Summary

AU Multi chapter fic. Married Robert lives in Paris with his family. When Chrissie employs Aaron as a male au pair, Robert seethes with resentment, not helped when the au pair makes it perfectly clear that he disapproves of Robert too. But both men have secrets and thrown into close proximity to one another, they start to discover more about each other and themselves than they expected.

Notes

insp. by the recent episode where Aaron is so cute with Leo
Explicit for later chapters
Robert stepped swiftly out of the arrivals lounge at Charles de Gaulle airport, running a hand over his short blonde hair, just relieved to be home at last.

He turned right, heading for the exit where he would pick up a taxi to take him to his destination. He’d spent the last month setting up an office in Rio de Janeiro for the French company which he ran as a partner and director. A company owned by the Whites and to which he had made himself indispensable.

Now, after an eleven hour flight, he was looking forward to spending the night somewhere private and undisturbed, somewhere he could relax and then ultimately sleep. He glanced up at the clock and smiled to himself.

A group of passengers in front of him stopped suddenly to greet family members who had come to meet them, blocking his path. Robert rolled his eyes.

‘Oh for God’s sake! Are you all kinds of stupid? Can’t you see that you’re in the way?’

He felt a hand on his arm, touching him through his leather jacket, and turned with a frown, then blinked in surprise.

‘Charming as always. Did your journey make you moody?’

‘Chrissie! Oh my God. I … I didn’t expect you to be here!’

Chrissie reached up her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips, overwhelming him with the familiar scent of her expensive perfume and the clean smell of her rich dark hair.

‘But…how did you know I was on this flight? It was meant to be a surprise!’

‘Well I have my spies!’ She said. Robert raised his eyebrows and gave a short laugh.

‘Really?’

‘Aren’t I supposed to know when my husband’s arriving home after not seeing you for a whole month? Actually I just called the office in Rio, I think it was the tea boy or someone who told me, though I did have to wheedle it out of him.’

‘Tea boy?’

‘Or coffee lad. They probably don’t really do tea in Brazil, do they? Well whoever it was, I told him we were planning a surprise birthday party for you and needed to know exactly when you’d get here not to spoil it.’

‘But my birthday isn’t for months yet.’

‘Well he wasn’t to know that.’ Chrissie pouted. ‘Anyway, aren’t you glad to see me? I missed you. I’ve been so lonely while you were away.’

‘Course I’m glad to see you!’

Robert leaned down and kissed her again, this time lengthening the kiss and putting his arms around her waist.
‘Next time, kids or no kids, you’re coming with me. And I won’t take no for an answer.’

‘So let’s go home, then. I gave the Range Rover to the valet parking.’

They started walking together towards the exit.

‘And if you’re here, where are the kids exactly?’ Robert asked.

‘Oh! Glad you remembered them eventually. They’re home, of course. And they are so excited to see their Daddy, although technically they should be asleep by now.’

‘So who’s with them?’ Robert asked.

‘Ah, well, that’s another surprise.’

The valet pulled up, handing the keys over to Chrissie and taking the luggage from Robert to put in the back of the car. They set off, joining the Paris traffic, sluggish even at this time of the evening. Robert looked out at the lights, stroking a hand over his lips, then turned and smiled at Chrissie as she placed a hand on his knee. His phone rang and he looked at the number then rejected the call.

‘Late for someone to be phoning? Who was it?’

‘Just the office in Brazil. I’ll call them in the morning. More importantly, what were you going to tell me? This... surprise you mentioned?’

‘Ah! Well, promise you won’t be angry with me, but you know before you left we were talking about getting an au pair?’

‘I think it was my idea wasn’t it. You were complaining about being bored and wanting to get back to work.’

‘Yes, well, I hope you don’t mind, but I took your advice and I hired one.’

‘Without me?’ Robert looked shocked. ‘And I thought that you decided against one. You got all weird and jealous about the idea, remember?’

‘I know. Sorry about that. But the more I thought about it, the more sense it made and I really do want to get back to work, so I went through that agency that you recommended, and then I hired someone a couple of weeks ago now. You don’t mind do you? Say you don’t mind.’

‘Well I think you could have waited. Isn’t that something we should have decided together?’

Chrissie pushed out her lips.

‘I know.’

‘As long as you don’t start getting weird and jealous on me, I suppose what’s done is done.’

He watched Chrissie’s face, her eyes on the road as she drove and saw her smile.

‘I promise you, there is no danger of my ever getting jealous of this au pair.’

Robert grinned back at her, narrowing his eyes.
‘But the children like her? I mean she’s good with them?’

‘Yes. You can rest assured that they adore the au pair, especially Joshua. I think it’s the time they spend playing football together, actually.’

‘Football?’ Robert laughed again and Chrissie bit her nail before turning into a tunnel.

It was Lachlan who met them as they came in through the front door. Robert greeted him with a fist bump. ‘How you doing Lucky? Bet you missed me, eh? I bought you some games from duty free.’

‘Sweet!’

‘Shouldn’t you be in bed and asleep by now? It’s a school day tomorrow,’ Chrissie said.

‘Well we stayed up to see Robert, didn’t we? Though Josh didn’t last, he fell asleep about half an hour ago. And Doli’s in the nursery asleep anyway, of course.’

Robert’s face softened.

‘I’ll go up and see them, then.’

‘Shall I pour you a glass of wine? Or whiskey?’ Chrissie asked as he started up the stairs.

‘But Josh is still …’ Lachlan spoke and then stopped, looking behind him.

Robert turned and then froze where he was.

A young bloke had appeared in the hall, coming out of the family room. He was carrying six year old Josh in his arms. Josh was asleep, loose limbed, legs swinging, with his blonde head resting on the young man’s shoulder and his arms wrapped around his neck. Robert blinked, taking in the sight. First focusing on his son, then sweeping over the stranger, who was dark haired with a trim beard and a strong slim body. When Robert looked at his face, he was looking straight back at him with a steady gaze and Robert was suddenly struck by the astonishing deep blue of his eyes.

‘Who the hell are you, and what are you doing with my son?’

He saw the young bloke grimace, his mouth turned down for the fraction of a second. The he raised his eyebrows and spoke lightly.

‘Err, he wanted to stay up to see ya’ but he couldn’t last so I was going to take him up to bed. Chrissie?’

Even after years away, Robert could detect the familiar accent of his own childhood and youth. His frown deepened. And he didn't like the nonchalant way the lad had spoken to him and then deferred to his wife.

He stepped down off the stairs and moved forward towards him, tight lipped.

‘Just give me my son.’

Chrissie spoke, putting a hand on his upper arm.

‘Robert, this is what I was trying to explain in the car, though rather badly, I admit. This is Aaron.
He’s our au pair.’ She paused. ‘A male au pair. Rather obviously.’

Robert took a step closer. His jaw clenched and his pale eyes glared at this bloke who was just standing there calmly, holding his child.

He looked at his son again. He hadn’t seen him for a month, and now it seemed such a long time.

Lifting his hand, he placed it gently on Josh’s cheek, then leaning forward, he lowered his head and kissed him. All at once he caught a strong warm masculine scent coming from the young stranger holding him. He straightened up quickly and scowled. Then opened his arms.

‘Give him to me.’

Aaron gave a slight nod. He reached up with his left arm, still holding Josh securely with his right arm against his body and started to unwrap his arms from around his neck, looking at his face as, eyes still closed, he frowned in sleep.

‘Shhhh, come on Josh, lad, your Dad’s here,’ he said softly.

As Aaron handed him over, their arms and hands touched for a moment, Robert noticed how Aaron almost flinched at the touch and glanced quickly at his face, then Robert caught that scent again.

He felt his breath catch and stepped back, holding Josh now safe in his arms.

‘I’ll take him to bed. And then, when I come down-‘ He looked at Chrissie sternly, ‘- you and I are going to have a chat.’

After putting Josh down to sleep, Robert went to kiss his two year old daughter, Doli, who was lay like an angel on her bed. Seeing them made him realize just how much he’d missed them. How he’d missed spending time with them both. He sat for a moment, hands in pockets and looked around the room. How could he have even thought about delaying this for a day longer.

When he went back down, Chrissie had a tumbler of whiskey waiting for him. Aaron was nowhere to be seem, presumably having retired himself for the night. He took the whiskey and sat on the sofa, swirling the amber liquid and looking into his glass. Chrissie watched his face and then sat next to him, moving close and putting a hand to his cheek. He looked away.

‘You look so sexy when you’re sulking,’ she said.

‘I want him gone, Chrissie.’

She laughed.

‘So now who’s being jealous? What are you saying? It would be fine if he were a woman? There’s a word for that you know.’

‘But we don’t know anything about him,’ Robert objected.

‘Well we know that he has good references, he has an NVQ in childcare and he has a clean criminal record. I mean, what’s the point of going through an agency otherwise?’

‘What’s he even doing in Paris? What’s his name even?’

‘He’s Aaron Roberts. And he’s working, travelling. It’s what people do.’
‘I don’t care. I want him gone.’ Robert swallowed down the whiskey and put down his glass.

