Summary

Set in A/U of Summer 2015 - Aaron lives alone at Wiley's Farm, he rarely speaks to anyone and he avoids the village at all costs. A curious Robert is determined to find out more about the very mysterious Aaron Dingle...

Notes

Trigger warning - there is a mention of suicide in this chapter.
Chapter 1

Paddy found Aaron, taking his frustrations off on a car, a sign that things were getting to him.

“Aaron, take it easy.” Paddy went to instinctively put his arm on his shoulder, before pulling back at the last minute.

“Paddy, leave me alone.” Aaron walked off so he was out of Paddy’s reach.

“So you’re not inviting for a cuppa then.” He tried to lighten the mood.

“You know where the kettle is.”

“Well, if I make us one, will you come and sit down for ten minutes and then I’ll let you get back to beating the hell out of that car.”

It took another five minutes of convincing before Aaron relented into agreeing. Paddy placed the cups down on the table in the sparsely filled living room of Wiley’s farmhouse.

“Your mum’s worried about you. She asked me to come and check up on you.”

“She doesn’t need to, I’m fine.”

“She misses you, you know.”

“I find that hard to believe when she barely visits.”

“She wants to visit more but every time she comes, you argue with each other.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“I just thought with the news this morning, you might’ve wanted to talk?”

Aaron was puzzled. “What news? My wifi’s playing up so I haven’t been online for a few days.”

“They’ve found a body at the glamping site.”

Aaron went white. “What, how?” He could barely speak.

Paddy was stuttering nervously. “They said the police believe it’s been there quite a few years and they put up photos of some of the clothing found. Victoria’s freaked. Turns out, they match some of Alex’s clothes. Looks like you were right all along.”

“I’ve been telling you all for the past two years but no-one listened.” His anger poured out. “I get blamed for that murderer killing himself. It takes a year before mum can even look at me, never mind, speak to me.”

Paddy looked at him. “She feels guilty, Aaron. But to be fair to your mum, you never told us how you knew. What were we supposed to think?”

“Maybe you should’ve just believed me when I told you what Cameron was capable of and what he’d done. But no… everyone believed his lies. The fact he killed himself should have told you
that he had something to hide. Two people would still be alive now if you’d all listened. Molly
doesn’t have a mother and mum went to prison because of Cameron.” Aaron ranted.

“Aaron, we’ve been over this. Gennie died in the crash, Cameron tried to save her. Your mum
killed Carl because he attacked her.”

Aaron closed up. “Look Paddy, I’ve got loads of stuff to be getting on with. Tell mum I’m fine.”

“Why don’t you come and tell her yourself?”

“I meant it when I said, I’m not going back to the village. It’s too noisy for me.”

“Are the headaches not getting any better? Have you asked Dr Lawson about them?”

“I don’t want to bother him. He’s a busy man.”

“Yes, but he’d want to know. He’s been involved in your case for almost four years, why wouldn’t
he be interested?”

“Paddy, they’re just headaches. Everyone gets them. A few painkillers and I’m fine.” He lied,
knowing nothing touched them.

“Ok, I’ll go but remember I’m always here for you. I’ll pop up in a few days.”

Aaron watched Paddy leave, feeling confused. He always thought he would be pleased when he
was proved right, but it felt empty, much like his life.

He turned back to the car with the hammer, trying to blank out his life and what it had turned into
since the crash.

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of car engine and then the aggressive barking
of dogs. He was curious as Duke and Riley didn’t normally bark if it was someone they knew.

He walked around the corner to find a blond man climbing out of a rather nice, expensive Audi R8.
The man walked up to the gate nervously taking in the two dogs that were baring their teeth at him.

“Off.” Aaron order with authority. The dog stopped barking immediately and headed off to the
other side of the barn, out of sight.

“I love a warm welcome.” The blond man commented in a smarmy, sarcastic manner.

“They’re just protecting my property, which by the way, you’re trespassing on.” He fired back, not
liking this man already.

“This is your property then?”

“Yeah it is. What’s it to you?”

“Well, I don’t think it is your property. It’s mine…actually.”

“I don’t think so mate. If you’ll just leave.” Aaron’s patience was wearing very thin.
“I’ve just bought Home Farm, so I think that makes Wiley’s Farm mine.”

“So you’re the infamous Robert Sugden, living in the big house now.” Aaron had heard from Paddy that Robert had moved back with his new posh family, not that he was particularly interested.

“You really know how to push your luck then.” The blond man was clearly annoyed. “Anyway, you’ve not really helped yourself. I was going to give you 4 weeks’ notice about ending your rental agreement but now I think 2 weeks would be better.”

“I’ve signed and paid for the next six months. You can’t just evict me.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find I can. My solicitor says I can. The agreement you had with Mr Macey is now null and void, so you’ve got two weeks to move out.”

“Here’s the eviction notice.” He handed over the piece of paper for Aaron to take, which he did. He then held it up before tearing it up and throwing it back in man’s direction.

The other man puffed angrily. “You’ll regret that. I’ll be back tomorrow with a new one.” He then walked off, luckily just in time, otherwise he could have seen Aaron breaking down in a fully-fledged panic attack.

Robert climbed in his car, furious at Aaron’s attitude. He wouldn’t get away with it.

He drove into town to see Val at the B&B. She grabbed them a cuppa and they sat outside chatting.

“I need this kept between us.” He reminded her.

“You know me, pet. Discretion is my middle name. So do I not get any of the details?” She asked curiously.

“No it’s just a blip, nothing that can’t be sorted. I just thought some space would make her see sense.”

“Are you sure that’ll happen?”

“Yeah I’ll be back living there for the foreseeable future once Chrissie’s calmed down.”

“I bet Lawrence is pleased, he really doesn’t like you, does he?”

“That’s an understatement.”

“You do know it’s going to get round this village in no time, don’t you? And it won’t be coming from me.”

Val watched as a Subaru pulled up outside David’s shop.

“I wonder what he wants here.” She looked over.

Robert looked over. “Who is it?”

“Aaron Livesy or I think it might be Dingle now.”
He suddenly sat up and took an interest. “Why wouldn’t he be here?” He dug for information, hoping it might help get Wiley’s Farm back.

“I can count on my hand the number of times he’s been in the village since Cameron died.”

“Cameron?”

“Yeah Cameron Murray! Chas and Debbie’s boyfriend… long story. He was a bit of a player but he seemed nice enough. Anyway, Aaron accused him of murdering Alex. Vic’s ex-boyfriend funnily enough. No-one believed him, of course. He’s never been the same since the accident. They just thought it was his brain injury.”

“What accident?”

“Let me finish this story first, then I’ll get to that. Anyway, Cameron managed to brush off the claims but then Aaron accused him of killing Gennie and Carl King a year later. But of course, it was rubbish. Gennie died in a tragic car crash and Chas killed Carl in self-defence. The accusations proved too much and he killed himself back in 2013.”

“God, that’s awful. So what was this accident?” He didn’t know why he was asking.

“Back in 2010, Aaron was driving along a country road with his boyfriend Jackson. They had some kind of row, Jackson lost control and the car crashed and ended up on a railway line. Aaron saw a train coming, managed to jump free but couldn’t rescue his boyfriend. Jackson died instantly and Aaron ended up in a coma for over a year.”

“How can so much happen in one village?” He asked himself.

“So he lives at Wiley’s farm now. Rumour has it, he’s wracked with guilt over Jackson and Cameron. He’s very reclusive, only Paddy visits him. His mum has tried to fix their relationship but she cannot get over Cameron’s death and keeps blaming him for it. It’s a real mess.”

“You do know that the body at the glamping site belongs to someone called Alex Moss, don’t you?” Robert asked. “The police haven’t released the name yet, but I overheard them talking to Lawrence about it.”

Val was shocked at the news. “So Aaron was right all along. I wonder if he had something to do with it.”

“But then why would he bring it up, he would get implicated.” Robert pondered.

“How else would he know? Maybe he has a crystal ball.” She joked.

All of a sudden, their conversation was interrupted by the sight of Aaron storming out of the shop, horror etched all over his face. He got in his car, before screeching off at breakneck speed.
Chapter 2

Robert couldn’t settle. The look on Aaron’s face haunted him. He headed over the shop where he found Alicia and David in deep conversation. He pretended to look around the shelves but close enough to hear what was being said.

“I don’t know what happened, David. I handed him his change for the dog food and he just dropped the bag, and ran out.” Alicia was explaining herself.

“He’s not been right for ages. Maybe he just can’t handle being amongst people. Did you touch him or anything? Since that stuff came out about his dad, he can’t bare people touching him.”

Robert wondered what had happened between Aaron and his dad, but obviously couldn’t ask.

“Well, I might have touched his hand in passing without meaning too. I didn’t really take much notice. He did seem on edge when he came in. He even left his dog food behind.”

Robert approached the counter. “I couldn’t help but overhear about Aaron. I’m heading past Wiley’s Farm now if you want me to drop it in.”

David shook his head. “I would maybe give him a wide berth for a while. He’s better left alone when he’s in one of his moods. He’s got a temper on him.”

He smiled. “I’ll take the risk. I can just drop it and leave. He must need it.”

Alicia nodded. “Robert, that’ll be lovely of you. And when you see Lachlan, can you tell him there’s some hours going at the shop over the next few weeks or so.”

He didn’t want to let drop about his breakup so he just agreed to tell him.

Robert made the ten minute drive up to Wiley’s and as much as he hated to admit it, his interest in Aaron had been heightened even further when he found out he was gay. It had been a while since he’d been with a man, but something about Aaron piqued his interest.

He pulled up just outside the gate and noticed the dogs were tied up at the other side of the yard. He took the risk that they were secure, opening the gate slowly to see. They ran to the end of their chains and then barked frantically. He expected Aaron to appear but there was no sign.

Walking around to the front door of the farmhouse, he noticed that it was slightly ajar. He headed in. “Aaron.” He called out.

He could hear some faint sobbing coming from another room, so he headed through. He found Aaron slumped in the living room against the wall, his head in his hands. “Leave.” He commanded.

“No, not until I know you’re okay.”

“I’m fine. Now you can leave.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“It’s none of your business.”
“Aaron, I saw you come out of the shop. I’ve brought the dog food for you.”

“Leave it on the table on your way out and please stay away from me.” His voice kept breaking with emotions.

Robert stood up, knowing he wasn’t going to get anywhere. “Ok, I’ll leave you alone.” He got up and was almost out the door when he heard a quiet voice calling him back.

“Robert.” He begged as he broke down completely, the sobs becoming louder and more frequent.

Robert knelt down beside him and was about to reach out to place his arm on Aaron’s but within seconds, Aaron had scuttled to the other corner of the room. “Please don’t touch me.”

He backed off, standing up and taking a seat on the sofa. “Ok, just tell me what you need and I’ll do it.”

“I need space.”

“Do you want me to leave you?”

“No, please stay.” Aaron said, leaving Robert confused.

“Do you want a cuppa? A coffee?”

“I’ll have a tea.” Aaron stuttered a few words.

Robert headed through the kitchen, wondering what he’d got himself involved in. It didn’t matter though, something made him want to help Aaron.

He looked in the fridge to find some milk, noticing a lack of contents. He found a small bottle of milk, still in date.

When he went back into the living room, he found Aaron slumped in the chair. His face was now in full view and his lack of colour was shocking, his hands were on his knees shaking.

Robert couldn’t help but be concerned. “Aaron, are you alright? You look awful. You’re white as a sheet and you’re shaking. Are you cold?”

“No, I’m fine.” He huffed back.

“How can I help you if you won’t let me?” Robert asked.

“I don’t need your help.”

“But you just told me to stay. Look I’ll go.”

Aaron backed down. “Look I’m sorry. I just have these funny episodes where I feel ill for a bit. I’ll be ok in a bit.”

Robert took a seat on the opposite sofa. “Is that why you ran out of the shop?”

“Something like that.” Aaron straightened himself up as he was beginning to feel better.
“Have you been to a doctor about it?”

“Robert, I spent a year in a coma so I’ve seen enough doctors to last a lifetime. I’m not going to be some guinea pig so they can work out what’s wrong with me. The neurologist says it’s just a by-product of my head injury. I assume you know all about my accident, considering your change of mood towards me and the fact I saw you looking at me when you were talking to Val.”

Robert was caught on the back foot, shocked by Aaron’s matter of factness. “Yeah she does have a habit of gossiping.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear. I’m village gossip fodder because I keep out of everyone’s way.”

“I can form my own opinions.”

“So are just being nice so I’ll sign away this place.”

“No actually, I can be nice… sometimes.”

“So can I stay?”

“Lawrence won’t allow it. He wants all the Home Farm assets back.”

“Why? I pay the going rate of rent on this place, in fact, too much considering the state it’s in.”

“Because he likes everyone to dance to his tune. God help the people who rent his houses in the village. Look, I might be able to get you a few months before you have to move out but that’ll be all I can manage.”

“Better than nothing I suppose.”

“You’re starting to look better.”

“thanks!”

“So what do you do here all day?” Robert asked curiously, shocked at how easy it was to talk to Aaron.

“This and that. I mainly strip cars and sell the parts on Ebay. Cain brings them up and before you ask, they’re not stolen.”

“A Dingle being involved in legal stuff, who would’ve thought it?” Robert commented hoping he hadn’t wound him up.

To his surprise, a half smile appeared on Aaron’s face. “Yeah, it is a bit weird.”

Robert could feel himself taking in Aaron’s face. Even with his downer of a mood, he had the most gorgeous eyes that you could just get lost in. There was a vulnerability about him, making him want to help him. But the moment was shattered by the ringing of his mobile.

“It’s Chrissie, give me a minute.” He took the call.

“Hi Chrissie…. Calm down.”

“You what… when did all this happen? I was down there before and she was fine.”
“Ok, I’m coming. I’ll be back home in ten minutes.”

He hung up, clearly in shock.

“what happened?” Aaron asked.

“Chrissie wants me back home… family emergency. This could be my chance to get back in. She kicked me out yesterday because she found out I’d kissed her sister at our engagement party last month.”

“Ouch.” Aaron replied.

“Anyway… it seems Alicia has accused Lachlan of sexual assault, which is a bit weird when she only said to be less than an hour ago that there were extra hours going at the shop for him.”

“Well you’d better get off then. Thanks for the tea. “ Aaron said, almost chivvying him out of the door.
Chapter 3

Robert couldn’t work Aaron out but that was for later, now he had to concentrate on getting back into the life he’d worked so hard for.

Chrissie was waiting outside of Home Farm when he pulled up. He got out and gave her a supportive hug. “So what’s happened? What did Alicia say?”

“I don’t know, it’s so confusing.”

Dad’s taken Lachlan to the police station voluntarily. “I want to see Alicia and ask why she’s making these accusations. They’re ridiculous.”

“I know they have to be. I was speaking to Alicia a few hours ago and she mentioned Lachlan working some hours in the shop over the next few weeks. Lachlan’s been at school hasn’t he?”

“yeah as far I know.”

“I think we should stay away from Alicia, as it could be seen as intimidation by the police.” Robert tried to reason with her but got nowhere.

“No, we’re going. Don’t bother coming if you can’t back me up.”

Robert smiled supportively. “I’m here for you, Chrissie.”

They arrived in the village. The shop was still open which puzzled them.

“You’d think they would close up.”

They climbed out of the car and headed in to find a smiling Alicia behind the counter. David was stocking up at the other side of the shop.

“What’s going on?” Chrissie yelled her.

Alicia looked shocked. “What’s wrong?”

“You accuse my son of sexual assault and you ask what’s wrong.”

Robert grimaced. “Chrissie, let’s hear her out.”

David came over immediately. “What the hell are you talking about?”

They were interrupted by the arrival of Lawrence. He rushed in. “Chrissie, calm down. It’s all been a big mistake.”

Chrissie looked around. “Where’s Lucky? Has he been arrested?”

“No, he’s at home. He’s fine. It was an anonymous accusation made online. The police don’t believe it for one minute. Apparently there’s been a hoaxer who’s been sending false crime reports for years and they think it’s them.”
“Well it wasn’t me.” Alicia replied horrified. “Lachlan’s such a lovely lad. Why on Earth would I accuse him of anything like that. I hoped he’d take on some hours in the shop.”

Chrissie was finally calming down. “I’m so sorry, Alicia.”

“You’ve got nothing to feel guilty about Chrissie. It’s this pathetic troll sitting at home making up stories who needs to be arrested.”

“Can they not find out who they are?” Robert asked.

“No, the website doesn’t track IP addresses or no-one would report crime. It’s anonymous so people will come forward.” Lawrence explained.

“I need to see Lucky. He’s the victim in all of this.” Chrissie fawned over her son.

They headed back up to Home Farm.

“Don’t think you’re staying.” Lawrence fired at Robert.

“Chrissie asked me to come and I’m here supporting her like I should be.” He announced, placing his arm around his fiancée.

“Much like you were supporting Rebecca.” He added.

“I told you that was just a drunken kiss. I drank a whole bottle of whiskey. It never went any further. Ask Bex.”

“I did and she says the same thing.” Chrissie commented. “Dad, can we just call a truce? I asked him to be here. He’s moving back in.” She announced before whispering in his ear. “Don’t think this is the end of it though. You’re in one of the spare rooms until I tell you otherwise.”

Robert followed her in the house, thrilled she’d agreed to try again. He was back where he belonged.

The following day, Robert drove up to Wiley’s with the good news he had for Aaron. He found him ripping a car to pieces. The dogs were laid down next to his feet. They started to bark attracting Aaron’s attention.

“Be nice.” He commanded; seconds later they were going up to the gate to greet Robert, tails wagging enthusiastically.

“You have them well trained.” He smiled. He grabbed a piece of paper out of his car. “I feel guilty over trying to throw you out and guess what, I’ve convinced Lawrence to give you a new six month contract.” He handed it over to Aaron who looked over it quickly.

“I’m not interested. £1500 per month. I was only paying £800 before. You should be paying me for looking after this dump. It’s falling apart. So why don’t you take this contract back to your precious family and tell them where to shove it.”

Robert was annoyed. “You really don’t know when to accept what’s being offered, do you? It’s the best offer you’ll get.”
“Well, tell him, I want 50% off and then we’ll talk again.”

“It’s never going to happen, Aaron. He doesn’t negotiate. Take this offer or he’ll have the bailiffs up within the week, clearing your stuff out. He’s not in the best mood at the moment.”

“The precious little grandson got arrested, did he?”

“No, it was all a mistake. Some psycho filed a false report online.”

“The mud still sticks doesn’t it.” Aaron probed.

“No actually. Lucky’s come out of this well. Alicia and David are all over him like a rash. He’s starting work there today so he’ll be out of the house a lot. It gives me a chance to pull out of all the stops to get Chrissie back. It shouldn’t take too long.” He couldn’t help but notice an odd look appear on Aaron’s face.

“Surely, Alicia shouldn’t be taking the risk. I mean it must be all around the village by now.”

Robert became defensive. “No, we’ve managed to contain it. Why would Alicia be taking a risk?”

“How do you know he won’t do something to her.” He replied, not thinking through what he was saying.

“Aaron, what are you on about?” The bits of the puzzle were form a bigger picture in Robert’s head.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it. Look, leave me alone. I don’t want company.” He walked away towards the house.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Robert shouted after him, taking a risk. But Aaron didn’t stop walking.

“I’ll tell the police it was you.” He threatened to get Aaron to listen.

The reaction was the last thing he expected. Aaron turned around. “You’ve left me no choice.” He walked over to Robert and grabbed his hand with every ounce of strength he had. He wrestled him through the gate.

It took Robert a good ten or twenty seconds to wrestle his hand away.

“Right, do one or I’ll make you leave.” Aaron asked calmly.

Robert looked down at his hand, curiously. It was red from the pressure but otherwise it looked fine.

“No, not before you tell me what’s just happened.”

“I’ve asked you to leave…simple and please don’t come back. You’re not welcome.”

“This isn’t over by a longshot. You could have destroyed a young lad’s life and for what?” Robert was riling him up.

He could see the anger building by the redness of his face but in true Robert style he didn’t know when to stop. “Lawrence is a dangerous man and when he finds out, you’ll know about it. You’ve crossed the wrong family. If you have any sense, you’ll be packed up and moved on by tomorrow. I’m sure mummy dearest will have you back. Oh, no I forgot, she’s not speaking to you anymore, is she?”
“Leave it Robert before I do something I’ll regret.”

“What are you going to do? Accuse me of killing someone?” He laughed.

Aaron finally snapped. “Let’s ask Katie, shall we? Oh I forgot… we can’t. She died in a tragic accident a month ago. Or was it an accident? Why don’t you tell me, since you were there.”
Robert panicked and followed Aaron into the farmhouse. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes I do. You were there, I know it was an accident but you were still there. I’m sure Andy would be interested in hearing about it.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m not explaining myself to you. The fact I know should be enough to convince you to help me.”

Robert shook his head. “What do you need help with?”

“I need you to help stop Lachlan. He’s dangerous. He’ll assault her and she’ll end up moving away from the village. I can’t let that happen and you’re in the perfect position to stop him.”

“So you want me to help ruin the life of a young man, who’s never done anything wrong.”

“But he has. I can tell by your shiftiness that this isn’t the first time he’s done something like this. Admit it, he’s a sex-pest.”

“He’s 15.”

“So what! He’s still a danger to women and the longer he’s allowed to be, the worse it’ll get. Trust me, he’s a psycho and this is only going to be the tip of the iceberg.”

“What can I do anyway?”

“You can warn Alicia about his past and tell her she shouldn’t be alone with him.”

“Do you have idea what the Whites will do if they find out? They’ll destroy me. Being kicked out of Home Farm will be the least of my worries.”

“Don’t worry about the Whites. I can take care of them if need be. I’m sure there’s enough dirt on them to stop them in their tracks.”

“Why are you so being so bolshie?”

“Because I’m sick of creeps like Lachlan taking away people’s lives. Cameron killed three people, two of them could have been prevented if someone had believed me. I have to act this time and stop it. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t.”

“You’ve put me in an impossible position and I don’t know if I’m willing to risk what I’ve worked so hard for. Give me some time to think about it.”

Aaron nodded in understanding. He was asking Robert to throw away his life and trust him with no proof being offered.

“I’ll be back in three hours. I’ve got to meet Chrissie and Lawrence for a family lunch in the pub.”

“Ok, I know I’m asking a lot.” Aaron conceded.
Robert arrived to find Lawrence staring impatiently at his watch. “Chrissie and I have other plans this afternoon, so we don’t appreciate you keeping us waiting.”

“I got caught up at Wiley’s. Aaron says the contract is a no-go. He only pays £800 per month now and this is a massive hike. Is there anyway we can reduce the rent a bit?”

“Are you going soft, Robert?” Chrissie asked. “There’s a lot of people in this village going to facing a rent increase. Declan Macey must have struggled to make a profit on his rental portfolio. Anyway why should we single out some weird guy that hangs out all by himself on a farm.”

Robert wasn’t getting anywhere so he changed the subject. “How’s Lachlan?”

“He’s great.” Lawrence piped up. “He’s on a day’s trial with Alicia at the shop.”

Robert felt uncomfortable at the thought. After all, this wasn’t Lachlan’s first foray into being inappropriate with girls. It was the reason they’d moved to Emmerdale in the first place.

“I’ll check on him in a bit, see how he’s doing.”

Chrissie screwed her face up. “Why would you bother, when you barely spend any time with him?”

“Well, that’s because you keep telling me to butt out of anything to do with Lachlan.”

“No, I tell you to butt out of any decisions about his upbringing. Playing a computer game with him is fine.”

“He plays all of those violent games and I don’t like them much.” Robert commented.

“You could make more of an effort.”

Robert couldn’t be bothered with the dressing down he was getting so he got up and went to the bar. “A pint, Chas! Thanks!”

She smiled at him, making him give her an odd look back. “Have I got something on my face?”

“No, I just overheard you saying you’d been up to see Aaron. I was just wondering how he was.” She asked hopefully.

“He seems ok to me but I don’t know him very well, so what’s his usual.”

“Sullen, miserable and moody.” She offered.

“He’s normal then.” He smirked. “Why don’t you go up and see him?”

Chas took him up on his advice, getting Diane to cover the bar while she headed up to the farm.

Aaron was surprised to see his mum pull up in the yard. He wasn’t in the mood for another fight.

“Hey love.” She announced cheerily as she got out of the car.

“What are you doing here?” He asked trying to sound conciliatory. He missed his mum, but he had reasons for keeping her at arm’s length.

“Do I need a reason to come and you? Paddy said you mentioned me visiting sometime so here I
am. I’d love a cup of tea.”

He nodded. “Come in, don’t mind the mess.”

She wandered into the lounge and took a seat next to Duke and Riley who had taken up most of it.

“They’re not the best guard dogs.” Aaron commented as he handed his mum a mug.

She looked at him. “I’ve missed you, love. I’m so sorry I didn’t believe you about Cameron.”

“I miss you too, mum. I’m just glad they’ve found Alex and he can finally be laid to rest. You haven’t let on that I knew to the police, have you?”

“Of course, I haven’t. I would never do that.” She protested. “I heard the Whites talking about this place at the pub. I hear they’re going to put your rent up. You’ll barely be able to afford it, and there’s still your room at the Woolpack. Come home…”

He paused for a second. “I can’t mum. I’m settled here and I’ll fight the Whites so don’t worry about me. You could always visit a bit more if you like.”

“That’d be nice.” She went over to hug him.

“Mum… please. You know…”

She backed off. “That man deserved to die. I feel so guilty that I left you with him. Why don’t you see someone about it? I’ll pay for a counsellor.”

“No, it’s fine. I just want to deal with it in my own way and in my own time. You weren’t to know about Gordon.”

They chatted for a bit longer before Chas headed off back to the pub. Aaron was pleased that he’d made some headway with his mum, he missed his family like mad.

Robert arrived back at Wiley’s a few hours later. He found Aaron sitting petting Riley who was sprawled across his lap.

“I see you’ve got your hands busy.” He joked.

“Where have you been? Thought you’d bailed on me. I’ve decided that I’m being unfair to ask you to get involved. I’ll deal with it. The Katie stuff will stay between you and me. I’ll not breathe a word to anyone.” He explained softly.

“It doesn’t matter now because I’ve sorted it. Alicia won’t be alone with Lachlan any time soon.”

“What did you do?”

“I told her that he can’t be trusted. He’s done it before. There were two girls at his last school, he stalked them both and one day, he touched one of them up. Of course, the parents and girl were all for reporting him to the police, but Lawrence got to them first. He paid a lot of money to buy their silence and promised to move away.”

“The problem with that is that he’s never been punished for what he did, so he just carries on doing it.” Aaron said. “It was Anna and Emily wasn’t it?”
“How did you know?” Robert could barely form his words.

He motioned for Robert to sit next to him. “Sit down a moment and give me your hand.”

Robert was obviously in shock, but went along with the request, offering his hand to Aaron.

“Don’t freak. You’re the only person I’ve ever told about this but I can read people’s minds. Ever since the accident and being in a coma, I’ve been able to touch someone’s hand and see into their past, present and future. When I grabbed your hand earlier I could see that you were thinking about those two girls and Lachlan.”

Aaron took his hand, only to drop it within a few seconds. His face went ashen white as he tried to process what he’d just seen…
Chapter Notes

You'll may have guessed by now that this story is going to be loosely based on the premise of the Dead Zone. Hope it's not too far out there for everyone :}

Robert watched as Aaron got up. “I think it would be better if you left.”

“What? You can’t tell me to leave when you’ve dropped a bombshell on me like this. Then you read my mind and look like you’ve seen a ghost. What’s going to happen to me?”

“You’ll be fine.”

“You won’t tell me, will you? Why? Maybe you’ve made up this cock-and-bull story. I mean who can read people’s minds. It’s like something out of a sci-fi novel.” Robert goaded him.

“Just leave.”

“Not until you tell me what you saw.” Robert pushed him.

“I can’t. It’s better you don’t know.”

Robert put his head in his hands. “You can’t say something like that and not tell me. Am I going to die?” There was panic in his voice.

“No I promise you it’s nothing like that. If I tell you, will you just leave?”

Robert nodded in agreement.

“I saw you having sex with someone.”

“What, who with? Future or past?”

“In the future… I couldn’t see who was with?” Aaron lied.

“So, you’ve freaked out because of that. Was it that bad?”

“Well come on… be honest. I would rather not see you re-enact Fifty Shades of Grey.” He said, quickly covering up the truth.

“I suppose not, but I bet it was pretty impressive viewing.” He smirked as a way of lightening the mood.

“Well you did seem well into it.” Aaron was bright red.

“So was she hot? At least, give me some hope. It wasn’t Chrissie was it?”

“I don’t know and the sooner you let me forget about it, the better. Look, do you mind going? I’ve got some stuff I want to be getting on with.”
Robert headed off, his mind churning over the bombshell, Aaron had dropped. How was it possible for someone to read other people’s minds? Was he lying? Why was he so bloody attracted to him? In some ways, it was the last question that bothered him the most. However much he hated to admit it, Aaron Dingle had got under his skin and he was struggling to stay away from him.

His thoughts turned to the reception he would get back at Home Farm. Alicia was going to let Lachlan down gently without dropping Robert in it, but he feared it wouldn’t work.

When he got back he found Lawrence and Chrissie in deep conversation in the kitchen.

“What’s happened now?” He acted innocently.

“Alicia sent Lachlan back home, saying she didn’t need help after all because Jacob had asked for some hours in the store over the holidays. He’s really upset, he’s stormed up to his room.” Lawrence explained.

“Lucky thinks it’s because of that false police report. Apparently, she was acting all strangely towards him. We’re heading down there later to speak to David and Alicia. We need answers. No one treats Lachlan like that and gets away with it. Dad’s not coming as I’m worried about his heart. You can come and back me up.” Chrissie informed him.

“Don’t you just think we should leave well alone. I mean you could end up blowing Lachlan’s past and for what, some poxy job with no prospects. Surely he can do better than the local village shop.” Robert tried to weasel his way out of further digging on Chrissie’s part.

“Lachlan isn’t a threat to anyone and the sooner everyone knows that the better. We’ve already had to move to get away from those horrible girls at his last school. The only thing he did wrong there was being a teenage boy. Did you see the way those girls were dressed? Talk about asking for problems.”

Robert felt uncomfortable with the victim blaming when he knew full well that Lachlan was the only one at fault. But, as usual, he was scared to say anything.

Robert and Chrissie drove down to the village, just after the shop closed up and knocked on the Metcalfe’s door.

“Hi Chrissie. What are you doing here?” Alicia asked nervously. “David’s out at the minute and I’m busy.”

Chrissie pushed her way in. “It’ll only take a few minutes.”

Alicia moved back to let her and Robert in. He could see her looking at him in confusion.

“Right, I’ll get straight to the point. Why did you let Lachlan go?” She asked.

“As I told Lachlan, Jakey wanted some hours at the shop to earn some extra money and I felt I had to put family first. Wouldn’t you do the same?”

“I’m not buying it.” Chrissie snapped. “We’ve been thinking about setting up a shop on Home Farm Estates. Knock down prices too because we can secure cheaper stock.”
Alicia was annoyed. “So you’re threatening me.”

“No, it’s not a threat.”

Robert looked over at Alicia panicking and made a decision that would change his life. “Chrissie, it was my fault.”

Chrissie glared at him. “Give us a minute.”

“I’ll sort this, Alicia. Don’t worry.” He whispered as he past her on the way out of the door.

They climbed in the car.

“I told Alicia that Lachlan seemed to have a crush on her. I didn’t say anything about Lachlan’s past. I noticed the way he was looking at her in the shop this afternoon and it made me uncomfortable. She had a right to know. And, no, it’s not the way the girls dress, it’s the fact that Lachlan has an unhealthy interest in women and he needs help from a professional.”

He had barely finished his last sentence when he felt a slap across his face. “You dare to cross me. You’ll pay for this.”

“Lachlan will become a monster in the future, if you don’t get him some help now. Trust me!”

“I’ll never trust you again. Have you got any idea what this has done to Lachlan? His self-esteem is shattered.”

