did it much good.”

“Sorry, can’t do it,” Aaron said with a smile, seeming to get a kick out of telling Robert no for a perfectly legitimate reason. “We’re fully booked today, you’ll have to wait your turn.”

“I’ll pay extra,” Robert said, surprised at Aaron’s response. This was new, ever since he’d made it big, he barely had to ask for anything. Most people were falling over themselves to help him, but not Aaron it seemed.

“I don’t care how much money you’ve got,” Aaron said. “Locals, our regulars got here first. You go to the back of the queue no matter how many film sets you’ve been on.”

“Oh, you don’t like me, do you?” Robert said.

“I don’t like people throwing their weight around,” Aaron corrected. “Your money doesn’t impress me. The fame thing, I don’t care. I don’t think sitting in front of a camera for most of your life makes you that special myself.”

Robert smiled. It had been a while since he’d met someone new and so wonderfully normal around him. Usually it took a while for new people to get used to him, the real him behind the camera.

“Fine,” Robert said. “Tomorrow. I can wait.” He passed Aaron the keys and their fingers brushed. Robert knew he hadn’t imagined the gentle sensation of their skin touching. Especially when
Aaron’s eyes flicked up to his, almost holding a challenge.

“How’re you getting back up to Home Farm?” Aaron asked as Robert moved away from him, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.

“I’ll walk,” Robert said easily. It was a nice morning, the walk up to the top of the village could be good to clear his mind.

“Didn’t think you’d lower yourself to mere walking,” Aaron countered.

“Oh, how much you have to learn about me, Aaron,” Robert said with a smile. No, that was a self satisfied smirk. Aaron watched him leave, biting his bottom lip. It was only after he’d disappeared from sight that Aaron realised he’d been focusing with a single minded attention on Robert’s arse in those jeans. Mm. No. Stop that line of thought right now.

Aaron knew he shouldn’t. Knew no good could come of this, but in the privacy of his own bedroom that night, he googled Robert Sugden. He hadn’t really paid much attention to him before. Sure, he’d seen a few of his films, couldn’t help it with how much exposure he got, but never really been interested in knowing the slightest bit more about him, other than knowing that he’s Vic’s brother.

Thousands of results turned up, interviews he’d given, photo shoots, his major films, award nominations, so Aaron changed the search, adding the word “personal.” A hell of a lot of photos came up when he went under the image search. Generally there were two types of shots, candid ones that had been captured of him leaving some club in the small hours, or posed ones, for premiers and similar. All of them showed him with a different woman, never appearing with the same one twice. Actually, the only woman who did turn up more than once with him was Vic. But Aaron did notice that all of Robert’s acquaintances were women, and he closed the search. He didn’t want to focus on it. If Robert didn’t like men, that would be the end of that particular fantasy, wouldn’t it? And if Aaron spent a few more seconds than he should do looking at some arty topless shots of him online, that was no ones business but his own.
“I bring supplies,” Vic said, letting herself into Home Farm with the spare key Robert had given her earlier. “Though if you’d have told me I’m buying food because my multi millionaire thirty year old brother can’t look after himself…”

“My car died,” Robert reminded her. “And yeah, I could have wasted money on getting food delivered today, but why do that when I could see my beautiful sister?”

“Flattery isn’t going to get you everywhere,” she said, slamming the fridge shut. Robert pushed a cup of tea towards her and she softened slightly. “Gossip might, though.”

“What?”

“How much did you get for your last film?” Vic asked, studying him closely. “It’s just... there’s rumours going around and I can’t argue with them if I don’t know. I want to defend you!”

“You’re being a nosey cow,” Robert said, though it was said with affection.

“Someone said twenty million.”

“No, it’s not that much,” Robert said instantly. Then seeing that Vic wasn’t going to let it drop. “Six.”

“Million?” Vic asked, jaw dropping.

“Mm,” Robert said distractedly.

“And I’m employed as your skivy, bringing you up food, when you’ve got that kind of cash in the bank?!” Vic said, slapping his arm. “Bloody hell.”

“Well, taxes take a big chunk,” Robert said defensively. “And I wouldn’t want to be one of those idiots caught not paying my taxes, would I?” Vic laughed in spite of herself. “And I didn’t plan for the car to start making random noises at me either.”

“Buy a new car,” Vic suggested. “Is buying this place your “I need to settle down” kind of thing?”

“Maybe,” Robert said. “I don’t know. I’ll never spend the money I’ve got, I don’t actually have to work ever again but... what’d be the point of that?” Vic shrugs.

“Give some of your cash to me. I’m sure I’d have fun spending it.” Robert laughed. “Any special woman in your life?”

“No.”

“Rob, come on.”
“There isn’t.”

“I see pictures of you plastered all over the press, and the internet. You could at least give me something,” Vic wheedled.

“It’s casual,” Robert said. “Everyone I see is very casual, no one actually wants me. I get no privacy, because everyone wants the man they see on the films, and that’s not who I am, Vic. You know that. Whenever I spend the night with a woman, she’s snapped by a dozen photographers leaving the hotel.”

“Could always bring her home instead of some cheap hotel,” Vic suggested.

“No, the hotel is not cheap,” Robert said. “And anyway... Home’s private.”

“I’ve been to that London flat of yours. Very posh.”

“I don’t want people there who’re... almost strangers. No one actually... wants me.”

“You’re lonely,” Vic realised.

“Yeah,” he said. “Guess that’s why I found my way back home.” He put his arm around his sister and hugged her for a moment. “Listen, what’s with Aaron?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“ Took my car in and he’d barely give me the time of day.” Not strictly true. “He doesn’t seem to like me much.”

“He’s quite... blunt,” Vic said. “But he’s a good guy, he really is. He’s Adam’s best mate and he’s family to me.”

“He doesn’t say anything.”

“Probably not impressed by your attitude of “money can fix the problem.””

“I don’t go around like that,” Robert said. Vic just looked at him. “Do I?”

“You have a certain... arrogance about you,” she said. “Don’t worry, it’s part of your charm.”

“So glad you came over now,” Robert said sarcastically.

“Couldn’t have you starving, could I?”

Robert walked down into the village early the next morning to check on his car. Though he knew it wouldn’t be ready, he just wanted to have a look at it. What surprised him was Aaron was already there. It could only be about eight in the morning, so he was clearly a keen worker. And he was working on his car.

“Surprised to see you here,” Robert said. Aaron turned around and slammed the bonnet shut, a little more aggressively than Robert was comfortable with.

“Cain said I had to get this one done,” Aaron replied. “Security risk apparently. Didn’t want this flash car hanging around longer than absolutely necessary.”
“Cain here?”

“No,” Aaron replied. “You’re stuck with me. It’s all done though.”

“That quick?”

“We had the replacement part in stock, so it didn’t take long,” Aaron said with a shrug. Then he looked at the car again. “I had to get my hands on it,” Aaron said, looking at the car with almost lust. “I’d never get to own anything like this. It was good to work on.”

“Want to drive it?” Robert suggested. Where the hell had that come from? No one touched his cars, ever. He was incredibly possessive over them.

“No,” Aaron said, though it was clear he was tempted. “Probably be blamed for crashing your car or something.”

“I’m insured to the hilt,” Robert said. “You could drive it if you wanted.” Why was he pushing this? It had nothing to do with the fact those overalls were rolled up to Aaron’s elbows, his muscular forearms attracting more of his attention than they should. *Careful now. You have no idea about this man, and if you throw yourself at him and he’s not interested in you, he could call a press conference tomorrow.* Robert had kept his bisexuality a secret, and he liked it that way. He didn’t want the extra media attention, and he didn’t want to be anyone’s kind of role model. And it would be a big deal for his career too, even if everyone said it wouldn’t. His typical “heart throb” roles where he always got the girl would dry up, and that would be it. He’d just be some washed up actor who had a good four or five years of success. No, his private life was better kept private. Which meant he couldn’t throw himself at surly moody mechanics no matter how good they may look in their overalls.

“Do you need a script or can you manage to hold a conversation without one?” Aaron said. Robert realised he’d been staring while he thought things through.

“No, think I can wing it on my own,” he countered back, getting his wallet out of his pocket. “What do I owe you?”

“Oh, the great Robert Sugden carries cash, does he?” Aaron said, going into the back of the garage to get the paperwork.

“No, just plastic,” Robert said. “But only until I can find a butler to take care of things so mundane as money.” Aaron let out a laugh, a laugh that lit up his eyes and made them sparkle. Made him look a hell of a lot younger too. Robert gave him his card, but Aaron cursed as the card machine didn’t seem to be working.

“It’s always doing this, the connections so bad here,” he said under his breath, whacking the machine against the side.

“I’ll pay later when the machines fixed,” Robert said. “If that’s okay. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t carry that much cash with me.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said, handing him his credit card back. “I think you’re good for it.”

“Oh, I’m definitely good for it.” Robert made sure to make his words drip with innuendo and Aaron’s eyes dropped to his lips. Just for a second, but it was there. Robert almost grinned with satisfaction. “Keys please.” Aaron handed them over. “Thanks.” Aaron watched him get into his car and leave, pretty damn sure that had been flirting. He didn’t read that much into things that weren’t there.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I wanted to get this up tonight. Hope you enjoy!

Robert decided to do some digging. He looked on facebook for Aaron’s page, purely because he needed to know if he liked men. And that wasn’t the kind of thing someone like Robert could just ask an almost stranger. If Aaron wasn’t a discreet person, which he may not be, it might create a media storm he didn’t want. It wasn’t that he was ashamed because he wasn’t, but a lot of personal stuff did tend to get in the way, and he wanted his career to be a success. Not one of those who crashed and burned.

Aaron’s facebook page didn’t make it immediately obvious so Robert had to scroll back a bit. Then there it was. This guy called Ed. Rugby player. Fit. Actually, very fit. As well as a brief dart of jealousy, Robert felt relieved. Not barking up the wrong tree then. Just what exactly was he going to do about it?

Aaron was livid. Robert had paid for his car repairs, pushing an envelope through the garage door. It was filled with about five hundred quid extra than the bill actually came to. Aaron separated the money, then looked at the five hundred pounds. What the hell was Robert Sugden playing at? Why would he give an extra five hundred quid? Was he trying to buy Aaron? No, don’t be so bloody stupid. But what was the other option? Five hundred pounds was one hell of a tip for a job well done. The more he thought about it, the more it pissed him off. Because if Robert was trying to bribe him, or buy him in any kind of way, then Aaron knew he’d been completely misjudged.

He’d been thinking about it all day, which meant by the time he’d finished work, he’d made a decision. Without examining it too closely, he drove up to Home Farm. Aaron got annoyed all over again when there was an intercom at the gates, preventing him from driving down to the house. No element of surprise then, where Robert was concerned. Aaron was too wound up to even think that something like this could possibly be necessary for someone as famous as Robert and he wound the car window down, pushing the intercom.

“Yes?”

“It’s Aaron,” he said, heading into angry territory now. “Or am I considered too dangerous for you to open the gates?”

“Come in,” Robert said, a buzzing noise making the gates start to open. Aaron could not have rolled his eyes more. What a pretentious twat. Once he was able, Aaron drove down and parked quickly before ramming his fist against the front door instead of knocking.

“Don’t try and break my door down,” Robert said after opening it. “What’s your problem?”

“Five hundred quid!!” Aaron questioned, holding the roll of notes up. “What the hell do you think you’re playing at?”
“Little bonus for a job well done,” Robert said, realising too late that that had sounded way too condescending. “For the car,” he added. “It’s running perfectly.”

“Oh, so what, you think chucking me a few quid’s going to make us be friends, do you?” Aaron said angrily, throwing the money at Robert, making the notes scatter everywhere. “I don’t want your money! You can’t buy me, if you’d wanted us to be mates, buy me a pint!”

“I’ll remember that for next time,” Robert said.

“No, there is no next time,” Aaron said. “I want nothing more to do with you, you can’t always throw money around to get people to like you! God! You’re nothing like Vic, I don’t know how you’re related.”

“Aaron, wait,” Robert said quickly as Aaron moved to the car. He grabbed Aaron’s arm and then blinked as he was flung back.

“Get your hands off me or the next time you’re on a film set I’ll guarantee you’ll have a black eye,” Aaron threatened, pointing at him.

“I’m not trying to buy you Aaron!” Robert shouted. “It was… just some stupid idea and… look, I’m sorry.” He sighed but genuinely looked contrite and Aaron paused. Then realised his mistake. Robert was an actor, one worth millions. He could choose to look any way he wanted to, that was his job.

“You’re just toying with me,” Aaron said. “Playing around with me. It’s how you get your kicks, isn’t it? Always has been from what I hear.” Aaron glared at him, daring Robert to challenge him.

Robert couldn’t believe this. The money was supposed to be a joke, a nothing. And now they were fighting about it outside his front door in the dark? “Always has been from what I hear.”

“Yeah, because the gossip is so reliable,” Robert said sarcastically. “I’m sorry about the cash, forget about the money. I… wanted to see you.”

“Why?” Aaron asked. “Couldn’t go into the pub like a normal person?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, nothing about my life is normal, Aaron. I’ll never get normal again, I’m too well known.”

“Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?” Aaron asked in disbelief.

“Aaron, would you just shut up for five seconds, please!” Robert was getting frustrated beyond belief, but seeing Aaron this angry and almost aggressive was a turn on, and it shouldn’t have been. Robert moved before he consciously allowed it and kissed him, half expecting to be thrown back or punched. It didn’t come. It was a brief kiss, just a press of lips while Robert’s hand moved to cradle his face. Aaron looked dazed and Robert wondered for a second or two if he’d been incredibly stupid to even think that that argument could have had any sexual tension in it. But Aaron’s bright eyes told him he’d read this right.

His eyes flicked to Robert’s lips, then Aaron moved and kissed him again. This time, with no surprise, it was deeper. Robert allowed himself to enjoy it, the taste of Aaron, the desire and the want. The slight brush of his stubble against Robert’s face, the sighing and gasping as he drew back for breath before coming back for more. Aaron’s hands were clinging to his leather jacket, pulling him close as the kiss went on and on. Robert could feel his body and wanted to taste more, like he’d been starving for this for far too long. He wanted to get Aaron undressed and in his bed as
soon as possible. He slid his hands down to Aaron’s arse, pulling him as close as it was possible to be.

“No,” Aaron said suddenly, pulling away, forcing them apart, breathing heavily. “I have to go.”


“Because we both know you’re not going to stick around for long,” Aaron said as he got into his car. He didn’t say anything else as he drove off, leaving Robert feeling confused and alone.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Minor brief mentions of Aaron's self harm in this chapter, just in passing. All Aaron's history with Gordon and self harming due to his past abuse is true in this story, and it will be coming up at some point. Thank you so much for the support so far!!

When Aaron parked outside the pub, he was still breathing heavily, replaying those last few moments in his head. Because that could not have just happened, Robert could not have just thrown himself at him. Things like that didn’t happen, though Aaron’s kiss bruised lips told a very different story. And he tasted good. So good that it had been a real struggle to pull away when it had been obvious Robert would have been up for more. He tried to examine why he did pull back. *Because the Robert Sugdens of this world don’t go for guys like you. Wasn’t aware he went for guys at all.* Aaron sighed and got out of his car. Sitting here thinking about it wasn’t helping.

He went into the house and found Chas at the kitchen table. “Got time for a chat?” she asked in a bright voice.

“No,” Aaron said darkly.

“Aaron, you’ve been in a mood for days, and I’m really trying not to worry about you.”

“Mum, I’m fine,” he said, exasperated. He couldn’t blame her for worrying, but he was okay. “Just been busy at work.”

“If you’re sure…?” she said. “You’ve not been… hurting yourself again?”

“God, no,” Aaron said instantly. That thought hadn’t occurred to him. “I’m honestly fine, now I need a drink.” Aaron went through and poured himself a pint, which he took upstairs with him. He wanted some time alone to think.

Robert hadn’t slept well. Why had Aaron pushed him away? He’d enjoyed it, Robert knew he had, and his body had felt incredible so why stop? One thing Robert knew was he wasn’t about to let this go. Aaron had felt too good and even if he walked away, his body was obviously willing. Robert drove down to the garage the next day, not feeling in the mood to be particularly patient right now. Though he had made sure he looked good before leaving. Jeans, deep blue shirt and his usual leather jacket. He had noticed Aaron’s eyes hovering over that jacket before, could still feel Aaron’s hands pulling him close by his jacket.

Robert walked up to the garage, hearing the general noises of car repair. “Hi. You alone?” Robert asked, seeing Aaron elbow deep in an engine, sleeves rolled up. He should not look that good splattered in oil. Aaron’s eyes flicked up at Robert only for a second before he returned his attention to the car.

“Dan’s on a coffee run,” Aaron said. “Cain’s looking at Moira’s car up at the farm.” Robert took
that as a yes.

“Why did you run last night?” Robert asked bluntly.

“Maybe you’re not that special,” Aaron said, challenging him but keeping his eyes on the car. “Ever think of that?”

“Aaron…”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not about to advertise that you like a bit of rough on the side. I’m not a gossip.”

“I didn’t think you were, but… Do you have such a low opinion of me?” Robert asked almost in disbelief.

“I’m realistic,” Aaron said. “There is no way that someone like you is going to bother with someone like me for more than a bit of fun.”

“And you object to a bit of fun, do you?”

Aaron straightened up, looking at Robert straight on with eyes that seemed to see right through him. “No, I don’t. But I won’t be used, that’s all.”

“And what do you mean by someone like me?” Robert asked curiously.

“Your life is not meant to be lived tucked up in a quiet Yorkshire village,” Aaron said. “I see the papers, I know you’ll vanish and go off filming God knows what and probably never come back here. They’re already speculating why you’ve moved out of London and I’m not naïve.” Robert didn’t mention that for Aaron to know all that meant he’d definitely googled him at the very least. But he wanted to disregard that, his manic life didn’t effect how he felt for Aaron. And he wanted him.

“Look, the footballs on tonight. Come and watch the England match up at mine this evening,” Robert said. “I want to see if I can change your mind about me.” Aaron considered it, but Robert didn’t wait for an answer walking away. Arrogant, Aaron thought. But he also felt fairly sure he was going to go. He didn’t have it in him to turn down an offer like that.

Aaron couldn’t pin down exactly why he felt nervous as he went to Home Farm that night, but he did. The gate still annoyed him, but he tried to ignore that. Everyone had noticed that over the last week or so a few photographers liked to hang around, see if they could get any photos of Robert, so Aaron knew it was necessary.

“Hi,” Robert said with an easy confidence as he let Aaron into the house. Aaron looked around, feeling completely out of place in this house. It was very upmarket, but then he’d known it would be. “Beer?” Robert suggested, leading the way into the kitchen.

“Please,” Aaron said. “Vic’s been here, hasn’t she?”

“Yes,” Robert said with warmth. “How can you tell?”

“Fridge magnets,” Aaron said. Vic firmly believed a kitchen needed to be lived in, and the posh, almost sterile surroundings would bother her. The fridge magnets were undoubtedly Vic’s
influence. As were (Aaron guessed) the fresh flowers on the kitchen table.

“I’ve missed her,” Robert said honestly. “My life… well, I don’t always get time to spend with her. Missed my own fathers funeral because I was contracted to be in Los Angeles at the time.”

“I heard you didn’t much get on with Jack Sugden much, though.”

“No,” Robert said. “Still liked to have been here.” Robert passed him the beer and their fingers brushed as they went into the lounge and Robert flicked the TV on. It was the prematch discussion which neither man was actually interested in. Hopefully England would thrash France, even if it’s only a friendly.

“How did you get into acting?” Aaron asked.

“When he kicked me out, my father said the only thing I was ever good at was lying, and making people believe anything I said.”

“I heard that’s called manipulating,” Aaron replied.

“Yeah, most people around here would think that,” Robert said, shaking his head slightly. “But dad was right, it was the only thing I could do. Making people believe me. At least I found some idiots who’d pay me well for it.”

“Speaking of, aren’t you supposed to be off filming in Berlin right about now?” Aaron said. Robert stared at him, lips twitching. “Or anywhere,” Aaron said, trying to back pedal.

“And how exactly do you know I’m supposed to be in Germany?” Robert asked, voice low.

“Vic.”

“Aaron, don’t lie,” Robert said. “Vic doesn’t know where I’m meant to be, so you must have looked me up.”

“All right, yeah I did,” Aaron said, looking adorably embarrassed making Robert smile. “I can’t help being curious about you.”

“I’m choosing to see that as flattery,” Robert said. “Not stalker like behaviour.”

“You’re not worth the time to stalk, mate,” Aaron said, glad that Robert wasn’t offended.

“I don’t really like football,” Robert admitted as the players walked onto the pitch.

“But it’s an international match?” Aaron said. “Case of national pride, you’ve got to support England.” Robert rolled his eyes. “And if you didn’t care, why did you invite me here?”

“I’d have used any excuse to see more of you,” Robert said, voice soft. Aaron’s eyes dropped to his mouth, a tell Robert was quickly learning meant he wanted to be kissed. Robert moved, but stopped just a hairs breadth away from Aaron’s lips. He could feel Aaron’s breath rushing against his own mouth. “Not going to panic and run?” Robert whispered.

“Try me.” Robert kissed him, making sure to keep himself under control, even as he pushed Aaron back against the sofa, looming over him. Robert didn’t want to lose himself until he knew Aaron wasn’t going to get up and leave. Aaron looked at him, surprised when he stopped.

“Making sure you’re not going anywhere,” Robert said. “I’m not having my evening ruined two nights running.”
“I ruined your night, did I?” Aaron teased, at the same time his fingers sliding under the hem of Robert’s shirt. His fingers were warm and sure on his spine, sliding up his skin, making Robert shiver. He wanted Aaron’s hands everywhere on his body right now.

“Mm,” Robert admitted. “I’ve wanted to see what’s under your overalls since I first saw you leaning over a car.”

“Have you now…” Aaron pushed himself upwards and kissed him deeply, passionately. Giving Robert everything he had and Robert lost control. He had to have Aaron. It was that simple.
An extra chapter today! Because this was just too fun to write, thank you for the kudos and support on this story. Mentions of Aaron's self harm scars here, and probably on and off from this chapter onwards.

Aaron woke up in the pitch black. Or almost pitch black, as the only light was coming from the digital clock on the bedside table. 2:12am. He should leave. Aaron didn’t share a bed often, and he rarely stayed all night when he had a one night stand. The mattress was comfortable, incredibly so, even with Robert’s almost possessive hand on his hip. Aaron couldn’t wake up here in the morning. To be removed like rubbish and never see Robert again. He gently removed Robert’s hand and got out of bed slowly, trying to find his clothes. He put his underwear on, then he remembered that most of his clothes were downstairs. They’d had sex on the sofa, quick, frantic and desperate before moving upstairs for a more leisurely round two. Robert had slept with men before, that much was obvious. He was too okay with what was happening, initiating a lot of the contact between them for it to be otherwise.

“What’re you doing?” Robert asked sleepily, rolling over into the empty space that Aaron had left.

“Going home,” Aaron said, throwing his very crumpled T shirt on.

“No,” Robert murmured, reaching for the light and turning it on. “Stay, I want you to stay.”

“Robert, you don’t want to wake up with me.”

“Please.” Robert pouted at him, his eyes now open and sparkling at him.

“When’re you going to learn?” Aaron asked, leaning over him and kissing his bare shoulder briefly. “Your charm doesn’t let you get everything your own way.”

“I’ll cook breakfast,” Robert said. “If you stay, I’ll cook you breakfast.”

“You can cook?” Aaron asked in disbelief.

“Stay and find out.” Aaron thought about it for half a second more before curling up in bed with him. Robert grinned, looking reminiscent of the cat who’d got the cream and Aaron wanted to wipe that look off his face, hating that he was giving in. But the mattress was comfortable. And Robert sure as hell wasn’t the worst person he’d shared a bed with. Incredibly fit too, those online photos didn’t do him any justice at all. Robert turned the light back off and put an arm around him and pulled Aaron close, a hand on Aaron’s arse. Aaron allowed himself to relax a little and rested his head on Robert’s chest. It felt incredibly good to be held, to feel Robert’s strong arms around him. Now they were both awake Robert was more alert than he’d been previously. Robert moved and stroked his fingers along Aaron’s left forearm, where the prominent scar was that had obviously been self inflicted.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Robert asked.

“No.”
“Aaron…”

“None of your business,” Aaron said coldly. “If you really don’t value my privacy, ask Vic. Or Adam. They know, but I don’t talk about it. I’ll need to trust you first.”

“Okay,” Robert said quietly. “I won’t pry.”

“Good.”

The next time Aaron woke, sunlight was streaming in from the floor to ceiling windows which he hadn’t noticed the night before. He’d been a bit distracted. He could feel the scratches on his thighs and felt fairly sure Robert had left imprints of his teeth in the top of his shoulder. And right now he could hear Robert on the phone, voice incredibly tight and sounding unhappy.

“No, I told you I was busy.” A pause as Aaron blinked himself awake, admiring the sight of him. Robert wore a pair of jogging bottoms, low on his hips, showing off his pale skin and freckled back. “You told me I was done. No. I’ve already given you an extra… fine. No, not from London. Book the flight from Manchester.” Aaron’s heart sank. “Two days, and that’s it. Bye.” Robert dropped the phone on the bedside table, seeing Aaron awake. “Oh. Morning. Did I wake you?”

Aaron shook his head. “You do know that if you want to make the point to your one night stand that there’s nothing more, you don’t have to leave the country to do it.”

Robert smiled, perching on the edge of the bed. “If I wanted to get rid, I’d have told you to get out when you tried to slink away in the middle of the night.”

“Fair enough,” Aaron said. “Guess that offer of breakfast isn’t coming?”


“Which exotic location are you swanning off to then?” Aaron asked.

“Berlin, you were right. They keep messing me around and telling me they’ve finished with me and…” Robert sighed heavily. “I’ll see you when I get back,” he promised. “I won’t be long.”

“No,” Aaron said quietly. “You won’t see me when you get back home.”


“Look, we both know that this, whatever it is, can’t go anywhere. You’re not going to come out, so let’s just leave it.”

“Aaron, I’m not gay,” Robert said. Even though Aaron had expected it, it hurt.

“So what, last night was just a serious lapse, was it?”

“I’m bi,” Robert said. “Something for which I am not going to apologise.”

“Okay,” Aaron said slowly. “But that’s not common knowledge, is it?”

“No, and I don’t want it to be,” Robert said. Aaron sighed. “You honestly have no idea what would happen if the press got hold of this. It would be a media shit storm I don’t want. And you wouldn’t either, by the way. I’ve lived with the press for years, I know how it works.”
“Robert, I’m not saying…” Aaron sighed heavily again. “Forget about that because… it’s just one night, right?”

“I don’t think I can get you out of my system after one night,” Robert said honestly, eyes glowing. “I don’t want to go to bloody Berlin, I want to stay here with you.”

“I don’t do the fake flattery thing,” Aaron said, getting out of bed.

“How about genuine flattery then?” Robert questioned, pressing a kiss to Aaron’s waiting lips. Then his phone rang again. Robert sighed but answered it.

“Hi Kat,” he said. “Yep. I’ll be there this afternoon, just waiting for my flight to be confirmed. Well, I didn’t fancy doing what you do and staying in Germany for an extra two weeks while digging my claws into German men.” Aaron raised his eyebrow at Robert who caught his eye and smiled. “Look, I’ve got to go.” Robert disconnected the call.

“And who’s that?” Aaron asked.

“Oh, it’s Kat. Catherine Dujardin,” he added at Aaron’s blank look. “Co star.”

“The blonde supermodel?”

“Didn’t think you’d know who she is,” Robert said in surprise.

“I wouldn’t,” Aaron said. “Adam’s rather partial to her.”

“Oh, is he?” Robert asked. “Good to know.” A thought had occurred to Aaron as he lay in bed. Robert was, and always would have women throwing themselves at him. And Aaron didn’t want anyone else touching him. How could he be possessive after one night? Robert was in no way his and probably would never be.

“I should go.”

“I owe you breakfast,” Robert said.

“Another day then,” Aaron said. “I’ll expect a full English.”

“Count on it,” Robert said seductively. Aaron tried and failed for his tone of voice not to affect him.

Aaron came home and unfortunately bumped into Chas in the hall. “Good morning. Where have you been?” she asked, clearly nosey.

“Out,” Aaron said.

“With?”

“Just this guy,” Aaron said. “It’s no one.”

“No one who keeps you away from your house all night?” she called up the stairs. Aaron didn’t reply.
“You’re in a bitter mood,” Kat said, fluttering her eyelashes at Robert. Robert just shook his head. He liked Kat, she was a genuine friend who’d never once tried it on with him, or vice versa. They were holed up in his hotel room that evening, starting on the whisky after a trying day.

“Phone call this morning dragged me away from something I’d much rather be doing,” Robert admitted. “And it’s been a long day.” It had, it was now one in the morning and they’d just finished filming for the day. The production crew were crap, they’d told him he was finished a couple of weeks ago, but had changed their minds. Useless.

“Is that something or someone you’d rather be doing?” Kat asked, looking at him pointedly.

“Catherine…”

“There’s a reason you moved out of your London pad to some tiny village I’ve never heard of in the middle of the English countryside,” she said. “Settling down?”

“No, going home,” Robert said. “My sister lives there, my parents are buried there. Plus I’m the wrong side of thirty, I don’t need to spend every week of the year clubbing.”

“So you’re telling me you haven’t met someone,” Kat pushed.

“I didn’t say that,” Robert said casually.

“Right, so… if I threw myself at you, you’d turn me down?”

“Absolutely,” Robert said, swilling his whisky in his glass. “But that’s nothing to do with my personal life, it’s because you’re a mate and if you came onto me I’d know you’d had too much to drink.”

“You kissed me all afternoon,” Kat said.

“With thirty people watching and a camera crew,” Robert pointed out.

“Details,” Kat said, waving her hand at him. “Let’s go out, let’s hit the clubs, I could do with meeting some gorgeous guy.”

“No,” Robert said.

“Ha!” Kat replied, pointing at him. “Knew there was someone.”

“It’s the small hours of the morning, I just want to sleep.”

“That’s never stopped you before,” Kat said. “Come on, you don’t have to do anything, hold my purse while I dance inappropriately with some fit German hunk.”

“No, I need to make a call.”

“Who is she?” Kat asked.

“None of your business,” Robert asked. “And I’d like some privacy, so… I’m going to ask you to leave.”
“Spoil sport,” she said. “Ah well,” she said, hoping off the bed and checking her hair in the mirror. “You always were too good for me.”

“Go on, get out of here,” Robert said easily. She smiled and blew him a friendly kiss before vanishing from the room. Robert double checked the door was locked and got his phone out. He called Aaron. He’d got the number from the garage when he’d taken his car in.

“What…?” came Aaron’s grumble when he finally answered.

“Hello to you too,” Robert said.

“Oh. It’s you.”

“That doesn’t sound too enthusiastic.”

“You want enthusiastic, don’t call at two in the morning,” Aaron said, though his voice had warmed up considerably. “How’s Germany?”

“Boring,” Robert said. “Just finished work actually.”

“You’re kidding,” Aaron said. “It’s late.”

“Came back to the hotel and had a whisky. Then called you.” Aaron sighed and Robert heard what sounded like moving bed sheets. “What’re you wearing?”

“Mm, no,” Aaron said. “Way too tired to work myself up.”

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“No,” Aaron repeated. “Haven’t known you nearly long enough for that.”

“Oh, something to look forward to then,” Robert said. “When you have known me for long enough.”

“All I want from you is bacon,” Aaron said. “You still owe me.”

“You’re keen for me to keep my promises,” Robert said.

“I won’t stand being lied to in any way,” Aaron said, and suddenly the conversation had turned more serious.

“I’m not lying to you,” Robert said.

“No? Are you really interested in me? I mean, for more than just sex.”

“Well, the sex was incredible,” Robert said. “But yes, I am interested. I… don’t make a habit of midnight calls to people I’m not interested in. And if I didn’t want to see you again, I’d have made that perfectly clear. Arrogant arse of a rich actor, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Aaron said warmly. “Just underwear. It’s late and I’m in bed, so that’s all I’m wearing.”

Robert didn’t breathe for a second or two. “Colour?” Aaron chuckled down the phone.
Robert had been gone for four days by the time he returned to the village. Every night he called Aaron, usually waking him up in the middle of the night, but he loved the calls. He loved the fact that it seemed Robert wanted to talk to him every day. Their conversations were generally fun and light hearted, and Aaron tried to ignore how good it felt hearing Robert’s voice. Because this, whatever this was would only be a brief fling. Robert would move on, Aaron wasn’t naïve. He could not allow himself to fall for Robert as it was as near a fact as anything could be that it wouldn’t last. Robert was smooth, knew the right way to behave to get whatever and whoever he wanted. It was part of his job after all, making people fall under his spell. Aaron didn’t want to get his heart broken, and this set up was perfect for it. He knew he was already halfway there. Even after one night together, hearing Robert’s voice felt so good. And he wanted Robert’s hands on his body again, it had been an incredibly good round of sex and he craved more.

So when Robert called him at eleven in the evening, letting Aaron know he was home and did he want to see him… it didn’t take much persuasion to drive up to Home Farm.

When Robert opened the door, Aaron stopped for a second. The well put together man he was used to, whether from photographs or in reality is gone. Robert looked incredibly tired, dark circles under his eyes, the usual sparkle gone. His hair also looked like he’d run his hands through it constantly, almost standing on end. “Are you okay?” Aaron asked.

“Mm,” he said. “Long week. Barely slept.”

“I don’t have to be here,” Aaron said.

“If I wanted to be alone, I wouldn’t have called you in the first place,” Robert said bluntly, letting him in. Once the door was closed, Robert kissed him, pushing him up against the wall. After quite a few days without it, he enjoyed the feeling of having Aaron’s muscular body pressed against his.

“Oh, God, I’ve missed you,” Robert breathed. “Missed the way you taste.” Robert kissed him again, deeply and making it linger. When their hello kisses faded away, Robert smiled at him. “Have you eaten?”

“It’s nearly midnight, so yes I’ve eaten,” Aaron said.

“Mind if I eat something? I don’t like food on flights, so I’ve not had anything since breakfast.”

“It’s your house,” Aaron said as they went through to the kitchen. Aaron watched as Robert stirred the pasta which was already on the oven, pausing only to make a cup of tea.

“Want one?”

“Beer if you’ve got it,” Aaron said. Robert chucked him a can from the fridge. “Thanks.” Aaron watched as he made his mug of tea with single minded attention.

“I always do it when I come back home,” Robert said to Aaron’s look. “Nowhere in the world makes tea the way the British do. If I’m going somewhere for a long time, I take teabags with me.”

“Can just imagine that,” Aaron teased. “What one thing can the famous Robert Sugden never do without? Teabags.”

“Shut up,” Robert said, though his eyes were light. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“You barely know me,” Aaron countered, feeling he was getting in far too deep too quickly.

“I know you a lot better than most people in my life,” Robert said. "I want to keep seeing you. And
I need it to stay between us, can you handle that?"

Aaron considered for a moment. "We can try. But why me?"

“With what I do, I usually have a lot of people around me, but not anyone who…” he tailed off and tried again. “Most people see the “famous” Robert and don’t actually want to know me. You didn’t put up with any of my shit as soon as you met me. You’re here because you like me. Or I hope you do.” For the first time, Aaron’s seeing Robert as nervous, and it’s endearing and attractive, because this isn’t a front, this is real.

“I’m not here because you’re rich or famous,” Aaron said. “I actually see that as a problem, not something to boast about.”

“Why?” Robert asked curiously, draining his pasta.

“I like my personal life to be private,” Aaron said. “But I also won’t hide forever with you. I don’t want to have to be careful about what I say to who, or make sure that you’re never seen with me. I’m not sure how long I could even do that.”

“Aaron, the fact I want to keep you… well, secret, for want of a better word doesn’t have much to do with the fact you’re a man,” Robert said. “Yes, it makes it more complicated, but…” Robert sighed. “I want more with you. But… when it comes out in the public eye, me and you will be over, and I don’t want it to be over.”

“Why would it be over?”

“I want something normal with someone who’s normal. The press attention will drive you mad.”

“You’ve tried before?”

“I had someone once. I’ve only had one serious relationship really, most people I meet are flings. Anyway, she was pretty, nice, worked in a tax office, so boringly normal. I liked her so much, but she was hounded by the press so constantly that in the end she decided it wasn’t worth it.”

“Am I a fling?” Aaron asked, pushing it now they were talking openly.

“No,” Robert said. “I don’t know what you are yet, but you are not someone I’m going to forget about in a hurry.” Robert started eating, leaving Aaron to think. This was getting too serious too fast, but he didn’t know exactly what he could do to stop it.
Aaron woke up first, and panicked when he realised he was in a strange bed. Then he remembered. Breathing calming down, he turned on his side to watch Robert sleep. He really was beautiful. His face scattered with freckles that he didn’t normally see. A lot of them were only visible this close. Even when seeing his films, it was hard to see them. No, you have to stop doing that, Aaron told himself. He knew he needed to stop comparing the fictitious Robert with the one lying in bed with him now. If he wanted any hope of it working, and he did.

Actually, Aaron wanted Robert right now. But he didn’t want to wake him, he’d clearly had a hard few days, so he got up carefully and quietly, putting his clothes back on. He didn’t bother with his hoodie, Robert had already seen every scar on his body. So what if the short sleeved T shirt revealed more than he usually would. He went into the kitchen for breakfast, stomach rumbling and started searching for food. He took a moment, looking at the coffee maker and wondering which buttons to push to get it to work. Luckily it seemed pretty self explanatory and it started brewing away.

He started going through the cupboards, looking for cereal. All he could find was some high fibre boring rubbish which he certainly wasn’t eating for breakfast. And even if he did, when he opened the fridge for the milk, he scowled as he smelt it. Definitely gone off, though that could hardly be surprising after Robert being absent for a few days. He chucked it and started looking for bread instead, he’d have toast. It was a little hard, but should be okay once it had warmed through. He poured himself a cup of coffee, feeling incredibly tired. Which was hardly surprising, in bed the night before him and Robert had talked. About useless things, fun casual things, and most Aaron taking the mick out of Robert and his charmed lifestyle. Though Robert had said that Aaron should meet Kat at some point. Apparently they’d get on well. Aaron liked the assumption that this was going to work, that Robert wasn’t thinking of chucking him any time soon.

Aaron heard footsteps and grumbled, “the milks gone off, you’ll have to have black coffee.”

“I’ve got more milk.” That did get Aaron turning around sharply because the voice wasn’t Robert’s. Vic stood in the kitchen, shopping bag in hand and her jaw doing a good impression of hitting the floor. “R… Robert said he was coming back and… Okay, should have called.”

“Aaron…?” Aaron said. “Don’t… don’t…” Aaron had no idea what he was trying to say. Don’t what?!

“Um… as far as I know, Robert’s not even been in the country twelve hours,” Vic said. “And… you’re here. How long? He’s barely moved into the village yet…” Vic gave her head a shake.

“It’s not what you think,” Aaron said. Then cringed, because that was such a line. “Robert wants it kept quiet.”

“Why?” Vic asked.

“Come on, you know who he is,” Aaron said. “Different woman every night of the week, I’m sure I don’t fit the pattern.”

“Got the coffee ready? I need caffeine.” Robert came into the kitchen through the interconnecting door, rather than the one leading to the hall where Vic stood. He was shirtless, clearly not having seen Vic and kissed Aaron on the mouth. Aaron stood stock still, not responding. “What’s wrong?” Robert asked. He nodded in Vic’s direction and Robert turned.
“Not quite what the spare key’s for, Vic,” Robert said coldly.

“I was trying to do a nice thing!” Vic said, waving the bottle of milk. “I didn’t come up here expecting to bump into your one night stand.” Aaron bristled at that. “By the way, what happened to “home’s private” and that you don’t bring your “affairs” to your house?”

“Maybe I should go,” Aaron said, starting to feel incredibly uncomfortable.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Robert said darkly. “I invited you here, she just turned up.”

“By the way, I’ve been completely ignoring the main issue, how long’ve you been gay?!” Vic exploded, shock now giving way to her voice.

“Vic, calm down,” Robert said. He glanced at Aaron gratefully as he passed Robert his own hoodie. Robert put it on, zipping it up and appreciating for half a second that it smelled like Aaron. “And I’m not gay.”

“Robert, don’t lie to me!” This seemed to Aaron’s point of view that this was turning into a full blown sibling argument which he really didn’t want to get in the middle of. He tried to leave but Robert gripped his hand tightly.

“Robert, it’s fine, I’ll leave.”

“No,” Robert said.

“You’re so stubborn!” Aaron shouted. “Your sister’s allowed to be shocked.”

“Aaron, don’t get pissed with me.”

“You’re the one hiding,” Aaron snapped bitterly.

“He isn’t wrong,” Vic chimed in. “The world wouldn’t end if you did come out.”

“Okay, both of you shut up and listen!” Robert shouted. They both fell into silence as Robert turned to Vic. “Remember a few years ago, for your sixteenth birthday. I took you on a shopping trip to Oxford street in London, covering everything. Buying you anything you wanted.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Vic said.

“Do you remember the following month of solid press attention those photos got because the press thought I was screwing an under age girl?”

“Yes,” Vic said dully.

“You remember being followed to school by paparazzi until they cottoned on to the fact your last name was Sugden?” Vic didn’t say anything so Robert continued. “You think I want to put myself or Aaron through that when it isn’t necessary?”

Vic looked completely convinced. “All right,” she said. “Sorry. It’s just… I know you like women and…”

“I like both, Vic. Always have. I just keep it quiet, that’s all. You think I’d get the usual heartthrob roles if people knew?”

“Is this serious?” Vic asked.
“It’s early,” Robert said in lieu of giving an actual answer.

“And mum doesn’t know either. Please don’t tell her, she’d only give me an earful.”

“I won’t,” Vic said. “But if she asks me point blank because the two of yous weren’t careful enough to hide it, I won’t lie.”

“That’s fair,” Robert said.

“And if Adam asks, I won’t lie either.” Aaron sighed.

“But…”

“He’s my husband, I will not lie to him,” Vic said firmly.

“Fine,” Aaron said. “We’ll be more careful.”

“Now, I was having a really good morning until you turned up,” Robert said. “We’re busy.”

“Oh, by the way?” Vic said at the door. “Really happy for the two of you.” Now she’d got over the shock, she was beaming. She left the house and Robert sighed.

“I need to take that spare key off of her,” Robert cursed under his breath. “Honestly, just turning up like this.”

“How did she get through the front gate?” Aaron asked. Neither of them had buzzed her in after all.

“It’s got a code, which she knows,” Robert said. “One seven four six. If you want to know.”

“Thanks,” Aaron said, appreciating the trust he was showing. Looking at Robert, having invited him into his home to sleep with him, actually sleep rather than sex, now giving him the code to the gate. “I mean it, thank you.”
One month later.

“Right, you are going to sit here and talk,” Chas said firmly. Aaron would have argued, but she’d come prepared with a plate of burger and chips, and a pint. He was hungry and the lure of food was too tempting.

“Talk about what?” Aaron asked before taking a sip of his drink.

“Who’s the boyfriend?”

“Mum…”

“And don’t you dare tell me there isn’t one,” Chas continued. “I see you smiling more, you’re not complaining so much about work, and more importantly you’re not sleeping here.”

“I sleep here,” Aaron said defensively.

“Not lately,” Chas said. “You’re not as sneaky as you like to think. So, who is it and what’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing’s wrong with him,” Aaron said.

“So I’m right, this boyfriend exists, then?”

“Yes, he exists,” Aaron said. “And that’s all I’m saying.”

“Aaron…” she whined.

“Nope,” Aaron said. He picked up his burger and started eating it determinedly.

“Does he make you happy?”

“Yes,” Aaron said. “He makes me very happy.”

“Good. But I’m not finished being nosey.”

“I know.”

“Want to come with me to LA?”

“Why’re you going to America?” Aaron asked confused. He’d not mentioned this before. They were currently curled up on the floor of Home Farm’s living room, entwined together, a blanket over their naked bodies.

“The premiere of “State of Play.” Gotta be there, then come back here for the London one in Leicester square.”
“Why’re you asking me then?” Aaron asked. “Not like I can come with you, is it?”

“I’m asking you because I’m sure you’d make a couple of twelve hour flights much more interesting,” Robert said lowly. Aaron rolled his eyes. “I’m asking because I don’t want to be away from you for that long. The hotel will be paid for, you could have a few days off from work…”

“You mean hide in the hotel suite in case any photographer happens to see me. While you go off with a beautiful waif to this premiere of yours.” There wasn’t any criticism in his voice, Aaron didn’t want the press attention just as much as Robert didn’t.

“It’s the way it has to be until we’re sure about each other,” Robert said. “You know that.”

“Doesn’t mean I like it,” Aaron said. He sighed sadly as Robert rolled away from him. “I’m not blaming you. I wish life were easier. I wish it wasn’t a big deal you being with a man. I wish it wasn’t a big deal, you being with anyone at all.”

“The press know I have someone,” Robert said.

“How?” Aaron asked in surprise. They’d been careful, only ever being intimate at Home Farm. Which while a little limiting, had it’s advantages. It made the building feel almost like a sanctuary.

“I haven’t been seen crawling from any clubs or hotels at four in the morning with my latest conquest,” Robert said with a shrug. “The more observant journalists have noticed and it’s being speculated on.”

“Oh, right,” Aaron said. “And which unsuspecting woman’s the current bookies favourite?”

“No idea,” Robert said with a shrug. “It doesn’t matter. And I would like you in LA with me.”

“I can’t go,” Aaron said. “You know I can’t. Too many people would ask questions if we both vanished at the same time and…”


“Do you… are you ready for us to be public?”

“Maybe,” Robert said. “I’m so enjoying having you here to myself, but… you make me happy and I don’t want to hide you.” Aaron smiled at that. “I’m not ashamed of you.”

“I’m not ashamed either,” Aaron said. “But… this’ll be difficult, you know it will.”

“Mm,” Robert said. “It’ll be worse for you.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve been living with the cameras for years, you have no idea what’s coming,” Robert said seriously.

“I see journalists around the village,” Aaron said defensively.

“That’s nothing, I promise you,” Robert said.

“Hang on, what happened about your career?” Aaron asked. “You said being out and public would effect your career, the roles you’d get. It’s your livelihood Robert.”
“Yeah, it probably will,” Robert said. “But I don’t care, because I’m in love with you.”

Aaron jerked up from the floor, his eyes hurriedly running over Robert’s face in shock. He’d never heard that, Robert had never told him. “No,” he said. “You can’t, I’m not… we’ve only been together for a few weeks and…”

“Aaron, calm down,” Robert said, stroking his hair. Though he couldn’t hide the disappointment that his sentiment hadn’t been returned. “I do love you. Even when you’re stubborn and irritating as hell.”

“I er… I’m so screwed up,” Aaron said, seeming sad. “Robert, you could do so much better, I’m…” Robert shut him up by putting his hand over his mouth.

“Aaron, stop,” Robert said. “If you’re not ready, it’s fine. If you want to run in the opposite direction, I’d get it.”

“I can’t run from you,” Aaron said. “Never could, not really. I tried the first time you kissed me. I didn’t get very far did I?”

“Your fault,” Robert said lightly. “You looked too damn good oil splattered in overalls.”

“That’s your weakness is it? Dirty mechanics?”

“No, you’re my weakness,” Robert corrected him.

“How about mum?” Aaron said. “How about we tell her and see how that goes?”

“Yeah, then there won’t be a problem,” Robert said. “Because she’ll throttle me, so there won’t be any issue with how the media sees it.”

Aaron hit Robert playfully and he laughed. “She knows you make me happy.”

“How?”

“Well, she knows whoever I’m seeing makes me happy,” Aaron corrected. “I think she’ll be okay with it. After the shock dies down.”

“Mm, maybe.” But Robert didn’t seem convinced. “No, we could. She should know how important you are to me,” Robert said. Aaron kissed him sensually, Robert pouring all the love he felt for this man into one kiss.

“We should go to bed,” Robert said. “As much as I’m enjoying this, my back will be screaming if we sleep on the floor.”

“Old,” Aaron murmured. Robert pinched his thigh and they laughed easily. They went upstairs, curling up in bed together. It’s when Robert was very close to drifting off to sleep that he heard it. “I love you too.” It filled Robert with warmth, but at the same time he could sense Aaron’s apprehension.

“Why does that scare you?” Robert asked.

“I don’t know,” Aaron whispered. “Just does.” Robert shifted in bed and mouthed at his stomach, his chest.

“I’m not going to leave you,” he whispered against Aaron’s skin. “It’s going to be hard, but I’m here. I’m in this.”
“I’m in this too.” Aaron swallowed. “We’re in the bubble, and I like our bubble. It’s happy and good, and we’re about to burst it by telling people.”

“Yes,” Robert agreed. “But the bubble’s not real life, is it?” Aaron had nothing to say to that. “We’ll be okay.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I'm drowning everyone in far too many updates of this, but it's such fun to write!
They had decided what they were going to do. They were going to tell Chas the truth about their relationship, and then Robert was going to fly to LA for his premiere. Robert joked that on another continent might be the only way he’d be safe from Chas Dingle’s wrath. When he came back, they’d meet up in Robert’s place in London. If they still wanted to go “public” Robert would call his agent and let him deal with the unnecessary fall out.

“This seems like a lot of fuss over nothing,” Aaron said one evening. “Why do we have to arrange how strangers find out about our relationship?”

“We could do the alternative,” Robert suggested. “Just let some photographer catch me with my tongue down your throat?” Aaron rolled his eyes. “Thought not.”

“Is it safe?” Vic called out loudly, a hand over her eyes.

“Yes,” Robert said. “We’re dressed.” They were, just about, T shirts and jogging bottoms. Vic said she’d never recover from the image of her brothers arse when she’d walked in on them two weeks ago. Vic opened the bag of Chinese food she’d been delivering for them.


“The sooner Yorkshire gets delivery drivers, the better,” Vic cursed.

“I like that little Chinese place in Hotten,” Robert said in his defence. “They don’t deliver.”

“I am not going to be your personal slave for much longer,” Vic moaned.

“You’re the only one who knows,” Robert said. “It’s just easier.”

“For you,” she said.

“Oh, come on, I see you eating all the prawn crackers,” Robert said, making Aaron laugh. “And this’ll be the last time.”

“Oh?”

“I’m flying to LA tomorrow, and when I come home the shit’ll hit the papers most likely,” Robert’s eyes slid to Aaron’s. “I don’t like hiding.”

“You sure you’re ready for that?” Vic asked, but she was mostly asking Aaron.

“No,” Aaron said. “I’m not sure about all the press, but I’m sure about him.” Robert couldn’t tear his eyes off of Aaron and Vic knew she was interrupting. She stole a spring roll from the Chinese takeaway then left. Robert put his large hand on the back of Aaron’s neck, pulling him closer, knowing they both liked this. Aaron loved feeling Robert’s hands on him like this, and Robert
enjoyed having Aaron pliant and willing under his touch.

Aaron went into the back room of the Woolpack, seeing Chas there. “Hiya love. All right?” she said.

“Mum, I want to talk to you,” Aaron said.

“What’ve you done?” she said, face falling. “Do I need to lie to the police, an alibi, what?”

“Calm down!” Aaron said. “No, nothing like that. I just… need to sort of… come clean I guess. About this man I’ve been seeing.”

The worry on Chas’s face vanished and she’s all eager. “Tell me everything! Start with a name.” They both turned as the door opened.

“Hi, Diane let me through,” Robert said quickly, coming to sit next to Aaron.

“If you don’t mind, this is a private conversation,” Chas said, looking at Robert with complete disdain.

“I know,” Robert said. He took Aaron’s hand. Chas saw and looked at the way Aaron was looking at him.

“No,” she said. “Come on, you have got to be joking! Him?!”

“What exactly’s wrong with me?” Robert asked, offended as Chas spluttered.

“Well, to start with, in the closet, user, manipulator, not to mention the world of trouble being with him is going to bring down on your head!”

“Yeah, we have considered that,” Robert said. Chas snapped.

“I wasn’t talking to you!” Aaron interjected.

“Right, and are you going to be happy when your face is on the front of every magazine, when they write the most obscene things about you and…”

“You buy all those magazines,” Aaron pointed out.

“Yes, because they’re trash and I like a bit of escapism, not because I think anyone I know will actually be in them!” Chas snapped. “Let alone my son!”

“Chas, we have thought about this,” Robert said. Chas huffed, getting up from the table and going through a pile of magazines. Both men looked at each other for a few seconds, Robert’s thumb rubbing Aaron’s knuckles gently, reassuringly.

“There!” she said, flicking to a page that showed Robert kissing a brunette who wore a very skimpy dress. And about three other shots, all with different women.

“Those photos must be at least a year old,” Robert said frowning at them.
“Oh, and he’s meant to believe that, is he?”

“Have you actually read the article mum?” Aaron asked. Chas snatched the magazine back and scanned it. The article was questioning why Robert Sugden hadn’t been seen in the limelight and hadn’t been associated with any woman in about three months. Not even the morning after shots from hotels that had become his norm.

“Oh, and that reasons you, is it?” Chas asked Aaron.

“Yes,” Robert said seriously. “He is.” Aaron looked at him warmly, those eyes making Robert want to pounce on him. He would if they were alone.

“I’m meant to sit here and listen while you tell me you’re ruining his life?!?” Chas asked.

“Mum, it’s my choice,” Aaron said. He was used to her freak outs, and either he could argue and shout with her, or wait for her to burn herself out. The latter seemed to take less energy. “I want to be with him, even if it’s not ideal.”

“There was me thinking I was perfect,” Robert said.

“As long as we’re together I’m going to have bruised shins,” Aaron countered.

“As long as we’re together, you’ll continue to bring my ego down.”

“Like I have any effect on that,” Aaron said with a scowl.

“Vic says you have.”

“Wait, Vic knows?!” Chas interrupted.

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “Walked in up at Home Farm about a month ago.”

“A month?!” Chas said. “She works in my pub and she didn’t say anything!”

“It was none of your business mum! And we’re telling you now.”

“I really want to talk to my son alone,” Chas said, a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Fine, I’ve got a flight to catch anyway,” Robert said.

“Call me when you land?” Aaron asked urgently, making Robert nod. Even though they weren’t alone, Aaron kissed him. He couldn’t let Robert leave the country without kissing him goodbye.

“Don’t forget me?”

“Six days,” Robert said. “Would take a lot longer to forget you.” Aaron rolled his eyes at the line. “I’d rather have you on my arm than Kat.”

“Do I need to be jealous?”

“No,” Robert said firmly. “I’ll wake you up every night calling you.”

“Thanks,” Aaron said. They kissed again and Robert sighed.

“Bye Aaron.” Aaron adored the way Robert said his name, as if his voice was caressing it. “We don’t have the time,” he added, reading Aaron’s look.
“I know. Catch your boring flight.”

“Bye.” Robert kissed him once more and then was gone.

“How about we skip the lecture,” Aaron said to his mother.

“Right,” she said. “We’ll just assume you’re an idiot then.