‘Well I’m going to work this week, so if you want to stay at home with the kids instead, fine.’

‘You know I can’t do that. After being away so long I’m needed back at the office. I have too much to do.’

‘Well then. I guess you’re stuck with him. You know what I think?’ She asked. Robert looked back at her.

‘I think you have jet lag and that you need a good night’s sleep, and it will all look better in the morning.’

Aaron woke up, his heart racing. He stared into the dark, trying to adjust to his surroundings, to remember where he was. He’d been dreaming, arguing with Paddy and his Mum about something or other and then there’d been the fire and just Adam, and he’d been running. Cain was there and Ed and he’d felt sick watching his life fading to grey as he’d crossed the sea on a dark evening.

Now he felt a wave of homesickness. It came over him sometimes like this, but why now?

He swallowed and then realized why he’d woken. Doli was crying in the room next to his.

He quickly threw off the sheet and climbed out of bed.

He picked Doli up and rocked her in his arms. As she quietened he found the chair in her room and lowered himself, just sitting, holding her, feeling her small fist tug against his T-shirt as she settled and her eyes started to close.

When the door opened he looked up, startled for a moment.

Robert Sugden was standing there, rubbing a hand over his blue green eyes, dressed only in loose cotton pajama trousers worn low on his hips. Aaron’s eyes swept the pale skin of his shoulders and chest, adorned with freckles from his trip to Brazil. In spite of himself his eyes flickered downwards to the edge of his hip bones where blue white skin ran down in a soft v next to his lower stomach, disappearing under the striped material there.

Aaron looked too long and then looked away. Doli stirred and he rocked her gently again.

‘She’s fallen asleep,’ he said, hearing his voice tremble slightly, frowning with annoyance at himself.

Robert nodded, stroking a hand sleepily over his stomach and turning, left the room.

When he’d gone, Aaron slowly exhaled.

This could be a problem, he thought.
Robert

Chapter Summary

On Robert's first day back, he fails to impress in a spectacular manner.

‘So, you’re from Yorkshire?’

Robert asked the question lightly without looking up from his phone which he held in front of him while he scrolled down, rapidly texting replies to messages. It was midday and he was sitting at the kitchen table, dressed in his pajama trousers and a dark velvet dressing gown, having finally emerged after sleeping in all morning.

‘Uh, yeah.’ Aaron answered with a quick glance at his face.

‘Whereabouts?’

‘Huddersfield.’ Aaron lied.

It was what they’d put on his passport, on his application to the agency, on just about every single document since he’d left just over a year ago.

‘Yeah? Which was your local? The Fox was it? Lively place on a Friday night. Or did you go to the Crown? What was the name of the Landlord, there? Dawson, Jack Dawson wasn’t it? Interesting bloke. Quite a character.’ Robert continued to text without looking up. ‘Used to pop in there when I was in the area on business.’

‘Err… Didn’t really go there that often.’ Aaron answered. He stood up and emptied the remains of the scrambled eggs on toast that he’d been eating into the bin. He put the plate in the dishwasher then turned and started to unfasten Doli from her booster seat.

‘I’ll take her up for a nap.’

Robert lowered his phone and indicated her plate which still had some squares of toast and pieces of egg on it.

‘She hasn’t finished yet. Sit down.’

‘I think she’s tired. We were in the park all morning.’ Aaron answered. Doli smiled at him, waving sticky fingers in the air and Aaron pulled a face, half smiling, half frowning at her before sitting again at the table.

‘So what did you do, then?’

Robert put his phone down and looked straight at Aaron’s face. Aaron looked back and noticed a halo of black around the blue green iris of his eyes. He felt uncomfortable, and not just because of the questions.

‘What?’ he asked.
'In Huddersfield? On a Friday night? What did you do? Choir practice?'

Aaron opened his mouth to answer and Robert’s phone rang.

Robert stood up.

‘Hey! I know. Don’t be like that! I didn’t know…’ His voice changed to something softer, coaxing. He started to walk into the main living area away from the kitchen and out of earshot.

Aaron breathed out. He unhooked Doli from her seat and quietly stepped out of the kitchen, carrying her upstairs.

Once Doli was asleep, Aaron went to his room and lay back on his bed, arms above his head, staring at the ceiling. Why had Robert asked all those stupid questions? And why hadn’t he just asked him where he came from, instead of going all weird.

The first two weeks had gone so well. Chrissie was, well, she was a bit of a control freak, and not exactly a hands on mother in the traditional sense, but she was ready to be pleased as long as the kids were happy. And Josh and Doli were just lovely. Lachlan was bit strange, but kept himself to himself most of the times.

Robert though had thrown him. He’d seen the photos of Robert when he’d started. First thing he’d noticed was that he looked a lot younger than Chrissie, well maybe not the first thing he’d noticed. Now he’d actually met him, and he wasn’t impressed. Unpleasant was a word that sprung to mind, unpleasant and …arrogant. That was the word he was searching for.

He closed his eyes and saw Robert’s eyes, the dark halo around pale blue green, staring back at him.

Robert stepped into the shower.

He thought about Chrissie. How she’d woken him earlier that morning before leaving for work.

‘Robert I know you’re still sleepy and jet lagged,’ she’d said, ‘…but we will have some time to ourselves this evening, won’t we? I’m pretty sure you must have missed me after your month away. Well, I hope you did.’

Her manicured fingers had played over Robert’s stomach teasingly down past his belly button, slipping under the waistband of his pajama trousers as he lay on the bed.

Robert had reached one hand onto hers, stilling her, while the other moved up to her hair. Smiling, he pulled her down over him for a kiss.

She was already dressed for work with her make up on. When she leaned back from the kiss, she wiped lipstick from his mouth with the side of her thumb.

‘Why don’t we meet for a meal tonight? I can book us a restaurant.’ She’d suggested.

‘I’m not sure. I haven’t really seen Josh and Doli yet. They haven’t seen me.’
He’d watched her face as she pouted back at him.

‘We can go after they’ve gone to bed. And Aaron will look after them. You see? Wasn’t I clever? Just think about how much easier it’s going to be for us to spend time together!’

Robert leaned a hand against the tiles of the shower. Aaron. He scowled, then turned his thoughts back to Chrissie. She would be fine, he thought, she’s a survivor.

Aaron woke with a start.

He needed to clear up the kitchen and Doli’s toys before she woke up and then it would be time to go and fetch Joshua from school. He went downstairs quickly.

While he was working his mobile phone vibrated in his pocket. It was Ed.

‘He’s a jerk…’ Aaron was saying, when turning he saw Robert stepping into the kitchen behind him.

Robert was wearing a tailored maroon suit with a white shirt and a tie. With one hand he was pulling at the waistband of his trousers, still holding his phone in the other. He smelt of expensive men’s perfume and something else beneath that, something better.

Aaron ended his call abruptly and turned away, but Robert put a hand on his shoulder. Aaron stepped back instinctively, stepping away from the touch.

He read the surprise in Robert’s eyes and smiled weakly.

‘What?’ He asked.

‘Look, I need to go to out, to work. I may not be back when Josh gets home from school. I left some gifts though, in the living room. Can you make sure he gets them? If I’m not here?’

Aaron nodded, and Robert left, his scent lingering in the kitchen.

‘My Dad’s really good at football. He’s better than you.’

Aaron turned down the corners of his mouth, pushing Doli in her buggy as they walked home from school past the stone facades of the Paris apartment blocks and the lime trees, leaves shining in the autumn sun.

‘Course he is. I’m just an amateur.’ Aaron hesitated. ‘What about Rugby? Can he play Rugby?’ He’d been determined not to engage in the conversation, but it slipped out in spite of himself.

‘Course he can.’

‘Course he can.’ Aaron echoed.

When they got home, Josh ran through the living area, flooded with sunshine shining through the tall windows, reflected on the parquet floor. He ran upstairs and stopped at his parent’s bedroom door. Aaron followed him to the top of the stairs and watched as he pushed the door open. He saw
his face fall.

‘He’s not here.’ Josh said.

‘Look mate, I think he had a business meeting to go to. You know, grown up stuff?’

Downstairs Aaron handed over the wrapped gifts.

He watched his face as he opened them. Josh watched Aaron’s face back, looking for signals about how he should feel.

Josh unwrapped an iPad and Aaron nodded.

In another packet there was a Nike football kit in the Brazilian yellow colors with Neymar on the shirt.

‘Yeah mate! You can wear that when we go to the park.’

Josh smiled back.

‘Look! There are presents for Doli, too.’ Joshua said.

‘Ok. So let’s open them.’

Aaron pulled Doli onto his knee on the floor and put the presents in her hand, winking at Josh as she slowly peeled off strips of the paper. Unable to hold himself back Josh started to help, until they’d unwrapped her gift to reveal a toddler sized carnival costume and mask.

Aaron slipped the mask on for her and, delighted, she ran off in search of a mirror.