“No, his plan to get close to Alicia is shattered. Did those other two girls deserve what happened to them? Their lives are probably in tatters but don’t worry, Daddy Dearest opened his wallet and paid their families off.”

“As soon as we get back to Home Farm, I want all your bags packed. You have an hour. If you ever set foot on the estate again, I’ll make sure you suffer.” She drove him back and ordered him to pack.

He’d packed in under an hour with the help of Chrissie shoving all of his stuff into black bin bags. “Dad wants to see you in the office. I’m going to make sure that Lucky is okay.”

Robert found Lawrence sitting in the office. “You wanted to see me.”

“Sit down and listen to me.” He ordered. “Right, I want all your keys back for the house and car. You are never to bother us again or you’ll regret it.”

“You really think I’m leaving with nothing. Right, you listen to me. I want the car to sell on and I want Wiley’s signed over to me. It isn’t even on the Estate.”

“Why would you want a run down farm?”

“Farms can really turn a profit these days if you know what you’re doing. I’m going back to my roots, following in my dad’s footsteps. I’ve come to realise family are important. So I’ll turf the tenant out and at least I’ll have somewhere to live, far enough away from you, Chrissie and Lachlan. And don’t worry, I have no intention of coming anywhere near this place again. So have we got a deal?”

“You’ll be leaving with nothing.” Lawrence protested.
“Ok that’s fine. I hope Lachlan likes the inside of a prison cell because that’s where he’ll be when the police find out about his unhealthy obsession with girls. And how do you think you’ll cope when you end up behind bars too for blackmail. You didn’t have much fun last time, did you? Let’s see, shall we?” He picked up his mobile as if to call someone.

Chrissie glared at him as he left the office ten minutes later. “Have a nice life, Chrissie. Don’t expect to hear from me again.” He smiled smugly as he left office with the signed deeds to the farm.

Aaron was sitting watching TV when there was a knock at the door. He opened it to see Robert’s car pulled up right outside the door. He looked down to see a pile of bags next to his feet.

“Hi Aaron.” He said cheerily. “I’m sorry to drop this on you but I was hoping I could move in tonight.”

“What are you on about, Robert?” He asked, clearly not wanting to be bothered.

“I’m your new landlord and I need somewhere to stay for a while. I’ve been kicked out of Home Farm and Lawrence signed this place over to me. If you can help me with these bags, I’ll make us a cuppa and tell you all about it.”

Aaron moaned, realising his life had just become more complicated…
“You can’t stay here.” Aaron said as he slammed down the cup of tea.

“Well, I don’t have much choice. I’ve just given up my whole livelihood to protect Alicia, so I could do with a small favour from you. Don’t pay me any rent on this place while I’m here. You can save up some money plus Lawrence can’t kick you out. As far as I’m concerned, you rent this place, I’m just a guest.”

“Guests are normally invited.” Aaron shot back.

“Aaron, please I need somewhere to stay. If I stay at the B&B, my business will be all over the village within hours. You have a few spare rooms, surely. This is a four bedroom house, isn’t it?”

“Yeah I have spare bedrooms but there’s no furniture in them.”

“Well, we can sort that out tomorrow. I should get about 80k for my Audi, so that’ll buy us a bit furniture plus I have some money put aside for a rainy day.”

“You make it sound like you’re moving in here permanently. I can’t be doing with anyone living here. I need my space.”

“It won’t be permanent. I wouldn’t mind doing this place up in case you ever decide to move out and then I can sell it on at a profit. This place has 30 acres of land and could sell for upwards of £1 million if we did it up.”

“We?”

“Sorry slip of the tongue. I meant ‘me.’” Robert was excitedly making plans, leaving Aaron feeling overwhelmed. “But you could always help me do it up. I’ll give you a cut of the profits for the work you do and you could buy a nicer place than this. Why don’t you check how it turns out?”

He offered his hand to Aaron in gest.

“Don’t make fun of me.” He sounded hurt. “Fine... you can have the sofa for tonight, I’m off to bed. We can set some ground rules in the morning.”

Robert nodded. “Thanks. You wont even know I’m here. I’ll stay out of your way as much as I can.”

Aaron came down early next morning to find Robert sleeping in an upright, but slouched position with Riley next to him, all four legs in the air and Duke resting across him.

“Thank you for siding with me, guys.” He whispered to himself as he quietly headed into the kitchen, hoping not to wake them.
As much as he tried, he couldn’t keep the dogs out of the kitchen once he opened the fridge.

“I hope you haven’t woken him up. I could do with at least a few hours of peace.” He told the dogs.

Amazingly, Robert did sleep a couple more hours, finally waking up at 9am. He looked at his watch. “God, I’ve slept in.”

Aaron appeared from the kitchen with a mug of coffee for him. “Slept in for what? I thought you didn’t have a job.”

“Yes, I do. As I explained last night. I’ve got some furniture to buy for this place. I definitely need a big bed.” He said trying to massage the crick of his neck. “I don’t suppose you do neck massages do you?”

Aaron just glared. “Don’t go there, Robert.”

Robert went red. “I’m so sorry. I just getting used to things and I’m always putting my foot in it. Maybe my new hook-up will be an expert massager. I can always dream. I meant to ask how far ahead your flashes normally go?”

Aaron looked at him. “Is your next lay all you can think about? Seriously.”

“No, of course not! I was only joking.” Robert protested. “But you would wonder if you were me… surely? I mean I’m sure you’ve had your fair share of blokes up here.”

He snapped. “Actually no… There’s been no-one since Jackson.”

“How can you live that long without it?” Robert asked in shock.

“Well, it’s a bit hard considering I can’t touch anyone without having flashes. Look, I want to be alone so I’ll just be outside.” Aaron fired back making him feeling instantly guilty. He suddenly realised how hard it had been for the younger man to live with a gift like that.

Robert gave it an hour before heading out to offer his apologies and a bacon sandwich, he’d miraculously conjured up from the random items dotted about in Aaron’s fridge. “Peace offering.” He handed Aaron the plate.

“Thanks!” He managed a smile back. “I’m sorry for snapping all the time. It might take a few days to get used to having company.”

“I’ll stop and think before I say anything in future. I don’t mean to upset you.”

“I know. Most people would freak out completely and stay as far away as possible from me, but you haven’t.”

“I do care, Aaron.” Robert stepped forward slightly without realising, almost as if he was being drawn to him.

They just stood there for a few minutes, taking in each other. Aaron could feel himself closing the gap even more. He didn’t even know what was happening anymore, it’s as though it was out of his control.

Then as quickly as the moment had built, it disappeared with the blaring of a horn and the barking of
a dog. “It’s Paddy.” Aaron announced before jumping back as if nothing had just happened. “He beeps the horn when he needs help to unpack the car. He does my food shopping for me. Do you want to hide or shall we just pretend you’re here about the tenancy?”

“It’s up to you. I’ll go along with whatever.” Robert wasn’t think straight, his mind wandering all over the place about what had almost happened.

Paddy appeared from around the corner. “Hiya.” He announced with his usual cheeriness. “Am I interrupting?” He asked, curious as to why Robert was there.

“No, Paddy. It’s fine. Robert’s just here about the tenancy agreement.”

“I hope he’s not trying to chuck you out.” Paddy said in a semi-joke.

“No, we’ve come an agreement.” Robert replied. “We’ve just got a few issues to iron out.” He shot Aaron, letting him know that the exchange wouldn’t be so easily forgotten about.

He smiled. “I’m going to sort my car and some other stuff out. I’ll see you later.” He said, quietly enough for Aaron to hear whilst Paddy faffed around with the shopping bags in his boot.

Robert came back a few hours later to find Aaron sitting on his laptop, talking to someone. As soon he saw him come in the door. “Look, I need to go. I’ll be in touch soon.” He shut the laptop as if he was trying to hide something.

“Everything ok?”

“Yeah fine. I was just chatting to a friend.” He explained, clearly trying to cover.

“A close friend?”

“I don’t really want to talk about it. Just because you moved in, you don’t have the right to know about every part of my life.”

“Ok, I’m sorry for asking. It was none of my business.”

“It’s ok.” Aaron got up and went to unpack some more of the shopping that Paddy had left.

Robert went over to help. He opened the fridge and motioned for Aaron to hand him some stuff to put away. He handed a few items across but then almost dropped the milk, so Robert scrambled to stop it falling, only to accidentally make contact with Aaron’s hand.

He watched as Aaron pulled away, giving him a confused and uncertain look.

“What did you see this time?”

“You again… but in a different place.” Aaron blushed.

“Same person?” Robert asked curiously.

Aaron just nodded.

“I must say, you’re very pre-occupied with my love life. Is there anything you want to tell me?” He
asked, clearly flirting with Aaron.

“No, why should there be?” Aaron was taking some steps back when he felt Robert moving forward towards him for every step back he took.

“I think you know.” Robert was pushing for more.

“Do I?” Aaron replied slowly. “You tell me.”

You could cut the atmosphere with a knife, the tension was palpable. The silence was finally broken.

“It was you in your flash wasn’t it? With me, I mean?” Robert asked, shaking with anticipation.

There was further silence for a minute whilst Aaron held his gaze before slightly nodding.

“Keep your hands by your side.” He said softly as he leant over until his lips met Aaron’s. He waited for a response before applying more pressure to the kiss. Aaron pushed against his lips without moving his hands.

“There’s nothing stopping you from using your hands.” He grunted at Robert impatiently.

Robert responded by putting his hand around the back of Aaron’s head and pulling him further into the kiss.

The kiss lasted for what seemed like ages before Robert pulled back to see a lustful gaze on Aaron’s face. He could see Aaron wanted to take this further but he didn’t know how to…
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Just a shortish chapter. I should be able to update regularly over the weekend. This story will be getting darker in the next 4-5 chapters.

Robert could see the disappointment on Aaron’s face as the younger man looked away, embarrassed. “I’m sorry. This isn’t fair to you.”

“Aaron, please listen.” he coaxed him to look at him, which he eventually did. “This is more than okay. I’ve wanted to kiss you for days but I didn’t think you’d be interested. I’ll wait for you… til you’re ready.”

“Then what…”

“Then we give it a proper chance, if you want me.”

“Of course I want this.” Aaron was tearing up. “I’ve been so lonely these past few years and finally, you come along. You don’t treat me differently like everyone else would if I told them about my ‘curse’."

“A curse? Is that really what you think it is?”

“Most people would think of it as a gift but believe nothing could be further from the truth. It’s made me a prisoner. I wish I didn’t have it but I do.” He was opening up.

“So what caused it?”

“It’s something to do with my brain injury and the coma. The doctors are still trying to work it out. There’s only a few of them know about this and no-one else can know. I’ll be in a Government facility within hours, tested like some lab rat. You’ve got to promise me.” he started to hyper-ventilate.

Robert put his hand on his shoulder before removing it. “I’ll never breathe a word, I swear. Is it safe to touch you anywhere but your hand?”

Aaron blushed. “Yeah, it’s only hand to hand contact.”

“Oh I see.” Robert realised what Aaron thought and laughed.

“You’ve been with men before, I guess?” Aaron asked curious about his past.

“Yeah, I’ve had a few one night stands with men, nothing serious. I’ve never been interested in taking things into a second night before you.”

“You might not even get into a first night.” Aaron suggested, his mood clearly low. “Why don’t you just find someone who give you what you want?”

“It’s you I want. I don’t want to pressure you into everything. I’m not some sex-crazed person
“Thank you for being patient.” Aaron kissed him gently before pulling him into a hug, making sure their hands stayed apart.

“You’re worth it. Anyway, you can do me a favour. Come shopping with me for a bed tomorrow. I don’t think I can do another two nights on the sofa. Riley and Duke weren’t too happy with my intrusion last night.”

“I wouldn’t agree with that, they seemed very comfy to me. Yes, I’ll come shopping with you as long as it’s not anywhere too busy because I can’t handle crowds.”

“Why don’t we go early for the store opening?” Robert asked.

“Yeah that would be ideal. I don’t want to seem too forward but you can sleep in my bed tonight.”

Robert shook his head, much to Aaron’s disappointment.

“I don’t want you having to sleep on the sofa.”

“I wasn’t talking about me on the sofa. I’ve got a big bed and I’m sure we can stay out of each other’s way.”

“Oh, you mean sleeping in the same bed.” Robert’s face lit up. “Why not and I promise no funny business. I’ll keep to my side.”

Aaron soon gave up hope of space, as within minutes of Robert falling asleep, he started to inch over the bed until he had his arm over Aaron’s stomach. Then the kicking started, not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to keep waking him up. He didn’t care though, it was a novelty to have someone cuddling up to him. Eventually the kicking stopped and he fell into a deep sleep, the best he’d had in months.

Aaron woke up a little disorientated. He could feel a warm breath against the nape of his neck. “Riley, get off.” He shouted before realising he’d made a mistake.

Robert woke up with a start and noticed that he was intruding major time in Aaron’s personal space. He pulled away, putting distance between them. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“Oh, I thought you were the dog.” Aaron turned over so he was facing him. “You’ve been cuddled into me most of the night, but I’m not complaining. It’s the best night’s sleep I’ve ever had.”

“Me too.” Robert moved slightly over the bed, pressing a light kiss to his lips. “Look I’ll make us breakfast. Paddy got everything we need for a fry-up.”

“Even better, let’s have breakfast out.” Aaron announced chirpily.

“You’re chipper this morning.” Robert commented.

“Maybe I just like having you here.”

They finally managed to prise themselves from the bed after a further snuggle before getting up. It was on the way to Ikea that Aaron brought up the subject.
“I’ve been thinking about last night…”

“Don’t worry I’ll be in my own bed tonight. You don’t have to worry about me kicking you.”

“I’ll actually miss you. It was nice having someone to cuddle up to.”

“Well, why don’t you sleep in my room tonight?”

Aaron nodded. “There is one thing I didn’t tell you. I get severe headaches if I get too many flashes. No-one is sure why, but they’re like migraines but a hundred times worse. Nothing touches them.”

The concern registered on Robert’s face immediately. “Did you have them after you touched me?”

“Not really. It’s not every time and tends to be with longer flashes. I get them at other times as well, but not as bad.”

“How long do they last?”

“Anywhere from a minute to ten minutes although they have been lasting longer recently. I had a twenty minute one after touching Alicia’s hand in the shop the other day. That’s why I was such a mess when you got here the other day.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing the doctors can do?” Robert was worried.

“It’s difficult to do anything when they don’t know what’s happening to me.”

“Well, let me know if you have one; at least I can be there for you.” Robert went to touch his hand to show his support, then quickly realised. “Sorry it may take a while to get used to not doing that.”

Ikea wasn’t too busy when they arrived, they headed for some breakfast. As they took a seat, Robert noticed Aaron looking uncertain. “Are you okay? Just say the word and we can get out of here and head home.”

“No it’s fine. I don’t get out much so it just feels weird, but if you’re here, I’ll be fine. We need to get some furniture. I just wish I could pay my way for some of it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve just got £78,000 for my car so let’s live a little. I mean this isn’t exactly the most expensive shop is it?”

“Nah I suppose not.” Aaron said as he tucked into his breakfast.

“So how did it go with your mum?”

“How did you know about that?” Aaron asked suspiciously.

“She overheard me talking to Lawrence at the pub about you and I suggested she should go up and visit.”

“It was nice to see her but she fusses a lot.”

“Just because she cares.” Robert defended her. “You and Paddy are close aren’t you?”

“Yeah he’s like my dad. He’s always been there for me. Even when I battered him, when I was
struggling to admit I was gay, he forgave me and helped me through it all.”

“You don’t have to tell me but I heard David say something about your real dad.”

Aaron took a deep breath. “Can I tell you later at home? This isn’t really the place.”

“Of course.”

“All I’ll say now is that he died last year and believe me, he won’t be missed.” Aaron explained, the topic clearly unsettling him.

“Tell me when you’re ready.”

Aaron stared at Robert. “When did the infamous Robert Sugden become so caring and nice?”

“Maybe it was when I met you.” He looked at Aaron. “Something’s going on between us and I can’t explain it.”

“Let’s not try. Let’s just see where we end up… no pressure.”

“No pressure.” Robert repeated as he leant over and kissed him on the forehead.
Chapter 8

Comic relief was provided a few hours later, courtesy of Jimmy and Nicola who had been roped by Robert to ship all the furniture back to Wiley’s in a Home James Van.

“You’re paying top whack for this, Robert.” Nicola moaned. “You said this was going to be a small job and it’s anything but. You’re lucky everything fit in the van.”

“I’ll give you both a good tip if you quit whinging, Nicola. I’m not quite sure how Jimmy puts up with you.”

Nicola didn’t hold back as she quipped. “Well at least we made it down the aisle. Not sure we can say the same for you and Chrissie. I mean she’s obviously thrown you out.”

“That’s none of your business.” Robert wasn’t impressed at the comment.

“Well it’ll be the business of the village soon enough and you’ll be dealing with endless gossip and questions.” Jimmy added his opinion

“No doubt, Chrissie will have everyone filled in before the gossip gets around.” Robert replied. “I’ll get Aaron to give us a hand, the sooner we can get this stuff unloaded the sooner, I get rid of you two.”

Aaron appeared. “What’s all the sniping about?”

Nicola looked at him. “It seems like ages since I’ve seen you in the village. Everything ok?”

“Well it was until I got stuck living with this muppet.” He announced, clearly annoyed.

“Yeah actually, Robert. Why are you living here?” Nicola asked, just letting Aaron and Jimmy do all the hard work.

“I got it this place signed over to me from the Whites if I agreed to leave quietly. I needed somewhere to live and Aaron’s just going to have to put up with me. I mean I’m not going to fork out for a B&B when I can live here free of charge.” He made his point.

“I suppose not. Maybe Lawrence will give me the Estate Manager’s job now. I assume you’re not working for them anymore.”

“No I think that ship’s sailed.” He smiled. “Look, knock yourself out. If you want to work for them, I won’t stand in your way. Just a word of warning, Lawrence and Chrissie aren’t the easiest people to work with.”

She laughed. “I think I can handle them considering some of the people I’ve worked for. I mean I live with Jimmy. If you can deal with that, I can cope with anything.” She pointed at a clueless Jimmy.

He smirked. “Fair point.”

“Right, now we just need to put them together.” Robert looked at Aaron as soon as the van was unloaded and they were alone.
“Look, why don’t you just watch and I’ll ask if I need help.”

“Ok, I’m sure I can cope with that.” He suggested flirting as he dragged him in a kiss.

After three hours of Aaron slogging his guts out, the bedroom furniture was all assembled as well as the dining room table and chairs.

“This looks amazing.” Robert looked around the room. “The bed’s huge. Plenty of space to stretch out and avoid each other.”

Aaron smiled knowingly. “Well I guess I’m in here tonight. Maybe Duke and Riley will take my bed so we can have some peace and quiet.”

It started out as a slow and passionate kiss, but things started to build within seconds. Robert could feel his cardigan coming off, closely followed by Aaron trying to pull his t-shirt over his head. He pulled back in response.

“You do know what’s happening here?” he asked in a husky voice.

Aaron was clearly distracted as he was trying to undo Robert’s belt. “Shut up…” Those were the last words spoken as the rest of the clothes soon formed messy heaps on the bedroom floor as Robert ended up on his back resting on the new mattress as Aaron straddled him…

“Well that brings a new meaning to the game Twister.” Robert smirked as he propped himself up on his elbow, looking at Aaron who was lying next to him, the duvet in disarray.

Aaron blushed. “It does, doesn’t it? All of the effort was worth it though. I’ve missed it, not just the sex, but being close to someone.”

“It was amazing.” Robert kissed him gently before panicking slightly. “You didn’t get any flashes, did you?”

“No, none.”

“Good…”

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by a loud banging on the door. Robert jumped up and grabbed his clothes, putting them on as he descended the stairs.

Aaron followed and headed into the living room, taking a seat on the sofa.

“Paddy!” Robert exclaimed as he opened the door. “You’re here to see Aaron, I take it. Come in!”

Paddy didn’t even respond at first, the intense glare said it all. “Well I’m certainly not here to see you, am I?”

“Hi Paddy.” Aaron announced cheerily, well aware he was soaked in sweat.

“Are you ok?” Paddy asked concerned. “You look….”

“Yeah I’ve just been putting some furniture together.” He was clearly distracted, worrying the vet would put two and two together and get the right answer.
Paddy had obviously been given the full story by Nicola, in fact most of the village probably knew by now about the unexpected living arrangements.

“Why can’t he put his own furniture together? I’ve already had to listen to Nicola moaning in the pub about the amount of stuff Jimmy and you had to unload. Aaron, you do have rights as a tenant. Why don’t I pay for some legal advice for you? Just because he’s the landlord, doesn’t mean he can move in.”

“Don’t worry about it Paddy. He’s reduced my rent while he does this place up so I can save up for someone else.”

“Why don’t you come back to the village? Your old room in the pub is still there or you could stay with me, Rhona and Leo until you get sorted.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine here. I like it up here and Robert knows to give me plenty of space. He won’t last long living on a farm.” Aaron explained, not wanting to give away even the slightest hint of what was really going on.

He changed the subject. “So how are things?”

“Fine…” Paddy replied nervously. “I need…a favour.” He stuttered. “Rhona and me are talking about having another child. But she’s not keen due to her age and Leo’s condition, so we have talked about it and we’ve decided to adopt.”

Aaron broke into a smile. “That’s amazing. You’re great with Leo and you’ve helped me through so much. So what can I do?”

“I know it’s asking a lot but I was wondering if you would be willing to meet the social worker down the village to give us a reference… you know… tell her we’ll be fab parents.”

“You don’t need to ask. You’ll pass with flying colours, Paddy.”

“Now all we need is a positive reference of Tess.”

“Who’s Tess?”

Paddy was caught off guard. “She’s Leo’s teacher.”

“I’m sure she’ll give you a five star review. She’ll see the way you are with Leo.”

“So when do you want me?”

“How does tomorrow at 2pm sound? She’s seeing Marlon at the pub so you could meet her there afterwards.”

“That’s fine. Maybe I could catch up with mum at the same time. She’ll be surprised. How’s she holding up after news of Alex came out? She seemed okay when she popped up yesterday but I’m worried that she’s hiding stuff from me.”

“She’s not bad. It’s obviously praying on her mind and she does feel guilty that she didn’t believe you and put a stop to it. I think it brought the Gordon stuff back too.”

Just then, Robert appeared with a pot of tea for them. “I made you both a brew.”

Paddy glared at him. “It’s okay, I need to go now. So Aaron, thanks a lot. I’ll text you tomorrow to confirm the time.”
Aaron got up and took Paddy by surprise by going up to hug him. “You’ll be fine.”

Paddy accidentally brushed his hand against Aaron’s as he was pulling away to leave. Aaron excused himself. “I just need the toilet.” He rushed out the room, but not fast enough to arouse suspicion.

Robert smiled. “I’ll show you out.”

Paddy was annoyed as he followed Robert out of the house. “You’d better not upset him, otherwise you’ll have me to deal with. He’s up here alone but that doesn’t mean that me and the rest of the Dingles aren’t watching his back.”

“I’m sure he can look after himself, Paddy. I’m here to live, not to cause trouble. He knows where we stand.” He tried to calm him down.

“I’ve never trusted you, Robert. You’re always out for everything you can get. Just so you know I’ll be checking in everyday to see he’s ok.”


Robert headed back into house. “I don’t think we’ve hit it off yet.” He joked about Paddy, only to be met with deafening silence.

He walked into the living room, only to find Aaron passed out on the sofa…
“Aaron, Aaron… are you okay?” He shouted in panic as he tried to shake him awake. It took a few minutes before there was a response.

Aaron groaned as he opened his eyes, before quickly shutting them again. “The light… shut the curtains.”

Robert did as he asked before taking a seat next to him. “Another headache?”

He just nodded in response. “I’ll just sit here quietly until it goes away.” He started to rub Aaron’s upper back to try and relax him.

It took fifteen minutes for him to become more responsive. He managed to open his eyes, squinting at first. “It’s going.”

“What happened?”

“I made contact with Paddy’s hand and then I got a flash. I wish I hadn’t. He’s having an affair, Rob.”

Robert sat back in amazement. “Who with?”

“I don’t know her.”

“Can you tell if he’s already started the affair or if he’s about to? Maybe you could stop him making a mistake.”

“I can’t be certain but I would say it’s been going on for at least a few weeks. I got a few flashes of them. Some of them I’d rather forget.”

“I didn’t know that Rhona and him were unhappy. I mean they’re planning to adopt.” Robert commented.

Aaron couldn’t hide his annoyance. “They’re happy as far as I know. He’s never given any indication of problems. I can’t let him adopt, he’ll wreck the kid’s life. I need to do something about it.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Well he’s asked me to give him a reference to the social worker tomorrow afternoon at the pub. I guess, it’ll have to be a bad one. I look up to him and he’s done this. I can’t get my head around it.”

“If it’s any consolation I know what it’s like. Jack and Sarah both cheated on each other.”

“Yeah and look how that ended.”

“I hope the social worker doesn’t drop me in it. I just need to work out who this woman is.” He thought for a minute. “He was a bit weird when he mentioned Leo’s teacher. Have you got your laptop on?”
“Yeah!”

“Right, check out the website for Connelton Primary School. They often have photos of the teachers.”

It took a few minutes to confirm his suspicions that he was sleeping with Leo’s teacher. “Mrs Tess Harris. Oh my god, I wonder if she’s married too. Maybe she has kids.” The discovery hurt Aaron even more. “I’m going to have it out with him.”

“You can’t. He’ll want to know how you found out.” Robert replied, pulling him into a much needed hug.

“Thank you for being there for me.” Aaron replied, before being caught off guard by Robert’s response.

“I’ll do anything for you. You’ve blown me away, Aaron. Surely you know that.” Robert explained with sincerity.

“Do you really mean that?” Aaron maintained eye contact with him.

“Every word… no-one comes close and it actually scares me. It’s been less than a week, how am I going to feel in months, years.”

“Maybe you’ll be sick of me.”

“I don’t think that’ll ever happen.”

“There’s so much you don’t know about me.” Aaron replied.

“Same here but I would like to find out.” Robert closed the distance between their lips.

After dinner, when they were sat around the table, Robert brought up his worries. “Aaron, I think you should see someone about your headaches.”

“I already have, there’s nothing they can do.”

“Get a second opinion. I’ll pay.”

“I’ve had the second and third opinions. There’s nothing they can do. I just have to live with it.”

“There might have been some research since you last saw the doctor. Maybe there’s some new treatment.”

Aaron pushed back the chair, angrily. “Leave it, will you Robert. I’m going to bed. I need some space.”

Robert wasn’t convinced. He felt like Aaron was hiding something but at the moment, there was no way he would be opening up. He decided to watch some TV and catch up on some emails from puzzled business contacts. It would keep his mind off his fight with Aaron.

Next thing he knew, he felt a hand on his shoulder. “Rob, wake up or you’ll get a crick in your neck.”
“What time is it?” Robert muttered. “I must’ve fallen asleep when I was watching.”

“It’s 11. Why don’t you come to bed? I’m sorry about before. It’s just I get frustrated sometimes when my head’s been bad. I wish someone could come along and take this curse away, but it’s not that easy. So can we just agree to move on?”

“Yeah, on one condition. You let me come to the pub tomorrow with you when you speak to the social worker. I think Vic’s on tomorrow so I’ll see if she can meet for a chat while she’s on her break.”

“Ok, that’ll be nice.”

“I’ll just watch from a distance so we can keep up the pretence.”

Aaron smiled as he nodded towards the bedroom. “We were disturbed this afternoon, maybe we could pick up where we left off.”

Robert grinned. “Like I’m going to turn down an invitation like that.”

Paddy was bouncing around like an eager puppy as he greeted Aaron outside the Woolpack. Robert had headed into the village earlier to have some lunch and to chat to his sister while she was on shift. Aaron walked the mile or so down to the pub.

“I’m so nervous.” The vet commented. “Are you ok? Rita’s lovely. She’s just in the back room waiting for you.”

Aaron took a deep breath as he walked through the pub, offering a brief smile and wink to Robert without anyone seeing.

Rita was having a cup of tea and being pestered by Marlon about whether she wanted anything to eat. She turned him down.

“Aaron.” She got up to shake his hand before Marlon interrupted.

“He doesn’t like anyone too much in his personal space.” He whispered.

Rita backed off with a smile. “Nice to meet you, Aaron. Mr Dingle, would you mind if Aaron and I could have a chat alone.”

Marlon left.

“I’m sorry about him and the whole handshaking thing. It’s about my dad. I think Paddy said he’d told you about it.”

“Yes he did. If anything I do makes you uncomfortable, please let me know. This is all very informal, Aaron. I just need to talk to you about Paddy and Rhona’s suitability to adopt a child. It seems you are in the perfect position to tell me about him.”

“Paddy has been amazing since I moved back to the village, he’s supported me through so much even when I battered him when I came out as gay. Most people would have kicked me out or called the police, but Paddy stuck by me through everything. Even when the stuff came out about my dad, he was there for me every step of the way.”

“He sounds like he’s been a great support, Aaron. What about Rhona?”
“She’s like the mum, I wish I had. I mean I get on with my mum now, but it hasn’t always been that way. Both Paddy and Rhona have been nothing but supportive of me, which is what makes this so hard.”

Rita showed concern as she sensed Aaron’s uncertainty. “Makes what hard? Anything that you tell me will be in the strictest confidence.

He took a deep breath. “Rhona and Paddy are having problems in their marriage and I don’t think they should be adopting at the moment. I don’t even know if they’ll be staying together.”

“Can you tell me anymore because they seem happy?” She probed, but in an empathetic manner.

“Rhona is happy as far as I know but Paddy clearly isn’t. I found out yesterday he’s having an affair. I’m not willing to say who with, but it’s been going on for a few weeks. When Rhona finds out, she’ll leave him.”

Rita gave him a supportive smile. “Aaron, I really appreciate you being honest with me. It must’ve taken a lot to tell me.”

“I love Paddy. He’s my dad, but I can’t risk a child being brought up in a broken home like I was. It’s not fair. Can I go now?” He was clearly upset.

“Yes, of course. Thank you again.”

He walked out of the room through the pub, indicating to Robert that he could do with a lift home.

He’d almost made it to the car when he heard heavy footsteps on the gravel behind him. “How did it go? Of course, it went fine.” Paddy giggled.

“Can I talk later? I’ve got a headache coming on. Robert’s going to drive me back home.”

“Look, I’ll drive you and you can tell me all about it.” Paddy suggested, clearly not willing to take no for an answer.

“No, it’s fine. I just want to be left alone.” Aaron could feel himself welling up. It didn’t take Paddy long to notice the tears.

“Aaron, what’s wrong? Did it go ok? Did Rita say something?”

Something made him snap. “No, she didn’t say anything. Can we just leave it?”

“Did you say something to her?”

“Leave it, Paddy.”

“What did you say? If you said something bad, I have a right to know.”

“Paddy… please.”

“You have, haven’t you? If you’ve wrecked our chances of becoming parents, I’ll never forgive you.” It was the biggest mistake Paddy could make.

Aaron let rip, all his upset and anger at Paddy’s betrayal pouring out at once. “Me… wrecking your chances. That’s a joke.”
Paddy lost it and pushed Aaron for me information. “What did you do?”

“I told her… that you weren’t fit to raise a child. You’re having an affair with Leo’s teacher and you think I’d let you adopt a child. Are you tapped or something?”

Paddy couldn’t process it. “What are you on about?”

“Mrs Harris, isn’t that her name? How long has it being going on?”

“I’m not having an affair.”

“Don’t lie, Paddy. I know all about your sordid meetups in dark car parks.” He fired back.

“How could you know?” Paddy asked as he staggered back in shock.

“I saw you.” was the answer given by an approaching Robert who had watched the whole exchange from a distance. “You and her in the back of her Peugeot.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. I will be updating my other stories in the next few days :)
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

There are brief mentions of cancer and homophobia in this chapter. Nothing too graphic though.