“We’ll be going public when he gets home from LA,” Aaron said.

“You don’t want to do that,” Chas said.

“No,” Aaron said. “I’m not sure I do, but one thing I know is that I can’t hide any longer. He’s important to me.”

“Oh, Aaron, please tell me you’re not falling for his crap?” Chas said. “He’s an actor, he can obviously say the things you want to hear.”

“He doesn’t act with me,” Aaron said.

“He’ll hurt you.” Aaron didn’t argue with that, he couldn’t. It was probably true.
“You look great,” Robert said as he held his hand for Kat to get out of the car onto the red carpet.

“I know,” she said with self confidence, her eyes sparkling. “So have you broken up with your new woman?”

“Why’d you say that?” Robert asked, steadily ignoring the journalist and photographers.

“What girl turns down a film premiere with Robert Sugden?” she said. “I know I didn’t.”

“Kat…”

“Which means you’ve either broken up with her, or she turned you down when you offered. And I know what I’d bet on.”

“She didn’t want to come,” Robert said. “Had something better to do.”

“You offered her a free stay in LA, walking down the red carpet with you on her arm, and she said no? And you’re still with her?”

“Yeah, pretty much the size of it,” Robert said, not wanting to get into the exact why of it. Kat stared at him in disbelief.

“Oh, my God, you love this one don’t you?” Kat said.

“Yeah,” Robert said, feeling good admitting it. “Yeah, I do.”

“Well she must be mental,” Kat said. “Fancy making her jealous?”

“What?”

“I’m a really good cover,” Kat said.

“Don’t try it,” Robert warned. “Just because she didn’t want to deal with the lions of the press doesn’t mean I’m going to chuck her.”

“You’ve fallen hard,” Kat said slowly. “Haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” Robert admitted. “I have. And I’d like to protect…” Robert bit his tongue because he’d almost said him. And revealing that to Kat on the red carpet in front of the worlds media probably wasn’t a good idea.

“You could at least show her what she’s missing,” Kat said, pressing closer to him in front of the worlds press.

“Keep your claws away,” Robert said lightly.

“Where’s your fun side?”

“They’re looking awfully cosy,” Chas said. Aaron whipped around, annoyed that his mother had
been looking at the pictures of Robert and Catherine on the red carpet over his shoulder. In spite of the fact it was incredibly late and they both should be asleep.

“It’s fine,” Aaron said. “He had to take someone.”

“And you’re okay with seeing her all over him like that?” Chas asked. No, he wasn’t fine. But he also wasn’t about to tell his mother that either. He didn’t want I told you so’s.

It’s nothing I swear. Kat was messing around. ly x

Aaron looked at his phone and realised Robert must have texted him only five minutes after the shots were released. It felt good to know he was being thought of. But then he remembered those photos again and felt cold.

“Who is he?”

“What?” Robert asked collapsing onto the hotel room bed. It had been a long day, he wasn’t in the mood for cryptic games. He’d undone his tie and taken his jacket off, but otherwise was still dressed from the premiere he’d just been to. Well, that and the after party. “Who’s who?” Robert asked.

“Your boyfriend.”

“What?! No, there’s nothing and…”

“Robert, I’m not the dumb blonde I play,” Kat said quietly. “There must be a reason you were alone tonight, and I have very occasionally seen you eye up men.”

“Kat…”

“Plus you didn’t want me draped all over you in front of the cameras, I could tell.” Robert didn’t say anything, not really wanting to deny it when asked outright. “It’s fine,” she said. “I’m not going to announce it. Just talk to me, you’re a friend.”

And it’s a relief to talk. So Robert did. “You love him?” she asked quietly, when Robert stopped talking about Aaron.

“Yeah,” Robert said. “I’ve only been away from him a couple of days and I always want to be with him. I… I don’t know how I’m supposed to cope without him when I film on location.”

“Where?”

“I was speaking generally.” Robert took a drink of his whisky. “I don’t have anything immediately in the works.”

“Have you got a photo?” Robert smiled and got his phone out. He trusted Kat.

“He’s not my type,” Robert warned as he tried to find a good photo. “You’re going to look at him and think he’s much more your type.” He got a picture, they were laying in bed together, but the photo was just of their faces and he showed it to Kat.

“Oh,” she said, sounding deflated and looking disappointed. “Are… you sure he’s gay? Because he
is gorgeous!”

“‘I know,’ Robert said, almost proudly. Gorgeous and his.

“How long did it take him to get over the fame thing?” she asked.

“About two seconds,” Robert said.

“Seriously.”

“I am serious. He doesn’t care.”

“Really?” she asked in disbelief. “Not asked for a car or anything yet?”

“Nope,” Robert said.

“You’re lucky,” Kat said. “Last ‘normal’ guy I met wanted me to make payments on his mortgage.” Robert smiled at her sadly.

“You should go,” Robert said. “Don’t want it said that we spent the night together.”

“Boyfriend wouldn’t like that,” she said.

“No, he wouldn’t.” Once she’d gone, Robert called Aaron.

“Did I wake you?”

“No, it’s eight in the morning,” Aaron said. “You clearly can’t work out the time difference.”

“Not on this much alcohol I can’t,” Robert said. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Aaron said.

“What is it?”

“Didn’t much like that woman all over you,” Aaron admitted.

“Aaron, it was only for…”

“The cameras, I know. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.” Aaron didn’t sound pissed off, just tired.

“I miss you,” Robert said. “Where are you, paint me a picture.”

“Actually in the café,” Aaron said. “Getting some coffee before I start work.”

“Anything interesting?”

“No,” Aaron said. “Your car was the most interesting I’ve worked on for a while. Oh, Vic tried to talk me into eating this blue cheese pie thing. It was horrible.”

“Tell her that, did you?” Robert asked amused.

“You know how much I like my food, I think she caught on when I left half of it on the plate.” Robert laughed.

“You know, it is so good to hear your voice.”
“Yeah,” Aaron said, his voice having lowered significantly. “Me too. And you look really good in that suit.”

“Of course I do,” Robert said with confidence that made Aaron scoff. “But it’s good to know you’ve been looking at the pictures of me. Some reason I find that a bit of a turn on.”

“I have to work,” Aaron said. “Some of us can’t spend the entire day in bed.” Robert’s stung, because what he does is work too.

“I’ve got to do so much PR for this film, I doubt I’ll get more than five hours sleep before my wake up call.”

“Poor little famous person,” Aaron said sarcastically. “Remind me which five star hotel you’re in?” Robert laughed. He needed someone like Aaron to keep him grounded, only realising how much now that he had Aaron in his life.

“I love you,” Robert said fervently.

“Yeah. You too,” Aaron said quietly before they hung up.
The days apart crawled by, and Aaron hated it. He also hated himself for how often he was looking up interviews of Robert. Because he’d not been wrong, there were a lot of them, all pretty much saying the same thing. Only one he found with any questions about Robert’s personal life.

Interviewer: You’ve bought a house lately in Yorkshire, your home town. Is this a sign you’re settling down?

RS: It was time to go back home. I’d always loved that house, and my sister lives in the village so it felt right.

Interviewer: I’m sure all our readers would like to know, any special lady in your life? As you’re probably aware of, there is some speculation as you seem to have withdrawn from the limelight recently.

RS: I’m the wrong side of thirty now. Bit old for it all, I like a quieter personal life. If I can get it, which I usually can’t.

Interviewer: That didn’t answer the question. Any significant other?

RS: I think my only true love is a bacon sandwich!

The last comment had made Aaron smile broadly. Robert never actually had cooked him a full English breakfast, he had several times made them bacon sandwiches. Because he’d put the bacon in the pan and neither of them could ever wait. Aaron hoped that was a nod to him, though the other half of him felt like he was being a sentimental git.

Chas wasn’t happy, but she was seething quietly, much to Aaron’s relief. And she hadn’t blabbed either, though whenever Robert came into the conversation, the temperature dropped several degrees. How Diane wasn’t picking up on it was a mystery to Aaron. Especially when Robert called at really odd times to speak to him.

The day before Robert was due back, Aaron went into the pub’s kitchen for Vic. Adam was there too, chatting with her and Aaron didn’t think before speaking. “Can I have the key?”

“Which key?” Vic asked, looking up briefly from chopping potatoes.

“Robert’s,” Aaron said. “He wants me to pick up his leather jacket before meeting him in London. Forgot it, apparently.”

Vic hesitated. “I er…I’m not sure I should,” Vic said. “He’s very private, he doesn’t want just anyone to have access to his house.”

Aaron sighed and scrolled through his phone to the text messages. “I know the code to the front
gate, I’ve got a key for his London place, he trusts me, Vic.” She read the messages and nodded, going to her bag.

“Rob’s house?” Adam asked, looking completely bewildered between the two of them. “What’ve I missed?”

“Nothing,” Vic said, while Aaron chewed his bottom lip. He’d become used to Vic knowing about them, so it hadn’t felt awkward talking to her. He hadn’t paid attention to Adam being there.

“What’s going on?” he asked, looking between Aaron and Vic. Vic was the one to speak first.

“I only didn’t tell you because you’d have made a big deal of it.”

“Of what?” Adam asked.

“Robert and I… we’ve been seeing each other,” Aaron said, biting down on his bottom lip again.

“What?” Adam asked, frowning. “No, Robert’s not gay. Is he?” he asked, turning to Vic.

“Not really your business,” she said, handing Aaron the key and returning to her potatoes.

“Really? What happened to “he’s an arrogant twat” and “Just because he’s famous doesn’t make him special?”” Adam asked.

“Oh, I still think all of that,” Aaron assured him quickly. “We talk about how arrogant he is all the time. And I need to go, I’ve got a train to catch.”

“Mate!” Adam shouted after him.

“Just… keep your mouth shut,” Vic said. “Leave them to it, they’re happy.”

“How are you so okay with this?”

“I’ve known for a while,” Vic said. “It’s fine!”

“But… Aaron and your brother that’s… weird! And he’s my best mate and he never told me!”

“You get used to it,” she said with a wide smile.

Aaron spent the entire train journey south trying to fight off the panic. He shouldn’t have gone to Robert’s house. That one thought was crystal clear, because he was fine until he’d done that. Excited to see Robert again, as well as enjoy his London flat which Vic had said was very luxurious. But now all he could think about was that bloody letter. He shouldn’t have looked. Why had he looked? Sod the fact it was addressed to him, it was a letter in Robert’s house, he should have just stamped his curiosity down. But he hadn’t, and now he was panicking. He felt fairly sure that Robert knew he couldn’t be bought, and that Robert liked that about him. So what was he playing at? Buying property in Aaron’s name?

Once in London, Aaron followed the directions Robert had given him before he left the country, and found the flat with no problems. He unlocked the door with a key Robert had left him, and disabled the alarm. All of that he did with a sort of detached awareness, as his mind was still stuck on those property deeds he’d read at home. No, at Robert’s home, he corrected himself. He couldn’t even have a look around the flat, his mind was in so much turmoil, and he had previously
wanted to be a bit nosey. See what Robert’s bachelor pad was actually like. The only thing Aaron could see was that it was all clean edges, no clutter, more like a show home than a place anyone lived. Home Farm might be posh and upscale, but it was obvious that Robert did actually live there, photos, knick knacks, books scattered everywhere.

It was a top floor flat, with floor to ceiling windows on the left side, in a way that was obviously supposed to be stylish, but appeared to Aaron to be more annoying. Who cared if you could see the city spread before you, Aaron had always valued his privacy, and he dropped the blinds. Even if no one could see up here, it made him feel better. He got a text on his phone, Robert saying he’d landed and was on the way home from the airport. Aaron just waited. He checked the fridge, but there was no beer, so he felt at a loose end. He didn’t want to get comfortable in someone else’s house.

By the time Robert came in, smiling, Aaron had worked himself up in a state. “What the hell are you doing?” Aaron hissed as Robert walked in the door of his flat, dropping his carry on bag on the floor. Robert looked completely bewildered, and (if Aaron was being honest with himself) way too sexy for having just come off a plane. Bedraggled in a way which looked so good.

“Okay, not the hello I was expecting.”

“Robert…”

“I need a little bit more information,” Robert said blankly. “What have I done? I thought you were okay with the Kat thing, and…”

“Forget about Kat,” Aaron said. “You’ve bought a house in my name? What’s wrong with you?”

“That’s meant to be a surprise,” Robert said. “How do you even know about it?”

“I don’t think that’s the issue,” Aaron said. “Why would you even think that’s what I want?”

“I’m trying to take care of you,” Robert said.

“You can’t buy me!” Aaron shouted. “I will not be like one of your previous… whatever. I’m not going to just sit back and let you pay for everything, ignore the fact I have a job and a life before you came into it. I won’t be a kept woman, Robert.”

Ignoring that rather sexist comment,” Robert said. “I’m not trying to buy you. I am trying to look after you. Because when this comes out, I think you’re going to need a bolt hole, when it gets too much. I know you think you’ll be able to cope with it, but it’s just in case. And living above the pub would be terrible for you, the security isn’t good enough and photographers and journalists could just come into the bar. I want somewhere safe for you.” Aaron breathed in and out deeply, trying to calm down. “It’s tiny anyway, not much. It does have a lot of private land with it, which means you could genuinely escape from the press if you wanted to.”

“I don’t want a house from you,” Aaron said, holding onto the point stubbornly. “I don’t want to be indebted to you, because if and when we end, there’s no way I could ever give you back these… things.”

“Then leave,” Robert said. “If you left this flat right now and never wanted to see me again, I wouldn’t take the house back. It’s a gift, it’s in your name, I am not trying to buy you. And I would have told you eventually, but I knew it’d take a long time for you to accept it.”

“I’m not accepting it,” Aaron said stubbornly.
“No,” Robert said, dropping his shoulders. “I did think that was coming.” He sighed. “Now, are we still fighting? Or can I kiss my boyfriend hello after a week not seeing you?” Aaron didn’t want to soften to him, was still a little bit on edge after Robert’s absence, and the nasty shock finding out about the house, but when Robert looked at him like that it was particularly difficult to stay pissed off with him. Robert kissed him and Aaron let him.

“This argument isn’t over,” Aaron warned, his breath rushing over Robert’s lips.

“No,” Robert said. “I know. Because you’ve said what you want, now it’s my turn. How did you find out about the house?” His hands slipped to Aaron’s arse, pulling him close and pressing their bodies together. He wanted to be touching Aaron, badly, even though he was annoyed. “Did you go through my paperwork in the office?”

“I went up to Home Farm. For your jacket,” he added, and Robert nodded. “Some post. The documents for the house and it was addressed to me so I opened it. I have not, and I would not go through anything that’s yours.”

“It’s addressed to you, because it’s yours. I’m not trying to buy you. If I ever thought buying you would work, I wouldn’t still be with you.”

“I know,” Aaron said, relenting. “I just… I know that I’m going to be called a gold digger and… They’ll look at me and wonder why on earth you’re bothering.”

Robert smiled at him. “I could give you a list if you want,” he said. Aaron rolled his eyes but kept looking at Robert as he held him. “You’re gorgeous. You’re sexy as hell. I love your laugh, the way your eyes light up. I love that you don’t give me any crap, you don’t let my bullshit get in your way. And you don’t treat me like I’m anything special because I’m well known. And somehow, at the same time, you make me feel like I’m the most special thing in the world.”

“Robert…” His words had got Aaron more emotional than he was prepared for and Robert kissed him deeply. “Which way’s the bedroom?”

“What, you didn’t check out the place first?” Robert asked.

“Only checked the fridge, you don’t have any decent beer,” Aaron said.

“Oh, I’ll fix that,” Robert assured. “My single malt’s wasted on you anyway.” Robert’s hands tightened on Aaron’s hips and he kissed him, a proper hello kiss this time.

Robert moved to lift the blinds up and Aaron shook his head. “Don’t. I want privacy.”

“No one can see,” Robert whispered seductively. “And I want to watch the city as I make you come.”

“No,” Aaron said forcefully, putting a hand to his mouth to stop Robert moving closer. “That is a line, one you’ve probably used on dozens of people. We don’t do that, I don’t want the Robert Sugden who stands on red carpets and makes everyone fall at his feet. I just want you.” Robert realised what he meant and sighed.

“Sorry,” Robert said. “It takes me a while to unwind from that life. Switch it off. You have me, Aaron. You should know that, you have all of me.” And that might have been a line too, but it was an honest one, so Aaron let it go. Especially when Robert grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the bedroom.
Robert woke to an empty bed and for a moment thought he’d dreamed coming home. He pressed his nose into the pillow on Aaron’s side and smiled. Not a dream then, he had been sleeping there. He got up and found Aaron looking out over London. He was already dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

“How was LA?” he asked, not turning around as Robert made himself some coffee.

“Lonely,” Robert said. “Tiring. I’m very glad to be home.” Their fight about the house hadn’t exactly been resolved, just put on hold. Robert refused to apologise for trying to take care of Aaron, and Aaron refused to admit that it might be necessary. Robert walked towards Aaron and kissed him good morning, enjoying feeling Aaron almost melt against him. “Are you okay?” Robert asked, stroking his face.

“Yeah,” he said. “I half thought…”

“Go on,” Robert urged.

“A week away would make you see that I’m not worth the bother.” Aaron shrugged.

“No, a week away made me miss you,” Robert said honestly, making Aaron smile slightly. “Did you not sleep well? It’s still early.”

“No, I… had a nightmare. I’m fine,” he added at Robert’s look. Robert kissed him very softly. “Really, I’m fine. Though my back hurts a little. You bit me.”

“Couldn’t help it,” Robert said, completely unashamed. “I couldn’t resist, you’re just too tempting.” Aaron rolled his eyes.

“How’re we going to do this, then?” Aaron asked.

“You still want to go public?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “As long as you’re sure…”

“I’m sure,” Robert said. “I love you.”

“Oh, you must think it’s going to be bad, then.”

“I think it could be bad,” Robert said. “Remember I love you.” Aaron leant his forehead against Robert’s for a moment. “Right, so I’m going to call my agent, or we’re going to go down and have breakfast at this café I like, and let you be photographed with me.” The thought made Aaron feel sick and Robert could read it on his face. “I’ll call my agent.” They both sat down on the sofa and Robert got his phone out.
“Okay, I need a face to face meeting,” Robert said to Steve on speaker phone as soon as he picked up.

“Oh God, that means it’s money, sex or drugs. Which?”

“Are they my only options?”

“Robert, you don’t give me many problems,” Steve said. “And it’s early in the morning, before I’m even officially working. Which means this is serious. Sex? Tell me that you haven’t been caught with a prostitute.”

“What?!” Robert spluttered, ignoring Aaron’s grin.

“I can spin pretty much everything else, but that one’s always tough.”

“Why would you even think that?”

“You’ve not been seen with any women lately. People are starting to notice and wonder.”

“I’m in a relationship,” Robert said. “Which is why no ones seen me.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem?”

“Well…”

“Three illegitimate children? History of lap dancing? Come on, just tell me.” Aaron was full on laughing into his fist, he couldn’t help it.

“It’s a man.” That did stop Aaron’s laughter, because the pause from Steve was telling. “Don’t,” Robert said.

“How long have you been hiding you’re gay?” Steve asked.

“I’m not gay, I’m bi, and no, I don’t want to make any kind of statement.”

“Right,” Steve said. “Give me more information, what do you actually want to come out of this?”

“Well, going down the street with my boyfriend without being blinded by the press’d be a good start.”

“Are you living on planet earth?” Steve asked. Aaron decided this was the time he should leave, because he could sense this conversation moving onto less flattering ground in short order. “Can this man…”

“Aaron,” Robert interrupted.

“Oh, can Aaron be removed, or…”

“You’re not listening to me,” Robert said firmly. “This is happening. I’d like it to come out in a contained way, rather than someone shooting a camera at my bedroom window.” Aaron squeezed Robert’s shoulders, then left him to it, almost positive that he’d be spoken about more and more negatively as the conversation went on. And getting angry wouldn’t do anyone any good.

“If you don’t want to release a statement, there isn’t much I can do,” Steve said. “I can draft one and have it released from the press office with your approval…”
“Yeah, let’s do that,” Robert said.

“Right, give me his name.”

“Aaron Dingle,” Robert said. “He lives at home, in Emmerdale.”

“Any skeletons in his closet that I need to know about?”

“Er… he’s on a suspended sentence for skipping bail,” Robert started. It made Steve sigh heavily.

“Skipping bail for what?”

“Arson,” Robert said. “He didn’t do it, it’s just the skipping bail that was a problem.”

“Oh, a minor problem,” Steve said. “Look, I’ll get back to you.” Robert sighed as he ended the call, following the noise into the bathroom.

“You don’t have to hide in the shower,” Robert called over the running water.

“Thought I was getting in the way,” Aaron said.

“He’s going to call back,” Robert said. “When he’s decided how to handle this.”

“This?” Aaron said, thinking that sounded slightly offensive.

“Want company?” Aaron smiled, he could hardly turn down Robert naked in the shower after all.

The statement was incredibly brief, only saying some waffle about them valuing their own privacy (which Robert fully expected to be ignored) and within twenty minutes of it being released, there were already photographers downstairs. Robert could see them waiting outside the building. Aaron had become quieter and quieter throughout the day, even for him which was saying something. But they knew they couldn’t hide out forever. Chas had called, which Aaron had pretty much ignored. A "yes, no, bye" kind of conversation.

“Probably would have been better if we’d released this when we were home in the village,” Aaron said.

“Now you tell me,” Robert said. “Come on, let me take you out for dinner.”

“Robert…” Aaron started. “Have you seen the circus down there?!”

“They will always be there until we go out, you know that. I do know a restaurant that’s discrete. We could get some food?”

“All right,” Aaron said.

“Sure?”

“Get me out of here before I change my mind,” Aaron said. Robert smiled, making a call to have a car waiting for him.

“You do have an incredible life,” Aaron said. “You are aware of that, right?”

“What do you mean?” Robert asked.
“Most people drive when they want to go out. You call a car and one magically appears.”

“Shut up,” Robert said with a smile. “You’ll be grateful for it in twenty minutes.”

“Yeah,” he said. Robert kissed him, and within seconds they found themselves sprawled along the sofa, Aaron on top with a smile as he pushed Robert into the cushions. “We could forget about dinner…” Aaron suggested, rolling his hips suggestively.

“I think we’re both going to need something to look forward to after running the gauntlet,” Robert said, his hand going to Aaron’s jeans suggestively. His phone buzzed. “Car’s ready. Come on, it’s really good food. Japanese okay?”

“Don’t know,” Aaron said honestly. “Not tried much sushi in my life.” Robert stood up, grabbing his wallet and his keys, and Aaron had a moment that he just felt so incompetent. How could he compare with that? Robert looked gorgeous, and here was he, a scruff in a hoodie and jeans. And everyone outside would want to take his picture and wonder what the hell Robert was doing and…

“Breathe.” Robert stood in front of him, speaking surely, his hands comfortably on Aaron’s neck. “I’ll be with you the whole time. Anyway, first times always the worst. Let’s get it over with.” He squeezed Robert’s hand tightly and they left the flat, going into the lift. Robert gave Aaron a kiss in the lift, trying to reassure him, though he knew it wasn’t helping much.

The amount of camera bulbs flashing off made it seem like they were under floodlights. The calling and screeching of journalists was louder than Robert thought he’d ever heard, and it was more like a scrum than anything else, fighting through it to the car. Even if it might be fueling the fire, Robert grabbed Aaron’s hand, pulling him towards the waiting car. Robert pushed Aaron in first, before sitting next to him on the backseat, hurriedly driving off. Or trying to, it was difficult with the amount of press. Within a couple of minutes they were away.

“Well done,” Robert said, looking at Aaron who seemed almost shell shocked, leaning back on the seat.

“For what?” Aaron asked.

“You didn’t punch any of them,” Robert said. “That’s a start.” Aaron laughed under his breath.

“I know you warned me, but that was…”


“You sure this restaurant’s discrete?”

“As good as you’re going to get in London,” Robert said. “And anyway, we need to eat. The whole point of this is that we didn’t want to hide.”

“Yeah, it was,” Aaron said. “I know. Just… didn’t know people cared what I look like.”

“Are you going to let me treat you?”

“This time I just might,” Aaron said. Robert smiled and kissed him gently. Then a little bit more.

“Mm…” Robert sighed against him. “You taste good.”

“How long’ve you got to be in London for?” Aaron asked knowing that now wasn’t the time to start being intimate.
“Two days,” he said. “You don’t have to stay with me. Get the train back up home.”

“No, I want to be here. I like being with you. Not much waiting for me at home, I’m sure Cain’ll give me a few more days off.”

They fell into silence until they got to the restaurant. There were a few photographers there, but more of the standard. It was well known that some of the rich and famous used this restaurant. Again, Robert held his hand as they went inside, only a few flashes of cameras this time.

Aaron didn’t relax until they were seated at a table in the corner, no one paying any attention to them, but even then, Aaron couldn’t fully let himself go until he started eating. He always felt better on a full stomach.


“Thanks. I know I’m a bit…”

“What, not what the masses expected?” Robert quipped. “I think it’s obvious by now I get bored with the usual. Don’t think I’m going to get bored with you.”

“I really hope not,” Aaron said, smiling a little. “Don’t want to have gone through all that for nothing.” Robert reached across the table and took Aaron’s hand, running his thumb across the knuckles gently.

“No matter what happens…”

“I know,” Aaron said quietly.

“Dessert?” A friendly waitress asked, coming over to the table. Robert did not let go of Aaron’s hand, eyes sparkling at him.

“Yes, please.”
Chapter 14

Going back to Robert’s flat was again a mess of cameras, shouting journalists and a quick walk inside. When they were safely ensconced in the flat, Aaron answered his phone which had been ringing on and off all day. “Mum, I’m fine,” he said tiredly.

“Love, I’ve been so worried,” Chas said down the phone. “It’s everywhere.”

“Yeah, I know,” Aaron said.

“Warned you this would happen,” Chas said, her usual acid tongue coming back now that she was finally talking to her son. “Knew you should stay miles away from Robert Sugden.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Aaron said. “Did you call to check I was okay, or just for the lecture?”

“Aaron!”

“Mum, I’m… Well, if not great, I’m doing okay.” Chas huffed down the phone. “What’re they saying?”

“Not much about you,” Chas said. “Yet. All about Robert and how long he was hiding and all that rubbish. But it won’t be long and…”

“Mum drop it!” Aaron snapped. “I love him, and I knew it would be like this.” Aaron sighed, rubbing his forehead hard. “Anyone in the village yet?”

“A few journalists have rocked up. Thank God Home Farm is down that long drive, they can’t see the house from the top.”

“So they’ve tried,” Aaron said. “Great.”

“When are you coming home?”

“When Robert does,” Aaron said surely. “I am fine. Now I’m going to go.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“How is she?” Robert asked, passing Aaron a glass of whisky as he sat next to him. Aaron didn’t usually go for whisky, but after today a strong drink would be good.

“Moaning at you,” Aaron said. “She’s okay. Apparently people are up outside yours.”

“I guessed that,” Robert said. “I’m actually surprised at how I’ve been able to settle down there without journalists getting in the way. Come here.” Aaron allowed himself to be held against Robert’s body. “Tomorrow I’ve got a lot of PR to do before the London premiere,” Robert said. “So you’ll be on your own all day. Is that okay?”

“Can I hole up here?”

“Yes,” Robert said with a smile. “Kat’s coming with me to the premiere, is that…?”

“Yeah, but isn’t that unnecessary now?”
“I promised her she could come,” Robert said. “And it’s not like I’m not going to get the attention is it?”

“You sound nervous,” Aaron noticed.

“Yeah,” Robert said. “I am. It’s going to be… bad. Or, a lot, rather than bad.”

“I didn’t think you did nervous,” Aaron said.

“Well, this matters.” Aaron shifted and kissed him, keeping it tender and reassuring.

Aaron woke up to a headache and a banging on the door. Frowning at the empty bed, he threw some clothes on and answered it, because whoever it was wasn’t taking the hint.

“What?” he asked, throwing the door open, at the same time realising he was alone, no Robert in sight. A blonde woman he knew only from photos and films, Catherine Dujardin stood there, a fake smile on her face and what looked like a pastry box in her hand. “Robert’s not here.”

“I know,” she said. “But you are, and I’ve been desperate to meet you. Aaron, right? So you going to invite me in?”

“Yeah, might as well,” Aaron said after a brief pause, thinking it might make the morning slightly more interesting.

“It’s Kat by the way,” she said, sitting in the arm chair and tucking her legs under her in a way that told Aaron she’d been here often before. She had a very slight American twang and looked impossibly beautiful for eight in the morning.

“I know who you are,” Aaron said, closing the door.

“And… I know who you are,” she countered. “So, I guess we’re even.”

“Robert know you’re here?” Aaron asked.

“Um… not exactly. Though the press camped outside might give him a tip off.”

“This is his place, not mine,” Aaron said. “Not sure you should be here without him knowing.”

Kat laughed, then looked at him. “Oh. You’re serious?”

“It’s not mine,” Aaron repeated.

“I come here all the time,” she said in her defence.

“I doubt that’s true,” Aaron said, making himself a coffee in the kitchen. If it was true, he was sure Kat would have come up when he’d first been googling Robert, and she hadn’t. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with Kat in the place, but it also seemed clear she wasn’t leaving until she was ready. And with photographers downstairs, he wasn’t about to make a scene. “What do you want?”

“Are you always this charming?” she asked. “I’ve bought croissants.”

“I’m more of a toast kind of man,” Aaron said. He paused because he’d just seen a note by the kettle.
Had an early start. You looked far too relaxed to wake up. I’ll call when I can. R x. There was also a phone number on the bottom of the note with Call Charlie if you need anything.

“Are you jealous of me?” Aaron looked up from the note to realise Kat had been waffling on.

“Yes,” Aaron said honestly. “I don’t want to lose him.”

“I will have nothing to do with that,” she said.

“Come off it,” Aaron said. “He could be with you so easily. Could you really see me being the one on his arm in front of all the cameras?”

“He wants you,” Kat said. “He glowed when he talked about you.”

“Robert doesn’t do that,” Aaron said dismissively.

“No,” she agreed. “He doesn’t, so you need to know how rare that is.” Aaron had nothing to say to that, so changed tack.

“Tea?”

“Please,” she said, smiling at him. Aaron gave her half a smile back

“Have you seen the articles?” Kat asked.

“No, and I’m not sure I want to,” Aaron said. “I knew it would be a big thing for Robert, but I didn’t expect them camped out downstairs. It’s been more than twenty four hours, what exactly are they expecting to see?”

“You,” Kat said, taking the cup of tea from him with a smile. “They’re desperate to catch a picture of you, they know you’re up here. Beyond a few in the middle of the street, they haven’t had a look at you yet.”

“That’s what I should do then, give them a good long gawp at me?” Aaron asked in disbelief.

“Half the women on the planet would love to be in your position. He’s rich, gorgeous and talented. You’ve ruined quite a few fantasies with this, and everyone wants to see what you look like.” Aaron scoffed. “You knew you were getting into this when you got with him,” Kat said quietly, not without sympathy.

“I didn’t think a one night screw would turn into this,” Aaron said bluntly. “I didn’t mean to fall for him, he’s not really mine to fall for.”

“He is now,” she said.

“Well, I guess that’s true.” Aaron sighed, looking at his coffee cup. “Sorry. I’m not making a great impression on you.”

“You’re not what I thought,” Kat admitted. “But you’re sure as hell not after him for his money.”

“No, I’m not,” Aaron said. “I’d rather he were poor, we wouldn’t have all this mess to deal with.”

“Yeah, but… sometimes it’s good problems to have, right?” She smiled at him slightly.

“You’re going with him to his film thing tonight, right?” Aaron asked.
“No,” Kat said as if this was a stupid suggestion. “He doesn’t need me now it’s out in the public.”

“He does need you,” Aaron said. “He’s nervous about tonight with all the press being there and… he told me you were going.”

“I didn’t think I’d still be invited,” she said with a shrug.

“He needs a friend,” Aaron said. “I’ve never seen him nervous.”

“I don’t think I have either,” she said.

Robert had a TV interview today, which (thank God) wasn’t live. In fact, he’d have tried to get out of it, but he knew the interviewer well. Caroline, a middle aged woman who had always written nice things about him in her column, and shown him in a good light with TV interviews.

When he walked into the studio where they were setting up, she stared at him. “I’ve been glued to my phone, expecting you to cancel,” she said.

“Now, why would I do that?” Robert asked innocently. “Not like half the worlds media isn’t camped outside my flat is it?”

“Well, you’ve got balls, I'll say that,” she said with a smile. “How are you?”

“You asking as a friend or a journalist?”

“Both.”

“I’m okay,” Robert said. “You know this is for PR for State of Play, right?”

“Yes,” Caroline said sweetly.

“Are we actually going to talk about the film?”

“It might come up,” she said. “I can’t help it that viewers are more interested in your personal life right now. How is Aaron?”

“We’re starting already are we?” Robert said with a false smile. Perfect.
Robert text him, saying the interview would be on the TV at two thirty. Aaron convinced himself that he wouldn’t watch it, until about two minutes to the appointed time. Then he flicked the telly on anyway, thinking knowing could be a lot better than not knowing. His first thought was Robert looked so good. He wore a black shirt, the sleeves rolled up showing off his freckled arms. He also had one or two more buttons undone than strictly necessary at his throat and Aaron felt a brief flash of heat at remembering how that patch of skin tasted. Aaron could only tell that he was nervous because of the slight movement of a muscle in his jaw. A stranger wouldn’t be able to see it, though Vic probably would.

They spent a couple of minutes blathering on about the film, which Aaron had zero interest in. Then, as was inevitable, it turned onto Robert’s personal life.

“Robert, I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t so much as ask about your significant other,” the interviewer asked. “There’s been quite a stir in the media lately.”

“Mm,” Robert said non-committally. “I noticed.”

“Do you think the fuss is because it’s an unknown, or because you’re dating a man?” the interviewer pressed.

“I think it’s safe to say it was unexpected,” Robert said and Aaron could see he was choosing his words carefully. “Even I didn’t expect it.”

“This is the first time you’ve ever released a statement about any of your personal relationships. How serious is this?”

“We’re happy and together,” Robert said, avoiding the question.

“Did you move away from London so you could be closer to him?”

“No,” Robert said. “Happy coincidence.”

“Oh? And how did you meet this… Aaron Dingle?” she continued.

“He’s a mechanic,” Robert said. “Met him when I took my car in.”

“And?”

“Caroline, I’m here to talk about the film, not my personal private life,” Robert said, though it was accompanied with a winning smile so no one could take offence to the brush off. The interview went on for a minute or so more, before it cut away. And Aaron could breathe again. He’d actually spoken a lot without really saying anything. The only thing vaguely personal had been the fact Aaron worked as a mechanic, but Aaron felt fairly sure the press would be able to find that out anyway. Not like he was in hiding.

The phone rang and Aaron answered it. “Was that okay?” Robert asked.

“You’re nervous,” Aaron said.

“Yeah, about your reaction,” Robert said. “I know we’re private people, but I had to say something and…”

Chapter 15
“It was fine,” Aaron said. “Are you this concerned about my judgement?”

“Yes,” Robert said. “It matters.”

“Robert you could have said anything and I’d have barely noticed,” Aaron said. “You’re going to wear that black shirt again, right?”

“Oh, you liked that?” Robert questioned, voice lower and seductive.

“Mm, sleeves rolled up, yes I did like it. I’d like to peel that off you later.” They both knew he’s trying to distract them, but it was working.

“I’ll remember that,” Robert said. “Are you okay?”

“I met Kat today.”

“And you’re still at the flat?” Robert asked. “She can be a bit full on.”

“She’s nice,” Aaron said. “Think she got my grumpy side though.”

“You have another side?” Robert questioned. Aaron laughed, a laugh that Robert hadn’t heard in what felt like such a long time and he smiled. Aaron could hear someone calling him on the phone line.

“I…”

“Have to go,” Aaron finished for him. “Will you be back before the Leicester square thing?”

“I… um not sure. Sorry. Things tend to overrun. Tomorrow I’m all yours.”

“I’ll count on that,” Aaron said. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

Aaron opened the door to see a complete stranger there. “Who’re you?” Aaron asked, standing firmly in the doorway and not letting him in.

“I’m Steve Askers,” the man said. “Robert’s agent, has he…”

“Yeah, he’s mentioned you,” Aaron said, moving aside. “Robert okay?”

“Yeah, fulfilling all his commitments,” Steve said. “And it’s him I’m here to talk about.”

“What about him?”

“I’m asking you to stop,” Steve said. “Stop seeing him, just leave him alone. Let him move on with his life.”

“No,” Aaron said. He didn’t need to think about it, there was no way he was giving Robert up.

“This might change your mind,” Steve said, giving him a check. Aaron moved and took it, looking at the figure on the check and shook his head.

“You can’t buy me,” Aaron said. “It isn’t about the money.”
“That’s how much he’s lost since the two of you went public,” Steve said, still incredibly calm, making Aaron pause. That was so much money.

“How?”

“His advertising partners are deserting him. Porsche and Rolex have both left him.”

“Isn’t that discrimination?” Aaron snapped back.

“Yeah, it is,” Steve said. “But they can get away with it by simply saying they’re not renewing the contracts. rather than ending them early.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” Aaron said. “Not really my fault though.”

“Aaron, I’m not stupid. I’ve known Robert an incredibly long time. He’s a good worker, and underneath the fame, he’s actually a good guy. I’m not doing this to be the bad person here. I’m doing it, because I care about Robert and I know the damage you’d do to him even if you two can’t see it.”

“I’m not going to leave him no matter what you tell me,” Aaron said. “And the money? It’s not about that.” He held out the check but Steve didn’t take it.

Steve sighed. “Okay, I actually believe you’re not a gold digger. I believe you love him and you care for him. So take a few minutes and think about what this is doing to him. How much he stands to lose being with a man publicly. He won’t get romantic leads in films, he won’t get teenage girls fawning over his posters, and they’re the ones with the money. He will lose out in so many ways, his advertisers are already jumping ship. They don’t know what to do with a bisexual man. Gay has a place in this industry, but…”

“You’re sounding incredibly offensive,” Aaron interrupted.

“I’m not here to be politically correct,” Steve said. “The world isn’t, so I need to be realistic. He will lose out as long as he’s with you. And they will dig, you’re a Dingle, you’re on a suspended sentence, no one thinks you’re good enough for an A lister like him.” Aaron’s already low self confidence took a hit at that, because that was exactly how he felt. Steve nodded at the check. “Please take it, and leave Robert alone. Let him go, for his sake.”

“Robert doesn’t want me to go anywhere.”

“That’s why he employs me,” Steve said. “I look after him, even when he doesn’t know what’s best for him. Please, Aaron. Just think about it.” Steve left and Aaron looked at the check. One thing he knew for certain was that he would never cash that. No way was he going to make money off of this situation. But maybe Steve had a point. They were never going to last anyway, so if it was hurting Robert’s career, maybe the best thing to do would be to pull back. Aaron wasn't naive. People like him didn't get a happily ever after.

Aaron sat in the steadily darkening room, thinking and waiting. Robert had not come home, text to say he’d see him late tonight, but Aaron was considering what to do. And it wasn’t about the money, it was about the point Steve had made. He hadn’t really believed it, that it would have this effect on Robert’s career. Hadn’t honestly thought that it would be that big a deal. But clearly it was. Oh, God, why did this have to be so difficult?
Robert had had a day of it, the only good spot on the horizon was that he now had a week to ten
days off before he had to do anything else. Well, another particularly bright spot was Aaron
waiting in bed for him. He ignored the photographers and went inside the building, slightly pleased
there were markedly less of them there.

He unlocked the door and was pleased the flat was quiet, meaning that Aaron was most likely
asleep. He went through to the bedroom and stopped at the still made bed. Or almost made bed,
Aaron never could make a bed properly. The most important thing was Aaron wasn’t there. Instead
of his boyfriend, there was a note on the bedside table, on Robert’s side.

Sorry, just need to get home. Need a break. Sorry. Robert froze. No. This couldn’t be happening,
they’d agreed. Aaron couldn’t be gone. Nothing scared him nearly as much as that did. Robert
called Aaron but it went straight through to voicemail so phoned up Charlie, his PA instead. He
didn’t even get the chance to ask the question before Charlie spoke.

“About an hour ago.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the small hours of the morning when Aaron got home, relieved to see no press outside the pub. He unlocked the door and found Chas in the kitchen. He’d called ahead to say he was being driven home. Ignoring the fact that “home” was halfway up the country, apparently being driven that far wasn’t a problem.

“Hiya love,” Chas said tiredly, her face free from make up. She hugged her son tightly, and Aaron didn’t want to let go. For once, he let his mother hold him and try to make it better.

Even before Robert asked Charlie, he was fairly sure where he’d gone. Back home. Emmerdale would feel much safer than London, or practically anywhere else right now. Maybe being cooped up in Robert’s flat had effected him more than he’d let on. After all, it’s a strange place to him, but Aaron wasn’t answering his phone. He had no idea if Aaron was even okay.

“Aaron, please pick up your bloody phone,” Robert said to the message, wishing it was Aaron he was speaking to. “Just let me know you’re okay. I couldn’t… please call.”

Robert stopped pacing his flat and physically forced himself to put down the glass of whisky that seemed to have found its way into his hand. Then he looked down at himself, still in his suit from that premiere. Whatever he was going to do, he wasn’t going to do it dressed like this, so he got changed into jeans and a shirt. Black as requested. If he had to fight to keep Aaron in his life, he’d wear something he knew Aaron liked. Throwing on his leather jacket, he grabbed his keys and his phone, which rang.

“Yes?”

“Car’s waiting,” Charlie said. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, have you tracked Aaron’s phone?”

“That’s a little grey, legally speaking,” Charlie said.

“All right, don’t bother then,” Robert said. “I’ll call if I need anything else.” He hung up and quickly went downstairs. It was so late that there weren’t any press there, thank God. In the car on the long journey north, Robert checked all and any articles about them in the gossip columns on his phone, trying to find something that might have pushed Aaron. He wasn’t aware of what people were saying, it didn’t much matter.

The photos published were all pretty much the same, except for one which had clearly been taken on someone’s phone in the Japanese place, them holding hands, just looking at each other. Robert silently seethed that his privacy had been ruined like that, and wondered if that would be enough to tip Aaron over the edge? No, he didn’t think so somehow. This felt bigger. Actually, Robert himself didn’t mind the photos. He liked how good he and Aaron looked together, though he didn’t focus on the articles themselves. Robert put his phone away and sighed. The miles between
London and Emmerdale could not disappear fast enough.

It was just before four in the morning when Robert’s car slowed down outside the pub. Now he was here, he knew he couldn’t wake Aaron up. If he was having doubts, waking him up wasn’t about to help.

“What now?” the driver asked politely.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Robert said. “Take me to Home Farm instead. You can kip in the spare room if you want before driving back down south.”

“Very good sir.” The driver took him home, even though Robert knew he wouldn’t sleep.

“Aaron here?” Robert asked, coming into the back room of the pub without knocking. He’d walked through the village, ignoring the whispers and glares from the villagers. He didn’t need the small minded gossip, his problem was gossip on a more international scale.

“He doesn’t want to see you,” Chas said, standing up as if preparing for a fight.

“Well, thanks to him I’ve had a sleepless night, trying to track him down and panicking about what made him leave. And I get less charming when I haven’t slept, Chas,” Robert snapped.

“You getting pissed because you can’t get your way won’t work with me,” Chas warned. “We’re not all obligated to fall at your feet.”

“I’m not trying to…” Robert sighed heavily. “I don’t need you to like me. I’d like to know where Aaron is, because he ran out of my house in the middle of the night for God knows what reason and I need to see him.”

“He isn’t here,” she said, seemingly taking great pleasure from telling him this.

“Where is he?” Chas didn’t say anything. “For God’s sake, he could be anywhere! At least let me know he got home safely.”

“Of course he did,” Chas said. “I’d have started screaming at you by now if he hadn’t.”

Robert felt like he could at least partly breathe again. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Chas said. “I heard the door go at around six, but... Aaron’s not here.”

“Okay, thanks,” Robert said heading towards the door.

“What made him leave?” Chas asked.

“I don’t know, I wasn’t with him yesterday.”

“I thought you were going to protect him from all this.”

“I can’t be with him twenty four seven,” Robert said. “Now I’m going to find him. Or try to.”

Robert left the house, wondering where Aaron could have gone. He wasn’t at the garage, and it
was too early for the café to even be open. He was tempted to knock on Vic and Adam’s door, but if he wasn’t there, it would open a whole host of questions he didn’t want to answer. Exasperated, and not really expecting anything, he called Aaron.

“Can’t get rid of you, can I?” Aaron said gruffly.

“I’ve followed you halfway up the country, the least you could do is answer your phone,” Robert said, aware he was snapping which probably wasn’t the best idea.

“I did answer the phone,” Aaron said. “You’re talking to me, aren’t you?”

“Where are you?” Robert said, trying to calm down.

“Up at yours,” Aaron said. “I just… walked to clear my head and ended up here.”

“I’m on my way. Don’t vanish on me.”

“Yeah, I’ll be here.” The call ended and Robert headed back up to his house as fast as he could. Bloody typical, he’d gone looking for him, and in the end Aaron had come to him. He got up to his house and found Aaron sitting on the doorstep. “Haven’t you got Vic’s key?”

“Didn’t feel right using it,” Aaron said, standing up. “I didn’t mean for you to follow me, I know you have… stuff to do.”

“Why did you leave?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Aaron said.

“Clearly it does, because otherwise why would you come here?” Robert said. Aaron looked shifty. “Are you ending this?” Aaron didn’t answer which only made Robert more worried. “Okay,” Robert said, forcing a calmness. “I know this is all new to you, but you don’t get to run because you’re scared of the press.”

“That’s not what this is.”

“I asked you if you were sure, before we said anything!” Robert said, his voice rising now. “I’m the one risking everything, here! You can walk away whenever you want and go back to your normal life! And after forty eight hours you’ve changed your mind? Where the hell does that leave me, Aaron!!”

“Exactly,” Aaron said tearfully, his voice shaking. Robert was shouting, but Aaron had never felt like shouting less. He felt unbearably sad, not angry. He was ending this (or trying to) for Robert’s best interests, not because he didn’t love him. “You’re risking so much, and I’m not worth it Robert. Is it true that your sponsors are leaving you?”

That did stop Robert for a second and he put his hands in his pockets. “Well, sod Porsche. I’ve been getting bored driving their cars anyway, time for a change. Always fancied a Jaguar.”

“Oh, Robert,” Aaron said, shaking his head. “This is just the start. This is what you were trying to tell me and I didn’t listen. Because I didn’t want to, we were happy. I can’t be responsible for ruining your life, and your livelihood. I won’t do it.”

“What do I care if some bigoted organisations stop paying me?” Robert said. “It’s not like I don’t have enough money to live off!”
Aaron had wanted to avoid this, but it seemed Robert wasn’t letting go of him without a fight, so he got the check out of his back pocket. “Steve, your agent, he came and gave me this. To leave you. Let you live in peace. Forget the past week ever happened.” Robert looked at it in surprise. Then anger.

“Right, I can’t buy you, but he can?” Robert questioned, frowning at him because he wasn’t following at all.

“No, it’s not the money.” Aaron tore up the check and dropped the pieces. “But I am costing you so much, Robert. I can’t… I didn’t realise how big this would be. I didn’t think you being bi really would matter to everyone.” Robert simply stared at him, the anger dying now that he realised Aaron wasn’t trying to leave him because he was being selfish. It was the exact opposite.

“I don’t want to leave you, I really don’t. But…” Aaron’s voice was wavering and his eyes filling with tears. Robert wrapped his hands around Aaron’s neck, needing him close and Aaron almost folded towards him, their bodies touching everywhere.

“Do you really think I’m going to swap money I don’t need for you?”

“You should,” Aaron said weakly. “I’m not worth it.”

“I need you. You make me happy,” Robert said. “Not that that’s always obvious when you’re making a complete prat of yourself.” Aaron laughed, closing his eyes. Robert kissed him, soft and gentle.

“I thought I could let you go,” Aaron whispered. “I can’t.”

“Good.” Aaron laughed. “No more of this okay? I don’t care who drops me, you are far too important to me.” They don’t know how long they stood there with each other, holding each other. Until Robert pulled back.

“I think I owe you breakfast,” Robert said, making Aaron laugh. “Come on.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should make the point, I’m not saying Porsche are bigoted or discriminatory in real life, but someone had to be the bad guy here! Hope you liked this, and thank you for the encouragement so far!
“Okay, you can cook,” Aaron admitted, feeling a lot better after breakfast. Robert did do a great full English.

“I don’t often treat myself like this,” Robert said, closing his eyes as he felt satisfyingly full. “Full English is strictly off the diet.”

“What diet?” Aaron asked with a frown.

“I’ve got to keep in shape for my job,” Robert said, still with that tired tone, making Aaron wonder if he’d even slept. “We can’t all eat everything that isn’t nailed down and look as good as you do.”

Aaron smiled at him, taking the compliment. “How’ve I not noticed that?”

“Because we’ve been holed up here for most of our relationship,” Robert said. “I only have all the healthy rubbish in the fridge. Generally, anyway.”

“I’m sorry I ran,” Aaron said quietly.

“Don’t be,” Robert said. “The only thing I think you should apologise for is not picking up your phone. I worried that something bad had happened.”

“All right, I’ll answer the phone next time,” Aaron said.

“Next time?”

“I can’t promise I’m not going to have another panic attack,” Aaron said. “I probably will before this is over.”

“Fair enough,” Robert said. “I think I’m going to bed. I’ve not slept.” Robert got up, only pausing when Aaron called him.

“Robert?”

“Yeah?”

“There’s some stuff… I need to tell you. About my past,” Aaron said. “It’s… complicated.”

“Okay,” Robert said, seeing the look on Aaron’s face meant this was serious. “Want a drink?”

“No, it’s still the morning,” Aaron said, frowning. “Oh, you know what, it’s nothing. Nothing that can’t wait.”

“Are you sure?” Robert asked.
“Yeah.” Aaron didn’t want to ruin it. They were home and finding a level footing again. Why spoil it?

After a brief hour of sleep, Robert realised he had something to do. Steve Askers was still under the impression he was employed by Robert. He quickly dialled him while lying in bed.

“Robert, what’s the problem?”

“You are,” Robert said darkly. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t sack you?”

“Oh. Lover boy told you.”

“No, he tried to leave me, then I reluctantly pulled it out of him,” Robert said. “You really thought money would work?”

“Nine times out of ten it would,” Steve said completely unashamed. “I only did what any agent would have in this situation. You pay me to make problems go away.”

“I used to pay you,” Robert corrected.

“Look, you don’t want to work with me, fine,” Steve said. “But you’d be an idiot to lose this agency, and you know it. We’ve done good things for your career, you’d never be in this position if it wasn’t for us. Lizzie would make a good replacement if you really can’t stand working with me.”

“Got a number for her?” Steve parroted one as Robert scrambled for some paper to write it down. In one thing Steve was right. He couldn’t really chuck the whole agency simply because Steve was an ignorant homophobic bastard. He disconnected the call, and dialled the number.

“Elizabeth Thompson.”

“Hello, this is Robert Sugden, I hear you might be responsible for me now.”

“Oh!” she said, and Robert could hear a fluttering of paperwork in the background. “Yes, I was warned. I mean told.”

“No, you mean warned,” Robert said. Then decided to be blunt, it would be the only way this would ever work. “Would you pay my boyfriend to leave me?”

“Not unless it was proven he was only after the money,” Lizzie said. “Which I get the feeling is not true for you and Aaron.”

“No, it isn’t,” Robert said. “What would you suggest we do? To handle this… situation.”

“Let yourself be caught on camera with Aaron,” Lizzie said after the barest moments pause. “The press, the photographers are never going to stop until they get some images of your boyfriend, people, your fans are too desperate to know. Once they’ve got a few snaps, they’ll more or less leave you alone until you do something else noteworthy.” Robert considered that. It wasn’t a bad idea, but the problem would be convincing Aaron to go along with it.

“Mark Havers is a sympathetic photographer who delivers his product to us,” Lizzie was carrying on. “You can have final say on which images are released if we use him.”
“What do you mean by sympathetic?” Robert said, instantly on the defensive.

“One who doesn’t sell until we agree,” Lizzie said. “Which in this case will mean until you sign off on them. It works for both of us, he gets tip offs from us about where and who to photograph, and we get final say on the images.”

“Looks like you’re my new agent then,” Robert said, pleased with how matter of fact she was being. “I’ll get back to you, if Aaron agrees. Which I should warn you, he might not. He’s a bit stubborn.”

“Okay,” Lizzie said. “Talk to you later then Robert.”

Aaron and Robert decided to spend the day at Home Farm, both of them not really talking or doing much, just existing together. Robert needed sleep, and even Aaron dozed. He’d not slept much the night before either. The only black spot was when Chas called him.

“I knew that smarmy git would talk you round,” she said. “You don’t want to be with him, Aaron!”

“I do,” Aaron said tiredly. “I just had a wobble. The media and… I couldn’t cope with it, so I came home. What’ve they been saying?”

“All wondering about you,” Chas said. “And they’ve all rocked up in the village again, they know you’re here. There were so many up at the gates to Home Farm I could barely drive down into the village.”

“Great,” Aaron said dully. “No getting away from it though, is there?”

“Not really,” Chas said. “Are you okay?”

“Getting there.”

“They won’t stop until they have a good long look at you,” Chas said. “Trust me, I’m one of these obsessive women who stay glued to the gossip magazines.”

“I’m not anything special, mum,” Aaron said. “I’m just…”

“Clearly Robert thinks you’re special,” Chas said reluctantly. “I should go,” she said. “Leave you to it. I love you.”

“Love you too, mum,” Aaron said. He disconnected the call and closed his eyes, only opening them when he felt Robert straddling his lap and pushing his body very close, kissing him. “Hi.”

“Mm,” Robert whispered. “Hi.” Aaron stroked his thighs, enjoying it thoroughly when Robert kissed him, sensual and wanting. What with everything over the past few days, it seemed like a long time since Aaron had felt this pure lust that had so attracted him to Robert in the first place. Physically Robert was beautiful, and Aaron didn’t like the fact he could forget that so easily. And the sex was fantastic too, no one else Aaron had ever slept with could compare. Aaron reached behind and pushed his hand so he could cup Robert’s arse, making him groan.

“I want you,” Robert said.

“What’s stopping you then?” Aaron asked, thrusting upwards against Robert, making his head fall forward at the sensation.
“Bed,” Robert said shortly.

“She’s not good enough for you, is it?” Aaron teased, eyes light.

“No,” Robert said. “Can’t see every inch of you on the sofa, I need a bed.”

“Fine,” Aaron said. “Get off then.” Robert reluctantly got up, missing the touch and led Aaron up the stairs.
“My agent has an idea,” Robert said. They were both sated and tired, but happy.

“That idiot,” Aaron murmured, curling up closer to Robert as Robert stroked his back gently.

“No, not the one who tried to pay you off and got you running scared,” Robert said. “I’ve got a new one, Lizzie… oh, what was her last name? Thompson, that’s it.”