Josh picked up the paper. Underneath a third gift dropped down onto the floor. It was a fan for the hot weather, a rainbow fan. Aaron blinked. It was definitely a gay pride fan.

What a jerk, Aaron thought.

Chrissie had come home and kissed the children, asking Aaron details about their day, about what they’d eaten, about plans for tomorrow. She’d disappeared upstairs and come down in a long red dress with a lot of cleavage showing. Aaron noticed her watching the clock. She’d poured herself a pint glass of wine. When he came down from putting the kids to bed, she’d gone back up. He’d heard the TV on in their room, then quiet as he’d turned in for the night.

Around two in the morning he woke from another dream.

Jackson, but before his accident. Their first time. Aaron’s body shuddering with excitement, but still afraid. So I’m gay. He’d already said it, said it publicly, but this was something else. This was the moment it became real. He watched Jackson’s eyes close, felt his body stroking against him, and then, with a deep intake of breath, he was coming.

He woke up and realized he’d spilled on his pajamas and the sheets.

He leapt out of bed swiftly, frowning. He stripped the sheet quickly from the bed, washed and changed into a clean T-shirt and sweatpants, frowning at himself. Where had that come from?
Opening his door quietly he made his way downstairs, where the air was cooler, and poured himself a glass of water then wondered through to the living space. The moon shone in through the window onto the parquet floor. He thought about being in the Woolie, playing darts with Adam, drinking a beer.

He wondered what Adam was doing right now. He’d be fine, wouldn’t he? He breathed out through his lips. It was fine. It was all fine, he told himself.

He was just about to go back upstairs when he heard the key in the door.

‘For fuck’s sake!’ Robert said when he turned on the light, seeing Aaron sitting there. His suit jacket was under his arm, his tie gone, the top buttons of his shirt undone.

Aaron stood up quickly, feeling vulnerable and angry all at once.

He moved forward towards Robert.

‘Nice one mate. You nearly broke that little lad’s heart tonight. You should have seen his face. And your wife.’

He saw Robert’s eyes flicker towards the stairs then he sneered and walked swiftly through to the kitchen.

Aaron, possessed, followed him.

And suddenly he reached forward, his hands around the open neckline of Robert’s shirt, pushing him roughly against the kitchen wall.

‘You don’t even care!’

Robert’s hand came up to his chest just as suddenly, pushing him back against the fridge door, fingers circled around his T-shirt so that Aaron could feel the heat of his hand against his chest through the material. Aaron knew he could take him. But he couldn’t risk it. Couldn’t risk being out there, no job again, nowhere to stay.

‘And who are you? Judging me? A child minder?’ Robert hissed. ‘And a liar. You’ve never been to Huddersfield in your life. I made it up.’

For a moment Aaron could hear Robert’s breathing and then he saw his eyes, glowing dark in the moonlit kitchen, moving down, looking at his mouth. He felt his heart rocking and looked back at Robert’s lips.

He waited.

Robert pushed him roughly back again, letting go of his grip on him. He turned on his heels and walked away, out of the kitchen.

Aaron listened to himself as his breathing gradually subsided, feeling the cold refrigerator behind him. He ran a hand over his face. What had he just done? He’d just put himself out of work and for what?
Aaron

Chapter Summary

Aaron changes his opinion about Robert, again and again.

Aaron lay on his bed in the early morning. Mentally he was packing his bag.

Robert wasn’t going to let him stay, not after last night, he was sure of that. He would tell Chrissie that he’d lied and then they would ask him to leave, maybe worse. Maybe Robert would report him to the agency, to the police, even. Aaron’s palms felt damp with sweat. He grimaced. So what if he does, bring it on!

He would go home then, serve his time. He could do that for Adam and then have done with it.

His eyes felt gritty from lack of sleep.

Ed would take him in, however awkward that might feel. They’d made plans to meet up later that evening anyway. Or perhaps Emile, an old friend of Ed’s who’d been good to them both when they’d first arrived, when they were still together and high on affection. In those early days, Emile had helped them to find an affordable place to stay and to negotiate their way around the city. Emile would be a good choice, better than going back to Ed and opening up old wounds now that they’d moved on and become friends again, past those first painful days when things had fallen apart.

He wrapped his arms around himself. He would need to lie low. He could contact Cain, ask for a new passport, new false papers. He would stay under the radar somehow until the papers arrived.

His mind drifted again. He’d played the scene over and over. Robert Sugden’s fingers curled against his chest, his face up close, lips parted, and the cold of the refrigerator at his back. Something had happened, or had it? He bit his lip. Most likely his overactive imagination. When he closed his eyes he saw the scattering of freckles on Robert’s cheek running down over his throat.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d disliked someone this intensely.

The alarm on his telephone rang, bringing him back to the present.

Frowning, he silenced it. He needed to go to Doli and then it would be time to get Josh up and ready for school. For now he would do what he did every morning, he decided, and just wait for the fallout.

But when Aaron put his head around Josh’s door, he found that Josh wasn’t alone. Robert was there, sleeping next to his six year old son, lying on his side with an arm wrapped loosely around him.

Josh lay close to his father, his white blonde hair touching against Robert’s. He was squinting at his father’s face, watching him reverently, while his small hand held his cheek.

When he saw Aaron at the door, he raised a finger to his lips, warningly.
‘My Dad’s asleep,’ he whispered, and kissed Robert’s face.

Aaron looked down at the floor and spoke quietly.

‘Yeah. But you need to start getting up for school, you know.’

‘Just a bit longer,’ Josh bargained.

Then Robert turned onto his back and opened his eyes, looking at his son with a smile Aaron hadn’t seen before. And suddenly he felt like an intruder, hesitating with a hand on the door jamb. Robert turned and looked straight at him so that Aaron looked away again.

‘It’s OK, you were right...what you said last night.’ His voice was gravelly. ‘I’ll take him to school this morning.’

Turning back to his son, he kissed the top of Josh’s head.

Later, while Aaron made toast for the kids and packed food into Josh’s lunchbox, Robert came into the kitchen with Chrissie, both of them dressed for work.

Robert slipped his arms round behind her waist, eyelids lowered seductively.

‘So am I forgiven? It wasn’t as if I wanted to stay all evening, but you and your Dad did say you want me to be the face of the company.’

Chrissie pouted, stroking down the sleeve of his jacket.

‘I suppose so.’

‘So tonight, then. And this time I get to book the restaurant.’

‘We can’t do tonight. It’s Aaron night off. Remember? I already told you.’

Robert’s eyes jumped to Aaron.

‘Well he’ll just have to change his night off. You’ll do that for us, won’t you? Especially since I’m trying to make amends here?’

Aaron felt confused. He couldn’t tell if Robert’s words were meant for Chrissie or for him?

He didn’t want to change his night out. He needed to talk to someone, to tell Ed what had happened and listen to his steady rational voice, but he felt he had no choice. He wasn’t even sure if Robert was still going to tell him to leave.

‘Fine,’ he murmured.

‘See! There you are! Told you it would all turn out right.’

Robert ran his hands down over Chrissie’s behind and leaned in for an open mouthed kiss.

Blushing, Aaron turned away.

When Chrissie had gone, and Josh had run into the living area to find his shoes, Robert turned back to Aaron, fixing his eyes on him sharply, like he had the day before.
‘Make me an espresso before I go.’

Aaron felt his heart thumping.

‘I’m not your skivvy,’ he growled.

Robert looked back at him, still scanning his face, making Aaron uncomfortable.

‘Drop the attitude. I’m making an effort here.’

He walked out of the kitchen after Josh, and soon Aaron heard the sound of the door closing behind them and exhaled as the house was left to him and Doli.

After school Aaron took Josh to the park and with Doli sleeping in her push chair they kicked a football back and forth.

Much later, when the children were in bed and asleep, Aaron watched some TV in his room. He got out his phone and scrolled down looking at photos, snapshots sent to him. His Mum behind the bar, Paddy and Marlon giggling about something or other, Adam messing around on a quad bike at the farm, Belle leading a pony by the halter in the yard outside Wishing Well cottage, Vic and Diane caught mid mouthful eating something, eyes wide. He felt his eyes closing. When he opened them he could hear voices outside his room. He glanced at the time. It was around midnight.

‘Just let me change,’ Chrissie was laughing.

‘I don’t want you to change, I want you as you are.’

‘Wait! Not out here!’ Chrissie laughed again.

‘I can’t wait with you. I’ve been waiting all evening.’

Then the sound of a door opening and closing and then… silence. Just Aaron’s heart racing on in the dark. So he’d got Robert wrong, all wrong.

After all, he’d only just got back and like he’d said, he was running a business, and who knew what stresses and commitments he was up against. Aaron had just jumped to conclusions and behaved badly really. He blushed in the dark, thinking about his outburst the night before. His lucky escape really. He just needed to keep his head down and do his job and look after these two beautiful children that he was responsible for.

He was almost asleep when there was a soft knock on the door, and then, before he had time to speak, it opened, the light from the landing casting shadows across the bed.