Aaron turned away, motioning for Robert to follow him to the back room of the pub that was now empty.

Paddy turned on Robert. “It wasn’t me. I would never cheat on Rhona.”

“It was definitely you. I rang the school and Tess was more than happy to fill me in.”

“Why would she do that?”

“So it’s true then.” Aaron continued. “Don’t blame, Robert. You’re the screw up, Paddy. Is that why you agreed to adopt because you feel guilty.”

Paddy was caught on the back foot. “No, of course not. I want to adopt.”

“You’re supposed to be my dad. You know I was all set to tell this social worker what a top bloke you were and how lucky it’d be to have a dad like you.”

“It doesn’t affect me as a dad.”

Aaron pointed out the obvious. “You’re having an affair. You’re betraying Rhona, Leo and any other kid that came along. You’re going to wreck all their lives and you can’t even see it.”

Paddy was becoming annoyed with Robert’s continued presence in the room. “This is between me and Aaron if you don’t mind.”

Aaron nodded for him to leave.

“I tried to end it, Aaron. I’ll end it now and you can go back and tell the social worker you made a mistake. I don’t want anyone getting hurt especially Rhona.”

“Well you tried and failed on that one.”

Paddy exploded. “Says the man who drove an innocent man to his death.” As soon as he said it, he knew he was wrong. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean it.”

Aaron’s face crumpled as he went towards the door and opened it. “Get out.”

Paddy did as he asked, only to stop as he was leaving. “I need to be able to trust you not to tell Rhona.”

“You don’t even need to ask, I don’t betray people. It’s a pity the same can’t be said for you, isn’t it?”

As soon as Paddy’s left. He walked over and punched the door.
The noise brought Diane rushing in. “What’s going on?” She looked at the door and then Aaron who was nursing a bruised hand.

Before he could warn her off, she took his hand to survey the damage. He pulled it away instantly.

“Are you ok?” She could see the panicked look on his face.

“Yeah I’m fine. I just need to get out of here.” He practically ran out of the back door where Robert followed him. “I need to go home.”

Aaron began to feel his headache starting. “Can you put your foot down? I need to lie down. My head’s really bad.”

Robert had to help him into the farmhouse. “You lie down on the sofa. I’ll close the curtains. I hate seeing you like this.”

“Rub my back again, that helped a bit last time.” Aaron explained, as he clamped his eyes shut, clearly in agony.

It took over 30 minutes for Aaron to recover this time, much to the concern of Robert. “It’s getting worse, Aaron. Please let me call a doctor. There must be something we can do for you. I can’t watch you go through this all of the time.”

“I need to get away for a few days. I’m going to take your advice and see the specialist again to see what he can do.”

“Great idea. I’ll get packed and we can leave right away. What about Riley and Duke?”

Aaron shook his head. “No, I need to go alone. Anyway you need to stay here.”

“To look after the dogs. I don’t think so.”

“No, to look after Diane. This attack was triggered by touching her hand. Robert, her cancer’s back, this time in her stomach and if she doesn’t get treatment soon, she’ll die. You need to find away of convincing her to go to see the GP, as soon as you can.”

Robert was struggling to take in the news. “Okay… I’ll convince her but why don’t you wait until I can come with you. In a few days!”

“No, Robert… please understand… I need to go.”

“At least tell me where.”

“No, I can’t. I know you’ll come looking for me. Diane needs you more than I do. I’ll be back in a few days and I’ll text you to let you know I’m okay.”

Robert fought him for a while but knew he had to let him go alone. Aaron headed off in a taxi, not happy driving with his headaches.

He jumped into his car and headed into the village. Diane was serving behind the bar, and weirdly, now he knew, he could see that she looked pale and tired. He took a seat at the bar to keep her company.
“How’s Aaron?” Diane was concerned.

“He’s okay. He’s gone away for a few days, to get away from me, no doubt.”

“He’s not impressed with you moving in, I bet.”

“How could anyone resist living with me?”

“Well obviously Chrissie did.” She joked. “Sorry I’ve probably touched a nerve there.”

“Diane, are you okay?”

“Yeah I’m fine… why?” She asked curiously.

“It’s just when I came into the pub there, I noticed you looked a bit washed out.”

“Thanks for that, Robert. How to make me feel better.”

“So you are feeling ill?”

“Well I can’t say I’ve been 100% myself lately. I think all the shifts at this place are getting to me. I’ve decided to ask Chas if we can get some help in.”

“Maybe that would be a good plan.”

Diane excused herself to go and serve a customer while Robert popped outside for a moment to make a call.

He came back in. “Diane, are you free at 11am tomorrow?”

“Yeah why?”

“You’ve got an appointment with Dr Cavanagh. I’m worried about you and it would put my mind at rest if you would go for a check-up. I’ll pick you up at 10.30 and drive you in.”

Diane tutted. “What’s gotten into you, Robert? You’ve changed since you and Chrissie split up. I know it’s only been a few days but you’re much nicer now. Between you and me, I find her and Lawrence a bit snotty and Lachlan is just strange.”

“So you’ll go.”

“Yeah if it will keep you quiet.”

Robert headed to the pub the following morning, not expecting Chas to be there too. It was the last thing he needed. He wasn’t in the best mood as it was, having missed Aaron to cuddle up to during the night. At least he’d texted to say he’d arrived there safely, wherever there was.

“Where’s Aaron?” She asked him directly.

“What do you mean?”

“Finn said he’d driven him to the train station yesterday.” She explained herself further.
“He’s gone away for a few days.”

“To get away from you, no doubt. Where’s he gone?”

“Look Chas. I’m not his PA. I don’t know where he’s gone. He didn’t tell me and it’s none of my business.”

“I need to speak to him. Paddy’s upset with him for some reason and he won’t tell me. So I need to ask Aaron about it.”

“Well don’t look at me.”

Robert was relieved when Diane appeared from the back room. He couldn’t put up with much more of an interrogation off Chas. He felt his stomach flip with nerves when he realised that Diane wouldn’t be getting good news today. He just hoped Dr Cavanagh would spot that something wasn’t quite right.

“Let’s go!” He put his arm around Diane, leading her to the car to make the short drive to Hotten. She noticed his new car.

“This is a step down from the Audi. Did they take that off you too?”

“No I sold it so I do up Wiley’s with the money. I’ve always wanted a classic Porsche so guess what.”

“I was wondering what actually happened between you and Chrissie? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“It was a few things. Basically she found out, I’d had a fling with her sister, Bex and I said something about Lachlan that annoyed her.”

She shook her head. “Will you ever learn? Why can’t you ever settle for what you’ve got? You’ll never be happy.”

“I’m happy now… actually.”

“What makes you happy about living at Wiley’s? You’ve never been interested before, so what’s changed? Aaron can’t be easy to live with.”

“He’s no bother to be honest. I just give him space when he asks for it. Simple…really.”

“I thought he would go off it when I heard you’d moved in. He’s not exactly one for company, not since all that stuff with Cameron. He’s a bit of lost soul.”

“I don’t see that to be honest. He’s different when you get to know him.”

“And you know him?”

“I’m getting to know him.” He said without giving too much away.

Diane’s expression changed. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“That might be a bit of an exaggeration but we do get on.”
“Robert, it’s okay if you like him. I’m not Jack.”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “I don’t get you.” He pulled up in the GP surgery’s car park and turned to her to listen as she explained.

“Jack told me about the time he found you and that farmhand in your room. He said you were obviously confused about your feelings but he sorted it out.”

Robert reacted badly. “Did he also tell you that he strapped me after he found us and that he sacked the farmhand on the spot? He would’ve never accepted me for who I really am.”

Diane rubbed his arm in support. “He was wrong for what he did, but he was old fashioned. He didn’t understand. Maybe he would’ve understood more now, if he’d still been around.”

He changed the subject. “Let’s discuss it later. We’d better get you in.” He opened the door for her and they headed in.

Twenty minutes later, Diane appeared, her expression giving away that she knew something wasn’t right. Although Robert knew it was going to happen, it didn’t make dealing with it any easier as he hugged an emotional Diane…
Chapter 11

Things moved quickly over the next few days as Diane was admitted to hospital for emergency surgery to remove the cancer. She would then be started on a chemotherapy regime over the next few weeks to mop up any remaining cells. The doctors were hopeful but said it could be a very different story if she’d been diagnosed much later.

Robert, Andy and Victoria were regular visitors to the hospital although the two brothers had managed to avoid each other so far, their relationship had never recovered since Katie’s death.

“Robert, can I have a word?” Andy stopped him a few days later as their paths crossed whilst visiting the hospital.

“Yeah of course.”

“Chrissie has been saying some things about you having an affair with her sister. Is it true? Is that why you broke up?”

Robert paused for a moment, knowing this would have repercussions. “Yeah it’s true.”

“So Katie was right?” He responded angrily. “You made us all think she was crazy. Why?”

“Andy, why would I admit to having an affair? She wouldn’t leave it alone. Who would out themselves?”

“But she died, thinking I didn’t love her. I told her she was obsessing over you.”

Robert thought back to the day at Home Farm when Katie asked her to meet him at one of the outbuildings. He went, not knowing what to expect. She accused him of having an affair with Rebecca and that she was going to tell Chrissie about his dirty little secret. He’d locked her in a room whilst he tried to dissuade from her plan. But as she had looked for another escape route, she’d fallen through some floorboards, plunging to her death.

In response, he’d covered his tracks, wiping her phone for any traces of the messages and cleaning up the scene so no-one would’ve known he was ever there. As much as he managed to clean up the evidence, he couldn’t wipe away his guilt at what had happened. It ate away at him every day.

“Andy, I am so sorry about what happened to Katie but surely you understand why I didn’t admit to having an affair. I thought we had put this behind us.”

“Put it behind us… my wife is dead. How can I put that behind me?” Andy replied. “You’ll never change, will you?”

“I have changed. Leaving Chrissie was the best thing I ever did.”

“Definitely financially… how you came out of the relationship with anything, I’ll never know? And why… a farm? You’ve never shown any interest in farming. You didn’t deserve her.”

“Andy, you don’t know the first thing about Whites, so don’t pretend you do.”

“Well, I’m going to find out as I’ve been given the job of Estates Manager.”

Robert was shocked, but held it back. “Good luck with that one, you’ll need it. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to see Diane.”
He headed into her side room. “Hi, how are you?”

“I’m doing ok. Thank you for making me go to the doctors. You saved my life, Robert.”

“No, I didn’t… the doctors did that.”

“You’ve changed… and we never did finish that conversation the other day.”

“Which one?” He played it down.

“The one about Aaron. I was right about you two, wasn’t I?”

Robert decided not to deny it. “Yeah you are right. But we want to keep it quiet for now, so would you mind not telling anyone.”

“My lips are sealed but for what it’s worth, being with him seems to be agreeing with you.”

“He means a lot to me, Diane and I can’t risk losing him.”

“I hope he doesn’t mind you visiting all the time.” She pointed out. “You don’t need to come every day, you know. Although I must admit, it’s a nice break from Val.”

“Aaron’s away for a few days.”

“Anywhere nice?”

“I don’t know to be honest. It’s complicated.”

She nodded in understanding. “No need to explain. I’m happy for you, Robert. You always seem to be searching for something and now it looks like you may have found it. Don’t throw it away.”

“I won’t…” He replied with a smile.

Robert was starting to worry about Aaron when he didn’t return his calls two days a row. He’d been gone almost a week when he thought about trying to get the contact details for his doctor. But he didn’t know how to find out.

By the weekend, he was planning his next move when the door opened and in walked Aaron. He looked totally different as if a weight had been taken off his shoulders. He beamed as he saw Robert. “I’ve missed you.” He ran up and hugged the older man.

“Where have you been? I’ve been worrying when you didn’t text back.”

“Sorry, make me a cup of coffee and I’ll explain more about it.”

“Ok, I went to the clinic and they did loads of tests. Anyway, they’ve come up with a treatment. It’s experimental and it works by supressing brain function in the area that causes my flashes.”

Robert grinned. “so no more flashes… or headaches?”

“As long as I stay on this medication, I won’t be getting any. It could have side effects we don’t know about yet, but anything is worth a go.”

Aaron nodded before grabbing his hand. “Sorry I didn’t keep answer your texts or calls. It was very full on.”

“I wish you’d let me come with you.”

“I was better off alone.” He replied, before changing the subject. “How’s Diane?”

“She’s doing great. She’s had her surgery already and they’re planning her chemo in the next few weeks. She should be out in a few days. Thank you for saving her life.”

“I’m just glad I touched her hand when I did.”

“One thing though… she knows about us. She guessed. But she won’t tell anyone.”

Aaron rubbed Robert’s knee. “It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

“Look it’s late… why don’t we go to bed. I’ve missed having someone to cuddle up to.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Robert smiled before grabbing his hand and pulling him upstairs.

Chas arrived early the next morning, knocking hard on the door, waking them both up. Robert jumped up, and looked out of the window. “It’s your mum.”

Aaron groaned, half asleep. “Tell her to go away. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“I didn’t either… remember I was there. Look, I’ll go and cover but you’ll have to get up.” He kissed him on the cheek.

The moment he opened the door, Chas barged in. “I want to know where Aaron is. He’s not answering his phone and he’s not told anyone where he is.”

Robert smirked. “The clue is in your last sentence. No-one knows where he was, including me.”

“Was?” She asked.

“Yeah he got home late last night. I heard him getting up before so have a seat. Do you want a coffee?”

“Not from you!” She looked at him in disgust. “Aaron can make me one when he gets up.”

“I can see where he gets his charm from.” Robert muttered sarcastically.

Chas leaned forward from her seat at the table. “what did you just say?”

“Nothing, it’s not important.”

“If you dislike him so much, why don’t you leave him be and move out. It’s not like you haven’t got the money. Chrissie has been telling everyone who will listen what a love-rat you are and how you took them for loads of money.”

“I knew it wouldn’t take her long. She’s probably loving it.”
“You slept with her sister. Do you blame her? You do like to keep it in the family, don’t you?”

“Look, I want nothing more to do with that family so Chrissie can do what she wants. I’m sure they’ve still got millions left so they won’t be on the breadline anytime soon. I mean let’s face it, I only got this place plus my car. It’s not exactly the Ritz.”

“Well, Aaron’s put with it for years so it can’t be that bad. Anyway he’ll be out of your hair soon if I have my way. His room at the pub’s being redecorated so he can come home.”

“This is my home, mum.” He smiled at her, before hugging her. “I’m settled here so I won’t be coming back to the village.”

“But he’s going to turf you out soon.”

“No, he’s not. We’ve come to an understanding.” He shot a look at Robert.

“I’ll have that cup of tea now, love.” She asked Aaron. “Maybe we can have some privacy.”

Robert took the hint and left the room… “I’ll take the dogs for a walk.”

“Sorry I didn’t let you know where I was. I went to see Dr Wilson. He gave me some new tablets to stop the headaches. They’re working really well so far.”

“That’s great.” She smiled. “I’m glad he’s still looking after you.”

“What’s happened between you and Paddy? He’s in a right mood. He said you’d had an argument but wouldn’t say what about.”

He clamped up. “I can’t say, mum. It’s between me and him.”

“Why don’t you invite him up here? I hate to see you two arguing.”

“I think it would be better if he made the first move as I’d rather not have him here if he’s not speaking to me.”

“You might be waiting a while. I’ve never seen him this mad in ages. Even Rhona can’t work out what’s wrong. The adoption isn’t going ahead anymore which doesn’t help. Apparently, someone told the social worker they wouldn’t be suitable parents.”

“That’s weird.” Aaron suggested.

“Yeah I thought so. I mean who would do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Except you do! It’s pretty obvious it was you. Did you bring up Rhona’s pill addiction because she’s worried that you did? She’s not angry with you, just curious why you did it? So why did you?”

“It’s complicated and I’m not going to talk about it. I’d rather forget it happened to be honest.”

“You’ve wrecked any chance they have of kids. I think you owe Rhona an explanation because she is seriously beating herself up. Paddy’s mood is only making things worse. Anyway, I’ve invited her up. She should be here any minute so you can explain to her what you told the social worker.”
Just as she finished her sentence, there was a knock at the door…
“Why would you do it, mum?” He glared at his mum as she went to open the door, panicking on how he could handle it.

“Rhona, come in!” Chas invited her in.

Aaron felt a pang of guilt as he noticed her red-rimmed eyes, clearly from crying. “Hi.” He said sheepishly.

Rhona took a seat at the table, just as Robert came in the back door with the dogs. “They didn’t want to go.” He smirked, noticing the gathering. “Pretend I’m not here.” He went to the other room, but stayed close enough to the door to listen in.

“Aaron, I’m not angry but I think I deserve an explanation. Did you tell Rita that we weren’t suitable to adopt?”

He nodded without saying a word.

“Would you mind telling me what you told her?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Well, I’m not leaving until I have an explanation. What have I ever done to you? If you had concerns, why didn’t you tell Paddy you didn’t want to give a reference. I’ve been off the medication for years and surely I’m doing a good enough job with Leo, so what’s different about an adopted child.”

“It’s complicated.”

Rhona pushed on. “There’s nothing complicated about it. You stopped any chance we have of ever adopting a child. Paddy’s devastated. He’ll barely talk about it. After all, he put up with from you. We give you a roof over your head. Paddy forgave you when you beat him up and still supported you when you came out.”

“I know.” Aaron started to well up. “I’m sorry but I had to do it.”

“Why?”

“Hate me if you want but I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Don’t bother coming anywhere near us. And let’s forget Leo ever had a god-father. You don’t deserve to have anything to do with him. Do you know how much he would’ve loved a brother or sister?” She piled the guilt on until Aaron began to sob.

Suddenly their conversation was interrupted by Robert piling into the kitchen. “I’m sorry but I’m not
going to let this go any further.”

Aaron glared at him to stop but it was too late.

“Rhona, don’t blame Aaron. If you want anyone to blame, blame Paddy. He’s having an affair with Leo’s teacher.”

“No…” Rhona couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Chas couldn’t either. “No, he wouldn’t do that.”

“Ask him. I saw him in the back of Tess’s car in Hotten car park a few weeks ago. I told Aaron when I found out you were planning to adopt. I didn’t want a child being brought up in a broken home like I was. He felt he had to tell Rita because he was worried your marriage wouldn’t survive if you found out.”

Rhona looked at Aaron. “Is this true?”

He just nodded before giving Robert a hurtful look and storming out of the room.

“Look what you’ve done now.” Chas turned on him. “Spreading rumours like that.”

“Rhona, just ask him. He didn’t deny it when we confronted him over it and why don’t you think he’s not speaking to Aaron. This is Paddy’s fault and no-one else’s.” Robert tried to console her but was rebuffed by Chas.

“I’m going to take her home now.” Chas helped a shocked Rhona out of the door.

Robert looked up the stairs where Aaron was hiding out. The noise from the door slamming betrayed his level of anger. He headed up before calling through the door quietly. “Aaron, can we talk?”

“Go away.” Was the reply he got.

“I’m not going away until we can talk about what just happened.”

He didn’t get a reply. In fact, his repeated attempts were rebuffed all day, until just after 8pm, he was shocked when Aaron appeared on the landing. “You had no right to tell her.”

“But you were getting the blame for wrecking Rhona’s life, when it’s only one person’s fault. I had to defend you, it wasn’t fair.”

“I don’t need you to defend me. I promised Paddy that I wouldn’t breathe a word about him and Tess, you know I did. Yet, you betray me and spill everything the first chance you get.” Aaron could barely contain his anger.

“Why do you let people trample all over you?”

“I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.” Robert replied. “You’re too selfless, Aaron. You need to start looking after yourself, rather than other people. You owe it to yourself. Now, your flashes are under control, you need to seize the opportunity to get your own life back on track.”

“How can I? No-one cares about me. I’ve cut myself off for so long that I think people have
forgotten that I exist. Paddy is one of the few people who gave a toss about me and now I’ve messed that one up.”

“He’ll come around.”

“Well he might have done until you stuck the boot in. His marriage is over now, thanks to you.”

Robert shot him an incredulous look. “You’re kidding right. I think Paddy may have had something to do with it.”

“Yeah, but he may have dumped Tess and stayed with Rhona. No-one would’ve been hurt. Fair enough, the adoption is off the table but they could’ve stayed together. Think about what this could do to Leo.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this. Paddy is the one who decided to risk his marriage when he got it off with Tess. You saved a child from joining a broken home. So where have you messed up? I don’t regret telling her and I would do it all over again.” Robert explained his stance.

“You don’t have room to talk. You’ve been screwing around on Chrissie with her sister. You like to keep it in the family, don’t you? First Katie and now Rebecca.”

Robert just looked defeated, shaking his head. “Look, there’s no point. I’ll be out of your hair in the morning. This has all been a mistake and I’m sorry you feel I’ve messed up your life. I guess this was never going to work, so let’s just end it before hurt each other even more. I hope you find happiness, Aaron, because you deserve it.” He walked over and kissed Aaron on his forehead before retiring to his room.

Robert couldn’t sleep, his break up with Aaron, preying heavily on his mind. He’d been tossing and turning for hours. He was overwhelmed by devastation, making him realise just how deep his feelings for the younger man were. He was just drifting off finally, when he heard the door open.

“Robert?!” He heard a voice call out. “I don’t want to break up. I need you.” Aaron announced, his voice breaking.

“Can we talk about this in the morning?” Robert replied.

“Ok… but can I sleep in here with you?”

Robert moved over in response, lifting the duvet so he could climb in. He put his arm around Aaron. “You’re okay. I’m not leaving. I just can’t watch you suffer. I love you.” He whispered in his ear.

Aaron didn’t respond, he just nestled into Robert’s hold...
Chapter 13

“Can I come with you to pick Diane up, unless you think it’ll look suspicious?”

Robert was surprised by the question. “Of course you can. Vic and Andy can’t make it so it’ll just be us anyway. At least we can act as a couple… if that’s ok with you.” He suggested nervously.

Aaron smiled and nodded. “I thought you would be the one struggling with PDA’s, with not being out, I mean.”

“Maybe you make me want to show you off.” He blushed. “Are we ok after last night? I hated arguing. In future, I’ll ask you before I open my mouth. I just want to protect you all the time.”

Robert explained.

“There’s no need to wrap me in cotton wool. In fact, I’m going to take your advice and take the opportunity to get my life back, starting with lunch in the pub after we’ve dropped Diane off. Let’s just convince everyone we’re mates. I’m not ready to announce ‘us’ to the world, just yet. I quite like it just being us two in our own little bubble.”

“You’re cute when you get soppy.” Robert grabbed his hand, something that still felt like a novelty in the wake of Aaron’s new treatment. “I’m sorry for blurting out the L word last night. I’m surprised, I didn’t scare you away.”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily. I don’t mind you saying it. It was nice to hear it.”

Diane was clearly happy to see them when they arrived at the hospital. She was sat by the bed, waiting with packed bags.

“Thanks for picking me up, pet. Aaron, it’s nice to see you. It’s been a while.” She smiled at him.

“You too. I’m happy you’re ok.” He replied nervously, unsure how to act around her.

“Robert, could you go and ask the nurse if my medication is ready so I can get out of here.” Diane asked, leaving them alone.

“Aaron, I’m happy for you both. Robert seems genuinely happy. And don’t worry, this stays between us. No-one will hear about your relationship from me.”

“Thanks.” He bent down and hugged her. “I really care about him. I won’t hurt him.”

“I know that, pet.”

Robert arrived with her two bags of medication. “Are you planning on opening a pharmacy?” he joked.

“Cheeky.” She smiled.

They arrived back in the village, parking around the back of the pub, so they could take her stuff upstairs.
“Have you got some time for lunch on me?” She offered. “Just to say thank you for making me go to the doctors.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that, Diane.”

“I insist. I’m going to tell, Marlon. I would join you but I could do with a nap.”

They walked around the outside of the pub, going in the main doors. As soon as they entered, they wished they could have left straightaway. Of the people they wanted to avoid, they were all sitting in the pub. Paddy was at the bar drowning his sorrows and Chrissie and Lawrence were sat with Andy and Nicola.

“Do you want to leave?” He whispered. “Before anyone sees us.”

“Too late.” Aaron commented as Chas came over from behind the bar. “Aaron, love. What are you doing here?”

“I went to pick up Diane so she’s treated us to lunch.” He explained.

He could see Paddy was glaring at him from his seat and Chrissie was clearly talking about Robert’s appearance.

“Have a seat and I’ll bring you a drink over. What does he want?” She refused to talk directly to Robert. “Just so you know, Robert. Rhona’s in pieces, thanks to you.”

Robert kept his calm. “Chas, I’m here for a quiet meal with Aaron, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t bring it up.”

Aaron piped up in his boyfriend’s defence. “I don’t think Robert forced Paddy to have an affair, mum.”

Chas looked at her son. “Aaron, what’s happened to you? You’re siding with him.”

“I’m not siding with anyone, mum. In fact, I would have snapped yesterday and said something to Rhona myself. Why should I be blamed for something that’s Paddy’s fault?”

She didn’t reply and went off to get their drinks.

Paddy was the first to approach them as they finished up their burger and chips. “I hope you’re both pleased. She won’t even look at me, never mind talk to me.”

“Well, I wonder why that is.” Aaron replied. “Paddy, stop pinning the blame on everyone but yourself.”

Chrissie then rocked up. “I notice Robert’s keeping quiet. Maybe because he doesn’t have a leg to stand on. He was having it off in the toilets with my sister the night we got engaged. He’ll never stay faithful. I pity the next woman who falls for his pathetic charms.”

To make matters worse, Andy shouted over. “He even cheated with my wife on my wedding day. I hope you never find happiness, Robert. You don’t deserve it.”
Robert got up and left, leaving Aaron sitting eating his meal alone. Getting up, he followed him out of the pub. “We don’t need them, Robert. Let’s go home.” He climbed in the car, suggesting Robert did the same.

“I’m sorry you had to hear all that.” He told the younger man.

“Robert, I know you come with a past. So do I! But you haven’t judged me, so why would I judge you. I’m old enough to come up with my own opinions and I like you.” He put his hand on his knee to show his support. “I know what I’m getting myself into and I’m not running anywhere.”

As soon as they were in the door of the Farmhouse, Aaron made his plans clear as he started to take off Robert’s clothes. “I’ve wanted to do this all day.”

Robert blushed. “Well don’t let me stop you.” As he grabbed Aaron’s hand before dragging him upstairs.

They didn’t venture into the village for the next few days, deciding to push on with the renovations on the farmhouse. Robert headed out to the DIY store one morning to grab more supplies. When he came back, he could sense that something was bothering Aaron.

“What’s happened? Has someone been?”

“No, I’m just tired that’s all. I don’t think I got much sleep last night and doing this place up is quite tiring.”

“Maybe it’s the tablets. Are you getting side effects?”

“No, I haven’t noticed any. I’m just tired. I’m just going to go for a lie down for a few hours.”

Robert tried not to fuss but he couldn’t help worry. “Let me know if you need anything.”

The tiredness continued for over a week, until Robert finally convinced Aaron to speak to Dr Lawson about it.

“He’s a busy man.” Aaron replied, clearly trying to brush off his concerns. “But I promise I’ll try and give him a call this afternoon.”

It was over dinner that night that Aaron mentioned that he’d spoken to the doctor and apparently tiredness was to be expected for the first few weeks until his body got used to the new medication. “At least, I haven’t had any flashes or headaches. I’m sorry I haven’t been in the mood recently.” It was clear what he meant.

“Don’t worry about that. You don’t think that’s bothering me, do you?”

“Well, I just worry.”

“Why would you worry?” Robert asked curiously. “I can go without sex you know. As long as you’re alright, I don’t care about anything else.”

“It’s just with your colourful past.”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“Maybe you’ll go and find someone else.”
Robert touched his hand. “I’m not going anywhere, Aaron. I thought we’d been through all of this. I’m serious about us and no-one else has come close to what I feel for you. I love you and I’m staying.”

He could see that Aaron wasn’t convinced.

“Nicola was in the café before.” Aaron changed the subject. “Apparently she’s annoyed because she’s been demoted in favour of Andy at Home Farm. He’s senior Estate Manager and she’s only Estate Manager. She reckons Andy’s having some sort of fling with Chrissie.”

Robert smirked without a hint of jealousy. “More fool him. She’ll get bored soon. I mean all he talks about are tractors and kids. He’s not exactly the most interesting bloke in the village.”

“So you’re not jealous?”

“No, of course not.”

“But you were with her for a long time so I wouldn’t be bothered if you were.”

“I’m not… ok. Wherever are these sudden insecurities are coming from?”

“Nowhere…maybe it’s just the mood I’m in. Just ignore me.” Aaron reassured him.

But Aaron’s mood didn’t improve over the weeks that followed, leaving Robert puzzled and unsure of what to do to help him. He felt so helpless. Every attempt he made to get close to Aaron were rebuffed and made matters worse.

“I can’t deal with you being all touchy-feely all the time.” Aaron announced out of the blue one night as they were sitting watching TV.

“Sorry, I didn’t realise I was being over the top, I’ll back off.”

“I feel pressured all the time, Robert. I can’t bear to see the hurt look on your face, every time I turn you down. I feel suffocated and I need some space. Would you mind moving into the other bedroom for a while?”

Robert was surprised at the suggestion but didn’t show his upset. “Of course not. It’s probably my kicking, keeping you awake.”

“Thanks. Look, I’m heading to bed early.” Aaron commented before heading upstairs.

Robert could feel Aaron slipping away from him and he needed to find out what was causing his withdrawn mood. But he didn’t know where to start…
Chapter 14

Robert decided to back off Aaron, allowing him to come to him if he needed anything. Unfortunately it backfired when Aaron withdrew further into himself, splitting his time between his bedroom and walking the dogs. Any offers to come on the walks were rebuffed. “No, I just want to go alone. Maybe some other time.”

By the following evening, Robert snapped. “Right, we need to talk about this. What’s happening to us?”

“I don’t feel like talking. I just want to be left alone. You know I’m not feeling 100%, Rob.”

“Do you want me to move out?” Robert decided to test the water and wish he hadn’t when the reply came back.

“That might be the best option to be honest.” There was barely any emotion in his voice. “You could move out for a few days while I caught up on my sleep and the side effects of these tablets wore off.”

Robert lied. “I’ve got to go away for a few days to see if I can talk any of my business leads from White Enterprises to still working with me. I need a job, I can’t just live off the money from the car forever.”

“Perfect.” Aaron replied. “I’m sure I’ll feel all better when you get back.” He tried to reassure Robert but in a half-hearted, unconvincing manner.

Robert booked himself into a hotel near Leeds. He didn’t want questions and the prying eyes of the village on him. He opened his laptop and did a search on Dr Lawson. He didn’t know much about him except his name. But it didn’t take long to find out that he mainly practised in Switzerland at a private clinic, although he did spend a lot of his time seeing private patients in the UK along with doing the lecture circuit. A busy man by all accounts, so he was surprised when he read that he would be in London for the next few days. So he booked a hotel and headed down.

Dr Lawson was doing a lecture at one of the top university hospitals so Robert took a seat in the reception as he waited for him to appear. An hour later, people started to pile out of the lecture theatre. Robert thought he must have missed him when he didn’t appear for what seemed like ages but then…

“Dr Mark Lawson?” Robert shouted as he watched a man hurry out of building.

The grey haired man turned around, curious. “Yes, can I help you?”

“I need to speak to you about one of your patients.” Robert replied.

The man shook his head. “Ring my secretary, she deals with all my appointments in this country. Anyway, surely you know I wouldn’t be able to discuss anyone else’s care due to patient confidentiality.” He smiled and wandered towards a taxi.

“Dr Lawson… it’s Aaron Livesy.” He explained, stopping the doctor in his tracks.
“I’m sorry but who are you?”

“I’m Robert Sugden, Aaron’s boyfriend. I’m worried he’s going down hill on the medication you’ve given him. I just wondered if you could talk to him. I know you can’t discuss his care with me but could you talk to him? Please I don’t know who else to talk to.”