“That was fast.”

“Well, Steve had to go.” Robert said it like it was obvious and Aaron brushed his stubbled cheek against Robert’s chest, knowing he liked it. Robert shivered under him, making Aaron smile.

“Idea,” Aaron prompted.

“You know all the whatever are camped at the top of the driveway?” Robert said. Aaron nodded into Robert’s skin. “They won’t stop. They can scent blood so…”

“Get to the point, Robert,” Aaron said bluntly.

“We need to appear somewhere, give them something. Otherwise we’ll never be alone and they’ll always be there.”

“So…?”

“Lizzie knows this photographer, and we’d have final say on what gets out into the public domain,” Robert started uncomfortably. He knew Aaron wouldn’t be wild for the idea before he’d even suggested it. “If you’re up for it.”

“This is such a weird conversation,” Aaron said. “Discussing who and where some stranger takes photos of us? It’s no one else’s business.”

“While you’re with me, I’m afraid it is,” Robert said sadly. “Get it over with.”

“I honestly though it’d have died down by now,” Aaron said. “Do whatever you think, you know how to handle this more than me. Just… let me know before anything’s published, I guess.”

“Okay,” Robert said. His hand slid between Aaron’s thighs. “We don’t have to do anything now, though, right.”

“Higher…” Aaron whispered, smiling at him.
“I’m pregnant.” Robert smiled at his sister warmly.

“That’s great,” he said sincerely. Judging from the almost brimming joy on her face, this was certainly a good thing, and he hugged her. “You and Adam happy?”

“Very,” she said. “I’m actually four months gone.” This did not surprise Robert. He had noticed his sister had put on weight, but that was the kind of thing you didn’t mention unless you wanted to insult someone.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Robert asked.

“You’ve been busy,” she said with raised eyebrows. “How is Aaron?”

“Okay.”

“Now… how is he really? It’s a lot.”

“Yeah, it is. But I think he’s doing okay.” They’d managed to escape Home Farm for the evening, Robert driving them down into the village, through the chaos of photographers. Aaron was currently in the pub, saying he hadn’t had a decent pint in ages, most likely with Adam. Robert thought he’d check in with his sister, as Vic had asked him to call her anyway. Now he knew why. “Thought of names yet?” Vic smiled to herself, and spent a good twenty minutes going through the shortlist. Robert smiled, it was so good to see her so happy.

An hour went by and Robert drove Aaron back to his, where it had been decided Aaron would be staying, almost without a conversation. They both wanted to be together, to enjoy the touch. And they were happy, Adam having told Aaron about the pregnancy too. They were content together, even in spite of the press outside Home Farm. Too happy for it to last long.

Two days later.

“Why not? That’s a nice one!” Robert said indignantly. They were in bed, Robert had his laptop open and they were picking the photographs they’d be happy to have published. Robert was much more open to this possibility than Aaron was. He had grunted, not really getting that people wanted to gawp at them. Mark, the photographer had been allowed on the property and the land, and had caught almost a hundred of them, most were complete rubbish, some were indecent. Aaron did not like that Mark had pointed a camera at Robert’s bedroom one little bit. “At least we get final say,” Robert had pointed out, which only made Aaron grunt and groan.

“Tell me what’s wrong with that photo? You look gorgeous.” Aaron did, he was ruffled in a T shirt and jogging bottoms, looking out of the bedroom window of Home Farm. Aaron pointed and Robert suddenly understood. His scar on his left arm was clearly visible. The permanent mark straight and damning.

“I don’t want people asking questions,” Aaron said.

“Can I ask questions?” Robert asked carefully.

“You can ask,” Aaron said warily.

“Okay.” Robert swallowed, suddenly nervous about saying the wrong thing. “Were you trying to kill yourself?”
“Not that time,” Aaron said. “I… needed to cut to cope. And it got infected, which led to blood poisoning. None of which was intended. Adam rushed me to A and E when he found me collapsed.”

“What do you mean, not that time?” Robert questioned.

Aaron looked shifty but didn’t avoid answering. “When I realised I was gay, and when I knew fighting it wouldn’t help, I couldn’t cope. I couldn’t accept it. I locked myself in the garage and tried to… gas myself.” Robert looked completely shocked. “I’m not proud of it, and I’m quite glad someone was there to stop me.”

“Why?” Robert asked. “You’ve hurt yourself so badly that you could have died twice, and that’s not even counting the other scars on your body. What is it that’s so bad? What hurts you so much?”

“It’s er… complicated,” Aaron said. “And it’s hard to start telling you. I want to, but…”

“I’m always here listening,” Robert said. Aaron shook his head. “When you’re ready.”

“We’re meant to be picking photos,” Aaron said, an attempt at changing the subject. Robert looked at him sharply, then allowed him to let it drop. He’d never spoken to Robert about his scars, even though it was obvious they’d been self inflicted. So even opening up this much was progress. And Robert could be patient, he’d wait.

It was eight oclock the next morning, Robert making coffee in the kitchen when his phone rang. He answered it, off hand. “Yeah?”

It was Lizzie, sounding grim. “Have you seen it?” she asked.

“Seen what?” Robert said. He hadn’t had his caffeine fix yet, cryptic messages were beyond him.

“Page five and six of The Sun.”

“No,” Robert said without even thinking. He’d most certainly not looked at any newspapers lately.

“Robert, you need to read it, then tell me what to do,” Lizzie said.

“Email it to me?”

“Sure,” she said. “Doing it now.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a long, double page spread about Aaron,” Lizzie said.

“Saying what?” Robert asked, sensing Lizzie’s reluctance, and knowing that wasn’t good.

“That he was sexually abused by his father.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Robert almost dropped the phone. Why, who would lie about something as disgustingly perverse as that?! And then go and print such filth?! Even as his rational brain tried to deny it, the words let certain things slip into place. If it was true, it would explain a lot about Aaron. Why he couldn’t accept he was gay, why he hurt himself. Why he struggled to open up about his own history, and Robert knew he did struggle, even when he wanted to talk.

“I need to talk to him,” Robert said, aware the phone was still connected. “I’ll… Surely that’s illegal? Isn’t that against privacy laws or something? They can’t print that, right?”

“I’ll get on it,” Lizzie said. “I’m not sure, but I’ll check. You want a retraction?”

“Have all the media outlets picked up on it, or just one?”

“Just one,” Lizzie said. “A couple of the others are interested in a comment, but they’re not stupid. They know it’s a little bit of a legality issue.”

“I have to go.”

“Okay.” The call ended and Robert checked the email on his phone. It was a disgusting article. And whether true or not, he was going to sue the paper and seek damages. They couldn’t be allowed to print it and get away with it.

Aaron awoke to a ringing, in bed alone. Groaning, he answered the phone. “What? S’early.”

“Aaron, it’s… the papers printed some stuff about you.” He recognised Chas’s voice but it took a moment for the words to make any kind of meaning to him.

“What kind of stuff?”

“About you and Gordon.” Aaron sat up, suddenly well awake.

“Is it… everything?”

“Pretty much,” Chas said. “I thought I should warn you, if you haven’t told Robert…”

“No, I haven’t,” Aaron said. “I’ve tried, but I can’t find the words.”

“You need to talk to him.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Aaron said bluntly, hanging up. He got out of bed and quickly dressed, not wanting to have this conversation wearing next to nothing.

He zipped his hoodie up as he went down the stairs, finding Robert in the kitchen, sat at the table and scrolling through his phone. Just from the way Robert was sitting, stiff and on edge, and the frown on his face, Aaron knew he knew.

“Is it true?” Robert asked hollowly, looking up as he heard the footsteps.
“So one cheap tabloid prints a story about me and you ask me that?” Aaron said defensively.

“I’m suing the paper,” Robert said offhand, standing up. “Because either they’re lying or have ignored the law that gives sexual abuse victims anonymity. Either way, I’m not letting them get away with it and hurt you this way. But I’m asking you, because I trust you, and I’d want you to tell me.” Aaron dug his fingernails into his palm hard. “No, don’t do that,” Robert said, grabbing his hand and stopping him. Robert dropped his hand quickly, not wanting to be touching him more than necessary right now. “Just tell me.”

“Yes, it’s true,” Aaron said. Robert looked appalled and Aaron hated himself for admitting it. For putting that look on Robert’s face.

“That’s what these were for, isn’t it?” Robert asked softly. His fingers traced the air above the scars he couldn’t see. Robert knew exactly where they were, he’d kissed along them often enough.

“Yeah,” Aaron admitted. “I… struggled to cope when I knew I was gay, I’ve told you that. But it went deeper because I thought… he did this to me. He made me like it and want it. And that was a hard thought to cope with. To know that he’d hurt me that way, and what, I wanted more of the same?”

“It’s not the same,” Robert said.

“I know, now,” Aaron said. “But as a confused teenager, I didn’t know that. The thoughts… pushed me to the edge.”

“I’m not surprised,” Robert said. “You don’t still feel like that, do you?”

“No,” Aaron said. “I don’t. But it’s the reason I wasn’t prepared to hide with you, no matter how famous you were. I can’t hide who I am, it hurt me too much for too long.”

“I wish you’d told me,” Robert said.

“I would have.”

“Aaron…” Robert said softly.

“No, I would have,” Aaron repeated. “I’ve been trying to find the words lately, but it’s difficult. I don’t want to put that look on your face.”

“What look?” Robert asked. Aaron didn’t answer. “You could have told me sooner, before we were serious.”

“What, am I supposed to tell everyone I meet, hi I’m Aaron, my dad raped me repeatedly when I was a kid?” Robert scoffed. “You’d have treated me differently.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Everyone does when they know,” Aaron said. “Everyone. And I was working up to telling you, I really was. For something like that you’ve got to find the right moment. But even the control over when I’d tell you what I went through has gone. It’s been taken from me.”

Aaron’s voice wobbled and Robert wanted to hold him but didn’t know if that’d do more damage. The look in Aaron’s eyes told him he needed it and Robert wrapped his arms tight around him. Aaron almost crumpled against him, needing his support.
“If I’d told you earlier, you’d have run.”

“I wouldn’t have run,” Robert said into his neck.

“Maybe.”

“If you never want to talk about what he did to you, that’s okay,” Robert said, pulling back but keeping his hands on Aaron’s face surely. “If you need to talk about it, that’s fine too.”

“I will need to say… certain things,” Aaron said, wiping his eyes angrily. “I’d thought a lot about how I’d tell you, what I’d say. None of which is what they printed.”

“I’m sure,” Robert said. “Want to talk now?”

“No. I need a drink,” Aaron said firmly. He didn’t care that he hadn’t even had breakfast, talking about that man always hurt him.

“I love you,” Robert said. “This doesn’t change that. It does not change how I see you.”

“Thank you,” Aaron said, voice still shaky.

Aaron didn’t care about the time of day, he needed whisky if they were going to continue talking about this, and they both sat around the kitchen table. “Aaron, I need you to talk to me,” Robert said. “How… bad was it?” Aaron looked down at the table.

“I don’t think rape has a good side,” he said darkly. “I’m fine as long as I don’t see him. When I see Gordon, I fall apart. He got back with my mum and I started hurting myself again. And ended up in A and E.”

“How long’s he in prison for?”

“He isn’t,” Aaron said. Robert spluttered. “Don’t start.”

“Why?!”

“Because I didn’t go to trial,” Aaron said. “I couldn’t, and I had no proof anyway.”

“Aaron…”

“I’m not strong enough to stand in front of a courtroom full of strangers and detail every filthy thing he forced on me,” Aaron said. “I can’t do it, especially when it’s only my word versus his.”

“So, he’s free?” Robert asked in disbelief. “You could see him any time and…”

“Robert, stop it,” Aaron said firmly. “It’s in the past.”

“Aaron!”

“I’ve got a restraining order against him,” Aaron said. “He isn’t allowed to see me, and that’s as far as I can go.”

“Think about it,” Robert said, fighting to stay calm. “You could get him locked up, out of your life forever.”

“Robert, I’m only going to say this once,” Aaron said. “He abused me. The first time I was too
young to really understand what was even happening to me. It is my choice whether I report it, and I’ve had my choices taken away from me in the past. I won’t allow you to pressure me into it either.”

Robert nodded once. He understood, but the fact that Aaron’s father was walking around freely made Robert want to scream. How did Aaron bear it?

“I’m going to have a shower,” Aaron said. “If this conversation’s finished.”

“Yeah,” Robert said. “Are you okay?”

“Not really,” Aaron said. “Something you needed to know, though.”

By the time Aaron came downstairs after a long shower, and calming down from that emotionally charged conversation, Robert had just about finished with phone calls. He looked too tired for this early in the morning. He forced a smile when he saw Aaron. “Don’t let it change us,” Aaron said, the thing he’d worried about the most. “I like how we are.”

“Mm,” Robert said. “Been speaking to lawyers, publicists, Lizzie, everyone.”

“Why? People will forget, just let them,” Aaron said with a shrug. Robert didn’t mention that it’s unfortunate timing, because the gossip mags had been running with the pre-approved, almost affectionate photos on the same day. Meaning that their relationship is again in the spotlight.

“Right, I want breakfast,” Aaron said firmly. “Instead of whisky. Come with me to the café.”

“We won’t be alone,” Robert warned.

“I don’t care,” Aaron said. He felt after talking to Robert about the abuse, a few cameras weren't the worst of his problems by a long shot. “We decided to come out to the press together, mainly so we didn’t have to hide. In case you haven’t noticed, since it all came out, all we’ve done is hide. I want to have breakfast with my boyfriend and a coffee at Bob’s. Are you coming?”

Robert smiled at him, marvelling at the strength Aaron had. He was such an amazing man, in spite of how shit life had treated him. He got up and walked towards Aaron, kissing him so softly. “Yes. Just let me get ready.”

“Couldn’t have the cameras catching your bad side, could you?” Aaron quipped, his eyes sparkling like the Aaron that had so attracted him in the first place. Robert smiled, and instinctively knew he could… no, they could get through this.

Chapter End Notes

This would normally be where I started winding stuff down, but the response to this AU idea has been overwhelming, so I could keep going with it?? Thanks for reading this far!
As expected, the cameras were all there, outside Home Farm, and in the village. There are even a couple of journalists in the café, snapping them in a way they clearly think is discreet on their phones. Robert’s used to this kind of thing, he’s more concerned about how Aaron’s coping with it. But he seemed unbothered. Their conversation that morning would have effected him more, Robert knew.

In the café, they sat next to each other, because Vic had come in and sat opposite them, almost glowing with happiness, her feet up on the sofa. They were all purposefully ignoring the topic of conversation of the media. Robert noticed one of those trashy magazines poking out the top of her handbag and looked at it pointedly. Vic squashed it down impatiently.

When Aaron and Robert’s breakfasts arrived, they both stared at Vic who systematically stole things off their plates. Aaron slapped her hand when she went for his second rasher of bacon.

“Oi, that’s mine,”

“Pregnant woman here!” she said in her defence.

“Can we have another one please Bob?” Robert asked.

“Right you are,” he said easily. It was nice, Robert realised. Having breakfast with his boyfriend and his sister was nice. And after the emotional morning, that was good to have.

“Found him.”

“Where?” Robert asked, staring into space in his kitchen as if he was hanging onto every word that was spoken to him over the phone.

“Exeter. South west.”

That made Robert pause. Exeter was at the other end of the country, and might just be far enough away to live with, if Aaron wanted to. For some reason, Robert had expected Gordon to be somewhere close by. That creepy feeling he couldn’t quite name. “What’s he up to?” Robert asked.

“Not working currently,” his private investigator said. “He’s er… undergoing cancer treatment.”

“Prognosis?” Robert asked, thinking that if the justice system didn’t get him, fate might just intervene. Cancer couldn’t happen to a nicer man.
“I can’t get into his medical files. They’re sealed, it’s wildly illegal.”

“I’ll double your fee,” Robert said without even thinking.

“Give me a few hours.”

“Perfect.”

“Who was that?” Robert hung up and turned around, seeing Aaron standing at the door. How long had he been listening in?

“No one,” Robert said. “Just Lizzie checking in with the response to the photos, which has been positive actually and…”

“Stop bullshitting me,” Aaron said. “You’re a good actor, but you’re not that good.”

“All right,” Robert said, relenting. “I hired a private investigator to track down where Gordon is. I’m sorry, I just thought you’d want to know.”

“I don’t,” Aaron said firmly, staring at Robert. “I have no need to know where he is as long as it’s far away from me. How dare you look him up? I told you I wanted it dropped.”

“Aaron…”

“Robert, I don’t want to be involved with anything to do with that man! If I know where he is, it’ll panic me.”

“Okay, I won’t… continue it. I couldn’t just sit here being inactive! So…”

“Do not tell me where he is,” Aaron said. “I mean it, I want nothing to do with him.”

“Okay,” Robert repeated. “I hate the thought of anyone hurting you, I want to kill him.”

“I know that feeling,” Aaron said, his tone softening now. “The anger doesn’t help.” Robert nodded, staring at his hands.

“When’ve you next got to go somewhere?” Aaron asked, an attempt at changing the subject and calming down.

“Next week,” Robert said. “Monday, I’m flying into New York.”

“For what?”

“Filming a new project.”

“Right,” Aaron said. “And how long’s that going to be?” Robert sighed, which was answer enough. “How long are you going to be out of the country, Robert?”

“Three months.”

“What?” Aaron asked faintly. “No, you can’t.” Robert smiled without any real amusement. “You can’t… I can’t be away from you for that long.”

“You could come with me,” Robert said. Aaron rolled his eyes, then saw that he was serious. “You could.”
I have a life here,” Aaron said. “I can’t drop everything just for you. You wouldn’t if it were the other way around, be honest.” Robert didn’t argue. He couldn’t. As much as he might like to, his life wouldn’t come to a complete stand still for Aaron. “I’ve missed enough work at the garage, and you might see it as beneath you, but it’s family. And Cain’s been good to me, I don’t want to let him down.”

“I know,” Robert said, reaching out and placing his hand against Aaron’s face tenderly. “You’re a good man.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Aaron said with raised eyebrows. Robert smiled at him. “I want a bath.”

“You had a shower this morning,” Robert said, frowning. It was barely three in the afternoon.

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “I was kind of hoping I wouldn’t be alone.” Robert smiled and nodded, taking Aaron’s hand and going up stairs.

They didn’t have sex, both of them feeling like it might be too soon after Aaron’s revelation. But they did kiss and touch an awful lot, stroking skin and enjoying each others bodies, in an almost novel way as it didn’t culminate in sex. Robert lay back in the bath, Aaron wrapped around him, his head on Robert’s chest. It was wonderfully comfortable, surrounded by each other and the hot water, even if the bath was a touch on the small side. Robert’s hand was tangled in Aaron’s hair, his other hand resting on the small of his back.

“How do you…” Robert stopped himself. Probably not the right time to be talking about Gordon, when they were laying naked together.

“Go on.”

“Well, I flatter myself by thinking we have quite an active interesting sex life, and…” Robert stopped uncomfortably. “You know what, it’s not my business, it’s a horrible question, forget it.” Aaron knew what he was trying to say.

“I was terrified the first time I slept with a man,” Aaron admitted. “Nathan. I only went through with it because I was determined not to let that bastard win. I wanted him, but God I was scared.”

“And?”

“It was good,” Aaron said easily. “But the best thing was that I knew I could, if I wanted. That he hadn’t won.”

“Have you always enjoyed it with me?” Robert asked.

“Yes,” Aaron said honestly. He snuggled into Robert’s neck, not really minding talking about this as much as he thought he would. It was a lot easier when they were touching too. “You need a bigger bath.”

“I like being squashed with you, thank you very much,” Robert said, making Aaron smile.

“Who was your first guy?” Aaron asked.

“Don’t know.”

“Come on,” Aaron said. “I’ve told you really personal things about myself, and you can’t even…”
“No, I mean I don’t know his name,” Robert said. “Never did. Names weren’t important at the time, but I remember what he looked like.”

“Go on, then,” Aaron said. “Tell me more about him.”

Robert sighed heavily. “All right. I met him in a club, not too long after I left here. He was tall, six foot three of four. Really fit, tanned, muscled…”

“Careful, I’ll get jealous,” Aaron teased. Robert smiled, but carried on.

“He wasn’t gentle and I’d never felt anything that intense before.” Robert sighed. “It sounds stupid, but because he was a lot bigger than me, it was the first time I’d felt… I don’t know, protected maybe. And looked after, which is completely stupid because it was a one night stand.” He tailed off and after a few seconds realised Aaron was carrying some tension.

“What?”

Aaron shrugged, which was difficult in their positions. “Well, I don’t make you feel like that, do I?”

“Of course you do.”

“Yeah, right,” Aaron scoffed. Robert shifted in the water, letting his hand squeeze Aaron’s arm.

“I’d deny it if you ever told anyone, but, you’re stronger than me, and I like that.” Aaron smiled into his skin, appreciating the lie.

“I don’t want you to go to New York,” Aaron admitted. “I know it’s your life and I know that you have to go, but… I’ll miss you.”

“You can visit,” Robert suggested. “There’s no way I can go that long without you.”

“I can’t afford that,” Aaron said. “Flying back and forth.” The hesitation from Robert was telling. “I don’t want you paying either.”

“But I’d get to see you,” Robert said. “And I’m the one who’s leaving.”

“All right,” Aaron said reluctantly. “But you stick me in first class, I’ll kill you.”

“Fair enough,” Robert said with a laugh.
Chapter 21

The week until Robert left seemed to go by so quickly. Aaron had practically moved into Home Farm, not wanting to waste any of the limited time they had. It was the evening before he was due to leave, and they were in bed together.

“You could stay here in the house without me,” Robert suggested. “I wouldn’t mind, I trust you.”

“No, I couldn’t,” Aaron said. “This is your place, I couldn’t be here without you. It’d feel wrong.”

“You could go to the house I bought for you…” Robert suggested, making Aaron roll his eyes. They’d not mentioned it since their fight about it in London. “Be better than above the pub. More private. Space away from the press.” They had tried to get on with their own lives, but even when Aaron was doing nothing more interesting than working at the garage, they were always present, watching him. And they were in the pub too. Chas would have complained, but apparently journalists drink a lot and were filling the pub till quite nicely. If they were going to be there anyway, the least they could do was make some money off them.

“I’ll think about it,” Aaron said.

“Will you really?” Robert asked. He wanted to protect Aaron best he could. A protective feeling he’d never had with anyone else which he didn’t want to examine too closely.

“Got the keys? Could have a look around,” Aaron suggested lightly.

“That would mean a lot to me,” Robert said sincerely, stroking a hand down Aaron’s back. “I don’t think you have your own best interests at heart sometimes.”

“I’m enjoying saying goodbye to you,” Aaron said, rolling his hips into Robert’s body, making him gasp slightly. “Don’t spoil it by lecturing me.”

“Keys are in the office,” Robert said. “Bottom drawer of my desk, in an envelope with your name on.”

“Remind me why you even have an office and a desk? It’s not like you spend a lot of time pushing paperclips around.”

“Need somewhere to keep my tax returns,” Robert said. He pulled Aaron to him, so Aaron straddled his waist looming above him. Robert arched upwards, punctuating almost every word with a kiss to any part of Aaron’s body he could reach. “Insurance, property deeds, income, lawyers fees, film contracts, agency agreements, interviews I’ve given, or promised to in the future. Need somewhere to put all the paperwork don’t I?” Aaron rolled his eyes again, a seemingly constant occurrence around Robert lately, skin glowing from the attention. Robert stroked his thighs and Aaron lay down on top of him, enjoying feeling Robert everywhere.

“Speaking of interviews,” Aaron said. “What’re we up to now?”

“180,” Robert said.

“Thousand?”

“Mm,” Robert agreed, stroking his skin.
“That’s stupid money,” Aaron said in disbelief.

“Apparently the fact you don’t want to give an interview is seen as a plea for more cash.”

People were bidding for the first joint interview with both Robert and Aaron, heatedly. Aaron’s complete disinterest wasn’t putting any of them off either. Robert privately thought it would get to 250 before they got the message that Aaron really wasn’t interested in speaking to journalists.

“Would it be okay if Kat came to see you now and again while I’m away?” Robert asked but could see instantly Aaron hadn’t taken that well, bristling at the suggestion as he rolled off Robert and looked at him.

“I can look after myself, I’m a big boy…”

“I know,” Robert interrupted cheekily. Aaron ignored the innuendo.

“I do not need your friends checking up on me while you’re in New York,” Aaron said firmly.

“She liked you,” Robert said honestly. “And she knows what the press can be like, she’d tell me the truth.”

“And I wouldn’t?” Aaron countered.

“No, if things got too much, you’d tell me you’re fine and then run away again,” Robert said pointedly.

“You know me too damn well,” Aaron said. Privately he liked it. He liked that he was with someone who knew him this well. But that didn’t mean he was up for being spied on either.

“To do my job, I need to be able to switch off from real life,” Robert said. “I can’t do that if I don’t know you’re okay.”

“Okay, I’ll see her,” Aaron said reluctantly. “Don’t expect me to be overly nice to the woman you’re sending to spy on me, though.”

“It’s not spying…” Robert said.

“Make sure she’s giving me good reports?” Aaron said, though his voice was light and teasing, not really offended which made Robert relieved. That could have gone the other way. “Who do I send to spy on you?”

“I can take care of myself,” Robert said. Aaron scoffed at him being a total hypocrite. “I’ll have security, I’ll be on a closed film set most days, surrounded by people. Plus I’ve dealt with the press for nearly a decade in different ways. I can cope with it. But I will miss you.”

“Promise me you…” Aaron started, then tailed off. Robert looked at him expectantly. “Promise me you won’t sleep with someone else. I mean, you’re going to have beautiful women throwing themselves at you, you’re rich and famous and gorgeous and I couldn’t bear losing you.”

“All that might be true, but I’m in love with the grumpy git back home,” Robert said, making Aaron smile, which made him look younger. Robert stroked a hand through his hair softly. “I won’t sleep with anyone. Except you, when you visit. Which you will, yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Aaron said. “The sex is too good to leave you alone for too long.” Aaron laughed as Robert’s hands started tickling him, knowing his weak spots. When the laughter subsided, they
both lay next to each other, unable to tear their eyes off each other.

“Make love to me,” Robert whispered. “I want to feel you when I’m stuck on a plane tomorrow.”

“Oh, there’s a challenge,” Aaron said, pulling Robert into a deep kiss.

“I’m not coming with you,” Aaron said, though that didn’t surprise Robert. Everyone and his mother had a phone these days, and neither wanted their goodbye caught on cameras at the airport. They stood in the hallway of Home Farm, Aaron had his arms around Robert’s waist, and they were both ignoring the beeping of a car horn outside, which meant Robert’s lift to the airport was here.

“I know,” Robert said. “Call me whenever you want to, and you can use Charlie for anything you need.”

“That’ll prove expensive,” Aaron said. Robert didn’t even answer, the money wasn’t important.

“Keep an eye on Vic,” Robert continued. Then he shook his head. “This is ridiculous, I’m going to America, I’m not dying.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said, kissing him gently. “You’re being stupid.”

“Come in three weeks. Don’t leave it longer,” Robert said.

“Three weeks,” Aaron agreed. “I’ve never been to America. It might hold more attractions than you do,” he teased. Robert pinched his arse, leaving them both laughing.

“Go,” Aaron said lightly. “Don’t want to miss your flight.”

“Ah, they’d probably hold the plane for me.”

“I don’t even want to know if you’re joking or not,” Aaron said. “Go.” Robert kissed him passionately once more and then they broke apart. Robert opened the door, and a driver was there, ready to put his suitcase in the car. Robert let him, looking at Aaron, drinking him in.

“I’ll be fine,” Aaron said. “I can cope without you, it’ll be like you were never here.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Robert said.

“Who could forget you?” Aaron said. Robert looked reassured, but that was as far as Aaron was going to go. “I’m not in the habit of stroking your ego, that’s what you pay people for.” Robert smiled, and kissed him gently.

“Bye.”

“Bye.” Aaron watched as he got in the car, going up the drive. When he was alone, Aaron let out a deep breath. He’d coped perfectly well without Robert in his life for years, so why did being alone now bother him? Aaron turned back to the house, only then realising that Robert had left him with the keys. If that wasn’t trust, he didn’t know what was.
Chapter 22

Robert settled into his hotel suite, tired after a long flight and no sleep the night before. He had a five am wake up call the next morning to start filming. Realistically he should have been in New York for days, to adjust to the time difference and be calm before diving in to a new project. But he hadn’t wanted to leave Aaron, which meant tomorrow was going to be… challenging.

“Anything else sir?” the concierge asked.

“No. Thank you. Actually yes,” he said, changing his mind as the man reached the door. “If any calls come through from Aaron Dingle at the front desk, can you make sure you put them straight through to my room? I don’t care what time it is, I want them put through.”

“I’ll make a note,” he said. Robert didn’t really expect Aaron to call the hotel over his mobile, but wanted to be sure that Aaron could always reach him if necessary.

“Thank you.” Robert poured himself some whisky and sighed when he was alone. He started unpacking, knowing from experience that if he didn’t, he’d end up living from his suitcase. At least unpacked, he’d feel slightly less rotten.

When he did open his suitcase, he stopped. There were three photos of Aaron there, ones he’d never seen before. And Aaron didn’t like having his photograph taken, he deleted most of the ones on Robert’s phone. He looked gorgeous, fluffy haired and relaxed and Robert recognised that this would have taken a lot from Aaron. To have some photos printed of himself, then put them in Robert’s suitcase. He didn’t have much self confidence, and Robert appreciated this. A lot. How Aaron couldn’t see the effect he had on him was unbelievable.

“Gorgeous,” Robert text him.

“I’m watching Clear Sight.” Robert laughed. He’d never shown much interest in the films Robert made, but that one if Robert remembered rightly had him shirtless for several scenes.

“Missing me already?”

“Prefer the real thing to be honest.” Robert smiled, almost able to hear his tone of voice.

“I need to sleep, early wake up call tomorrow. Sorry,” Robert text him.

“Your alter ego will have to keep me company instead. Night x,” Aaron replied. And with talking to Aaron, Robert could finally sleep.

“So this is where Robert grew up?” Aaron looked up from the car he was elbow deep in to see Kat. She looked completely out of place here, perfectly thin and beautiful, so well put together that she shouldn’t be seen anywhere near a dirty garage. The bag hanging off her arm probably cost more than his car.

“Got a problem with your car?” Aaron asked bluntly.
“No.”

“Then I’m working,” Aaron said, returning to the engine.

“Nope,” Kat said cheerfully. “I hadn’t imagined your grumpiness.”

“Seriously, Kat, I have so much to catch up on,” Aaron said. “Robert’s a major distraction when he’s here. Now that he’s not I need to put the hard graft in.”

“I can wait.”

“How good a friend to him are you?” Aaron asked. “That you’d drop everything and come to Yorkshire to keep an eye on me because he asked?”

“He got in the way of an ex boyfriend of mine,” Kat said, seeming serious now. “I had… a man who liked hitting me. When I tried to end the relationship he’d… he went too far and Robert got in the way. Rob got a black eye for it, and in return he fractured this mans jaw. I owe him an awful lot.”

“And I’m the favour am I?” Aaron asked, a little surprised by this story.

“Something like that,” she said.

“Look, I’ve got to get this car done,” Aaron said, softening a little. “There’s a café over there, I’ll join you in half an hour on my lunch break.”

“Great!” she said cheerfully, sauntering off to Bob’s. Aaron sighed and turned back to the car.

“Who’s that?” Aaron’s eyes flicked to Cain.

“Kat, she's a friend of Robert’s,” Aaron said.

“How come you have someone who looks like that when you’re gay?” Cain asked, his eyes still following the path the blonde had taken.

“Careful,” Aaron said. “Moira wouldn’t like to hear you talking like that.” Cain scoffed and dropped the subject.

“Right, you’ve got me for twenty minutes, you can report back to Robert that I’m being a good little boy, then leave me in peace, okay?” Aaron said. Kat smiled sweetly and pushed a cup of coffee towards him. Aaron took the offering and sat down.

“How are you?” she said.

“Hungry. Bacon sarnie please Bob,” Aaron added as the man in question passed. Bob nodded with a smile.

“I meant, how are you with Robert awol?”

“I did actually manage to survive without him,” Aaron said, a little annoyed. “I don’t fall apart just because he’s on another continent.”

“I’m not your enemy,” Kat said wide eyed. “I bought you a coffee.”
“I’m okay,” Aaron said, relenting a little. “I can’t help that I miss him.”

“You could go to America,” she suggested. “Honestly, what’s keeping you here? It’s a tin pot village in the middle of nowhere, and you’re working as a mechanic.”

“Oi, I’m just starting to like you.”

“Robert could take care of you,” Kat suggested. “He isn’t overly precious about his money, it’d be fine. I know he loves you.”

“Difference is I don’t want to be taken care of,” Aaron said bluntly. “I don’t want his money, this was my life for a long time before he came walking into it.”

“You’d never need to work again.”

“Slow down,” Aaron said. “It’s not like we’re getting married. He’ll get bored of me sooner or later.”

“Do you really believe that?” Kat asked, frowning at him.

“Almost everyone does,” Aaron said casually. “I just want to enjoy him while I have him. I mean, come on. He’s a film star, he’s not going to slum it with me for long.”

“Aaron, he loves you,” Kat said. “I’ve never seen him like this before. Have a bit of faith.”

Aaron smiled at her. It was easier to trust in how Robert felt when he was close by. It was harder to remember that it wasn’t a dream or a fantasy when Robert was out of the country. Because how could Robert seriously be in love with him? The good thing was Robert did call everyday. That could be at any time during the night, but Aaron never minded. He liked hearing Robert’s voice a lot more than he’d ever admit.

“I just miss him,” Aaron said. “It’s… well, he’s not here is he?” Aaron didn’t do talking about his feelings, and certainly not with someone like Kat who was almost a stranger. He wouldn’t even discuss this with Adam, or his mum.

“He misses you,” Kat said. “Avoiding the nightlife too, no inappropriate photos have appeared.”

“Do they normally?” Aaron asked.

“Oh yes,” Kat said.

“Cheers Bob,” Aaron said as he delivered the bacon sandwich. “You can tell Robert I’m fine, and the press haven’t made me bolt.”

“What about your house, what am I telling him about that?” Aaron hadn’t gone to see it, though he’d been tempted.

“Mind his own business,” Aaron said grumpily.

“Who’s that?” Kat asked

“Hiya mate,” Adam said, coming over. Then his eyes stopped on Kat. “You’re Catherine Dujardin?”

“Last time I checked,” she said pleasantly. Adam’s eyes were almost bulging at her.
“Hate to burst the bubble here,” Aaron started as he saw them both staring at each other. “But you’re married.” Adam almost physically shook himself out of his stupor and blinked, though Kat looked the most disappointed.

“Right, yeah,” he said. “Vic actually sent me for a cream bun. Cravings and all.”

“He’s married?!” Kat hissed to Aaron as Adam went to the counter. “Why, why is life so unfair!”

“Before you go too far down that road, Adam’s married to Robert’s sister,” Aaron warned.

“Oh.” Kat sighed, but kept watching Adam over the top of her coffee until he left.

“Glad to see you’re overly worried about me,” Aaron said sarcastically.

“Well you’re clearly fine,” Kat said, waving her hand in dismissal. “Me, I’ve been single for far too long, and that Adam looks just my type. I really had hopes there.”

“What, for all of half a minute?”

“I’m a fast mover,” she said with a smile. Aaron couldn't resist smiling too.

Chapter End Notes

On a temporary break. After tonights (16th March) episodes I'm struggling to be in the right frame of mind to write happy Robron, and that's what this is. I hate leaving fics halfway through, so I'll try to get back to it asap.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

I'm trying to get back into this, but updates will be slower, trying to get back into the headspace for writing after the week of ED episodes we've just had.

But I think we all need happy fluff right now so I hope you enjoy this, though it's shorter than my last chapters.

Aaron went up to the house. His house. The one Robert had bought on a whim and he’d never been to. With the house keys in Robert’s desk was the address, which Aaron plugged into his phones sat nav. It didn’t take long to find, it was on the outskirts of the village, the opposite way to Robert’s place. Which Aaron was glad of, it would be too… oppressive maybe? If Robert had bought a place directly near his house. Or maybe Aaron was over thinking it. His phone told him to turn left down almost a dirt track which was going to ruin the suspension on his car. Aaron followed it for what felt like a mile until he reached a cottage. A very abandoned looking cottage. Aaron parked and unlocked it, the door creaking as he pushed it open. It was very small, and it was obvious that no one had actually lived here for a good ten years, possibly longer.

It only had one bedroom and a bathroom upstairs, and a large room downstairs, combining both kitchen and living room. Robert had been right, it was a bolt hole and nothing more. He’d probably bought it more for the land if he ever wanted to escape from the press and the attention that being with Robert Sugden would bring him, though since Robert had left, the journalists had been less demanding and eager. Aaron’s phone rang and he answered it, surprised he got reception here. He sat down on the sofa, ignoring the small cloud of dust that rose in front of him.

“Yeah?”

“Hi.” Robert’s voice was familiar and wonderful and Aaron sighed happily.

“What’re you doing calling me?” Aaron asked. “Isn’t it the middle of the day there?”

“Any other person would be eager,” Robert said. “But no, you complain about the timing of the call.” Aaron laughed. “They wanted to film outside today, but it’s raining. I’m on stand by until the weather passes over.”

“So you thought, I’m bored, I’ll call Aaron,” he said, teasing.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Robert said. “How are you?”

“Why, what did Kat tell you?”

“Said I should stop worrying about you,” Robert said. “But I won’t, I like worrying about you.” His voice had dropped and Aaron sighed. If they were together, he knew what that voice would mean.

“Robert, I can’t. Not over the phone.”

“I know,” Robert said. “Booked your flight from Manchester.”
“Oh, great,” Aaron said sincerely. “When?”

“Friday night, eight o’clock in the evening. Means I get you all to myself Saturday when you arrive.”

“You do realise I’ll probably be sleeping when I get there,” Aaron said.

“You can sleep on the plane,” Robert said, like it was obvious.

“I can’t sleep on planes,” Aaron said. “Never can.”

“Oh,” Robert said. “Okay, I’ll move the flight to earlier in the day, I was trying to…”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Aaron said. “Friday evening is perfect. Car waiting for me at JFK?”

“Yeah, it’s already arranged,” Robert said.

“I was joking,” Aaron replied.

“I’m not,” Robert said. “Want you safe. And at my hotel as soon as physically possible.”

“You’ve got a one track mind,” Aaron teased.

“I miss you,” Robert said. “Where are you?”

“I’ve actually gone to check out the house you bought,” Aaron admitted. “It’s a wreck.”

“Yeah I know,” Robert said. “Dead cheap too, in case you were worried about that.”

“I may not have… let you know at the time, but I appreciate it,” Aaron said. “Thanks.”

“Okay, good,” Robert said. “How’s the press?”

“Mostly gone. It was you they were interested in, not me. Though I have had one persistent one wanting an interview.”

“What’ve you told them?” Robert asked.

“To go away,” Aaron said. “Though I might have used stronger language.”

“Aaron…”

“It’s fine,” Aaron said. “I’m fine. How’re you?”

“Good,” Robert said. “Though I’ve had my hair cut way too short for this film, you’re not going to like it.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I don’t like it,” Robert said bluntly.

“That your biggest concern right now?” Aaron teased, trying not to laugh. “The state of your hair?”

“I like that you like what I look like,” Robert said. There was a muffle on the background of the phone line and Aaron knew this conversation was coming to an end, Robert would be needed elsewhere.
“Aaron, I…”

“Have to go,” he finished for him without malice. “I get it, you’re busy.”

“I’m all yours on the weekend though,” Robert promised. “Got three whole days off, back to work on Tuesday.”

“Oh, what shall we do with three days?” Aaron said lightly. “Go.”

“Love you.”

“I love you,” Aaron said lowly. The call ended and Aaron sighed. He loved hearing Robert’s voice, but it was also a stark reminder that he wasn’t here. He wished he could drive to Home Farm and Robert would just be there. Aaron sighed again, looking around the house. No good sitting and thinking about him, he’d be seeing Robert soon enough.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Thank you all you lovely readers who've left messages for me on this today. It'll get better on screen!

Anyway, this is really tomorrow's chapter, but I'm posting it early as a thank you. And we need all good things and happiness for our boys right now.

The week passed slowly. Aaron cleaned the house up, but didn’t replace any of the furniture. Didn’t have the money or the inclination. But he did get rid of all the dust, the dirt and two mice that seemed to have holed up under the kitchen floorboards, and it was at least habitable. Chas had complained that she was barely seeing her son lately, what with the house, work at the garage and him imminently leaving for America, he’d only been to the pub to sleep.

“How’re you coping?” she asked about an hour before he left.

“Mum, I don’t need a deep in depth conversation,” Aaron said. “I’m going to see Robert tomorrow, just leave it.”

“I get to be concerned about you!” she said. Trust now for Chas to be the time to pick to get involved in his feelings. “He’s not been in the country for three weeks, he could have moved on and…”

“Mum, I trust Robert,” Aaron said calmly. “And you know as well as I do that if he’d been with anyone else the gossip columns would be discussing it to death.”

“You don’t read those,” Chas pointed out.

“No. But you do, and if there was anything I’m sure you’d be sticking it under my nose right about now.” Chas looked deflated and Aaron smiled. “Why don’t you like him?” Aaron asked.

“He’s too famous,” Chas said. “God knows I want you to be happy, but… they won’t stop discussing you. The press and, I want you away from all that.”

“Sadly it comes with him,” Aaron said. “I don’t like it either, but I love him. And I have a flight to catch.”

“Then call me,” Chas urged. “I’ll need to hear that you’re okay.”

“What is it with you and Robert?” Aaron asked with a scowl. “I am capable of looking after myself.”

“I know. Just… checking.” Chas smiled at him then let her pull him in for a hug. “Take care.”

“Yeah, yeah.”
Aaron had got to the airport early, wanting to escape Chas’s questions and honestly, looking forward to seeing Robert too much to hang around the village. Which meant he had time to kill once he’d checked in and dropped his suitcase off. Aaron sat in a bar, drinking overpriced beer and checking the messages on his phone, distracted, when he realised three women in their early twenties were at the other side of him, pointing and obviously talking about him. Then he remembered. Because of Robert he was going to be recognisable. People would talk and point at him, for as long as he was with Robert. It came with the territory, but that didn’t make it any more comfortable for him. Aaron pulled his sleeves down over his hands, feeling self conscious just knowing people were watching him.

“Another pint please,” he said gruffly as one of the staff passed him, getting a nod. By the time he had a replacement drink in front of him, one of the girls seemed to have been brave enough to approach him and Aaron sighed heavily.

“You’re… you look a lot like Aaron, the guy that… Robert Sugden’s seeing. Is it you?” Aaron could deny it, but he thought about it for long enough that the girls face broke out into a wide smile. “I thought it was you! I’m Zoë, so… what’s Robert Sugden like in person? Is he really that gorgeous?”

“Not my business to talk about him,” Aaron said neutrally. Robert had told him several times to be careful what he said to strangers. You never knew who was either a journalist, or prepared to sell to one.

“Seriously, how did you get with him?” she pressed, not giving up. “I mean no one knew he was gay, he hid that so well and…”

“Again, I’m not going to talk about him,” Aaron said firmly. “And he’s bi, not gay.”

“Did you know him before he was famous?” she carried on. “Did you follow him to that village where he now lives?”

“A bit more to it than location,” Aaron said shortly.

Aaron sighed, wishing his flight was boarding now and not in forty minutes time. “Where’re you flying to?”

Aaron got up, abandoning his half drunk pint and attempting to escape her. “I have a flight to catch,” he said quickly. “Nice to meet you Chloe.”

“Zoë!” she snapped as Aaron retreated. She went back to her friends grumbling and Aaron took the chance to escape. Luckily, she didn’t follow him, but it did leave Aaron thinking. This is what his life would be every single place that wasn’t home. He would be recognised and pointed at, and whispered about, always. And all for Robert. Was it worth it? *If you didn’t think it was worth it, you wouldn’t be in an airport in the first place.* Aaron nodded to himself, and attempted to find his gate. He also made a big focus of mind to stop his fingernails digging into his palm.

Robert woke up early, even by his standards when he was usually up at the crack of dawn for work. Aaron’s flight was meant to land at 6:45am, and given time through immigration and to get to the hotel, he should be here at around nine. Or later if it took longer to get through passport control. Robert eventually got a text from the driver, saying Aaron was on his way and sighed with relief, though he would have preferred a call from Aaron himself. It felt like an awfully long time.
since he’d seen Aaron. He hadn’t really had the time to miss him though, he’d been so busy. But every day, whenever he had a few minutes, he did call Aaron, and the sound of his voice, his easy teasing, his not giving a shit about Robert’s fame was such a balm to him. Robert needed that, especially when he was surrounded by people who wanted to give in to his every whim.

Robert started pacing, waiting for Aaron. All he wore was a T shirt and jogging bottoms, knowing that when he and Aaron got physical they were usually unstoppable. And he was looking forward to a heated reunion. If he were a normal person, he’d have gone to the airport himself, but knew neither of them would want the attention. He’d told the reception of the hotel that Aaron was expected and for him to come straight up, but Robert was getting impatient. If it was a different time of day, he’d be starting on the whisky. He hadn’t even called for room service for breakfast, he just wanted Aaron here, with him.

Soon enough there was a knock on the door, and he opened it, smiling at Aaron. In the brief glance he caught of him before he kissed him hello, Robert knew he was tired. But he was here, looked good and felt better. And the one passionate kiss, the all too brief taste of him wasn’t enough when Aaron drew back.

“Hang on,” Aaron said. “I need a good five minutes to make fun of you for that.” Aaron pointed to his head and Robert rolled his eyes, rubbing a hand to his head self consciously. His hair was way too short and he knew it would certainly be a talking point.

“It’ll grow, and they’re paying me enough. Come on.” Aaron crossed the threshold and looked at the suite, impressed as he closed the door.

“Wow.”

“You’re not here to look at the room,” Robert said with a slight grin, walking towards Aaron and pulling him into his arms.

“Am I not?” Aaron said easily. Robert smiled into a kiss, the pressure of Aaron’s body felt right, and they slotted together like they’d never been apart. And Robert felt like he could breathe again, because Aaron was safe in his arms. The kiss quickly became desperate, hands fumbling under clothes. Aaron moaned quietly, sending Robert’s pulse racing.

“You could have called, told me you’d landed,” Robert breathed against his neck, groaning as Aaron’s hand wandered, clutching at his arse.

“Stupid phone wouldn’t do it,” Aaron countered. “Can’t get anything to work on it here.”

“You need something better than that piece of crap,” Robert said. “So I can always reach you and…”

“Why are we arguing about a phone?” Aaron said quickly, looking into Robert’s blue eyes. “I’ve got much better things to be doing with my mouth right now.” Robert laughed against Aaron’s lips.

“I’ve missed you.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Again, a big thank you to those who're sticking with this and still reading!! Again, another happy chapter here...

Aaron awoke slowly, feeling incredibly groggy. “I’m sorry.” He blinked his eyes open, focusing on Robert, now dressed, sitting on a chair and looking at him.

“Sorry for what?” Aaron asked. Aaron rolled over onto his back, then wished he hadn’t, hissing at the brief flash of pain. He could feel the scratches Robert had left on his back and was pretty sure that he had a bruise on his right shoulder forming from Robert’s mouth. Every muscle in his body ached, and Robert had touched him everywhere.

“That got a bit… heated earlier.”

“Don’t apologise,” Aaron said with a slight smile. “I love feeling you like this.”

“I hurt you,” Robert said softly.


“Breakfast,” Aaron said fervently. Food sounded wonderful. “Or is it more like lunch?”

“Okay, lunch then,” Robert said. “Room service or do you want to go out?”

“Why am I making all the decisions?” Aaron asked, narrowing his eyes at Robert.

“Because you flew three and a half thousand miles to be with me,” Robert said. “And I have limited time before I’ve got to be back at work.”

“You paid for the ticket,” Aaron said, though he was smiling. Robert just waited. “Room service,” Aaron said. “And ideally, you back in bed.” Robert smiled again, dialling through to the front desk, ordering two meals. Aaron didn’t pay much attention, slipping into a dozing state.

He awoke again when he could smell lunch. “Oh, great, I’m starving,” Aaron said, almost falling on his burger and chips, ignoring the fact he wasn’t dressed and was still in bed.

“What do you want to do today?” Robert asked when their plates were empty.

“Do you have to be anywhere, or is it seriously a free day?” Aaron asked.

“I’m all yours.”

“If only that were true,” Aaron said briefly, thinking of the girls at the airport. “Sorry. I’m not blaming you, I know it’s your job.”
“I can’t help the journalists that report on me.”

“I know,” Aaron said. “I was being… me. Anyway… I’ve always wanted to go up the Empire State Building.” Aaron suggested it almost shyly and Robert found him even more endearing. “It’s on my bucket list, I know it’s a tourist trap, but…”

“I said whatever you wanted,” Robert said with a smile. “But I think you need to get dressed first, as much as I enjoy you naked in my bed.” Aaron smiled at him. It felt so good to have him back.

“This is stupid, we should have just caught the subway,” Aaron cursed, their car stuck in traffic. He wasn’t exactly happy about having a driver either.

“I’m trying to keep people from paying attention to me for as long as I can,” Robert said. “You want camera phone’s pointed at you, go ahead.”

“Is it worse here?” Aaron asked. “Than what it was like at home?”

“Yeah,” Robert said briefly. “I’m on a film set most days, so I’ve not been around it too much, but yeah, it is bad.”

“Maybe this is a stupid idea,” Aaron said, shaking his head and starting to lose his nerve. He had realised it was a public place, but hadn’t really put that together with how everyone else would react to Robert’s presence. “I could go on my own.”

“I’m not ashamed to be seen with my boyfriend,” Robert said firmly.

“That’s not what this is, and you know it,” Aaron snapped.

“Come on, I’ll be with you the whole time,” Robert said. “What could possibly happen?”

“Mm,” Aaron almost grunted under his breath. “You been here before?”

“Once,” Robert said. “It was a PR photo shoot thing at four in the morning, I wasn’t there to enjoy the view.” Aaron nodded, accepting that. The car moved, suddenly free in traffic and within minutes they were outside the building. Robert squeezed Aaron’s hand tightly. The queue was large, going out the door, but one of the doormen recognised Robert and waved him inside. Aaron glared, but followed Robert’s lead, until they were standing in front of someone who was clearly the manager, or in charge.

“Mr Sugden! You should have told us you were coming, we’d have cleared the deck.” Aaron stared at Robert, torn between amusement and annoyance. Though skipping the rather large queue was definitely an advantage to being here with Robert.

“It wasn’t planned,” Robert said pleasantly, looking at Aaron who felt distinctly uncomfortable with everyone’s eyes on him. Or at least, that’s how it felt. “Got room for us?”

“Go on up, elevators at the end on your right. I’ll radio up, let them know you’re coming.”

“Thank you,” Robert said, he gripped Aaron’s hand and led him to the lift, ignoring the queue of tourists who were obviously talking about them. They got the lift to themselves and one staff member, and when they were alone, Aaron sighed.

“Do you always get away with not paying and queue jumping?” Aaron watching the floor numbers
quickly flicking past.

“Half the time,” Robert said. “It’s not worth insisting, I don’t want to cause a scene.”

“I hate this,” Aaron said.

“They’ll get bored of you.”

“They haven’t got bored of you yet,” Aaron pointed out.

“Well, I am the good looking one out of the two of us,” Robert teased, making Aaron roll his eyes. But it did relax him marginally.

Once they were at the top, the view did distract Aaron from his nervousness at being the centre of attention. Because the view was incredible. “Have we found something that shuts you up?” Robert teased, earning a glare. They ignored everyone else quite successfully, Robert wrapping his arms around Aaron, so Aaron’s back was to his chest as they both looked over the city.

It was comfortable and they weren’t gathering too much attention, beyond a general hubbub of noise which Robert had become used to over the years. After a few minutes, Robert felt Aaron fully relax in his arms, and felt pleased. He hated the nervousness and the tension Aaron usually carried, especially in unusual situations. And being with Robert in public was about as unusual a situation as life got. If Robert was a better man, he’d get shot of Aaron and let him live his normal life. But he was too selfish, and he wanted Aaron with him too much.

“Worth flying over for?” Robert asked.

“It’s all right,” Aaron grumbled.

“I meant me, not the view,” Robert said, pinching his side gently, teasing him.

“Nah, you were just my free ticket here,” Aaron said with a grin. It was a mark of the strength of their relationship that Robert knew without any doubt that he was joking. He kissed Aaron very briefly, as they were in public, and continued to hold him, looking over the city. For one of the first times in his life, Robert felt content.
“When I said let me know when you landed, I meant by the phone, not by your face being plastered all over the internet!” Chas shrieked down the phone.

“Mum, it’s three o’clock in the morning over here,” Aaron whined as he collapsed back against the pillows.

“I don’t care!”

“I’m fine, I’m safe and I’m tired. So I’m hanging up now. Love you.” Aaron put the phone down briefly and Robert looked at him before unplugging it to Aaron’s nod. “What the hell were the reception desk doing, sending that phone call through at this time of night?” Aaron asked, curling into Robert’s body.

“I bet Chas was persuasive,” Robert agreed. “She must have been, usually no one gets through. You don’t mind? About the photos I mean.”

“No, I don’t mind,” Aaron said. They’d both been well aware that people were taking photos of them while they were out in the city that day. After the Empire State building Aaron wanted to see the statue of liberty. And Robert agreed, mainly because he’d get to mock Aaron for being a typical tourist for a very long time to come. After that they’d had a few drinks and dinner, then back to the hotel. They knew that the photos random strangers had snapped of them had been sold and certain online sites had published them. Robert had looked through them and one or two he’d have actually liked in his own possession. He and Aaron looked good together. He was glad Aaron was... well, if not comfortable with the attention, at least getting used to it.

The phone call had disturbed their sleep and neither could drift off again so Aaron curled up against Robert. And Robert started to feel uncomfortable, because he was hiding something.

“What?” Aaron asked. “You’re way too tense for this time of day.”

“I need to tell you something,” Robert said. Aaron pulled back so he could look at his face. “Which you’re not going to like, but if I were you I think I’d want to know.”

“You’re worrying me now,” Aaron said. “What is it?”

“It’s about your dad,” Robert said. Aaron froze, and Robert could feel the glare coming from him.

“I told you to stop looking into him,” Aaron said.

“I know. I did. I have,” Robert said. Aaron scoffed, moving away and switching the lamp on. It took a few seconds for both of their eyes to adjust to the light. “It was something I found out before you told me to stop.”

“Which if you’d have asked me first, I’d have told you I don’t want to know. He’s away from me, that’s all I care about,” Aaron said harshly. “Why’re you pushing this?!”

“Because there’s a time limit on it,” Robert snapped. He was only looking out for Aaron and he wished he could have got a bit of bloody gratitude instead of a lecture. “He has cancer.” Those words stopped whatever it was Aaron was going to say.