Robert was standing there, the light behind him, so that Aaron couldn’t see his face clearly, only that he was once again dressed only in pajama trousers, that his body glistened with sweat.

He sat up rapidly, feeling exposed by this invasion of his territory, his heart thumping.

He saw the whites of Robert’s eyes as he looked over the room and then fixed on him in his bed.

Neither of them spoke until Aaron broke the silence.

‘I’m trying to get some sleep.’
‘Yeah. I… err, I just wanted to ask about Josh. He’s OK? He was alright after school?’

Aaron shook his head, trying to focus.

‘Course. We went to the park, played football. Well, kicked a ball around.’

He saw Robert’s silhouette nod.

‘Course.’

‘Join us. It’s what he likes to do. It would mean the world to him.’

Robert nodded again.

‘You’re right. I will.’

Then the door closed, and Aaron was left in darkness again.

It was Friday night when eventually Aaron headed to Le Marais on his postponed night off. More than a night off, twenty four hours was the arrangement, so that if he went out at eight one evening, he was due back at eight the following night. He’d wanted to meet up with Ed, needing to talk, but Ed couldn’t make it, explaining he had practice and then a press event for the Rugby team. So instead he’d called Emile.

He walked into the gay club, two hands in the pockets of his black hoodie, past the couples standing drinking together. When he spotted Emile at a table, he went over to join him, kissing the French way in greeting, Aaron still slightly uncomfortable even after a year.

Emile went to order him a beer. While he was gone, Aaron let his eyes glance over the talent. He’d known when he took a shower before he came out what he wanted to happen. He needed a distraction, someone to help calm the unsettled feeling that had been growing in his lower stomach over the past week.

‘What’s up, mon cheri? Something on your mind?’ Emile asked searching his face as he sat down with the beers.

‘Nah. Just had a difficult week at work.’

‘You want to tell me about it?’

‘Not really.’ Aaron gave a quick smile. ‘I’d rather just forget about it for a while.’

After the third round, Aaron eyes were still searching the crowd, then someone joined them, kissing Emile, sitting between them and quickly reaching out a slim long fingered hand to Aaron in greeting. Their eyes met.

Aaron saw warm brown eyes in a slim face, a short beard just around the jaw line and chin and red lips. The eyes and lips were smiling at him. At a guess the stranger was in his late twenties. He raised his beer bottle to Aaron’s and said ‘Cheers!’ Aaron gave him a short smile back then looked away.

When he looked back the eyes were still fixed steadily on him. He spoke to Aaron in French asking how long he’d been in Paris.
Nearly a year, Aaron answered in French:

‘So how come I didn’t meet you before?’ he turned accusingly ‘Emile…?’ He laughed.

They talked for a while. About Paris, Aaron’s job, Emile. The stranger switched to English, comfortable in the language, eyes still warm, smiling.

‘So… I’m an artist. In Paris. A cliché, non?’

Aaron looked back at his hands again, imagining them at work. He felt himself blushing unseen in the dark lighting of the club.

‘I’m looking for a model. Will you model for me, Aaron?’

Aaron felt his pulse increase, the blonde French beer warming his insides.

‘I’ve never…’

‘It’s OK. It’s easy. I’d like to draw you.’

He shrugged.

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘OK. Let me show you where my studio is… not far from here? Not far from Emile’s rooms. You want to see?’

He stood.

‘Oh, and my name is Matheo, by the way.’

So they walked shoulder to shoulder, threading their way down the crowded streets past the bars and restaurants. Matheo was taller than Aaron and slim framed. Aaron found his eyes glancing sideways at this new acquaintance, looking at the smooth olive skin of his face. When they approached Emile’s apartment, Aaron knew that Matheo’s studio must be near and, sure enough, he stopped and placed a hand lightly on Aaron’s shoulder.

‘Here.’ He stopped at a doorway, inconspicuous between a barber shop and a coffee shop, but still near the bars and antique shops that were the stock in trade of the area.

Aaron hesitated, feeling light on his toes. Waiting for what he knew was the inevitable next stage of the evening. Then Matheo turned.

‘So, come tomorrow. Say eleven? To model? You won’t let me down, Aaron?’

He extended his slim hand once again, an unexpected formal farewell and then unlocked the door and was gone. Aaron was left frowning, on edge, wondering what had just happened, swallowing what he could only describe as disappointment if he bothered to define it, wondering what to do next. He hesitated looking around. The best thing would be to go back to the gay bar, to Emile. He could sleep over on the sofa, but first he would have another few drinks.

He turned, pushing his hands in his pockets and started to make his way back down the crowded street. Maybe it was better this way. He shook his head. Once again he’d misread signals.

And then he looked up, and saw him.
Robert.

He was in front of one the more expensive restaurants that were located in the area. Dressed in a black leather jacket, his eyes searching the street. Aaron stood still, watching him, for a moment not thinking at all, just enjoying the view. On impulse he thought about crossing the street, though why and what he would say he didn’t know. It took him less than a moment more to register that Robert wasn’t alone. It was the movement of a hand up to his arm. He blinked suddenly with surprise. A tall blonde girl was by his side.

Robert turned to her and moved one arm around the back of her shoulder reaching round with his fingers to lightly stroke her cheek.

Aaron narrowed his eyes and continued to watch him until he hailed a cab and turned back to the girl saying something into her hair that made her smile. Robert opened the door and handed her into the cab and then moved to get in beside her. And that was the moment he looked up, his hand holding the door of the taxi and their eyes met.

Aaron’s lips were parted as Robert just stared back into his eyes. And then he ducked into the cab, and he was gone.
Aaron poses for a life drawing. He takes Josh and Robert to a Rugby match where Robert makes a discovery.

‘Stay the night with your girlfriend, did you?’

Robert was reclining on the sofa, Chrissie lying into his chest. His hand rested against her thigh, fingers spread, while in the other hand he held the remote control. On the table in front of them there was an open bottle in a bucket of ice and two glasses of white wine.

Aaron could see where the wine had made Robert’s lips wet.

Aaron felt his lip curl and struggled to keep his face still, looking back at Robert who regarded him with cold eyes.

‘Don’t have one, mate.’

Unlike you, he was tempted to add. He could just say it. Blow it wide apart. But Robert knew about his lies too, maybe this was why he’d kept quiet up to now, keeping them for later, knowing he had some hold over him.

It was around nine thirty on Saturday evening and he had just unlocked the door and entered the living area, aware that he was late and feeling at a disadvantage somehow. On the other hand the kids would already be in bed, even if he’d come home earlier, so it wasn’t as if he was letting anybody down, and now, if they woke, he’d be there to look after them.

He looked at Chrissie and gave a short smile. She seemed so smart. He wondered how Robert could have taken her in quite so thoroughly. Oh yes, he was good, all charm on the surface, but who was the real Robert?

‘Don’t ask him personal questions, you’ll embarrass the lad.’ Chrissie slapped Robert’s hand lightly, teasingly. ‘Just ignore him.’ She said to Aaron. ‘He’s feeling smug because he put the kids to bed single handed for once.’

‘Yeah. I intend to,’ Aaron answered quietly. He turned to leave to go up to his room. He needed a shower and a change of clothes. But then he remembered. He turned and looked back at Chrissie.

‘Err… I don’t know if you’ve got plans for tomorrow, but I’ve got a mate who plays Rugby for Stade Paris. There’s a match tomorrow and he’s given me tickets. I thought Josh…’

‘Isn’t he a bit young?’ Chrissie asked, but Robert sat up, his blue green eyes suddenly eager.

‘No. He’ll love it! Where are they playing?’

‘Just round the corner at the Jean Bouin stadium.’

‘So… I can come too. Chrissie you can take care of Doli, can’t you?’
Aaron closed his eyes for a second. The last thing he’d wanted was to go with Robert, but he knew Josh would adore having his Dad there on a proper outing for once.

‘Right then. The match is at 13.45. Just so you know. In case you had other plans.’ He added.

Robert narrowed his eyes.

‘No other plans.’

Aaron nodded, turning his mouth down at the corners, they both knew what he was referring to, after the night before. Turning he went upstairs to get that shower.

That morning he’d met Ed for breakfast and after they’d walked by the Seine.

‘He’s having an affair. Or he’s messing around… How can he do that? How can he risk everything? How many people would want what he’s got? Those precious children? And it wouldn’t just be Chrissie who got hurt.’

He shook his head with disgust.

‘I just want to smash his head against a hard place. Wipe that smirk off his face.’

Ed glanced sideways at him silently as they walked.

‘What?’

‘You sure you hate this bloke?’ He asked.

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Just seems… you’re reacting so strongly.’

Aaron pulled in his chin, but he felt his heart suddenly race.

‘He’s a joke. He’s straight and married, anyway.’

‘Anyway.’ Ed echoed.

Aaron pushed his fists deeper into the pocket of his hoodie.

‘Look,’ Ed went on, ‘if you think you can’t trust him, I think you should do what you said. Contact Cain, get a new passport, papers. Maybe you don’t need them now, but in case, you know? Get them done anyway, eh Aaron?’