Mark looked at his watch. “I’ve got to be across the city in an hour so I can spare 30 minutes or so. There’s a nice café around the corner.”

Robert nodded and followed him, ordering two coffees for them before taking a seat.

“Thank you for giving me your time. I’ll tell you what’s happening. His flashes and headaches have gone away but he’s tired and moody all the time. Now I know he’s never been the most upbeat, even tempered person but this is different. He just wants to sleep all the time. He said you told him it was side effects and it would last a few weeks. But it’s been longer than that and he’s no better, if anything, he’s getting worse.”

The doctor paused for what seemed like an age before taking a deep breath. “Ok, Robert. Aaron has never been a straightforward case and god knows, I’ve broken my Hippocratic oath quite a few times when treating him. There’s no easy way to put this… but Aaron is dying.”

Robert could barely form words as he looked at the doctor for any sign that he was mistaken.

“How long has he got?” he asked.

“It’s a difficult question to answer. The growth on his brain from his injury is constantly growing.”

“But the medication?”

“The medication is like a painkiller. It masks the symptoms but doesn’t stop the condition progressing.”

“So his condition is getting worse?”

“It has got worse considerably in the past six months. He had a brain scan a few weeks ago when he came to London. He has one every 6 months and it showed that it was growing faster than we thought. I asked a colleague for a second opinion and I told Aaron that we were concerned by the sudden increase in growth rate.”

“There must be something you can do? Surgery?”

Mark nodded. “There is an operation but it’s not straightforward. The success rate would be 50% at best and could leave him disabled. Plus there’s the added costs of surgery.”

“I’ll pay for anything he needed. Just bill me.” Robert was desperate to help.

“I don’t charge him but the surgery is completely different. It’s not like it is on TV and films, where a person has surgery and recovers. We are talking at least a week or two on the High Dependency Unit and the operation can’t be done in this country. The authorities would ask too many questions. I could do it at the clinic I run in Zurich but the costs would be vast.”

“How much are we talking about?”

“£250-300,000. To make it all above board, he would have to pay full price and as you can
imagine, Swiss healthcare doesn’t come cheap. I have people ready in place to do the surgery but Aaron has turned it down every time I offered it.”

“So money is the problem? I can sort it.”

“Well, money is an issue but the real problem is that Aaron doesn’t want the surgery. He’s shut down any idea of having it. He has no symptoms at the moment, he’s just pushing you away. He doesn’t want to see you hurt.”

Robert puzzled. “How do you know all of this?”

“I talk to him a few times every week. We’re close, Robert. I’ve cared for him since his accident and since then he’s become like son to me.”

“That’s funny because he never really mentions you.”

“It has to be that way. If anyone found out, there would be ethical issues, crossing the doctor-patient boundaries. No one else knows this but he saved my wife and daughter’s life. He told me they would be knocked over on a school crossing by a drunk driver. I took action and it stopped it from happening. Weeks later, some people were injured by a drunk driver at the same time that they would’ve been coming out.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Don’t underestimate his feelings for you. He’s been a different person since he met you. I wasn’t happy at first that he’d told you about his flashes, but it’s pretty obvious you can be trusted otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

“So what do I do?” Robert was lost.

“I would refuse to back off. Don’t let him push you away. And if you can, talk him into his surgery. It’s his only chance and even better if you can come up with the money.”

“I’ll speak to my solicitor tomorrow about mortgaging the farm. I really appreciate this.” Robert replied.

“No, I should be thanking you. I think he’ll listen to you if you persevere. The only thing is he would need to be off his medication six weeks before surgery could go ahead and he would be prone to flashes. As you’ve probably guessed, the flashes worsen his condition significantly. So you would need to keep him away from other people as much as possible.”

“Ok… it’s a lot to take in. But thank you so much for being honest with me.”

“I just hope you can get through to him. You do need to tell him everything though. Don’t hide the fact we’ve spoken. He’s very stubborn as I’m sure you already know, so good luck. If you get anywhere, call me and I’ll start to make preparations for surgery.” He passed Robert his business card. “Good luck.”

The drive back from London was a lonely one, his thoughts full of the emotional and difficult times ahead. He’d decided to take Aaron out the following day so they could talk.

It was past ten when he got home and he found Aaron asleep on the sofa, the TV blaring away in the background. He took a seat opposite and took in his sleeping form. He wished that he could take
away his illness, make him better but he knew the road was going to be a long and hard one. The question was, was Aaron willing to have surgery…
Chapter 15

Robert decided to take a few days before he would tell Aaron. He needed to see his accountant, Clive about getting a mortgage on the farm. He crept out before Aaron had a chance to notice he was back.

“How much do you need?” His accountant and friend asked.

“About £300,000 or ideally £350,000.”

“You’ll need at least a 50% deposit for that kind of sum. Have you got a job at the minute?”

“No, I lost that when I walked out on Chrissie. I’ve got about £100,000 deposit.”

“This isn’t going to be easy, Robert. I have to be honest. I may be able to get you another 100k. If it was a working farm, it would be much easier. At the moment, it’s a redundant farm so there won’t be much demand if it were put on the market. Get it up to a high standard and generating some income and you’ll be sitting on a goldmine.”

“There must be some way.” He was desperate.

“Can I ask what you need to raise the money for? Is it illegal?”

“No, it’s not illegal. It’s for my friend who needs it. I can’t say anything more than that. I need this money, Clive, so is there any way?”

“I don’t suppose you know someone who could act as guarantor. They would need some collateral to secure the mortgage on, a house or a business.”

“I don’t have many friends at the moment.” He pointed out, awkwardly.

“Family?” Clive inquired.

He thought for a second. “how about my stepmum? She has a pub which is doing quite well at moment.”

“Sounds like it could work if she was willing to sign. Does she own it outright?”

Robert’s expression sank. “No, she part owns it with someone who hates me.”

“There may still be a way. Is it a 50/50 share?”

“No, she owns 60%. Turns out her business partner tried to swindle her out of the money so she could run away with a murderer. Not that she knew he was a murderer.” He qualified it. “Diane let her back in.”

He could see Clive’s expression changing. “This could work in our favour. Surely she must have some kind of safeguard in place now.”

“Yeah I think she can be a sole signatory but her business partner can’t.”

“Right, convince her, bring her in and then we’ll get it sorted.”

“Great. How long will it take?”
“About 3 weeks to finalise it. Then you can do what you want with the money. A bit of advice though… look at getting the farm up and working and we could be talking one million plus.”

“I’ll look into it. My stepmum is undergoing treatment for cancer at the moment so will that affect her ability to sign for it.”

“No, because it’s being secured on the pub.”

Diane was unpacking the latest drinks delivery when Robert appeared. “Need any help?”

She smiled. “If you’re offering it, I’ll take it.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Not too bad. Ask me next week after I start chemo and I’ll be telling you a different story.”

“If there’s anything I can do, let me know. I’d be happy to take you and sit with you during your sessions.”

“That’s kind of you, pet. You may have to fight Val for that privilege. She’s all over me since she found out.”

“You should get some help at the pub to do your shifts. I would offer but I don’t think I’ll be very welcome.”

“It’s fine. Alicia’s going to do more hours and Moira said she was happy to help out. Something’s bothering you, isn’t it? You’re pre-occupied.”

“I need a big favour.” He asked.

“What is it, pet?”

“I need a mortgage on the farm and it’s too much for me to get without a guarantor. I was wondering if you would consider it. You would need to secure it on your share of the pub.”

“How much are you needing? Can I not loan you some?”

“No, it’s about £350,000.”

“What do you need that much for?”

“I can’t say. I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate.” He begged her.

“Have you got yourself caught up in something you shouldn’t?”

“No, nothing like that. You would need to trust me.”

“I do trust you, pet but it’s difficult to agree with when I don’t know the details.” She explained, but she could see how desperate he was.

“Diane, I can promise you that it’s all above board but I can’t say what it is. Not yet anyway. You’re the only hope I have. I don’t exactly have many friends who will support me.”

She nodded. “Ok, but you’re promising me that this is nothing that’s going to come back and bite
“No, it won’t. I promise you.” He hugged her. “Can you come to the accountants this afternoon? My solicitor will be there too.”

In the end, Robert secured a mortgage for £400,000, wanting the extra to cover any contingencies. Diane was even more puzzled why he wanted more but she told him that she trusted him 100%. With the money now guaranteed, Robert turned to the hard part, getting Aaron to agree to have surgery.

He headed back into Wiley’s and noticed Aaron was out on the outer field, throwing a ball for the dogs. He parked up and made the five minute walk down the track.

“Hey.” He said calmly, unsure of the reception he would get.

He could see the panicked look on Aaron’s face. “What… what are you doing back? I thought we’d agreed that you’d be away for a few more days. I’m getting better but I just need a bit longer, Robert. Is there any way you can stay in the B&B?”

“No, I’m staying here tonight. I can’t be bothered with the villagers. They’ll be gossiping about you throwing me out. No, I staying put and you’re going to tell me what’s going on. We were getting on fine and now you’ve gone all cold on me.”

“I knew this would get back to that.”

“I’m not even talking about sex. You seem more preoccupied with that than me. I’m talking you about you shutting me out and not telling me the truth about what’s going on.”

“Robert, just leave me alone… please.”

“No, I’m not going to leave until you tell me what’s happening.”

“Right, I hoped I wouldn’t have to do this… we’re over. This was just some fling and I’m bored now. Please back your bags and leave. I’ll start to pay rent again. I’m sure you can find somewhere else to live.”

“No, I’m still not leaving.”

Aaron stormed off without a word, heading in the direction of the farmhouse. Just as he was about to open the door, Robert played his trump card to get him to listen. “Aaron, I know you’re dying.”

He responded by running towards him, jamming Robert against the farmhouse wall. “You don’t know what you’re talking about and if you don’t do one, I’ll have to make you.” He threatened him before releasing him.

“Dr Lawson told me everything.”

“Yeah right. He wouldn’t do that.” Aaron fired back, as he headed into the farmhouse, closely followed by Robert.

“Aaron, I was worried about you, so I went to find him and he told me about your condition and the fact it’s getting worse. He also said the medication doesn’t cause the side effects and that you’re pushing me away so I don’t get hurt.”
“He’s a doctor. He wouldn’t tell you private information about me.”

“He did and he told me how you saved his family from that drunk driver. He really thinks a lot of you. He told me about the surgery. Aaron… you need to have it.”

“You don’t understand…”

Robert finished the sentence for him. “But Aaron, I do understand. I’ve sorted the money for your surgery, you don’t have to worry about paying for it. We just need to give Dr Lawson the green light and he’ll start planning your operation. You could be having it six weeks from now.”

“You don’t get it, do you? It’s not the money… I’m too scared to have it.” He broke down completely as the flood gates opened.
Chapter 16

Robert had lost track of time, but he knew that Aaron has been sobbing and clinging to him as if his life depended on it for at least an hour. He finally heard the sobs let up a little as Aaron pulled back as they sat on the sofa.

“Sorry!” Aaron spoke weakly.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Aaron? Let me help you.”

He now pulled back more so he was sitting looking at Robert, his face bright red from all of the crying. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You have to fight. Don’t give up. I’ll be with you all the way. Dr Lawson is one of the best in the world, he’ll do everything he can.”

“I’m too scared, Rob. I won’t make it off the operating table alive. I don’t want to die, I’m not ready.” He begged Robert to understand what he was saying.

“I’m not ready to lose you either. And I know you’ll pull through, you need to stay confident. I don’t think he’d attempt the operation if he didn’t think the odds were good.”

“Less than 50%...that’s my chances and even then there’s a chance I could be paralysed, brain damaged or both.”

“But surely that’s better than a 10% chance of long term survival. Aaron, only you can make the decision but please know that the money is there if you need it. And I’ll be by your side, the whole way.”

“I can’t think about this right now. Can we take the dogs for a walk and maybe head down to the village for a drink? This place is coming in on me. I know it’s odd but I just want to watch life going on in the village. It might give me some perspective.”

Robert put his arm and around him, smiling. “Ok, but I think you might need to freshen up. You look like a complete mess.” He pointed at his red eyes.

An hour later, they arrived in the village and took a place outside the pub. It was a warm summer evening so it was quite busy. Robert headed into the pub to grab a few pints, only to be met with a frosty reception from Chas.

He ignored her mood, as he wasn’t in the mood for an argument. “Two pints, please Chas.” She tutted and wandered off to get them.

He got a note out of his wallet. He was suddenly distracted by a familiar giggle coming from a table behind him. He turned around to see Chrissie draped over Andy, snogging his face off.

Andy glared at him as he broke off from Chrissie. “Seen enough?” He fired at his brother.

“Too much, actually. You do know that people are trying to eat their meals. Wouldn’t want them put off their food, would we?”

“You’re just jealous.” Chrissie commented with a smug grin.
“I don’t think so.” He smirked.

“At least he knows how to keep a woman happy.” She announced loudly, clearly having had quite a lot of wine to drink.

“Well, that’s great, Chrissie. Thanks for sharing that enlightening piece of information.” He replied, clearly annoying them both at his lack of interest.

“Pity I didn’t choose him first.” Chrissie wouldn’t let up.

“Yeah it would’ve been better for us both.” Robert explained.

She looked at him in disgust. “I don’t think you came off too badly, Robert. You did well out of our split.”

“You did well too. I don’t think the company would be worth anything near what it is now without me there. I look forward to watching it go downhill.”

Chrissie sniped back. “I think you’ll find we’re doing better than ever. Maybe it’s with you being out of our family.”

“Yes, you must be spending some cosy nights up there with Lachlan. How is he by the way?”

“Not that you ever cared. At least Andy takes an interest in him. You never did step up to the plate when it came to be a stepdad.”

“I wasn’t allowed from what I remember. Anyway have a nice night, there’s somewhere I need to be.” He focused back on the bar, only to be met by stony-faced Chas.

“Who’s the unlucky lady? Since you don’t have any friends, I assumed you must’ve picked up some clueless woman with no taste.” Chas asked.

“It’s Aaron actually.”

“You do know he’s just trying to keep you sweet so he can stay living there.”

Robert couldn’t help himself. “We’re mates actually, so we’re having a drink. Do you have a problem with that?” He asked.

“Yeah actually but I know it wouldn’t do any good to tell him how I feel about it, so I’ll just leave it.” She knew when to give up.

Aaron saw him. “I was about to send in a search party.”

“It was your mum’s riveting conversation and the fact Chrissie and Andy were trying to convince me that I was jealous of their new vomit-inducing relationship.”

“And are you?”

“As if. As Paul Newman said - Why Go Out For Hamburgers When I Have Steak At Home?”

Aaron laughed and made a face. “What are you on about? And who’s Paul Newman?”

He shook his head. “You’re seriously asking me that. He was one of the greatest actors of all time
and you’re asking me who he is.”

“Ah.. so he used to act years ago. Now you’re showing your age.”

Robert smacked him playfully on the thigh. “I’ll make you pay for that later.”

“I’m sure you will.” Aaron grinned. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Your mum is never going to like me, is she?”

“She isn’t the one going out with you so it doesn’t matter. So I’ve been thinking about it and I’m going to talk to Dr Lawson about the surgery. That doesn’t mean I’m going to have it but I want to know more. I’ve never discussed it in depth with him because the lack of funds made it an impossibility anyway.”

“You’re making the best decision.”

“I just need to ask one question… where did the money come from?”

“I had some saved up and the rest comes from a mortgage on Wiley’s. There’s £400,000 in case you need extra. There is one thing you need to know. I had to have a guarantor on the mortgage as I don’t have a job at the moment. So Diane’s agreed to act as one but the problem is that your mum doesn’t know. It’s only on Diane’s 60% of the pub and don’t worry, I don’t plan to forfeit on payments. We could do up Wiley’s when you’ve recovered…. If you have the op, I mean.”

“Mum will go off it if she finds out.”

“I don’t see how she would. Diane won’t tell her and I don’t think anyone else would find out…. so relax. Apparently we could get over a million for Wiley’s if we turned it into a working farm, so I was thinking of asking Andy to come on board and see what he can do with it.”

“I don’t think there’s much hope of that now. He’s attached to the Whites and as I am sure you know, the attraction of money can be pretty convincing.” Aaron explained.

“Like that’s going to last. Chrissie will be bored in a few weeks. He’s rebound… trust me.”

Their conversation was suddenly distracted by the appearance of Chas coming from the pub. “Hi love. How are you keeping?” She completely ignored Robert’s presence.

Robert cleared his throat and excused himself. “I’m just going to the toilet.”

As soon as he left, Chas began. “What are you hanging around with him for? You do know he’s trouble, don’t you?”

“Maybe he is, mum. But we get on well and at the minute, I could do with a friend.” He replied, realising he’d almost dropped himself in it. “I mean with the Paddy stuff that’s going on. How’s Rhona?”

“She’s pretty bad. Paddy’s gone away for a week to give her some space to decide what she wants. She said it’s over between them so I guess, we’ll just have to see what happens. Robert was out of order dumping him in it but you seem to defend him these days, so I’m not going to start an argument.”

“Thanks, mum. I can’t believe Andy’s got himself caught up with the Whites.”
“Chrissie seems well into him. You think she would’ve learnt from her time with Robert, not to get caught up with the Sugden’s. Seems like the Whites are flavour of the month at the minute. Lisa was saying this afternoon that our Belle’s seeing Lachlan.”

Aaron tried not to show panic at the news. “He’s bad news, mum. Surely Zak and Lisa can see that. In fact, all the Whites are bad news.”

“I must admit I find Lachlan a bit odd but he seems to really care about Belle. She’s had a relapse with her mental health and he’s been really supportive.”

“But he’s only 15 years old. Surely she should be with someone her own age.” Aaron argued.

“She’s only two years older, love. And if it was the other way around, no-one would bat an eyelid. Lisa’s keeping an eye on things but doesn’t want to upset Belle at the minute so she’s happy for them to keep seeing each other.”

Robert appeared, making Chas head off back into the pub. “I’ll see you, love. I might pop and see you in the next few days or come down to the pub. We could do lunch.”

He nodded, watching her disappear.

“Rob, we have a major problem.” He announced, seriously worried by the new development with Lachlan…
Chapter 17

They were finishing up their drinks, choosing to discuss the Lachlan matter once they were home so no-one overheard, when they noticed Vic approaching with Adam. “What’s going on here now? You two look as thick as thieves.”

“Nothing.” Robert announced, looking across at Aaron for guidance.

“Want another pint?” Adam asked cheerily.

“No, we can’t. We were just about to head home.” Aaron announced, realising he’d hurt his feelings.

“Ok, looks like it’s just us, Vic.” He looked rejected as he headed into to grab some drinks.

Vic immediately turned. “What’s up with Aaron? He’s been trying so hard since he’s got out of prison. You barely look at him these days and you two used to best mates. He thought you just wanted to be alone but now you’re being all friendly with my brother. He thinks you still blame him for the garage fire.”

“I don’t… it’s just.”

“Just what?”

“I can’t explain. Robert, are you coming?” he asked, nodding for him to leave.

“I’ll catch up with you soon.” He told his sister before following Aaron, who’d already started heading up the road.

“What happened between you and Adam?”

“It’s complicated. We used to be good mates but then he went off the rails when he found out that Cain was having an affair with his mum behind his dad’s back. He tried to set fire to the garage with Cain in it but I stopped it. I saw it happening when Cain passed me the keys for the garage the day before.”

“So you stopped speaking to him because of that?”

“No, I stopped speaking to him like I stopped speaking to most people in the village. I just wanted to be left alone… until I met you.” He pulled Robert back. “I’ve decided I’m having the surgery. I’m going to ring Mark tomorrow and tell him to start planning. You’ve changed my life for the better, Robert and I’m going to fight this…” He pointed to his head before hugging Robert before whispering in his ear. “I love you.”

Robert beamed. “Do you really mean it?”

“Yes, I mean it. I love you.” He grabbed his hand and they walked back to Wiley’s.

As soon as they arrived back, the discussions started. “So what are we going to do about Lachlan and Belle?”
Robert looked concerned. “I’m not sure what to suggest. Do you think he would hurt her?”

“He’s a monster, Robert. He’s capable of anything. What he was going to do to Alicia was horrific, I mean this was not just touching her up a bit.”

“The problem we have, is that your mum seems to be softening towards him and the general consensus amongst the Dingles is that he is helping her. Maybe we need to help them see what he’s really like but the question is how? I could tell them about the girls at his last school but that doesn’t seem that bad when you compare it to the Alicia stuff.”

“How about if I was to get involved? I could get closer to Belle and keep an eye on things. I might be able to get an idea what he’s planning. I know the Dingle van needs a major overhaul. Maybe it’s time I offered.”

“How about if I was to get involved? I could get closer to Belle and keep an eye on things. I might be able to get an idea what he’s planning. I know the Dingle van needs a major overhaul. Maybe it’s time I offered.”

“Ok… that might work, but you must promise me that you won’t go making physical contact with anyone once you’re off your meds. I told Mark that I’d make sure that you didn’t. Any contact could weaken you.”

“I’ll be careful. You’re like a right mother-hen.” Aaron joked, making light of the situation to stop Robert stressing so much.

“Well, expect it to get worse.” Robert laughed. “All you need to do is keep out of trouble for six weeks.”

“So does that physical contact rule apply to us?” He announced as he led a smiling Robert upstairs.

The next day, Aaron made a start on his plan, making his way up to Wishing Well.

“Hi love.” Lisa said as she opened the door to him.

“Hiya Lisa. I was wondering if Zak was about. I heard he’s been moaning about the van so I thought I’d take a look at it. I’ve a shed full of spare parts that I might be able to put to good use.”

Lisa smiled. “He’ll be over the moon. I would offer to fix it up, but I don’t have the parts.”

Zak arrived back and was thrilled at the offer of help. “Mind you, you may have an apprentice. Lachlan was keen to learn a bit more about engines so he could help out.”

“I think he feels like he wants to prove himself since he started going out with Belle. They’re officially going out as of yesterday.” Lisa added.

“So how do you feel about that? He can be a bit odd, can’t he?”

“He’s amazing with our Belle. She’s been having problems again, not sleeping well and hearing voices. She’s had her medication changed so she feels better but I think it’s Lachlan’s who has made the real difference. It’s like he understands her.” She crowed.

Aaron put on a false expression. “That’s great. He comes with money too, so it can’t all be bad.”

Zak chuckled. “There is that.”

“So would it be okay to have the keys so I can see what needs doing.”

Lisa passed them to him. “It’s nice to see you out and about. It’s been ages since you’ve been over here.”
“I just need to get out of Robert’s way. It’s tiring, having to play nice all the time when I can’t stand him. I’m just worried that I’ll be kicked out of the farm if I annoy him.” He lied.

“Why don’t you get some legal advice? Maybe Rakesh could tell you where you stand.” Zak suggested.

Lisa launched into a rant. “I don’t know how he managed to get the farm off Chrissie anyway. I mean they weren’t even married so he could have been left with nothing. He’s not a nice person according to Lachlan. I mean who cheats with their future sister-in-law, although it wasn’t surprising with all the Katie and Andy stuff in the past. I don’t even know what’s keeping him here. It’s not like Emmerdale has anything left for him.”

“Look, I’m going to head out now to have a look.” Aaron wished he’d never brought up the subject.

“There’ll be a bacon sandwich coming your way in ten minutes. I’ll bring it out.”

“Thanks, Lisa.” He smiled as he headed out of the door.

Luckily, the van was a mess and it needed quite a bit of work if there was any hope of it passing its MOT in two weeks’ time. He had a lot of the parts anyway from his years of car stripping.

He’d been working for a few hours when Belle arrived home with Lachlan.

“Hey Aaron.” Belle smiled at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Just fixing up the van.”

Lachlan came over to inspect, leaving Aaron’s blood running cold at having him so close. He knew he had to act nice.

“I was going to have a look at it for Zak but I guess you’re better qualified than me.”

“I was at a loose end, so I don’t mind.” Aaron made an excuse. “Mind you, it could take days to fix it up so it can pass its test.”

“It’ll be nice to have you around.” His cousin smiled.

“Yeah, we’ll have to catch up, Belle.”

Lachlan interrupted. “Actually, don’t mind me. I need to pop back home for a bit. I’ll be back later.” He kissed Belle, making Aaron’s flesh creep.

After he’d left, he headed into the house with Belle for a sandwich that Lisa had made.

Lisa and Zak had gone into the village to run some errands, leaving them alone.

“Got yourself a toyboy?” He joked. “He seems keen.”

“Yeah he’s amazing. He’s grown up so much recently. I always thought of him as an annoying teenager but he’s changed. He seems so much older than 16.”
“I thought he was only 15.”

“Well he is, but he’s 16 next week.” She replied.

“I’m happy you’ve found someone.” He lied. “As long as he treats you right.”

“Yeah he’d never hurt me. It’s just nice to be myself with someone and not have to hide my past.”

That comment struck a chord with Aaron and his relationship with Robert.

“That’s good to hear.”

He finished up his lunch and headed back into the village, as he’d had a text from his mum to come for lunch at the pub. Just as he pulled up outside the pub, his phone rang. It was Mark.

“Hi Aaron, sorry I’ve taken ages to get back to you. I’ve been in theatre all morning.” He explained.

“No problem. Look I’ve decided to have the surgery, if that’s still ok.”

He could hear the emotion in Mark’s voice at his announcement. “You have no idea how much that means to hear that, Aaron. I guess I have Robert to thank.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“You must have loads of questions. Do you want me to call you later and we can discuss it in more detail?”

“No, I’d rather not know much more about the operation… not until the nearer the time. I just want to enjoy the next few weeks before I have to think about it.”

“I can understand that.” The doctor replied. “You’ll need to stop your medication and I’ll have to ask you to pop down to Manchester for some tests in the next few weeks. We need to check you’re fit for surgery. There’s also some paperwork you’ll need to fill in. I’ll be back in the UK in two weeks if you could come down. You could have the tests at the same time. I’ll text you the details.”

“I’ve already stopped the meds and just let me know the details.” Aaron explained.

As he hung up, the reality of his upcoming surgery and possible consequences hit him and he could feel a massive panic attack coming on…
Chapter 18

Aaron felt as though he couldn’t breathe, his head started to spin and his heart pounded. He thought about making a quick getaway back to the farm, back to Robert. But he knew it wasn’t safe to drive, so he had no choice but to wait until it passed.

His panic was interrupted by a banging on the car window. “Love, are you ok?” He looked up to see the concerned face of his mum, staring at him.

He lowered the window. “A panic attack…” were the only words he could manage to get out. He heard his mum shouting of Adam who was passing. “Adam, could you help me get him inside?”

They helped him out of the car and guided him into the back room.

They sat him on the sofa. “Do you want some water?” Chas asked.

He nodded. “Could you back off, I feel suffocated.” He asked, as he felt them becoming too close to comfort.

Chas passed him the water and took a seat at the table as did Adam.

“What happened?”

He felt himself calming down a little, enough for him to talk. “I was just sitting in the car when I felt one of the panic attacks coming over me. It’s nothing to worry about, I get them sometimes. Just another consequence of the accident, the doctor says. I’ll be fine once I calm down.”

“It’s that Robert Flaming Sugden, causing you all this stress.”

“No it’s not, mum. Can we just leave it? Give me another five or ten minutes to pull myself together and we can grab some lunch, but not if you’re going to talk about him all the time.”

“Actually Adam could join us. My treat.” She looked over at Adam. “If you’re not busy.”

“No, I’d love too. Like I’m ever going to turn down free food.”

Aaron enjoyed his lunch, in fact, it felt like the good old times when he and Adam used to be as close as you could get as mates… then the accident changed everything. They’d grown apart as Aaron had continuously pushed him away.

Chas wandered off to help behind the bar as Marlon was moaning about being left singlehanded to watch the pub and kitchen.

“It’s been good.” Aaron smiled as Adam had to excuse himself to go and help on the farm. “Maybe we could have that drink you mentioned yesterday sometime.”

“As long as you promise not to bring, Robert. Vic is not impressed with her brother at the moment. Thinks he’s changed beyond all recognition.”

“He’s not all that bad. He has his moments but he can be a laugh.”

Adam noticed how Aaron’s face lit up unintentionally when he talked about Robert.

“You’re blushing when you talk about him. Do you fancy him or something?”
“No of course not.  Any way it wouldn’t matter, would it?  He’s not exactly gay.”

“No, he’s not.”  Aaron replied.  “Look, I have to get back up to the farm.  Robert’s cooking dinner and I said I would be back.”

Adam was concerned.  “Seriously mate, you need to watch out.  You’ll just setting yourself up for a fall with this crush.”

“I know and I’ll get over it… don’t worry.  Listen, not a word to anyone.”  Aaron patted his friend on the shoulder.

“My lips are sealed.  I mean there’s nothing to tell.”  Adam smiled.

“No there isn’t.  I’ll text you in the next few days about meeting up again.”  Aaron hugged him.

He headed back to the farm to find Robert busy tidying up one of the outside sheds.  “Hey, how are you?”  He asked.

Aaron smiled.  “I’m fine.  Just had some lunch with mum and Adam.  It was nice to reconnect with him actually.”

Robert wandered over to him, openly flirting by placing his hands on Aaron’s hips whilst looking him up and down as he tended to do.  “Should I be jealous?”

“Nah… I kissed him years ago and I can guarantee he’s straight.  I wouldn’t feel right anyway, with him going out with your sister and everything.”  He laughed before leaning into kiss the older man.

“Do you want some help?” he pointed at the piles of hay behind him.

“Maybe you can help me with something.  I’ve always wanted to do this.”  There was a glint in Robert’s eyes as he pulled Aaron behind the haybales, before they fell onto a large pile of hay.

Meanwhile, back in the village, trouble was looming.  Cain arrived in the back room along with Paddy, who’d just returned from his days away.

“Thanks for coming.”

“What’s this all about, Chas?”  Cain asked.

“It’s our Aaron.  He’s having problems and we need to help him sort them.”

“What sort of problems?”

“Robert Sugden is making his life hell and we need to do something about it.  Aaron’s frightened to say anything about it in case he gets kicked out of Wiley’s.  I’ve asked him to come back and live in the pub but he says he needs his space.”

Cain got up.  “Ok, he won’t be causing Aaron any more bother by the time I’m finished with him.  Can you ask Aaron to come down the village tonight and I’ll sort it.”
Chas stopped him. “I normally would have agreed but Robert will have the police called within minutes and you’ll be arrested. We need to be clever about this.”

Paddy joined in. “There’s nothing I would like to see more than having him brought down. He wrecked my marriage but how can we do it?”

“Robert has always been dodgy so let’s get something on him, so we can chase him out of Wiley’s and more importantly, out of Aaron’s life. We just need to get something to blackmail him with.”

Cain thought about it for a second. “I might be able to call in a favour. Rakesh owes me so I am sure we can convince him to do some digging. As you say, it shouldn’t take long to find something on him.”

The plan was put into motion.

Back at the farm, Aaron and Robert were finishing up dinner with some beers. “Thank you.” Aaron said as they snuggled up on the sofa.

“What for?”

“Just for being there for me. It means more than you can ever know.” Aaron explained.

“I should be thanking you… for putting up with me.”

“I could put up with you forever. I’m getting too mushy, aren’t I?”

“I like mushy.” Robert kissed his forehead. “I really mean it when I say you’ve changed my life and there’s no-one else for me.”

Aaron’s idea had been forming in his head since speaking to Mark and for some reason, he felt the sudden need to ask. “Robert, I wanted to ask you something but I want you to be honest with me. I’ll understand if the answer is no.”

“Ok… I’m listening.”

“I’m really scared about having surgery but I was wondering if you would there with me…”

“You know I will. You don’t even need to ask.”

“Let me finish… I need someone fighting my corner and speaking up for me when I’m unconscious. I want you to make any decisions that need to be made, no matter how hard they are. It might be too much to ask.”

Robert wanted to reassure him but he knew the risks of the surgery. “Of course, I’ll make decisions on your behalf.”

“Even if it means…” Aaron was about to finish his sentence when Robert placed a finger against his lips.

“Aaron, don’t…”

“But we need to talk about it sometime.”