“You’re sure?” he asked after a few moments. Robert nodded. “W… what kind of cancer?”
“Liver. It’s advanced and…”

“Right,” Aaron said. “Is he going to live?”

“Not without a transplant,” Robert said. “It’s er… he’s not got long. And even if you hate me for looking up on him, if you wanted to say something to him, you don’t have a lot of time.”

“I don’t,” Aaron said. “And I don’t want him mentioned again between us. It’s over, it’s gone. I don’t want to relive it, Robert.”

“Okay,” Robert said. They shifted in bed, Aaron finding a comfortable spot in Robert’s embrace after a few minutes. “I had to tell you. If I could speak to my dad once more, I know I would. We didn’t get on, and I know it’s not the same, but if you wanted that chance…”

“I know,” Aaron said, cutting him off. “I get it, I’m not mad. But it isn’t a subject I find easy to talk about.”

“Okay. I understand.” Robert leaned across to switch the light off before settling back against each other.

“Love you.”

“Mm,” Aaron said. “I suppose I do too, otherwise why would I put up with you?” Robert smiled into Aaron’s hair.

“No, this is ridiculous!” Aaron could hear Robert’s voice, sounding more pissed off than Aaron could remember. “You said I…” Another pause and Aaron sat up, watching Robert pace back and forth, on his phone. Shirtless too, so at least Aaron had a good view. “I was meant to have the entire weekend off. I’m not supposed to be on set until Tuesday, I had plans and…” Robert closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, Robert could see it. “Fine. Goodbye.” Robert dropped the phone onto the table and sighed.

“You’ve gotta go to work,” Aaron said, trying to avoid being disappointed. Unsuccessfully.


“It’s fine,” Aaron said. “Sure I can entertain myself for the day.”

“It won’t be all day, it’s three hours tops. Why don’t you come with me?” Robert suggested. “Want to see a film set?”

“I’ll just get in the way,” Aaron said. “Sure you don’t want me hanging around.”

“Course I do,” Robert said. Then added lightly, “You could watch me get shot several times, flailing around on the ground in agony?”

“You die in this film?” Aaron asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” Robert said, offhand. “painfully. And anyway, I want to be around you as much as I can before you fly back home.” Aaron was tempted, he didn’t really want to spend time away from Robert either. “Want to come?”
Chapter 27

It hadn’t taken Aaron much persuasion in the end. Once he’d got onto the set, people pretty much ignored him. And he hadn’t been ignored in a room full of people ever since he and Robert went public, so that felt so good. To be inconspicuous again. It took a while, but eventually Robert came onto set, now dressed in a suit and ready to film. He wore a suit that fit him perfectly, which had obviously been made to measure, and Aaron tried not to let it affect him as he watched Robert on the monitor. He looked incredibly good, even with the short hair and Aaron bit down on his bottom lip. He’s yours. The thought was quite a startling one. This man who everyone was fawning over was actually his. God, that sounded so unreal, even in his head. Aaron could see the switch, when Robert turned himself off, trying to slip into character.

It took a while for them to actually start filming, and Robert had been bragging. It wasn’t a death scene he was watching, but a conversation with another character in an office. Aaron couldn’t actually follow what was going on in the scene, because he didn’t know the plot of the film. The first take was deemed no good and they redid it twice more. Aaron didn’t mind because seeing Robert in his element felt so good and for the first time, Aaron actually admitted to himself that Robert was a good actor. Probably should watch more of his films, actually. Before meeting Robert, he’d not really had any interest, and after they’d got together, Aaron preferred the real thing, the man with no mask. Maybe when he got back home, watching Robert’s previous films would distract him from the loneliness. Yeah, right, Aaron told himself. Once he got back home, Robert had another three weeks here. Then he’d be home, thank God. Until the next one, a nagging voice told him. Or the next one, or the one after. He’s too good for you. He should be with someone like Kat, not the local mechanic in a tiny English village no one had ever heard of.

“Well?” Aaron shook himself out of his reverie to see Robert looking at him expectantly. “What’d you think?”

“Why does my opinion matter?” Aaron asked.

“Because you matter,” Robert said simply. Aaron felt himself go warm, realising Robert meant it.

“I like the suit,” Aaron said. “Not so sure on the makeup though.” Robert laughed.

“Let me get changed and cleaned up, We’ll get out of here.”

“That’s it?”

“For today,” Robert agreed. “They’re doing some stuff with stunt doubles, they don’t need me.” Robert kissed him softly, and Aaron let him in spite of all the bustle, people coming and going. “I’ll be back in five minutes. Ten tops.” Aaron waited, and it didn’t take long for Robert to reappear, looking more like his usual self. “You look disappointed.”

“I love how you look in a suit,” Aaron whispered, eyes glinting.

“This feels distinctly unfair,” Robert countered. “I’ve not seen you in a suit yet. Bet you fill that out nicely. Bet I could peel every layer off your body very slowly.” Aaron let out a sigh, trying not to show how Robert’s lower voice effected him.

“Guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

“Or I take you out somewhere that you have to wear one,” Robert countered.
“We both know I wouldn’t be wearing it for long,” Aaron teased. “Ready to get out of here?”

Robert nodded.

The time they had together in New York passed far too quickly, and soon Aaron was scheduled to fly back. “You don’t have to go,” Robert reminded him in bed the night before after a rather enthusiastic round of sex. “You could stay with me, your job… you don’t actually need it.”

“Yes, I do,” Aaron said. “At a certain point, you’re going to realise I’m more trouble than I’m worth. I need something to fall back on. I can’t rely on you for everything, because when you leave me, I can’t be left with nothing.”

“Maybe I like you relying on me,” Robert said. “Maybe I like taking care of you. I know you don’t ask for it”

“This will end, Robert,” Aaron said. “You know it will.”

“No, I don’t know it,” Robert said. “I love you, screw what the rest of the world think.”

“You’ve seen it then?” Aaron pressed after a moment of silence.

“Yeah,” Robert said. He had. The gold digger articles had started appearing, only online and mostly on American sites. But they were there. Which was hypocritical, because if Robert had wanted to wine and dine a new woman, there wouldn’t be this backlash. It would almost be expected, but it seemed to make a difference, with Aaron being a man. A lot of them had published photos of them all over the city, seeing the sites, with comments such as “first romantic holiday with the new boyfriend” and much less flattering ones that Aaron didn’t want to focus on for too long. It was enough to know that Robert had seen the articles, and hadn’t mentioned it.

“I thought they’d have got over it, over me by now,” Aaron said.

“They won’t,” Robert replied. “Not until they’ve got an interview. Like it or not, you’re interesting.”

“Why?”

“Well, if nothing else, you’re the only person I’ve been serious about in quite some time,” Robert said, kissing his hair. “And, I hate it, but the fact you’re a man makes you more interesting to the media.” Aaron scoffed. “We could do an interview.”

“I told you, I don’t want to,” Aaron said.

“No, but they aren’t stopping,” Robert said. “Once I get home, we could give Caroline a call, a journalist I’m friendly with, she’d write it… well, we could remove anything we didn’t like.”

“My problem is I’m not that interesting,” Aaron said, uncomfortably. “What would I say?”

“Her job’d be to ask the questions, don’t worry,” Robert said. Aaron didn’t look convinced. “Just think about it. After it’d been released, you’d be with me, my boyfriend, the man I’m living with and the intense press would slow down. It’d be accepted, unless you did something outrageously scandalous.

"Hang on," Aaron said. "Living with?"
"I..." Robert looked a little nervous now. "I was hoping, when we both get back to the village that you'd move in with me. Permanently. Properly. I want you with me all the time."

"Seriously?" Aaron asked. He hadn't expected that.

"Time without you is pretty much wasted," Robert said. "Come on, you were there all the time anyway, it wouldn't be that much of a change."

"Okay."

"Really?" Robert looked shocked and Aaron laughed.

"You're right, I am there all the time," Aaron said. "And if you'd like me there, then yes. Course I'll move in."

"Aaron, that means..." Robert really looked like it did mean everything to him. "I love you. I thought I'd have to use all my charms to talk you into it."

Aaron rolled his eyes, then made Robert groan by rolling his hips.

“I’m not saying yes, about the interview I mean, but I will think about it,” Aaron said. He moved quickly, straddling Roberts hips and he had a glint in his eye, meaning he wanted one thing. “Now, I’m leaving in… three hours. Got another round in you?” Robert grinned and leaned up for a deep kiss.
“Aaron, love, think about it,” Chas urged, watching as Aaron zipped his suitcase up.

“I have. I’ve thought of nothing else,” Aaron said. “Why’ve you got a problem with Robert? What’s he actually done that’s so wrong?"

“Aaron…”

“Seriously,” Aaron said, stopping and staring at his mother. “He treats me well, I love him, and it’s not why I’m with him, but he’s rich as well. Why don’t you like him?”

“Katie said…”

“No one made Katie take her knickers off for him,” Aaron said bluntly. “He was a teenager then. Ever think people can grow up? I’d hate it if some of the stuff I did was held against me for the rest of my life.” Chas glared, but said nothing. “Anyway, it’s too late. I love him. I don’t… I never thought I’d feel like this.” Aaron said the last words quietly, but it doesn’t make them less true. He thought his feelings for Robert would have burnt out by now, or become less maybe. The opposite was true, even when he wasn’t physically present.

“What about when he leaves?” Chas said. “What do you do then?”

“He isn’t going to leave me,” Aaron said.

“Of course he is,” Chas said dismissively. “He’s not even in the country right now.”

“Mum, stop it,” Aaron said. “I’m moving up there, because I want to be with him. That’s it. And if you’re so convinced it’ll fall apart, why don’t you support me? Because if it does, I think I’m going to need you if it all goes wrong.”

“Come here.” Chas pulled him into a tight hug and Aaron let her.

“I’m not dying, I’m moving up the road. I’ll be in for a pint most nights anyway.” They let go and Chas nodded.

“Take care of yourself.”

“Yeah, I will,” Aaron said. He took his case to his car, the last load to be brought up to Home Farm, and he drove the short journey. Robert came home in two days, and they’d agreed that he’d be moved in by that point, neither wanting to waste time after he landed in the UK.

Aaron parked his car in the garage, next to Robert’s Porsche, that for some reason he still had. After the sponsorship thing, Aaron had expected him to get rid of it, but after all, they had both been quite busy lately. Aaron took the last couple of bags of his possessions into the house before locking the garage, smiling at his latest acquisition, parked outside.
It was a pile of old rusted metal really, a car that didn’t even run. Aaron had bought it as a project to work on, and if one day he actually got the engine functioning, he’d consider that a major success. Adam had been complaining that he never spent any time with his best mate lately, so they’d gone out for the day, ending up going to a car sale. Which had actually turned into more of a junk sale, but Aaron had liked the look of this car, and it had been a while since he’d actually bought anything for himself. Robert being rich was all well and good, but Aaron didn’t spend money on anything any more. So much of his life was wrapped up in Robert, and had been ever since they met, that doing something on his own, for himself felt good.

Of course, there was no space in the garage with two functional cars there, so the tin pot car was just sat outside it, gathering rust. At least no one would want to steal it Aaron thought to himself. He went inside the house and unpacked his things, wishing for Robert to be with him. Soon.

Two nights later Robert text him that he’d landed in Manchester, and Aaron bit his bottom lip. He’d been considering something that Robert had mentioned while they’d been in New York together. But then it felt stupid, because suits were for weddings or funerals, and nothing else in his experience. Or court, but that was a whole other issue. But Robert had said he wanted to see Aaron in a suit. Had he just been being flippant? Aaron didn’t think so, because he knew what Robert in a perfectly fitting suit did to him. As in, make him want to tear Robert’s clothes off. But it was different the other way around, wasn’t it? Because there was nothing special about Aaron, was there? *If Robert didn’t think that, you wouldn’t still be around,* Aaron thought. He knew Robert would have no problem ditching him and moving on, and there was no indication of that happening yet.

So Aaron dressed in his suit, dark trousers, black jacket and white shirt, wanting to surprise Robert when he came home. As he had no intention of going anywhere other than the bedroom, he left the tie off. No need to overdo it completely. If it had even half the effect on Robert that Aaron felt when he looked at his boyfriend, dressed up like this, it would be worth it.

Aaron looked at himself in the mirror once more, wondering if he was being stupid, when there was a knock on the door. The anticipation and excitement of seeing Robert after so long didn’t make him stop and think that Robert had keys, and he wouldn’t be knocking on his own house. Instead Aaron opened the door, the smile freezing on his face. It was someone he never wanted to see again. Gordon.
The fear that Aaron thought he’d never feel again was instantaneous. Fear, revulsion, anger, hate, it was all there, bubbling under the surface as Gordon pushed his way into the house.

“Get out!” Aaron almost spat at him.

“Not until I’ve spoken to you.”

“I’ll call the police,” Aaron said, patting his pockets for his phone. It wasn’t there, because he’d got changed for Robert. It was still in his jeans. “They’ll arrest you, you’re breaking the terms of the restraining order.”

“You can’t threaten a dying man with prison,” Gordon said. “Five minutes and I’ll go.”

“What do you want?” Aaron said, backing up a step. He had little fear that Gordon could hurt him physically, he didn’t look well at all now that Aaron stopped to look. But that didn’t stop Aaron feeling irrationally afraid of this man who had caused him so much hurt in the past.

“I need money,” Gordon said quickly.

“I don’t have money,” Aaron said.

“You live here!” Gordon scowled, looking around the house pointedly.

“I don’t have access to Robert’s bank accounts, you can’t ask me for money I haven’t got,” Aaron snapped.

“Boyfriend doesn’t trust you?” Gordon sneered.

“It’s not my money,” Aaron countered back. “I don’t need to spend it. Anyway, why do you need money? Must be desperate for you to come here.”

“I need a liver transplant, and I’m not going to make it to the top of the list before I peg it,” Gordon said. “I need money to get around that. Pay enough, you can get everything you’d want.”

“Buy a liver?” Aaron asked in complete disbelief. “You can’t buy an organ. And you know something, even if I had that kind of cash, why should I spend a penny of it on you?”

“I’m your father.”

“You’re my rapist,” Aaron said firmly, pleased with the way Gordon flinched at his bluntness. “Leave.”

“Ask Robert for the money.”
“No,” Aaron said. “Contrary to popular belief, I’m not screwing him for a big pay day. I wouldn’t ask for that kind of money for myself, let alone you.”

“Aaron, you remember…”

“What you’re capable of?” Aaron interrupted. “Yeah. I know exactly what you’re capable of. My memory works just fine, thanks.”

“You couldn’t have hated it that much,” Gordon said with a smirk that haunted Aaron’s nightmares. “Going gay? Must have liked it even then.” Aaron’s fist was itching to hit him, but it wouldn’t do any good at all, and could land himself in a lot of trouble. He was trying to hold onto that rational thought, when something occurred to him.

“How did you even get through the gate? I thought you meant to be dying, could hardly climb over it,” Aaron said. Honestly, Gordon didn’t look well.

“I’ve been watching you for days. Eventually caught you typing in the number to the security fence. Pathetic, really.” Gordon smirked again, Aaron feeling a hatred and disgust that this man could have been watching him without Aaron so much as getting an inkling about it. Robert’s fuss about security and looking after him, and making sure Aaron was safe didn’t seem over the top at all, it now seemed like a bloody necessity.

“Get out,” Aaron said. “Just leave, I’m busy, I’ve got things to do.”

“You know he’ll get bored of you, right?” Gordon said. “Why would he stick around for a pathetic victim like you? You’re nothing, you’re useless, he’s a star, why would he bother? Probably alright for a bit of fun, but you’re deluded if you think it would ever be anything more than that.” Even after all this time, Aaron hated how well Gordon knew him. He knew exactly where to hit so it hurt the most.

“Is it any wonder I’ve got low self esteem when I grew up with you,” Aaron said, though the fight had gone out of him. Almost like he knew Gordon had won this round and he didn’t have it in him to keep going. “I’m not an open access to money. So leave. I couldn’t give you that kind of cash even if I wanted to.”

Gordon took in a breath to speak, but they were interrupted by the door opening. “What’s that pile of rust doing outside the…” Robert tailed off, seeing Gordon there. Robert knew what he looked like from the private investigator he’d hired. “Get out of my house,” Robert said, voice changing instantly.

“I want to talk to my son, pretty boy,” Gordon said. Robert looked at Aaron and saw him pale and panicking, breathing heavily. All his concern was for Aaron, but he knew he had to get this man out of the house before he could even begin to comfort Aaron.

“Mark, I may need a witness,” he called to the open door. A man who was obviously Robert’s driver appeared with a suitcase, hovering there.

“I think the restraining order means he doesn’t want to talk to you,” Robert said to Gordon. “And you’re on private property, so leave.”

“No,” Gordon said, smirking at Robert. “Not until I get my money.” Oh, so that’s what this is, Robert thought. Realised Aaron’s boyfriend’s rich and want to get as much out of his son as possible. He didn’t even deserve to be called a father, what a pathetic waste of space.

“Aaron, do you want to give him money?” Robert asked levelly.
“No, are you insane?” Aaron asked.

“There’s your answer,” Robert said to Gordon.

“I’m not leaving until…”

“We have three options,” Robert interrupted, with every appearance of calm. “You leave. I call the police. Or I break your jaw with my fist. I know which choice I prefer.” Gordon grumbled, but he did retreat towards the door. “Mark, make sure he leaves my property,” Robert added seriously to his driver. He nodded and they left, leaving Robert with Aaron, who’d crumpled to the floor.

“It’s all right,” Robert soothed, crouching down next to him. “You’re safe, I promise.”

“C… can’t breathe…” Aaron forced out. Robert looked at him and realised he wasn’t being dramatic, he was struggling to breathe. Robert wrapped an arm around him as Aaron panted, wondering what on earth to do. It felt like endless minutes but it was probably only seconds until Robert decided to call Chas. She might know how to handle this, and Robert hadn’t been aware that Aaron had a history of panic attacks. And certainly not like this, he had panicked with all the press when their relationship went public but not to the point the couldn’t breathe. Robert thought all this while he was fumbling with his phone, dialling Chas’s number.

“What is it, it’s late,” she answered.

“Chas, it’s Robert,” he said quickly, watching Aaron’s face go pale, a hand to his chest, Robert ineffectually rubbing his back.

“Oh?”

“I think Aaron’s having some kind of panic attack and I don’t know what to do, I don’t know… it’s like he can’t breathe right and… Do I call an ambulance?” Aaron shook his head, eyes wide at the suggestion.

“Okay,” Chas said. “Er… usually touching his face and hair helps, you’ve got to get him to calm down. I’m on my way up there.”

“Chas?”

“She’ll be okay,” she said, though who she was trying to convince Robert didn’t know. “Just try to calm him and I’m on my way.” The phone went dead and Robert sat with Aaron on the floor in his hallway, stroking his hair. It seemed to help a very little bit. Within a couple of minutes Aaron’s breathing was coming easier, chest not heaving quite so much.

“You’re okay, you’re safe,” Robert said soothingly. “I’m here, no one can hurt you.” He kept muttering these things for God knows how long. Mark came back and nodded at him, letting Robert know Gordon had gone. Robert was desperate to call the police, but knew he’d have to check with Aaron first.

By the time Chas showed up, Aaron had calmed down. He was quiet, his head in Robert’s lap, enjoying Robert’s fingers through his hair. When Aaron saw his mum, he jumped up, embarrassed at having been caught like that and the three of them silently went through to the kitchen.

“I’m okay,” Aaron said to the room at large as Robert made tea. “I had a bad thing, I’m fine now.”

“Bad thing like what?” Chas asked.
“Gordon showed up,” Robert said darkly when Aaron seemed reluctant to give the information.

“Then call the police!” Chas said to Aaron, who flinched at her loud voice.

“Absolutely,” Robert agreed. Aaron glared between the two of them, like they were ganging up on him.

“I don’t want any fuss,” Aaron said. “It’s fine, he’s gone, it’s over.”

“How many times has he seen you?” Robert asked, giving Aaron his tea. “I haven’t been here in so long, was this the first time he’s talked to you?”

“Yes,” Aaron said honestly. Robert and Chas shared a look that made it clear they didn’t believe him. “It was!” he snapped, wrapping his hands around his warm mug.

“Apparently he’d been watching the house for a few days.” As soon as the words left Aaron’s mouth, he wished they hadn’t.

“He what?!” Chas snapped at the same time Robert stared at him. “He’s been watching the house? Right that’s it.” Robert picked up his phone.

“Robert, I told you no police!” Aaron said.

“I’m not calling the police,” Robert said offhand, before turning his attention back to the call. “Charlie. Hi, yeah I’m back in the country. I need extra security at my place. No, not London, my house in Yorkshire. As soon as possible.” Aaron and Chas watched him as he quickly arranged for two security guards to come to keep watch on the house. When Robert had hung up, Aaron almost twitched, uncomfortable.

“Robert, that’s going to cost a fortune, it’s not worth it, he’s gone, it’s fine, I’m fine.”

Robert looked at Aaron and could tell he was shaken up, even if Aaron didn’t want to admit it. Robert sat opposite Aaron, close enough that they could touch, though he made no move to.

“Aaron, it is worth it. The only thing that matters to me is that you’re safe. I can’t cope with the thought that he might turn up at any given moment, God knows how you can. And you are worth it. I don’t care how much money it costs, it would never be too much as long as you are safe. Okay?”

“Rob…” Aaron spoke almost on a sob, and it was as if Chas wasn’t even in the room, neither man spared her a second of attention.

“Did he touch you?” Robert asked quietly.

“What, you think I can’t handle myself against a cancer patient?”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Robert said, not letting him off the hook. “Did he touch you?”

“No.”

“Aaron…”

“No, he didn’t,” Aaron said surer this time.

“Sure?”

“I think I’d remember something like that,” Aaron said, lips twitching. “Welcome home, I guess.”
Robert forced a smile, and did allow himself to touch Aaron, both hands cradling his head gently. Aaron relaxed into his touch, closing his eyes. Robert’s phone ringing was what broke the moment.

“I have to… it’ll be about the new security arrangements.” Aaron nodded and they broke apart. “Go and have a bath, calm down. Okay?”

“Robert…”

“Then you can explain to me why I’ve got a collection of rust sitting in my driveway,” Robert added, eyes sparkling. Aaron rolled his eyes, but didn’t argue, leaving the room and pausing to give his mum a hug on the way out. Once he’d gone, that left Robert and Chas alone.
Chapter 30

Robert turned to his own abandoned cup of tea, trying to focus on drinking it when he realised his hands were shaking and he couldn’t stop it. Chas could see it too and reached for his hands, putting the hot drink down. “Rob, it’s okay,” she said quietly. To his memory, that’s the first time she’s ever used his name, when it’s not filled with disdain or criticism.

“I… God, I hate seeing him hurt like this,” Robert said.

“You care about him don’t you?” Chas asked.

“No, I’m in love with him,” Robert corrected her quietly. “I can’t ever imagine my life without him in it.” Robert hadn’t meant to say that, hadn’t even verbalised it to himself yet, but he knew it was true. He needed Aaron in his life. “What did you think? That I was just toying with him?”

“Yes,” Chas said. “That’s exactly what I thought. You saw someone you wanted and no one says no to you, do they?”

“Aaron would,” Robert said with a slight smile. “He’d tell me no if he wanted to.”

“Yes,” Chas said, smiling slightly. “I think he would.”

“He’s so… wonderfully normal. He never treated me like I was special because I’m famous,” Robert said. “I do love him, I don’t want you to doubt that.”

“Like you care what I think,” Chas said.

“Not particularly,” Robert said. “But Aaron does, whether he admits it or not.”

“He can’t keep working at the garage,” Chas said quietly, and it’s clear from her face that she’d been thinking this for a while. “You’re earning stupid money and he’s on minimum wage down there? If you mean it, and you want it to work with him.” Robert smiled, recognising that Chas was being sincere, thinking that their relationship could work long term. The first time she seemed to actually believe in him.

“I know,” Robert said, exasperated. “But it’s a sensitive subject. I know he doesn’t need the job, but he won’t hear of it. He acts like it’s me… trying to take away his independence, or smother him, or buy him. Which it isn’t. We could have a really good life together if neither of us ever worked again.”

“He’s waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Chas said. “He won’t be able to believe you’re serious about him, because he doesn’t see himself as worth it.”

“I know that,” Robert said. “I can’t do anything about that, though. Except give him my time.”

“Did you mean what you said?” Chas asked. Robert frowned at her. “You can’t imagine your life without him.”

“Yes, I do mean it,” Robert said. “If I didn’t think it’d make him run a mile, I’d marry him tomorrow.” Chas scoffed. “I’ve never felt like this about anyone, Chas. I know you don’t like me,
“Why do you think I don’t like you?” Chas asked. Robert stared at her. “All right,” she relented. “No, I don’t much like you. But I like how much you care for him. Aaron needs to be… I don’t know, looked after a little bit. Though he’d deny that.”

Robert smiled. “I know he would.” Chas suddenly looked uncomfortable, her eyes starting to look for the door. “Thanks,” Robert said. “For coming, I mean… I didn’t know what to do, he wasn’t breathing.”

“It’s okay,” Chas said quietly. “What did Gordon actually want?”

“Oh. Money.” Robert gave a brief recap of the conversation, surprised when Chas’s face lit up. “Cancer? He has cancer?”

“Yeah,” Robert said. "Not going to make it through the year without a transplant." “Oh, that’s such a shame!” she said with a broad grin. Robert smiled slightly, because in this instance, he enjoyed fate getting its way, even if the justice system didn’t.

“The thought of Aaron having to go through all that makes me feel sick,” Robert said quietly. “I don’t know how he can cope with it and…”

“Yes,” Chas said. “I feel the same way too.”

“How could someone hurt a child like that?” Robert asked, his voice wavering. “His own son, how could it happen? How…”

“Hey…” Chas said, and to both of their surprise, Chas pulled him into a hug. Robert couldn’t help it, he completely broke down. It had been a long time, probably fifteen years or more since he’d been held like this, as if by a parent. Robert couldn’t help the tears that swam in front of his eyes, feeling this kind of comfort.

“Sorry,” Robert said when he’d had the time to feel suitably embarrassed for falling apart on Chas’s shoulder, a woman who up until very recently had hated him. “God, you must think I’m a mess.” He scrubbed his eyes harshly, in a movement that was more reminiscent of Aaron than it was himself. “Thanks.”

“Just… take care of him,” Chas said, forcing a smile. “And I’m going home to sleep. Make sure he sleeps too.” Robert nodded in agreement before locking the door behind Chas.

He went upstairs, to find Aaron wrapped in a towel, having just got out of the bath. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Aaron said. “You and mum kill each other yet?”

“No, we seem… to have found some common ground,” Robert said. Aaron frowned. “That doesn’t sound like either of you,” Aaron said, making Robert smile slightly.

“How are you really?” Robert asked.

“Okay,” Aaron said seriously. “It was just a shock to see him, but… I am okay.”

“Did he threaten you?”
“No,” Aaron said. “Just his usual disgusting self. And I’d like to forget, so…”

“We’re not having sex,” Robert said bluntly. He knew he couldn’t, after everything that had happened. It would be Aaron using him, using them as a distraction technique.

“How about you hold me instead?” Aaron said. Robert agreed. That he could do.

Chapter End Notes

And this story is slowly coming to an end now. Sorry, but all good things, and all that. It will have a happy ending though, I promise!
Chapter 31

Ten days later.

Robert let Caroline into the house quietly, aware that it was early, and waking Aaron up needlessly wasn’t going to put him in a better mood. “Casual, right?” he warned as she went into the kitchen, eyeing everything up.

“Of course,” she said with a sweet smile. “You know everyone’s waiting to read this interview.”

“Be kind,” Robert said. “He’s not used to it and he’s quite… shy with people he doesn’t know.”


“Yes,” Robert said. “It’s the only way he’d agree to it. Coffee?”

“Please.” Aaron had reluctantly agreed to this interview and Robert had suggested having it at Home Farm, because at least that way it was somewhere he was comfortable. Plus they had the added advantage of the option of kicking the journalist out if she got too nosey. Or if Aaron really couldn’t cope with it, which Robert knew would be a realistic possibility.

“Thanks,” Caroline said, taking her drink. “Why buy this place then?”

“Started already?” Robert asked pleasantly.

“Well, I daresay you’re going to stop me from printing all the really interesting bits,” Caroline said. “So I’ve got to make do with what I’ve got, haven’t I?” Robert rolled his eyes at her, an Aaron habit he’d picked up on. “Who’s the baby?” Robert followed her eye line, then smiled. The ultrasound picture pinned to the fridge, that was Vic’s. She was getting big now, near her time and she was very tired of being pregnant.

“My sister’s pregnant,” Robert said. “She put that there.”

“Oh, going to be an uncle? Ever thought about children yourself?”

Robert glared at her. “Warning you now, you float that idea past Aaron and he’ll clam up.”

“You’re no fun now you’re taken,” Caroline said. “What happened to that carefree teasing flirty Robert I met all those years ago?”

“He grew up,” Robert said. “He met Aaron.”

“You love him?”

“Yes, I do,” Robert said.

“Not after your money?”

“Caroline…”

“Just asking.”
“You’ve known me for years, you think I’d be suckered in by a gorgeous man if it was just for my money?”

“No,” Caroline said fairly. “No, I don’t. Good coffee.” Robert nodded, both of them hearing Aaron come down the stairs.

“I don’t like waking up alone,” Aaron whispered as he came into the kitchen, only having eyes for his boyfriend and kissed him gently. Robert let him for a few seconds before putting his fingers to Aaron’s lips to stop him.

“We’ve got company.” Aaron looked, then visible stiffened.

“Oh. Forgot that’s today,” he said, turning away and reaching for the coffee.

“Hello Aaron, I’m Caroline,” she said, smiling sweetly.

“Good for you,” Aaron grumbled under his breath.

“You said you’d be nice,” Robert reminded him.

“I haven’t eaten,” Aaron said, like that was an explanation. Which, with him it usually was. Robert moved around in the kitchen, grabbing the bread and sticking it in the toaster. Aaron, nearer the fridge, grabbed the bacon and passed it to Rob, adding milk to his own coffee. It was a well worn morning routine, both of them fitting easily in the same space. Robert seemed at ease, but Aaron was acutely aware of the third presence there.

“You don’t say much, do you?” Caroline said as the bacon was frying.

“If you’re looking for someone who likes the sound of his own voice, I think Robert fits that pretty well,” Aaron said.

“Oi!” Robert said, laughing at Aaron. Aaron smiled into Robert’s neck, pressing a brief kiss there. It had relaxed him very slightly, and five minutes later the food did an even better job.

“Aaron, what first attracted you to Robert?” Caroline asked. Aaron narrowed his eyes, debating what to say. “Liked what you saw in his films?”

“No,” Aaron said honestly. “I don’t watch him. I mean, I’m slowly working my way through them now,” he added, catching Robert’s eye. “Be a bit insulting not to, really.”

“So, who made the first move?” Caroline pushed.

“Er… started with a shouting match really, I seem to remember.” Robert said, casting his mind back. “Over a car.”

“No, over your inflated ego,” Aaron said. “The fact you couldn’t buy me, remember?”

“Still cost me five hundred quid, that did,” Robert said. Aaron frowned, not following. “You threw the money at me, it scattered everywhere and it rained that night. Never found the cash.”

“You were distracted,” Aaron said.

Robert’s eyes dipped to Aaron’s lips and stayed there in a way that was far too intimate for a third person to be here. “I was,” he agreed. Caroline broke the moment, by asking a question that Aaron didn’t really listen to, wanting Robert on his own right now.
After a few minutes, they agreed to go outside, for Aaron to work on his “project” car, Robert knowing Aaron would relax more if they weren’t just talking about them, or their relationship. As long as he kept his hands occupied. It worked too, and Caroline was good at her job, trying to keep him talking with boring, easy questions. Robert was in the garage, but distracted on a phone call which (seemed to be) to Kat. He was animated enough anyway.

“Are we going to hear wedding bells any time soon?” Caroline asked Aaron with a sly smile. Aaron’s hand slipped in the engine at the question.

“Shit!” he hissed under his breath, being covered with a shower of oil. “Robert!” he shouted, needing an extra pair of hands. Robert hurried towards him and together they got the leaking engine under control.

“Why didn’t you drain it first?!” Robert asked impatiently.

“I thought I had!”

“Not well!” Once it was under control Robert looked at Aaron and tried to stop laughing with difficulty. Aaron was covered in oil, splattered everywhere.

“I’ll get you a towel and a clean shirt,” Robert said, retreating towards the house.

“I am capable,” Aaron snapped.

“You’re not coming into the house like that,” Robert said, looking at him. “There’d be oil everywhere and it’d never come out of the carpet.” Aaron silently admitted he had a point. Robert left the garage and Aaron had a moment of pure panic, being left alone with a journalist.

“I don’t bite,” she said. “How are you? You seem tense.”

“I get tense with strangers,” Aaron said. “Especially nosey ones.”

“Then why did you agree to this interview in the first place?” Caroline asked.

“For Robert,” Aaron said. “He’s been dealing with this mess and attention for a lot longer than I have. He knows what’s best.”

“How do you feel about him?”

“I love him,” Aaron said. “More than I’ve ever loved anyone. I just wish he didn’t come with all this,” Aaron said quietly. “Like you, having to be here. I want us to just… be. Exist together, not have every minor move we make under a microscope. Not have a running commentary on when we’re going to get married, or if he’s going to dump me. Yeah,” he added to Caroline’s stare. “I’ve seen the online polls.”

“Aaron, I’ve known Robert a long time. He’s very private. I mean, he does all the publicity stuff, but before you, no one really got to the real him. The fact that he even let you stay in his house once is much different to everyone else. Never mind moving in with him. And he’s also being very aware of how this press attention effects you. He knows he’s changing your life, and he’s keeping you first in his priorities. Robert is not going to leave you. It’d be more convenient for both of you if he did.”

“Well, we never did easy,” Aaron said, smiling at her and feeling less insulted than he expected to. “I love him, but I can’t stop waiting for me to… wake up. Because in no reality did I ever really get him.”
“Towel,” Robert said, coming back, throwing the item at him. Aaron dried himself off, stripping the ruined T-shirt off. Caroline caught sight of his scars as he was cleaning himself up, and she looked at Robert. Robert shook his head, eyes wide. That was not a subject that was up for discussion.
The rest of the day went smoothly enough, and Caroline was picking up her handbag to leave when she looked at Robert. “Oh, I forgot to say congratulations.”

“For what?” Robert asked.

“You’re tipped…”

“It’s not confirmed,” Robert interrupted. “It’s all wild speculation at this point.”


“Right, I only didn’t tell you because nothings going to come of it. Nothing, it’s just hot air and fuss and nothing.”

“Didn’t tell me what?” Aaron pushed.

“Don’t make it a big deal of this,” Robert warned.

“Robert…”

“My agent called the other day,” Robert said. “It seems… I may be being nominated for an Oscar.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing, it won’t happen,” Robert said quickly. “Thanks for dropping me in it,” he added to Caroline.

“Sorry,” she said, seeming it. “I thought you’d be shouting it from the rooftops by now.”

“Not when you’re worried your boyfriends a flight risk,” Robert said. Caroline left, and Aaron went back into the kitchen. He was angry, Robert could see it from the tension he carried in his body.

“I am not a flight risk and I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!” Aaron said angrily.

“It doesn’t mean anything!” Robert said. “It’ll probably never happen anyway, I’ve created too many headlines this year.”

“Because of me,” Aaron said dully.

“Because the press need to get their own lives. I don’t regret a minute with you.”
“No?”

“Well, maybe the sex on the stairs wasn’t the best idea we’ve ever had, but apart from that…” Robert teased. Aaron’s eyes went light, but he was still worried, Robert could see it.

“If I do have to go to this awards ceremony, I might finally get to see you in a suit,” Robert tried, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Could try one on for you upstairs…” Aaron suggested, almost shyly.

“Oh, don’t tempt me if you’re not going to follow through…” Robert said darkly.

“Give me ten minutes,” Aaron said, biting down on his bottom lip, managing to smile at the same time. Robert kissed him deeply, sighing as Aaron left. Robert probably managed five minutes before he followed him up the stairs. Aaron looked damn good, the white shirt clinging to his body, the jacket fitting him perfectly. And that’s before Robert even let his gaze go lower to admire the trousers.

“Oh, you like then?” Aaron asked, just a hint of nervousness there. But he felt encouraged by Robert’s obvious reaction, the way his eyes grazed Aaron’s body.

“Turn around,” Robert said. Aaron was about to argue that he wasn’t a performing monkey, when he saw the look of lust in Robert’s eye. He knew better than to break the moment, so he turned, enjoying Robert’s groan when he saw exactly how perfect Aaron’s arse looked in that.

“You know you’re not going to be wearing that long, right?” Robert said, pulling Aaron into his arms and kissing him gently.

"Why's that then?" Aaron said with a smile.

It took quite some time for their breathing to get back down to normal. That had been incredibly intense, and Aaron almost curled himself into Robert’s shoulder, coming down from the high. “All right?” Robert whispered.

“Mm hmm,” Aaron moaned. “Probably should think about getting back to the garage soon.” Robert felt the last vestiges of satisfaction fade away from him, not sure if he had the rational side of him up and functioning enough to have this conversation. Ever since the “Gordon” incident, Aaron hadn’t been to work. He hadn’t really felt the need or the desire to go and Robert hadn’t pushed either. He knew that Chas had had a word with Cain, to explain Aaron being absent. What Robert didn’t know was whether Aaron had any intention of actually returning to a minimum wage job. He didn’t want Aaron to, but knew Aaron wouldn’t be happy, having everything paid for for him, out of Robert’s money. The fact that Robert had more money than he could ever reasonably spend seemed to be besides the point.

“I don’t want you working there,” Robert said, trying for honesty.

“Tell me why,” Aaron spoke with a calmness, rather than his usual tone of “I’m up for a fight” which is why Robert considered it so carefully.

“Because you don’t need to,” Robert said. “What you make in a week, I don’t think I’d even notice that amount going out of my bank account.”
Aaron snorted. “Try that again without sounding like an arrogant prick.”

“Okay, because you’re my boyfriend, you don’t need to put up with being shouted at by Cain in a nine to five job. We could have a better life than that together. We could have more. I want more with you. I want everything with you.”

It could have sounded trite and overly sentimental, but the soft look in Robert’s eyes told Aaron he meant every word. “You mean that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Robert said. “I will never get bored with you. I got bored with everyone before you, but I’m done. I don’t ever want anyone else. You’re it for me. All I ever want.”

“Robert, what are you actually trying to tell me?” Aaron asked quietly, eyes darting around, almost in panic. Panic wasn’t the reaction Robert was looking for, and the disappointment was instant.

“Nothing,” Robert said. “It doesn’t matter. I’m happy with you, that’s what counts.”

“Robert…” Aaron said.

“I’m not trying to tell you anything,” Robert repeated, firmer this time. He let his hand wander between Aaron’s thighs, looking for a way to distract him. But Aaron wasn’t having it, he forced some space between them, staring at Robert’s face.

“Robert, I’m not going to assume you’re saying what I think you’re saying, so you’re actually going to have to say it,” Aaron said, almost tripping over his words.

“You looked panicked,” Robert said sadly. “It’s fine. I’ll wait. I can be patient.”

“Stop thinking you know what I’m going to say,” Aaron said. “Just tell me. Talk to me.”

“All right then,” Robert said with a massive sigh, turning on his side and looking at Aaron. “I have never, ever felt like I belonged anywhere. I was the outcast with my family, always the disappointment. By the time I had any success at all, there were barely any parts of my family left to even have something I could call home. Aaron, I love you. I want to make a life with you, whatever that means, and whatever we’ll face together. Will you marry me?”

“Seriously, that’s where we are?” Aaron asked, though his face seemed definitely happy. Almost glowing, giving Robert some hope that it wasn’t a no. Then he remembered something, and Robert’s face went dark. “What?” Aaron asked, seeing the change come over him.

“I don’t have a ring,” he said quietly, seeming almost embarrassed at the lack of it. “Kat’s bringing it for me tomorrow. This… I didn’t plan it like this.”

“Why?”

“You think if I went into a jewellers looking for an engagement ring, it wouldn’t be all over the internet in five seconds flat?” Robert said. Aaron nodded briefly in agreement. It would be, he knew that. “I planned to surprise you. I also didn’t plan on discussing this in bed after sex.”

“This is insane,” Aaron told him, a carefree smile on his face, one Robert rarely saw. “We’ve only known each other a couple of months.”

“A lot of months,” Robert corrected. “I love you. I don’t need to know anything else.”

“Yes,” Aaron said, eyes gorgeously blue, sparkling with joy. “If you’re seriously asking me, then
“Yeah?” Robert asked nervously.

“Yeah.” Robert’s face filled with the kind of happiness Aaron had never seen there, whether on film or in person. He looked so content and blissful that Aaron suddenly felt almost giddy. He’d done that, he’d made Robert that happy. Just for saying one word. God, he felt so lucky. Robert kissed him, a gentle kiss full of promise and love, so much more tender than normal, lasting a long time. Aaron’s hands tangled in Robert’s hair, keeping him as close as physically possible.

“Robert, it’s so soon,” Aaron said, suddenly getting a anxious feeling in his stomach. “Are you sure you’re not going to change your mind about me?”

“Are you going to change your mind about me?” Robert countered.

“No,” Aaron said surely. “No, I’m not.”

“There’s your answer then.” Aaron couldn’t stop staring at him, looking at his freckles, his blond eyelashes. This man was so beautiful and belonged to him. This man wanted him for the rest of his life. The thought was incredible to Aaron.

“We can never tell anyone this, you know that,” Aaron said.

“People will notice.”

“No, I mean… we can’t tell people you proposed to me in bed. I’d never live it down.”


"I don’t plan to," Aaron said. "You need some normal in your life."

"Yes," Robert said seriously. "I do. And I need you." Aaron opened his thighs and Robert didn't need another invitation, smirking as he covered Aaron's body with his own.

Chapter End Notes

Just the one chapter (plus epilogue) left!

EDIT: I have now been talked into writing more of this, a sequel or a part 2, I'm not quite sure yet. So it won't be the very end quite yet...
“I hear congratulations are needed,” Kat said with a smile, as Aaron opened the front door. “By the way, that Steve’s really fit. He single?”

“Er, Steve?” Aaron questioned, letting her in.

“One of your security guys up at the gate,” Kat said, following Aaron through to the kitchen, where Robert was reading the paper. He gave Kat a wide smile.

“You got them?” Robert asked eagerly.

“Hi Kat, how are you?” she parroted. “I’m not your personal shopper you know.”

“Be grateful I didn’t get Vic to do it,” Robert said.

“Because a nine month pregnant woman is really unobtrusive in jewellers, isn’t she?” Aaron quipped back.

“Right, rings,” Robert demanded holding his hand out.

“Not even a coffee first?” Kat asked. “Honestly, what do you see in him, Aaron?”

“Good in bed, I suppose,” Aaron said with a grin. Kat laughed and Robert looked offended. Kat dug around in her purse and found the small pair of ring boxes, giving them both to Robert. Aaron couldn’t help being curious, even if he pretended that it didn’t care, or it didn’t matter. The ring itself didn’t actually matter, but in the eighteen or so hours since Robert had actually proposed, Aaron couldn’t deny he wanted to wear something that was his, something that showed the world Robert belonged to him, and vice versa.

Robert snapped the first box open, then looked at Aaron, suddenly nervous. “If you don’t like it, or you’d want to wear something else, I don’t mind. I’ve only seen pictures before, so if…”

“Shut up,” Aaron said easily. “Unless this is you changing your mind…”

“No,” Robert said firmly, stopping Aaron before he could go too far down that line. Robert took the ring out of the box and slid it onto Aaron’s finger. It fit, luckily and Robert breathed a sigh of relief. This was the first time he was seeing it in person, but it looked right on Aaron’s hand, and he was glad Kat had sent him so many pictures of the options.

“Give me yours then,” Aaron said. Robert handed the box over, and Aaron quickly put the matching one on Robert’s finger. They held hands, staring at the new additions in the quiet. “They’re perfect,” Aaron said. Robert kissed him very softly, unable to articulate the emotion of this moment. “But you know what this means?” Aaron added.

“What?”

“We’ve got to tell my mum,” Aaron said. Robert grimaced and Aaron laughed, before kissing him, deeper this time. Their hands started wandering and the cool of the new metal bands on their fingers sent a thrill through both of them.

“Why don’t you two get a room?” Kat said goodnaturedly. “You two are sickening, you know that? I’m not even going to be able to find a date to take with me to your wedding.”
“Who says you’re invited?” Robert said, both men having forgotten temporarily that she was even present.

“Look, why don’t the three of us go and have lunch at the pub,” Aaron suggested. “Talk my mum out of screaming the whole place down.”

“Sounds good,” Robert said. It didn’t, but hiding their engagement from Chas didn’t exactly appeal either. How could Chas Dingle make him feel like a shy schoolboy?

“Going to marry me whatever she says?” Robert asked.

“I plan on it,” Aaron said. “Look at you, all nervous.”

“We’ve only just found common ground,” Robert said. “I can’t think she’s going to take this particularly well.”

“Do we hate your mother?” Kat asked bluntly.

“No,” Aaron said with a smile. “But… she’s not that keen on Robert.”

“At least you’re not going to marry me,” Robert replied.

“Can’t really blame her, can you?” Kat said, sharing a conspiratorial glance with Aaron. Aaron grinned while Robert shook his head at them both ganging up on him.

The three of them walked into the pub, seeing Chas behind the bar. She smiled widely at Aaron and instantly pulled him into a hug. “Can we have a word?” Robert asked. She looked at both men and nodded through to the back, while Kat let Ross Barton (of all people) buy her a drink. When they were in the back room, Aaron didn’t know where to start. Turned out, he didn’t actually have to say anything. Chas was sharp, she’d seen their rings and come to the obvious conclusion. “You’re engaged?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said holding Robert’s gaze for a moment. “Mum, I’m really happy,” he added. “Please don’t kick off.”

“You’re going to take care of him?” Chas asked Robert.

“Yes,” he said seriously.

“Good,” she said. She hugged them both again, tightly, which surprised Robert. He didn’t do hugs like this, he thought it more likely that Chas would want him shot.

“One more thing, we’re keeping this quiet,” Robert said. “Just from the press, for a little bit longer. So if you could…”

“Yeah,” Chas said. “I get the picture. But if you go out in public wearing engagement rings, someone will pick up on it.”

“We’re working on it,” Aaron said. Robert’s phone rang and he excused himself.

“Are you happy?” Chas asked, once she’d got Aaron alone.

“Yeah,” he said. “I never thought I’d get this. But I am happy, he makes me happy.”

“That’s all that matters.” She smiled at her son, and Aaron smiled back, a smile which faded when
Robert came back into the room. He looked serious, definitely not the look of a newly engaged man.

“What is it?” Aaron asked.

“Er… you… I’ve been keeping an eye on Gordon. And my investigator just called.”

“Say it,” Aaron said, though he knew from Robert's face. “Just… tell me.”

“He’s dead.”

“You sure?” Aaron asked after a moment of silence.

“Yeah,” Robert said. “I’m sure.”

“Oh.” Aaron had no idea how he should be feeling right now. The man who’d made his childhood hell was dead. But all that Gordon might have done to him, he was still his father. A time that didn’t actually feel that long ago, he’d loved him. A time that didn’t get the chance to think it through any further, because he found his face being pressed against Robert’s familiar chest, the scent of him so achingly comforting which he needed right now. Aaron didn’t know why he was upset, he should be glad. But a part of him hurt anyway.

“It’s all right,” Robert soothed, pulling him onto the sofa, arms tight and sure around his body. “I’ve got you. Let it out, it’s okay.” And Aaron did, feeling safe in his arms.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Aaron watched with admiration as Robert came back into the hotel bedroom, wet from the shower, skin glistening temptingly, a towel around his waist. “Not got the time, Aaron,” Robert said, correctly reading his look. “Got to go and do the whole red carpet thing, remember. Need a suit for that.”

“Trust me, more people’d appreciate you like this,” Aaron said as Robert lay on the bed next to him.

“Only you get this,” Robert said quietly, leaning across the bed and kissing him softly.

“There’s a semi naked calendar of you going around online that says different,” Aaron teased.

“Oh God,” Robert said, wincing at that, making Aaron laugh under his breath. “The photo shoot was before I met you. Not my fault it’s only just been released.”

“Mm,” Aaron said. “Why did you think that was a good idea?” Aaron couldn’t help grinning widely. “Not that I’m not a fan of the August shot, but…”

“Oh, so you’ve looked,” Robert questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Wanted to compare it to the real thing,” he said, off hand. “Much better like this.” He leaned over and kissed Robert’s chest gently. Robert smiled before moving to the bedside table and putting the chain around his neck, where he’d taken to wearing his engagement ring. Neither of them wanted to invite the press attention if they didn’t have to, and for the last week, Robert had been doing a lot of PR, and the Oscar interview circuit he couldn’t get out of. So, his ring had been worn under his shirt, keeping it close to his skin but not letting anyone else see it. Aaron hadn’t had to be as careful, because he didn’t have cameras pointing at him all day.

“Don’t,” Aaron said firmly.

“Don’t what?” Robert said.

“Just... take it off,” Aaron said. “Wear it where it should be.” Robert didn’t move, but allowed Aaron to take the chain off from around his neck, unclasping it and sliding his engagement ring off. Aaron put the ring onto Robert’s finger, exactly where it belonged.

“You know what this means?” Robert asked. “A cameraman will spot it tonight.”

“Let them,” Aaron said simply. “I love you.”

“Ready for the car crash?”

“No,” Aaron said honestly. “But I don’t think I ever will be. We need to just... let them print whatever it is they’re going to print.”

“And you pick Oscar night, do you?” Robert said. “You know how to pick your moments. Are you sure?”

“Very.” Aaron ran a hand over his hair in agitation and nervousness. He wanted it to be public, but
that didn’t mean he was looking forward to the white flash of cameras from the press.

“Aaron, I’m going to say it once more, you do not have to come with me tonight,” Robert said seriously.

“Yes, I do,” Aaron said. “I need to be there for you. And I want to.”

“All right,” Robert said. “Got a suit to put on then.”

Robert took Aaron’s hand in the back of the limo. He could tell Aaron was incredibly nervous and agitated, this being his first time doing the red carpet. And he was certainly starting with a bang. Robert stroked Aaron’s engagement ring gently, loving Aaron even more for wanting to do this for him. “We don’t have to do this,” Robert said.

“Yes, of course we do,” Aaron said.

“No, I do,” Robert said. “There’s no problem with us circling the block and taking you back to the hotel.” Aaron looked at Robert and saw that he honestly meant it.

“You’d do that for me?” Aaron asked.

“I know this makes you uncomfortable, the whole circus. I have to be there, you don’t.” Robert looked at him and seemed to come to some sort of internal resolution, because Robert nodded, then moved to talk to the driver.

“No, I’ll come,” Aaron interrupted quickly. “I need to be there for you.”

“Whether you’re physically with me or not, I know you’re there for me,” Robert said.

“No, I’m coming. Kat’ll be there?”

“Yes, she’s around,” Robert agreed. “Probably wearing a tiny scrap of a dress, but…” Aaron rested his head on Robert’s shoulder comfortably, the calm before the storm.

“Are you sure you want to come?” Robert asked once more, Aaron straightening up.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just don’t… leave me on my own to face the wolves.”

“I won’t for a second,” Robert promised. He kissed Aaron very gently as the limo drew to a stop. “Ready?” Aaron wasn’t, but he nodded anyway. The waiting wasn’t going to make this any easier.

“Let’s get it over with,” Aaron said. Robert did not care that the photographers could see into the back of the limo from where they were, he kissed Aaron anyway, hoping it was full of reassurance. The look in Aaron’s eyes said it was working. He slipped his hand so he was holding Aaron’s gently.

“Come on.” Aaron forced a smile, and kept a tight grip on Robert’s hand as they left the car. He’d be okay, as long as he had Robert by his side.
END OF PART ONE.
PART TWO

Chapter Notes

I am absolutely rubbish at leaving things on my computer unpublished. So really, this should be being added after the weekend, but I just couldn't help myself, and wanted to know what you all think. Thank you for the encouragement so far, and I hope this continues to live up to expectations.

Aaron went into the office of Home Farm and stood blinking. He hadn’t expected to be confronted by four strangers in suits, and a very harried Robert behind his desk. “Oh, sorry,” Robert said. “I… er… we keep spare chargers in the bottom drawer, and…” Aaron waved his phone in illustration. One of the men whispered to Robert who shook his head.

“Absolutely not,” Robert said, one step away from shouting. “No, it’s not happening.”

“Calm down, Robert,” Aaron said. “Want to tell me what’s not happening?” The lawyers looked shifty.

“They want you to sign a prenup,” Robert almost spat. “I’ve told them it’s not happening, no way, but they won’t listen to me!” The noise started rising with all the lawyers trying to convince Robert this was a good idea.

“Robert!” Aaron shouted, trying to make himself heard. “They’re right.” Everyone looked at him in complete shock. “Of course they’re right. I don’t mind…”

“Well, I do mind!” Robert snapped. “How can you even consider…”

Aaron reached across the desk and covered Robert’s hand with his own, trying to calm him down. “I’m not after your money, Robert. You know that. I don’t think they’re totally out of their minds trying to protect you.”

“But it’s just so insulting!” Robert shouted.

“I’m not planning on us needing to use it anyway,” Aaron said, still calm. “What does it matter if you’re saying I can’t sue for half your money or the house if we ever get divorced?”

“You’re way too good for me,” Robert said.

“Remember that,” Aaron said with a grin. Robert sighed heavily. “Let me have a look at what you want me to sign, then.”

The lawyers all seemed to be falling over themselves, none of them having expected Aaron would be willing so quickly.

“You can get your solicitor to look over them,” one of them said.

“I can manage to read, thank you,” Aaron said sarcastically, ignoring Robert’s smile. All but one of the legal people left, as Aaron slowly read it through. It was long winded, but not particularly complicated.
“I’ll sign, but not that section,” Aaron said. Then he looked at Robert. “Have you read this?”

Robert shook his head. “No. And if I had my way, you wouldn’t be reading it either.”

“RS reserves the right to have complete parental rights to any and all dependents,” Aaron parroted. “I’m not signing that. Because that’s referencing children, right?” he asked the lawyer.

“Get out,” Robert said to the lawyer, without heat. Because he and Aaron had never discussed children, in more than abstract terms, like when Vic was with her new baby. The lawyer left. “You want kids?”

“Maybe,” Aaron said. “Not now, though!” he added seriously. “But in the future, maybe. I’d like the option anyway. And I’m not signing something that says if we divorce, you’ll have the right to stop me from seeing them.”

“Them?” Robert questioned. “Plural now is it? We’re having more than one kid?” Aaron blushed and Robert would have laughed if it was anything less serious. Aaron looked adorable when he blushed like this. “It’ll be removed from the contract,” Robert said softly. “But I don’t want you signing it anyway. Our relationship is none of their business.”