Aaron nodded, what Ed was saying made sense.

‘And you’ll come to the match tomorrow? I’ll get you in VIP.’ He’d added.

Aaron had smiled, reaching out to touch Ed’s arm, seeing his eyes flicker in response to the touch.

‘Yeah. I’ll be there. Josh’ll be so made up. Just make sure you win, eh?’

After his shower Aaron lay down on his bed, his towel around his waist. He heard footsteps on the
stairs and sat up suddenly heart thudding, looking towards the door. He couldn’t remember if he’d locked it or not. He rarely thought about his scars, even noticed they existed, but a small voice told him to keep them hidden. Who knew what they might think about him? If they thought he was unstable, looking after the children. Which he wasn’t. He ducked back into his en suite bathroom just in case, listening as the footsteps receded down the stairs again, breathing out with relief.

It was the second time in the same day he’d thought about them. His scars.

Around eleven Aaron had found himself between the barber shop and the café.

Looking from left to right, chest rising and falling, he’d placed his finger up to the buzzer and after a moment’s hesitation, he’d finally rung and with an inelegant buzz the door had clicked open and Aaron had stepped inside.

Matheo was smiling, wearing charcoal grey shorts and a black cotton shirt, untucked at the waist, the sleeves rolled up to under his elbows so Aaron could see the muscular sinews of his forearms.

‘You came Aaron! Bravo! Really!’

Aaron found himself in a high ceilinged room with a single bare window stretching all the way down to the floor so he could see into the apartments opposite. A multitude of canvases rested against the brick walls, painted with cityscapes, twilights and figure drawings of men, partly hidden, stacked over each other so that all Aaron caught was a shoulder, or half a portrait with heavy lidded eyes, cheek bones, lips outlined with red, calves, thighs. There were wooden easels and a tall wooden table with paints and brushes, a faint smell of turpentine hung in the air.

Aaron saw two doors, one open, and beyond it an unmade bed with white linen, presumably where Matheo slept.

‘So Cognac?’

Matheo reached for two glasses from a kitchen area that Aaron hadn’t noticed at the back of the room.

‘Early, isn’t it?’

‘You had breakfast?’

Aaron nodded.

‘Then it isn’t early.’ He poured them both a drink. As he took the glass, Aaron noticed his hand was trembling ever so slightly. He sipped at the liquid, then tipping the glass drank it down it one.

‘You can undress in there.’ Matheo indicated the bedroom. And Aaron had panicked.

He’d known, of course he’d known. Wasn’t this why he’d come?

‘Look, mate. This was a mistake.’ His voice was light. He was standing on his toes, eyes on the door.

‘Why?’

‘I’m err…’ Aaron turned his head. He couldn’t talk. Instead he just pulled up his T-shirt, all the way up to his collar bone, curling the material in his fist, looking away. ‘These… you err… won’t
want to draw me … cos of these. Better find another model.’

He waited like that. He could see Matheo from the corner of his eyes, looking at his body.

‘So now I know you’re a virgin, an art virgin, Aaron, I’m not interested in these. These are superficial. But you have a nice rib cage.’ He smiled.

Aaron smiled back, blowing air from his nose. Matheo filled his glass with another measure of Cognac.

‘So drink this, then will you go and undress for me? Model for me?’

The alcohol relaxed him. He went into the bedroom and took off his clothes. He found a towel and wrapped it round his waist.

Since Ed he’d had a number of one night stands, mixing things up, trying things out with a confidence he hadn’t had before, but this was out there. He’d never done anything like this before.

Matheo indicated a lounger spread with a pale green candlewick cover.

‘Can you lie down there… yes? And remove the towel.’

Aaron knew his neck and chest were flushed as he tugged at the towel and let it slip away to the floor. He thought his nipples must be hard but was afraid to move his hands to check.

‘And can you bend up the knee of your right leg? Ok, and just yes, open your left leg sideways for me. Then put your arms up like this.’ He placed his arms behind his head to demonstrate.

‘Perfect. Are you comfortable?’

Aaron was breathing hard, he didn’t know if he was comfortable or not. He felt his cock stirring, thickening.

‘Aaron, can you just pull your foreskin back?’

Aaron blushed more, doing as Matheo asked. At the touch his already swelling cock grew even harder. He felt Matheo’s eyes on him, now his cock head was exposed.

He wanted them to have sex already, but Matheo, still fully dressed, perched on a high stool behind an easel, charcoal in hand, and started to draw.

He was lying back on the bed, arms outstretched at either side. It was his first time, he felt sick with desire; there was pain, a burn so strong it took his breath away. Jackson was smiling at him, moving over him, his lips moving, muttering words of comfort and love. He smiled back and at last the pain was gone, replaced with an intense pleasure. Aaron was hungry for this, he reached round his slender waist pulling him, urging him to go stronger, closing his eyes as the pleasure built. But when he opened them it was Robert, not Jackson. Shock coursed through his body. Robert’s lips were wet. And now Aaron was over him, inside him, stroking his hip, whispering against his ear, he wanted to wait but all at once he was coming, inescapably, deep inside him, while Robert gasped, coming too, shouting his name. ‘Aaron! Aaron! Aaron!’

He woke.

His pajamas, the bed, everywhere was wet again. But even worse was the dream. Robert Sugden?
He felt irrationally angry with himself. He’d need to wash the sheets on Monday, after they’d gone to work. For now he changed, spreading a dry towel to lie on.

This was Matheo’s fault. He should never have posed.

‘Do you want to look?’ he’d asked eventually.

Aaron had found the towel, holding it against him and stood, stretching, then walked in bare feet towards the easel where Matheo was regarding his work with a frown.

He knew nothing about art, but it was probably good he thought and still he blushed again, looking at his naked form in the picture. Now surely they’d have sex. But Matheo stepped back.

‘It’s not finished. Can you continue next Saturday? Same time?’

They walked to the stadium. Robert smelt of expensive perfume and leather and beyond that something else, a masculine scent that took Aaron back to his dream, so that he shook his head with a frown. The route became more crowded the closer they got. Aaron reached down and lifted Josh onto his shoulders, following the stream of fans, dodging cars already illegally parked up on the sidewalks. Josh reached out a hand and touched his father’s face with his fingertips.

They went through the security checks, Robert having to go through twice, unfastening his gold Rolex, dropping it in the tray. Then they were led to the VIP lounge with a glass balcony over the stadium. Aaron bought them beer in plastic cups and Orangina for Josh and hot dogs for them all.

Then they made their way down the rows of seats towards the front ready for the match to begin. Robert held onto Josh’s hand, while Aaron carried his drink for him. The roar from the crowd when the players came on was deafening. Aaron leant down. He pointed out Ed and Josh nodded eagerly.

The match didn’t disappoint. Glancing at Robert’s face, Aaron could see the glint of excitement in his eyes. Stade Francais Paris, Ed’s team were playing against Toulouse. When they scored an early try the home crowd went wild and then Ed kicked a conversion and Josh squeezed Aaron’s hand, jumping with delight while Aaron blushed with pride. At half time though, Toulouse had gone ahead 24 to 18. Josh’s face had fallen, his eyes glittering and face hot. He was almost in tears.

Aaron glanced at Robert.

‘Do you think he’s had enough? Should we take him home?’

‘No! NO!’ Josh was almost crying.

‘OK, son.’ Robert said. ‘Just sit down with me here and rest for a little while, will you? That’s it.’ He pulled Josh against him, sitting, a hand on his head to calm him. Aaron watched them, father and son. No matter what he thought about Robert personally, he had to admit that with Josh, he was good.

Robert caught his eye and Aaron couldn’t help himself, nodding in approval. Robert nodded back looking somehow pleased, as if Aaron’s opinion actually counted for something. Aaron looked away.
The second half was close. When Stade Francias were given a penalty kick, they were all on their feet, on their toes, holding their breath in anticipation. When they scored, the roar from the crowd reached a crescendo.

‘Yesssss!’ Aaron’s fist punched the air, and then he felt Robert’s arm around his back, fingers curled into his shoulders, pulling him close, pulling him off balance. Glancing sideways at his face so near now, he saw his eyes laughing.

‘You should smile more often.’ He said into his ear, his voice low enough to cut through the din of the crowd. ‘It suits you.’

Aaron blinked suddenly. Why the charm? Why with him? Now?

The match finished with Stade Francais victorious. After, the players on the pitch approached.

‘Come on Josh! You wanna say hello?’ Aaron moved quickly down the steps to the barrier where Ed was waiting, glistening with sweat, glowing with pride. Robert moved down more slowly behind him with a still eager Josh.

‘Hey, mate. Brilliant match! You played so well.’

They embraced. Ed, high from his win pressed his lips against Aaron’s mouth and then hugged him again harder, closer.

Looking up Aaron saw the sudden shock on Robert’s face as he blinked, lips parted.

‘He’s Aaron’s boyfriend.’ Josh told his father.

‘No Josh, we were … before, but not now.’ He answered.

‘You’re gay?’ Robert said.