“I know that, but maybe tonight isn’t the night.” Robert suggested. “How do we go about making
me your next of kin?”

“I’m not sure. We’ll need to ask Mark when we see him. There’s probably just some form we’ll need to fill in.” Aaron explained.

Robert’s eyes lit up. “There is another way. We could make the whole thing much easier for us both.”

Aaron was puzzled. “How?”

“Marry me…”
Chapter 19

“You’re kidding right?” Aaron was speechless as he sat up to see whether Robert’s expression was giving any hints.

“No, I’ve never been more serious. Think about it, I love you and you love me. Plus it means I’ll be your automatic next of kin. What happens if some of your family find out about your surgery and try to mess up your plans. It’s possible.”

Aaron couldn’t take it in at first, but as the explanation began to sink in, it was making more sense. “I must be mad but yes…. The answer is yes.”

Robert hugged him.

“So when were planning?” Aaron asked. “We can’t hang about.”

“You have to give 28 days’ notice at the registrar’s office so we’d better head down there tomorrow. We can be married in 4 weeks.”

Aaron was beginning to get excited. “That doesn’t leave much time before my surgery but I’d love to marry you.”

“We’d better get planning.” Robert replied.

“As long as it’s nothing too fancy, just us turning up is enough for me. I don’t want any of my family to find out about the wedding or operation. The last thing I need is them fussing over me and taking over. If you feel anyone needs to know whilst I’m knocked out, that’s up to you. I trust whatever decision you make.”

“Thank you for trusting me.” Robert kissed him. “Do you fancy an early night?”

“Yeah why not!”

The following morning, they managed to get a cancellation at the council office in Leeds to register their marriage plans. They decided to book the simplest ceremony at Leeds Town Hall, followed by a night away in a hotel nearby. They headed back to the farm to spend the next few weeks, chilling out before Aaron had to have his tests in Manchester.

Aaron continued to help out with the Dingles van. Lachlan started to hang out more at Dingles, even staying over a few nights. This development worried Aaron as it was becoming serious and he could see that Belle was besotted with him. One night, Lisa offered for Aaron to stay for dinner, which he accepted as Lachlan would be there.

“I wish I didn’t ever have to go back to Home Farm. Grandad’s not happy about me hanging out here although mum’s too busy drooling over Andy to notice what I get up to.”

“Well, you’re welcome here anytime.” Zak made it clear.

This wasn’t going well and Aaron wondered what he could do to help speed up Lachlan’s exit from the family. If he could only find out what Lachlan had in mind, it would make things so much easier. But Mark had warned him again about using his abilities.
“Andy must be keen on your mum.” Aaron piped up.

“I’m not sure he is as he seems to spend most of his time talking about his time with his dead wife and slagging off his brother. Mum’s definitely into him. I think it’s a rebound after Robert but even Grandad can’t make her see sense.”

They were just tucking into their desserts when there was a loud banging at the door. Lisa looked over at Zak in confusion before going to answer it.

It was Lawrence. “Where is he?”

“I’m here. What’s up?” Lachlan replied.

“You being here all the time is what’s up. Your mum and I have discussed it and you’re coming back home. There’ll be no more staying overnight.” Lawrence was in no mood for a discussion.

“No way. You can’t stop me coming here.”

“Oh, yes I can. You’re only 15. Don’t make a scene, Lucky.”

Lachlan got up and walked calmly right up to his grandad’s face. “I’m staying here. Don’t expect me back.”

Lawrence huffed. “Right, your allowance is being stopped with immediate effect. Maybe the Dingles can fund your upbringing because we won’t be.”

Lachlan took a seat. “I’m staying so please leave.”

Zak backed him up. “I think you should go. You’re both upset at the minute. Wait until the morning until you’ve calmed down and then discuss it properly.”

Lawrence nodded and left.

Aaron took the news back to Robert that Lachlan was very entrenched at the Dingles and that it would take a new approach to tackle the problem, although they were both stuck for ideas for what to do.

Aaron headed down the pub the following day while Robert was checking out some business propositions for after Aaron had recovered from his surgery. They had enough money to live off for the time being. The money from the mortgage had just been paid into Robert’s account so he immediately transferred most of it to Mark’s clinic in Switzerland. Mark said they could pay in instalments but Robert and Aaron agreed to pay it all in advance and get back anything that wasn’t spent.

When he got there, his mum was chattier than usual.

“What’s got you in such a good mood?”

“Nothing, just happy. I feel as though life is on the up. I mean I’ve got you back in my life and that makes me so happier. I hated it when we were barely speaking.”

“Me too. But we can make up for it now.” Aaron smiled.

They had a few drinks, catching up on news about Lachlan and Belle when Rakesh arrived. Aaron
noticed him looking over at the bar and signalling to Chas.

“What’s that all about?” Aaron asked.

“Oh that! He’s just giving me some legal advice. Nothing important. I’ll tell you about it another time.” She brushed it off.

As soon as Aaron had gone, she called Cain and Paddy and told them to come around.

They were soon all huddled in the back room.

Rakesh pulled a file out of his briefcase. “Right, I have found something and to be honest, I’m glad I did. This affects you, Chas…. Big time.”

Chas nodded for him to explain.

“What’s the ownership was this place?”

“I own 40% and Diane owns 60%. But what’s that got to do with Robert?”

“Well I did some digging and it seems that Robert has taken out a mortgage on the farm and he’s secured £300,000 on Diane’s share of this place.”

Cain interrupted. “That’s impossible! Do you not both have to agree to something like that?”

Chas shook her head. “No, not after the Cameron stuff. She didn’t trust me so she wanted to take a majority share and be a sole signatory. But I can’t sign stuff without her approval. What does this mean?”

“Well, as far as I can see it, it could mean Diane having to forfeit her share to the bank. That would have a knock-on effect on you and the pub. It gets worse. I did more digging and it seems Robert doesn’t have a job. You’d better hope he has the money to pay this loan back.”

She was in denial. “Diane wouldn’t sign for something like this without discussing it with me first. She knows I wouldn’t agree so he must have forged her signature. What can I do?”

“I think you need to ask her.”

“I don’t want to stress her out because she’s feeling washed out from the chemo. Is there anyway we can find out more.”

Rakesh shook his head. “There’s no way. I’ve had to pull in a few favours to find all of this out.”

“Do you know why he’s borrowed the money?” Paddy asked curiously.

“It states on the official documents that he wants to get the farm up and working. He could be on to a good thing if he can, because a working farm could be worth well over a million. But I’ve seen cases like this before where a person comes into money, decides to go back to nature, buy a farm and think they’ll make a fortune. It rarely happens. Does he have any idea how to run a farm?”

Cain smirked. “You’re joking right. He showed no interest in his dad’s farm. It was left to Andy after he died.”

“Well, I think we have problems. There is one way out. Get Robert to pay back the money to the
mortgage company. There will be financial penalties but he can pay those out of his £100,000 deposit. That way… there is no mortgage anymore so there’s no need for a guarantor.” Rakesh explained.

“Right, we’ll do that. I think we need to ask Diane if she agreed to it. I want to discuss changing the signing rules after this.” Chas heard Diane chatting to Marlon at the bar so called her in.

Diane looked around the room, curious at the random gathering. “What’s happening here?”

“Diane, I hate to bring this up now but did you sign as a guarantor on Robert’s mortgage?” Chas asked her outright.

She suddenly looked nervous. “Yes I did. He just need someone to sign the paperwork so he could get a mortgage.”

“And you didn’t think to ask me?”

“I knew you would refuse so I just went ahead and did it.” Diane tried to explain but it fell on deaf ears.

“Do you know why he wanted the money?”

“No, but he said it was important.”

“He put down on the form that he was planning on putting the money into the farm, you must have known that.” Cain commented.

“I didn’t really read all the paperwork, I just signed. He seemed desperate and I trust him.”

Paddy chuckled. “Trust Robert Sugden, are you kidding me?”

Chas put her hand up to shut Paddy up. “Diane, we know it’s not your fault. How can he stoop so low, to ask an ill relative to sign paperwork without knowing what they’re getting themselves into?”

Cain was ready to start a lynch mob. “Get him down here and he can explain himself. This should be very interesting.”
Diane knew she had no choice, it was safer for Robert to come to the pub where other people were about, rather than have Cain go out looking for him.

She texted him, he arrived 10 minutes later.

“Diane?” He asked as he headed into the back room. As soon as he saw Cain, Paddy and Chas along with his stepmu, positioned around the room, he had a bad feeling. She walked over to him. “I’m sorry, they found out about me signing on the pub.”

Rakesh got up to leave.

“Would you mind staying?” Cain asked him. “We could do with a legal opinion on the crap that Sugden’s going to feed us.”

“We know that you got Diane to sign on her share of the pub. How could you? She’s got cancer and you used it to get what you wanted.” Chas started to rant at him.

He knew he was going to have to come up with something to get them off the scent. “Chas, the pub isn’t in any danger. I’ll be able to make repayments on the mortgage. The farm will make a mint once it’s up and running. I couldn’t turn down a golden opportunity like that.”

Cain glared at him. “If it’s all so innocent, why not ask Chas as well?”

“I knew she would say no so I asked Diane. This is foolproof.” Robert explained.

Cain looked over at Rakesh. “Why don’t you tell Robert, what you told us about farming?”

“It’s not guaranteed that you’ll be able to turn the farm around. It’s partially derelict. You’ll need a lot of knowledge about farming to turn it into a profit, nevermind, a healthy one. Plus, you’re not working, are you?”

“I’m starting a new job soon so I’ll easily be able to afford the repayments.” He explained nervously.

“If you’re getting a new job, how do you expect to get the farm up and running.” Paddy added his voice.

“I’m going to employ someone.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to ask Andy.” Chas teased.

“I had thought about it.”

“He hates you, Robert and he’s shacked up with Chrissie, so maybe you want to try someone else.” He laughed.

Cain stared at Robert in the menacing manner he used. “Right, we are willing to overlook this, if you pay the mortgage back and you tell Aaron to move out of Wiley’s.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Which part?”
“Either.”

“I want my son back in the pub where he should be.”

Robert fought back. “He’s not a child, Chas, so I’m not sure why you continue to treat him like one.”

“I know my son better than you ever will and he’d better off living here than with someone like you. He doesn’t even like you. In fact, no-one does, so why don’t you go and crawl back under the rock you inhabited in your time away from village.”

“Anyway, Aaron aside. I need you to call up the bank and arrange an appointment today. I’ll be coming with you to make sure you pay every penny back.” Cain explained.

“Do you know how much that’ll cost? I’ll pay thousands in penalties.”

“Not my problem, Sugden.” Cain walked over to him. “I’m sure you can afford that.”

Robert knew the next bit of news wasn’t going to go down well. “I can’t pay back what I haven’t got.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve paid upfront for all the farm equipment I’ll need.”

Paddy shook his head in disbelief. “I work on farms all the time and no-one would pay upfront for equipment, a deposit… yes, but not the full amount.”

Cain pointed towards the door. “Why don’t you head home and pick up the stuff you need. I expect a text in the next hour with an appointment time and I’ll be driving so don’t get any ideas about going alone.”

Robert sped back to the farm where Aaron was working on getting some bits together for the Dingle Van. He noticed up that something was wrong. “What’s up?”

“Cain did some digging and they know that Diane has signed the pub against the mortgage on this place. He’s coming with me to the bank to pay back what I borrowed so the mortgage can be cancelled. Aaron, I don’t have the money to pay him back. Not that I would anyway.”

“I guess we’ll just have to tell them what it’s for.” Aaron was worried.

“No, you know that won’t work without them finding out the full story and stressing you out. There must be something else?” Robert asked.

Aaron thought for a minute. “Well, there is but it could be risky.”

Cain was losing patience when Robert finally turned up at Butlers two hours later. “I don’t like waiting around for people, especially the ones I don’t like. In fact, why don’t I just save us the bother of me coming and beat you up here.”

“You really don’t want to do that.” Robert replied confidently.
“So let’s go.” Cain pointed for him to get in the car.

“I’ve decided that I’m not going to bother, seeing as how I’ve done nothing illegal. Diane signed willingly so you have nothing on me. Whereas I have quite a bit on you. You’re not the only one who can do digging.”

“Stop bluffing and get in the car. I’m not kidding now.”

“Maybe we could pop into the Skipdale Building Society Branch in Ikley whilst we’re out.”

“What are you on about?”

“June 2012, wasn’t it? You were parked outside in the back lane, I believe, in a black Mercedes. I hear that wasn’t the only one. Wasn’t there a spate of robberies around Yorkshire, that Summer? In fact, we could even make it a family affair. I hear Eli and Marlon had an interesting visit to a bookies a few years ago. They’ve never found anyone for that robbery either. There’s so much more I could tell the police but I won’t, if you back off and leave me alone.”

Cain was ashen white. “How would you know all that?”

“I have contacts and believe me, it wouldn’t take much more digging to pin something on the whole of the Dingle Clan. You lot aren’t exactly law abiding citizens. Take Aaron, for example, he’s not an angel, is he? And just think I could solve my tenant problem at the same time… bonus. Back off, or I’ll go and have an interesting chat with the police. And before you get any ideas, I have sent all of this information to my solicitor.”

Cain went up to him. “you’ll pay for this.”

“Make me!” Robert fronted up to him, right up to his face. “And don’t worry, Chas won’t lose the pub because of me.” He walked off, climbed in his car before driving off. As soon as he got out of sight of Cain, he pulled over…. his heart pounding with fear after the tense exchange.

He managed to pull himself together, enough to drive back to Wiley’s. Aaron was pacing up and down.

“How did it go? Did he back off?”

“Yeah, for the moment.” Robert announced as he signalled for him to follow him in the house. “That is one of the most terrifying things I’ve ever done.”

“But he backed off, so job done. Cain’s not stupid. He wouldn’t risk going to prison over this and it would be even worse if he dropped other Dingle members in it as well. You’re safe for now, don’t worry. I wouldn’t let him hurt you. I’d sooner tell everyone what the money’s for.”

Robert kissed him, smiling. “God, you’re family have a chequered history don’t they?”

“Yeah definitely. I mean that’s only what I picked up over the years, making contact with Cain. The Marlon and Eli stuff is just family hearsay, although I still struggle to see Marlon as a robber.” Aaron smiled.

“What do you mean, you didn’t go?” Chas couldn’t believe what her brother was telling her.
“It’s scary, Chas. Robert knows so much about our family. Things that I’ve never told anyone. He has enough information to bring down the whole of the Dingle family and what worries me is that he’ll use it.”

“Why does he want all that money? And do you think he’s doing digging on everyone to blackmail them? It’s funny how he found out about Paddy and his affair. What worries me more is that Aaron is caught up in all of this?”

“He knows stuff about Aaron too. He didn’t say what but I believe him. We need to do something about this. There’s no way, Robert Sugden is running the show. He must have a source and when I find out who it is, they’ll both live to regret it.” Cain swore revenge…
“Where’s your precious stepson these days?” Chas snarked at Diane as they worked together behind the bar. “He’s been nowhere to be seen in almost a week.”

“He’s probably laying low.”

“Well lucky for him, he’s not been around the village. Cain’s gunning for him.”

“Look, Chas. Can we not let this affect our friendship?”

“Friendship? That’s rich coming from you, considering you signed my pub over to Robert.”

“I didn’t sign it over.”

“You might as well have done. I’m only biting my tongue because you’re having treatment at the minute.”

“Robert’s not the monster you think. He’s changed… a lot.”

“Yeah of course he has. I can’t believe you’ve fallen for that one.” Chas smirked, before walking off.

That afternoon, Robert arrived at the pub to speak to Diane. “Have you seen Andy? I need to talk to him about the farm.”

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t bother, pet. He’s still up at Home Farm with Chrissie. I’m not sure it’s a good idea to ask him.”

“Well I want to try. Maybe I can convince him that Wiley’s is a better offer than life with the Whites. Mind you, he’ll be like me, attracted to the money.”

“How’s you and Aaron these days? Chas said he hadn’t been seen much.”

“We’ve been spending loads of time trying to get the farm thing off the ground. He’s amazing, Diane. How times have changed?” He smiled, happily.

Meanwhile Aaron was up at the Dingles putting the final touches to the van before its MOT the following day. He wasn’t happy to see Lachlan had moved in permanently with Belle in the flat above Wishing Well.

Lisa was singing his praises as he shared a cup of tea with her and Zak. “He’s a lovely lad. Made all the difference to our Belle having him here.”

“They’re very young to be this serious, aren’t they?”

“Belle’s been through so much.” Zak added. “So anyone who makes her happy is welcome here.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Lisa jumped up and answered it. “Lisa, how are you? I’m just here to drop off that medication that we didn’t have yesterday. I was passing so I dropped
in.” a young man explained.

“I didn’t expect to see you here. Come in, Dr.” She welcomed him in. “We’re just having a cuppa. Do you want one?”

“That would be lovely.” Alex smiled. “But I can see you have company so I don’t want to impose.”

“Rubbish, sit down.” Zak patted the seat next to him. “Lisa told me how well you looked after her yesterday and it’s nice I can thank you in person.”

Aaron was concerned. “What happened?”

“Don’t worry… love. I had an angina attack yesterday, it lasted longer than it normally does so I went to the hospital to get checked out. This lovely Dr came to my rescue. Alex… this is Aaron.”

Aaron smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

His constant smile continued as he accepted a cup of tea from Zak. “This is a nice village; it must be nice being away from the hustle and bustle of Hotten.”

“Are you off duty?” Zak asked. “Maybe you could pop down the pub later on.”

Alex got up. “I’ve got to pop back to check on a few patients but I could free up an hour or two later.”

Alex headed off, leaving Aaron puzzled. “That was a bit weird.”

Lisa brushed off his concerns. “No, he’s just a lovely young man who’s going the extra mile. Why don’t you pop down later to the pub. We need to thank you for the work on the van. You’ve saved us a fortune.”

Aaron nodded, knowing that Robert would be there, trying to convince Andy that he could be a big asset to the farm.

It was almost five by the time that Aaron reached the pub. Andy had finally agreed to meet up with his brother at five thirty.

Alex was already there with Belle, Lachlan, Zak and Lisa. It was almost as if he was part of the family already, making Aaron very curious.

Alex stood beside him at the bar. “Let me get these.” He offered.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll get you one to say thank you for helping Lisa.”

He smiled. “That would be nice.”

“So how long have you lived around here?” Alex asked.

“About seven years on and off. My mum owns the pub.”

Alex blushed. “Just when I thought you couldn’t get any more attractive…. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just Lisa’s been telling me all about you and I wouldn’t mind getting to know you better.”
Aaron panicked. Lisa had set him up and seeing the look on his mum’s face made it pretty obvious that she was in on it too. He didn’t know how to react.

“I’m not really looking for anything at the moment, Alex.” He tried to let him down gently but Alex was persistent.

“It doesn’t have to be anything. Just two people hanging out together. There’s an amazing Italian’s near the hospital that I’ve been meaning to try out for ages. Let me treat you… no pressure.”

Chas interrupted. “Of course he will. Aaron would never turn down a free meal.”

Alex grinned. “Great, how about tomorrow night at 7pm.” Just then his phone went off. “Look, that’s the hospital. I’ve been asked to cover for a few hours. Give me your number and I’ll text you.”

Aaron could feel both Lisa and Chas’s eyes on him, so he knew he had to play along or there would be too many questions. He showed Alex his number so he could programme it in. The doctor then rushed off before Aaron could get his point across.

Robert appeared in the side door and took a table in the corner. He looked over at the bar and noticed Aaron giving his number to some strange man. He was distracted by the arrival of Andy.

“Hi Andy… a pint?” He flew out of his chair across to the bar.

“Two pints… please.” He announced to Chas who was clearly excited about whatever was going on between Aaron and this young man.

“If you don’t mind waiting a few minutes, I’m busy.” She pointed to her son.

“What’s going on here?” He asked Aaron who was standing next to him.

“My son’s got a date tomorrow with a doctor.” She crowed to anyone who was listening.

“Mum!” Aaron tried to shush her. He turned around faced with Robert, with the most curious expression on his face. It didn’t take long to work out that he was jealous, he looked like a scolded child.

Aaron made an excuse and headed to the toilet, closely followed by Robert, who didn’t even bother coming up with one.

“What the hell? You’ve just accepted a date with some other bloke.”

“Is that why you look like someone’s nicked all of your toys?” Aaron joked, knowing he shouldn’t but he did enjoy riling Robert up at times. The make-up was well worth the argument.

“Are you surprised?” He announced quietly so no-one would overhear, but clearly seething with anger.

“I’m not going out with him. I’ll contact him later and turn him down. We’re getting married in three weeks so why on earth would I go out on a date with someone else. I didn’t get the chance to tell him before.”

“Well, you’d better set him straight.” Robert was starting to calm down but was clearly making it clear that Aaron was his property only, as he pushed him into a cubicle, pinning him against the wall,
before kissing him passionately.

Aaron eventually pushed him off when he heard voices outside. “We’ll continue this later at home. But just so you know, I love it when you come across all jealous and possessive.” He kissed Robert.

“Oh don’t worry, we will be continuing this later.” Robert replied with a familiar glint in his eyes.

“Look I don’t have his number so why don’t I pop over to the hospital and let him know that there’s not going to be a date. To be honest, it’ll save me having to face Alex’s fan-club out there again. Lisa and mum are almost drooling over him.”

Robert smiled, nodding. “Okay, but don’t be too long. I’ll have a quick pint with Andy and meet you back at home in an hour and a half. Don’t keep me waiting.”

“As if I would do that.” Aaron smirked as he grabbed his keys to make the short drive to Hotten hospital.

He headed into A&E, hoping he could see Alex. “Hi, is Alex about? He’s a junior doctor here, I think.”

“You mean Alex Mason?”

“Yeah that’ll be him. Can I speak to him quickly?”

“He’s busy at the moment.” The receptionist replied, pointing over to the commotion going on at the far end of the department. Alex was barking orders to the nursing staff, saying someone was on their way by ambulance with a suspected heart attack.

“Is it okay to leave a note for him?”

“Yes of course. I’ll just get you a piece of paper and a pen. I’ll make sure he gets it.”

Alex spotted him as he was asking a nurse at the desk for something. “Aaron, what are you doing here?”

“I came to see you about tomorrow night but I can see you’re busy. Call me later.”

He noticed a trolley passing, carrying Lawrence White. He looked white and was clearly unconscious. “Male… identity unknown. He was found by a dog walker slumped in the woods near Home Farm. He’s been unconscious since he was found. His BP is 182/99 and his pulse is 114. The ECG tracing shows signs of an MI.” the ambulance man was explaining to Alex.

“That’s Lawrence White.” Aaron informed Alex. “He lives at Home Farm. He’s got heart problems.”

“Do you know him well?”

Aaron shook his head. “No, not really. I can get you his daughter’s number. She’ll be his next of kin.”

“That would be amazing.” Alex smiled.

Aaron rang Robert who was at the pub, talking to Andy. “Robert, can you get in contact with
Chrissie? Lawrence has just been rushed into hospital. Looks like he’s had a heart attack. He doesn’t look good. Tell her to hurry.”
Chapter 22

Aaron was sitting with Alex giving him as many details as he could about his limited knowledge of Lawrence. They were interrupted by the arrival of Robert, Andy, Lachlan and Belle.

“We were all at the pub.” Aaron explained to Robert. “Chrissie’s on her way.”

“Can I just ask who everyone is?” Alex asked.

“I’m Lawrence’s grandson, Lachlan.”

“I’m his daughter’s boyfriend, Andy Sugden.”

Robert looked at the doctor. “I just brought them in.”

“How is he?” Lachlan asked in concern.

“He’s stable at the moment. We’ve given him some medication to try and limit the damage to his heart. Is he on any medication for his heart? We’re waiting on his medical notes.”

“Yeah he was on loads of medication, about six tablets a day. But I couldn’t tell you what they were all for. He just used to joke on about him needing so many.” Lachlan explained. “I’ve asked mum to bring his medication list. She just texted to say she’ll be twenty minutes or so.”

Aaron stood back with Robert, looking across to Lachlan. “There’s something not right here.”

Robert nodded. “You’re probably right but you know what… you and me are staying out of this. I’m not getting involved with the Whites again and you’re not to get any ideas… ok?”

Aaron wasn’t convincing when he replied. “Ok. Look why don’t we get out of here. We’re like two spare parts.”

Robert nodded before heading over to Andy who was pacing up and down. “I hope he’s going to be alright. Chrissie wouldn’t be able to cope if anything happened to him.” Andy commented.

“Look, I’m going to give Aaron a lift home. You’ll be okay, won’t you?”

“Yeah I’ll be fine. And just so you know… you can stick that job, Robert. The way you treated the Whites was unforgivable. Chrissie’s filled me in on everything you’ve done over the years. You’ll never change, will you?”

Aaron shot him a look, not to challenge Andy’s accusations.

Aaron was just on his way out of hospital when he heard someone shouting his name. “Aaron?”

It was Alex. Robert turned around and couldn’t help but glare at him, not that the doctor noticed, too mesmerised by Aaron. “What did you come to see me about?”

“I wanted to say that it was nice for you to invite me on a date but I’m going out with someone else.”

Alex looked hurt. “He’s a lucky guy… unless he’s made up just so you don’t hurt my feelings.”
Aaron shook his head. “No he’s not made up and you don’t even know me Alex. I don’t think we’d be compatible anyway.”

Alex smiled. “Look, I have to get back. I might see you around.”

“Maybe you will.” Aaron replied, as an idea started to form.

Robert smirked when he left. “How could anyone think it would be a good idea for you two to hook up. He’s a bit wet.”

Aaron agreed. “yes, and you know what… I have an idea. Finn’s mooching around the village at the moment like he needs cheering up. You must admit, it would be worth a go.”

“You mean… Finn and Alex. Yeah, why not! At least that stops him sniffing around you.”

Aaron laughed. “Like he’d get anywhere near me with you constantly marking your territory.”

“I don’t do that.” Robert protested half-heartedly.

“yeah you do. The look you get when anyone gets too close. Just so you know… don’t stop. I like it and once we get home, I’ll show you how much…” Aaron flirted.

It was almost midday the following day, as Aaron and Robert lay entangled in bed, when they heard a knock on the door. Aaron jumped out of bed and looked out of the window. “It’s Diane.”

Robert grabbed his jogging bottoms and a t-shirt before heading downstairs. “Diane? Is everything ok?”

“Where have you been? I’ve tried to call you so many times, your phone keeps going to voicemail.”

Robert went red. “Sorry, I’ve been busy.”

“Oh… I don’t need to know anymore.” She put her hand up to stop him saying more. “Can I come in?”

Robert nodded and directed her into the kitchen, just as a dressed Aaron appeared. “Hi.”

Diane smiled at him. “We’ve got a problem. Andy’s is being questioned at the police station.”

“What for?” Aaron asked.

“For murder.”

“Murder?” Robert queried.

“Lawrence died late last night, he had another heart attack. The police think that Andy tampered with his medication. Lachlan saw him in the medicine cupboard, a few days ago.”

“Lawrence is dead?” Robert couldn’t believe it.

“Yes. Chrissie is in bits and now Andy’s been arrested. He had motive. He’s been telling me for weeks how Lawrence has been trying to break them up.”

“You don’t think he did, do you?” Robert probed Diane for her thoughts.
“No, of course not. He was in complete shock when he called. I don’t think he would be stupid enough to do something like that. I think Lachlan is trying to get rid of Andy.”

“You could be right there. Something was off with Lachlan last night.” Aaron said. “He seemed very on edge and he’s an odd kid.”

“I assume he’s at Hotten police station. I’ll call my solicitor and get him up there.”

“Can you give me a lift?” Diane asked.

“Look Diane, why don’t you just stay in the village. I’ll try and sort this. The last thing you need is stress at the moment.”

She hugged him. “Thanks, pet. Please do what you can.”

“Diane, we might not get on all the time, but he’s still my brother. I’ll do everything I can. I’ll call you when I know anything.”

Robert drove up over to Hotten station. He headed in to see the desk sergeant. “Hi, I’m Robert Sugden. My brother was brought in for questioning this morning.”

“He’s in the interview room at the moment. Take a seat and I’ll get someone to have a word with you.”

“I hope he has a solicitor in with him because I’ve arranged for one to come and sit in.”

He could see by the uneasiness of the police officer that they weren’t following protocol. “I’ll go and have a word with the detective.”

A woman came out a few minutes later. “I believe you’re here asking about your brother.”

“Yes, I’m Robert Sugden. Are you interviewing him without a solicitor present?”

“We’re waiting for a duty solicitor but she’s been held up.”

“But I was led to believe that you’ve already started interviewing him and I assume he hasn’t turned one down. Anyway, I’ve arranged for a solicitor to come and sit in with him. He’ll be here in about 30 minutes so I would appreciate if you could hold off until then.” Robert tried to explain without riling DS Hart too much.

The solicitor arrived and headed into the interview room, only to appear an hour later.

Robert walked over to him. “Bill, thanks for coming at such short notice. What’s happening?”

“Andy’s denied everything. He says he knows nothing about Lawrence’s medication. Apparently there’s no prints on the medication container but there are prints on the door handle of the medicine cupboard.”

Robert couldn’t believe it. “That’s not exactly conclusive proof. I mean Lawrence used to keep his medication in a kitchen cupboard. Andy’s been living there for weeks so it wouldn’t be unusual for his prints to be on cupboard handles.”

“But we have the added problem of Lachlan White’s statement saying he saw Andy handling the medication bottle. He claimed Andy tried to convince him that he was looking for a painkiller for a
headache. Andy’s denying that ever happened.”

“So what next?”

“They need to wait for the post-mortem on Mr White and the toxicology report. So they have agreed to release Andy on bail. They’ve set it at £10,000 and he needs to be registered at a set address and he has to report to the probation office in Hotten every two days. His passport will be confiscated.”

“Bill, can you tell DS Hart that I’ll post the bail and he can come and stay with me at the farm. Hopefully this will be ok for them.”

Bill arranged for Andy to be released on those condition, much to the annoyance of Andy. “I’m not happy about this.”

“What… you could be a bit more grateful. So you’d rather be kept in custody?” Robert fired back at him.

“No, but I could stay in the village.”

“I think you’d be better off away from the village at the moment. You know how the villagers will react. Just come and stay at the farm for a few weeks until the police realise that you’re not guilty.”

“Like you think I’m innocent.”

“Andy, I know what the Whites are like remember. And for what it’s worth…I don’t think you’re guilty.”

Aaron was working on a car outside when Robert’s car pulled up. He was surprised to see Andy climb out of the passenger side.

“Aaron, is it ok if Andy stays with us for a week or two?”

Aaron nodded. “Of course. It’s your house anyway.” He acted a little cold to keep up the pretence so Andy wouldn’t guess what was going on.

Andy wandered into the house with his bag.

“You don’t mind?” He asked Aaron when he was out of earshot.

“No, he’s your brother. Mind you, it’s going to hard to keep our relationship under wraps, isn’t it?”

“Yeah I know but I couldn’t let him rot in prison for something he didn’t do. No doubt, Lachlan is making up his statement. We need to find out what’s happening. Andy and me might have had our problems but he needs my help.”

Aaron turned around to see Andy watching them from the door, so he put his hands back in his overalls. “This was going to be fun…” He whispered to himself under his breath.
Chapter 23

Andy didn’t make things easy for Robert as he refused to even acknowledge him for the first day. He pretty much kept himself to himself in the third bedroom, which luckily Robert and Aaron had bought a bed for.

Aaron and Robert were having breakfast when Andy appeared. “Aaron, I’m just going to grab my car from the village and check in with the probation officer in Hotten.” He didn’t even look in his brother’s direction.

As he headed out of the door, Aaron followed him outside. “Andy, just a minute. Look I wasn’t going to get involved but I’ve had enough. Either you start making an effort with your brother or you can go and stay in the village. I’m not going to act as some ridiculous go-between. You may not like him and I know you’ve got history, but he’s basically bailed you out and given you somewhere to live. If you don’t pull into line, you can do one.” He turned around and headed back into the farmhouse, leaving Andy speechless.