“Robert, it’s their job to protect you,” Aaron said quietly. “It’s why you pay them. And being brutally honest, if we did split up I’ve already got that house in my name on the other side of the village. A place to live, I don’t want more than that, it’s not my money Robert, and it never was.”

“Don’t sign it,” Robert said.

“I will,” Aaron said. “Because it doesn’t matter. I’m marrying once, I’ve no intention of leaving you. So this bit of paperwork doesn’t matter.” Robert glanced at Aaron with a lust filled look that Aaron recognised, and he straddled Robert’s lap, pushing against him. Robert grinned, hands going up and down Aaron’s back as they kissed, deep and passionate.

“I need uncles,” Vic said, coming into the office, looking at them both desperately. Holly was in her carrier, crying with her screwed up face. “I don’t know what she wants!”

Aaron got off Robert with a little reluctance, picking Holly up and cradling her gently, smiling at the little girl.

“Aaron’s got the magic touch,” Robert said, almost proud of how well his niece and his fiancé seemed to have bonded.

“Sh, sh, sh,” Aaron murmured to the bundle, rocking her gently.

“How do you do it?!?” Vic wailed.

“I refuse to be scared of a baby that weighs about the same as a bag of sugar.”

“Several bags of sugar,” Vic corrected, sitting down exhausted.

“Vic, would you have signed a prenup if Adam asked you to?” Robert said, seeing an opportunity as Aaron comforted the baby. Aaron glared at him, not wanting to talk about this.

“What, assuming either of us had more than two pennies to rub together?” Vic asked. Then she seemed to click onto what Robert was actually saying. “You’re asking him to sign a prenup? Rob, how could you? He’s not after your money, and if you think he is, no way should you be marrying him!”
“Thank you,” Robert said pointedly, staring at Aaron. “I don’t want you signing it.”

“I don’t care,” Aaron said, trying to keep his voice level, now that Holly had quietened a little. “I love you. What does it matter if we have paperwork to tell me that if I ever fall out of love with you, I can’t have half of everything?”

“Stop being so selfless,” Robert said. “I can’t…”

“Robert…” Aaron said firmly. “If I really thought we wouldn’t work, I wouldn’t have said yes when you proposed. I am not marrying you for cash. Your lawyers want me to sign it, so I will.” Robert shook his head, but stopped arguing. It was pointless. And Aaron did make one point, that they’d hopefully never need to use it anyway.

“There you go mummy,” Aaron said, handing the now sleeping baby back to Vic.

“You make me feel so incapable,” she said. “And Moira’s at the house, I can’t let her see that I’m not coping, because then I’d feel completely incapable and useless and I can’t even calm my own baby! And…”

“Vic, you being upset is winding her up again,” Robert said, noticing the baby starting screwing her face up at hearing her mother so distressed. “Give her here, and go upstairs and have a bath. Relax and calm down.”

“You sure?”

“She’s fed, right?” Robert asked.

“Yeah,” Vic said. “Yeah, course she is.”

“Then we’ll be fine. Go.” She looked at Robert but didn’t really have it in her to argue, and agreed, giving Holly back to Aaron carefully.

“Well, you said kids,” Robert teased, looking at the bundle in Aaron’s arms.

“I didn’t mean instantly!” Aaron said, though he couldn’t help but smile at the gorgeous sleeping baby.
A short chapter here, but it's the good fluffiness before the angst!

Robert flicked through the articles over the last couple of months about them and their relationship. Vic tended to save the magazines that mentioned him, she had for a few years, so it was easy to go through them. He didn’t seek them out, but it was useful to catch up with them every now and then, just to see what the mood or opinion was. The one Caroline published after Aaron moved in was there, received well. Then the piles of pictures and publicity from the Oscars. Aaron looked nervous in the pictures, no surprise, because Robert knew he had been nervous. He was the one with him after all, feeling Aaron’s hand shaking in his. There’s a big double page spread with the headline “Engaged?” pointing out the fact that he and Aaron are wearing matching rings. They’ve not officially confirmed it through Robert’s agent, but it’s obvious by this point.

Robert turned over the page and scowled by reflex. Sebastian Piovene smugly smiling at the camera, hands wrapped around his best actor Oscar. “You’re not torturing yourself are you?” Aaron asked, coming into the living room, seeing Robert glaring at the pictures.

“I don’t mind that I didn’t win,” Robert said, closing the magazine. “I mind that he did. Come on, he only had about three scenes in that film of his. It’s ridiculous!”

“Robert, it doesn’t matter,” Aaron said, sitting down in the arm chair. “You said you wouldn’t win.”

“But he’s so arrogant!” Robert snapped.

“I’m going to tell Vic to stop saving the rags for you,” Aaron said. “And by the way, you’ve got a little bit of arrogance about you too.”

“No, I haven’t.” Robert said indignantly. Aaron just did that little chuckle of his under his breath.

“What’s this?” Robert looked to see Aaron holding a wedding magazine.

“Oh, God, Vic must have put that there,” Robert said, shaking his head. “Though it wouldn’t hurt to start planning, we’ve been engaged for a few months now.”

“Mm,” Aaron said. “Do we actually need a plan? Just do it, right?”

“Well, a marriage licence might be necessary,” Robert said. “And the where and when needs organising.”

“When’re you busy?” Aaron asked. Robert frowned. “Like out of the country for filming, or whatever it is that keeps you out of the UK,” he added pleasantly.

“I’m not,” Robert said bluntly.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Aaron said. Robert was a busy actor, how could he be at home for endless weeks without anything on the horizon?
“I’ve filled all the contracts I had, before we went public. I don’t have… any other projects going on. It’s fine,” he added to Aaron’s look.

“Because of me?” Aaron asked.

“Because there are still quite a lot of bigots in the industry,” Robert said. “Apparently, no one’s going to believe I’m straight any more. Don’t worry.”

“That’s… Oh, God, I’m so sorry,” Aaron said.

“Yeah, I am too,” Robert said honestly. “But it isn’t your fault.” Aaron still looked guilty and twitchy and Robert hated that, because it wasn’t his fault in any way. Robert moved over to him and straddled his lap, looking into Aaron’s eyes closely, Aaron stroking Robert’s thighs almost out of habit. “It doesn’t matter.” Aaron shrugged, before Robert kissed him gently. “I wouldn’t give you up for anything, please forget it.”

“Can’t exactly forget it, can we?” Aaron said. Robert distracted Aaron with another kiss.

“Come on, I’m Oscar nominated now, remember? Won’t be short of job offers for long. It’s just a dry patch, it happens.” Robert’s normal attempt at bravado didn’t quite come off as intended, but Aaron appreciated it anyway. Sometimes Robert’s ego was a good thing. Robert kissed him softly, letting it linger, all gentle presses of lips, leaving Aaron wanting a lot more.

“So, wedding,” Robert said, trying to bring them back to the subject at hand. Though he didn’t get off Aaron either, enjoying the close contact. Would he ever get over the physical novelty of being with Aaron? “Where do you want it?”

“Here,” Aaron said. “Home. Couldn’t have it anywhere else really. I want…“ he was distracted by Robert kissing his neck for a moment. “I want mum to be there. And Adam and Vic, but I don’t really need anyone else, you know? Small.”

“Okay,” Robert said. “Can Kat come?”

Aaron thought about that. He liked Kat, and knew she was Robert’s best friend, but there was no denying that she was high profile and would drag press attention with her. But then, Robert Sugden’s wedding was probably always going to have press attention.

“Yes,” he said. “Of course Kat can come, she’s your friend.”

“She likes you too,” Robert said, before moving forward and kissing Aaron’s neck sensually.

“It’s the middle of the day, why do I get the feeling you’re trying to talk me into bed?” Aaron said, smiling at him.

“Doesn’t normally need persuasion,” Robert said, trailing his hand down to the front of Aaron’s jeans. “I want you, I won’t apologise for that.”

“The doors locked, right?” Aaron asked lowly, guessing that they weren’t actually going to make it upstairs.

“Yeah,” Robert whispered, before leaning into another kiss.

Robert gave wedding planning to one of his PA’s, because Aaron was right in one thing. The
wedding itself didn’t actually matter, the marriage did. He agreed and disagreed with several options after discussing things with Aaron, but left all the actual planning to someone else. Well, there had to be some benefits to being wealthy didn’t there?

“There three weeks from today?” Robert suggested one night in bed. “For our wedding.”

“That’s soon,” Aaron said in surprise. “Are you sure?”

“We can stretch out our engagement longer if you like?” Robert said. “I thought sooner would be better.”

“Why?”

“You might see sense and leave me,” Robert said quietly.

“Robert…” Aaron said, exasperated. “I’m not going to leave. So three weeks sounds perfect to me.”

“Great,” Robert said, smiling slowly.

“Guess I’ll have to go to all those red carpet things now,” Aaron said. “Can’t get out of it when I’m your husband, can I?”

“The last one wasn’t that bad, was it?” Robert said.

“I was… nervous,” Aaron said. “I don’t get why people are that interested in me. Or you actually, come to that. You’re not that special, Sugden.”

“Oh!” Robert said, rolling on top of a laughing Aaron, pinning his body to the bed. “Is that so?”

“Well, not to them. But you’re special to me,” Aaron said, relenting, eyes soft.

“God, the way you look at me sometimes…” Robert said quietly, stealing a kiss.
Wow, over 1000 Kudos. THANK YOU!! :D Tried so hard to get this chapter done today as a thank you, weekends are busy for me. But I managed it, so enjoy!

The time until their wedding ticked down double fast. Beyond buying a new suit, neither man actually had too much to do. Though Robert was slightly disappointed their honeymoon looked like it might be postponed. His agent had got him a script read through in London, which he had no intention of accepting, as it would land right in the middle of their honeymoon. Unfortunately Robert had made the mistake of telling Aaron, and he had insisted Robert didn’t avoid it, and took the offer of work when it was there. Robert grumbled, but not too much. He enjoyed his work and a new challenge was always good.

Now Gordon had died, Robert had let the security guards at Home Farm go, which meant Aaron felt more comfortable. He didn’t like people watching him, said it made his skin itch. Though it was something Robert would have preferred to keep, just as a little security blanket, he didn’t want to get into an argument with Aaron. Not now when they were looking forward to their wedding, and things were going so well.

It was tomorrow. Where had the last few days and weeks gone? They weren’t having a stag night as such, but Aaron did want to go to the Woolpack and have a few drinks with his friends. I.e. Adam. Robert didn’t mind, but now he was saying goodbye to Aaron, it was almost like he didn’t want to let the other man out of his sight.

“It’s just a couple of drinks,” Aaron said as Robert kissed his neck sensually, almost like he was marking him. “I’ll crash at Adam and Vic’s, and see you tomorrow at the registry office.” It was going to be a small quick ceremony in Hotten, then back to the Woolpack for celebratory drinking which would no doubt go on well into the night and the next morning.

“Okay,” Robert said, taking in a deep breath. He hadn’t realised how much he didn’t like to part from Aaron, to actually sleep alone until this moment. Why had he had to go and be all traditional, wanting to spend the night before their wedding apart? Such a bad idea on reflection. It was different when Robert was out of the country, because it was hotel rooms, strange beds, beds Aaron wasn’t supposed to be in. Unlike his bed at home, which is exactly where Aaron should be. This was different and Robert didn’t much fancy the loneliness.

“This was your idea,” Aaron said, reading his face. “You wanted this and…”

“I know,” Robert said. “But I miss you when we don’t sleep together.”

“Soft,” Aaron said, but the affection in his eyes was unmistakable. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Robert kissed him deeply.

“I’ll be the handsome one in the suit,” Robert said, a show of his usual confidence. “Oh, before
“Right.” Aaron tugged his engagement ring off, putting it in the box Robert held out. They’d decided to use the same rings, because Aaron didn’t want to wear two, and he also didn’t want to replace his engagement ring with a wedding band. It meant too much to him, to them both. Robert put his in the box next to Aaron’s, and took his hand. Robert rubbed the bare patch on Aaron’s finger. The ring had already worn a groove into his skin. Unable to resist, Robert kissed his finger there, ignoring Aaron’s rolling of the eyes.

“Don’t get in trouble with Kat,” Aaron warned.

“Mm, well last time we were alone with a lot of alcohol, we ended up in Amsterdam.”

“That sounds like a story,” Aaron said, lips twitching.

Robert shrugged. “That’s what happens when you have more money than sense and overindulge in vodka.” Aaron wondered if Robert would even be here this time tomorrow, and Robert could read it in his face. “She’ll keep me under control, don’t worry.”

“See you tomorrow then,” Aaron said, kissing him gently. The beeping of a car horn in the driveway distracted them. “That’ll be Adam.” Robert allowed his fingers to stroke Aaron’s stubble gently, enjoying the sensation.

“See you later.”

“Bye.” Aaron kissed him once more, deep and a little dirty, a promise of more tomorrow. Aaron’s eyes were sparkling as he left the house, and Robert sighed.

“Okay, now you’ve got that out of the way, what’re we drinking tonight?” Kat said from the hallway.

“Not much,” Robert said. “I need to be sober for tomorrow.”

“Robert Sugden, are you nervous?” she teased. Robert was feeling too fragile, too worked up to buy into it. “Don’t worry, it’ll all be fine.”

“You ever feel like you’ve found everything you want, and you’re scared it’s going to be taken away?” Robert asked quietly, excusing his sentimentality because it was the day before his wedding. He was allowed to be sentimental.

“No,” she said. “We don’t all find our Aaron. I want vodka. Come on, I need to toast your wedding.” He followed her to the booze. One whisky might calm his nerves.

Aaron couldn’t sleep. He was nervous, which was stupid. He had a life with Robert carved out already, one day, one legality didn’t really define anything, did it?

Because he was lying awake, mind running a hundred miles an hour, he heard Holly when she started snuffling. Thinking it would save Adam or Vic a journey, he cradled the baby, cooing over her. Holding her solid weight actually helped to calm him down, because she was real and tangible and stopping her from crying was something Aaron could do. Or usually anyway, though right now it wasn’t working.
“She wants milk,” Vic said, smiling at the sight anyway. “Afraid you’re no good for that.”

“No,” Aaron said, handing Holly over to her mother. “No, I’m not. I’ll go…” he said awkwardly. But Vic was in such a habit, she was already feeding the baby, who’s crying had instantly been cut off. She sat down on the chair, looking at Aaron.

“Can’t sleep?”

“No,” he said. “I can’t believe this is happening. I think… it’s like a dream, and I’m waiting to wake up.”

“My brother’s not all that,” Vic said. "You and I both know he has flaws."

“Do you never get…”

“No, go on,” she said when Aaron stopped. He did speak, but only because he’d had a few pints, it was late, and he could blame his emotions on that.

“Do you ever look around you, and think God, I’m so lucky?” Aaron cleared his throat. “Like, when you think of you and Adam, or Holly. Or… I don’t know, it’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” Vic said quietly. “I think that’s called happy, Aaron.”

Aaron smoothed his suit down for the dozenth time. He was in a private room of the registry office and his nerves hadn’t faded one bit. He’d got a couple of texts from Robert, so knew he was both sober and still coming so he couldn’t ask for too much more, could he? There was a knock on the door and Aaron turned, seeing Adam and Kat coming in, Kat wearing a fabulous red dress that Adam was struggling to keep his eyes off of.

“Ready?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know,” Aaron said.

“I tell you, if you think you’re nervous, you should see Rob!” Kat said, a glint in her eyes.

“Really?”

“Yeah, he’s bricking it,” Kat said almost gleeful. “I’ll have to tease him about this in the future. He thinks you’re going to run out on him. God knows why!”

“He’s not had too much whisky,” Aaron said. The silence was telling “Right?!”

“He’s had one this morning,” Kat said. “A large one.”

Aaron sighed heavily. “Please make sure that he’s not drunk, I’d quite like my husband sober when we do this.”

“Will do,” she said with a smile, leaving the room.

Aaron was nervous. Why was he nervous? He wanted this more than anything, he wanted Robert more than he thought he’d ever want anyone in his entire life. He just needed a moment alone. “Adam, can you… I need a minute to think.”
“I’ve got the getaway car if you want,” Adam said, only half joking.

“No, I’m fine. Just want to be alone for a sec. Okay?” Adam nodded, pulled his mate into a hug, then left him alone. Aaron took several deep steadying breaths. He was really doing this, he was really getting married to Robert. God, how did this happen to someone like him? How did he get to marry someone who loved him like this? It didn't happen, it just didn't.

“Right, I’m coming,” Aaron said as the door opened, assuming it was Adam. It wasn’t. It took about two seconds for Aaron to react. It was two, no, three men who looked more like thugs. They came at him, and Aaron reacted instinctively, he punched one in the face, who fell back with a groan, but two more men were on him, trying to restrain him. It was instinctive, Aaron fought and struggled, but he was outnumbered as his hands were forced behind his back, the grip tight, hard and painful, even as he fought them. He still struggled, trying to escape when the black hood went over his head completely disorientated him. Then he felt a punch to his temple, and he blacked out.
“I’ve been sent to stop you from doing that,” Kat said, grabbing the glass and pulling it out of Robert’s reach. “Hubby says no more whisky.”

“You’ve seen him?” Robert asked. “How is he?”

“He looks perfect,” Kat said with a gentle smile.

“Thank you,” Robert said quietly, appreciating that. If he ever did this again (not that he planned to) he’d make sure to refuse any ridiculousness about spending time away from his husband. Such a stupid idea. And for some reason, he felt anxious, like something was about to go horrendously wrong. Which was stupid, of course nothing was going to go wrong. He loved Aaron, and he knew that Aaron loved him. So what was the problem?

“Are you okay?” Kat asked.

“Mm,” he said. “Just… need to see him. He’s the only one who calms me down when I get like this.”

“I’ll go and get him,” Kat said. “You’re nearly up anyway.”

“Kat, you’re…”

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said, unable to even formulate what he wanted to say. “You’re a good friend, that’s all.” She smiled a dazzling grin at him before leaving.

“Oh hi,” Kat said, seeing Adam alone in the room. “Where’s Aaron? It’s nearly time to get him married off,” she added brightly.

“That’s a good question,” Adam said. “He er… said he wanted some time alone, so I left him. I came back and… he’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” Kat asked. Adam looked at her pointedly. “No, he can’t be gone,” she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Well, gone where?”

“I don’t know,” Adam said. “There’s no sign of him. And his phone’s here too, so we can’t call him. I think he’s run for it.” Adam held up the phone in illustration and Kat couldn’t believe it.

“Aaron wouldn’t,” Kat said obstinately.

“I’ve known him longer than you,” Adam said. “When things start to get on top of him, he can be… a little unpredictable.”

“But he loves Robert!” Kat said, shaking her head. “They’re actually sickeningly sweet, when you stop and watch them together. No. I can’t believe Aaron would just leave him.”
“Then where is he?” Adam said. Kat looked around the empty room, her heart sinking. His absence spoke louder than she could.

“Right, we’re ready to go,” Chas said happily, looking around the room. “Where’s Aaron?”

“Million dollar question,” Kat murmured under her breath, sat on a chair and tapping her high heeled foot with impatience. Chas looked at Adam, confused.

“He’s not here,” Adam said.

Chas paused, the words not making sense. “So… where is he?”

“We think he’s bolted,” Adam said.

“No, you think he’s bolted,” Kat grumbled. She didn’t believe Aaron would just leave, especially without a word of explanation to anyone. That wasn’t the Aaron she knew, he wouldn’t hurt Robert like this without a good reason.

Chas looked completely deflated. “I’ve wanted him to leave Robert for ages, and now that I’ve finally accepted it, Aaron just walks away?” Everyone stayed silent not knowing what to say.

Vic came in to join the growing number of people, Holly in her arms. “What’s going on?” she asked. “I’ve got a baby in a brand new clean dress and it won’t last long. What’s the hold up?” Everyone looked uncomfortable. Adam filled her in briefly.

“No,” she said simply. “He can’t have.”

“Exactly,” Kat said chipping in, glad someone agreed with her.

“Can’t have or not, that looks like that’s exactly what he’s done,” Adam said darkly.

“When did you get all doom and gloom?” Vic asked. “You know how much he loves Rob, you all know that! Why would he leave?”

“I’ll drive around for a bit,” Adam said. “See if he’s found a pub somewhere for one last pint to calm his nerves. I can’t just sit here.”

“Call if you find him,” Vic said, letting Adam kiss her, then the baby.

"I will."

As the seconds ticked by into minutes, no one said anything, but they were all thinking it. Someone was going to have to break Robert’s heart, and Vic was the first one who looked like she was willing to vocalise it.

“Look, one of us is going to have to tell Robert he’s got a runaway groom,” Vic said eventually, when the silence started to become too much.

“I’m not doing it,” Kat said. Everyone looked at her. “Come on!” she said. “I can’t tell him that, it’d crush him!”
“It’ll be better coming from you,” Chas said. “You’re his friend, if he has to hear bad news…”

“Bad news about what?” Everyone turned to see Robert at the door, looking possibly more twitchy than anyone had ever seen him. “Someone spit it out. We’re already running late.”

“Er…” Kat started. “It’s Aaron. There’s a tiny problem.”

“Which is?” Robert asked.

“He’s gone,” Chas said quietly, Robert looking appalled. “Adam’s checked the building, and he’s looking outside now. Don’t worry, we’ll find him.”

Aaron came around slowly. He wasn’t sure for a few minutes, because though he felt conscious, his vision was black. Then sense caught up to him. He could feel the hood over his head, tight, his breathing making the fabric damp against his mouth. Restricted. Trapped. Unable to move. Aaron’s breathing started coming in fits and bursts, needing more air than he was getting. No, You cannot panic, he thought to himself. If he had a panic attack right now with his airway restricted like this, he’d probably pass out. And he needed to stay awake, alert.

He tried his wrists, no they were tied fast. Pulling caused pain, and no effect either except to strain his arms and shoulders. He wasn’t sure, but he thought his ankles were tied too, though it was hard to tell in the cramped space. One thing he knew was he couldn’t move his legs. He knew he was in a car boot, could feel the vibrations from a running car and that really wasn’t helping him to calm down either. No, it was the hood over his head that was really causing him problems. The restriction, the desperate feeling of imprisonment was driving him mad. Surely they wouldn’t be driving him that far away. What on earth could they possibly want with him anyway? What would be the point? Robert. This must have something to do with Robert. Because Aaron wasn’t useful for much was he?

Robert. The thought was like cold ice. He’d be waiting for Aaron at the registry office right now. Waiting as Aaron didn’t show, dressed up in his suit, looking gorgeous. He wanted to marry Robert. God, he couldn’t think of anything he wanted more, and being nervous about today didn’t change that. But he had wanted this, Robert for the rest of his life. And strangers had taken that away from him for God knows what reason. Robert would be waiting, his face and heart falling as he realised Aaron wasn’t going to show. Surely someone would work out that he wouldn’t leave on his own accord. Not without saying something to someone. God, he hoped someone would have a bit of faith in him, and start looking for him. He needed his friends and family to start looking. How long had he been knocked unconscious for? It didn’t feel like too long, but he might be imagining that.

Aaron moaned as the car went over a bump. Several bumps actually. They were going down a country lane, or a farm track, they had to be. That might be useful if he ever got out of this. Aaron tried to stay calm, and managed well enough until the car drew to a stop, the engine dying off. God, what were they going to do with him? The panic filled his entire body as he heard footsteps on gravel.

“He probably went outside to get some fresh air,” Kat suggested.
“What, for a three mile hike?” Robert asked harshly. Then felt bad for snapping, this wasn’t Kat’s fault. “He’s been gone too long. He isn’t coming, Kat. He doesn’t want me.”

“No,” Kat said. “I don’t believe that, getting married’s a big thing. He probably needed…” Kat had nothing else to say, running out of excuses now. As time went on, it just looked worse and worse. And she was sat here with her best friend, whose heart was breaking. She had never seen him look so distraught.

Robert looked at her and shook his head. “Come on, he’s been gone for more than an hour now. If he’s not here, it’s because he doesn’t want to be.” Robert downed a glass of whisky, needing the distraction. Or something to sink into a maudlin depressed state, more like. “It’s because he doesn’t want to marry me. And that’s just going to have to be something I accept.” He was speaking hollowly, not really feeling his words, not yet.

“No,” Vic said. “He loves you, I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation. He wouldn’t walk out. And if he was getting cold feet, he sure as hell would have told someone! Sorry sweetheart,” she added, rocking Holly who’d twitched at Vic’s anger.

“I love him too,” Robert said, voice breaking. “More than I ever thought possible. But where is he, Vic? Why would he leave?” She didn’t have an answer.

Chapter End Notes

I've tried very hard to get this chapter up asap, I don't like leaving readers on a cliffhanger for too long! Thank you for your encouragement, and I hope you liked this chapter too! x
“Maybe something’s wrong,” Robert said quietly. “Maybe this is more than nerves. He really didn’t say anything to you?” he asked. Chas shook her head, not having heard a word from Aaron. And Robert was right, Aaron saying nothing to anyone was strange.

“No,” Kat said. “I’m done waiting now, I’m not going to be miserable, I’m going to figure out what the hell is going on.” Kat got up, leaving the room, intending on talking to someone in charge. The registrar by now had assumed that the wedding wasn’t going ahead, and had moved on to the next wedding. Brilliant.

“Hi,” Kat said brightly to the receptionist. “You got CCTV in this place?”

“We hold a lot of legal documents,” she said as if Kat was completely thick. “Yes, of course we do.”

“Great,” she said. “We have a runaway groom who hasn’t taken his phone, and I’d quite like to know what happened, and where he’s got to.”

“I can’t do that,” she said.

“Have you been on the front desk all day?”

“No,” she said tartly. “I do actually have other duties besides answering the phone, you know.”

Great, Kat thought. I have someone who’s bitter at life and hates her job.

“I would really appreciate it if you could see the footage for room 5b. I’d like to know…”

“I can’t do that without management agreeing,” the woman interrupted.

“How much?” Kat asked bluntly, seeing that charm and a nice smile wasn’t doing it. “I need to see the footage for the last two hours. People don’t just vanish into thin air, ten minutes before their wedding.”

“I’m not available to be bought,” she said with fake dignity. Then seeing that Kat wasn’t being moved, she sighed. “Let me have a look…” Kat breathed a sigh of relief and watched as the woman typed away on the computer. “That room has it’s own side entrance for privacy, but you need the key, which Mr Dingle would have had. It’s usually used for when brides want to keep their dress away from prying eyes.” The receptionist rolled her eyes, making it clear just what a bitter person she was. People had been coming and going all day, Aaron wouldn’t have locked it, Kat was almost positive of it.

“Oh God.”

“Oh God, what?” Kat snapped, her sweet voice changing into a harsh tone instantly. The receptionist had gone pale, her eyes wide.

“I… er… think we should call the police.”

“Tell me why,” Kat demanded.

“It… doesn’t look like he walked out of here by his own free will,” she said. She turned the screen of the computer around and Kat’s jaw dropped.
Aaron could almost hear his heart beating, racing as the footsteps on the gravel approached. He tried to calm down, tried to listen. “…sure he can breathe in there?” Aaron heard, the footsteps stopping outside the boot.

“Yeah, he’s no good to us dead is he?” Aaron took a reassurance from the words, because maybe, just maybe they weren’t planning on killing him. A ridiculous thought, as who would want to kill him in the first place? God, this was weird. Aaron froze as the boot opened, waiting for something to happen, as it wasn’t like he could move. He knew the boot was open, because of the slight fresh air, and the vague light patches coming in through the hood. It wasn’t pitch black, but even so Aaron wanted it gone. And then it was, Aaron blinking at the sudden harsh light against his eyes. Before he could really focus, strong arms were hauling him up, dragging him towards a barn, looking very much abandoned. His ankles were tied, he realised, no way could he walk on his own right now.

By the time his eyes started working again properly, he was thrown onto the hard ground of the barn, three people looking at him. It hadn’t been three men, he realised. It was two men and a woman. Why that made a difference, he didn’t know. He didn’t recognise any of them, and they weren’t covering their faces. The two men had to be brothers, they looked way too similar to be anything else. What that meant for the blonde woman, Aaron didn’t know.

“Right, we’ve done your dirty work, how about a pay day?” The taller of the two men said to the woman. Oh, so she was the one in charge, was she?

“Phone,” she said, holding her hand out. The tall one threw her a phone, obviously a cheap phone that had never been used before. “You got Robert Sugden’s number off his phone, right?” she said, nodding towards Aaron when she said “his.”

“Course,” the man said. “Couldn’t lose our money, could we?”

"Great." The woman dialled the number.

“Robert we have a serious problem here,” Kat said, finding Robert still dejected. “And no more whisky, you need a clear head for this.”

“What is it?” Chas asked, sensing the tone meant something serious had happened.

“I guess I’ll show you.” Kat got her phone out and queued the footage the receptionist had sent her. Once she realised it was bad, the receptionist had become much more amenable. Robert watched the CCTV on the small screen, frowning.

“No,” he said simply, unable to believe what he was seeing.

“We all know Aaron wouldn’t leave you without saying anything at all,” Kat said. “Come on, Rob.”

“But… why?” Robert asked, feeling both bewildered and a little faint. Chas snatched the phone and replayed the video. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Robert, snap out of it!” Kat said. “Someone’s kidnapped your husband, and all you can do is sit
“You said you’d protect him, you said you’d keep him safe!!” Chas shouted, being the one to break the uncomfortable silence. “This is your fault, Robert! How could you let this happen?!”

“I didn’t walk in here and kidnap him, Chas!” Robert snapped. “I’m just as worried as you are. More!”

“Yeah, right,” Chas scoffed. “Just when I think you’re not bad for him, you go and prove me wrong!”

“None of this is getting Aaron home, Chas!” Vic interjected.

They were all interrupted by Robert’s phone ringing, which he answered quickly, heart hammering with what he now knew. It was an unknown number.

“Yes?”

“Is this Robert Sugden?” A woman’s voice.

“What do you want?”

“I think we’ve got something that belongs to you,” she said, voice almost smug. “Aggressive man, isn’t he?”

“Again, what do you want?” Robert said.

“Good, we understand each other. Thought a round one million would do it.”

“This is about the money?” Robert asked, unable to hide his relief. He had money, and if it was just about that, chances were they wouldn’t hurt Aaron.

“Of course it’s about the money,” she said. “No police, no anything, you give us the money, we give you back your lover in one piece. More or less anyway.”

“I’m not giving you a penny until I know he’s okay,” Robert said firmly.

“Alternatively, we can keep asking for more because you’re being… uncooperative. Two hours.”

“I need more time,” Robert said. “I can’t just go into a bank asking for that kind of money without red flags being raised.”

“Three then.”

“You could be having me on,” Robert said. “I need to hear Aaron, I’m not negotiating with you on that.”

“Fine.” Robert listened, his heart hammering and the adrenaline filling his body. Robert heard a shuffle on the phone, waiting for something, anything that would let him know Aaron was okay. He had to be okay, because if he wasn’t and Robert had wasted time thinking he’d been jilted…

“Abandoned farm shed. Ah!…” It was Aaron’s voice, speaking quickly, but Robert also heard the painful groaning.

“That was my brother punching your fiancé’s jaw,” the woman said. “I’ll call again. No police.”
The line went dead and Robert exhaled heavily.

“It’s money. They want money.” The panic and fear hadn’t set in yet, it had all been happening too quickly. But Robert knew that it would.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

How has this story reached 40 chapters??!! Big thank you to all of you still reading this, as it's turned into a bit of a marathon hasn't it? Warnings for homophobia, and references to Aaron's past in this and probably the next couple of chapters too.

Special thanks to Turquoise Terrier and Smittenwithsugden for helping with this...

Aaron’s jaw was throbbing from where he’d been punched. He’d just had to say something, anything that might help, rather than sit here waiting for someone to rescue him like a pathetic weakling. “You really are a pain in the arse,” one of the men was saying.

“I’m not the one who tied a stranger up in the boot of their car,” Aaron snapped. He was getting more than a little pissed off now, that feeling being more prevalent than the fear. “In case you hadn’t realised, I had plans today.”

“Like he’d ever marry you,” the woman said, and Aaron couldn’t place the look on her face. Jealousy maybe? Both men were looking at her, and it was clear she was in charge of all of this.

“What do you want with me?” Aaron asked.

“Money,” one of the men said.

“Might be for the two of you,” Aaron said. “It’s not that for her, is it?” Both men looked at her, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Leah, you said this was a quick buck, that you wanted some muscle for your grand plan,” a man said. “I didn’t agree to anything else.”

“It’s fine, it’s going to be fine. Robert Sugden will pay, then we can get free with the money and forget about him.”

“You think I’m worth a million do you?” Aaron asked. “Not heard about the prenub he got me to sign? Money’s too precious to him, he’s not going to pay.” Aaron didn’t know what he was doing, he just knew that he couldn’t lay here, tied up on the floor doing nothing.

“He’s a millionaire,” Leah said. “He’ll pay that to get his toy boy back.” She spoke with complete disgust, and Aaron was realising that a same sex relationship bothered her.

Aaron was torn. Robert had the money, more than enough. But God, Aaron couldn’t see a world where he was worth anything nearing that. It was insane. “You don’t think much of me do you?” Aaron said.

“What, the local bit of rough?” Leah asked. “He could have anyone. Any woman he wanted.”

“Oh... A woman like you?” Aaron said, continuing to push her buttons.

“I think my brothers are going to go for a drive,” she said, looking at them both. “Make sure no
one’s around and that we have the place to ourselves.

“Not sure we should leave you with him,” one of the men said warily.

“He’s tied up, I think I can handle myself,” she said acidly. “This was my idea, you’ll get your pay out. Go.” Aaron watched with mounting fear as the two men left. It was obvious they had no vested interest in this. They were just the back up, and Aaron could handle a few punches, in a fight, he gave as good as he got. But being left alone with the woman who clearly had a different motive was… worrying. Robert was the manipulator, Robert would know what to say to her to get under her skin. Aaron didn't have the way with words that Robert did, to get around her.

“I think we need a little chat,” Leah said, sinking to the floor so she was now at Aaron’s eye level. “Robert asked for three hours to get the money, so… we’ve got time.” That did not fill Aaron with confidence.

Robert had barely finished recounting the phone call to Chas, Kat, Vic and Adam (who’d returned) when the police were barging in, having been called by the clerk. Standard procedure apparently, though Robert was shocked that this happened often enough that “procedure” was necessary. Robert was refusing to speak to them, to cooperate, because the woman on the phone said no police. He would do absolutely everything to ensure Aaron’s safety. Like he should have been doing in the first place. It was a mess of police officers, clerks and family all talking at once and Robert realised he was losing his window of opportunity. Sooner or later an officer was going to ask for his phone, if the kidnappers called again. Robert couldn’t allow that to happen. He needed to be in control, or as much as he possibly could be right now.

“I need some air,” Robert said.

“Mr Sugden, we really need…” one of the police officers started.

“Are you arresting me?” Robert asked bluntly.

“…no,” the officer said, like this was insane.

“Then I don’t have to talk to you,” Robert said, making sure he had both his phone and his car keys in his pockets as he left the building. He didn’t want to cooperate with the police, he wanted Aaron back with him, home and safe. He didn’t care if it cost him money, Aaron’s safety was too important. He'd pay everything he had to make sure Aaron was safe and happy and loved.

“Rob, wait!!” He ignored that, going to his car. He needed to get to his bank manager, start a conversation and screw everything else. He unlocked his car and sat in the drivers seat.

“Robert Sugden, don’t you dare drive off, I’m in heels!” Kat screamed after him. He looked and saw her slipping off her shoes, running barefoot to his car. “Get out.”

“No, I need…”

“I’ll drive,” Kat said. “Come on, I’ll go wherever you want. But you’ve had too much to drink, and the last thing Aaron needs is for you to be pulled over for driving under the influence.” She had a point, and Robert got out, going to the passenger seat.

“You’re going to drive barefoot?” Robert asked, passing her the keys.
“They’re Manolo Blahniks,” she said. “Not wasting those shoes driving. Now where am I going?”

“I’m guessing we have two hours and forty five minutes,” Aaron said. The silence was starting to get to him, not to mention the pressure on his wrists. He was laying awkwardly on the floor but had no purchase to actually move, and he wasn’t about to ask Leah to help him sit up either. He didn’t want that woman’s touch anywhere near him. “So are you going to talk, or what?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Leah said quietly. “Why’re you so special? What makes you... the one.”

“Ever think Robert’s not actually that special either?” Aaron said. “He kicks in his sleep, he’s moody and he drinks way too much coffee and whisky.” He had other flaws and problems with living with Robert, but not ones he was willing to share with someone who may or may not be psychotic.

“You’re a pathetic victim, why would he waste the time?” That hurt. Aaron had almost been expecting it, but he couldn’t help how much it hurt, to have his past thrown at him. It’s not like he could help or was responsible for what Gordon had done to him.

“Last I heard, no one can help being raped,” Aaron snapped.

“Yeah,” Leah said quietly. “You really believed that, you’d have taken it to court, wouldn’t you?” She wanted him to break, thought she was good enough with her words that he’d crack. Aaron became even more determined than before not to give into it. “If you really didn’t enjoy it, why would you go gay?”

“You’re ignorant as hell,” Aaron said. “Going gay, as you put it, isn’t a choice!”

“Robert Sugden is gorgeous, and he isn’t yours,” Leah said slowly, like he was struggling to understand something obvious. Yep, definitely obsessed, Aaron decided.

“I think there’s some naked photos on my phone that would suggest otherwise,” Aaron said. There wasn’t, but he knew it would wind her up and got a brief thrill of satisfaction from Leah’s flinch. Then he couldn’t resist. “You realise he always uses body doubles in his films, right? That’s not really him. You can always tell because he has a bunch of freckles on his...”

“Shut up!” Aaron instantly regretted speaking, because the black hood was back on his head before he could blink.
“Well?” Kat asked as Robert returned to the car, a holdall in his hands. He’d had to go home to get his identification, otherwise he’d have no hope getting the money from his accounts. He’d also shed his tie, opening a couple of buttons on his shirt as he tried to sober up and think clearly.

“I’ve only got five hundred thousand,” Robert said, sitting next to Kat in the car. His phone rang, but he ignored it. It was Chas, and he wanted to keep the phone line open for Aaron’s kidnappers.

“They wanted twice that,” she reminded him.

“Well, hopefully they aren’t going to stick around and count it,” Robert said tightly. “It was all I could get without the bank making a referral check to the police, the last thing I want. That amount of money…”

“But it is your money.”

“Yeah, but in cash, in twenties, with no plausible explanation?” Robert pressed. “If I were the bank, I’d have questions.” Kat was silent. “You think it’ll be enough?”

“Depends,” Kat said. “If they’re really intent on hurting Aaron, no money would be enough.”

“No,” Robert said slowly. He’d already realised that. “Let’s hope it’s just money they’re after then.”

They had about ten minutes until the time was up to gather the money, and right now they had nothing to do but sit in the car, waiting. Robert started talking, knowing that staying in silence wasn’t doing his imagination any favours.

“God, I’m going crazy, I don’t know how long I can stand this. He could be dead already, they could be doing anything to him right now.”

“They won’t be,” Kat reassured.

“If he’s… hurt, he won’t recover from it.”

“You mean…” Kat cleared her throat. “Was it true, about him and his dad?” Robert flicked his eyes in a way that was a yes. “Oh, Rob. Sorry, I thought they were just publishing trash. I didn’t think…”

“It… it was worse than what they wrote. Aaron’s told me everything and… I don’t actually know how he lets anyone touch him at all, me included. To get past that, to live a normal life… he’s the most amazing man I’ve ever known. But if some strangers touch him when he doesn’t want it… God, he won’t cope…”

“Robert, he will be okay,” Kat reassured, rubbing a hand on his thigh reassuringly. “He will.”

“You can’t know that,” he said, shaking his head. “For God’s sake, I have our engagement rings in my pocket. I can’t even know he’s wearing his!” He liked it when they wore the rings, like wherever they were, there was a tiny connection between them both. And he’d been robbed of even that small bit of comfort.

“Robert, look at me,” Kat said firmly. He did, eyes a little damp. “You cannot fall apart, not yet.”
When Aaron is safe and home with you, then you can fall into pieces, and let him put you back together. But not now, you can’t afford to.”

“Kat… he’s the other half of me. I… I… just…” he was stuttering and falling over his words.

“Sh, it’s okay,” Kat soothed, pulling Robert into a hug. “I promise it’ll be okay,” she said lowly. They both knew it was a promise she had no control to keep.

Aaron’s hands were going numb. He had been rubbing the patch of skin where his engagement ring should sit, trying to focus on that rather than the lack of vision. Leah had left the hood on him in silence for…. He didn’t know how long. But the rope around his wrists was clearly making the circulation difficult because he was struggling. And he could really do with a drink.

“You know he’s probably off with someone else now,” Leah said, letting Aaron focus on where her voice was coming from, trying to stop his attention from drifting. “If he doesn’t pay, he was probably just waiting for a reason to get shot of you.” Aaron didn't really believe that, but the words hurt. He did have a fear of Robert wanting someone else, because he could have anyone he wanted, man or woman. Rich, gorgeous. And Robert had settled for him. Robert often told him that he didn’t want anyone else, that he wasn’t settling, but it was hard for Aaron to believe. He had so much baggage.

“He’s got a blonde supermodel hanging off his every word. What is it, some twisted threesome kind of thing? Robert Sugden needs something a bit more exotic to satisfy him?” Aaron kept his mouth firmly shut. Kat wasn’t a threat, he never believed that. Or not since he and Robert got serious, and he'd got to know Kat, anyway. At first he had, because Kat was from Robert’s world, obviously beautiful and… Yeah, he cut that line of thought off sharply. He was sure if this mad Leah killed him, Kat would comfort him. Help Robert get over it. Stop being so negative. Don’t you dare let her get under your skin!

“I was talking to you!” Leah snapped, pulling the hood off and slapping his face. It was the shock of being hit that bothered him more, because Leah was quite a small woman, and there wasn’t much force behind it.

“Hitting someone who's tied up,” Aaron said. “Really big of you, that.”

“I think I should see just what Robert sees in you,” she said with a sneer. It took a few seconds for Aaron to realise what she was talking about. Leah approached him with a knife that Aaron had no idea where it had come from. Aaron could barely move anyway, with the way he was tied up, but when she got near him, he could barely breathe. A crazy woman with a knife wasn’t someone he wanted to be anywhere near. He still had his tie on, the knot having loosened, and Leah took it off him, then used it as a gag. All Aaron could do was glare at her.

Then he closed his eyes as she started to cut off his suit jacket and shirt, trying to imagine himself anywhere else. That was an expensive suit, Aaron thought bitterly. Then realised how ridiculous that was, as Robert was probably getting an obscene amount of money together right now, to essentially buy his freedom. Aaron gasped around the gag as the knife nicked his skin, knowing he was bleeding.

“Oh, didn’t expect this.” Aaron opened his eyes to see Leah examining him, looking at his self harm scars in a way that made Aaron feel embarrassed, ashamed. “And Robert Sugden wants you like this? You really believe that? God, you’re delusional.” Aaron closed his eyes and tried not to
feel it as Leah traced the lines on his body, her fingernail scratching against him. It felt so wrong. The only person who was allowed to touch him like this was Robert. Robert kissed along his scars so beautifully, so tenderly, somehow never making him feel ashamed of how low he’d got in the past. This was horrendous.

Aaron heard a car approach, and hoped, that maybe this was help. Leah got away from him, letting Aaron breathe again for a few moments. She looked out of a crack on the door and her shoulders sagged with relief. Anything that made her happy couldn’t be good, Aaron knew. The door opened and both of her brothers came in, dropping a bag on the floor.

“Got the supplies you wanted,” one man said.

“Great,” she said. “What’s the time?”

“Sugden’s got about five minutes until his times up,” he said.

“Great, I’ll call him,” Leah said. She picked up the phone and dialled through, it only took two rings before it was answered.

“Got the money?” Leah asked.

“Yes,” Robert said. “Where is he?”

“No, no,” Leah said. “We’re not doing it like that. I tell you where we’re holding him, you’ll turn up with the police. So... You’re going to go where we tell you, we’re going to take the money, and then we’ll tell you where Aaron is.”

“I need to know he’s okay,” Robert said. “I won’t do what you say until I know he’s all right.”

“He’s a little tied up right now,” Leah said. “Last time we let him speak to you, he didn’t behave. I’m going to text you a location. Be there in twenty minutes.”

“Fine,” Robert said. “But don’t you dare think you’re getting away with this.” Leah hung up the phone, typing away on the phone, composing a text message. Once she was done, she looked at both men.

“We’ve got to move quickly,” she said to her brothers. “Hold him for me.” Aaron started struggling against his ties even more, knowing he wouldn’t like what was about to happen. But he didn’t have the strength against two men, and when Leah got out a medical kit from her bag, that’s when Aaron really started panicking, shouting into the gag. He couldn’t look away, almost hypnotised by it as Leah prepared a needle that Aaron wanted nowhere near him. There could be anything in that needle. This could be the last time he’d be alive, drawing free breath. God, how could this be happening?! It wasn’t fair. Leah was clearly psychotic enough to kill him if she wanted to.

“No!” Aaron screamed into the gag, fighting with every muscle he had to get away from the hypodermic needle approaching his arm. But he was tied too tightly, restrained too well and he had nowhere to go. The sharp scratch of the needle hurt, because he was tight with tension trying to fight it. “No, no!” He could feel God knows what drugs starting to take effect, his arm going heavy. Then his body. And then he couldn’t move at all. His body went completely limp, and he couldn’t move a muscle, but he was still awake, aware. The gag was ripped from his mouth, but he couldn’t speak. That involved moving his jaw. Leah and the two men were moving around him, setting something up maybe, but he couldn’t lift his head or focus his eyes to work out what. The noise hurt his head, and he absolutely couldn’t move. Hard enough to breathe right now. The three
figures blurred, swimming in and out of his vision, then he was alone. It took him a while to work out that they weren’t coming back, the entire time hoping and praying Robert would find him soon.
Chapter Notes

Between April 15th and 19th, I won't be writing or posting anything, as I'm away from home. Mentioning it because I think it'll coincide with *stuff* on screen, and it won't be me vanishing from the fandom, I promise!!

That said, thank you for all the support on this fic, and enjoy!

Robert sat in his car at a crossroads, the old fashioned signpost sitting in the middle, almost taunting him. Which way would those bastards be coming from? He was waiting, waiting for the kidnappers to turn up, waiting for Aaron, waiting, waiting. He needed the other half of him back. It felt like he couldn’t breathe, knowing Aaron was in danger. If he had wanted to spend his life with Aaron before this mess, that feeling had no increased tenfold. Because without Aaron, Robert wasn’t whole. Which if he voiced it out loud would sound ridiculous, but it was how he felt.

Parked behind him, about fifty feet down the road was Adam. Robert had called him, and Adam wanted his best mate back too, not all that eager to play to the police’s game plan of tracking the kidnappers down, rather than paying up for Aaron’s safety. Which is what Adam had told Robert was going on. Robert needed the security of knowing Adam was there, just in case something went wrong. Having himself added to join Aaron wouldn’t help anyone.

“They’re late,” Kat said tightly. Robert looked at her, and saw that she was nervous too.

“Don’t you start losing it, you’re the only one keeping me sane right about now.”

“He’s my friend too, Rob,” Kat said. “I don’t want anything to happen to him either.”

“I know.” They both looked as a car approached, the second one since they’d parked. It was a black nondescript car, which slowed, then stopped. A woman and two men got out of it, and Robert followed suit, locking the car with Kat and the money inside. Just in case.

“Where is he?”

“Money,” the woman said.

“Where is Aaron?” Robert repeated sternly.

“He’s alive,” one of the men said. “Hand over the money, and no one will get hurt.”

“I’m a little short,” Robert admitted. “Could only get five hundred grand without the police being called, which I assumed you wouldn’t want. You can take my car if you want. Take anything.”

The woman’s eyes fell on the car with almost glee. “No,” the man said. “We’re not taking something that can be traced.”

“James!”

“No,” he said firmly. “Hand over the money.”
“I want my husband back,” Robert said harshly. “I am not negotiating on that. Where is he? Not a penny until then.” Robert suddenly realised that those two men could probably forcibly take the money from him, and was glad he’d locked it in the car with Kat.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” the woman told him. “You are going to hand over the money. We’re going to leave and in an hour, when we’re safely away, we will call you with Aaron’s location.”

“No,” Robert said. “You’re not leaving here without me knowing where he is. I’ll find him on my own if I have to.”

“He’s on an anaesthetic drip,” Kat said. “I’ve guessed at his weight and dosage, so I’m assuming he has about two, possibly three hours before he overdoses and his heart stops. If you call the police, if you stop us from leaving, if you track us or the money, Aaron will die.”

“No,” Robert said, his voice going to almost like a whisper. “You can’t… I don’t care about the cash, take it, just tell me where he is.”

“One hour,” this James said, who apparently had a firmer grasp on the situation. The woman looked like she was enjoying this way, way too much. “That’ll get us far enough away and you’ll still have time to find him.”

“If I find him in anything less than perfect health, I will make sure you have very painful deaths.” It might have been more convincing if his voice hadn’t been shaking. The woman laughed at him, openly, her eyes sparkling with malice and she looked like she was loving this. That was not promising.

“Money,” James said firmly. Robert didn’t feel like he had a choice, knowing that every second he hesitated, it was another second that Aaron’s life dripped away. Assuming they were telling the truth, but then, why would they lie? Clearly they didn’t care about anyone other than themselves.

Robert went to the car and got the holdall, ignoring Kat’s look. He felt the weight of the money, but he hadn’t been lying. He didn’t care about the cash.

“There you go,” he said darkly. The two men took the cash out, quickly exchanging the bag. Probably assuming it had some kind of tracking device on it (it didn’t.) The woman just looked at Robert, staring at him. “Do I get the name of the people robbing me and threatening my husband?” Robert asked.

“Why would I do that?”

“Well, you said James, so I know one of your names.”

“You threatening me?”

“I want Aaron back,” Robert said. “That’s all. I don’t want revenge, I want him safe.”

“Be patient,” she said. Robert watched with mounting dread and fear as the three of them got into the car and drove off.

“Know where he is?” Kat asked as Robert got back into the car. Robert shook his head and explained. “How long’s he got?”

“I don’t know,” Robert said honestly. “I... oh, God.”
“Why did you give them the money, Rob?”

“Google works fine on my phone, thank you,” Robert said. “Most people who’re abducted are dead within the first three hours,” Robert said darkly. “It’s already been that. He’s probably already… dead.” Robert swallowed uncomfortably. “And if he’s not, I want to do anything I can to give him the best chance possible. So I did what they said.” Robert’s voice broke, the tears freely flowing down his face.

“I got the reg number,” Kat said.

“Good, I guess,” Robert said. They sat in silence, and waited through agonising minutes.

“If I lose him, it will completely destroy me,” Robert said thoughtfully. The quiet in the car was giving him time to think. “I can’t go on without him, Kat. It isn’t an option.”

“I envy you, you know?” Kat said quietly.

“Why?” Robert asked in disbelief. He wouldn’t wish how he felt right now on his worst enemy. Like he’d lost all hope, all the will to carry on.

“To be… to have someone who you love so much you’d do anything for them. As long as they were okay, as long as they were happy, it would be enough to make you happy. I’ve never had that, Rob. Didn’t think it really existed outside of fairy tales.”

“This is all my fault,” Robert said. “Aaron’s in danger because of me. Even if he does somehow get out of this, he shouldn’t be anywhere near me from now on.”

Kat stared at him. “You can’t end it,” she said bluntly. “You were going to marry him this morning!”

“I love him,” Robert said. “I do, so much. Enough that keeping him safe has to come first.”

“Robert…”

“I’ve been so selfish, right from the beginning,” Robert said. “He had a life. A good one, but I saw him and I wanted him. I didn’t care what it’d do to him, how being with me would destroy him. Because I was so selfish…”

“I think he had some say in this as well,” Kat said. “I know Aaron. He wouldn’t be with you if he didn’t want to be.”

“Maybe,” Robert said. “Maybe he just likes being protected and safe. Maybe he likes the house. Maybe I’m just good in bed.”

“Right, I need you to stop with all the self pitying crap,” Kat said. “You know Aaron loves you, when you’re in the right frame of mind.”

Robert was stopped from replying by his phone ringing, which he fumbled to answer. “Yes?”

“Got a postcode for you,” a male voice said. Robert listened intently, repeating it to Kat who typed it into her phone’s sat nav.

“You better pray he’s all right,” Robert said.
“I didn’t sign up for murder,” the male voice said, before it was cut off and the call ended.

“Drive,” Robert said to Kat firmly.
“Come on, you can go faster than that,” Robert muttered.

“I’m already going ten miles over the speed limit,” Kat countered. “And I’m American, so I’m driving on the wrong side of the bloody road!”

Robert stopped talking to her, not wanting to distract her concentration. The last thing they needed was to get into a car crash. She turned right sharply, down a farm track and Robert kept biting down on his bottom lip, Aaron’s habit. He needed Aaron safe, nothing else mattered. It was a rocky track, probably destroying his car, but he didn’t care. Kat drew it to a stop outside a dilapidated barn, and Robert hurried out of the car, running to the barn. The door was stiff, but it did move, painfully slowly.

“Aaron!” It was as if things were happening in slow motion, he saw Aaron laid on his side, unconscious, shirtless and attached to a drip. He moved as fast as he could, but it felt so slowly until he was at Aaron’s side. He touched his face, then recoiled in horror. Aaron felt cold. “No, no, please God no,” he whispered to himself. “Please.” He put his fingers to the pulse in Aaron’s neck, and found it. He was alive.

He had no idea if medically it was the right thing to do, but Robert pulled the needle from his arm, wanting, needing it to stop pumping poison into Aaron’s body. A bead of blood came from his arm but no more, so that was good. Maybe, was it? Robert had no idea. Distantly he could hear Kat making phone calls. Police, ambulance, Robert didn’t care.

“Please look at me,” Robert begged, his hands cradling Aaron’s face, carefully because he could see a red bruise on his jaw, not fully formed yet. He hoped it had the chance to turn blue. “I need to see your eyes once more, please.” Kat moved behind them and started fiddling with the ties binding Aaron’s wrists. It was hard going, the knot was tight where Aaron had clearly been pulling, his skin swollen and inflamed too. But she managed it, all the while Robert whispering to Aaron, urging him to open his eyes.

Robert thought he saw movement, a little frown on Aaron's forehead. His usual scowl. “Look at me,” he demanded. “I saw you move, look at me.”

“I’m cold…” Aaron whispered, not opening his eyes. Robert quickly shed his jacket and covered Aaron’s body with it. He had felt cold. But he was speaking, he was here. He was alive.

“Don’t ever scare me like that again,” Robert said, a palm to his face. “I need you on this planet.”

“Soft.” Robert smiled, actually smiled. The first time in hours. Hours that felt like years.

“Now look at me,” Robert said. Aaron forced his eyes open, but Robert could see it was difficult, his eyes slipping in and out of focus.

“Head spinning.”

“You’ll be okay,” Robert reassured him, hands still to his face. “I promise.”