‘Yeah, mate.’

‘But… why didn’t you say? Before?’

‘Why, is it a problem?’ All at once Aaron felt nervous. But why should he be? He could see the confusion on Robert’s face.

‘No, no… course not.’

‘Then that’s alright then.’
The Red Porsche

Chapter Summary

Aaron and Robert both go out on Friday night. Aaron models again. On Monday morning Aaron helps Robert to start his car with surprising consequences.

Chapter Notes

As Finn would say 'I don't know anything about cars.' Except that a Porsche has the engine in the back, so forgive any car inaccuracies lol
A little M/F action in this chapter, as well as M/M too.
And some homophobic comments. LOL there's a bit of everything.

Josh fell asleep exhausted with his head resting sideways on his father’s shoulder as Robert carried him home after the Rugby.

‘I can take him, if he’s heavy…’ Aaron offered, but Robert said no, he was fine.

Earlier they’d walked to the stadium in silence, apart from Josh’s chatter. Now they walked back in silence, too. But somehow it was a different kind of silence; better Aaron thought, as if Robert had dropped some of his smart aleck attitude from before.

Sure, he was still a cheat, and Aaron wouldn’t want to be in Chrissie’s shoes, but he did genuinely seem to care about the kids and he was so good with Josh, attentive, loving, like a father should be.

Aaron bit his lip and looked down the street.

Robert suddenly spoke. His voice was soft.

‘So you and the rugby player, Ed is it … you were an item?’

‘Yeah.’ Aaron answered.

‘But you’re not anymore?’

‘No.’

‘We’re you… married? I saw the name, Roberts, on the Rugby shirt.’

Aaron blinked. The whole point of the name on his false papers was that people would think they were married. That it would be a distraction. It hadn’t been the best of plans.

‘No, just a coincidence. It’s a common enough name.’

‘So why did you split up?’
'I don’t know… I err… wanted more.’ Aaron answered, all at once surprised by himself for sharing with Robert, saying something aloud that he’d not said to anyone else up to now.

‘And now you have a new… you’re with someone else, then?’

‘No. No one else.’

Aaron thought about Matheo, his brown eyes and olive skin, the slender muscular tone of his body. ‘Anyway, what’s it to you, mate?’ He said, suddenly defensive, worried that he was giving too much away.

He saw Robert turn his head brushing his chin over Josh’s white blonde hair.

‘Alright, mate, just asking. You are living under my roof.’

‘Well maybe I should be asking you about that lass you were with the other night? I am living under your roof.’ Aaron countered.

Robert frowned. His eyes glanced down at his son in his arms. He spoke quietly. ‘Maybe I want more too.’ Then, as if like Aaron, he needed to raise his armor. ‘And who are you to judge me? The morality police?’ He breathed waiting. Aaron shook his head. ‘Thought not.’

But Aaron looked at Josh.

‘Just think about who’d get hurt… Who would lose out?’

‘Jus shut it!’ Robert snapped.

Aaron squared his shoulders and pushed his hands in his pockets.

They walked the rest of the way in a different kind of silence.

When they came in through the door, Robert said he’d put Josh to bed for a while before tea, but Josh squirmed in his arms, fussing.

‘No! Aaron! Want Aaron!’ He whined, stretching out his arms towards him.

Robert handed him over and for a moment their fingers touched. Aaron felt Robert’s eyes flicker to his face but he kept his own eyes on Josh. As he turned to the stairs to take Josh up, Robert took off his jacket. The smell of leather was replaced suddenly by Robert’s smell, strong with sweat after carrying Josh through the streets in the still warm weather and all at once Aaron was uncomfortable, feeling his body respond. Was this Robert? Or would any man have the same effect? It was just a long while since he’d had it. Too long. He frowned. He should abandon the artist and messing around and just go for a straight forward pick up next time he was off work. Any one night stand would do.

Why was he making this so complicated?

‘Gay? Are you sure?’

‘Yeah. Even Josh knew...’ Robert sounded amused.
Coming back down Aaron had been about to walk into the kitchen when he heard them and froze.

‘You don’t think he’ll turn Josh?’

‘Come on Chrissie. An educated woman like you?’

‘Oh My God! Or you? He might try and turn you?’

‘All that effort not to employ a female au pair.’ Robert was laughing at her. ‘Anyway I’m only interested in you …’

Aaron heard a slap on plump flesh and Chrissie gasp then giggle followed by the sound of noisy kissing. He backed away quietly. Lachlan, sitting on the sofa with his computer looked up, eyebrows raised.

‘I’m just…’ Aaron pointed back up the stairs and made his way towards them, his heart thumping.

He didn’t know how to feel; disappointed at Chrissie, or surprised at Robert for being the more enlightened of the pair, or both. Anyway, he heard Robert’s words. It was what he’d said to Ed, and Ed had pulled him up on it. He frowned, trying to sort out the confusion in his head.

But Robert was right, he scowled; who would choose this? You just got comfortable with being out and then there it was, the stigma, slapping you in the face all over again. And this wasn’t just his workplace, it was supposed to be his home, at least for the present.

In his room he paced the small space by the bed, feeling vulnerable and all at once alone. He closed his eyes and thought of Ed’s arms around him that afternoon. It was a comfort, but he wouldn’t go back there, he’d been right to leave. As he’d said to Robert, the spark, it hadn’t been enough and he wanted more. But when he thought about the future, it was swathed with mist, nothing was clear.

He sat down heavily on the bed and swallowed, wiping his eyes.

At least there was one thing he could do. Taking out his phone, he texted Cain.

Robert was hardly around the following week, leaving early for work and coming back late. At first Chrissie had seemed somehow different with him, though he wasn’t sure if it was just his imagination or not.

On the Monday she asked him if he minded changing his night and day off permanently to Fridays and Saturdays.

‘It’s Robert.’ She explained. ‘He has this thing with the Brazil office every Friday night, conference call, meeting thing or something. It’s to do with the time difference apparently.’ She explained. ‘Anyway, it means I’m stuck at home, so you may as well go out and …’ she hesitated, her expression changing slightly, ‘so you might as well go out on Fridays. If it works for you.’ She finished.

Aaron nodded. He wasn’t buying it about Robert, but it really wasn’t his business after all. And this way he’d get to see Matheo. A small case of unfinished business, one way or another. He’d wait for Friday to come around.
Robert answered the door to room service wearing only his boxer briefs. He tipped the lad and took the bottle and glasses from his hands, putting them on the coffee table, then opened the bottle and poured himself a glass. He looked at his watch, he’d be alright for another hour or more.

He glanced at the ruffled sheets on the bed and sat on the sofa, taking a mouthful of wine.

The girl, Lucie, came out of the bathroom, she was wearing his shirt with a couple of buttons fastened at the front.

Robert patted a thigh.

‘Come here, then.’

She straddled his lap and he tucked her black hair behind her ear before moving his fingers down and unfastening the buttons, pushing the shirt material aside, letting his eyes sweep down over her breasts and body to the smooth mound and slit between her thighs.

From nowhere suddenly he thought of Aaron. Of their conversation about wanting more. This wasn’t really it. It wasn’t what he wanted, but there was something in him, driving him. He saw Aaron’s deep blue eyes looking at him steadily, and all at once he had an image of Aaron, sitting straddled over him, like this, in Robert’s open shirt, lips parted. He panted, then panicked, trying to push the image away. Leaning forward he kissed the girl hard, inhaling her taste, too hard, so that she gave a short squeal of protest and he leaned back and muttered ‘Lucie… désolé’

He spread his knees, so that her thighs moved further apart, then moved his fingers down, feeling her wetness, gliding up over her clitoris. With his other hand he pushed down his boxer briefs and released his arching erect cock. He pulled her forward over him, sliding slowly inside. She sighed with pleasure and lowered her forehead onto his shoulder as he moved his hips under her, his eyes open, looking over her shoulder with a frown, Aaron was still there, in his mind. He’d meant to go and play football in the park with them after school, he remembered, why hadn’t he done that?

The night club was packed and loud. Aaron wore a jacket and a black baseball cap in reverse now that the autumn was turning the weather cooler, particularly at night. He saw Emile, as ever surrounded by a group of friends. But Emile shifted when he saw him, making a space for him to sit down and, after he’d smiled in greeting and pulled off his jacket, Emile put an arm round his shoulder and kept it there companionably. It was as if he knew Aaron was feeling lonely, needing some contact and comfort. He kept up his conversation with his friends, sending someone to the bar to buy him a refill of his beer and one for Aaron. Aaron sat quietly, letting the flow of French wash over him, relaxing in the presence of his older friend.

He heard a familiar voice saying hello to Emile from just behind his back and looked up, feeling his breath shorten. It was Matheo. He saw his eyes slide down to his face with an intimate smile, and blushed, as if he was naked again.

‘So I’m going to get a drink, yes? Aaron, can I get you another one?’ He offered.

‘Sure, yeah. A beer, thanks.’

‘Want to come? Give me a hand?’