It had the desired effect. When Andy returned, his mood had totally changed. “Robert, can I have a word?” He nodded towards the living room.

“Of course.”

“Right, Aaron made me realise that I was being a total pillock before. Thank you for bailing me out of prison. I’ll be making an effort while I’m staying here and I’ll be out of your hair as soon as I can. I want to be with Chrissie, she needs me. All I have to do is prove my innocence and hopefully she’ll give me another chance.”

“Thanks, Andy. For what it’s worth… I do believe you’re 100% innocent and I’ll do everything to help you prove that. I would advise against getting back with Chrissie but when have you ever listened to anything I had to say.”

“Never… probably.”

Aaron was pleased to see the brothers talking somewhat civilly over dinner. They’d ordered pizza. “Does anyone fancy some gaming tonight?” Robert asked them.

Andy nodded. “yeah, why not! Sounds like fun. Do you remember when we used to play Super Mario on the Nintendo 64?”

Robert smirked. “I remember because I always won. You much preferred the outside life.”

“I still do. In fact, I was thinking since you’re doing me a favour, why don’t you let me repay it by giving up some tips to get this place up and running.”

“That would be great. We’d really appreciate it.” Robert panicked slightly at his slip. “I mean Aaron will be glad that I won’t rope him in anymore.”

The next few days were difficult as Robert found himself pining for Aaron. He couldn’t bear to
sleep alone, but they both knew they couldn’t risk it if they didn’t want Andy to find out. The chances to spend time alone were few and far between, but they managed to put them to good use.

“Are you mad at me?” Robert asked one morning, as they lay in bed, making the most of Andy’s visit to Hotten Police Station.

“Of course not! I could never be mad at you. What makes you say that?”

“I thought you would be fed up of having Andy about. He may be with us for a while.”

“I know that and I totally understand why you needed to invite him to stay. However much has gone between you, he’s still your brother. Anyway, someone had to rescue him from the evil clutches of the Whites. Is he still talking about getting back with Chrissie?”

“He did mention it yesterday. He thinks they’ve still got a chance and I’ve made my opinions clear so I’ve decided to leave well alone. She won’t have him back anyway. I just hope the police don’t find anything to charge him with.” Robert explained.

That afternoon, Robert spent the afternoon, clearing out one of the barns with Andy.

“Just like old times eh…” Andy suggested. “I know we’ve had plenty of fights and disagreements but we did have some good times, didn’t we?”

“Yeah we did.” He smiled back. “I do appreciate you helping me out with this. Maybe you could think about that long term job offer.”

“I don’t think Chrissie would agree. I mean, I do like being back into farming but she won’t agree with me working for you. She really hates you.”

“Yeah I worked that one out. I was wrong to cheat with Rebecca but there were other issues as well. Lawrence hated me and he was constantly coming between us, belittling me in front of Chrissie and Lachlan. I hated it. I honestly think the money was the only thing keeping me there.”

“Well, admit it, but you did do well out of it. Chas is still furious about you using Diane as a guarantor. What happens if this farming idea doesn’t work out? I mean I’m just curious what you’ve spent the money on. Have you really spent the whole lot?”

“I haven’t spent it as such. It’s just tied up.”

“Tied up in what?” Andy was curious. “An investment of some type. You know Cain still is out for your blood, don’t you?”

“Yeah, the fact I’m a marked man amongst the Dingles never escapes me.” He laughed nervously. “I keep watching my back. Look, I can’t tell you about the money but it is going to a good cause that’ll pay off in the long run.”

Aaron appeared with two cups of tea. “Thought you could both do with a cuppa.”

“You could help us with this.” Andy smirked.

“Nah mate, it’s not my thing. I’ve got a car to dismantle by the end of the week so I’ll leave you both to it.”
Andy watched Aaron wandering off. “I never put you two together.” He made an off-the-cuff comment.

Robert snapped unintentionally. “What do you mean together?”

Andy was puzzled. “What do you think I meant? I mean living as housemates. Aaron’s not the easiest person to get on with and you’re up yourself most of the time; it’s just you two are the last people I would put as friends.”

“He’s alright when you get to know him. I think he’s just a deep person.”

Andy nervously broached the subject. “Does he fancy you or something? It’s just I’ve noticed him looking at you a few times… like in a weird way.”

“This is a bit embarrassing to talk about and do you mind not mentioning this in front of Aaron? He’ll go off it if you accuse him of fancying me.”

“I value my life so I won’t mention it again, except to say that I think he does fancy you.”

The following day, DS Hart arrived unannounced at the farm with a uniformed police officer. “Is Andy Sugden about?” She asked Robert.

“Aaron could you go and get him?” Robert asked.

A few minutes later, Andy came back with Aaron.

“Mr Sugden, is there somewhere we can talk?” DS Hart suggested.

Andy looked nervous. “Yeah, let’s go into the farmhouse.”

Fifteen minutes later, she came out and drove off, leaving Andy to explain what had happened.

“They’re not pressing charges due to lack of evidence. Apparently Lachlan can’t be sure he saw me in that specific cupboard. Lawrence has been drinking quite a bit lately and his bloods showed he was three times over the drink drive limit so they think that he may have taken too much medication by mistake, and when added to the alcohol in his system, his heart gave out. Apparently his GP said he was a walking timebomb and it could’ve happened at any time.”

Robert patted his brother on his back. “that’s amazing news.”

“I’m going up to see Chrissie. She might be willing to give me another chance now. Wish me luck.”

Robert looked at Aaron in confusion. As soon as Andy left the room, he piped up. “Aaron, why would Lachlan back off? He could’ve pushed this and got rid of Andy for good.”

“I wonder if he’s involved somehow and he’s decided the police investigation could throw up suspicions about him.” Aaron suggested. “I mean there’s no way Chrissie is taking Andy back so he’s won anyway. I could find out.”

“No, you won’t. We agreed, Aaron. Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”
“I promise.” He kissed him.

Andy arrived back an hour later, his despondent mood clearly reflecting the outcome of his reconciliation attempt.

“I guess it didn’t go well.” Robert asked as his brother came into the kitchen.

“No, it didn’t. She’s threatening to sue me for the death of her dad. She says she hates me and I’ll pay for what I did. She’s furious with Lachlan for withdrawing his statement and to make things more complicated, Rebecca’s arrived.”

That was the last thing that Robert wanted to hear. “Well, I supposed she would come back with the funeral coming up.” He could see Aaron looking over, chewing his lip as he did when he was unsure and nervous.

It wasn’t until Andy had gone into the village to break the good news about the inquiry being dropped that Robert managed to get some time alone with Aaron.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah why wouldn’t I be?”

“This is about Rebecca isn’t it?”

“Yeah it is. It’s just life is so complicated at the moment, the last thing we need is one of your old flames coming back and making things worse.”

“Aaron, she means nothing to me. It was over months ago. I’ll just stay away from her. It’s you I’m in love with. No-one else matters. We’re getting married in two weeks and nothing is going to stop me saying ‘I do’.” He tried to reassure him, but he could still see the doubts creeping in…
Chapter 24

Although Robert hadn’t been with Aaron very long, he knew when he was bottling up his feelings. It became clear over breakfast the following morning that news of Bex’s return was playing on his mind.

“Did you love her?”

“Rebecca?” Robert already knew but asked. “No, not really. If you want to know the honest truth, she was easy and available. It didn’t take much to get her into bed. But I’m not that man anymore.”

“Are you sure because you do realise you’ve been pre-occupied since you heard she was at Home Farm?”

Robert knew he needed to convince Aaron about his feelings. “I’ve been worried that you’ll feel insecure about it. All that matters is you. It’s clearly bothering you, so let’s put it to rest now. I’m not spending the next few weeks before our wedding, having you worrying.”

“I don’t mean to. I know deep down that you wouldn’t cheat. Look, let’s focus on planning this wedding.” Aaron tried to appear confident in his reply but it was easy to see his doubts were lingering.

“Can I just ask you something?” Robert changed the subject. “Where do you see us in 6 months?”

“That’s a random question and you know I can’t answer it. You know it’s four weeks to my operation today.”

“I know but say you could forget you even needed surgery, just for a minute. Let me rephrase the question. Where would you like to see yourself in six months?”

“I’m not sure. With you… of course. I’d like to make it up with mum and Paddy.”

“Where do you see yourself living? What I mean is… are you happy to stay on Wiley’s forever.”

“I’ve never really thought about. This has been my home for years and I’ve not thought about living anywhere difference. What’s with all the questions?”

“Right… tell me if I’m crazy but how would you feel about living at the Mill. Rumour has it that it’s going up for auction. It’s been repossessed. Rakesh has hit financial problems and he’s given it up.”

“Won’t Jimmy and Nicola go for it? I mean they were forced into selling.”

“I don’t think anyone in the village could afford it. How about we give it a go? The auction’s in Leeds tomorrow, so why don’t we take a drive?”

Aaron smiled. “Yeah I mean, I’d love to move back to the village but what about this place? If you sell, you’ll be lucky to cover the mortgage you took out.”

“Well, I’ve been doing my sums. One of my investments is about to pay out at least £100,000. Plus, Mark emailed this morning to say he’s transferred £150,000 back to me because he says the operation will cost £200,000 at most. That’s still a £50,000 contingency fund. I’ve got just over
£50,000 in my savings. We can stretch to £400,000. Clive said he can get a bridging loan for the rest until I start a new job in the autumn, once you’re back on your feet. Then we can get a joint mortgage once we’ve gone public. Please tell me if I’m getting excited for no reason.”

“I would love it but the farm won’t run itself.”

“I had this even crazier idea about giving Andy the farm… well not giving it to him. He would have to make repayments on the loan from the farm profits but he would keep a generous cut of any profits and have somewhere to live. We had a talk yesterday and he thinks it could take a year or two to have it totally up and running but he thinks he can generate some income within a month or two. I’ve not mentioned this to him yet as I wanted to clear it with you first.”

Aaron was a silent for a moment or two. “I think it’s an amazing idea. I’ve got some saving… about £40,000. It was a half-hearted effort to come up with some money for surgery. Anyway, we’re going to need to invest more in the farm so Andy can get started. I mean, I don’t think you’re cut out to be a farmer and you two seem to be getting on better than ever.”

“Yeah I need to thank Chrissie for bringing me and Andy back together.” He laughed.

“Look, since Andy’s out for a few hours… why don’t we take advantage.” Aaron looked him up and down, making his intentions clear, not that Robert put up any resistance as he was dragged up the stairs.

Two hours later, Robert and Aaron flew around the bedroom getting dressed as they heard Andy pulling up.

“Look, let’s go and bid for the Mill tomorrow before we say anything to Andy. I mean we might be stuck here at Wiley’s if we don’t win.”

The auction room was surprisingly empty by the time the Mill came up in the catalogue, and luckily for them, there was no-one from the village, well not until Robert spotted a familiar face appear at the back of the room.

“’You’re kidding me.” He shot a surprised look at Aaron. “We might have some competition. Bex is here, the blond woman at the back with the weird thing on her head.”

Rebecca wasted no time in coming over as soon as she had clocked her eyes on him. “Robert, how nice to see you. I just wish it was in better circumstances.”

Robert lied. “I’m sorry to hear about Lawrence. What are you doing here?”

She smirked. “I could ask you the same thing. I’m looking for somewhere to live.”

“You’re moving here?” He tried to keep calm, noticing the glaring Aaron standing behind her.

“I’ve decided it’s time to put down some roots. And as you can imagine, I’m not welcome at Home Farm after Chrissie found out about us. So I’ve answered your questions. So why are you here?” The flirting dripped off every word that came out of her mouth.
“I’m just here because I fancy my chances.” Robert replied, realising he’d made the wrong choice of words.

“I quite fancy my chances too. Maybe we could grab a drink after the auction to catch up without Chrissie finding out.” She noticed he had company. “Your friend could come too.” She looked Aaron up and down arrogantly, making his blood pressure rise. “Who is your friend by the way?”

Robert rolled his eyes. “Bex, this is Aaron. Aaron, this is Rebecca White.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m sure you’ve heard all about me.” She put out her hand to greet him.

“Nah not really.” He cut her dead. “Look, the auctions about to start.” Aaron pointed over to the seats at the far side so they could escape this horror of a woman.

“Well, I guess we’d better take out seats.” He directed at Aaron. “Nice to see you again, Bex.” He walked off without another word.

Aaron whispered in his ear. “How the hell did you end up with her? She’s a nightmare.” He watched as she took a seat a few rows back.

The bidding was slow to start. The two other interested parties dropped out when the price got to £310,000, leaving only Robert and Rebecca in the running.

The auctioneer was making quick work of the two horse race as the price soared to over £380,000 with no sign of Rebecca dropping out.

Aaron could see the disappointment on Robert’s face as the price reached £400,000.

“Any more offers? How about £405,000?” The auctioneer asked. Aaron turned around to see the smug look on Bex’s face. He nudged Robert to up his offer. Doing as he suggested, Robert raised his hand several more times until the hammer finally fell at £420,000.

“Sold to the gentleman in the fourth row. Well done, sir.”

“Are you sure we can afford it?” He asked quietly.

“We’ll just have to use my savings and put less into the farm for a while. There’s no way she was going to win.” Aaron commented before smiling confidently.

Rebecca was clearly annoyed. “Where are you getting all this money from? Chrissie told me how you’d fleeced them for a farm and now this. It doesn’t matter anyway.” She completed ignored Aaron’s presence. “It’s a big house. Maybe we could share.” He went to kiss him but he moved away.

“What’s wrong with you, Bex? There is no ‘us’. I mean there barely was an ‘us’. Just walk away before you make an even bigger fool of yourself.”

“Why are you being like this?” She asked in desperation.

“Because you don’t seem to take subtle hints… So I’m going to make it very clear for you. I’m not interested.”

Robert walked off, leaving a shocked Bex, standing in the middle of the room. Aaron followed, clearly impressed by his fiance’s performance.
“Hopefully she’ll get the message.” Robert smirked as they headed off to complete the paperwork and to pay the deposit.

With all the paperwork signed, they sat in the car outside the building. “Are you sure, we’re not overstretching ourselves? I mean we only have 14 days to complete and exchange contracts.”

“I’m well aware of that.” He pulled out the auction catalogue and opened it at the Mill. “I see Rakesh has put an en-suite in the master bedroom. But I already know that, considering I’ve seen it before.”

“When have you been to the Mill recently?”

“I’ve seen the en-suite with both of us in it.” He replied, watching a flash of recognition appear on Robert’s face. “Remember that little flash I had when we brushed hands in the kitchen at Wiley’s.”

Robert blushed. “You mean… that flash.” Making it obvious what he meant.

“Yeah… that flash. I couldn’t work out where it was, but now I guess we know. And I can also guess what we’ll be doing in the en-suite in about 14 days’ time.” He replied suggestively…
Chapter 25

Robert decided to ask Andy over a pint at the pub a week later as soon as the Mill financing was confirmed to be in place. Aaron was headed out for the night with Adam to Hotten under the pretence of a stag-night with the wedding only one week away. Robert had laughed at his suggestion, pointing out that Adam wouldn’t even get to know it was a stag-night. He was just happy to see Aaron smile and happy.

“So you’re buying?” Andy asked cheekily as they headed to the bar.

“I suppose so, since I invited you.”

“Two pints please, Diane.” He looked around and noticed Chas glaring at him. “This is going to be a fun night. If looks could kill, I’d be dead.” He whispered to his stepmum.

“If only we were that lucky.” Chas fired at him, with little concern that everyone could overhear.

He smiled. “Nice to know how you feel, Chas.” He grabbed the pints and headed over to the table where his brother had taken up residence.

“I would be careful. You know how Cain likes to talk with his fists.” Andy warned him.

“Careful, Andy. It almost sounds like you care. I’m not worried about Cain.” He lied.

“Anyway, what did you want to chat about?” He asked Robert.

“Right, I have a proposition but you have to promise me that this will stay a secret for the time being.”

“Ok, I won’t breathe a word.”

“Right, I’ve bought the Mill and I’m moving back to the village.”

“You’ve given up on the farm already. Why doesn’t that surprise me?!” Andy moaned.

“No, actually. I was wondering if you want to live at Wiley’s and run it. You can keep a share of the profits and live rent free in the house.”

Andy’s eyes widened with interest. “But why would you offer that to me?”

“Because I firmly believe that the farm is a potential goldmine and you love farming, so it would seem too good an opportunity to miss. Of course, this would all be set out in agreements so you don’t have to worry about me fleecing you. I have changed, Andy and I want a new start. This is my way of us reconnecting, whilst making me some serious brass.” He explained. “So are you interested?”

“Yeah definitely. Would I have free rein on how to run the farm?”

“Well, I know nothing about running a farm so I couldn’t interfere if I tried. The budget isn’t that big at the moment and I can only afford to invest about £30,000 upfront.”

“My god… you haven’t bought the Mill with the farm money, have you? Chas is going to go off it if she finds out.” Andy commented.
“She’s not going to find out just yet.” He replied confidently. “Would you manage with 30k?”

“You’re the boss. Look I’m going to get Bill to draw up some agreements. I want you to take your time reading them before you sign. I think you’ll find that it’s a good offer.”

“Ok, I guess the next pint’s on me.” Andy got up and ordered two more pints.

“Can I join you?” Vic asked as she clocked her brothers drinking together. She shouted over to the bar. “Andy, I’ll have a pint as well.”

Andy kept up his end of the deal by keeping his mouth shut as Vic took a seat.

Robert was enjoying spending time with his brother and sister so he was annoyed when it was shattered by the arrival of Rebecca. She breezed into the pub like she owned it.

“Hello, can I have a pinot grigio?” She asked Chas who was busy serving.

“A what?”

“Never-mind. A glass of your most expensive white wine will do.” Rebecca replied. “Actually make it a large one, I’ve had a rough day.”

Chas didn’t really probe further as it was pretty obvious Rebecca was going to tell her anyway.

“My dad’s funeral was today. It’s been tough.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Chas replied. “Was he local?”

“Lawrence White…. You must know him.”

“Yes of course.” The penny dropped. “You’re Rebecca.”

“How did you know that?” She was shocked.

“Well let’s put it nicely. The rumours have been around about you and Robert, and his marriage break-up.”

Bex blushed. “Not what I like to be known for but never mind.”

Vic overheard the conversation and noticed Robert looked as though he’d rather be elsewhere. “Hi Rebecca.” She said as she headed over, much to her brother’s annoyance. “I’m Robert’s sister, Victoria. He’s told me all about you. Why don’t you join us?”

“I don’t believe this.” Robert muttered to Andy. “Why does Vic need to stick her nose into everyone else’s business?”

Before Andy could reply, Vic had pulled out a seat for the new guest. “Robert, Andy… you don’t mind if Rebecca joins us, do you?”

Robert shook his head, basically because he had no choice.
“I don’t think we’ve met.” She looked at Andy.

“I’m Andy… Robert and Vic’s brother.” He smiled nervously, waiting for her to make the connection.

“Oh, you’re Chrissie’s ex. She hasn’t stopped going on about you for days.”

He sat up in interest. “Really, do you think there’s any chance of us getting back together.”

“No, she hates you.” Bex just came out and said it.

“Still direct as usual, I see.” Robert announced.

Vic tutted. “Ignore him, Rebecca. In fact, I would like to apologise for the way he treated you. No doubt, Chrissie blamed you for the affair. But knowing Robert, it would be his fault.”

“Vic, do you have any family loyalty at all?” Robert glared at her.

“Family loyalty, that’s rich coming from you. All that stuff with Katie the night before her wedding to Andy… need I say more.”

Robert was about to defend himself but surprisingly Andy stepped in. “Vic, I think we’ve moved past that now. Let’s not bring all that crap up again.”

Rebecca interrupted. “So Robert, I should have let you buy me a drink. In fact, no… allow me.” She shouted over at Chas. “Excuse me! Could we have a bottle of champagne? Robert’s celebrating tonight.”

Chas came over with an ice bucket and a bottle. “What’s to celebrate?” She asked curiously.

“Bex… don’t.” Robert asked her.

She ignored him. “Robert’s celebrating his new house purchase.”

“Which house purchase?” She pushed for me.

“Oh I’m sorry. Was it a secret that you’ve bought the Mill?”

Chas was taken aback. “You’ve bought the Mill? How in the hell did you afford that? No, don’t tell me… you used the money secured on this place to pay for it. This just gets better.”

“How much has that cost us?”

“£420,000, not including buyers fees.” Rebecca twisted the knife.

“You’re not going to get away with this.” Chas whispered in his ear. “It’s lucky for you that Cain’s away in France for the next two weeks.”

“Chas, leave me alone.” Robert just wanted to leave as this was becoming more complicated by the second.

Chas wasn’t the only one who wanted more details as Vic started to dig, then Diane came over.

“Robert, can I speak to you?” Diane asked him. “In private… now” She pointed him through to the back room.

“This concerns me too.” Chas started to follow.
“No, Chas. I’ll sort it.” Diane was adamant, making her back off. “You two shouting at each other isn’t going to help.”

“I’ll watch the bar but I want to know what’s going on.”

Robert took a seat at the table in the backroom as Diane slammed the door. “Right Robert… I want to know what’s going on. I have a right to know, considering it’s mine and Chas’s livelihood at risk here.”

“Ok… but you have to promise me that you won’t tell Chas any of this. I’ve been sworn to secrecy.” Robert knew he’d been backed into a corner and needed to be upfront.

“I can’t promise that until I know.”

“I’m going to trust you because I know I haven’t been fair with you, but please know I haven’t told you for good reason.”

“I’m all ears.” She was still annoyed but curious.

“I have bought the Mill, and I did use some of the money from the farm to do it. But that wasn’t why I remortgaged the farm. Aaron needs surgery. We’re flying out in three weeks to a private clinic in Switzerland for an operation to remove a growth that was caused by his accident. As you can imagine, it’s not cheap.”

Diane’s concern was instant. “But surely it would be safer and free to have it in this country. The NHS is ok, you know. They’ve been amazing with my cancer treatment.”

“Diane, it’s an experimental treatment and it’s not licensed in this country. The surgeon who’s cared for him since the crash is carrying out the procedure at his clinic. He’ll die without it and even, if he has it, it carries a high risk.” He started to tear up.

Diane started to console him. “Oh pet. I had no idea. It all makes sense now why you were so desperate.”

“I just need him to get better.”

“Why don’t you just tell, Chas? She’s got a right to know.”

“It’s complicated and Aaron doesn’t want her to know until he’s across there and about to undergo surgery. He’s worried that she’ll interfere and push him to ask for a second opinion. And how do you think she’ll feel if she finds out about us>”

“She’ll come around. She loves Aaron.”

“I know she does, but she hates me.”

“But if you were to explain all of this to her, she’d understand.”

Robert looked at her. “It doesn’t matter anyway because it’s his choice and I’ll respect it. Please support us on this one.”

“You know I will. No-one will hear it from me.”

A thought crossed his mind. “You could do me another favour. We’re getting married at the end of next week and we need a witness.”
“Married!” She exclaimed.

“Yeah… I know it seems quick, but everything has been put into perspective over the past few weeks and I love him more than anything.”

She hugged him. “I’m so happy for you, pet. Of course, I’ll be there. Do I need a hat?”

“You can if you like.” He managed a smile. “But remember… no-one else is to know.”

“My lips are sealed but a word of warning… don’t push Chas too much or you’ll have Cain to answer to when he comes back.”
“It’s so long since I’ve been on a decent pub crawl, Ad. We’ll have to do this more often.” Aaron announced as they staggered through the streets of Hotten heading towards pub number 5. “I’m sorry I’ve been a jerk the past few years.”

Adam patted him on the back. “Aaron… shut up. This is like the fourteenth time you’ve apologised in the past hour. Let’s just concentrate on having a good night. The next round is on you.”

“You know what… I could murder a curry.” Adam pointed over the road. “If we have something to eat, it means that we can sober up a bit.”

Aaron nodded in agreement so they headed over the road to see if they had a spare table.

“Well, it was worth a try.” Aaron said as they’d been informed the restaurant was fully booked. “Did you see the empty tables? I think they weren’t impressed by how drunk we are.”

“Their loss, mate.” He smirked. “Let’s find another pub.”

As they staggered across the road, Adam’s phone rang. “It’s Vic. I’ll call her back later.” He rejected the call, only to have an annoyed message arrive a few seconds later from her, asking why he was ignoring her.

“Look, I’m going to give her a call from over there as it’s too loud here.” Adam commented, clearly deafened by the loud music coming from the nearby pub.

Aaron couldn’t help but notice Belle standing outside an Italian restaurant with Lachlan. Things weren’t looking friendly between them, so much so, that it concerned Aaron. He wandered over but stayed well back so they didn’t spot him.

“Lachlan, why did you want to come out? I told you I would’ve cancelled.” Belle was clearly angry with him.

“I thought it would take my mind off grandad, but I wish we hadn’t come. Your college friends are so annoying and could you be any more obvious with Gerry?”

“How many times?” Belle screamed. “I’m not interested in Gerry. He’s just a friend from college. He’s like that with everyone…even the boys. He’s just over-enthusiastic about everything.”

“Well he seemed very enthusiastic about you. Why did you tell him about the job at the B&B? You want to see him again, don’t you?” He accused her.

“Because he’s after a job and Doug and Diane are struggling with Eric and Val away. They were asking around the village yesterday asking if anyone wanted a few hours work.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Look I’m going home. I’ll see you later.” She started to walk off, only to find herself pulled back as Lachlan grabbed her arm.

Aaron sprung into action. “Take your hands off her now.” He ordered Lachlan to step back.

“Aaron!” Belle answered in surprise. “We’re fine. Just leave us to sort this out.”
“I’m taking you back to the village now with Adam and me.” He noticed that Lachlan still had his hand around her wrist. “Leave go…” He repeated.

“Or?” Lachlan had a wild look in his eyes.

“Or I’ll make you.”

He stepped up into Lachlan’s personal space before acting without thinking. He grabbed Lachlan’s hand with his own… then he froze for a moment… before a scene of falling rubble flashed before his eyes. Before he could process more, he pulled his hand away to protect himself.

It was few moments late when he felt a sharp and intense pain shooting through his head. The pain was more intense and painful than it had ever been. He felt his legs giving way as the pain kicked in more. Adam arrived just in time to catch him as he staggered back.

“Aaron, are you ok?”

“What did you do?” Adam shot a look at Lachlan.

“Nothing. He just pulled my hand away and then he went like this.” Lachlan explained, backed up by Belle nodding in agreement.

“I’ve just had too much to drink.” Aaron managed to whisper. “Can we go back home now?” It took a few minutes before he could take his own weight.

Adam shouted off a taxi and bundled him in it. Aaron’s head was banging make it difficult for him to concentrate. “Emmerdale… please mate.” He ordered the taxi driver.

He finally started to feel the pain lift and the foggy head clear as they approached Emmerdale. “You could just drop me off at Wiley’s. I’ll be fine.” Aaron protested.

“No way, mate. There’s no-one up there to keep an eye on you. There’s problems at the pub, Vic says so we needed to get back anyway.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“Apparently Robert’s bought the Mill with the money secured on the pub and your mum is baying for his blood.” Adam explained, much to Aaron’s concern.

“Oh god, this isn’t going to end well.” The concern making him forget about his headache.

They both headed into the pub, right into the middle of a stand-up row. The rest of the pub had been cleared of people except Vic, Diane and Andy.

Chas was shouting. “Well, you may have tricked Diane into believing your little story, but I’m not falling for it. I want you out of this village and out of our lives.”

Aaron intervened. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Robert’s bought the Mill and he’s used the money, secured against the pub to buy it.”
“Mum, calm down.” He replied. “He hasn’t used the money secured on the pub. He had an investment pay out and he used that. I was at the auction with him.”

“Oh, why were you there with him?”

“Because, he’s my mate and he asked for some company. This is all above board. The farm will pay for itself soon enough.” Aaron defended him.

“I told you, Chas.” Robert couldn’t help himself. “Andy’s going to be taking over the running of Wiley’s and getting it back to a full functioning farm. It’ll be making money soon enough.”

“You’re hiding something.” She went up to his face. “And once I find out what it is, Cain will want to speak to you about it.”

Aaron pulled his mum back. “Mum, leave him alone.”

She turned around. “Well I’m surprised at you… siding with a Sugden over a Dingle. Guess I know where your priorities lie. Do you fancy him or something?” She accused Aaron, her temper clearly running away with her.

“No, of course not!” He lied.

“Aaron, he’s been blackmailing Cain and me.” Chas shouted.

“I haven’t.” Robert protested. “I was just protecting myself from being beaten up by your brother. I think you’re over-reacting.”

Aaron couldn’t believe Robert was going about this all the wrong way… goading his mum more. “Robert, just leave it. Let’s head back. The taxi’s outside.”

“I want to sort this out.”

Aaron whispered in his ear. “I had a flash in Hotten and I need to get back.”

Robert’s mood changed instantly. “Ok, we’ll head back. Andy, are you ready?”

“Aaron, what did you say to him?” Chas asked as they exited the pub.

“It’s not important.”

“Aaron, I’m just looking out for you. You need to get as far away from him as you can. Once Cain’s back, he’s a dead-man walking and you don’t need to get caught in the cross-fire.” She begged him to listen.

“If Cain lays a finger on him, I’ll report him to the police.”

“Look, I don’t want to argue. But you know as well as I do, that I couldn’t stop Cain even if I wanted to.”

“Well, I guess we’re done here.” Aaron walked out of the pub and into the waiting taxi.

They arrived back at Wiley’s, Andy still puzzled by what had gone on at the pub.

“I think I could do with a coffee.” He said as he slumped on the table, the headaches and the effects
of the alcohol making him feel out of sorts.

“I think we could all do with one.” Andy replied as he got up and put the kettle on.

“Are you sure, you’re alright?” Robert was fussing over Aaron, unconcerned that his brother was in the room. “How bad was it?”

“Pretty bad. I just need a good night’s sleep. Can we just tell Andy about us? I’m sick of sleeping alone.” He whispered to Robert as Andy headed out of the room for a second.

Robert nodded. “Ok, if you’re sure.”

“I am. I’m fed up of having to pretend and the mood I’m in at the moment, I don’t even care if mum finds out about us.”

They all took a seat at the table with their coffees.

Robert brought up the subject. “Andy, you’re probably wondering about tonight.”

“Well I did wonder.”

“Look, I’m bisexual. Aaron and me are together. We’re getting married next week in Leeds.”

They watched as Andy sat there with his mouth gaping open, as he processed the information he’d been given. “I didn’t expect that.”

They told him about how they’d fallen for each other and how they were going to be moving into the Mill together. They left out the parts about the upcoming surgery.

“It’s just we’re sick of staying apart and you may have wondered if we were sleeping in the same bed.” Aaron explained.

“I am happy for you both, although give me some time to get used to it.” Andy replied honestly.

They finally made it up to bed so they could talk openly. “So what happened?”

Aaron explained. “Lachlan and Belle were out with some of her friends and they were having an argument over a friend of hers. He thought that this lad fancied her and was trying it on with her. She tried to leave, he grabbed her hand, so I intervened and pulled his hand away.”

“So what was the flash about?”

“It was only a brief second one as I had to leave go. It was just some falling rubble, nothing else really. I didn’t see anyone and I couldn’t work out where it was, so maybe it’s nothing. I just want some sleep now.”

Robert kissed him and pulled him into a cuddle. “We’ll sort your mum out tomorrow. I know you had a row with her.”

“Ok…” Aaron said as he soon drifted off to sleep…
Aaron wasn’t in the best mood when he woke up, the combination of too much drinking and the flash the night before. He didn’t feel like facing up to Andy’s questions so he decided to take the dogs for a walk to clear his head whilst Robert spoke to his brother. They’d agree on what they were going to tell him.

“I’ve made you breakfast.” Andy smiled at Robert as he placed the food down on the table.
“There’s one in the oven for Aaron if he wants one when he gets back.”