“Did you pay?” Aaron’s blue eyes were trying to focus on him, but it’s difficult.
“Had to get you back, didn’t I?” Robert said, trying for off hand.

“Robert, can you… kiss me?” Aaron looked almost embarrassed to be asking, but Robert had never heard anything sweeter. He closed the gap and kissed Aaron gently, slowly. Aaron wasn’t as responsive as normal, a bit uncoordinated but he made a little moan in his throat at the contact.

“Thought I’d never see you again,” Aaron said quietly, his eyes betraying his fear more than his voice did.

“Yeah,” Robert said, voice shaking as he felt like he might fall apart, his fingers lacing through Aaron’s hair. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

A really short one here, but I didn't want to leave it on such a cliffhanger for too long! And I wanted the reunion scene to have its own chapter.
Chapter 44

It only took a couple more minutes for both paramedics and police to turn up, almost simultaneously. Aaron had lost consciousness again, but Robert kept a hand on his neck, feeling the reassuring throb of his pulse against his fingertips. It was more likely to be sleep from exhaustion Robert was informed, and that he could live with. What he didn’t like was the police pulling him away while Aaron was loaded onto a stretcher, asking him questions. Robert answered them, or tried, most of his attention was on Aaron. He got the impression that they were giving him a warning for disrupting a police investigation, but Robert couldn’t care less right now. Kat gave them all the practical information, but Robert was too distracted to. He managed to shake the police officers, making it clear they’d have to arrest him to stop him going in the ambulance with Aaron.

In the hospital, Robert was shooed out, so the police officers could speak to Aaron alone. Robert didn’t mind in theory, but the forced separation after the day they’d both had didn’t make Robert more amenable to it. The good thing was Aaron looked like he was talking. Now the immediate danger was passed, Robert wanted those bastards to suffer. It wasn’t about the money, it was about what they’d clearly put Aaron through, and the fear Robert had been living under for hours.

Once the officers were finished, Robert went in to Aaron’s private room, ignoring the security on the door that Robert had recruited almost instantly after Aaron was safe. Aaron looked tired, but awake, and he smiled weakly at Robert. Robert moved to kiss his forehead but Aaron tilted his head up pointedly. Robert smiled and kissed Aaron’s lips softly. “How are you?” he asked.

“How are you?” Aaron said. “They want to keep me in overnight just to check that mad obsessive freak didn’t give me any other drugs.”

“What happened?”

“I’m okay,” Aaron said. “She… this Leah woman, I think she’s obsessed with you. She had a major problem with you marrying a man. And she liked to… taunt me I guess. She said a lot of things and… I’ll get over it.”

“What did she say to you?” Robert asked. Aaron shrugged. “No, don’t give me that. I want to know.”

Aaron sighed, but gave an overview of it, repeating some of the things she’d said. He didn’t want to hide anything from Robert. “The worst was… when she saw my scars on my chest. She made me feel… dirty and ashamed. I guess it was… not knowing what she was capable of. What she’d do to me. And… I thought she was going to kill me at the end. When I had that needle attached to my arm, I was still aware. Um… I couldn’t move, but I knew they were there. And I thought I’d never see you again.” His voice wobbled and Robert squeezed his hand gently, wanting to offer him whatever comfort he could, but not sure his touch would be welcome. He was in little doubt for much longer, because Aaron moved across on the hospital bed, looking at Robert. Robert couldn’t resist, was powerless to, and he lay next to Aaron holding him gently, their bodies pressed tightly together.

“Supposed to be our wedding night, after all,” Aaron said, trying to make light.

“I can’t joke yet,” Robert said. “I can’t, after the fear of not knowing if you’d be okay, I…”

“Ssh, it’s okay,” Aaron soothed, stroking his hair. “I’m okay, we’re both fine.” Robert allowed himself the reassurance, even knowing that it couldn’t last. He couldn’t put Aaron in this kind of
danger again, Aaron was too special and far too important. But for now, he pressed his nose into Aaron’s neck, breathing him in.

It didn’t take long for Aaron to fall asleep again, and once he was, Robert kissed his stubbled cheek gently, half of him wondering if this was goodbye. Carefully, Robert got up, seeing Chas standing outside the room, looking through the window.

“How is he?” Chas asked.

“Shaken,” Robert said, closing the door to leave Aaron in peace. “But I think he’ll be okay in the long run. Got an update from police?”

“Yeah,” Chas said, though her tone meant it was nothing good. “The number plates were fake, duplicated off a pensioner in Devon. There’s no way to trace them.”

“The police told you that, did they?” Robert asked.

“It’s what they’re not saying,” Chas said, shaking her head. “Why did you pay them?”

“They’d have probably killed Aaron if I hadn’t,” Robert said. “It wasn’t even a choice.”

“You said you’d protect him,” Chas said bitterly, the accusation there in her voice. “You said you’d keep him safe.”

“I know,” Robert replied. “And I am so sorry, but it won’t happen again.”

“Won’t it?” Chas said.

“No,” Robert said surely. “He is too important, I cannot live another day like this one, it’ll destroy me. And probably him too.”

Chas frowned at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Just… let’s wait until tomorrow,” Robert said evasively. “Things might look better after a good nights sleep.” She didn’t argue, everyone was exhausted. Robert went back into the hospital room to sit with Aaron. He needed to be near him if he was going to have the strength to leave him. A statement that didn’t make much sense, but that was how he felt.

In the morning, Chas had dropped off a change of clothes for Aaron and he was being discharged, the doctors having agreed that he had nothing sinister in his system. Robert’s back ached from having spent a night in an uncomfortable chair, the pain almost keeping him grounded. He wanted to kiss Aaron, badly, but he resisted the temptation. But Aaron knew him too well.

“What’s wrong with you?” Aaron asked, zipping his hoodie up.

“Just… stressed,” Robert said. Aaron looked at him, as if daring him to lie, but then let it go. “Listen, I wanted to talk to you.” Robert knew he had to do it now. If he waited until they got home, the resolution he’d come to would break. Because he and Aaron were so comfortable at Home Farm, if Robert had that presence back with him, he’d never willingly be able to part with him.
“About what?” Aaron asked warily. He didn’t like the look on Robert’s face one bit, but couldn’t place it. Usually, he could guess what subject Robert was about to talk about, but not right now.

“I think…” Robert cleared his throat. “Maybe we rushed things. It’s er…”

“Spit it out,” Aaron said. Why, why did Robert pick now to notice how bloody gorgeous Aaron’s eyes were? Blue, sparkling, expressive and… God. He could fall in love with those eyes alone.

“I want you to have a long and happy life, and I just don’t see that happening, when you’re with me,” Robert said sadly, knowing he was doing this to protect Aaron, because it was what was best.

“Don’t talk rubbish,” Aaron said. “I am happy with you. Unless this is you telling me you don’t love me any more.” Robert didn’t speak, the seconds ticking by and breaking Aaron’s heart, his face falling with the realisation that that was exactly what Robert was meaning. “Oh, you’re…” he said when he could find words again. “Right,” he said, eyes at the floor. “Okay. Well, I’m alive and safe, your conscience is clear. You can leave now.”

“Aaron…” Robert said softly. This had been the plan, to leave Aaron, but he hadn’t expected that look of utter heartbreak on Aaron’s face. And the hollow pit in his own chest either. “It’s not…”

“I’ll manage without you Rob,” Aaron said shortly, staring at the ceiling. “Did before, and I was always waiting for the other shoe to drop. You to find someone better, someone easier. Go.”

“Aaron, there’s no one else.”

“Then why’re you throwing us away?” Aaron asked. “I thought… doesn’t matter. Clearly I was wrong.”

“Aaron…”

“Leave before I make you!” Aaron said through gritted teeth, fists clenching. “I can’t look at you, its…” Aaron tailed off, determined not to cry in front of Robert, he wouldn’t give him that. Robert looked Aaron up and down, nodded once and left the hospital room. Only when he was alone, did Aaron allow the sob in his throat to escape, the devastation overwhelming him.
Chapter 45

Aaron called a taxi to take him home. Or rather, to the Woolpack. Robert had made it as clear as he could in the limited time Aaron had given him that he wasn’t welcome in his home any more. And he had to call from a payphone in the hospital, as his mobile phone was in a plastic bag for “evidence” right now. For a few seconds, Aaron felt completely alone and he hated it. Usually alone was good, because it calmed him down, he didn’t have to pretend to be “fine” to anyone.

The doctors discharged him, but reluctantly. They’d given him the all clear, but they read into Aaron’s black mood as a side effect of being drugged, which it wasn’t. It was a side effect of Robert ditching him. Just the day after they were supposed to get married? Lucky escape some would call it. Aaron knew he was in a little bit of shock after the last twenty four hours, and everything that had happened, unable to fully absorb it yet. Going to get married, being kidnapped, being drugged, Robert saving him, Robert dumping him… yeah, busy day.

It was only when the taxi driver asked for the fare, parked outside the pub the Aaron realised he had no money on him, no ID, nothing. He told the driver to hang on, and got his mum to cover the fare, feeling slightly embarrassed that apparently, no, he wasn’t too old to have his mum bail him out.

“Hiya love,” Chas said brightly, trying to hide her surprise at Aaron on her doorstep as they went through to the back room. “I didn’t think Robert would let you out of his sight today.”

“Yeah, I did too,” Aaron said. “Been kicked out.”

“You what?” Chas asked, not following in the slightest.

“Robert ended it this morning,” Aaron said briefly, looking at the table. “I don’t really want to think about it.”

“But… why?” Chas asked. That did not match up with the man who was losing his mind the day before.

“What do you care, you hate Robert,” Aaron said, moving to make himself a cup of tea, anything to keep his hands from shaking.

“I don’t like him,” Chas said. “But I’m not blind either. He adores you, I don’t believe he’d just leave you. He wanted to marry you yesterday!”

“Well, a lot can happen in a day,” Aaron grumbled. “I can’t… I… Oh, God, it’s over.” It was almost as if it was finally hitting Aaron and he couldn’t stop the tears from coming, overflowing. Chas pulled him into a hug, and he sobbed.

Robert got back to a large empty house. Before Aaron had become a permanent fixture in his life, the house had been fine for him alone. But now it seemed far too big for just him. And Aaron’s presence was everywhere in the house, his beers in the fridge, his cheap shower gel in the bathroom, his clothes in the wardrobe. And flung on the back of every chair he could find. Like he was going to come back to it imminently. Not to mention his rusty project of a car in the garage. And his drivable car. And… “Oh God, what have I done?” Robert told himself. No. It’s to keep him safe, it’s so that yesterday will never happen again. So Aaron can live his life out of danger,
and because of that it had to be the right thing to do.

He found the box with their engagement rings still in, and sighed. They were meant to be their wedding rings, to sit on their fingers for the rest of their lives. Robert suddenly couldn’t bear not to be wearing his own, so he slipped it onto his finger. In that moment, it seemed almost irrelevant that his relationship with Aaron was over, he needed to feel like he belonged to him. Anyway, he’d bought them, he could wear it if he wanted to. Robert was withdrawn from his thoughts be a buzz at the front gate. He quickly answered it, needing a distraction.

Kat. He waited until she came into the house, and she almost instantly frowned at Robert when she saw him. “You got him home safe, what’s with the miserable face?”

“I um… I left Aaron.”

“Left him where?” Kat asked. “At the hospital?” Then she looked at Robert and realised what he was actually saying. He looked pale, tired and depressed, and she put the pieces together. “No,” she said. “You can’t have. Just… why?!”

“Kat… I love him,” Robert said, but she wasn’t done.

“Right, how thick are you?” Kat asked bluntly and loudly.

“Don’t.”

“You dumped Aaron, are you completely out of your mind?!” Kat shook her head. “I should give you a slap around the head, knock some sense into you!”

“It’s not because I don’t love him,” Robert said.

“Obviously,” Kat interjected. “I know you love him. So what are you playing at?”

“He could have died yesterday, Kat,” Robert said, going through to the lounge and laying on the sofa, Kat followed him, curling up on the arm chair. “If he had, it would have been entirely my fault. And I can’t live with that, being the reason Aaron’s in danger from crazed obsessives? No.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t tell Aaron the real reason you’ve abandoned him,” Kat said.

“I’ve not abandoned him,” Robert said. “It’s… no, I didn’t tell him.”

“Why?”

“Because he’d have stayed with me,” Robert said. “He never values his own safety, so I have to. This is the only time I’ve really been selfless in my whole life,” Robert said quietly. “I love him enough to let him go, as long as he’s safe.”

“You’re an idiot,” Kat said. “You should have left the choice to him.”

“He’d have brushed it off,” Robert said. “I know him so well, he would have.”

“Yeah,” Kat said softly. “And if I were him, I would have too. Do you know how rare it is to have someone you love and who loves you? I wouldn’t care if it lasted five minutes, or five decades, I’d hang onto it for as long as I could.”

“Speaking of, why are you still single?” Robert said, changing the subject.

“Rob…”
“Go on, give me a distraction.” Kat rolled her eyes, but did as he asked, talking about her own life for a few minutes.

Aaron walked down the drive to Home Farm, car keys gripped tight in his hand. He was going to pack his car with some of his stuff, then drive back down to the pub, where he was clearly going to spend the night. Or the next few nights. He felt wrong using his keys to the house, so he knocked. When Robert answered, he felt his breathing stop for a minute. It was all too easy to forget how gorgeous Robert was when he saw him every day. When Aaron had him to wake up to every single day, to count his freckles, to kiss along his perfect skin…. Aaron cut that off right now. Robert wasn’t his, though the soft way he said “hi” didn’t help Aaron right now.

“I’m just here to pick up some of my stuff,” Aaron said. “Give you back your key.”

“Aaron, you don’t have to…” Robert started.

“Did you break up with me this morning?” Aaron asked, almost staring him down.

“Well… yes, but…”

“Do you want me?” Aaron asked. The look in Robert’s eyes had him doubting it. Robert was looking at him like there was nothing he wanted more. But surely that couldn’t be right. Robert’s an actor, Aaron reminded himself.

“Not any more,” Robert said, and Aaron knew it must be his imagination that was making Robert’s voice sound hollow. Aaron looked at the floor as Robert cleared his throat. “Look, keep your key,” Robert said. “I’m leaving anyway, you can come and get your stuff while I’m down in London.”

“London?”

“That read through I told you about? They want to start filming quickly, so I’m not going to be here. It’ll be easier for you not to see me around the village. Gives you time to get your things.”

“Why did you pay for me?” Aaron asked. “Surely it was a simple solution, have someone else get rid of me. I mean, if you were ending it anyway.”

“I’d like to think ending a relationship isn’t in the same league as standing by and doing nothing while someone’s trying to kill you.”

“Fair enough,” Aaron said. They were interrupted by Kat bouncing into the hallway.

“It’s good to see you conscious,” she said to Aaron.

“Just grabbing my stuff.” Aaron escaped into the bedroom, needing some air, an escape. He chucked things into a bag, haphazardly, needing to get away from the house. It held too many memories. The door opened, but it wasn’t Robert, it was Kat. “What’d you want?” Aaron asked harshly.

“Don’t be too hard on Robert,” she said, perching on the edge of the bed. “You’ve no idea what he went through when you were kidnapped.” Aaron ignored this. “For what it’s worth, he’s being a total idiot.”

“That I agree with,” Aaron said. “No offence, but what do you want?”
“I think you need a break. Why don’t you come with me to Paris?” Kat suggested.

“You know, it’s been some time since I’ve been propositioned by a woman,” Aaron said with a forced smile. Good to know he could still smile.

“I have to go,” Kat said. “Got a photo shoot for Vogue, so it’s all expenses paid, could come and have a break. From here, from Robert. Think about what you really want.” Aaron thought about it, but there wasn’t really much of a choice, was there. It wasn’t like he had much holding him here, was it?

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “What the hell, let’s be impulsive.” Kat beamed.
“Right, before we go any further, Robert is not a subject for discussion,” Aaron said firmly. He and Kat were sat on the plane, getting ready for take off, Aaron half wondering if he’d gone mad, agreeing to go to Paris with a supermodel slash actress. When he looked at it from that perspective it was such a strange situation to have gotten himself into. A nobody of a Yorkshire lad, ending up like this...

“But…”

“Kat, I mean it,” Aaron said. “He’s made it pretty clear where he stands. I may not be rich or famous, but I have enough self respect, and I’m not going to beg him.”

“All right!” she said, holding her hands up. “You’re probably going to have my apartment to yourself for most of the time, that’s okay?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said, they had already discussed this.

“It’s got a good view though,” she said with a smile. She started rambling about the sites, and Aaron stopped her, covering her hand with his own.

“You’re talking a lot,” Aaron noticed.

“I don’t like flying,” she admitted. “Makes me feel… nervous.”

“You’ll be fine,” Aaron said slowly, not negating her fears. “You must have flown loads.”

“Well, yes,” she said. “But…” she shivered as the plane started taxiing on the runway. Aaron took her hand and gently rubbed her knuckles in what he hoped was comforting, at the same time wondering absently if her ring was a genuine ruby. Once they were in the air and level, Kat let his hand go.

“You’re calming,” she said to him. “Never knew that about you.”

“I think there’s a lot of things you don’t know about me,” Aaron said easily.

“I know enough, Robert tells me things. Or some things,” she added, seeing the look on Aaron’s face. “Vodka and coke, please,” she added to the flight attendant who’d started serving drinks in first class. Aaron didn’t mind first class in this instance, because he knew the magazine that wanted Kat’s photo shoot was paying for it.

“Whisky,” Aaron ordered, off hand.

Kat waited until Aaron had started drinking it before pointing out, “you know that’s what Robert’s drinks.”
“And I thought I liked you,” Aaron said darkly. Kat just laughed.

“I’ve not stayed here for a while, so it’s a bit of a mess,” Kat called as Aaron stood looking over the incredible flat. It actually reminded Aaron of Robert’s place in London. Clearly the minimalist look was “in.” That, and floor to ceiling windows. She’d been right, it had an excellent view of the Eiffel Tower.

“This is yours?” Aaron asked.

“Mm,” she said. “I needed a crash pad for Paris fashion week.” It was more than a crash pad and she must know that.

“So what are we doing?” Aaron asked, suddenly uncomfortable. He was in someone else’s home, and he had no idea what to do with himself.

“I’m going to touch up my make up, do my hair, then hit a night club,” Kat said. “You can do whatever you like, I’m not a baby sitter.”

“I thought this was a distraction from Robert?” Aaron said.

“No, I said you needed a break,” Kat called from the open door of the bathroom as she checked her hair. “Whether that involves seeing the sights of Paris, of getting plastered on whisky, it’s not my business.”

“Want company?” Aaron asked.

“Promise to vanish if I get lucky?”

“This place has two bedrooms, right?” Aaron asked, making Kat laugh. “Yeah, I’ll disappear. As long as he’s good enough for you.”

“And you’re a good judge of character are you?”

“I’m a gay man,” Aaron said. “Who for a long time didn’t want to be gay. I’ve spent a lot of time looking at men and sizing them up. Trust my opinions.”

“Okay,” she said. “I might do that.”

Aaron sat in the corner of the club, drinking his beer and watching Kat chat up men. It wasn’t his perfect idea of a good time, but sitting inside watching the world go by didn’t exactly thrill him either. Anything to keep him busy.

“So, what do you think?” Kat asked, sitting down next to Aaron fifteen minutes later, replacing his empty beer with a new one.

“Think about what?”

“Those men,” she said, like it was obvious. “Which one would you say…”

“That’s why I’m here is it? To objectify men with you?” Aaron asked, unable to be completely
“Aaron, I’ve been single for far too long,” Kat said. “And even if it doesn’t turn into anything, I could do with a bit of fun.” Aaron didn’t reply. “You can look,” Kat said to him. “Do more than look if you want, Robert ended it.”

“I don’t want anyone else,” Aaron said instinctively, not liking the reminder.

“Why don’t you call him?” Kat pushed. “If he’s who you want. I’m sure he’d like to hear from you.”

“How would that conversation go?,” Aaron asked bitterly. "Sorry you dumped me, im just checking in that you really meant it before I sleep with a Parisian.”

"Okay," Kat said, shaking her head. "Right, picking men for me,” she added, changing the subject.

“The blonde,” Aaron said, not needing to consider it. He’d been watching Kat enjoying herself with those three men, and he had been looking. No harm in looking, even if the thought of someone other than Robert touching him made his skin crawl right about now.

“Really?” she asked. “Thought you’d pick the dark tall guy.”

“Well, we’re looking for you and not me,” Aaron said. “The blonde’s the fitter one.” Kat looked said man up and down and nodded.

“You staying?” Kat asked.

“No,” Aaron said. “Thanks for the attempt, but I’m not really in the mood.” He forced a smile, because it wasn’t Kat’s fault Robert had dumped him and he didn’t want to bring her down. She should be having fun.

“Was bringing you here a horrible mistake?” Kat asked, studying him. He knew she meant Paris, not this particular night club.

“No,” he said, really making an effort to be normal and forget that he missed Robert like someone had chopped his arm off. “No, I know what you’re trying to do, thanks.” Aaron hugged her tightly, enjoying the touch and the closeness of someone, even if it wasn’t the someone he really wanted. “I’ll see you at yours,” Aaron said. Kat nodded and let Aaron leave, Aaron finding the fresh air outside almost soothing. He should probably take the metro back to Kat’s apartment, but he didn’t mind the walk. He needed the exercise to almost clear his mind. Though nothing would help the ache in his heart where Robert should be.

Aaron hadn’t slept well. A new bed, a strange city and a cold mattress on the other side of him all combined to make sure he didn’t rest for more than an hour or two at a time. At six o’clock in the morning, Aaron gave up and got up to make his coffee. He fumbled around Kat’s flat, not sure where everything was, but he got it going soon enough. He couldn’t think. Everything felt empty, he needed Robert. God, this hurt. No, focus on one thing at a time. Making coffee. Adding milk. And sugar. He didn’t usually have sugar, but he felt like he needed the energy right now.

Aaron turned around to see a very nearly naked man rushing around the flat, picking up his clothes from where they’d been scattered. Aaron raised his eyebrows and this man stopped (who was indeed the blonde from last night Aaron had singled out). He looked at Aaron as his mouth turned
into a silent O, eyes running around in panic.

“Look, mate, she told me she was single, I didn’t know…”

“What, Kat?” Aaron asked, with a little amusement. “No, I’m not with her, you’ve got the wrong end of the stick.”

“No?” he asked, almost nervously.

“No, I’m gay. Not got any interest in her, not like that, anyway. She’s a friend,” Aaron said.

“Okay,” the stranger said, the tension leaving him a little as he threw a shirt on, covering a tanned fit body. Robert was fit, but not tanned and... Aaron stopped that line of thought.

“You got a name?” Aaron asked pleasantly.

“William. Will,” he said.

“Aaron.”

“Just friends?” Will asked, as if wanting to confirm this.

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “She awake?”

“No.”

“So you’re sneaking out without seeing her?” Aaron asked, this time coldly.

“She’s not going to want to see her drunk mistake the morning after, is she?”

“Kat wasn’t drunk last night,” Aaron said. Yes, he’d not been there for the whole time, but she was only slightly buzzed when Aaron himself had left. About an hour after he’d got back to her flat, Aaron had heard the door go. She couldn’t have been that drunk.

“Look, she’s gorgeous, she’s not going to want to see me,” Will said. Aaron was forcibly reminded of himself, the first time he’d slept with Robert. Sneaking out, so as not to have the humiliation of the expected cold, awkward morning after conversation. William had the look of someone who knew his luck couldn’t last. Had I looked at that at the time? Aaron thought. Expecting reality to kick in, and Robert to leave him? Except he never had. Well, until very recently anyway.

“At least give her the chance to kick you into touch,” Aaron suggested.

“She’s got my number, she can call if she wants,” Will said with a shrug. He found his jacket, and put it on, giving Aaron a nod before he left.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Through some minor miracle, (and a lot of encouragement) I managed to get this chapter done today. Enjoy!

“I need an explanation,” Vic demanded, bursting into Robert’s house.

“Can this wait, I’m due in London,” Robert said tiredly.

“Why’re there pictures of Aaron in a Parisian nightclub?”

“Because he’s in Paris?” Robert tried to joke. She’d only just caught him, he was literally about to get in his car and drive south to London.

“And he’s not wearing his engagement ring,” Vic said. Ah. So the press had picked up on that little bit had they? The kidnapping had (thankfully) been kept under their hats, and hadn’t become fodder for the newspapers. But Aaron seen without his engagement ring couldn’t be good news for the interest of the press.

“I split up with him,” Robert said heavily.

“Why?” Vic asked, appalled. “I’d heard rumours, but… you don’t pay half a million for someone you’re planning to dump.” Robert sighed. “And you’re still wearing your ring, so you still love him. And don’t even try to tell me you don’t.”

“Wasn’t going to,” Robert said. “I love him, I will always love him, but I can’t be with him. And I’m late.” He held up his car keys in explanation.

“Robert!” Vic shouted after him. He ignored her.

“Robert, you’ve got to pull yourself together,” It was a week later, he’d been in London filming for that entire time. Or trying to, he was way off his game. He knew he was very close to being replaced, name recognition and the fee he commanded aside. He was doing a shit job, and he didn’t think they’d filmed much that was actually usable. The director was running out of patience. Robert had worked with Daniel before on a couple of films, and Robert knew it was only that relationship that hadn’t had him chucked off the set already.

“Sorry, Daniel. My heads all over the place,” Robert said honestly.

“Then get therapy, or fix whatever it is. I need you on top form, you’re usually so reliable. I can’t stop them from axing you completely, Robert,” he added in an undertone. “I can only delay it.”

“Look, I’m having some… personal problems,” Robert said. “It’s getting in my head.”

Daniel looked at him and shrugged. “And we’re haemorrhaging thousands for each day you screw
up on this film. Do you want me to replace you?"

“No,” Robert said. It was all he had going for him right now. He’d just have to forget about Aaron and try to focus, it was his only option. “No, I’ll fix it,”” Robert promised. He hoped he could keep that promise.

“Oh God,” Kat said under her breath. She had her ipad open and was scanning through the gossip columns. But her tone was more serious than that required.

“What?” Aaron asked, deciding to bite. It had been a week since Kat’s one night stand, and she’d done her photo shoot over three exhausting days, leaving Aaron pretty much to his own devices. And the slow time had been good for him to slowly accept the new reality. No Robert, not a good happy life any more. He’d probably have to go back to his garage job now. Have a normal life, without Robert in it.

“Robert’s been thrown off his film set,” Kat said.

“What?” Aaron said with a frown, moving to read the article. “No. Robert doesn’t lose his temper, or not at things like that. He knows it’s a job.” Aaron read, the only interesting bit other than the headline was “… due to personal problems. Robert Sugden’s fiancé, Aaron Dingle hasn’t been seen in public lately, and was last spotted in Paris, conspicuously on his own. And without a ring.” Aaron stopped reading, because the speculation was useless to him.

“What would make him do that?” Aaron mused quietly. “It’s not booze or drugs unless he’s changed beyond all recognition since I last saw him.”

Kat just stared at him. “Are you that thick?” she said bluntly.

“What’re you talking about?” Aaron asked.

“It’s you!” she snapped, annoyed that Aaron hadn’t come to this realisation on his own. “He is heartbroken over you, you idiot.”

“He ended it,” Aaron said. “He can’t be that heartbroken.

“He ended it because he loves you too much to see you get hurt over and over again. Which is what he thinks will happen,” Kat said. “He’s being protective and trying to do the right thing. God knows why, he’s never done the right thing before.”

“No, I’m not following,” he said after a moment.

“Aaron!” she shouted at him, completely exasperated. “Do you think so little of yourself?” Aaron was bewildered. “You have no idea what he was like when he realised you’d been taken.”

“Wasn’t a walk in the park for me either,” Aaron interjected.

“But you didn’t have to worry about him,” Kat said. “You only had to worry about yourself. He was going through hell. He’d talked himself into the fact you were already dead at one point. I have never seen him like that before, he was devastated.” Aaron took a few minutes to actually think about this. He hadn’t before, because so soon after regaining consciousness, Robert was finishing it between them. He hadn’t even thought about how he’d cope if it was the other way around. If Robert were in danger, and he had no idea if he were even alive, or being tortured… it
would drive Aaron mad.

“Aaron, your kidnappers are still out there, they haven’t been caught. Which makes Robert think you’re in danger as long as you’re with him. He still loves you, of course he does. He’s just being stupid and… well, Robert.”

“Robert, selfless?” Aaron asked. “Doesn’t sound like him. He sees what he wants and gets it more often than not.”

“Yeah,” Kat said. “So think about how much this means. How much you mean to him.” Aaron rolled his eyes, but his mind was ticking over, fast. If that was true… if Robert pushed him away to keep him safe, then he was an idiot. But it also meant that just maybe there was hope. For the first time in days, he felt hope.

“Speak of the devil,” Kat said, her phone ringing. Aaron could see upside down that it was Robert. “I know he’s my friend, but the two of you need your heads banging together, so I’m going to put him on speaker. Don’t say anything,” she warned to Aaron. He nodded, now curious rather than feeling hostile.

“Hiya,” Kat said, answering the call. “I hear you’ve been hard to work with lately.”

“Don’t start,” Robert said glumly. Aaron felt a sudden shock of want, just from his voice. It had been a while since he’d heard Robert, and his memories after coming out of his drugged state were hazy and not at all pleasant either. Though the memory of holding Robert close to his body was still a strong one. “I’ve already had the director and two producers lecturing me this morning, I don’t need you to pile on.”

“Switch off your personal life,” Kat suggested. “You always have before.”

“I can’t,” Robert said. “I miss Aaron so much, it…”

“Here’s a novel thought,” Kat said. “Call him!”

Robert sighed incredibly heavily. Aaron could almost imagine the weight of the world on his shoulders. “I’m starting to think you’re right,” Robert said. “I can’t go on like this. Even just to hear him shout at me.”

“Why would he shout at you?” Kat asked, rolling her eyes at Aaron.

“I ended it without even telling him the real reason. He’s so angry with me, he thinks I don’t care and I can’t get his face out of my mind.”

“Careful, I’m starting to get lovesick myself,” Kat warned.

“Yeah, I know, I sound pathetic,” Robert said. “And I’ve got an all night filming tonight, God knows how I’m going to manage it.”

“Seriously now, how long’ve you got before you’re out of work?”

“Probably another three days,” Robert said. “Maybe four or five if I’m persuasive. And you know something, I don’t even care. Why’d they have to wreck it? Things were good with Aaron, why did some random kidnappers have to destroy it. There’s no word of them by the way, it’s like they’ve vanished into thin air. I need Aaron safe more than anything and that won’t happen if he’s with me. I’m too well known, I…” Aaron reached for the phone and Kat batted his hand away.
“Do you want me to come to London?” Kat said.

“No,” he said. “I’ll only moan at you, and it’s not going to fix anything either.”

“Okay,” Kat said. “If you’re sure.”

“Yeah, I should go anyway,” Robert said. “How is Aaron?”

“Aaron?” she asked, aware the man in question was listening.

“Yeah, he’s with you isn’t he? He’s safe, right?!”

“Yes, he’s fine,” Kat said. “Well, he isn’t. The love of his life dumped him for no reason.”

“I had a reason.”

“No good reason,” Kat added.

“I have to go,” Robert said. “See you Kat.” She hung up and looked at Aaron.

“What am I meant to do now?” Aaron asked.

“Did you hear him?” Kat asked. “He’s heartbroken.”

“It was his choice!” Aaron snapped.

“Stand up and fight for what you want,” Kat said. “Don’t let a few psychopaths win! He wants you, he would have married you if they hadn’t got in the way. Robert’s just having a fit of morals, it won’t last long until he’s calling you.”

“Kat, stop interfering,” Aaron warned.

“He needs you,” Kat said, ignoring this. “And more importantly for you, you need him, I know you do. You both love each other, there is nothing stopping you from being together.”

“What do you suggest I do?”

“The Eurostar leaves Gare Du Nord every hour. You could be in the centre on London in three hours if you wanted to be. Robert’s not that far away from you.” Kat smiled at him. She already knew what Aaron would do. And even if Aaron didn’t want to admit it to himself, so did he.
Unfortunately it was a long train ride, which meant Aaron had plenty of time to talk himself out of the fact that this was a good idea, because Kat was clearly playing God. Wanting her two friends to be together. Robert might not want to see him at all, Aaron could be about to humiliate himself.

He still had the haunting voice of that woman telling him “how could Robert want you?” as her fingers had traced his self harm scars, her touch disgusting to him. It was a powerful thing, because it was how Aaron himself felt most of the time. His damaged body wasn’t perfect, far from it, and she’d hit a sensitive point of his, probably without even knowing it. It had been at least one reason why it was so easy to believe Robert when he’d ended it. Because of course he would, Aaron was damaged, defective.

Anyway, it was done now. He was already on the Eurostar, he had no choice but to go to London. Kat had helpfully supplied Aaron with the address where Robert was filming. “Just in case you need it,” she had said with wide doe eyed innocence that fooled absolutely no one. Not even Will who she’d known five minutes and who had popped up again before Aaron had left Kat’s flat.

One thing that did give Aaron pause was he didn’t have Robert’s number. His phone, his old phone was in evidence for his kidnapping, and he hadn’t got Robert’s number in his new phone. It left Aaron feeling a bit disconnected. He couldn’t even call Robert and let him know he was coming. Or warn him, if Robert didn’t want to see him. Aaron sighed and rested his head against the seat, the miles ticking down until London. And Robert.

Robert was getting his make up touched up, having finally got a few scenes done and dusted that the crew and particularly the director were happy with. Not that he missed Aaron any less, he didn’t. But he was becoming more able to put his personal life, his real life in a box, and lock it up while he was working. Much to the relief of everyone else, and the atmosphere on set had lightened considerably. When Aaron got back in the country, Robert knew he needed to see him. And if not that, call him. He wouldn’t be able to stay away for long, it had just taken a ten day absence or so to work it out. How had he ever thought it would be possible to lose Aaron for good? I wasn't. He couldn't even make it a few weeks.

“Robert?” He turned and saw one of the extra’s nodding in the direction of the door. There were people everywhere, the hustle and bustle of a film set, and in the middle of it all stood Aaron, looking at him. He was shifty, clearly nervous, but he didn’t take his eyes off Robert, even as he worried his bottom lip with his teeth. Robert couldn’t stop looking at him, brushing off the make up girl and walking towards him.

“Aaron, are you really here?” he asked.

“Mm,” he said, still looking jumpy, like a flight risk.
“Why?” Robert asked. Not that he was complaining, far from it. Aaron looked better than he remembered, filling out his hoodie well. Scruffy, gorgeous. *Perfect.*

“Kat told me why you left me,” Aaron said. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Robert sighed. “It wouldn’t have made any difference to you,” he said sadly.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Aaron said. “You still sticking to it, or have you realised you’re being an idiot?”

“Aaron…”

“I don’t want to let them win,” Aaron said. “At the risk of making a complete fool of myself, if you…” Aaron couldn’t go on. He didn’t talk about his feelings at the best of times, and he felt highly aware that a room full of extras and film crews and script editors were all staring at him, having stopped what they were doing. Robert closed the gap between them even further, trying to keep Aaron’s focus solely on him. It half worked, Aaron’s eyes returning to his. “Why did you run from me?” Aaron asked very quietly.

“Because I was scared for you,” Robert said forcefully. “It’s not because I don’t love you, Aaron. I do, so much.” Aaron’s eyes had brightened at that, sparkling with joy, though he hadn’t changed expression. Robert knew that was what Aaron needed to hear, knew he’d reassured him and took the risk. Robert kissed him, intending it to be gentle, but it turned out nothing near it. Aaron’s lips were warm, soft, familiar, wanting. And more importantly, Robert hadn’t had this touch in ten days, feared losing it forever. God, it felt so good to kiss him, and the embrace got deeper, Aaron’s hand threading through his hair, keeping him close, his other hand on Robert’s hip, bodies flush together. Robert ran his hands over Aaron’s body, whichever part of him he could reach, needing him, needing the warmth. He didn’t care who was watching, and even Aaron didn’t seem to mind. They drew back for breath, but neither of them were finished, Aaron having a tiny smile before his lips reattached to Robert’s, groaning into his mouth. Robert felt his heart race, even as he knew this couldn’t go on. They were in far too a public place. He pulled back with difficulty, both of them breathing heavily.

“Go to my flat,” Robert said. “I’ll be done as soon as I can,” he promised.

“I don’t have a key,” Aaron whispered. “It’s with all my stuff at home.” Robert was dressed ready to film, so he had none of his personal effects on him. Which meant he had to pull back from Aaron, inwardly groaning as everyone else suddenly remembered that they were busy, not supposed to be watching the pair of them.

“Not sure I like you with make up on,” Aaron tried to joke as Robert handed him the key.

“How did you even get in here?” Robert asked, his voice almost hushed. Like if he spoke too loudly, Aaron would turn into a figment of his imagination and vanish. “Security’s tight.”

“I have methods of persuasion,” Aaron teased, again chewing his bottom lip.

“You’ll have to show me those methods some time,” Robert said darkly, voice full of lust.

“We’re not fixed,” Aaron warned.

“I know,” Robert said. “But I don’t have the time right now to talk, I’m meant to be working.”

“Get to it, then,” Aaron said. Robert kissed his cheek softly once more before he allowed the assistant director to pull him off, his heart a lot lighter than before.
It was past two in the morning when Robert got back to his flat. He hurried and found Aaron on his bed, their bed, still fully dressed obviously trying to wait up for him, but hadn’t managed it. Robert smiled at him, looking so right, so perfect. Exactly where he belonged. Robert stripped until he wore a T shirt and his underwear before crawling into bed with Aaron. They still had things to discuss, but they could wait. He covered Aaron with the duvet, then allowed himself to sleep.

In the morning, Robert woke five minutes before Aaron, and spent that time watching the man he loved in complete relaxation. He had thought he’d never get this again, firstly through those bloody kidnappers, secondly through his own stubbornness and bloody mindedness. He was glad he didn’t have the determination to stick to it. Though Aaron had come looking for him, Robert had known it wouldn’t be long until he’d done exactly the same. He planned on telling him that.

When Aaron’s eyes flickered open, Robert offered him a soft smile, which Aaron returned. Then reality set in, and the worry started, Robert could see it in the frown on his face. “We need to talk,” Aaron said.

“I know,” Robert said, agreeing. “But breakfast first, yeah? You’re better on food.” Aaron smiled, that was so obviously true. Robert grabbed his hand, stopping when Aaron gasped. “What?”

“Not quite healed yet,” Aaron said, pulling up the sleeve of his hoodie. Robert held in his own gasp with difficulty. Aaron had marks on his wrists, clearly from where the ropes had been digging in when he’d been kidnapped ten days ago. Was it really only ten days ago? It felt like a lot longer. The purple bruising had faded, but there were still red rings around his wrists, a stark reminder.

“Food first,” Aaron said, ignoring whatever it was Robert was about to say. “Then talk.” Robert agreed easily, both of them going through to the kitchen.

Once they had coffee and toast, they talked. About a lot of things, Aaron trying to understand how afraid Robert had been, how he’d tried to fix the situation the best way he could. While Robert heard just how abandoned Aaron had felt, having their engagement ending for no good reason that he could see at the time. It took a long time to talk themselves out, tears and raised voices at times, from them both. But when the conversation came to it’s inevitable end, they both felt clearer, more at ease with each other. Like they understood the other man better.

“If you want to get rid of me, at least tell me the truth about why you’re ending it,” Aaron said.

“I will,” Robert said, taking his hand carefully. “But I won’t. I won’t want to lose you, I was close to calling Kat to try and work out if you’d want to see me. I was going insane without you, and…”
“I know,” Aaron said gently, cutting off his rambling. He felt it too.

“Will you allow me to employ extra security?” Robert asked, squeezing his hand tightly. “At least until those maniacs are caught. I can’t be worried about you like this, it makes me go crazy.”

“You let me go to Paris without security,” Aaron said. Then saw Robert looked shifty. “Robert…” Aaron growled.

“Kat had people looking after her anyway,” he said in his defence. “What did it matter if there was one or two more just keeping an eye on you?”

“How could you not tell me?” Aaron asked.

“You’d have said no.”

“No,” Aaron disagreed. “Not after the last few weeks, I wouldn’t. You weren’t the only one scared Robert. I thought I’d never see you again. I thought I’d never see mum, I’d never get to laugh with Adam again and…” his voice broke and Robert pulled him into a hug, enjoying the sensation as Aaron breathed him in, the closeness to Robert calming him down.

“It’s okay, you’re safe,” Robert soothed. “I’ll keep you safe, I promise.”

“But…”

“They’ll catch them,” Robert said, pulling back.

“Has there been any news?” Aaron asked. The police were meant to keep him informed, but as he’d been out of the country, he had no more knowledge than a week ago.

“No,” Robert said. “Apparently banks have blackmail protocol, and I was meant to inform them for that large a cash amount so they could trace the serial numbers on the bank notes. Honestly, protocol for that?!” Aaron smiled a little.

“You need to go,” Aaron told him. They both knew he had filming and after the terrible start of this film, he really couldn’t be late.

“Are you going to be here when I get home?” Robert asked, his voice wavering in a way that gave away his nervousness.

“Yes,” Aaron said. “Or in the city anyway, I might not stay in the flat all day.” Robert smiled, pleased that he was becoming more used to the inevitable press attention, even in spite of recent events.

“Security,” Robert said.

“Yes,” Aaron said. “But only until Leah’s caught. Okay?”

“Okay,” Robert said, already dialling on his phone. He’d fight the argument of keeping the security after Leah was caught, when it came to it.

Robert arranged security quickly and dressed, ready to leave for the studios. It was then that they shared a very tender kiss, less passion, more love.

“Be here when I get back,” Robert almost begged.

“I don’t have your number in my new phone,” Aaron said, needing it. Robert nodded and quickly
put his information in Aaron's phone.

“When I’m filming, my phones locked away, so I can’t reply to you instantly if you need me,” Robert said, suddenly worried. “It’s not me ignoring you, it’s my job.”

“I understand,” Aaron said. “Now go, or you’ll never get there.” Robert smiled, and kissed him once more, a soft melding of lips together as Robert pushed his body close to Aaron’s. For the first time since the kidnapping, Aaron felt the potent instant desire go through him for this man. If only they had the time.

“Later,” Robert promised, feeling the pull too. Robert left and Aaron sighed at being left alone. It felt good to have Robert back, but there was no denying Robert was an intense man to be around. Some time alone would be good.

Aaron decided to do the typical tourist thing, and he went on the London eye, an annoying man called Peter being his company for the day. Peter being the security that Robert had asked to have looking after him. Aaron hated to admit it, but he felt safer with someone looking out for potential insane “Leah’s”. It helped him relax more. Once he was on the wheel, he was sharing the pod with Peter, and a group of twenty something girls in a group, whispering behind their hands about him, rather obviously.

“You’re Aaron Dingle, aren’t you?” the blonde short girl said with a winning smile. “With… Robert Sugden?”

“Yes,” Aaron said dully. Great, he was now trapped in a confined space with some women who clearly knew exactly who he was.

“Um, can we get a picture?” she asked.

“What?” Aaron asked with a frown, not having expected that. “With me?”

“Natalie over there thinks you’re gorgeous,” she said. The woman in question went a deep red, burying her face in her hands.

“Er, yeah I guess,” Aaron said, completely thrown. He allowed the woman to click away with her phone for a bit, before shifting uncomfortably.

“Are you still with Robert?” she asked him.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” Aaron asked.

“No engagement ring,” she said sharply.

“It’s er… being resized,” Aaron said, quickly inventing a plausible reason. It was none of their business why he currently wasn’t wearing it, though now his attention had been drawn to it, he couldn’t stop fiddling with the bare patch of skin.

“What’s Robert like in real life?” one of the as yet silent women said. “Is he as good looking as he is in the movies?”

“No,” Aaron said, deciding to have a little bit of fun, now that it seemed these women were relatively normal. “Better.”
When Robert came back to the flat, he was on Aaron instantly, kissing him for all he was worth, demanding warm perfect mouth on his own. Aaron was surprised, but pleased with this reaction, Robert obviously turned on for him. “Been wanting you all day,” Robert whispered against his lips.

“How was work?” Aaron asked.

“No,” Robert said, shaking his head into another heated kiss. “Much better things to do with that mouth of yours.”

“Oh, yeah, like what?” Aaron teased, a sparkle in his eyes.

“Get on your knees,” Robert said in a filthy whisper before sucking his earlobe. Aaron suddenly felt nervous, unsure of himself, which was odd. The physical stuff was usually the uncomplicated side of their relationship.

“Wait,” Aaron said, his hands on Roberts arms to stop him. Robert did, looking at him curiously.

“I’m a bit… nervous, since that woman taunted me about…” Aaron’s hand went to his chest and Robert understood.

“If you need to keep your shirt on, that’ll be fine,” Robert said. “If you don’t want to do anything else…”

“I do,” Aaron said. “I’m just… being stupid,” he finished, feeling pathetic.

“No, you’re not,” Robert said gently, the desire still there, but the urgent lust having faded a little. He put both hands to Aaron’s face, holding him gently. “Whatever you want.”

“I want you,” Aaron said. He gripped Robert’s hand and pulled him to the bedroom.

In the end, Aaron had nothing to be nervous about. They started in bed, before heading towards the shower, finishing on the kitchen table, because somehow they still had a fraction of energy left. Aaron found he couldn’t move, sticking to Robert’s body on top of his, and loving it. He’d almost forgotten how much of an intense lover Robert was. He made Aaron forget everything else except how it felt when Robert kissed him and touched him. Like he was the centre of Robert’s world.

“All right?” Robert asked gently, as he got off Aaron, going to the fridge. “Well, we went to the kitchen for food,” he said. “Never actually got there.” Aaron smiled, getting off the table which was making his arse numb. He picked up a towel that had made it with them from the shower and wrapped it around his waist. Robert however had much higher self confidence, throwing Aaron a beer from the fridge without a stitch of clothing on.

“Aren’t you going to put anything on?” Aaron asked pointedly.
“Why, don’t you enjoy the view?” Robert teased. Then he relented and threw on a pair of trackie bottoms that were hanging around from the last time Aaron had been here.

“Happy?” Robert asked.

“Yes,” Aaron said, and he meant more than about their state of undress. “I am.”

Robert smiled at him slightly. “Will you wear your ring again?”

Aaron could see Robert was nervous, and smiled at him. It wasn’t even a question for him, his hand felt bare without it. “Of course I will. You got it here, or is it back at home?”

“It stayed with me,” Robert said. “It’s in the bedroom draws.” Robert left to get it, and within about a minute he’d returned, box in hand. Before Robert could put it back, Aaron felt the need to speak.

“I promised you a long time ago that I wouldn’t run from you,” Aaron said. “I need you to promise me, that you won’t push me away.”

“I promise,” Robert said, heartfelt. “I promise to always let you in, and to trust you, not to hurt you by shutting you out.” He took the ring, and looked into Aaron’s eyes before slipping the ring on, the permission in Aaron’s gaze. For some reason, this time it meant more, maybe because they’d been through so much more, both together and apart. “That’s better,” Robert said, looking at the ring.

“It is,” Aaron agreed, looking into Robert’s eyes for a moment, before kissing him deeply.

“I can’t go again,” Robert said quietly, sensing that Aaron wanted another round.

“Lightweight,” Aaron teased. Robert made a fortunate grab, and Aaron whined, being far too sensitive.

“And you can?” Robert asked.

“All right, you’ve made your point,” Aaron grumbled. They both laughed, especially when Aaron’s stomach growled.

“Shall we order a takeaway?” Robert said. “Not sure I can be bothered cooking.” Aaron nodded, whatever Robert wanted.

“I can’t believe this.” Leah scrolled through her google search, and saw some new photos, of Robert Sugden and his useless fiancé. Being incredibly intimate in what looked to be Robert’s London flat. Leah clicked on the article, and started looking at the photos in more depth. They’d obviously been taken by a photographer shooting the camera at the large oversized glass windows, Robert enjoying his lover on the kitchen table. So distracted they hadn’t even pulled the blinds for some privacy. You couldn’t actually see much, beyond bare chests, but it was screamingly obvious what they were doing, the shots more intimate than pornographic.

Leah felt a surge of jealousy go through her, hating that this man got to touch him like that. She knew she shouldn’t have listened to her brothers, leaving Aaron Dingle to walk away from them free and easy. She’d had the opportunity, and she’d changed her mind, because all her brothers wanted was the money and the quick pay out.
They had (quite rightly) assumed that murder would mean they’d never get away with the money anyway. Leah didn’t care, she knew this was more than money for her. And the jealousy was driving her mad.

She zoomed into one picture in particular, studying the look on Robert’s face as he looked at Aaron. So in love, like the world was in front of him. And Leah couldn’t stand it. No. She closed her laptop, her mind running a hundred miles an hour, because she had to get close to Robert Sugden again. It was just how…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the encouragement on this story! Now on a break, as I'm away from home for a week or so. I am taking suggestions on how to deal with the Leah situation... Thanks for reading!!
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

As I’ve been away, and in this fic, Robert was tied to filming in London for several weeks, there will be a time jump in this chapter, so they can go back home to Emmerdale together. Also, this is slowly coming to an end, but lots of stuff to resolve first! Enjoy, and I’m sorry for the wait.

“Have you seen this?!?” Aaron snapped, shoving his ipad under Robert’s nose in the kitchen. Robert looked at the pictures online, both of them being in the middle of sex on the kitchen table. No, Robert hadn’t seen them, and he quickly scrolled through the pictures. When he got to the end of the article, he breathed a sigh of relief. They weren’t (thankfully) pornographic shots, but they were private, and Robert seethed that someone had thought it was perfectly fine to take pictures through the window of his flat.

“I’ll get my agent to get onto the website publisher,” Robert said. “They shouldn’t be releasing images like that, it’s a violation of privacy.”

“That’s all you have to say?” Aaron asked.

“What would you like me to say?” Robert asked, getting up and placing his hands around Aaron’s waist, keeping him close, feeling the tension running through his body.

“Do I regret having sex with you on this table last night? No. It’s not worth getting angry over, Aaron. They’ll be forgotten this time next week.”

“Everyone I know will see them!” Aaron snapped, unable to believe Robert was taking this so calmly.

“It’s not like we’re hiding,” Robert said, far too reasonably. “Aaron, I’m happy I’ve got you back, and we’re together,” he said seriously. “I will not allow one photographer and one website to spoil that.”

“No, okay,” Aaron said, relenting. “I get your point. I just hate that there’s people out there who think it’s okay to take photos like that.”

“There’s always idiots in the world, Aaron,” Robert said. He dipped his head and kissed him good morning, keeping it lingering and soft.

“How long have we got to be in London for?” Aaron asked.

“I have to be here for another six weeks of filming,” Robert said. “You don’t have to be here at all. You could go home if you want.” Though Robert isn’t thrilled at the prospect, just having got Aaron back in his life, the way they should be.

“Yeah, right,” Aaron said sarcastically, to Robert’s immense relief. “I’d miss you too much. I can’t be a couple of hundred miles away from you.”
“I’m glad you said that,” Robert said with another kiss. Robert would have struggled with the distance too. “Now I have to get dressed and go to work. Don’t worry about the photos, I’ll sort it.”

“Okay,” Aaron agreed. There wasn’t much of an alternative choice after all.

Six weeks later.

Robert pulled the car to a stop outside Home Farm, and for the first time in a couple of months, he felt right and finally at home. He might not be a married man, as they’d planned, but he had Aaron with him, happy, and life was looking good.

Aaron was asleep in the passenger seat, having drifted off about an hour after Robert started driving on the motorway on the way up north. Robert had actively tried not to wake him, liking him like this, innocent, and somehow a lot younger in sleep. When he was awake and conscious, he seemed older than his years and Robert barely noticed the six year age gap between them. But now it seemed noticeable.

“Hey,” Robert said, reluctantly waking him. Or trying to. “Come on, Aaron, I’m not lugging all our suitcases into the house on my own.”

“Mm?” Aaron asked, coming around. “Did I sleep all the way?”


“Yeah,” he said, completely unconvincingly.

“I’m the actor, not you,” Robert reminded him. Aaron wasn’t an overly good liar, especially to him.

“It’s weird, being back here,” Aaron said. “The last time I was here, was before my stag night. Or…actually that’s not true. It was when I was getting my stuff when I thought you didn’t want me any more.” Robert felt the guilt roll over him for how he’d treated Aaron, even though he’d done it with the best of intentions. He knew he’d hurt Aaron, a lot.

“I’m sorry,” Robert said sincerely.

“I know you are,” Aaron said. “Still hurts though.”

“What can I do?” Robert asked, feeling at a complete loss. “I was trying to keep you safe, I was trying to…” he sighed heavily.

“I know,” Aaron said. “I just… if it was the other way around, I don’t know if I could have done it. Left you, because you were safer on your own than with me. I… I love you too much to ever think I could willingly let you go. And I suppose… I’ve been wondering if you love me the same way. If it’s enough.”

“I didn’t say it was easy,” Robert said quietly. “Seeing you tied up and unconscious on the floor, with that needle in your arm, knowing it was my fault… it has a way of realigning my priorities.”

“Yeah, okay,” Aaron said, accepting that. He had no idea how he would react if he found Robert in that position, how it would effect him, so Aaron knew he couldn’t judge.
“Let’s go inside.”

“I could sell the house if you want,” Robert said easily, shrugging his shoulders. “If it has bad memories for you, just buy somewhere else.”

“No,” Aaron said firmly. “I’m not letting that bitch win.” Robert smiled softly at him. “Plus… this house has some good memories too. Still remember you dragging me to the sofa to have your way with me. God, you were desperate.”

“I was not desperate!” Robert said.

“No, in my memory you definitely were,” Aaron said, the mood much lighter now. Robert put a hand on Aaron's thigh reassuringly.

“Come on, let’s go inside. Get you moved in properly.”

“Yes,” Aaron agreed.

Two weeks later.

“Robert, I’m five minutes away from getting on a flight, this better be good,” Kat said, the noise in the background making it clear that she was in an airport.

“It’s not Robert, it’s Aaron,” he said gruffly. “Lost my phone somewhere in the house.”

“Oh, hi,” she said warmly, and Aaron could almost see her smile. “So you got back with your good for nothing fiancé then?”

“Well…”

“Aaron, you’ve been silent for two months, since you left France,” Kat said. “You still in the honeymoon period, or has he started to become irritating again?”

“I thought you wanted me to get back with him?” Aaron questioned.

“I did,” Kat said, still amusement in her voice. “It’s good to see you and Robert happy.”

“You said you were flying,” Aaron reminded her. “Leaving or arriving in the country?”


“Have you got some free time?” Aaron asked.

“Aaron, what do you want?” Kat repeated.

“Can you keep your mouth firmly shut?”

“Yes,” she said. “No one knows I’m seeing someone, so I can keep a secret if I need to.”

“Is that William, the not so much of a one night stand kind of guy?” Aaron asked.

“Keep your nose out,” Kat said, off hand. “Yes, I can keep a secret. What is it?”