Aaron extracted himself. He felt Matheo’s hand slip round his waist as they walked together towards the bar.
After buying a drink, rather than returning to the group they found a vacated seat and sat down alone.

‘So, how is it going? Being an au pair?’

‘Actually I’m not really an au pair.’

‘Non? But last week you said…’

‘I mean, I’m working as an au pair, and I took a course, since I came to France, but I’m really qualified as a mechanic and it’s the job I’ve done longer.’

Matheo took Aaron’s fingers and turned them.

‘Ah! So it explains … your hands.’

Aaron had had enough of waiting. He leaned forward and pressed his mouth hard against Matheo’s, insisting on the kiss that he was so hungry for. He pushed hard, opened his lips and moved his tongue forward. He needed to get the message across, that he was ready for this and he wanted it tonight. No more messing around.

Matheo kept hold of his fingers returning the kiss. When they finally drew apart he was grinning back at Aaron.

‘OK. I get it, you’re mad with me.’ He laughed.

‘No.’ Aaron shook his head smiling back. ‘The opposite in fact.’

‘I have to explain…’ Matheo started.

They were interrupted by a voice.

‘Hey! Mat! I didn’t know you blokes knew each other!’

It was Ed. He sat down next to Aaron with a grin, placing his beer bottle on the table.

‘So you enjoyed the match then, Aaron? I think Josh had fun, didn’t he?’

Aaron sat back, blinking.

‘Yeah. Ed. It was… amazing.’

‘And that was the famous Robert. He’s good looking, man! You didn’t say.’

‘Who?’ Matheo asked.

‘The father of the children I look after.’ Aaron informed him.

‘Aaron says he’s a jerk.’ Ed smiled. Aaron looked down at his pint, he could see Robert’s face, carrying Josh on the way home from the match and hear his voice; maybe I want more too.

‘So, what’s with the new pink Rugby jerseys? That your idea?’ He asked Ed, changing the subject.

Ed sat with them chatting for the next hour, then Matheo stood up.

‘Sorry. I need to go. Nice talking.’ He said. Aaron felt his stomach fall. So he would have to wait another day.
Matheo walked the few blocks from the club back to his studio through the crowds. He paused as a car lift surfacing from an underground car park blocked his way. The car was a red new model Porsche. He waited, resting his hands in his pockets, admiring the vehicle, not, he told himself that he’d ever want one, but design was a branch of art and it was, after all, a beautiful design.

His glance took in the driver, handsome, blonde. As if he sensed him looking, he turned and their eyes met for a moment, pale eyes circled with a ring of black. The eyes ran down over his body. On impulse, Matheo winked back. But the driver looked away, putting the car into gear, and with a release of the throttle, he turned out onto the street and then, in a moment, he was gone.

Saturday at 11.00, high grey clouds moved swiftly over the pale blue sky pushed by an autumn wind. Aaron stood between the barbers and the coffee shop, waiting for the door, feeling his pulse beating in his throat.

Mat, greeted him with his slender fingers in a hand shake and a warm smile from his brown eyes. Aaron moved forward for a kiss, but was disappointed when Matheo stepped back, his reception not cold, but lukewarm, not what Aaron wanted, needed now.

‘What?’ He asked. ‘Yesterday you…’

‘Aaron, I tried to explain. First I have to finish the drawing. If we – ‘He lowered his voice ‘- go further, then I won’t be able to draw. I know it. The art comes first.’

Aaron blinked at his choice of words. He knew who he wanted to come first. His skin was so ready to be touched, his whole body felt on edge, waiting for the release.

‘Please, understand.’ Matheo begged him, walking inside, reaching for the Cognac and pouring a glass for Aaron.

Aaron squeezed his lips together, taking the offered glass.

‘OK.’ He answered and drank it down.

But when he lay down and let the towel fall away so that he was naked again, he could hardly breathe. His balls felt tight and full, as he took up the position from the week before, feeling Matheo’s eyes on him, he could feel his cock getting hard and he turned his head, blushing.

‘Just try to relax, non?’ Matheo said softly.

Aaron nodded and breathed in and then breathed out, forcing air between his lips. He closed his eyes, and let himself drift.

His mind went to Robert, and his anyway.

He imagined him here, looking at Aaron lying this way, naked, touching his shoulders his arms, then lying over him, his pale freckled skin moving against him, skin against skin. He shook his head then coughed and shifted slightly. From the corner of his eye he saw Matheo pause, charcoal in hand.

‘… désolé ‘ he muttered. ‘sorry.’
He tried to think of normal things, he thought about Emmerdale, then quickly chased the thoughts away. He thought about the Rugby match the week before. This week Ed’s team would be playing away, they’d set off today which is why he hadn’t seen Ed for breakfast, instead sharing a quiet coffee and croissant with Emile in his apartment where he’d slept on the sofa again. He thought about bacon butties and baked beans on toast, but that made him think of his Mum and again he quickly put his mind in reverse and again found Robert. He bit his lip. He thought about how Robert had stood in the doorway to his room, after sex with Chrissie that night. The sweat on his upper lip. The glow of white skin in front of his hip bones, the waistband of his pyjamas.

He was hard again, this time his cock stood up erect and thick away from his body over his stomach. He blinked. Matheo put down his charcoal with a sigh and stepped forwards towards him from his easel.

He perched besides Aaron on the canopy, and Aaron felt himself begin to tremble with desire.

Matheo leaned over and kissed him and their tongues met moving deep and hard against each other. He could see Matheo wanted him too, as he reached down and unfastened his shorts, releasing his long cock, flushed dark, his cockhead swollen and leaking.

Aaron reached out to touch him, but Matheo held his wrist.

‘Non, seulement pour toi… cette semaine. For you, this week. Next week for me.’

He stroked a hand down over Aaron’s arm, moving his fingers over his stomach leaving dark charcoal stains on his skin already wet with perspiration.

Then he curled his long agile fingers and thumb round Aaron’s shaft and started to stroke him, kissing him again. Aaron moaned from his throat at the touch he’d been longing for. As he picked up speed, Aaron panted into his mouth.

Matheo paused, as Aaron throbbed between his fingers. Then he started again, and finally Aaron was coming, calling out as his cum spilled white, thick and hot over Matheo’s fingers and their foreheads rested together.

‘The car won’t fucking start.’

Aaron looked up from buttering toast for Doli and glanced towards Josh who seemed happily oblivious to his father’s swearing, instead trying to sound out the word *Pokemon* written on the cereal packet in front of him at the table.

It was Monday morning, and the breakfast rush.

Lachlan, however, looked at his mother.

‘You see, Robert says *fuck*. Why do you always get on my case if I say it?’

Chrissie ignored him, answering Robert.

‘Well, can’t you find out what’s wrong and fix it? I thought you knew about cars? Isn’t it one of your things?”

Robert opened his palms.
‘Dressed like this?’

He was wearing the maroon suit with a white shirt and tie. One of his hands was already streaked with oil where he’d popped the bonnet and had a quick look. He picked up a cloth with a frown and started to wipe at it.

‘That’s for dish…’ Aaron started. Then he spoke louder.

‘I can take a look if you want.’

‘You?’

‘Yeah. I know a bit about cars. Used to help out in my uncle’s garage.’ It wasn’t a lie.

Robert pressed his lips together, glancing at his watch.

‘Come on, then.’

They stepped in the narrow lift together, taking them down to the car park under the building. Aaron glancing at Robert could see his jaw flex and looked away again quickly, avoiding Robert’s eyes.

The lights came on automatically as they stepped out of the lift into the low airless space that smelt of ozone. Robert used the remote to unlock the car as they walked towards it. It was the first time Aaron had seen it. He stroked a hand appreciatively over the shiny red metal of the Porsche. It was a long time since he’d had his hands on any car, let alone one as classy as this beauty.

Robert’s eyes narrowed, watching him.

‘You like it?’ He walked to the rear of the car.

‘What’s not to like? Pop the bonnet then.’

Robert started the ignition, but nothing happened. He moved round to the back, next to Aaron, watching him as his eyes grazed over the engine.

‘I checked the battery. It’s not that.’

‘If it’s the fuel injector, you’ll have to take her to a garage.’

‘I know.’

Aaron looked at the carburetor. Then moved his eyes back to the battery again, biting his lip.

‘Where’s your car jack? Give me the tire iron, will you?’

Robert rolled his shoulders impatiently but walked round the car then Aaron took the iron and raised it in the air, all at once smacking it down against the starter motor.

And suddenly the engine purred into life.

‘Wow!’ Robert blinked. ‘Thanks.’

‘Electrics.’ Aaron straightened up, trying to hide a small smile.

Robert switched off the ignition then turned it on again, hearing the engine again, he turned it off.
'Seems fine now.' Aaron said closing the bonnet.

Robert walked towards him.

'So where’d you learn so much about cars?' His voice was low, tentative.

'I told you.'

He looked up at Robert’s face and all at once he swallowed. Robert’s eyes had gone dark. His tongue flickered over his lips.