“Thanks, Andy. You can ask questions you know…”

“Oh, how long have you been into men?”

“Since I was a teenager, I guess.” He explained, not mentioning the farmhand. “I still like women, it’s just I’ve felt attractions to men too. I’ve had a few short flings with men, but nothing like what I’ve got with Aaron.”

“I would never have put you two together but I guess I could never see you being interested in men either.” His brother replied honestly. “What’s the hurry to get married?”

“Aaron’s not well. He needs neurosurgery abroad in a few weeks or he could die.”

“Oh my god. Does Chas know?”

“No, not yet. Aaron wants to leave it until nearer the operation. We’re flying over to Switzerland, getting Aaron settled and then we’ll let Chas and Paddy know. We plan on booking tickets for them to fly across so they can spend time with him before the surgery. The money I borrowed against the farm and pub is to pay for the surgery. It could cost £250,000.”

Everything was making sense to Andy now. “I can’t believe it. It’s so much to take in. Is there anything I can do?”

Robert nodded. “There’s a few things. Don’t tell anyone about this. Diane does know but no-one is to know. I need you to look after the farm. And, will you be at my wedding? We need a second witness and Diane’s coming. I know it’s difficult and she’ll never forgive me, but Victoria is not to know as she’ll let it slip.”

“Yes to everything.” Andy smiled. “I have to say I agree with you on Vic. You do know she’s got Rebecca staying at hers. She wouldn’t let her book into the B&B.”

“Fantastic!” Robert rolled his eyes. “Anyway, Bex isn’t important right now. I just want to concentrate on Aaron. Thank you for everything, Andy.”

Andy pulled him into a bear hug. “Thank you as well, Rob. You’ve given me a purpose in life after Katie and I actually like being on good terms with you for a change.”

Robert felt pang of guilt every time he heard Katie’s name but Aaron had helped him come to terms with the fact that her death hadn’t been his fault. He was just pleased to be speaking to his brother again, and the fact he could help him out, actually made him feel good.
Aaron headed down to the village with Riley and Duke to see what was happening. He would’ve rather taken a break from seeing his mum, but he needed to get more details on what Cain could have planned for Robert.

Robert said he could deal with Cain but even Aaron could see he was bricking it.

He knocked on the back door of the pub, for it to be answered by Diane. “Hi Aaron, pet. Are you ok after last night?” She asked concerned.

“Yeah I’m fine. Just a bit hung over. Where’s mum?”

“She’s in the bar getting ready for opening. Go and see her if you like. She’s in a slightly better mood than last night, but not much.”

“Thanks Diane.” He smiled. “By the way, we’ve told Andy about us and my surgery, but no-one else is to know.”

“That’s fine, Pet. I’m just thrilled to see Andy and Robert getting on so well.”

Aaron nodded in agreement before heading through to the bar. “Hi mum.”

“What do you want?” She asked clearly still annoyed. “I’m surprised you’re here when you could be hanging out with Robert and Andy. When did you change?”

“I changed because I had to…after the accident. You can’t expect something like that, not to change your life. I lost everything that day.” He replied.

Chas mellowed at the sight of her vulnerable side of her son. “You miss Jackson, don’t you?”

“Yes I do… but life moves on and we have to make the best of what we’ve got.” He could feel himself suddenly feeling as if he should tell her about the surgery but then Chas made the decision for him.

“And the best… is taking up with the Sugden’s and going against the Dingle Code, is it?” She couldn’t help herself, so riled by the presence of Robert in her son’s life.

“It’s always about the Dingle code, isn’t it? Does that override everything in life? Because believe me there are more important things.” He replied cryptically. “What’s Cain got planned?”

“Why would I tell you? You’ll go straight back and tell Robert everything. To be honest, I told Cain I didn’t want to know specifics, but believe me, it won’t be pretty. Cain wasn’t happy to hear the latest developments. Robert will regret ever crossing us.”

“My threat to go to the police still stands. I’m so sick of Cain’s bully boy tactics.”

“He’ll have the whole Dingle clan covering for him and it’ll be your word against his. I’m sure you’ll come to your senses soon when you work out that Robert is a user and he’ll tread on anyone that gets in his way. Look, if you don’t mind, I’ve got a bar to open up for.

“Ok.” He replied before shrugging his shoulders and walking off.

She shouted after him. “And I would stay away from the Dingles if I were you. Zak said you weren’t welcome on at Wishing Well until you work out your priorities.”

“I need to check on Lachlan and Belle.” He was concerned. “I don’t trust him not to hurt Belle. They had a massive fight last night in Hotten.”
“It was probably just a bust-up. Lachlan has a lot of fans amongst the Dingles so good luck with that one.”

Robert was working on plans for the wedding when Aaron arrived home, looking very despondent.

“What’s up?” he wandered over and give him a supportive hug.

“I went to see mum and it didn’t end well. The Dingles have closed rank and cast me out. I can’t even go and see that Belle’s ok.”

“I just wish I could make things better for you. Why don’t you tell her about your surgery?” Robert suggested

“No way! She’ll panic and take over. You’ll be cast aside and you’re the only person that matters to me, Robert. You’re the only one who can help me get through this. I need you to make decisions for me while I’m knocked out. No… the plan still stands. They can come over a day before the operation. Mum’s done me a favour anyway. I’ve decided to become a Sugden next Friday.”

“Are you sure? I know how much being a Dingle means to you, after everything that happened with your dad.” Robert suggested.

“No, I’m certain. I want to become a Sugden. I mean… I know we haven’t spoken about it but I wouldn’t mind looking into expanding the family one day and I’d want to have the same name.” Aaron explained coyly, unsure what the response would be.

“I’d love to look into the possibility of having children… one day, but let’s get this surgery out of the way and then we can think about the future.”

Aaron started to cry, the stress of the operation finally showing. “I’m scared, Robert. What if I don’t survive?”

“You will. You’re a fighter, Aaron.” He kissed him before hugging him tightly.
Chapter 28

Aaron took a deep breath as they drove towards Manchester. Mark was meeting them at a local private hospital to carry out all the necessary tests to ensure he was fit for surgery as well as getting the ball rolling on some paperwork.

He met them in the small café. “Hi Aaron, Robert… have a seat. I’ve ordered some coffee for you if that’s ok. We’ll have a chat for a while and then we’ll head upstairs to get the tests done. It’s just some bloods, a heart tracing and a few other tests. Nothing to worry about. How are your headaches?”

“Not too bad. I had a quick flash last week and a bad headache for a few hours, but that could have been made worse by the four pints I had before it happened. Robert’s making sure I don’t get myself into trouble.”

“Good… and you must listen to him as we don’t know how much damage further flashes are doing. You’ve only got two weeks to go and you’ll be all ready for surgery. I know it’s a stressful time, Aaron but I’m quietly confident that we’ll be able to do this safely. We’ve got a great team sorted.”

Aaron smiled. “I know you’ll do everything you can, Mark. I want Robert to make all my decisions for me when I’m unable to. We’re getting married tomorrow.”

“Married? Congratulations. You’ve been an amazing support.” He directed the comment to Robert.

“No doubt, you’ll be busy tomorrow but you’re welcome if you can make it.” Robert suggested. “It’s at Leeds Town Hall.”

Mark looked disappointed. “I would’ve love to come but I’ve got operations morning and afternoon tomorrow. I want to see the photos though.”

“We will make sure we bore you with them. My mum will be furious when she finds out about the wedding. She hates Robert and won’t be happy.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand when she gets across and finds out what you’re going through. We’ve arranged a family apartment at the hospital for Chas and Paddy. There’s also one for Robert, of course.”

They finished up their coffees and headed for the tests, which took an hour or so.

“So Aaron, I’ll see you in 12 days. We’ll look after you, don’t worry!” Mark waved them off. “I hope you have an amazing day, tomorrow.”

It was almost dark by the time they made it back to the farm.

“How about an early night?” Aaron suggested. “We’ll have to be up early tomorrow.”

“Ok, why not!”

“Yeah, we’ve got a busy few days with the wedding and then getting the keys on Saturday for the
Mill. Did you ask Andy about overseeing the renovations whilst we’re away in Switzerland?”

Aaron asked.

“Yep, all sorted. He knows how we want it doing. Rakesh has done an amazing job doing up the place so it’s only a few things.”

Andy picked up Diane at 9am the next day, with Robert and Aaron heading into Leeds separately for the 11am wedding.

“I’ve had a word with the registrar and told her that we won’t be doing any rings or hand-holding. I just said we weren’t a very tactile couple… in public anyway.”

“You’re so embarrassing.” He nudged Robert as he drove into the city.

“I know but you still love me.”

“You know I do.” Aaron replied, taking in how lucky he was to have Robert in his life.

Diane and Andy were waiting for them in one of the smaller rooms where the ceremony was about to take place. The ceremony was perfect, the vows went without a hitch, much to the surprise of both of them and they were soon announced as “husband and husband.” As much as they’d held back on the hand-holding during the ceremony, they didn’t hold back with their first kiss as a married couple, much to the puzzlement of the registrar.

“You look so happy, the both of you.” Diane gushed as they headed over to fill in the marriage paperwork.


The reception was a meal in a local Italian restaurant. There were no speeches or presents, well at least, that’s what Aaron thought until Robert began to speak up.

“Aaron, I know we said strictly no presents, but I lied.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket.

“I’ve booked us a honeymoon. We’re leaving on Monday for five days at a log cabin in the Lake District.”

Aaron was too shocked to respond at first. “That’s… that’s amazing. Thank you. I’m feeling guilty because I haven’t got you anything. Well I’m lying because I have.” He pulled out a watch.

“I thought I’d lost that.” Robert exclaimed.

“Well you didn’t. I found it down the back of one of the sofas so I pinched it and got it engraved with the date we got together and the date of our wedding.”

“Diane, Andy…. Thank you so much for being here.” Robert held up his glass to raise a toast. “Just so you know, we do plan on having a second wedding in the village so we can invite everyone who’s missing today.”

The four glasses clinked together.
As much as they didn’t want to, Robert and Aaron had to head back to reality the following day after a night in a Leeds Hotel, hastily arranged online after the wedding.

“I can’t believe we’re having to head back to the village.” Robert groaned. “Thank you for everything. I never thought I could be this happy.” He kissed Aaron as they pulled into Hotten to pick up the keys for the Mill.

Robert signed the papers and grabbed the keys. They were soon on the way back to the village. Aaron could see the change in his husband’s demeanour as they drove over the bridge.

“Don’t worry! He’s not back yet. I got Andy to check and apparently he’s not due back until next week sometime. We’ll be away so we’ll worry about it when we get back.”

“I know I keep saying that Cain doesn’t worry me, but he does.” Robert relaxed a little.

“I know that. Every time I mention his name, you tense up.”

They drove into the Mill driveway and took in the huge house. “What are we going to do with the other three bedrooms?” Robert asked as they entered into the living room.

“Actually, my sister’s been asking if she can come and stay sometime. I haven’t seen her since Gordon died and she’s always texting me telling me how bad life is with her mum. So when we get back from Switzerland, maybe she could come for a weekend.”

“Anyone is welcome, Aaron. It’s your house as much as mine… remember. What’s Liv like?”

“She’s really nice. Not a pick of bother.” He lied.

“I can’t wait to meet her.” Robert smiled as they began to pull the dust sheets off the floor. “Look, why don’t we just spend a few hours here sorting out and then head back and watch a movie. Andy’s going out tonight so we’ll have the house to ourselves.”

“Maybe we should order a bed for this place.” Aaron smiled knowingly.

“We’ll go bed hunting tomorrow if you like. Then Monday, we’ll have five days of peace away from this place. Just you and me.” Robert kissed him.

“I can’t wait.”

For the first four days, the honeymoon was everything they had expected and more. Five days away from the village, from Cain and from the thoughts of Aaron’s upcoming surgery. Robert had pull out all of the stops for their stay, arranging constant romantic gestures and cosy meals together in front of the fire.

It was on day five that everything changed.

Lying in bed, Aaron and Robert were discussing how to spend their last day before heading back to the village that evening. “So how do you fancy go-karting? I’ve set us up with a private session and I guarantee I’ll beat you.”

Aaron laughed. “I don’t think so. You do know your reflexes slow down as you age.”

Robert nudged him. “You weren’t complaining about my reflexes last night.”
“I need a shower.” Robert started to get out of bed.

“I’ll join you in a few minutes. I just want to check my phone.”

As soon as Aaron turned on his phone, the message notifications started as text messages started to come in. He looked in disbelief. “Rob, we’ve got problems… big ones. Cain’s back in the village and Andy saw him putting rope and duct tape in his car, along with what looked like some type of bat.”
Aaron noticed the look of horror on Robert’s face. “Right, we need to think.” He was almost speechless.

“Have you got everything you need to go to Switzerland?” Aaron asked, thinking on his feet.

“Yeah why!”

“Right, we’re going to book you a flight to Zurich for sometime this afternoon and you can go and get everything ready at the hospital. I’m due there in six days anyway, so I’ll change plans and head out in a few days to join you.”

“I’m not leaving you, Aaron. Not this close to surgery. I’ll just stand my ground with Cain. I can blackmail him again.” Robert suggested in a panic.

“No, that won’t work. This has gone past the point of no-return. He means business and I can guarantee if he catches up with you that you won’t be coming to Switzerland. You’ll end up in hospital. I’ve heard about some of the beatings he’s handed out over the years and they don’t end well.”

“I won’t leave you.” He protested again.

“You’re going, Robert. I promise I’ll come across in a few days once I’ve sorted my stuff out. You can fill in all the paperwork and get settled in at the apartment as well. It’ll make it so much easier for me when I get there. This way, Cain can’t touch you and everything will be out in the open after the surgery.”

Robert knew he had no choice so he opened his laptop and booked a flight for later that afternoon.

The hours leading up to the flight were stressful as they raced around, discussing what Aaron needed to bring across with him. Finally, it was time for Robert to leave.

“I guess I’ll see you in a few days then, Mr Sugden.” Aaron smiled. “I love you too.”

Robert kissed him. “I love you too, Mr Sugden. See you in a few days. Stay safe…”

Aaron headed back to Wiley’s after watching Robert’s flight take off. Andy was surprised to see him. “Where’s Robert?”

“He’s flew over to Switzerland to keep out of Cain’s way. I’m going over on Monday, a few days early. What did you see?”

“Cain was at the back of the pub last night loading up his BMW so when he popped back into the garage I had a quick peek and saw what he had in the back. He had tape, rope and a bat in the back, not to mention some tools. God knows what he was planning.”

“Well he won’t get near Robert now. And then when we get back, he’ll know what’s going on so he can lay off.”
The next day, Aaron got sorted around the farm, collecting the stuff he needed to go away. He missed Robert so much, but he was happier knowing he’d got settled in at the hospital apartment where he’d be staying for the next few weeks at least.

He headed down the village the following night to have a drink or two with Adam, as he didn’t want to let on that anything was different. His mum had heard that he’d been away with some old school friends to Brighton for a few days, although they hadn’t spoken for over a week.

He watched Paddy and his mum chatting away at the bar. “I’ll get another pint.” Aaron said as he got up to brave a chat with them.

“Hi, can I have two pints please?” he asked, unsure of the reception. His mum just nodded and went off to get the drinks, but Paddy was friendly.

“I haven’t seen you for ages. How was Brighton?”

“It was amazing.”

“I didn’t even know you kept in touch with any school friends.” Chas commented.

“Well, what can I say... the power of Facebook. You get back in touch with people that you haven’t seen in years.” Aaron replied.

“Where’s Robert?” She gloated. “Cain was looking for him earlier.”

“I think he’s gone away for a few weeks so I don’t think Cain will have much luck finding him.”

“Pity!” Chas announced under her breath.

“I can’t believe that you would even support Cain beating him up. You know how carried away he gets.”

“Well, I can’t believe you’re still defending Robert. I see he’s enjoying spending our money at the Mill. They’re fitting a new kitchen and bathroom next week apparently.”

“Good for him.” Aaron replied. “Look, I’m just here to have a quiet drink.”

Chas gave him the two pints. “Diane, if you don’t mind, can I just go and pack for my spa day with Charity tomorrow? I need to de-stress.”

Diane nodded. “Of course you can, pet.”

When she was gone, Aaron headed across to the bar. “Diane, are you sorted with cover? Robert said he’d sort it but he’s flown out to Switzerland early to escape Cain.”

“It’s fine. Alicia said she could do with some extra money and Andy said he’ll do some shifts in between getting the farm up and running. Plus Bob was after some extra money, so he’ll muck in doubt. You just relax. Robert’s phoned me and filled me in.”

Aaron made the most of his night out with Adam, knowing he needed to get home by about 11pm so he could give Robert a call. They’d only be separated two days but he hated being without him. Cain appeared just before 10pm, looking totally frustrated, no doubt by the total disappearance of Robert.

“Where is he?” Cain asked as he followed him into the toilets.
“He’s gone away as I told mum. I’m not his keeper, he could be anywhere.” Aaron goaded him.

“You think this is funny don’t you? I don’t even know you anymore, Aaron. What happened to you?”

“I got wise and worked out what matters in life. And you know what… beating someone to within an inch of his life doesn’t do it for me.”

“I’ve never been so disappointed in a Dingle.” Cain said before walking out.

Aaron followed a few moments later, only to hear the start of a commotion in the pub. Kerry had just come in. “There’s police and an ambulance all over the place. Something about an accident at the B&B.”

Diane rushed out. “Alicia, can you cover the bar? I need to see Doug’s ok.”

“Yeah of course!” She left David and headed around the bar to take over.

Aaron went out with Adam to see what happening. The paramedics were sitting with Doug on the wall of the B&B. Diane rushed over to him. “What happened?”

“He’s dead.”

“Who’s dead?”

“Gerry! The roof caved in on him. I wish I’d never tried to fix that crack. I’m too blame. A young man is dead because of me.” Aaron could see he was clearly shocked as he stood nearby so he could overhear what was going on.

“I’d locked up and put a sign up. I told Gerry to stay out.”

Aaron noticed Lachlan approaching. “What’s happened? I was just popping to see Bex when I saw all the cars arrive.”

Doug filled him in. “I’m not even sure what he was doing here.”

“I think I might know.” Lachlan explained. “Gerry had a go at me the other night, saying how lucky I was to come from a rich family. He said he was lucky if he could find somewhere to sleep some nights as he didn’t get on with his mum most of the time and his dad had done a bunk. Maybe he was sleeping here.”

One of the uniformed police officers arrived, asking if Doug and Lachlan could give a statement at the police station the following day.

Aaron realised there was not much point in saying out so he made the twenty minute walk home to Wiley’s. He explained to Robert had what happened to poor Gerry, not that either of them knew him very well.

That night, Aaron tossed and turned, his mind filling with his last flash… the falling rubble. He woke up with a start, wondering if it could be linked to Gerry incident. He didn’t see enough to identify where it was, but on reflection, he found it odd that Lachlan was there in the village that late at night. Then suddenly it dawned on him… what if it was the moment Gerry died, that would
mean that Lachlan must have been there…
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Two chapters in one day :) This is a shorter one, setting up the next part of the story. Next chapter will be up tomorrow.

Aaron headed over to Wishing Well, knowing he wouldn’t be welcome. This had been reinforced the previous day when even Sam had blanked him in the village. But he had a plan to worm his way back in.

Zak spotted him approaching. “Lad, you’d be better to turn around. Cain’s inside with Lisa and he’s not in a good mood.”

“Actually it’s him I need to see. I’ve just found out that Robert’s been using me and he’s ripped me off as well. I think I might know where he is and I want to tell Cain.”

Zak nodded. “Well in that case, just go in.”

Cain’s face changed as soon as he laid eyes on his nephew. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave now.”

“I’ve come to apologise.” Aaron held his hands up. “Robert’s going to pay and I want to help you to do it.”

“What’s he done?”

“Look, I could kick myself but I lent him some money to buy the Mill as he said he could make it worth my while when the farm picked up. Almost £40k. I asked him for a receipt of some kind to show that I gave it to him but he’s more or less admitted that I won’t see it again. I think he’s got massive debts and he’s used my money to pay some of them off. Why did I fall for his crap?”

Aaron acted angry and upset.

Cain was almost bright red as he was told the saga. “Right, that Sugden is a dead man walking and you can help me do it.”

Aaron agreed. “Anything to get my money back. All he does is destroys lives.”

“Right, we need to come up with a plan. Where is he?”

“I managed to get into one of his email accounts and it looks like he’s meeting someone this afternoon about an investment opportunity in Hotten. This is much bigger than just mine and the pub’s money.”

“Ok, we’ll go and find him. But first, since you’re here, you can help me shift some of these up to Home Farm.” Cain suggested. “I was going to ask Zak, but he says he’s got a bad back.”

Zak protested. “I have. It just flared up this morning.”

Aaron looked down to see four large bags and several boxes covering the floor. “What’s going
“Our Belle’s moving out.” Lisa explained. “Chrissie doesn’t like living alone since Lawrence died and she won’t have much to do with her sister, so she’s asked Lachlan to move back. He said he would but only if Belle could move in as well. I think the offer of money helped.” She was clearly happy with the decision. “I mean who wouldn’t want to live at Home Farm and at least she’s close by. It’s better than them moving away miles from Emmerdale.”

“Don’t you think she’s a bit young to be this serious?”

“He’s a nice lad.” Zak remarked. “He’s clearly got our Belle’s best interests at heart and he seems to understand what she’s gone through after all the Gemma stuff. If she’s happy, we’re happy.”

Aaron just nodded in understanding and then headed out to the car with some of the bags whilst Cain followed.

“I can’t believe you got sucked in by Sugden. Your mam reckons you fancied him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I guess I just liked having the company up at the farm after being alone for so long. He seemed like a nice guy, in fact, I couldn’t work out how this was the same Robert everyone went on about over the years. But I guess I know it’s all true now.”

Cain smirked. “Well, you’ll get to see him get what he deserves. I’m going to make this one count.”

Aaron could feel his stomach turning in disgust at the way Cain talked about violence so casually.

Belle was waiting for Cain to arrive. “Thank you so much for this.”

“Where is Lachlan? Get him to give us a hand.” Cain suggested as he lifted a heavy bag in the door.

“He’s down the police station with Chrissie giving a statement about Gerry.” Aaron noticed she seemed upset when she mentioned his name.

“What happened there?” Aaron asked curiously.

“The police seem to think he was sleeping in the B&B and he knocked the scaffolding holding up the roof, and it collapsed. I hate to think about it. He was a great guy.”

“Is that the same guy that you were arguing over in Hotten last week?”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t say we were arguing. It was just some cross words. He apologised afterwards. Anyway, we’re having a new start. Chrissie’s been lovely letting me move in and I think it’s important that Lachlan’s here with his mum. They’re both devastated about Lawrence.”

She made them a cup of coffee as she directed them where the bags needed to go. Aaron was trying to find out more about Lachlan’s current state of mind but his questions were interrupted by the arrival of Chrissie and him.

“Thanks for bringing all of this up.” Lachlan smiled at Cain and Aaron.
“No problem.” Cain offered. “Look after Belle or you’ll have me to answer to.”

“I will.” He put his arm around Belle, making Aaron uncomfortable at the thought of what Lachlan could have done to Gerry and maybe even Lawrence. Who would be next?

“I’ll take that.” Lachlan announced as he put his hand out to take Belle’s rucksack off Aaron.

Aaron made a snap decision as he noticed his Lachlan’s hand within inches of his. He went to pass the bag, dropped it and then grabbed his hand. The effect on his body was overpowering, unlike he’d ever experienced before. The flashes were coming in thick and fast, in fact, so fast, he couldn’t decipher them at first. But then suddenly, a vivid scene flashed before his eyes, showing him what this monster was capable of. He held on as long he could before his brain was overwhelmed by what he’d seen. Then, everything went black...
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Belle ran into the pub closely followed by Lachlan as soon as she saw the car parked up. “Chas! Where have you been? We’ve been trying to get in touch since this morning.”

“I was at a spa day with Charity. What’s wrong?” Chas panicked when she saw their expressions.

“It’s Aaron. He collapsed up at Home Farm earlier this morning. The ambulance has taken him up to Hotten General. He’s in a bad way, Chas. Cain’s sat with him. Apparently it’s something to do with his head injury.”

Chas grabbed her phone. “Diane…” she shouted through the back. “Can you take over at the bar? Aaron’s collapsed and I need to get to the hospital.” She called Paddy to come and get her.

Chas and Paddy got to the hospital as soon as they could, heading straight towards A&E. She approached a nurse. “Can you tell me where Aaron Dingle is?”

“He’s with the doctors at the minute. Are you a relative?”

“Yeah I’m his mum and this is sort of his dad.” She pointed to Paddy.

“Have a seat and I’ll get the doctor to come and have a word with you.” The nurse pointed to the waiting area.

“I need to know what’s going on?” Chas said to Paddy as she clung onto him for support.

Cain appeared when he heard Chas’s voice booming up the corridor demanding to know where her son was. But then she saw Cain coming out of a side room.

“Cain. What’s happening?”

“He’s not good, Chas. He’s hooked up to all sorts of machines. They’re discussing his case with a more senior doctor. It’s his head, he’s got some kind of tumour or something.” Cain looked shaken by events. “Apparently they’re talking about transferring him to a specialist unit.”

“Transferring him?” Chas stopped the nurse as she passed. “Is he getting moved to a ward?”

“No, he’s being transferred to another hospital.” Cain explained. “I didn’t quite catch where. The doctors are arranging it all now.”

Chas walked in to see Aaron attached to several machines and a ventilator. “What even happened?” She asked her brother, needing answers.

“I don’t know. He came to Wishing Well this morning and told me that Robert had conned him out of money as well. He wanted revenge and he said he knew where he was. Anyway, I asked him to help me out shifting Belle’s stuff up to Home Farm. We did that and he seemed fine. Lachlan and Chrissie came back from the police station and Aaron tried to hand him Lachlan a bag, ended up grabbing his hand and then he had some kind of seizure and then collapsed. He was breathing and had a pulse, but he wasn’t responsive at all.”
“This is all down to the stress that Robert’s caused him. I can’t believe he’s swanning around, living it up whilst my son is seriously ill in a hospital bed. You need to sort him, Cain and don’t hold back.” She seethed.

“Look you concentrate on Aaron, I’m going to sort Sugden out now. Aaron told me where he’ll be so don’t wait up. This could be a very long night.”

Cain headed out, just as a nurse came in. “What’s going on?” Chas pleaded for more information.

“Please try not to worry, he’s in hands of one of the best. The doctor says he’ll be a few minutes and he’ll be in to talk to you.” The nurse explained.

Minutes later, the door opened and in walked a familiar face. “Chas, Paddy.” He held out his hand. “I’m so sorry we couldn’t have met again under better circumstances.”

“Dr Lawson? What are you doing here?” Chas asked in a panic.

“I’m here to take over the care for Aaron.”

“But you haven’t seen him for ages so why would be here?”

He took a seat. “There’s a lot you don’t know. Aaron’s condition is deteriorating quickly. He has a growth on his brain caused by his accident. It’s been slowly growing for the past few years but now it’s become worse. He didn’t want you to know because you’d be worried.”

“But you can treat him?” Paddy asked, seeing Chas was clearly in shock.

“He needs surgery within the next few days so we need to transfer him today. The helicopter’s due in the next twenty minutes so I haven’t got long.”

“Where is he being transferred to?”

“Zurich! I have a private clinic there.”

Chas interrupted. “You’re taking him to Switzerland. Now, I know the NHS is strapped for cash but surely he doesn’t need to go to another country.”

“It’s complicated and believe me, Zurich is his only option.”

“What if I don’t allow it?” Chas spoke up.

“Chas, I know this is a lot to take in but you need to go along with this. This surgery has been planned for the past 5 weeks, he was due to fly over in a few days anyway. The fact he’s collapsed has changed things so we need to move things forward. He’s consented to the treatment already. He’ll die without it.”

“Die?” Paddy could barely get speak.

“Yes, he’s gravely ill, Paddy. He didn’t want you to know in case you tried to talk him out of it.” He looked at his watch. “Look, I need you to listen because I need to get Aaron ready. He’s going to be transferred by helicopter to Leeds Airport, there’s a private charter jet on standby to take him.”

“Right, we’re coming with you.”
“There’s no room for passengers. He requires a medical team to keep him stabilised during the flight. My secretary has arranged for two tickets on the 7pm flight to Zurich. You just need to turn up by 6pm and ask at the check-in desk. There’ll be a car waiting on arrival to bring you to the clinic. Accommodation is sorted as well. Don’t worry, he’s stable at the moment so he’ll be well enough to make the journey.”

Paddy was taking it all in, trying to support Chas at the same time. “Thank you for helping him.”

Chas grabbed his hand, tears pouring down her face. “I’m here, sweetheart.”

Just then, Dr Lawson’s mobile rang. “Hi.”

“No he’s fine. We’ll be landing at about 7.25pm and we’ll be at the clinic for about 8.15pm. Can I call you in a bit as Aaron’s parents are here. Try not to worry too much.” He told Robert, trying not to let on to Chas and Paddy. He hung up.

“Who was that? They seemed worried.” Paddy asked curiously.

“It was just someone at the clinic. Look, there’s much more to tell you but at the moment, I need to prioritise Aaron’s care. Once you’re at the clinic, I’ll come and see you once he’s settled in. I’m sorry I can’t tell you anymore at the moment.”

She leant down and kissed Aaron on the forehead. “See you soon, love.” Paddy had to pull her back to let the doctors get him ready.

Paddy and Chas were rushing around the village packing their stuff and telling the necessary people.

“Diane, Aaron’s collapsed. He’s being sent to Switzerland for treatment. We’re flying over tonight and we could be gone a while.”

Diane hugged her. “Don’t worry it’s all sorted. You just go and keep me updated on how his surgery goes.”

Chas picked up on her comment. “You don’t seem surprised and how do you know he need surgery.”

“I guess I just assumed.” Diane lied, so they didn’t get into an in-depth discussion but then Andy arrived with two holdalls.

“Chas, can you take these over with you?” He passed them to Paddy.

“Right, I want answers now. This news hasn’t surprised you, has it?”

Diane knew she had to admit the truth. “Ok, we knew Aaron was going for surgery. He told us both.”

Chas couldn’t help but be uspet. “So he told you two but didn’t think to tell me and Paddy. Do you know how it makes me feel?”

“Chas, talk to him about it when he wakes up. There’s no doubt a lot he’ll want to tell you. He had every intention of telling you about his operation. He had tickets booked for you to fly over later in the week anyway.” Diane replied.

Paddy hurried Chas up. “We need to get going, Chas or we could miss the plane.”
They headed off to the airport…

Chapter End Notes

If anyone has any prompts or ideas for stories, I'm cooljulesw on Twitter. Just let me know
Robert had been in turmoil since receiving the call from Mark at lunchtime, informing him about the situation. He’d paced up and down for what seemed like hours, waiting in the clinic carpark for the ambulance to arrive. It finally pulled up, just after 9pm. He watched helplessly as Aaron was stretchered, unconscious and hooked up to numerous bleeping monitors, into the clinic. He followed along with Mark.

“How is he?”

“He’s been stable the whole way.”

“Do we know what happened?” He asked.

“Not much more than you know already. He collapsed and passed out in front of his uncle, cousin and her boyfriend.”

“Lachlan?” he asked, immediately concerned.

“Yeah I think that his name. Why?”

“We’ve had concerns about him for a while and I bet Aaron’s tried to touch his hand to find out more. I warned him not to.”

“That would explain why this has happened. His brain couldn’t take anymore. We’re going to scan him now to see what’s going on and then we’ll settle him in. I know you’ve waited all day but can you give us another hour and we’ll get you in to sit with him.”

“Ok, how’s Paddy and Chas?”

“Worried sick, obviously. They’ll be arriving in an hour or two, so who do you want to break the news to them?”

“I’d rather tell them about me and Aaron but would you mind telling them more about his medical condition before I do.”

Mark nodded. “Of course, I will.”

As soon as Paddy and Chas arrived, they were ushered into large conference room where they took a seat at one side of an oval oak table.