“Robert and I… we need a witness for our wedding on Friday. We wondered if…”
“Where?” Kat asked eagerly. Aaron smiled into the phone.
Who's idea was it to have two AUs on the go at once?! Gah! Hope you enjoy this chapter, probably won't have more until Monday. Thanks for sticking with it!

“I, Robert Jacob Sugden, take you, Aaron Dingle to be my lawful wedded husband,” Robert said, relieved that after everything they’d got here, standing together in a registry office, vowing to spend their lives together. He took Aaron’s hand and slid the ring on gently, where it would stay for the rest of his life, all being well. “I promise I won’t push you away when I think I know best.” Aaron smiled, but let him continue. “Because I never know best, do I? I promise to always talk to you, to put you first in spite of everything that goes on in our hectic lives. I love you.” He squeezed Aaron’s hand, and he took the silent invitation that meant it was now his turn.

“I, Aaron Dingle, take you, Robert Jacob Sugden to be my lawful wedded husband.” Aaron took the ring and carefully slid it on Robert’s finger, the smile on his face so clear, it made Aaron almost burst with happiness. “I promise to stay with you, to not run when things get bad. Which… they will.” Robert rolled his eyes but didn’t interrupt. “I love you so much and I… can’t imagine my life without you in it. After the past few months, I don’t want to try either.” They held each others left hands tightly, feeling the metal bands of their rings clearly.

“I now declare you married. You may kiss your groom.” Both men were grinning so widely, it wasn’t more than a brief kiss, unable to stop the smiles for long enough. Present at their very small wedding ceremony were Kat, Vic, Adam (and baby Holly) and Chas, who’d made it perfectly clear if they made her stay away, they’d be barred from the Woolpack for life. They didn’t want a big event, they didn’t want it getting out to the media, especially with that mad woman still out there. So it had remained small, private and intimate. Perfect for the two of them.

After signing the marriage licence, they all left, trouping back to the pub for a good old fashioned knees up. Aaron and Robert had a car with a driver, wanting a little alone time away from their families on the short drive. Neither man could remember being happier as they curled up together on the back seat, sharing soft kisses and gentle touches. “What did you do with the prenub?” Aaron asked quietly.

“I told you not to sign that,” Robert whispered into his ear.

“When do I listen to anything you say?” Aaron asked.

Robert sighed, but carried on anyway. “I burnt it.” Aaron shouldn’t have, but he laughed.

When they got to the Woolpack, it was a mess of noise, food and drink, a happy buzz in the air with all of the people who mattered there for them both. And Robert had never seen Aaron happier. It warmed him immensely to know he did that, he made Aaron happy.
A little later Robert approached Kat in the pub and without saying a word, swapped her champagne glass for a flute filled with lemonade. Kat frowned at him when she sniffed it. “I don’t get to toast your wedding?” she asked, disappointed.

“How far along are you?” Robert said, not answering the question.

“I’m…” she sighed, looking at the floor. “How the hell can you tell? I made sure to pick a dress that doesn’t show my stomach off, that hides it.”

“I’ve filmed with you, Kat. I know your body shape and to me, it’s obvious.”

“ Aren’t you supposed to have eyes only for your husband?” she snapped.

“Kat…” Robert said. “Are you happy?”

“Haven’t told Will yet,” she said. “I don’t know how he’ll react to a baby, I mean, we’re so new…”

“Weren’t you on any birth control?”

“No,” she said firmly. “I haven’t been for my entire adult life.” Robert frowned at her. “When I was a teenager, doctors told me I had an incredibly rare chance of ever conceiving. I’m not going to go into the details, but I’ve always thought… if it happens, it happens. I always took the chance, thinking I’d cope with it later.”

“You’re keeping it then?”

“Course I am,” she said with a smile. “Got two uncles who need another niece or nephew to spoil, haven’t I?” Robert smiled at her and pulled her into his arms, hugging her.

“Congratulations,” Robert told her. She smiled into another hug, before Aaron approached them, frowning a little.

“Can I have my husband back?” Aaron asked with a smile, enjoying the novelty of using that word. *Husband.* Kat pushed Robert towards him happily.

“Take him!” she said with a smile.

“I like that,” Robert said against Aaron’s jaw, pulling him close. “Husband.” Aaron couldn’t stop the shiver of pleasure that ran down his spine at Robert’s low voice, repeating the word that meant so much, how much they’d come through to get here.

Aaron moved to whisper in Robert’s ear. “You’re going to call me that a lot later, while we’re in bed later, right?”

“Mm, gets you off does it?” Robert asked lowly.

“We’ll see later.” Aaron kissed his cheek softly and Robert grinned as Aaron went to grab a pint, rather than the champagne which had been on offer. Robert was so happy right now. He was finally married to the man he loved, his friends and family were around him, and there was no trouble at all. Life couldn’t get much better, could it?

Aaron and Robert were almost giggling as they went through the door of Home Farm that night,
though Aaron would deny anything near a “giggle” left his lips. Kissing and pawing at each other, so close that nothing could get between them. “I’m going to keep you up all night,” Robert promised, eyes dark with lust. Aaron’s eyes dropped to his mouth, imagining Robert’s lips on his body, everywhere, the way Robert could and would make him feel.

It was only the alcohol that made them both have much slower than normal reactions to what happened next. There was a flurry of movement, a struggle that couldn’t have lasted more than two or three seconds and then Leah appeared, a knife to Robert’s throat, the metal blade glinting in the light. Aaron didn’t move, was too afraid to, especially when he saw the fear in Robert’s eyes, fear that Aaron himself felt. Oh God, no. It couldn’t end like this.
Chapter 53

Aaron could hear their heavy breathing in the hallway but nothing else, as time seemed to come to a stop. All he could see was the panic in Robert’s eyes, and the knife at his throat, the buzz from the alcohol at their wedding reception fading fast.

“Get on your knees,” Leah hissed, and Aaron stopped breathing as she pushed the knife closer against his skin.

“All right!” Robert breathed, slowly doing as she said. Aaron’s eyes were glued to Robert, even as he tried to feel for his phone. It was in the pocket of his trousers, but how could he use it? Robert’s eyes went wide, and Aaron followed their gaze. The new security alarm system they’d had installed once Aaron had come back into Robert’s life was on the wall of the hallway. And the red light was flashing angrily, which meant that help was on the way. Fifteen minutes most likely, though how long had she been here? It couldn’t have been long otherwise they’d have been alerted by the security firm not to go home. As Aaron thought that, both of their phones buzzed with alerts. Loudly.

“Don’t try anything,” Leah said to Aaron. “Take your phone out and slide it towards me.” Aaron did slowly, then watched as she kicked it behind her, unwilling to let go of Robert for the second or two it would take.

“What do you want?” Robert breathed.

“Why would I want something?”

“You have a knife to my throat,” Robert said quietly. “You already got your money, I didn’t come after you. I don’t have anything else.”

“Why him?” she hissed, clearly angry. “You could have any woman you wanted, why him?!”

“I don’t think right now is the time to be discussing my sexuality,” Robert said. “Ah!” he gasped as the knife definitely nicked his skin. “Okay, okay, what do you want?”

“Him out of your life,” Leah said. The pause between both men made it clear that wasn’t going to be an option.

“We got married today,” Robert said, without thinking, then realising that was an incredibly stupid thing to say.

“Oh?” she asked. “I didn’t know that. I picked today because I’ve been watching the house. I saw it empty, I didn’t… why did you marry him? He’s so scarred, he’s damaged, I’ve seen him.”

The look in Robert’s eyes made it clear he wanted to argue that, but it probably wasn’t the best with the threatening knife hovering as a constant threat.

“Take me instead,” Aaron said, shaking his head. “Your brothers aren’t here to stop you this time. I’m sure you’d love to finish me off.” The glint in her eyes made it clear that, yes, that is what she’d want.

“Aaron, don’t do anything stupid,” Robert said. Aaron ignored this.
“Just tell me why, first,” Aaron said to her. “Is it just that I’m a man and you're homophobic?”

“I’m not!” she spat at him (though clearly she was). “You’re not good enough for him! What can you actually do?!”

“Not bad at giving an engine a going over,” Aaron said before he could stop himself.

“Aaron,” Robert warned, feeling Leah’s grip tighten on him yet again.

The three of them all heard a quiet noise from outside, and neither Aaron nor Robert moved.

“What was that?” Leah asked in a quiet voice, which almost seemed to carry more of a threat than a shout.

“You think after last time we’d be as careless again?” Robert asked. “We have extra security on the house to keep crazy people like you away from us.”

“Robert!” Aaron hissed at him. This wasn’t helping. God forbid Robert’s smart mouth got them both killed.

Everything then happened very quickly, and yet almost in slow motion at the same time. Leah had a look of shock on her face, seeing something, someone behind Aaron. And then...Aaron watched in horror, seeing the arc of the knife towards Robert’s face, not even having the time to open his mouth and yell for it. The slash of a knife, the bloom of bright red blood, Aaron’s sheer panic as two gun shots rang out in the night air. Leah collapsed after those two shots hit her in the chest, falling backwards, giving Aaron the chance to go to his husband. Aaron collapsed onto the floor, holding Robert’s face where it was obvious most of the damage was.

“Robert!” he shouted, Rob already clutching his hands to his bleeding face. “Robert, look at me, please!”

“I’m here,” Robert groaned, stretched out on the floor.

“Call an ambulance!” Aaron shouted to the two security guards who’d just shot Leah, but Aaron couldn’t tear his eyes away from Robert.

“Head… spinning,” Robert breathed.

“That’ll be all the champagne,” Aaron teased, relieved when he saw Robert’s lips twist into a small smile.

“You okay?” Robert asked, eyes glinting through what seemed to be an awful lot of blood splattered on his face, making Aaron’s heart fall through the floor. He had to be okay, he just had to be. There was no other option.

“I’m fine, don’t worry about me,” Aaron said quickly, dismissing this. Apart from the fear filling him that he could lose Robert, he was fine. “I can’t lose you,” Aaron whispered. “Don’t do this.”

“It just… hurts,” Robert said. “Don’t leave me!” he added as Aaron looked around the room, taking in both the security men and Leah’s still form very close to them.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Aaron reassured him. “You do the same, right?”

“Mm,” Robert agreed. “Never could shake you, could I?” Aaron forced a smile.

“Just stay here with me, keep talking to me.” And Robert did, his voice slurring slightly, but he
stayed with Aaron, managing to remain conscious until paramedics arrived. It was with a huge reluctance that Aaron backed away so they could attend to him, the entire time his eyes wide with fear. God, he hoped Robert would be all right.

“We’re receiving breaking news just coming through, actor Robert Sugden and his fiancé Aaron Dingle have been attacked at knife point in their home in Yorkshire. Robert Sugden has been admitted to hospital, and we’ve been told that his injuries are non life threatening. That’s a breaking story, we’ll give you more information as and when we get it.

“Husband,” Aaron said angrily as he flicked the TV off in the hospital room. “Not fiancé.” He’d wondered how long it would take the news to latch onto the story. Something to talk about that wasn’t politics. Aaron shifted on the chair, trying to get comfortable which wasn’t easy.

Robert was lying in bed, still out of it. The doctor’s had given him something to knock him out while he had his stitches done, and he hadn’t yet woken from it. Robert had managed to slip into something nearing a panic attack when he’d got to the hospital, realising that he had been slashed across the face, and they’d needed to sedate him to treat him. Aaron knew Robert was going to be in a complete state when he woke up. He might physically be okay, but the scars on his face… Robert would carry them for the rest of his life, and Aaron knew better than most how badly that would effect Robert.

Aaron chewed his bottom lip as Robert started twitching, finally waking up. “Hey,” Aaron said with a smile. “Decided to wake up then? You sure as hell know how to give me a memorable wedding night.”

Robert smiled, but it was forced and Aaron could tell that trying to keep it light wasn’t helping right now. It didn’t stop him from making the effort though. “Even mum called, worried about you. Think you’ve made an impression on her.”

“Aaron…”

“Vic’s been here too. Took one look at you and said you’d obviously be fine, then I made her get some sleep at home.” Not quite true, but Aaron knew Victoria crying over Robert wasn’t going to help anyone.

“Aaron, stop it,” Robert said firmly, staring at him. “I need to see the damage. Have you got a mirror?”
“Robert, you’re going to be fine,” Aaron said surely. And he was, physically there hadn’t been much damage at all. “Isn’t that the most important thing?”

“That means it’s bad,” Robert said. “Come on, just let me see it.”

“I’m not Vic or Kat, I don’t carry around a mirror in my handbag,” Aaron said sarcastically. “There’s one in the bathroom.” Robert narrowed his eyes, trying a glare, which pulled at his damaged face.

“Fine.” Robert swung his legs out of bed and moved towards the bathroom, ignoring Aaron’s slight noise of protest. There wasn’t anything else wrong with him, Leah had been stopped before she could really use the knife. Robert flicked the light on and stood perfectly still as he studied his face in the mirror. It was bad enough. There was a small cut through his right eyebrow, which didn’t much bother him. After a few weeks, that probably wouldn’t be noticeable. No, it was the carrying gash down his right cheek bone almost to his chin that would really be the long term memento from this. Actually, looking at it, he was probably lucky not to have lost an eye.

“Robert, it won’t be that bad for long. It’s just… fresh, and…” Aaron tailed off.

“It’s awful,” Robert said, still looking at it. He traced a finger over the wound and shook his head slowly. “Guess that’s my career over,” Robert said, the lightness in his voice not making Aaron believe he felt that way for one second as he left the bathroom and got back to bed. He felt deflated and hurt and… empty. Just empty.

“Rob, I’m sorry,” Aaron said quietly. “It won’t look that bad forever.”

“Mm,” Robert said. “But I’m not going to have much of a job to go back to, am I?” Aaron couldn’t reassure him. It was most likely true. “What time is it?”

“Er… two in the morning,” Aaron said.

“Go home,” Robert said. “I’ll get discharged in the morning. It’s not like it’s anything other than the superficial.”

“Don’t you dare push me away,” Aaron growled at him.

“I’m not,” he said, voice soft. “There’s no need for you to sleep here, go home, be comfy.”

“I’ll be back in the morning,” Aaron promised. “Don’t go anywhere until I come back.”

“I promise,” Robert said. He allowed Aaron to kiss him lingeringly in parting, then breathed out in relief when he was alone. Now he could indulge his vanity and cry without Aaron’s pitying look on him as well.
The next time Robert opened his eyes, the room had the dull grey pre dawn light to it, and he
instinctively knew it was early. He expected to be alone, but was surprised to see Kat in the visitors
chair, looking tired and much less put together than she normally did.

“Isn’t rest one of the key things for pregnant women?” Robert said.

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “I heard you cut yourself shaving and wanted to have a look.” She
spoke so bluntly that it put Robert more at ease anyway, and he stopped trying to hide the right
side of his face in the pillow.

“And what’d you think?” Robert asked. Kat looked at him, almost critically.

“A little nasty,” she said honestly. “But your better side got left alone.” Robert smiled, finding her
manner easier to take, rather than Aaron’s “you’re going to be fine.” Robert reached for the injury,
but Kat stopped him. “Don’t do that. The doctors say you’ve got to leave it alone until it’s started to
heal.”

“You’ve spoken to the doctors?”

“No. Aaron,” she said. “He’s worried about you.”

“Just feels guilty that he’s stuck with me like this,” Robert muttered.

“Oh, don’t feel sorry for yourself,” Kat snapped. “If you really think he married you for your
looks, you’re a bigger idiot than even I thought.”

“Aren’t you my friend?”

“I’m friends with both of you,” Kat said. “And as your friend, I’m entitled to give you a good
talking to when you’re being stupid.” Robert smiled again, before it faded.

“Seriously, Kat,” he said. “How will he want me, looking like this?” Kat allowed herself a little
sympathy for him, knowing that Robert had a streak of vanity about him. “Every time he looks at
me, he’ll see this, and remember that crazed woman and… how could he want me?”

“I’m going to give you… oh, twenty four hours that you can feel bitter and sorry for yourself,
because yes, you’ve had a shit time. But after that my sympathy expires, because you do actually
have a good life, Rob. You have a husband who adores you, and it’s not like you’re hard up, is it?”

“Mm, and my career?”

“You’re not a woman,” Kat said with a fake smile. “You’ll be okay. You might veer off into a
more… villainous character type cast, but you’ll be all right…”

“Kat, do me a favour?”

“What?”

“Call Aaron. I want to go home.” She smiled and nodded, doing just that.
Robert hadn’t said much in the hospital, or in the car journey back towards the village. There had been press outside the hospital, but one of Aaron’s hoodies and a pair of sunglasses had done a very good job at hiding the worst of the damage. Aaron drove, stopping the car at the drive to Home Farm and both men looked at each other, realising that they both didn’t actually want to be here.

“How about we pack a couple of bags and go to that run down cottage you bought me?” Aaron suggested. “Middle of nowhere, no wifi, no interruptions…”

“Sold,” Robert said quickly.

It took perhaps an hour for them to grab some stuff, hurriedly packing their bags and to make it to Aaron’s cottage, which had since accumulated a layer of dust. Robert stretched himself out on the sofa, trying to relax. It was difficult, because he felt so vulnerable and exposed. “Does the TV work here?”

“Er should do,” Aaron called distantly from the kitchen. He made them coffee, as they had no milk for tea in the house and no other food before returning to the living room, watching Robert watch a football match.

“You don’t like football,” Aaron reminded him.

“No,” he said. “But it’s a distraction from the throbbing in my cheek, so I’ll take it.”

“Speaking of, we should probably use that prescription cream the doctors recommended,” Aaron said.

“No,” Robert grunted.

“Robert…”

“It’s not going to make any difference,” Robert said stubbornly. It was meant to help reduce scarring long term, but Robert had no faith in it working at all. It was just something the doctors had to say when there was no hope of it ever getting any better.

“We’re using it, because I’ve just had to pay thirty quid for that bloody cream,” Aaron snapped, irritated. “I don’t particularly care if it makes a difference, but I’m not throwing it away without so much as trying.” Both men glared at each other, being equally stubborn until Robert relented first.

“Fine,” he said. “But I’m going to be miserable, okay?”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Aaron muttered. Aaron dug in his bag and found the medicated cream. Privately he agreed with Robert, it wasn’t going to do much for the scarring of a knife wound. But he had to try, he couldn’t do nothing with Robert slipping into a maudlin state. Robert didn’t seem like he was going to help so Aaron sighed, and applied the cream to Robert’s face himself, keeping his touch as gentle as he could. As soon as he started touching Robert’s heated skin, Robert took his eyes off the football match and locked his gaze onto Aaron. It felt like a long time since they’d touched each other, really touched. For God’s sake, Robert hadn’t even had the chance to spend any kind of time alone with his new husband yet. Aaron could feel it too, but he stayed focused on his job. It was only when his fingers had finished, that he let his touch linger for longer than necessary, his thumb finding Robert’s bottom lip and running along it slowly.

“Aaron…” Robert whispered quietly, the want clear. But Robert didn’t want to push, didn’t want to make himself even more vulnerable than he felt. Didn’t want to risk being turned down. Robert was still stretched out on the sofa, and Aaron moved, covering his body with his own, wanting the
touch to be as close as possible. Robert didn’t move, letting Aaron take all the initiative as Aaron kissed him briefly, sweetly. Robert still didn’t react.

“Is this okay?” Aaron asked, surprised that Robert hadn’t at least wrapped his arms around him. Aaron could see in his eyes that Robert wanted him, and yet no reaction… It confused him.

“I want you to want me,” Robert said. “Not just feel like you should.”

“Robert, I could never not want you,” Aaron said. “This…” he traced his fingers down the wound very gently. “… doesn’t change it. All it does is make me remember you’re lucky to be here. It could have been so much worse.”

“Don’t.”

Aaron kissed him again, and this time Robert did respond, pulling Aaron as close as he could get. Aaron arched his hips into Robert’s body. “Does it feel like I don’t want you?”

Robert smiled at him, wondering how he got this lucky.

“I guess it is our wedding night.” Aaron smiled too, pleased that Robert’s bad mood hadn’t seemed to last long as he sunk into a heated kiss.
The scars had affected Robert’s career, but oddly not in a bad way. It meant he was cast as villains more often these days, or characters with a moral ambiguity, and Robert enjoyed that a lot more than he thought he would. Two years on from the knife attack, Robert was again nominated for an Oscar. He didn’t win. It was on his third nomination a few more years down the line that he did. Ironically, it was the only ceremony Aaron didn’t attend with him, staying at the hotel in LA and looking after Catherine, their little girl who was desperate to see daddy on the telly. She got to stay up late as a treat.

“Clearly I was the bad luck charm,” Aaron teased on the phone, right after Robert’s win.

“I wish you’d been here,” Robert said. “I know you don’t do these red carpet things, but…” he sighed. “It would have been nice.”

“You thought I’d sit through another ten hour ceremony for yet another loss?”

“It’s not ten hours and I didn’t lose.”

“Well I didn’t know that, did I?” Aaron countered with a smile. “You sure it’s not some kind of mix up, like they did with best film a few years ago??”

“Shut up,” Robert said, with amusement and warmth filling his voice. “Let me speak to Catherine, say goodnight to her.” Aaron passed the phone over, though their daughter was more asleep than awake at this point.

“Daddy… you won?” Catherine asked.

“I did,” Robert said with a smile. “You being a good girl?”

“Uuhhh,” Catherine said. “When do I see auntie Kat?”

“She’s coming in a week,” Robert promised. Catherine got on very well with her name sake, and it was hard tearing the two of them apart sometimes. “Needs to see her favourite girl, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah… Night night daddy,” Catherine said.

“Goodnight sweetheart.” Catherine held the phone out for Aaron before her head lolled against the sofa in the kind of deep sleep only children could have.

“I need to go,” Aaron said. “She’s not the only one who’s knackered.”

“Okay,” Robert said. “I have to go to the after party, you know that, right? I can’t come back to the
hotel, I need to show my face…”

“I know,” Aaron said. “Robert, I’m so proud of you.”

“Don’t, you’ll make me blush,” Robert said in a low voice. A voice which meant he loved the compliment even if he wouldn’t say it.

“I am,” Aaron said. “And I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” Robert said fervently. Aaron heard a loud cheer and knew he had to go.

“I…”

“Go,” Aaron said. The call disconnected, and Aaron picked up their daughter, taking her to her bed.

When Robert returned in the small hours of the morning, he looked in on his family. Catherine was sound asleep, her blonde hair flung across her pillow, looking much more innocent than they knew her to be. She was a mischief when awake. Then Robert moved into the master bedroom of their hotel suite, smiling at Aaron. Robert would have to wake him, his body was taking up the entirety of the bed, limbs flung everywhere. Robert took his tie, jacket, socks and shoes off before climbing into bed with him, shoving him onto Aaron’s side of the bed.

“You stink of alcohol,” Aaron moaned, scrunching his nose up when his face pressed against Robert’s shirt.

“I love you too,” Robert said with a smile.

“How does it feel to win?” Aaron asked, curling into Robert’s body.

“Amazing,” Robert admitted. “Though I’m also glad I have you to keep bringing me back down to earth.”

“What, saying you’re nothing more than a cocky arrogant git who’s nothing special?” Aaron asked. “Like that?”

“Yes,” Robert said, kissing Aaron behind his ear. “Exactly like that. Catherine behaved?”

“Mm. You ever think…” Aaron started.

“Occasionally,” Robert said when Aaron showed no signs of continuing.

“Having another one,” Aaron finished. “I… I love being a dad to her, Robert. And I know you do too.”

“I do,” Robert agreed, pulling Aaron close. “And I do think about having more children. We’d both have to pull back on work a bit. With two. I don’t think either of us want to shove them into childcare…”

“No,” Aaron said urgently. “You’re not being one of those actors who shoves their kids money and only sees them on Christmas and their birthdays.”

“No, I’m not,” Robert agreed. He saw too much of that in his line of work, and it wouldn’t happen to his own children. “You’d be okay? Cutting back a little on the showroom?”
“Yes,” Aaron said. He had spent quite a bit of time thinking about this. Robert and Aaron owned a
car show room, just outside Leeds, and Aaron got to work on some really amazing cars in the
attached garage. Yes, Robert had set it up, had the money to get it going, but Aaron had made it
work under his own steam, with Adam’s help, and he loved his work. It was a profitable business,
and being able to fix cars Aaron once thought he’d never get to even touch was a wonderful thing.
But he loved being a father more. “But only if you don’t film for a good six months or so. We both
need to be there.”

“Yeah, all right,” Robert agreed easily. Far too easily.

“You’d been thinking about it too,” Aaron realised.

“I may have contacted our surrogate,” Robert said. “Just to see if she was interested in doing it
again, that’s all.”

“Without telling me?!” Aaron said.

“I thought you might need time to get used to the idea,” Robert said with a shrug. “And finding a
normal surrogate was a nightmare in the first place.” It had been. What with Robert’s fame and
money, even through agencies, most of the women they met wanted either an awful lot of money
or fame. Before they met Annabelle who was both nice, normal, and they got on with very well.
And the pregnancy had gone smoother than they could have ever dared hope for.

“What did she say?” Aaron asked.

“Said she needed to think about it because it’s a big decision, but I’m hopeful,” Robert said. Aaron
had pulled back a little to look at his face and Robert wrapped his arms tightly around his husband
again, needing him close. “Not what I thought we’d be talking about right now though,” Robert
added. “I’ve won an Oscar tonight, remember?”

“Well, we never did things the normal way,” Aaron said with a smile. He reached up and stroked
Robert’s face, along the scar gently. Robert still had moments that he felt incredibly insecure about
his disfigurement, and Aaron always made sure to touch him there, show him that he loved him
anyway. Robert splayed his right hand across Aaron’s bare abdomen, across his self harm scars.
To show him exactly the same.
PART THREE

Chapter Notes

Apparently I'm never going to be done with this universe! I am introducing Rebecca here, but there is NO CHEATING. So I hope that's okay with everyone! Hope you are still enjoying this marathon...

“I’m really sorry, I hate to let you down.”

“That’s okay,” Robert said heavily to the phone, which was on speaker. It would have to be okay, it wasn’t like they could force her, though Aaron looked very down. “Look, don’t feel guilty,” Robert said into the pause. “You already did it for us once before, we just thought we’d ask.”

“I can’t put my body through it again,” Annabelle said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Aaron said. They said their goodbyes and Aaron rubbed a hand over his face in irritation. “Back to the drawing board then.”

“We can get another surrogate,” Robert said, though he couldn’t hide how disappointed he was either. “We’ve already been through the fifty or so agency checks, it’s not like we’re at square one. They have dealt with us before.”

“I know,” Aaron said. “Just… hoped.”

“I know you did,” Robert said, drawing Aaron into a hug. “I did too.” Aaron rested his head against Robert’s shoulder, allowing him to be held. “I have to go. First day of filming today. It’d make a bad impression if I were late.”

“Go,” Aaron said, but Robert lingered to give Aaron slow, soft, loving kisses. They only broke apart when Catherine was tugging at Robert’s jeans. Robert bent down and picked the girl up, back twinging a little as he did so. He was getting old, and could see Aaron about to tease him as he straightened up, grimacing. Robert shot him a look that said clearly “not today.”

“You leaving?” Catherine asked wide eyed.

“Yeah, I’ve got to get to work,” Robert said. “Brand new film I’m working on.”

“Ooh! Can I come?”

“Maybe I won’t let our daughter destroy the film set on the very first day,” Robert said to Aaron who smiled at that. Catherine swung her eyes to Aaron, once Robert had said no.

“Don’t look at me,” Aaron told her. “Listen to your father.” Robert kissed the top of her head and put her down when she started wriggling. She ran into the living room, and Aaron smiled.

They were in Robert’s London flat, which looked a lot more lived in than it had when Aaron first visited here, all those years ago. When he’d been waiting for Robert to get off his flight and come back home to him. What turned out to be the first time of many. Robert loved his work, and Aaron wanted Robert to be happy. But those goodbyes were always terrible to go through, no matter how
much they may skype, and call… nothing was the same as having Robert living with him, until the
next film came along. The goodbyes had only got harder when Catherine came along, because
Robert had to part from both people he loved.

When she was very little, Robert refused any film that would take him internationally, because
Aaron and the baby wouldn’t go with him. They had decided they wanted Catherine to have as
normal a childhood as possible, not handing her off to a variety of nannies when they didn’t have
the time to care for her. That wouldn’t happen to their child. When Robert wasn’t filming, he
became the main parent, weeks of uninterrupted time off while Aaron sorted the business with
Adam, selling cars outside Leeds. It got a little hectic at times, but it worked for them.

Luckily, this particular film was a British production, and mostly filmed in London. So every night
when he came home, he’d have Aaron and his daughter waiting for him at the flat, which made it a
lot easier to detach his brain from his personal life while filming.

“Earth to Robert?” Robert looked at Aaron and realised he’d been daydreaming.

“Just thinking,” he said. “Now I’m really going to be late.”

“Go on,” Aaron said with a smile. Robert kissed him again, deeper this time much to Aaron’s
surprise, and Aaron smiled as he left.

“Bye bye daddy!” Catherine called to the closed door. Aaron smiled and got down on the floor
with her, hearing his knee crack as he did it. God, maybe Robert wasn’t the only one getting old,
Aaron thought. His thirtieth birthday party last year should have told him that one.

“Dolly in the house?”

“Yes, let’s play with your dolls house,” Aaron agreed, rewarded by a perfect smile from his
daughter.

“What are you doing here?” Aaron asked, opening the door to Kat. He was surprised, but pleased
to see her.

“Auntie Kat!!” Catherine shouted, running into her arms with a squeal.

“My favourite girl!” Kat said, smiling at her, rubbing their noses together, enjoying her giggles.

“Where’s Jacob?” Aaron asked as Kat put her down.

“School.”

“He’s at school already?” Aaron asked, shaking his head. “Where does the time go?”

“You’re telling me, I’ve not seen you three in ages!” Kat said happily. “Where’s Rob?”

“Work, filming,” Aaron said, putting the kettle on.

“Filming what?”

“Er…” Aaron said, the details having been lost on him. Kat laughed. “I want to say an MI5 kind of
thing?? I don’t really know, he’s got a lot of different projects. He did tell me but it kind of... didn't
stick.”
“Oh right,” Kat said, rolling her eyes. “Coffee please,” she added. Aaron nodded, making her one.

“I know it’s with that up and coming actress,” Aaron said. “Oh, now Robert did tell me her name…” Aaron said, searching for it in his brain.

“It astounds me how after being married to Robert for nearly six years, you are still so out of the celebrity circle,” Kat said.

“I don’t care,” Aaron said. “It wouldn’t matter to me if Robert had never been famous in the first place.”

“I know,” Kat said. “And I’m one of the few who believe that.” Aaron didn’t answer, he’d grown bored of the money grabber / gold digger articles, though they had vanished in recent years. Probably due to how long they’d been happily married.

“Rebecca, that’s it,” Aaron said, the name having occurred to him. “Rebecca White.”

“Really?” Kat asked.

“Yeah, why? Do you know her?”

“By reputation,” Kat said, raising her eyebrows.

“Go on then, what’s wrong with her?” Aaron asked.

“She’s just…” Kat sighed. “I don’t want you to be paranoid, but she just gets a little… forward with her co stars.”

“Forward how?” Aaron asked, though he had a feeling he knew.

“I’m sure Robert won’t fall for it,” Kat said. “She likes having affairs with people she films with, that’s all.”

“Right,” Aaron said darkly. “And you’re telling me this why?”

“Forget I said anything,” Kat said, realising she’d put her foot in it. “Robert loves you.” Aaron sighed heavily. “Sorry, me and my big mouth. Forget it please.”

“Kat, I’ve already made my peace with the fact I know he leaves me to film and kisses various women while on set, because that’s his job. Now you’re telling me…”

“God, I didn’t think,” Kat said. “Seriously, don’t worry. Robert adores you and Catherine.” Kat covered Aaron’s hand with her own and Aaron could feel his wedding ring there between their fingers. A physical sign of Robert’s commitment, and honestly, Robert hadn’t ever given him a worry that he’d stray. Not since years ago when Aaron had been jealous of Kat, though now that seemed completely ridiculous, never any need for it. Aaron wouldn’t let rumours leave him paranoid.

“Colouring?” Both of them looked at Catherine, holding her book and pens hopefully, and Kat lifted her to sit at the kitchen table.

“Come on then,” Aaron said. “What colour can daddy have?” Catherine studied them carefully and gave Aaron a red one. Aaron smiled and got to work on her colouring book.
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

To reiterate, no cheating here! And thank you all so much for your enthusiasm in continuing this AU.

Robert was being driven home at the end of a long day, silently seething because he knew he’d have missed Catherine’s bedtime. He’d barely seen her today, and he liked to always spend time with her if he could. It had been a long work day, being introduced to the new crew, producers and the rest of the cast without getting much of anything done, though a few scenes had been committed to camera. His opposite co star was Rebecca White, someone he’d never met before, though he’d heard of her. Rather obviously pretty if you went for that kind of thing, and way too happy for first thing in the morning too. Robert could get why she was a rising star, but he didn’t really think much of her. Beyond being friendly towards her, as he’d have at least six to eight weeks filming here, and that was made much easier when the cast got on.

“I’m on my way home,” Robert said, picking up the phone when he saw Aaron ringing. “Sorry it’s been such a long day, I know I said…”

“It’s fine,” Aaron said calmly. “How are you?”

“Hungry.”

“I ordered fish and chips,” Aaron said with a smile. “It’s just turned up, so if you get home quickly it might not be stone cold.”

“That sounds amazing,” Robert said honestly. “Got enough vinegar on them?”

“Yes, they are so sour I can’t even eat them,” Aaron said briefly. “How was work?”

“It was… fine,” Robert said. “All new people, all hectic mayhem, the usual.”

“And er… how’s your co star?”

“What is it?” Robert asked sharply. He’d been with Aaron for far too long to take that at face value. “Your voice changed.”

“Kat turned up today,” Aaron admitted.

“Let me guess, with the latest gossip about Rebecca White?” Robert said with a sigh.

“Well, it came up,” Aaron admitted.

“Hang on, are you checking up on me?” Robert asked, feeling stung. He had been completely faithful since he’d met Aaron, never given him any reason to doubt. And all it took was Kat repeating gossip? “What exactly have I done to deserve that?”
“Robert, if I were checking up on you, I’d have called way before now. You haven’t had any missed calls from me, because I trust you.” Robert breathed in and out heavily, but he had a point. He’d been gone for longer than twelve hours now, Aaron could have quite reasonably called to see where he was.

“Look,” Robert said. “Even if what they all say about her is true, even if she’s worse, that doesn’t mean I’m going to go there. Why would I?” There was a pause on the phone line and Aaron sighed.

“I know, I just get a tiny bit insecure sometimes,” Aaron admitted.

“I know you do,” Robert said, calming down from his brief flash of anger. He knew Aaron admitting that was difficult for him and he wouldn’t dismiss that out of hand. “I’m here and I’m yours. Okay?”

“How far away are you?” Aaron asked. Robert looked out the window, traffic wasn’t bad right now.

“Five minutes? Maybe ten,” Robert said. “Did Catherine go to sleep okay?”

“Fine,” Aaron said. “Perfect,” he added with much more warmth. “She had fun with Kat this afternoon. She’s really good with kids.”

“Yeah, she is,” Robert said. “What’s she doing in London?” he added as an afterthought.

“Er… fashion designing or something,” Aaron said. “I zoned out when she started talking about pink silk.” Aaron shuddered and Robert laughed.

“I’m nearly home,” Robert promised. “I love you.”

“You too,” Aaron said, hanging up. Robert sighed, wondering if this was another problem he’d have to deal with. Aaron didn’t often show jealousy, even when Robert’s photos were plastered all over magazines for people to stare at, but when he did Robert tried his best to reassure him. That Aaron was the one he’d chosen. Maybe he’d have to do that for the next few weeks, it wouldn’t be the end of the world.

Whatever Robert was about to say, when he walked through the door, the mouth watering scent of fish and chips took his words away. He was incredibly hungry. He sat at the kitchen table and started eating. “This is so good,” Robert mumbled around a chunk of cod.

“Good,” Aaron said. He hadn’t waited, had already finished his own meal. “I’m sorry,” he added, making Robert look at him. “You’re right, you don’t deserve me thinking the worst.”

“I have never cheated on you,” Robert said honestly. “Even when we weren’t strictly together, when things got patchy between us before we married… there was never anyone else, Aaron. Just because people say she’s easy doesn’t mean I’ll just think “she’s offering it, why not?””

“You’re right,” Aaron said. “I know my jealousy thing is my issue. It is hard for me when most women on the planet flirt with you when they meet you. I’m just the boring average husband you leave at home, or who is always three steps back from the cameras.”

“You’re not boring or average,” Robert said instantly. “And I don’t ask for the attention either.
Yes, in my twenties, it was rather enjoyable to have that, I admit it. The flirting, the press, but not now. It’s you, that’s it.” Aaron smiled at Roberts earnest face and kissed him, or tried to. Robert turned his head away, though all he wanted was Aaron’s mouth, to feel his body under his hands. Aaron knew the routine by now and he sat down, not trying to touch him again. This meant he’d been filming intimate scenes at work, it meant he wanted a shower first before he’d touch Aaron. Aaron sighed heavily.

“Don’t read into that,” Robert said seriously. “Directors like to get some of those scenes done first, you know that.”

“Yeah, I do,” Aaron said. Before the cast members got too friendly, and the tension was gone for their onscreen characters. Didn’t make it much easier for him to cope with. “Look, you eat, have a shower, and meet me in bed. Okay?”

“Yes,” Robert said, eating another chip. “Sounds like a plan.”

Twenty minutes later, Robert pulled back the bed sheets and wrapped himself around Aaron’s naked body, kissing his lips softly. “You’re not upset with me are you?” Robert asked, not wanting to continue the argument.

“No,” Aaron said, a small smile appearing on his face as he opened his thighs in invitation. Robert smirked back.

“Right, I want a word with you,” Robert said angrily. The phone was on speaker on the kitchen table as both men organised breakfast for themselves and Catherine.

“Oh, what’ve I done?” Kat said.

“Gossip?” Robert prompted. “Aaron? The film I’m working on, ring any bells?”

“Rob, I’m sorry,” she said, instantly cottoning on. “I didn’t think!”

“You’re not a dumb blonde, stop acting like it!”

“Robert,” Aaron warned, seeing that his raised voice was making their daughter look like she might cry. “It’s all right sweetheart, daddy’s just mad at auntie Kat.”

“But Kat’s perfect!!” Catherine said in total shock.

“At least I’ve got the smart one on my side,” Kat said.

“Catherine Penelope DuJardin…”

“Don’t you middle name me!” Kat snapped back. “Not my fault you didn’t tell your husband about Rebecca’s reputation is it?”

“Kat…”

“Aaron, are you there?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Can you talk to him?”
“I have,” Aaron said. “He’s angry with me and he’s taking it out on you, just ignore him.”

“I am still here,” Robert said.

“Why’s he angry with you?” Kat asked, now curious.

“I may have got a tiny bit jealous,” Aaron admitted grumpily.

“Why?” Kat asked blankly. “It’s not like Robert would ever go near the cheap little…”

“Three year old listening into this conversation, Kat,” Robert interrupted sharply before she could say anything more offensive.

“Robert, can I meet you on your film set for lunch?” Kat said, changing the subject.

“Er, yeah, if you want to hang around until a suitable break,” Robert said blankly.

“Great!” she said. “I’ll teach you some manners about how to talk to your best and oldest friend while I’m at it.” Kat hung up and Robert pinched the bridge of his nose, hard.

“Don’t take it out on her,” Aaron warned. “She’s been very good to us, you know she has.”

“I know,” Robert said. “I hate you feeling this way though. I want you to trust me.”

“I had a moment, that’s all,” Aaron said, sliding into his arms. “I do trust you. Come on, it’s been years.” Robert kissed him, the embrace deepening until Robert knew he had to go, not wanting to get turned on while their three year old was sitting having breakfast.

“See you later,” Robert said. He kissed Catherine once, then left the flat for what would prove to be another long day filming.
“Right, I’ve got twenty minutes, so start talking,” Robert said quickly, sitting at the table opposite Kat. They were on Robert’s film set, eating the provided lunch in a large room, conversation very loud from all the tables as they had a break. “Why did you want to meet?”

“Aaron!” she snapped, like it was obvious. “Cut him some slack.”

“I’m sorry,” Robert said in disbelief. “He accuses me of cheating, with no basis might I add, and I’m the one who has to cut him slack?”

“Yes,” Kat said seriously, stabbing her pasta with her fork. “And Aaron didn’t accuse you of cheating, he’ll have said he’s worried.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve known the two of you as a couple for a lot longer than I knew you single,” Kat said. “I know him. And I don’t really blame him either.”

“For Gods sake Kat!” Robert hissed. “I don’t drop my jeans for just anyone! What’s got into both of you?!?”

“I can just see his point of view,” Kat said with a shrug. “That’s all. He’s a normal guy, and even though he’s been with you for so long, by and large he’s still a normal guy. Just with a slightly healthier bank balance.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Robert asked frowning.

“Come on,” Kat said, like she couldn’t believe Robert was this stupid. “Whenever you go out in public, your fans flirt with you and mostly completely ignore him. Aaron doesn’t say anything because he knows you love him, and he trusts that you won’t stray.”

“Tell me,” Robert said sarcastically, feeling a little bit attacked. “Seeing as you have all this brilliant insight into my husband, how come you decided to tell him “oh, be jealous of the thin pretty blonde”?”

“Fine,” Kat said. “Not my wisest move. I honestly thought he’d have heard the gossip, or you’d have told him! I didn’t know it was news to him.” Robert sighed, but there was no use going over it again and again. The damage was done. “Are we still friends?” she teased, well aware that a minor argument like this didn't even come close to ruining their friendship.

“You didn’t even tell me you were in the country,” Robert grumbled.

“Yes, I did,” she said. “I told you I needed to submit my fashion designs. Which means London.”

“Why are you scribbling around with bits of paper?” Robert asked, jumping on the chance to change the subject.

“I’m too old to be a model, Robert.”

“You’re only a couple of years older than Aaron!” Robert said indignantly. “And you’re way younger than me!”

“Yes, but you’re lucky, because you’re a man,” Kat said sadly. “You get older, you just have the
ruggedly handsome thing, I get older... well, the words “washed up” have been thrown around. It’s fine, I’m used to it.”

“Kat…”

“I never got back to my pre pregnancy size anyway,” she said. “It’s fine. I’m just someone who used to be famous. I have my family, my friends, and I don’t actually have to work again if I didn’t want to, I’ve got enough money. Don’t feel too sorry for me.”

“Kat,”

“It’s fine,” she repeated. “I was never in your league acting wise, they just liked the young pretty blonde.”

“Speaking of,” Robert said, nodding to the other side of the room. Rebecca had walked in.

“Oh, she’s older than I thought,” Kat said, watching her help herself to a salad.

“Are you going to be a bitch before you even know her?” Robert asked bluntly.

“I’m looking out for my friends,” she said with a sweet smile. "Both of my friends."

“She’s fine, there’s nothing wrong with her,” Robert said, now tired of the conversation. “She’s been perfectly professional.”

“There won’t be a problem then, will there?” she said.

“Sometimes I think you and Aaron gang up on me,” Robert grumbled.

“Only sometimes? We must try harder then,” she said, smiling.

“No offence, but I’m getting a little bored of repeating that you’re a Russian spy,” Robert said, rolling his eyes as the cameras set up for another take.

“Bloody director,” Rebecca said under her breath. “We’re not doing that badly, right?”

“No, we’re not,” Robert agreed fervently. He wanted to be the one to put Catherine to bed tonight, though that was looking increasingly unlikely. Robert looked at his watch, then sighed. “Sometimes I think it’d be worth jacking it all in.”

“Oh, you don’t mean that,” Rebecca said, fluttering her eyelashes. “What would you spend your time doing? You’d be bored stiff.”

“I have a husband and a three year old daughter,” Robert said, somewhat proudly. “I’m sure I’d fill my time somehow.”

“Yeah, I heard about your husband,” Rebecca said. “How’ve you managed to make that work?”

“What do you mean?” Robert asked, getting his back up instantly. He didn't like anyone implying that because they were two men, it couldn't work.

“With someone normal,” Rebecca said, pushing the point. “That must be difficult.”
“Was at the beginning,” Robert admitted, now seeing what she meant. “I love him, that’s all I need.”

“Husband know you’re having lunch dates with pretty blonde supermodels?” Rebecca asked slyly.

“Are you kidding?” Robert said blankly. “If Aaron were here, I wouldn’t have been able to get a word in edgeways.” Rebecca laughed to herself. “Are you married?” Robert asked.

“No,” she said. “Permanently single apparently.” She sighed melodramatically but ruined the effect with a wink, making Robert smile a little.

“Right, ready to go again?” the director said.

Robert opened the door to his flat and almost stepped back in surprise. Aaron was kissing him deeply, passionately. “Woah, what’s that for?” Robert asked.

“I love you,” Aaron said. “I trust you and I’m really sorry.”

“Yeah?” Robert asked. “Are you?”

“I’ve got no reason to accuse you like that,” Aaron said. “I’m sorry.”


“Bedroom?” Aaron suggested.

“You’re eager,” Robert said. Aaron grinned, eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Er… your agent sent round the proofs for that calendar you’re doing,” Aaron admitted. “I just… want to compare it to the real thing.”

“Oh, it meets with your approval does it?” Robert said with a smile.

“Oh, God, yes,” Aaron said fervently. “And the blue shirt picture in particular. Tell me you still have that shirt.”


“Shame,” Aaron said, pulling him in the direction of the bedroom. “Come on “Mr January” I’ve been wanting you all day.”

“Why January?” Robert asked amused as he let himself be dragged off.

“Surely my favourite picture of you should be on my birthday month?” Aaron said, like it was obvious.

“Fine,” Robert willingly agreed before attaching his lips to Aarons. “You know that calendar was for charity right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Aaron said dismissively, pulling a laughing Robert into the bedroom.
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

Would you look at that, a two chapter day?! Will work on 1839 next, I promise! And this chapter has a time jump, going towards the end of Robert's filming in London.

Aaron had spent the majority of the afternoon on the phone, trying to sort things out. He wanted to do something special for Robert, for them both, it had just taken quite a bit of organising. Even with a travel agent. First Aaron had called Elizabeth, Robert’s agent to book him some time off of work or PR commitments, then tried to find somewhere they could go for a weeks holiday. Somewhere with hot sun, privacy and a place that was completely theirs for seven days sounded blissful. Of course there was the added snag of finding a country that didn’t have laws against same sex couples, Aaron thought bitterly. Being arrested for public indecency would probably put a bit of a dampener on their holiday. And Aaron wanted a private beach as well, so after a bit of research, he decided to cut his loses and call a travel agent who knew what they were actually talking about.

Then he’d decided to be incredibly extravagant. He and Robert had never really blown the budget completely and treated themselves, life tended to get in the way. And they’d been married for six years, together for seven or more, they deserved it. Or that’s what Aaron told himself when he put the deposit down. From his own bank account too, not using Robert’s fortune which he wouldn’t have felt exactly right about. Well, not without asking him anyway, which would kind of ruin the surprise.

The part that was going to be very difficult to swing with Robert was leaving Catherine at home. Catherine hadn’t spent much time with either of her grandmothers in the last six months or so, and Aaron had decided to leave her with Chas. Who’d been genuinely thrilled at the prospect of a week with her granddaughter. Soon enough it would be schools and the opportunity would be lost. Aaron had argued with himself about taking her with them, but he and Robert hadn’t spent any significant time alone since she was born, so he hoped Robert would agree with him. And the place he’d booked had excellent wifi so they’d be able to skype with her everyday.

Aaron had just finished his last phone call (flights) when the door opened and Robert came in. “Wow, you’re hours early,” Aaron said in surprise.

“We’re finished,” Robert said. “No more filming.”

“Seriously? I thought you went to Friday?”

“Got it all done,” Robert said, pleased as he collapsed onto the sofa. “That was not one of my best films.”

“You don’t know that.”


“So we’ve got a few free days?” Aaron asked. “Before we go back to the village?”
“Don’t get too excited,” Robert said darkly. “Going out for drinks with the cast tomorrow night. Which will probably go into the next morning, but I have to go.”

“I know,” Aaron said. It was a usual routine after wrapping up a film, and Aaron didn’t envy him.

“Where’s Catherine?”

“Watching Frozen,” Aaron said. “And asking why daddy can’t ever be in any good films.” Robert laughed.

“Shall we go out for dinner?” Robert suggested. “Just the three of us?” It had been a lot of late nights while filming, and Aaron smiled at him, knowing this was more for Roberts benefit than his.

“Yeah,” Aaron said softly. “Just the three of us. Speaking of,” he added at the reminder. “We’ve got meetings with potential surrogates at the end of next month.”

“When did they call?!” Robert asked in surprise.

“This morning,” Aaron said. “We could be going through it all again if we’re lucky.” Robert kissed him very softly and lovingly. He loved the idea of adding to their family, even if it was an inevitably slow process. “You have a shower and get changed, I’ll detach Catherine from her film and call a car to take us to a restaurant. Okay?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Robert said with a smile.

The fact that the next day, the online gossip columns were filled with pictures of them with Catherine in the restaurant was neither here nor there. One in particular was proving rather popular, Catherine asleep on Robert’s lap, Robert’s left arm around her, laughing into his wine glass as he looked at Aaron. With what he refused to even contemplate as “heart eyes” as one website mentioned. They looked like such a happy family, and though Robert didn’t usually read the trash about himself, he loved those pictures.

“No, I really can’t,” Robert said as a couple of the producers were pushing him for another drink.

“It’s still early,” Rebecca said indignantly, joining the melee. Early being a matter of opinion as it was now past midnight. “Job well done and all that?”

“All right,” Robert said, letting them fill his glass up with whisky. It was only his second of the night, him wanting a clear head. He’d mostly been on beer and was probably one of the more sober ones there. There being Rebecca’s flat, which had not been Robert’s idea. But he’d made enough films to know that nights like this could get out of hand if they were in a pub or a club of some description. Usually accompanied by incriminating photographs that did no one any favours.

“What’re you up to now?” Rebecca asked as the evening dragged on, both of them on the sofa, Robert nursing his whisky, making it last.

“Nothing,” Robert said. “Got no projects in the pipeline. I work less now I’ve got Catherine.”

“Isn’t that what nannies are for?” Rebecca asked, twirling a lock of hair around her finger.

“No,” Robert said with a slight smile. “Me and Aaron made the firm decision she’d be with family,
not strangers.”

“Mm, novel,” Rebecca said with a shrug.

“What’re you up to then?” Robert asked.

“New film in Australia, fly out on Friday,” she said.

“Oh, so you’re the reason we finished early,” Robert said as it dawned on him.

“That can’t be a bad thing, can it?”

“Point taken,” Robert said. It hadn't been the most enjoyable of films, Robert had to say that. Then Robert recoiled as Rebecca’s lips touched his. “What the hell are you doing?!”

“Come on, we’ve done it before,” she said, going in for another. Robert backed away sharply.

“Yes, with an entire production team and camera crew in front of us,” Robert said. “Not like this. I should go.”

“Come on, I know you love Aaron, but he can’t be fulfilling all of your needs,” Rebecca said. “You were with so many women before you found him and went all faithful. I remember, I read the papers.”

“Rebecca…”

“What happened to the bad boy everyone loved to gossip about?” she asked.

“It was years ago, I grew up,” Robert said. Rebecca’s hand slipped to his thigh and started going higher “And on that note, I’m leaving,” Robert said, removing her hand without being gentle.

“Robert, wait.”

“Look, I’ve humoured you up until now because we’ve had to work together. I don’t like your hands all over me, I don’t want you.” She had been very handsy and Robert had chosen not to say anything. Because it hadn’t become anything more and it would create more fuss than it was worth, and causing issues on set wasn’t a reputation Robert wanted to have. Plus he knew it was only a matter of weeks, and he’d thought she was harmless. He certainly hadn’t mentioned it to Aaron either, after the panic he had had about Robert being faithful when the project started. It was nothing he couldn’t handle. Or so he thought bitterly. Robert left her flat, heart racing hard as he went to catch the tube back to his place. He wouldn’t hide this from Aaron any more, couldn't. He had to know.
Robert came home and found Aaron stretched over his side of the bed, asleep. Hair curled, back bear of clothes, so Robert's gaze could linger over his spine. He smiled for a moment, then woke him gently, hand on Aaron’s shoulder. “Coffee?” he said, and Aaron sighed, knowing that that meant Robert wanted a conversation, even in his near sleep state.

“Yeah, okay,” Aaron said. “Five minutes.” Robert left his husband to blink himself awake, while Robert put the coffee machine on. Though in real terms, he didn’t think either of them would be drinking it, it at least gave his hands something to do.

“What’d you want to talk about?” Aaron asked, rubbing his eyes and sitting at the kitchen table. He wore a pair of boxers and an old T shirt and he looked so good, Robert thought distractedly. Muscles of his arms on show, so beautiful and it was all his. He now felt guilty for waking him up, surely this could have waited until morning? But Robert knew if he waited, he’d chicken out and this would just get worse because he lied to cover it up. And the “it” really was nothing in the first place, so....

“What’ve you done?” Aaron said when Robert didn’t answer straight away.

“Why’ve I done something?” Robert asked shiftily, trying to deflect the attention, trying not to give in to Aaron’s direct gaze which always demanded honesty from him.

“That guilty look on your face,” Aaron said. “You’ve not done something really stupid like… gamble Catherine’s trust fund or something?”

“No,” Robert said, wanting to get thoughts like that out of Aarons head instantly. “Like I'd do that to our daughter, that’s her future.”

“Then stop looking like you’ve run over someone’s cat.” Robert couldn’t even smile at the joke.

“Rebecca made a pass at me,” Robert said, looking into his hands. There. Short sharp and accurate. “I didn’t want her, I didn’t do anything.” Robert chanced a look up and saw Aaron looking both hurt and disappointed. He couldn’t decide what was worse.

“And you wake me up to tell me that?” Aaron asked quietly.

“I couldn’t lie to you,” Robert said, shaking his head. “I don’t want to lie to you.”

“You sleep with her?”

“No!” He was shocked by the question, but he must have been convincing because some of the tension in Aaron’s shoulders left him. “Of course I didn’t, I love you.”

“You wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me some glamorous woman threw herself at
“Fine,” Robert said, letting it go. He had bigger things to worry about right now. “She kissed me, I pushed her off, then left.”

“How did…” Aaron shook his head, then got up and started pacing, clearly agitated. Robert had known Aaron wouldn’t take it brilliantly well (why would he?) but Robert liked to think they didn’t have the kind of marriage that survived by lying. “God, Robert, this couldn’t wait until I’m awake?!” Robert didn’t know how to word that she had seriously unsettled him. So much so that he needed Aaron’s presence, Aaron to be here and talking to him, no matter how much of it was anger. “You’ve been filming with her for nearly two months,” Aaron said. “Have I been completely blind and…”

“No,” Robert said. “And that’s different, when you have directors telling you exactly how it should look, what position your head should be, it’s in character stuff.” Robert shrugged.

“Tell me what happened tonight,” Aaron said, staying calm and wrapping his hands around his coffee cup, giving them something to do. Robert did, briefly.

“There were about twenty people in her flat, but they were all milling around. Most were in the kitchen I think, that’s where the booze was. Rebecca and I found ourselves alone on the sofa, and we were just talking. She kissed me, and I backed off. I left instantly, got the tube and woke you up. That’s it.”

“Really?” Aaron asked. “Then why the desperate need to wake me up at one in the morning? Couldn’t wait until daybreak? You look guilty Robert, I know you too well.”

“I feel horrible. I hated her touching me,” he said instead, speaking almost bitterly. Aaron did stop pacing then, looking at Robert steadily.

“You mean that, don’t you?” Aaron said.

“No,” he said. “Because it shouldn’t be an issue. I thought she was just… God, I don’t know, I didn’t want to cause a problem with the production, it wasn’t worth it. And….”

Much to Robert’s surprise, he felt Aaron’s hands holding his, gently.

“She’s made you uncomfortable, hasn’t she?” Aaron said, realising his shifty posture wasn’t due to guilt at all.

“Yes.”

“Robert, that’s not right,” Aaron said calmly.

“Don’t,” Robert said, shaking his head. “Don’t be so… just kick off, be mad at me.”

“Why?”

“Might make me feel better,” Robert said, feeling well and truly sorry for himself. Probably aided by whisky.
“Come to bed,” Aaron said easily.

“But…”

“We probably haven’t finished discussing this,” Aaron warned. “But I need sleep, and no offence, but you’re looking pretty pathetic.” Robert let out a quiet snort of laughter.

“Just a kiss?” Aaron asked. He had to check, he had to know.

“Just a kiss.”

“Come to bed,” Aaron repeated. Robert stood up and Aaron held him, Robert needing his strength more than he’d thought before hand. “Tomorrow we go home,” Aaron told him, kissing his lips gently.

“Yes,” Robert agreed quietly, knowing that Home Farm was waiting for them. Emmerdale somehow felt safer. “Tomorrow we go back.”

Aaron watched Robert sleep, thinking. His husband had fallen asleep relatively quickly, but his body was arched into Aaron’s anyway, head against his shoulder, shins tangling with Aaron’s feet. He trusted Robert. He knew that if it had been more, if Robert wanted her, Robert would probably have kept his mouth shut. That didn’t make him exactly comfortable with it, but even though it wasn’t nice to hear, Aaron would rather know than not. It was the lying that would hurt so much.

But now Robert had told him, Aaron couldn’t sleep, keeping thinking about that woman with her hands on his husband, his lover. And it made him seethe with rage. How dare she think she had the right? So Aaron found himself on his phone, a hand absently through Robert’s hair as he did one of his least favourite things. Searching the celebrity gossip columns for information on Rebecca White. He needed to know everything he could about her.
On the journey up north, Aaron was driving. Robert looked tired, his eyes having purple shadows underneath them and Aaron knew he was more stressed than Robert was admitting.

“You don’t have to see her again, right?” Aaron said, correctly reading what was on his husband’s mind.

“I will at the premier in about four months time, but no,” Robert said.

“I might dig out the suit and go with you to that one,” Aaron said, he reached across the car and stroked Robert’s thigh gently.

“I had to tell you.”

“I know,” Aaron said. “Look, we’ll just take a breather for a few days.”

“When’ve you got to go back to work?” Robert asked.

“Soon,” Aaron said evasively.

“Who don’t you want to see daddy?” Catherine piped up from the backseat.

“Oi, nosey,” Aaron said, smiling at her in the mirror. She giggled from her car seat.

“Take the next exit for the services,” Robert told him. Aaron did what he said. “Want pancakes?” Robert asked, not above bribing his daughter to change the subject.

“Yay!” Aaron caught Robert’s eye and they both smiled.

They’d barely got home and put the kettle on when there was a loud knock on the door. Robert opened it, Aaron busy with Catherine and smiled when he saw Chas.

“What, have you got an alarm on the house to know when we’re here?” he asked, friendly. Any animosity between the two of them had faded around the time of his wedding to Aaron. And Chas was in love with her granddaughter too.

“I haven’t seen her in ages!” Chas said, almost dismissing Robert.

“They’re in the lounge,” Robert said. “Tea?” Chas nodded once before going to find Aaron, who was playing with Catherine and one of her sticker books.

“Hiya love,” Chas said to Aaron, smiling warmly at him before Catherine ran towards her
“Grandma!” she shouted eagerly, Chas cuddling her as the girl chattered away. Aaron got off the floor and sat on the sofa.

“How’re you three doing?” Chas asked.

“We’re okay,” Aaron said. “Just tired, it’s been a busy month or so.”

“I take it that’s what the holidays for?” Chas asked.

“Yeah, I think we need it,” Aaron said. “Before we get sucked back into the rat race again.”

“Come off it,” Chas said, putting Catherine down and allowing her to show her grandmother all of her toys. “You three don’t have a bad life. Don’t moan for no reason.”

“Yeah, okay,” Aaron said with a smile as Robert came into the room, handing Chas her drink.

“So where’re you going?” Chas asked them. Aaron sighed heavily, what with recent events he hadn’t actually told Robert about the break for them both.

“Mum…” Aaron said, shaking his head at the same time Robert said “Going where?”

“Oh,” Chas said. “I’ve um… you said it was all organised!” she said to Aaron.

“It is, he just doesn’t know it,” Aaron said. Robert’s eyes narrowed, looking between them.

“What’ve I missed?” Robert asked.

“It was meant to be a surprise,” Aaron said bitterly. “I was going to tell you this morning, but…”

“Yeah,” Robert said, knowing exactly why his mind had been on other things. And not wanting to go into that in front of his mother in law.

“I’ve booked a holiday for us,” Aaron said. “A week away, just us.” Robert’s eyes flicked to Catherine. “She’s staying with Chas.”

“For the whole week?” Robert asked.

“She’ll run rings around mum and Diane,” Aaron said, almost dismissively. It was obvious Catherine was the boss. “You know she will.”

“When?” Robert asked.

“Three weeks,” Aaron said. “I wanted to do something nice for us, and we haven’t had any time with just the two of us in years.”

“We can’t go,” Robert said instantly. “You said we were meeting with potential surrogates that week.”

“What?!” Chas asked, interjecting.

“Thank you for that,” Aaron said with raised eyebrows to his husband. They didn’t need Chas sticking her oar in, and Aaron had been perfectly fine with withholding that nugget of information.

“When?” Chas asked eagerly. “I’m getting another grandchild?”

“Slow down,” Aaron said, holding his hands out to her. “A long way to go yet.” He turned to
Robert. “And I thought… while it’s just the three of us, we can go away.” Robert looked at the soft expression in his husband’s eyes and sighed. It was a wonderful idea, Robert couldn’t deny it. The lure of having Aaron all to himself, uninterrupted was… powerful.

“Sure she’ll be all right?” Robert asked, looking at Catherine.

“She’ll be fine,” Chas said. “Want to spend a week with grandma?”

“A whole week?” Catherine asked, blinking.

“Does that sound okay?”

“I can go to the farm again?” Catherine asked.

“I’m sure Moira and great uncle Cain wouldn’t mind that,” Chas said, making the young girl beam. She loved animals. “But you’ve got to make sure to call Cain ‘great uncle’ okay? Make him feel really old.”

“Now?!?” Catherine asked eagerly.

“No, in a few weeks,” Aaron said, smiling at Catherine’s crestfallen face. “She’ll be fine,” he added to Robert.

“I know,” Robert said. “Where are we going?” Aaron smiled, knowing that was a yes.

“I’ve got an email with all the information attached,” Aaron said, tapping away on his phone. “It’s nice,” Aaron added, biting his lip as he showed Robert the pictures of the property he’d rented. “Virgin Islands.”

“God, that looks amazing,” Robert said. “I can’t really say no, can I?”

“I’ve been on the phone to your agent too, you have that week totally free,” Aaron said.

“You have been busy,” Robert said, impressed.

“Do you like it?” Aaron asked, almost nervously. Big extravagant surprises were more his husband’s style, Aaron didn’t do stuff like this.

“I’d be stupid to say I didn’t.” Robert kissed him softly. “It’s perfect. Anywhere you picked would be perfect.” Aaron smiled at him and kissed him again, only briefly because of the company.

“So what’s been going on in the village since we’ve been gone?” Robert asked Chas, now with a broad grin on his face.

It was three days later that their world was rocked completely. The first sign was the call at gone midnight. No one called at that time of day unless it was bad news. Aaron groaned in bed, Robert leaning over his body to pick up the phone.

“This better be really good,” Robert said grumpily.

“Hi Rob, it’s Liz,” she said.

“I thought we’d gone past the days that you worked this late for me,” Robert said to his agent,
getting out of bed to leave Aaron to his sleep. He was already snoring by the time Robert got to the door. “Spit it out. You’re calling me for a reason.”

“God, Robert, I’ve been working with you for years, and I never thought this was a call I’d have to make.”

“Liz, just say it.”

“Rebecca White’s been talking to the press.”


“She’s saying you raped her.”
Chapter 62

Thank you to those sticking with this for the ride! I will resolve it, don’t worry!

Robert frowned at the phone. “Robert? You still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” he said, closing the bedroom door quietly, leaving Aaron alone. “I can’t have heard you correctly. I can’t.”

“Yeah, well…”

“I’ve not touched her!” Robert hissed. “She’s the one who’s been trying it on with me and… God, I… I need a drink.”

“Robert, I have to ask…”

“No!”

“So you’re denying it?” Robert spluttered at her even asking the question. “I mean officially, I didn’t really believe that…”

“You’re damn right I’m denying it!” Robert said as loudly as he dared without waking up the rest of the house. “I can’t… look, you know what happened to Aaron, you had only just started as my agent when that was plastered all over the papers. You think… I feel sick.”

“If it makes you feel any better, she’s not taking it to the police,” Liz said.

“Oh, just the press, the international papers and magazines and online gossip chat rooms and….” Robert gave up, feeling his heart thumping hard at the implications of this. “Why’s she doing it?”

Robert asked her, almost desperately. “What’s the point? She’ll have no proof at all.”

“Look, I can’t read into her motivations, I don’t know her,” Liz said reasonably.

“When and where does she imagination this happened?”

“I don’t know,” Liz said.

“Oh, my God, I’m going to have to tell Aaron,” Robert said, his voice almost breaking. “How do I…”

“Look, there’s nothing that needs immediate attention,” Liz said. “But I thought you’d want to know.”

“Well, thank you for ruining my nights sleep,” Robert said sarcastically.

“Rob, it will work out,” Liz said. “She can’t keep the lie up forever, can she?”

“Well, yeah,” Robert said on a sigh. “But long enough to make everyone in the world believe I’m… If she sticks with it, in ten years time this will be what my daughter finds when she googles
“I’ll try and fix it,” Liz said after a pause. “I’d advise you and Aaron to stay away from her, no point in making things worse.”

“What… where’s the story appearing?” Robert asked. “Where’ve you got the information from?”

“Erm… An Australian publication,” Liz said dismissively. “Rebecca’s becoming a patron of a women’s refuge charity over there.”

“Oh, bloody brilliant!” Robert said. “So, I’m the villain here? And everyone will believe her because why would she lie? Why *would* she lie?!” he repeated, asking Liz the question.

“I’ll let you go, because I need sleep too. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Bye,” Robert said. He held the phone tightly, his knuckles white as he started to imagine all the horrible ramifications he could suffer from this, from one woman lying.

“Daddy?” Catherine asked, coming into the hallway, rubbing her eyes, clearly having heard him.

“Go back to sleep,” Robert said kindly. Catherine just blinked at him and Robert got down on his knees. “I just had a call, that’s all. I’m going back to bed. Your other dads already asleep, so you should be asleep too.”

“M’kay,” she said. Robert followed her into her bedroom and tucked her in, watching her until she was sound asleep. When she was, Robert quickly dressed, doing it as quietly as possible so as not to disturb Aaron. He needn’t have worried, Aaron was already snoring away. He couldn’t face telling him this accusation. After Aaron’s history, after being feared that no one would believe him about Gordon. To tell him that someone was lying about him in that way. He needed to clear his head, he needed something. He grabbed his keys, left the house, got in his car and drove.

The next morning, Aaron barely had the time to worry about where Robert had mysteriously disappeared to. Or not much anyway. Catherine needed breakfast, as did he, and he phoned Robert’s mobile, which went straight through to answer phone as Aaron buttered toast.

“Robert, pick up your phone,” Aaron said casually. “Oh, and if you go past a shop we need teabags by the way.” Aaron called again, and again, trying to avoid slipping into worry, just a little concerned. Distantly, he remembered a phone call in the night. Was it something to do with work? Aaron didn’t know, so instead he called Adam, to talk about work at the car showroom, saying he might be late because Robert had vanished into thin air. And he was the one who was supposed to be looking after Catherine today.

“Daddy couldn’t sleep last night,” Catherine piped up.

“Really?” Aaron asked.

“He put me back to bed.”

“Did he?” Aaron said. That phone call clearly was important, but not enough to let Aaron know what was going on. Aaron went on the news on his phone to distract himself from whatever Robert was up to. The NHS was on the brink of collapse (again), North Korea and China were seeing who could cause a nuclear war first, and in the showbiz section… Aaron frowned at it. He couldn’t be
reading that right. Right? At first he’d only glanced at the article, but now… It was lies, it had to be. Well, obviously it was lies!

“Catherine, we’re going to get you changed out of your PJs, get you dressed and then we’re going to see auntie Vic, okay?” Aaron said, making the decision.

“Okay,” she said innocently. It was the only place Aaron could think that Robert might have gone.

“Is he here?” Aaron asked quietly, shifting Catherine's weight in his arms.

“Yeah in the kitchen, what the hell is going on?” Vic asked.

“Go and find Holly,” Aaron said to Catherine, putting her on the floor. Aaron went through to the kitchen, finding Robert leaning over the kitchen table as if for support. Aaron didn’t need to ask to know he hadn’t slept. In fact Aaron couldn't remember seeing him look this bad.

“Next time you run away, try answering your phone,” Aaron said lightly, pulling a chair out and sitting next to him. Robert still hadn’t looked at him. “Rob, come on.”

“I can’t even look at you,” Robert said hollowly.

“Robert, you don’t think I believe any of that crap, do you?”

“You’re not even going to ask?” Robert said hesitantly, finally looking at him.

“No,” Aaron said levelly. “I’m not. Of course I’m not.” Robert had a tiny smile on his face. “Come here, you idiot,” Aaron said, pulling Robert in for a hug. Robert let him, taking strength from his husband, breathing in his scent. God, Aaron smelt so good. “But I am going to give you a lecture about leaving our house in the middle of the night and not letting me know where you are, okay? We’ve already had far too much to do with kidnappers, remember?”

“Fair enough,” Robert said. He kept his face buried in Aaron’s T shirt, needing the comfort.

“Don’t run away from me,” Aaron said. “You should know that by now.”


“She’s here,” Aaron said. “Probably driving Holly up the wall.” Robert smiled tiredly at him.

“I love you,” Robert told him.

“Good,” Aaron said. “Now stop feeling sorry for yourself, get home and get some sleep.”

“Yes boss,” Robert said sarcastically, rolling his eyes at Aaron’s smile. He still felt absolutely awful, but he knew he needed Aaron by his side, he couldn’t handle this without him. And the fact that Aaron hadn’t even questioned him made Robert feel more secure than he thought possible right now.

“Daddy?” Robert looked and saw Catherine blinking at him. He lifted the girl and pulled her into his lap, holding her close. He needed his family right now.
Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

I know I shouldn’t be posting another chapter today, but I'm rubbish about keeping stuff on my computer written and unpublished. Hope you enjoy, thank you!

The phone kept ringing. Mostly family, Diane, Chas, Vic (who called several times). Occasionally journalists, though how they’d got his home number was a mystery to Robert. After all this mess, that would need changing. One person who’d been suspiciously quiet since this “story” had broken, was Kat. No phone calls or anything, which was so unlike her. Robert had come to his senses enough to realise that if she hadn’t called, there was a reason, so instead he called her.

“I have five minutes, if that,” Kat answered without so much as a hello, a lot of noise in the background.

“I thought today you might have made a phone call,” Robert pointed out. “Today of all days.”

“I’d be wasting my energy talking about ridiculous lies, so what would be the point?” Robert smiled, feeling a rush of warmth towards his best friend. Like Aaron, she wouldn’t even entertain the thought. “You better not be sitting at home feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Maybe,” Robert admitted. “It’s not been the best day I’ve ever had.”

“Er… gate 23...” Kat said to herself.

“Are you in an airport?” Robert asked.

“Yes,” she said. “And I’m very near missing my flight so as nice as this has been, I have to go.”

“Kat...” Robert said, starting to become suspicious. “Where’re you going?”

“I hear Sydney’s beautiful this time of year,” she deadpanned.

“Kat!”

“What?” she said innocently. “Someone needs to give that lying bitch a talking to.”

“Hold on a second, what about Jacob?” Robert said. “You know, your son?”

“Spending quality time with his father,” Kat said. “I didn’t fancy taking him on a twenty four hour flight. And you’re not going to stop me, Robert.”

“God…” Robert sighed heavily, but had known Kat long enough to know that she was right. “What could you possibly say that would make this better?”

“I’ll get back to you in thirty six hours,” she said. “Anything else?”

“Kat?” he asked, his voice wavering.

“You’ll be okay,” she said, for the first time her voice softening. “You will be, you’ll all get
through this. Okay?"

“I’m frightened,” Robert admitted. “That one woman can say something which…”

“It’ll be fine,” Kat said. “Anyone who knows you…”

“I know,” Robert said. “I know.”

“I love you, you know that? You’re stubborn, irritating and God knows you wind me up like hell, but you and Aaron are my best friends.”

“Thank you,” Robert said. “I think I needed to hear that today.”

“Job done then,” she said brightly. “Or half anyway.”

“Don’t fly halfway around the world just to talk to her,” Robert said. “It isn’t worth it.”

“Would you do it for me?” Kat asked. There was a silence on the phone line, because they both knew the answer to that one. “Spend some time with your family, I’m going to watch five or six of your most terrible films on the flight.”

“Love you too,” Robert said warmly.

“They’re calling my flight,” Kat said. “See you in a few days.”

“Bye.” Robert hung up and looked at Aaron who’d come into the kitchen.

“You’re telling other people you love them are you?” he teased. Aaron knew it had been Kat on the phone.

“She’s flying to Australia.”

“Okay, why?” Aaron asked, making tea.

“I got the impression slapping Rebecca White is job number one,” Robert said.

“That’s not going to help,” Aaron observed.

“Hey, if you think you can stop her, be my guest,” Robert said, throwing his phone to Aaron. He grinned, but didn’t take Robert up on the offer.

“You look better,” Aaron said. A few hours sleep and a shower had done him the world of good, considering.

“Kat told me to stop feeling sorry for myself.”

“Er, so did I,” Aaron said.

“Yeah, well, you’re my husband,” Robert said. “You kind of have to stand by me.”

“Like hell I do,” Aaron said. “I want to kill her for what Rebecca's doing, and that’s not just out of loyalty to you.” Robert frowned, wrapping his hands around the mug of tea Aaron gave him. “It’s people like her that… make people like me always afraid that they’re never going to be believed. I always thought… I’d left it too long about… Gordon. No one would believe me after so long being silent. So, take you out of it, I’d still hate her for lying about something so hideous.” Robert moved, and leaned his head against Aaron’s shoulder, folding into his husband. He didn’t know
how long they stayed there, sat on their wooden kitchen chairs, draped over each other in the quiet. They both looked when they heard quiet bare feet on the floor.

“Er, why aren’t you in bed mischief?” Robert asked.

“Well, you’re not either,” she pointed out with a child’s logic.

“That’s a good point,” Aaron said fairly, smiling at her. “Come on, I’ll take you back to bed.” Aaron lifted her into his arms and Catherine buried her face in Aaron’s shoulder. She waved a hand at Robert in goodnight and he smiled at her.

“Daddy seems sad,” Catherine said as Aaron pulled the My Little Pony duvet over her.

“He’s had a bad day,” Aaron said. “It’ll get better.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” Aaron said instantly, though he wasn’t sure he should be making that kind of promise to her. He couldn’t see a good way out of this.

“Okay then,” she said with a child’s trust. “Night daddy.”

“Goodnight princess.”
“I can’t sleep,” Robert said.

“I know,” Aaron replied. He gave up on the concept of sleep and turned the bedside lamp on. “Talk to me.”

“I have nothing to say,” Robert said. “How anyone could say… that about anyone when it wasn’t true. I don’t understand.”

“It’s the most difficult thing to say when it is true,” Aaron said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Robert asked. They rarely talked about Gordon these days, it was so far in the past that it was no longer relevant. Not that Aaron wasn’t effected by it, he was, always would be. But it didn’t effect their relationship, and Robert didn’t want to dig up bad memories for the conversation unless Aaron initiated it. And he rarely did. “Back then, about Gordon. I’d have been… oh, God, I don’t know.”

“I’ll admit it’s been quite a while since I picked up a man for a one night stand,” Aaron said. That did get a smile from Robert.

“I should hope so too,” Robert said.

“But you really think I’d mention it when I just wanted sex?”

“Now, I’m curious,” Robert said, slightly amused. “Is that all you wanted from me when you met me?”

“It was a big part of your appeal, yeah,” Aaron said, dodging Roberts wandering hands trying to tickle him and laughing. The laughter faded after a few seconds and Aaron saw the shutters go down behind Robert’s eyes.

“Seriously, you were supposed to be a one night stand, and if it was anything more than that, it would only be casual. I didn’t foresee this. Spending my life with you, making my family with you. I didn’t plan this, I didn’t plan to fall in love with you. When I realised I was in love with you I was trying to work up to telling you. But it’s never easy to talk about.”

“No,” Robert agreed. “Do you think about it even now?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “Not often, but it’s always there. Do you think of Leah cutting your face open?” Aaron ran his thumb down Robert’s scar gently, and Robert grasped his wrist, turning it and kissing the soft skin there.


“Forget them,” Aaron said, cutting him off.
“They’re digging…”

“Into my past,” Aaron said. “I know. But I don’t care. Let the journalists print what they want, they will anyway.”

“I don’t know how you’re so strong,” Robert said, marvelling quietly.

“I’m not,” Aaron said. “Just… nothing I can do about it anyway, so best leave it.” Robert wrapped his arms around Aaron carefully, pulling him close.

“I love you,” Robert told him.

“Mm, you too.”

Kat was way too tired, she hadn’t managed to fall asleep on the plane. And she wasn’t going to waste time at the hotel when she could be giving Rebecca a piece of her mind, not now she was so close. The only thing she did do was check her make up in the mirror, because she was damned if she was going to confront her looking like she’d been dragged through a hedge. Hair and face in place, she followed the address her agent had given her in a taxi. And even though she knew this probably wouldn’t go over well, she was too angry to stop herself.

After knocking on her door (a rather nice house hidden down a half a mile private road) Kat started questioning the wisdom of this. There was a chance she could make this a lot worse.

“Yes?” Rebecca asked, answering the door. It was her smiling happy face that made Kat see red. She couldn’t help it, this woman was smiling, while Robert’s life was being torn to pieces? It was that more than anything else that made Kat’s right hand move without willing it, slapping the smug smile off that stupid cows face.

“What the hell?” Rebecca asked, her hands going to her cheek.

“And before you go and report me for assault, or whatever else it is your twisted brain can come up with, just know that if I was really trying to hurt you, you wouldn’t be able to get back on your feet.”

“Oh,” Rebecca said the pieces slotting into place. “This is about Robert.”

“Well, for an idiot, you at least got one thing right.”

“You better come in,” Rebecca said, moving into her kitchen. “Unless you’re going to get violent again.”

“No promises,” Kat said, the impulse to just shake this woman out of her lies incredibly strong.

“Look, I don’t know what Robert’s been telling you…”

“I’ve not spoken to him,” Kat said. Which was a lie, she knew Rebecca meant about this mess. And Kat would never question Robert about this. “I don’t need to talk to him, I know you’re lying.”

“You have a lot of faith in your… friend.”

“What, that he’s not the worst kind of human imaginable?” Kat asked with a scowl. “Yes, I do.”

“Not because you have some twisted threesome kind of thing going on?” Rebecca asked
There was a beat of silence. “Okay, what is wrong with you?” Kat asked. “Does everything have to do with sex? Is it too hard a concept to understand that I might be friends with two men, just because I like them?”

“It’s being retracted.”

“What?” Kat asked blankly.

“The interview. I was misquoted,” Rebecca said.

“Oh, don’t give me that crap,” Kat said. “That’s a hell of a leap to jump to, for even the most terrible half assed journalist to make.”

“I was pissed off with him,” Rebecca admitted.

“Oh, did he knock you back?” Kat said in a childlike voice. “He’s married!”

“Yeah, well most people don’t act like a wedding ring stops them!” Rebecca snapped. She sighed heavily. “I didn’t say what they printed. It will be being retracted.”

“Well, what did you say?!” Kat snapped. “Robert wouldn’t go near you!”

“I wasn’t thinking!”

“Shocking,” Kat said, rolling her eyes.

“I was talking about the charity work,” Rebecca said. “The whole article was meant to be about that, but Melissa Stevens needs an axe to the brain.”

“Who?” Kat said.

“The journalist. She twisted absolutely everything I said, to make it fit her perverted view of the world. She kept asking questions about why I didn’t like Robert after having just worked so closely with him. She wanted a story to go with the “face” behind the campaign.” Kat spluttered. “I didn’t say what she printed. God, I don’t want people to think I’m a liar. I’d go to the police if I thought that, I wouldn’t tell some low life from the press!”

“If that was really the case, you could have fixed this days ago by releasing a statement, denying it,” Kat said. “Not gone under this silence you’ve been doing.”

“My lawyers told me to keep my mouth shut and let them deal with it.”

“Have you got any idea what you’re doing to Robert?” Kat asked. “What am I even doing, you clearly don’t have a conscience.”

“Melissa Stevens has been suspended,” Rebecca said. “She won’t ever work in journalism again.”

“Well, I’m sure that’ll give Robert his reputation back,” Kat said sarcastically. “You’re so weak, you could have fixed this.”

“Fine,” Rebecca said. “Now you’ve insulted me, you can leave my house.”

“Was your aim to break up Robert’s marriage? Was that your grand plan?” Kat pushed.

“I didn’t think that far ahead,” Rebecca said. “How is he?”
“Who?”

“Robert!” Rebecca snapped.

Kat couldn’t believe she was even asking this. “Aaron’s upset because he has no chance of proving his husbands innocence over something so awful. Their little girl, Catherine, she’s three, she doesn’t understand why both of her parents are miserable when she used to literally have the picture perfect upbringing. Robert’s sister, Victoria’s fielding calls from the press, which she’s not told Robert because she doesn’t want to worry him. Several UK publications have dug up Aaron’s awful history and running with it, because how could he be married to someone like that? For years, without knowing? And all you care about is Robert? That says something disgusting about you.” Kat knew she was wasting her breath and left her house. She wasn’t sure if she felt better or worse, but once back at the hotel she called the magazine, and tried to find out if what Rebecca told her was true.
Chapter 65

“So the accusations front page news, the retractions on page 15,” Aaron said with anger.

“I know,” Robert said. “But I think we owe Kat a drink. Or several.”

“She’s like a caged tiger when she gets going,” Aaron said. “I didn’t know that about her.”

“Then you’ve never seen her severely pissed off,” Robert said. Kat had told them that she’d camped out at the magazines offices until they’d sacked the journalist, rather than a simple suspension, and she’d been hounding them to make an announcement. Which they had reluctantly done. However, the general feeling among the public was that it was possibly true, at least in a more minor form, but that neither of them wanted the publicity. Despite both Rebecca’s agent and Roberts teaming together to deny it utterly, the problem was it had taken too long.

“I don’t think we should go away on holiday,” Robert said as Aaron sat next to him on the sofa. “It’s… bad timing what with everything.”

“Or it could be perfect timing,” Aaron said. “Get away from it all, no press watching our every move. I see them in the village. Takes me back to when I first met you.” Robert smiled slightly, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Some time had passed, and they were meant to leave on Sunday. But even though it had been denied, Robert hadn’t got back to normal. He looked like he’d aged five years in the space of a couple of weeks. “I heard,” Robert said. “The phone call.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you,” Aaron said, curling up close to him on the sofa. "Or not now anyway."

“We’re off the list, aren’t we?” Robert said sadly.

“Yes,” Aaron said. No point outright lying about it.

“That’s so unfair,” Robert said, without heat. “I’ve not been charged with anything, it’s just one random article in a magazine who’ll be bankrupt by the end of the year.”

“Will they?” Aaron asked, taking the diversion.

“Yeah, I’ve got lawyers on it,” Robert said. “Don’t worry about that.”

“Alright. But the agency’s… they hear things, because you’re you,” Aaron said. “If you were someone normal, it wouldn’t be registering the way it is.” One red flag surrogacy or adoption agencies could not cope with, was anything to do with sexual assault. It seemed particularly unfair, as it’d been since denied by everyone involved, but the five day gap between the article and the retraction was damning. “Maybe give it time to settle down, and try again,” Aaron suggested.

“No,” Robert said. “It’s my fault we can’t have any more kids.”

“No,” Aaron said. “It is not your fault, it’s hers for lying. It’s the journalist for writing the article, and it’s the magazines for publishing it.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better, it’s not exactly working,” Robert warned. Aaron moved and kissed Robert’s jaw gently. “You could do it on your own,” Robert said. “Just for the official forms and the like.”

“I’m not going through surrogacy on my own,” Aaron said. “We’re a family, we do it together or
“Look, I appreciate your loyalty…”

“Right, you’re starting to wind me up now,” Aaron said, backing away from Robert so he could look in his eyes. “It’s not loyalty, we come as three. That’s all there is to it. I’m not doing it alone.” Robert smiled at him weakly and pulled him close, kissing him passionately.

“Upstairs?” Robert suggested when things started getting heated. Aaron grinned.

“Oh, would you calm down!” Aaron huffed, exasperated, annoyed, and desperately turned on. Robert had got moody and locked himself in the bathroom, once it had become obvious that he was having difficulties getting hard. Aaron groaned, his body was pulsing with need and he breathed deeply to calm himself down. Once he had, or at least a little, he went to the bathroom and knocked on the locked door. “Robert, come on,” he said. “It doesn’t matter, can we just get to bed and sleep?” Still nothing. “Fine, be a miserable git,” Aaron said, too tired to be subtle about it.

Aaron was very nearly asleep when Robert joined him in bed, finally getting out of the bathroom and curling up next to him. “It’s fine,” Aaron said quietly.

“No, it’s not,” Robert said.

“Look, you’re stressed, it’s been a bad couple of weeks. Stop making it such a big deal.”

Robert sighed, but kissed Aaron’s forehead anyway. “I feel so useless,” he admitted. “Sorry.”

“Come here,” Aaron said, kissing him softly. Robert gave himself over to it for a long minute until he parted.

“I think we’ve got company.” They both looked to the door to see Catherine there and Aaron nodded at her. She grinned and took the silent signal, jumping on the bed between the two men.

“It’s late,” Aaron said. “So we have to be really quiet and go to sleep. Okay?”

“Okay daddy,” she agreed. Aaron batted her blonde curls away from his face as she turned to Robert. “Are you not sad any more?”

“I’m okay,” Robert said, smiling slowly. “Because I’ve got you, and I’ve got your other daddy. So… I’ll be all right in the end.” Catherine smiled and Robert made sure his arm reached over their daughter and rested his fingers on Aaron’s hip. Aaron smiled at him and kissed him briefly. Before kissing Catherine’s hair and closing his eyes.

“What’re you having?” Aaron asked.

“White wine please,” Kat said, leaning up against the bar of the Woolpack. Aaron nodded to Chas, who was already pouring Aaron’s usual pint. Robert was sitting in the corner booth, smiling at Catherine who was playing, loudly.

“So, quiet trip was it?”
“Oh, it was great,” Kat said. “I think I made a nuisance of myself.”

“Do you?” Aaron asked with fake innocence. “Thank you for everything.”

“God! She just made me so angry!” Kat said.

“How about we don’t ruin tonight talking about her?” Aaron suggested.

“Fine,” she agreed, taking her wine from Chas with a smile. “How’s he doing?” she asked, nodding at Robert. “He seems… quiet. Less like his usual sarcastic snide self.”

“He is,” Aaron said. “I can’t really get through to him, it’s like… we’ve forgotten how to get back to normal. We’ve forgotten how to be us and…” he sighed heavily. “Sometimes I feel like Catherine’s the only thing gluing us together.”

“Now, you don’t mean that,” Kat said. “It’s not been that long, give him some time.”

“Maybe,” Aaron agreed. “Anyway, we go away tomorrow, maybe that will… help.”

“Maybe,” Kat said.

“Speaking of, you’re awfully tanned,” Aaron noticed. "And you were in Australia longer than strictly necessary.

“Well, I didn’t spend the entire time camped outside the press office,” Kat said, smiling. “I needed to go to a beach or two. Meet a guy. Or two.”

“Oh, yeah,” Aaron said, smiling. “And…?”

“I was childless on a beach!” Kat said with a shrug. “Forgive me for having a little bit of fun.”

Aaron laughed into his pint, before turning around and catching Robert’s eyes. He looked tired, and for the first time since Aaron had known him, a little old, a little worn around the edges. Aaron hoped Kat was right, that they’d get past this. He really hoped so, because he couldn’t imagine his life without Robert in it.
Chapter 66

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

On the flight, Robert slept for the majority of it. Aaron didn’t disturb him, knowing he needed the rest. Saying goodbye to Catherine had been quiet in the end, Chas having sat her down in front of a DVD after hugging both of her fathers goodbye. She’d been far too easy, and Aaron would call her when they landed. Though he didn’t have any doubts about Chas being able to look after her, and he and Robert needed a break, whatever the circumstances.

Robert woke when the plane was preparing to land, looking around dozily. “I didn’t sleep for the whole flight,” he said.

“Okay,” Aaron replied, not really wanting to argue with him.

“Wow,” he said, rubbing his face and trying to wake himself up. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be, you needed it. It’s been a hard month.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “We’ll call home when we get off the plane, right?”

“Course we will,” Aaron agreed. They did, but Catherine was already asleep, Chas promising them both that she’d been fine. Chatting a hundred miles an hour apparently, as happy as she usually was. It settled both men’s minds, as this was the first time they’d left her for days on end with someone else, even though they both trusted Chas.

“You rented this?” Robert asked quietly, looking around the massive house, built on its very own private island.

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “I thought we could be a bit extravagant and I wanted to surprise you. Before everything happened and the world caved in.”

“God, Aaron, it’s amazing!” Robert said. It was, a modern house, several luxurious bedrooms, an adjoining pool that faced the ocean, their own private haven. Plus quite a bit of private beach all for the two of them. And the kitchen was fully stocked, so they wouldn’t actually have to leave the island if they didn’t want to.

“I should admit, I can’t afford the whole thing,” Aaron said. “I didn’t think you’d mind…” Robert shrugged, indifferently. He wasn’t particularly precious with his fortune, because Aaron was his husband and he wanted to spend his money on his family. And Aaron knew that, so it wasn’t a big issue. Robert pulled Aaron into his arms, holding him close, feeling the flex of his muscles through their clothes.

“Thank you,” Robert said lowly into Aaron’s neck. “This is perfect.”

“You haven’t even seen the whole house yet,” Aaron said. “I wanted somewhere away from the press.” Robert almost snorted at that, because he understood that impulse very well. Robert kissed him gently.
“Lets eat,” Robert said, having slept through the meal on the plane, not that he enjoyed food on planes in the first place. Aaron smiled and agreed.

They didn’t do much for the first twenty four hours, beyond relax and call home, having conversations with Catherine, who seemed to have barely noticed they’d gone. Aaron knew Robert needed this time to unwind, and he didn’t begrudge him that in the slightest. Aaron for his part was enjoying swimming in the heated pool, with no fear that any stranger would see his self harm scars and judge him for it. It felt so freeing and even when he could feel Robert’s eyes on him, he didn’t feel self conscious. He always enjoyed Robert watching him, a lot more than he’d ever admit.

“You going to join me?” Aaron asked as Robert sat on the edge and dipped his feet into the pool, trousers rolled up to his knees.

“Why bother when I’m enjoying the view?” Robert flirted, and Aaron grinned. He’d missed this side of his husband lately. This side that made Aaron’s breath catch and wonder how he’d got this lucky.

“Shall I give you a better view?” Aaron teased. Robert’s forehead creased as Aaron twisted in the water, taking off his shorts off and throwing them at Robert, who dodged them with a laugh. When smiling, Robert looked years younger and… well, Aaron couldn’t resist. He grabbed Robert’s calves and pulled him into the pool with a splash. When he came up for air, spluttering, his shirt plastered to his chest Aaron couldn’t stop laughing when Robert tightened his arms around him.

“God, I love you,” Robert said quietly.

“I love you,” Aaron replied. “I wouldn’t change anything about our life.”

“Really?” Robert asked. “Not even…”

“Not one thing,” Aaron said surely. Robert smiled into a kiss as his hands started wandering over Aaron’s body, making the younger man moan slightly. Robert’s palm stroked his jaw gently.

“Inside?” Aaron suggested, voice a little hoarse.

“Why bother?” Robert said. “I don’t think we’ve ever been more alone.” And Aaron could hardly argue that, could he?

Aaron found Robert lying on the beach, almost undressed as he soaked up the sun. Aaron swallowed, trying not to drool over his husbands body, all tanned and the new freckles appearing on his chest, almost daily by now. Even after all this time, Aaron still felt so physically drawn to Robert that it was a struggle to keep his hands to himself. Especially when he didn’t have to. Aaron stroked his chest gently as he sat next to him.

“Take your shirt off then,” Robert said bluntly, squinting at him above his sunglasses.

“No,” Aaron said. “I don’t get a tan like you, I just burn.”

“I could rub it better,” Robert suggested and Aaron rolled his eyes with humour. “How’s your mum?” When Robert had left the house, Aaron had been skyping with Chas, Catherine having gone to bed after saying goodnight to both her fathers.
“Fine,” Aaron said. “A bit tired, I think looking after Catherine for so long’s tiring her out.” Robert smiled, not worried about their daughter in the slightest. Catherine had been rambling about the sheep she’d seen up at Moira’s, almost fit to burst with excitement from it all.

“You know something, we needed this,” Robert said. “It was a good idea, thank you.”

“You’re paying for most of it,” Aaron said, shrugging.

“I don’t care,” Robert said. “It’s been wonderful.” He kissed Aaron gently, Aaron frowning back when Robert’s sunglasses bumped into his nose. Robert laughed quietly. “We need to talk about more kids.”

“No we don’t,” Aaron said.

“We do,” Robert said. “I can’t be the reason… I mean, we can work around it.”

“Robert, I don’t need a kid who’s biologically mine,” Aaron said surely. “That was never what this was about.”

“You don’t know Catherine’s mine,” Robert said.

Aaron stared at him in disbelief. “Right, when we get home, I’ll count her freckles, ruffle her blonde hair and look into blue eyes I first fell in love with on the man next to me.”

“All right,” Robert conceded. “I didn’t want us to ever know.”

“Neither of us can help that she looks like you,” Aaron said. “Anyway, having a second child was never me saying “I want a kid that’s mine” you know?”

“I do know that,” Robert said. “But still, I wanted a bigger family, with you. If it was something you wanted too.”

“Maybe we can still have that,” Aaron said. “Give it some time to calm down, maybe in a year… we never know what will happen.”

“So we’re saying… not now,” Robert said slowly. “But maybe one day.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Aaron said. “I’d do the same again.”

“About what?” Robert asked confused.

“I wouldn’t change Catherine to make her mine,” Aaron said steadily. “She’s more mine than I ever thought I’d get.”

“I know,” Robert said quietly, feeling his heart race as Aaron kissed him, very softly. He loved this man so much, he’d give up all his fortune, everything material he had just to have his family safe, if he had to. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

This is slowly winding down (yes, I’ve said that before, but I’m running out of ideas,
and the boys are getting older!) At least 5 chapters to go I'm expecting, and thanks for the support on this MONSTER of a story so far!
PART FOUR

Chapter Summary

Another time jump (a MASSIVE one), and all of Part Four is really the epilogue, but it’s too much to put in one chapter (plus not all written yet) so it’s got a little bit more to go yet. Enjoy!

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Robert said quickly.

“Yeah, okay,” Aaron said, humouring his husband as Robert blinked himself awake. He wasn’t an old man, he didn’t need to doze off on his sofa. Of course not. “While you were not sleeping, Catherine called.”

“She okay?”

“Yeah, she’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“God, Aaron, why didn’t you wake me?”

“I thought you weren’t asleep,” Aaron said with a laugh, going into the kitchen to make a cup of tea for them both. Robert didn’t let him get away with that, following after him and tickling his waist, making Aaron do that half giggle that was so innocent and distinctly Aaron. Before either man made the decision to move, they found themselves kissing. Making out like bloody teenagers, but Aaron couldn’t help it. Sometimes he found himself looking at Robert, wondering how he could still be so physically attracted to the same man after so many years.

“I love you,” Aaron whispered. Robert grinned, kissing his jaw before whispering the same into his skin.

“Hi!” came the shout from the hallway. Aaron arched his head away from Robert, but kept his hands on his waist, until Catherine came into the kitchen, looking windswept and very happy, dropping a bag on the kitchen floor.

“Hi sweetheart,” Robert said, pulling her into a hug. Catherine let him before turning to give Aaron a hug too.

“So…” Aaron said. “Want to tell us what we’ve done to deserve this unexpected visit?”

“I can come and visit my parents if I want to, can’t I?” Catherine said, gazing at them in a way that didn’t fool Aaron for one second. It didn’t fool Aaron when Robert looked at him that way either. “Come on,” Aaron said, pointing at her. “I’ve been around for way too long for that look to work on me. It’s the look you gave me when you wanted more sweets as a toddler.” Catherine rolled her eyes. “Spit it out.”

“Um…” Catherine said, suddenly looking shifty.

“You’re not in trouble are you?” Robert asked, concerned for the first time she’d come through the door. “We can fix it, whatever it is.” Robert had already moved to his pocket to grab his phone.
“No, I’m not in trouble,” Catherine said, shaking her head. “So thanks for the implication of your very expensive lawyers and solicitors, but I don’t think I’ll be needing them.”

“Go on,” Aaron said, sitting at the kitchen table. “Just tell us. Or do I need a beer first. Whisky?” he added when Catherine didn’t seem forthcoming.

“I um… William asked me to marry him,” Catherine said, beaming at them both. Robert looked at Aaron and returned to his phone.

“Think I do need that solicitor,” Robert said darkly.

“Dad!”

“Robert,” Aaron said quietly, though he didn’t tear his eyes off of Catherine. She looked like she was glowing, clearly so happy.

“Look, I know you two take over-protectiveness to a different level,” she started, trying to speak calmly. “But I love him, and I’m really happy with him. Please don’t act like this is a disaster.” Still silence from the two men, who shared a glance. “I have not been hiding my engagement ring from the press for a week, so you could react like this!” Catherine burst out. “I wanted to tell you in person. Come on, you like Will.”

“Well…”

“All right, you don’t hate him,” Catherine edited.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t it traditional to ask the father of the bride his permission?” Robert said carefully.

“He didn’t want to spoil the surprise!” Catherine said. “He knows the three of us are close. And you can be quite an intimidating man,” she added to Robert.

“Er, hello? I was an option too,” Aaron put in.

“Exactly! How was he meant to pick between the pair of you!?” Catherine sighed. “Please don’t make me feel bad about this, not when I’m so happy.”

“Of course we’re happy for you,” Aaron said, reaching across the table and squeezing Catherine’s hand. She let out a small nervous smile. “If it’s what you want.”

“I do want this,” she said. “So much.”

“Why isn’t he here himself?” Robert asked dully.

“We decided it might be slightly better coming from me,” Catherine said. “He wanted to come, but ideally I’d like him alive for our wedding.” She raised her eyebrows pointedly and Robert allowed himself a small smile.

“If he hurts you…” Robert started.

“Yeah, I get the picture,” Catherine said briefly.

“You’re too young, Catherine,” Aaron started.

“I’m older than you were when you met him,” Catherine said bluntly, pointing to Robert sternly. “So don’t even try it.” That did get a laugh from Robert and some of the tension was broken.
“I love him,” Catherine said.

“Then I guess congratulations are in order,” Robert said.

“Yeah?” she asked. Robert nodded and hugged her, Catherine’s face lighting up like a beacon, now that she’d got some kind of acceptance.

“We only ever wanted you to be happy,” Aaron said, chiming in. “It’s all that matters.” Catherine smiled into a hug with Aaron.

“Go on,” Aaron said in bed that night. He’d been able to see the tension in Robert all evening, but luckily he was a good enough actor that he’d been able to hide most of it from Catherine.

“She’s making a mistake,” Robert said surely.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do,” Robert said. “He’s no good for her. It’ll ruin her life.”

“My mother said that about you a long time ago,” Aaron pointed out.

“Well, that was different,” Robert snapped. “And I proved her wrong.”

“Yes, you did,” Aaron agreed. “Give Will a chance.”

“No,” Robert replied stubbornly.

“Give him a chance, or no sex until you do.”

“What?” Robert said with a scowl. “How the hell is that fair?”

“If you don’t give the man she picked a fair shot,” Aaron said. “Catherine won’t forgive you. It’ll upset her, it won’t make her change her mind about Will, and I couldn’t bear it if there was such a gap between the three of us. And… if it does fall apart, she’ll need both of us.”

“When did you get so intuitive?” Robert asked. Aaron shrugged but didn’t answer. “Fine, he’ll get one chance. But he’s not hurting our daughter, I’ll kill him if he does.”

“I know,” Aaron said, curling up in Robert’s arms. “But you’d have to get in there quick, because I’d do the damage first. I might be getting up there, but I’m still handy with my fists.” Robert laughed into Aaron’s hair, a little happier before sinking off to sleep.
Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

Last Chapter! I decided against introducing Catherine's fiance as I wanted the last chapter to be about the three of them and no one else. It's also a little different to how I planned, but I hope it's enjoyed anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Robert sighed, screwing up what must be the tenth sheet of paper and trying again. He was attempting to make his father of the bride speech and he was failing abysmally. He and Aaron had decided that Robert was going to be the one to make the speech, as he was by far the more comfortable one speaking in front of a lot of people and Aaron didn’t want to do it. And it wasn’t just one of these things that he said he didn’t want to do but really did. The prospect of giving a speech on Catherine’s wedding day in front of all her guests, and in Aaron’s words “messing it all up” was not one he relished. Though right now, Robert was regretting agreeing to do it all himself. It was harder than he thought to write a speech about their little girl.

“Hi.” Robert looked up and saw Catherine at the door frame. “What’re you up to?”

“Nothing,” Robert said. “Or… attempting to write a speech for your wedding and it’s not going well. I keep getting distracted.”

“You left it until the day before my wedding to write the speech?” Catherine asked. Robert shrugged. It’s not like he hadn’t tried before, but Catherine was difficult to put into words good enough for her. “Anyway, distracted by what?” she asked, sitting on the sofa next to Robert. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

“I keep thinking about the week before you were born,” Robert said quietly. Catherine stayed silent, wanting to listen to the story. “We were worried. So worried actually, and you were two weeks late. So we had extra time to worry.”

“Worried about what?”

“Well…” Robert started, thinking about how to phrase it. “Surrogacy is a strange one. Because you know the baby’s yours, you know in a few days your life is going to change forever. And yet, the pregnant woman isn’t here, wasn’t living with us and we couldn’t see her or you whenever we wanted. It felt really strange in those last few days. Especially as we knew you could come any time. And we were… a little afraid she wouldn’t want to give you up when you were born. Because who would want to give you up?” Catherine smiled a little at that. “When you were born, Aaron was the first one to hold you,” Robert said.

“Was he?”

“Yeah,” Robert said. “He was the closest and the midwife handed him you. Aaron’s always been… always keeps his emotions close, guarded. Even with me, he didn’t allow himself to fall in love with me until he felt pretty sure I wasn’t going to up and leave him at the first chance I got. I’ve never seen him fall in love so instantly.” Catherine’s grin widened. “All it took was him setting eyes on you. He didn’t want to pass you over to me, didn’t want to let you go.”
“No?”

“No,” Robert said. “And then when he did, he told me “don’t you dare drop her!” Like I was ever going to do that.” Robert smiled at the memory. “You were so gorgeous, so perfect.”

“Were?” Catherine said with a sly smile


“So…” Catherine said when it was clear Robert had finished that story. “What are the chances that I’m going to get dad to dance with me at my wedding?”

“I’m working on it,” Robert said. “He will, just needs a nudge.”

“I really want to dance with him on my wedding day,” Catherine said. “And I know he doesn’t dance, and I’m not picking between you two, but…”

“He’s difficult to persuade, I know,” Robert said. “I’m working on it,” he repeated. “Trust me.”

“I know I haven’t really asked,” Catherine said. “But I didn’t think I needed to. You’re both giving me away, right?”

“Yes,” Robert said before she could even finish the sentence. “Don’t worry about that. No other option, not even for a second.”

“Good,” she said warmly.

“What’ve I missed?” They both looked to see Aaron coming into the room, watching them curled up on the sofa together. Catherine lifted her feet up in invitation and Aaron sat next to his family.

“We’re talking about when I was born,” Catherine said.

“Robert tell you he cried?” Aaron asked.

“So did you,” Robert countered. Aaron didn’t deny it.

“Got your dress all sorted?” Aaron asked.

“Yeah, it got delivered today with it’s final adjustments. I’ve tried it on and… it’s perfect.”

“Good,” Robert said. “Nervous?”

“Is it weird to say no?” she said slowly. “I’m excited, I’m so happy, but no I’m not nervous. Maybe I will be tomorrow but…”

“That’s good,” Aaron said quietly. “Excited’s good.”

“Were you two nervous?”

“Before our first wedding, yes,” Aaron said. “I thought he’d change his mind.”

“And I thought Aaron wouldn’t show up,” Robert added. “I don’t think we were nervous for our second wedding. Or not nearly as much.”

“No,” Aaron agreed. “By that point it was pretty obvious I couldn’t get rid of him.” Robert reached over Catherine to give him a good elbow, and the three of them ended up laughing.
“You should go and get some sleep. Big day tomorrow,” Robert said.

“Yeah, I should,” she said. “Don’t let me oversleep, I’ve got hair and makeup coming in the morning so…”

“Yeah, yeah,” Aaron said, waving his hand dismissively. She kissed both her parents, then went upstairs, leaving both men alone. “Can’t believe we got here,” Aaron said. “It feels like yesterday I was twenty four and trying to sneak out of your house after having a one night stand with Hollywood’s latest star.”

“It does feel like yesterday,” Robert agreed. “And you were never a one night stand, you just took a long time to be convinced of that.”

“Couldn’t believe you wanted me,” Aaron admitted. “Some days I still can’t.” Robert moved and kissed him gently, lovingly.

“Ready for tomorrow?”

“Seeing our daughter fly the nest? Not really,” Aaron said, and Robert smiled. “You know something? I look at you sometimes and I think, God I want you so much. Still.” It’s unusual for Aaron to come up with things like this so Robert appreciated it. “I never thought I would. All these years later.”

“I look at you and want you too,” Robert said. “I don’t… I still see you as you were when I met you. I know we’ve changed, obviously, but… you’re you, and that’s it.” Aaron smiled and kissed him, pressing his body into the sofa gently.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” Robert said and Aaron shook his head.

“No, you don’t,” Aaron said softly.

“I do.”

“Your agent called me by mistake a couple of weeks ago,” Aaron said. “I already know.”

“Why haven’t you said anything?” Robert marveled.

“I was waiting for you to tell me,” Aaron said. “Wondered how long it would take you.”

“Aaron…” Robert said lowly. “I was waiting for the right moment.”

“You don’t have to retire,” Aaron said. “Actors can go on way into their old age.”

“Er… how old do you think I am?” Robert asked, stung.

“You know what I mean,” Aaron said.

“Yeah, I do,” Robert said. “And I could do it, keep acting, keep being sent on location. But I don’t want to. I want to be boring, stay at home with you and just… be with my family and friends. I don’t need to work, and I’m old enough now that… I don’t want to either.”

“How long’ve you been thinking about this?” Aaron asked.

“Before I went to Paris,” Robert said. “I always thought that would be my last film.”

“I do wish you’d talked to me about it,” Aaron said. “It’s our lives, not just yours.”
“I know,” Robert said. “Unless you think living in the same house as me for weeks, months on end would put an intolerable strain on our marriage and…” Aaron laughed at that. After so long, that was extremely unlikely. “Will you dance with Catherine tomorrow?”

“Course I will,” Aaron said. “I’m just grumbling about it. Though, I never thought I’d dance with a woman on her wedding day.” Robert smiled at that.

“I hate to think of how my life would have gone if I’d never met you,” Robert said seriously.

“Yeah,” Aaron agreed. “I feel the same. But we made… quite a life for ourselves didn’t we?”

“It’s not over yet,” Robert said indignantly. “I’m planning on having a long, long retirement and we never do boring.”

“No, we don’t,” Aaron agreed. “And Catherine might not be nervous about tomorrow, but I sure as hell am.”

“She’s radiant,” Robert said honestly. “This is what she wants.”

“I know. I love you.”

“I love you.” Robert pulled Aaron to him and held him close. Aaron revelled in the touch, he never had got used to it over their marriage, and now it had been so long he doubted he ever would. Sometimes he felt like he could explode with how much love he had for this man.

“Are you sure about retirement?”

“Yes,” Robert said. “Let someone else do the press tours, the overnight flights that no one ever sleeps on, and the thirty hour shoots with no break. I am sure.”

“Okay,” Aaron said. “I hate to say it, but we’re not as young as we used to be.”

“Speak for yourself,” Robert grumbled. Aaron moved, kissed his way down the scar on Robert’s cheek. It had faded somewhat, but not nearly enough for the reminder to vanish. Aaron moved to Robert’s mouth, kissing him deeply. “Go up to bed. I’ve got to write this speech,” Robert said, turning away from him.

“Let me help,” Aaron said. “I should at least put something in. She’s my daughter too.”

“Okay,” Robert said. “You get the beers.” Aaron laughed under his breath and went into the kitchen while Robert sorted out his notes. It didn’t really matter what they wrote down, all that mattered was that the three of them were happy. And that was more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

.... deep breath....

This is it. The END and there will be no more of this universe. Thank you to everyone for reading, Kudos, and commenting. I absolutely wouldn't have got past around chapter 12-15 without the encouragement. (and helpful prodding from
Smittenwithsugden and TurquoiseTerrier.

And I realise this has changed dramatically from how it started, which was the idea of how would they hide their relationship if one of them was rich and famous. Well, it's been a bit of a rollercoaster, hasn't it?? Thank you for sticking with it to the bitter end, and I hope you enjoyed it, and it helped a little during the Robron drought!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!