“Have you noticed how posh this is?” She mentioned to Paddy as they waited for the doctor.

He nodded. “I guess Aaron’s in good hands.”

Mark breezed in the door. “How was your flight?”

“Good, good!” Chas replied nervously. “How’s Aaron, Dr Lawson?”

“Call me Mark… please. He’s been settled. You can see him in about twenty minutes, he’s just getting sorted.”
Paddy looked at Chas. “We just wanted to thank you for looking after him... Mark. You’ve been amazing and we know he’s in the best place.”

“There’s no need to thank me, Paddy. Aaron’s an amazing young man. There’s a lot to tell you, so where do I start?”

Chas smiled. “Why not start at the beginning?”

“That’s a good idea. Ok... Aaron has never been entirely honest with you about his brain injury. He’s known for years that he would face surgery at some point but he’s always turned it down.”

“Why would he do that?”

“There were several reasons. One of the main ones was he was scared that he would die. This is a risky procedure but looking at the latest scans, it has to be done sooner rather than later. We’re planning on keeping him sedated until his operation. We could bring him round but it could put added pressure on his brain.”

“Why did he keep it from us? It makes me so upset to think he had no-one there for him. Surely he could have told one of us. I wish to god we hadn’t had the row over Cameron. Sorry I won’t waste your time with that story but safe to say, we’ve not been as close as we should have been.”

Chas was becoming upset.

“Chas, I know all about Cameron. Aaron and I have spoken almost every week since his accident. Now, the next part is going to be hard to get your head around but I need you to listen to me carefully.”

They both nodded.

“Aaron never told you how he knew about Cameron, did he?”

“No, we could never work it out.” Paddy commented. “I think that’s why we didn’t act on his accusations.”

“The accident caused changes in Aaron’s brain. Some changes we can’t explain but they were very real. Aaron developed an ability to touch someone’s hand and see flashes of their past, present and future, much like reading someone’s mind. He has no control over what he sees, it seems to be whatever the person has on their mind the most.”

Paddy was white as a sheet, whilst Chas just sat there in total exasperated shock. “If we didn’t know you were a world famous doctor, we would think you were mad.”

“I was as surprised as you when I found out. This has to be kept a secret, only two of my most trusted colleagues are aware of his ability and if this gets out, it could mean unwanted attention from the medical field. Aaron would, in essence, become a guinea pig. That’s why he’s never told anyone about his ‘gift’ although he calls it a curse. He wanted to protect you and Paddy. This operation will stop this from happening.”

Chas was shaking. “Are you telling me that he could see everything Cameron did?”

“You would have to ask him about what he saw. He’s seen many things over the years and that’s part of the problem... every time he has a flash, his brain is weakened further.”
Just then, Mark’s pager went off. He looked at it. “I’m sorry but I need to answer this. One of my patients has some questions before he goes home. You can see Aaron in about twenty minutes, but first, there’s someone else you need to talk to.”

Mark got up and opened the door. “Your turn!” He said to some unseen person outside.

He turned back to Chas and Paddy with a smile. “Listen to what he has to say because he saved Aaron’s life.”

Chas and Paddy were shocked to see Robert entering the room, before taking a seat opposite them.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Chas asked outright. “What was Mark on about it?”

“I’m here with Aaron.”

“What do you mean?” Chas raised her voice, wanting an explanation.

“Aaron and me… are together. I know that’s a lot to take in, but it’s true.”

“Together? As in housemates?” Paddy asked naively.

“No… together… together.” He stuttered.

“You mean like boyfriends… together?” Paddy suggested.

Chas shook her head in disbelief. “There’s a slight problem with that suggestion, Paddy. Robert’s not gay. What sort of perverted game are you playing with my son?”

“I’m not messing him about Chas. I’m with him and I have been for months, a few days after I moved in. It wasn’t planned, it just happened.” He explained nervously.

“Something like that, doesn’t happen!” Chas wasn’t impressed with the news. “You’ve got an ulterior motive, Robert. What is it?”

“I fell in love with him. I know you’ll find that hard to believe with my past track record but it’s true.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe a word coming out of your mouth. If ripping me off wasn’t enough, you try to take my son away from me.” She fired the accusation at him.

“I haven’t taken him away from you, Chas. He’s still Aaron, and he’s still your son. He needs us to pull together, not fight amongst ourselves. However much you hate me, we need to get on for him… just until he gets his surgery and gets better. Surely that’s all that matters.”

Paddy looked at her. “He’s right, Chas. I don’t like it either but we do need to call a truce for Aaron.”

Robert half smiled at Paddy. “I promise to be on best behaviour. Aaron’s going to get through this and he needs us all. You love him and so do I, so at least we have something in common.”

Chas glared at him until she relented. “Ok, but we pick this back up after he’s home.”
Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was a nurse. “Aaron’s all settled, if you would like to go and see him.” She looked at Robert primarily.

Chas looked at the nurse. “Why are you talking to him? I’m his next of kin… surely.”

“We’re married, Chas.” Robert explained, waiting for the next round of fallout.

“Aaron wouldn’t do that.”

“We were married in Leeds two weeks ago at the Town Hall. I’ll show you the marriage certificate if you don’t believe me. He wanted someone to be in charge of his care decisions if he couldn’t make them. But, we also married because we love each other.” He started to well up, taking both Paddy and Chas by surprise. “I can’t deal with this…” He scuttled out of the room in tears.

Robert pressed his head up against the glass window in the long corridor connecting the offices with the ward. His world was falling apart, he didn’t have the energy to go up against Chas and Paddy. It was too much, he needed to save all his energy for Aaron. So he was surprised when he heard a voice call out.

“You look like you need a hug.”

He turned to see Chas standing there, with her arms out.
Chapter 33

Robert took the hug on offer in a surreal feeling moment. He cried for what seemed like an eternity before he pulled back to see if this was some sort of trick.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to have a go at you.” She announced in conciliatory. “But I do think there’s plenty for us to talk about. Come back and talk with Paddy and me.”

Robert followed her back into the room and took a seat opposite Paddy and Chas.

“So what’s happening? Why were you here waiting for Aaron?”

“Because he’s my husband and there was that small matter of Cain threatening to beat me to a pulp. If I’m honest, I can see why you’re pissed at me but there’s so much you don’t know.”

“Ok, we’re all ears.” Paddy replied calmly.

“I can’t think straight at the minute so would you mind just asking me anything you want to know and I’ll answer as best as I can.”

Chas started. “If you’re so in love with my son, why rip him and his family off.”

“That stuff Aaron told Cain this morning was to get access to Lachlan. He’s trouble but we don’t have anything concrete on him. He’s been a bit of a sex pest in the past, at his old school and Aaron was worried for Belle.” Robert didn’t have much else to go on as he was unaware of Aaron’s most recent findings so he held back on the details.

“I think he’s fine with Belle.” Chas added. “Zak and Lisa will keep an eye on him.”

“I know I asked Diane to sign the pub as security against the farm mortgage but with good reason.”

“So you could buy a house?”

“No, so I could pay for Aaron’s medical treatment. This isn’t cheap and it has to be paid for. Mark can’t offer any discounts or favours as it could raise suspicions and we don’t want anyone looking more into Aaron’s condition. The team he has treating Aaron are specifically chosen with this in mind. Your accommodation is paid for until Aaron is discharged. Aaron wants you to stay the whole time he’s here and I would appreciate the company. It could cost £250,000. I bought the Mill for me and Aaron so we could move back to the village when all this was over.”

Chas nodded. “I wish I’d known all of this. I would’ve understood. Why did you fall for him?”

“I can’t explain… I’m just blown away by him. He’s everything to me. The moment I met him, I was way out of my depth.” He replied, shocking Paddy and Chas with his sheer honesty.

“How did you save his life?” Paddy asked.

“I talked him into having the surgery. It carries a high risk as I’m sure Mark will have told you and he was terrified.”

“Thank you!” Chas got up and hugged him again.

“I never thought I would be saying this, but thank you.”
“Since we’re being honest, Paddy. It was Aaron who saw a flash of you and Tess. I just pretended it was me to protect him. He didn’t want anyone else to know about his flashes. Aaron also told me the information I used to blackmail Cain.”

He walked over and held out his hand. “I never thought I would be saying this, but thank you for looking out for him.”

“He misses you both… big time. But he’s had so much on his mind, he couldn’t deal with fighting so that’s why he kept backing off. He was frightened as well that his flashes would be found out.”

“I just wish he could’ve come to us about them.” Chas was clearly upset. “But after the way I treated him after the Cameron stuff, I’m surprised that he’d ever bother with me again. He’s actually changed a lot since you moved in with him… in a good way.”

“I promise I’ll never hurt him, well not intentionally. We’ll be moving back into the village when we get back and he’ll own half the house. I’m sure you think I’m out for everything I can get and maybe that was true when I was with the Whites. Being with Aaron has made me see what matters in life.”

“Never mind all of that. We’re getting another wedding when we get back I hope. We’ll pay.” Chas smiled at the thought. “I mean the Dingles will be queuing up. Have you got any photos?”

“Yeah, a few. We will be having a blessing at some point.” He pulled out the phone. “Before you see them, I have to admit that Diane and Andy were at the wedding as witnesses.”

“I knew it.” She replied. “They both seemed to know something before we left. Andy arrived with all of Aaron’s stuff as if he knew everything that was going on.”

He showed them the photos.

Chas’s face lit up when she saw them as she showed them to Paddy. “Have you seen how happy he looks, Paddy. He’s not been like that in years. You don’t scrub up too bad either, Robert as much I hate to see it. I never thought I’d see him married.”

Paddy shook his head. “Not after all the trouble he had coming out. So you’re a Dingle now.” He looked at Robert, who suddenly looked worried.

“Well sort of…”

“What do you mean?” Chas asked curiously.

“Aaron’s a Sugden now. He’s changed his name.”

Chas stood in silence for a moment, making Robert worry. “It’s ok…. As long as he’s happy.”

They were interrupted by Mark arriving. “No-one need medical attention.” He joked.

“No, we’ve decided we’re pulling together for Aaron.” Robert explained, looking at Chas and Paddy who were both in agreement.

“Excellent! You can go and see him now. We’ve looked at his latest scans and blood results and we’ve decided to bring the surgery ahead to tomorrow morning, so can I suggest that you go and see him and then try and get some sleep. We’ll be monitoring him closely overnight so it would be
better if no-one stays with him. He’ll need you more when he wakes up after surgery.” He explained honestly.

“That’s fine.” Robert nodded. “Can we all go in together?”

“Yes, of course. Just keep it down to about 15 minutes if that’s ok.”

They all headed into the large, airy room that would put an NHS hospital to shame. “This is so posh.” Paddy commented.

“I know. No wonder it costs a lot.” Chas added.

They pulled three chairs up and took a seat next to the bed. They sat in semi-silence until one of the nurses came in and suggested they head off for the night.

“It’s hard to know what to say.” Chas got up and kissed Aaron on the head. “I’m so sorry, love. You can give me a good telling off when you wake up. Paddy’s here.”

Paddy stood up. “We’re here for you, son. See you when you wake up.”

Chas whispered in Paddy’s ear. “Why don’t we give them a few minutes?” She indicated that they should leave Robert to say what he needed to.

Robert was left with his husband. “This is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. But you’re a fighter, Aaron and I know you’ll pull through. I love you so much. See you tomorrow.” He kissed Aaron on the forehead, allowing the tears to stream down his face before retreating into the arms of Paddy and Chas who were waiting outside the room for him.
Breakfast was awkward to say the least. Aaron had gone down for surgery at 8am and they expected him to be out by about 1pm. It was going to be a long morning, made worse by the fact that the atmosphere was totally weird. They were all in the clinic café having breakfast by 10.30am. Paddy was pacing up and down, clearly upset by the worry from the operation, but there was something else that Robert couldn’t put his finger on.

He watched as Chas pushed her food around her plate, looking as though she was in another world. She kept glancing over at Paddy but the eye contact was never returned. They were barely speaking.

The silence was broken. “I’m going to get some fresh air. I’ll be back in an hour or so. Robert, I’ll be outside if there’s any news.” He walked off without even waiting for a response.

Robert decided to be brave. “Chas, have you and Paddy had an argument?”

“No, of course not.” She was very defensive. “We’re both just worried about Aaron.”

“I know that, but there’s clearly something else bothering you.”

“There isn’t… well not really.” She replied.

“Aaron really doesn’t need an atmosphere when he wakes up so can I suggest you two sort out whatever is happening between you.” Robert remarked.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, she blurted out an explanation. “We slept together last night.” But then she clamped up. “Anyway, I don’t know why I’m telling you. Just forget I said anything.”

“Oh… is that a bad thing?”

“Don’t be silly. Paddy and me can’t get together.”

“Why not?” Robert asked the obvious question. “You’ve been together before and he’s single… so are you!”

“That’s exactly the reason why we can’t. The time we’ve been together ended in disaster and I think that’s the last thing we both need at the minute… plus he’s been broken up with Rhona for a few months. It was just a spur of the moment… a comfort thing… you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, but if that’s true, why is Paddy so upset?”

“He thinks that there’s more to it. I think he’s got his hopes that we could be more than a quick fling.” Then reality hit. “Wait a minute, what am I doing? I’m talking to you like you’re some kind of agony aunt.”

“I don’t mind. Look do you want me to go and speak to Paddy? I mean I normally wouldn’t offer but you two need to draw a line under this before Aaron wakes up.”

She just nodded.

It didn’t take long to find Paddy. He was sat on a chair in the nearby clinic gardens.
“Paddy, can I have a word?”

“Is it Aaron?” he panicked.

“No, it’s about this morning. I could see that something wasn’t right between you and Chas, so I made her tell me what was wrong.”

He was shocked. “She told you about what happened? What did you she go and do that for?”

“I didn’t leave her with much choice. We need this sorting.”

“There’s nothing to sort according to Chas.” He appeared dejected. “It meant nothing to her.”

“I wouldn’t say that. She’s seems upset. I think she’s worried that you’ve just broken up with Rhona and that you’ve had an attempt at a relationship before and it ended badly.”

“I’m serious about her and I don’t regret last night. I thought she might have felt the same but clearly not.”

“Look, I think you two need to talk it through. I’m going to stay out here for a while, so why don’t you go and talk to her, see how she’s feeling. I’ve got a pager from Mark so he’ll let me know if anything happens. I’ll come and get you if I need to.”

“Robert, thank you!” Paddy replied genuinely meaning it.

“It’s ok. Thank you for giving me a chance.”

Robert sat for an hour before Chas appeared. “You’ll be glad to know we’ve made up.”

“So you’re giving it a go.”

“No, not quite. We need to get Aaron’s surgery and recovery out of the way and then we’ll see what happens. The main thing is we aren’t arguing anymore.”

Seeing how upset and confused, Chas was by the events of the past 24 hours, Robert decided to take a risk. “Chas, I think you two could be good together. I shouldn’t tell you this but Aaron confided in me that he’d seen you and Paddy together in a flash after all the Tess stuff kicked off. He couldn’t keep up with it all.” He lied.

Chas couldn’t believe it but was clearly interested by the news. “You’re kidding. Do you think there’s a chance of us giving it a go?”

“I think you should. Aaron would be over the moon. I’m sure he’d love his parents to get back together… I mean who wouldn’t?”

She smiled at him.

“What time is it?”

“Almost one.” She looked at her watch.

“Why don’t we head back up? Maybe we’ll get an update soon.”

“Robert, wait.” She walked up and hugged him. “Thank you for everything.”
“As I said to Paddy before, I’m just glad you’re giving me a chance to prove myself. I don’t blame you both and even Cain for reacting the way you did with me. I haven’t exactly got the best track record in relationships but I’ll do everything I can to prove to you that I’m serious about Aaron.”

“We already know that, love. Anyway why don’t we agree to look forward, rather than dwell on the past. We can’t change it. Let’s just concentrate on helping Aaron to get better and back home where he belongs.” She replied, as they headed back up.

They collected Paddy as they headed up to the theatre waiting areas for news.

About an hour later, Mark appeared in his scrubs. “Sorry to keep you waiting. It took a bit longer than we thought it would.”

“How did it go?” Robert was panicking.

“We’re happy with how it went. I’m always guarded when I talk about an outcome, because neurosurgery is slightly more complicated than some other surgeries because recovery can take a long time. We managed to get most of the tumour out with clear margins, however there is a part we couldn’t remove as it was too close to a blood vessel.”

Chas piped up. “So is that bad?”

Mark shook his head. “Not really. We thought that it was a possibility and whilst scans can give us a picture of what’s happening, it’s impossible to tell how surgery will go until you get in there. It may grow back, but we can scan regularly, probably once a year. We may have got enough out for it not to grow at all. If it does come back, we need to discuss plans with Aaron, as there is an option of radiotherapy. The good news is that it looks benign but we won’t know for definite for a few days until the histology results come back from the lab.”

“So he should be fine?” Paddy asked.

“We think he’ll recover from the surgery but of course, with any brain operation, there’s a risk of damage to other areas. We just need to take one day at a time and see how he responds in his recovery. He’ll be taken to the high dependency unit for a day or two before he can be moved to the ward. I think he’ll need to stay here for at least two weeks. Anyway, try not to worry too much. As soon as he’s settled on HDU, one of the nurses will come and get you.”

They all thanked Mark before he left as they waited to see Aaron…
Chapter 35

Aaron, Paddy and Chas headed to HDU an hour later, expecting to see Aaron attached to a ventilator.

“Good timing.” Mark smiled. “We’ve just taken out his breathing tube and he’s managing to breathe on his own. The other machines are just for monitoring his breathing, his blood pressure, his heart and the pressure in his head. We’re weaning him off his sedation, so he should become responsive in the next hour or two.”

Robert thanked him as they all took seats around the bed. “It’s hard seeing him like this. I can’t wait until he comes around.”

An hour passed, a second hour passed… then finally Chas noticed his hand twitch. “Look, we’ll be outside. We think you should talk to him first and we don’t want to overcrowd him.” She pointed for them to leave.

His right hand started to move before his eyes fluttered open before closing again in response to the light. It took five minutes for him to open them fully. He turned his head slightly, picking out Robert sitting next to him.

“Rob…”

Robert got up so Aaron could see him better. “Aaron, you’re fine. Just relax, take your time to come around, I’m not going anywhere.”

A few more minutes past.

“Where am I?” Aaron looked around, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings.

“You’re at the clinic in Zurich.”

“Why?”

“You’ve had your surgery. It went well.” Robert grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

“How did I get here?” Aaron was starting to wake up.

“By helicopter and then airplane. But we can fill in all the details later, just lie back and keep calm.”

Mark arrived. “Hi Aaron, nice to see you’re waking up.”

The nurse came in and gave him some water.

“Your mouth will be really dry from the breathing tube. Try and have a few sips. Everything’s fine, it’s just going to take time to recover so don’t push yourself too hard.”

“What happened?”

“You collapsed in Emmerdale and we needed to get you here. Do you remember anything of that?”
“No, I having a row with my uncle in the pub and there’s other stuff that doesn’t make much sense.”

“Don’t worry, that’s to be expected. Everything will start to piece itself together in the next few days. You’ve had a major operation so don’t expect too much too soon.”

Mark and the nurse left Aaron alone with Robert.

“So how long have I been here?”

“Just since yesterday. They decided to do the surgery a few days early because you were unconscious and the tumour was getting bigger.”

Aaron pushed himself up with Robert’s help so he was sitting up more. “Sorry, things didn’t go as planned.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m just so glad that everything went okay. One day at a time. You’ll feel better each day. You gave me a shock though.”

“Do mum and Paddy know?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, they’re just outside. Do you want me to get them?”

Aaron smiled weakly and nodded.

“I’ll send them in and give you some time with them. See you later.” He bent over and kissed Aaron on the forehead.

“Hi love.” Chas struggled to resist giving him a big hug as she bounded into the room excitedly. “I just want to hug you…but don’t worry I’ll leave that until later. How are you doing?”

Paddy followed her in. “It’s great to see you awake, mate.”

They both took a seat next to the bed.

“I’m still not with it and my brain feels all scrambled up but at least it’s over with.” He replied. “Please don’t give Robert a hard time. Everything he’s done was for me. I wouldn’t be alive without him.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve made sure he knows how we feel about him.”

“Mum?” Aaron asked worried by her comment.

“No, love. I mean we’re grateful to him and as much as it was a shock that you got married, we can see how much he loves you. So everything’s good. Just worry about getting yourself better.” She smiled.

Aaron settled. “Do you know you’ve actually just said something positive about Robert?” He managed a joke.

“I know it’s worrying, isn’t it?” Paddy joined in.

The nurses came in after a while to check on Aaron. “Mum, do you mind if I get some sleep for a
few hours? Tell Rob, I’ll see him later.”

Over the next few days, Aaron improved physically and was moved into a side room. Most of the equipment was taken down as he managed to potter around with help. He had almost constant visits from Robert, Paddy and Chas.

“How’s the patient today?” Robert asked his husband as he headed into his room to see him one morning.

“I’m a bit worried, Rob. Surely my memory should be better than this. It’s been four days since surgery.”

“But Mark said it could take weeks to come back completely.”

“Yeah I know, but it doesn’t even seem to be improving. I can barely remember our wedding day or honeymoon.” Aaron sounded despondent.

“Well, maybe I can remind you about our honeymoon sometime?” He flirted, hoping it might cheer Aaron up.

“I know all that but it’s not the same. That was supposed to be the biggest day of my life and I can’t even remember any of it. I mean anything before that is as clear as anything. I don’t even know what happened for me to get here.”

“I’m sure it’ll all come back to you in time. Mark said not to stress yourself out too much, just let your memories come back in their own time. At least your flashes have stopped.”

“Yeah I suppose. It’s just frustrating, Rob. I know I’ve done really well but I just want to remember.” Aaron was becoming emotional, another side effect he was suffering from the surgery.

“Give it time… we’ve got all the time in the world now, so what’s the hurry.”

The following day, Robert was spending sometime with Chas in the clinic garden while Paddy helped Aaron with his physiotherapy session. They’d got into a routine of taking turns to support Aaron in his recovery.

He looked at Chas as they sat chatting. “Right, tell me if this is mad and I know it’s not official but we’ve already done that part anyway.”

“What are you on about Robert?” She asked.

“What if…. we get married again… here… this weekend. I’ve been looking online and they do blessings in Switzerland as a way of celebrating marriage. There’s a few people in Zurich who do it and I got an email back from one of them saying they could do it this weekend.”

She couldn’t believe it. “You’re serious aren’t you?”

“I’ve never been more serious. Aaron’s really down at the moment… about the surgery and his memory, so let’s cheer him up. We could do it instead of a ceremony back in the village and then just throw a party at the pub when we get back. Of course, I’d check with him first.”

“When the hell did Robert Sugden become the great romantic? I think it’s an amazing idea. It
might help me forgive you for us not being at the wedding.” She hugged him.

“If Aaron agreed, would you mind if I invited Vic across and maybe Adam? We could have it planned for this weekend.”

Aaron was thrilled at the idea, feeling it could help bring back some memories. Mark was more than happy for the ceremony to go ahead at one of the rooms at the hospital.

The following evening, the night before the ceremony, Paddy and Chas took a taxi to the airport to pick up Adam and Victoria. Diane had managed to keep the reasons for the visit quiet, saying Chas had thought it would be a good idea for Aaron to spend some time with some familiar faces.

Robert loved seeing how much Aaron’s mood had picked up in the recent days since he announced plans for the ceremony.

“Are you nervous?” He asked Aaron, who was sat in a chair next to his bed.

“Not for a minute. I can’t wait. It’s going to be funny to see Vic and Adam’s faces when they find out about us.”

“You do know, Vic will kill me.” He grinned.

“I’ll protect you. By the way, I actually approve of your taste.”

“What taste?”

“The rings. You made a good choice. I never thought I’d wear jewellery but I’ll make an exception.” He smiled at a confused Robert.

“Aaron, how did you know about the rings. I was going to surprise you.”

“I’ve seen them… last night just before I went to sleep. I was dozing off and you showed them to me.”

Robert shook his head. “No, I didn’t. I haven’t even got them yet. They’re in the shop getting resized.”

Aaron panicked. “You know what this means…”
Chapter 36

Robert went out to ask to see Mark, who appeared five minutes later.

“What’s wrong? Robert sounded concerned.”

“I still have my flashes.” Aaron was panicked.

“How bad are they?”

“I had one when I was about to fall asleep last night. I’ve not had any others apart from that one.”

“Have you been holding hands with Robert and your family since the operation?”

“Yeah, all the time and nothing’s happened.”

“Well that’s a good sign. I mean you were having them all the time beforehand. Maybe with some of the tumour being left behind, some flashes will remain. Grab Robert’s hand.”

He did as Mark asked…

Fifteen minutes later, despite trying to see a flash, there was nothing.

“I think we can take a wait and see approach. It could be that your brain is still recovering after the operation or maybe we could do some radiotherapy to try and shrink the remainder of the tumour. I’m sorry there’s nothing more I can say but I find it reassuring that they’re not happening all the time. After all, we’ve never come across a case like this so we just need to make stuff up as we go along.”

“I know that.” Aaron smiled. “I just like to be different to everyone else.”

“Why don’t we book you in for a scan a few weeks after you go home?”

“Ok, I’m in your hands and you’ve been spot on, so far.” Aaron explained. “This confusion is bothering me though.”

“Honestly, this is not beyond the expected recovery period. It could take weeks or even months to regain your memories. Just take baby steps and you’ll get there. I mean… physically you’re in great shape.”

Robert and Aaron were left reassured by Mark’s news. The three of them agreed that Chas and Paddy were not to know about this latest development.

Vic and Adam were on their way, according to a text from Paddy, so Robert waited outside out of sight, so Aaron could break the news about them. If he was there, there would be too many questions all at once, maybe too much for Aaron to deal with.

Adam was grinning as he and Vic entered the clinic room. “Hey mate.” He went over and gave him a hug. “You had us worried.”

Vic followed with a hug. “Nice to see you’re doing ok. Chas said you were doing well.”
“Well, I am but my mind’s still foggy so you’ll have to excuse me if I seem a bit off.”

Adam quipped. “Nothing new there, mate.”

Aaron laughed. “You’re so funny. Ha Ha.”

“So what’s with the invitation? I mean we could have easily paid for the flights and hotel, there’s no need for you to pay.” Vic explained.

“No, it’s our treat. Anyway, I’ve brought you over here on false pretences.”

Vic looked at Adam in confusion.

“I got married two weeks ago and I can’t remember much about it, so we’re doing it all again… well we’re having a ceremony and ring exchange tomorrow afternoon here at the clinic. We wanted you here as we felt guilty about you missing out on the wedding.”

Vic’s eyes widened. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“It’s Robert, isn’t it?” Adam interrupted. “I mean I just guessing but something tells me I’m right.”

Vic glared at Adam. “As if!” Then she noticed that Aaron had gone quiet and a brighter shade of red.

“You’re married to my brother? He isn’t even gay.”

“No he likes women as well. Look, I’m going to leave it up to him to explain. He’ll be here any minute.”

“I can’t believe it… Robert… married… to you.” Adam stuttered in shock. “I bet that went down well with your mum and Paddy. They hate him.”

“They’ve come around to the idea and they’re happy for us. Mum’s become really friend with Robert. I couldn’t believe it easier.”

Robert appeared. “We’ve got loads to talk about, I guess.” He looked at his sister who was clearly planning her barrage of questions.

“You could say that. I want to know everything. You do know Diane’s missing out on this and Andy.”

Robert went sheepish. “Don’t kill me but they were both at the wedding.”

She narrowed her eyes at him before smiling. “I’ll save that for later.” She punched him playfully.

Chas and Paddy soon arrived, rounding off the evening with some drinks and snacks that the clinic had arranged for them. Robert stuck close to Aaron, after the events of before. He could see he was worried, despite Mark’s best efforts to reassure them.

Mark stopped Chas as she was headed along the corridor to see Aaron. “Sorry to bother you, Chas.
There’s a Cain Dingle turned up in reception. He said he wanted to see how Aaron was getting on.”

She was surprised. “He’s been in France this week on a job, so maybe he’s driven down. If he sees Robert, we’ll have a massacre on our hands. I’ll pop down and see him.”

“Cain…” She called as she saw him sitting on one of the comfy sofas by reception. “What are you doing here?”

“I had a drop in Strasbourg and since it’s the weekend, I thought I would pop in. It’s only two or so hours. What’s with the radio silence?” Cain asked. “I keep getting asked how our Aaron’s getting on and I’ve barely heard a peep out of you except to say he’d pulled through the operation.”

“I’m sorry but they’re quite strict on the use of mobiles in the hospital. He’s doing well, I mean he’s still got a long way to go. He’s confused, his memory is not so good and he gets tired quickly but he’s getting stronger each day.”

He was relieved. “That’s great news, Chas. The other weird thing is that Diane seems to know more than me.”

“Well, I’ve had to keep her updated about the pub and when I’ll be back.” Chas replied defensively.

“Then to top it all off, I hear from Marlon that Victoria and Adam are flying over to see Aaron this weekend. Anyway I drove here to find out what the hell is going on because something’s not right.”

“Aaron asked for his friends to come over.”

“What are you hiding, Chas?”

She took a deep breath. “Ok, there’s been a few unexpected developments.”

“Like what?!”

“Aaron’s married. He got married two weeks before he came out here. He wants to have a blessing here this weekend, so Adam and Victoria are here for that.”

“Married, who to?” Cain asked in disbelief. “Is he even seeing anyone? Next you’ll be telling me he’s gone and got himself married to Robert Sugden?” He smirked.

“He has.” She replied as if it was the most normal thing in the world. “But it’s fine, Robert’s fine.”

“Well, you weren’t saying that when he was ripping you off and since when has he been gay.”

“He’s not gay, he still likes women. And they’ve been together more or less since Robert broke up with Chrissie and moved back on the farm. The money he borrowed has paid for the surgery and our stay here. I mean… look around, Cain. This is better than a five star hotel, it could cost £250,000 for all this.”

Cain started to realise that Chas was telling the truth. “So you’re telling me that Sugden saved Aaron’s life.”

“Yeah he did and you know what… he’s a changed person, Cain. He loves Aaron… you can see it a mile off.”

“But married?”
“Aaron wanted Robert in charge of his medical decisions. I just wish he felt he could tell me or Paddy about it. He’s been through so much. Now his short term memory is shot. The doctor said it will come back at some point but they can’t be sure how long will it take or whether everything will come back.”

“Oh Chas.” He hugged his clearly upset sister. “He’ll pull through.”

“I know he will, it’s just so hard to watch him struggle like that. He says bits are coming back to him. The last thing he remembers is talking to you in the pub about Robert. He can’t even remember his wedding or honeymoon, so that’s why we’re having a blessing on their marriage this week to see if it jogs some memories. I’m sure you could stick around and see it, as long as you promise not to lay a finger on his husband.”

Cain smiled. “As if I would do that. I wouldn’t want him to look bad on the wedding photos. Is there any chance of seeing Aaron since I came all this way?”

Aaron and Robert were both shocked to see the arrival of Cain. Robert’s eyes widened as he took a subconscious step back as Cain approached him. “Don’t worry, Robert. Chas has explained everything and I do appreciate what you’ve done for Aaron. I’m not going to smack you… well not unless your step out of line.” He smirked.

Robert left the room while Aaron filled him in on their relationship and the wedding, making it clear about the lies they’d spun to keep Aaron’s secret. Cain congratulated Robert as he came in the room. “Thank you!” Cain said quietly so he wasn’t overheard.

“It’s fine. I’d do anything for him and I would never hurt him.” Robert replied feeling as though he always had to justify himself with Cain, for fear of being hit.

Suddenly Cain piped up when Chas and Paddy joined them again. “You’ve only been away a week but everything’s happening back in the village. You’re not the only ones getting married. Belle’s just got engaged to Lachlan and they’re talking about moving away into Leeds. Lisa and Zak aren’t best pleased but they know he’s a good lad.”

Aaron looked at Robert with concern…

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