And then he took a step forward. Aaron felt his heart suddenly race with confusion.

'So, are you going back inside?'

Robert was so close, he was looking at his lips. There was no doubt now in Aaron mind what was happening. And suddenly he wanted this. He couldn’t think clearly, only that he’d wanted it since they’d first met.

'You tell me.' He answered his voice low, shaking.

He looked back at Robert’s mouth, waiting for what he knew was going to happen. Then suddenly, Robert stepped back, looking down. Confused, he turned to go taking a step towards the elevator.

Then there was a hand on his shoulder spinning him round again, and Robert’s hands were on his face, and his mouth pressed forward in a kiss, so hungry it took Aaron’s breath away. And reaching his hands up to the front of his shirt he was tugging at him, kissing him back. Robert’s lips were so soft, his mouth open, drinking him in like a man who’d been in a desert for too long. He was swaying, trembling. Aaron could feel his heart pounding under his fingers through his shirt.

He knew Robert wanted more, he wanted it too, his whole body burning, he pushed Robert back against the side of the car, pushing his hands against the waistband of his trousers, looking for the fastening. Not even caring that they were in the apartment garage, that at any minute someone else could come to take their car on the way to work.

Then Robert suddenly pushed him back.

'No! Wait.’ He turned his face to the side, panting.

Aaron stopped still holding his shirt, looking at his mouth then his eyes. Seeing the doubt.

'What?’ He asked gently.

'This is a mistake.’

‘But… you want it.’ Aaron answered, his body still churning sickeningly. Robert took another step away and started walking round the car to the driver’s seat.

'I've got to go.' He turned, not meeting Aaron’s eyes, opening the car door.

‘You’ve got oil… on your shirt.’ Aaron said, seeing the marks from his fingers on the white material.

'It’s OK. I’ll change.’ Robert closed the car door and started the engine.

Aaron watched him drive away.
Concussion

Chapter Summary

After the kiss, Aaron tries to work out his feelings for Robert, while Matheo provides a distraction. Robert goes away for the week, but when he comes back his attitude confirms in Aaron what he'd thought about Robert all along. After an accident happens.

It was wrong, all wrong.

But it didn’t stop him from wanting it, did it?

Aaron closed his eyes and let his head fall back to rest against the bedhead, in his mind, the recollection of Robert’s mouth against his own, of Robert’s heart racing under his fingers through his shirt.

Even though he knew he shouldn’t, Aaron wanted to take it further, to take Robert all the way, until that pounding heart accelerated to an exploding pulse under his fingertips.

He blew out from his lips, shifting uncomfortably on the bed.

Robert would probably make him leave now anyway. He hadn’t come home in the evening. Instead he’d called Chrissie, inviting her to meet him out for dinner, leaving Aaron with Lachlan and the kids. Aaron had fed them all their teas and put the kids to bed. He frowned, wondering what was going on in Robert’s head. Was Robert gay, then, or bisexual or what? Or was he just messing around? But it hadn’t felt like messing around. It had felt real.

He thought about his hands moving to unfasten Robert’s trousers. Robert could hardly have hidden how aroused he was, but that was exactly when he’d pulled away.

He looked up as his door slowly opened to see Josh standing there, rubbing his eyes, his hair tousled and his hairline damp.

‘Hey! Mate! You should be asleep.’

‘I had a scary dream.’

Josh moved close to Aaron, climbing onto the bed beside him, leaning his head against his side.

‘What did you dream?’ Aaron touched his forehead to see if he was feverish.

‘There was a car….’ He yawned then, ‘I don’t remember.’

Aaron moved his hand to his blonde head. He seemed cool enough.

‘Come on, I’ll take you back to bed, eh?’

He took Josh by the hand.

‘I love you, Aaron,’ he said.
Aaron kissed Josh’s head. He didn’t want to leave and he wasn’t sure that Robert could make him. The best thing would be to talk to Robert the next chance he got and just tell him he’d deleted the whole thing.

Except that he hadn’t, had he?

But the next morning he found Chrissie sitting alone at the breakfast table, her hand wrapped around a cup of coffee.

‘Robert’s gone away on business for a while.’ She told him.

Aaron nodded. He wondered if Robert was alone on his business trip. For the first time he thought about the possibility that he might be picking up other men.

On the Saturday, Aaron stood in the doorway once again, waiting for the buzzer that would unlock the door. He pushed his hands in his pockets and looked at the pastries on display in the coffee shop, shiny with fondant. They weren’t to his taste, anyway. Anyway. He kicked his shoe against the step. Matheo was taking his time and for a moment he experienced something like relief. He wasn’t sure that he wanted this, only that he wanted something to focus on, someone to touch, to be touched by. And this would take his mind off Robert.

The door buzzer jolted and he made his way up the stairs. He could already taste the Cognac and all at once he decided he did want this. He wanted it badly.

As he entered the studio he was met with the heady smell of linseed oil and turpentine. There was a Polaroid camera in a black case next to the brushes on the table that he hadn’t seen before.

‘So I’m going to start painting today.’

Aaron nodded. His eyes flickered to Matheo’s fingers and the front of his grey shorts under his untucked shirt. He wasn’t sure what this was, whether this was a relationship or something else. Last night he’d gone to the club but Mat hadn’t showed and he’d stuck with Emile and his new boyfriend, feeling like a third wheel, trying to work out if he was disappointed or not.

‘I thought I might have seen you yesterday…’

‘I was away.’

Aaron turned down his mouth and then noticed a travelling bag, zip open, in the corner next to the open bedroom door. The contents of the bag looked recently rifled through, a white shirt, trousers and a tie spilling out half on the floor. Aaron couldn’t imagine him in a tie. He looked back to his face and noticed he’d had a haircut, even his short beard was trimmed.

‘I only came back this morning,’ He went on. ‘So, can you get ready? And I want to take some photos so I can continue when you’re not here.’

‘Photos?’ Aaron’s nerves kicked in again.

After he undressed in the bedroom, he lay down again on the lounger and took up the by now familiar pose, both arms above his head. His body still trembled slightly as he moved his legs, his cock already thickening.

‘As-tu froid?’ Matheo asked softly.
Now that the weather was changing to autumn it was getting cooler.

‘No, I’m fine.’ He answered.

He wasn’t cold, the opposite in fact. He wanted the time to pass quickly and for Matheo to come next to him.

Matheo took the photos first and then he took up his place behind the easel and started to draw an outline on the canvas. Aaron felt light and heavy all at once, feeling the heat building between his thighs as he waited.

He thought about Robert’s jawline and pale throat and the heat of his body under his shirt. He wanted to undress him and turn him over and over again, to discover him with his fingers, with his mouth. He closed his eyes.

When the session ended, Aaron sat up awkwardly, pulling the towel back up over his waist. Matheo washed his hands, his lean shoulders bent as he focused on the task, before he turned and walked towards him, sitting down on the canopy so that his knees pressed against Aaron’s.

Their mouths met, tongues lapping against each other in the suddenly silent room.

‘Alors, let’s go to the bedroom? This time we fuck.’

Aaron nodded and followed him into the room where Matheo quickly pulled his shirt over his head and then stepped out of his shorts. Matheo patted the bed, inviting Aaron to turn and kneel near the edge while he stood behind him. Aaron could hear his breathing laced with need. His hole was already pulsing as Matheo fingered him. He felt the cold sensation of lube and then slick fingers pushing inside him, fucking him in and out and he moaned in response, shifting against the caress to catch the movement where it counted most.

He closed his eyes, he saw Robert’s face backing away to the car, the conflict in his eyes. He’d wanted it, Aaron was sure, but there was something else. All at once, here now with Matheo, it hit him with conviction that Robert had never slept with a man before.

‘Tu es si sexy! Tu es parfait!’ Matheo murmured quietly in French.

Leaning, he wiped his fingers sideways on the sheet and Aaron looking over his shoulder, his teeth biting hard against his lower lip, watched as Mat tore open a condom packet, then rolled the condom down his length.

He faced forward again waiting, his knuckles white on the bed in front of him, until Matheo raised his hips higher and he felt his cock head knocking against his rim, then all at once pushing inside his entrance.

Aaron blew out air from lips at the sting and then the slide of hard cock filling him, stroking against his sensitive nerves. This was what Aaron had needed to empty his head of Robert, of everything from the past week.

‘Est-ce bien? Est-ce que ça fait du bien? Là?’

‘Yeah, good… bien.’

Matheo started to thrust harder, going deeper, Aaron could hear the slap of his flesh against him as he moved. He screwed his eyes tight, feeling the rise building fast with each stroke. He lowered his head more leaning onto his knuckle and reached for his cock with his other hand. All at once he
felt Matheo stiffen deep inside him, growing even larger filling his tight space and then thrusting again and again as he came with a gasping, ‘Fuck! Fuck!’ Aaron fist ed himself hard to catch up with him, coming over his hand onto his stomach.

Mat pulled out, breathing hard, removing the condom and throwing it into a waste bin near the bed and Aaron turned onto his back resting on his elbows, his chest moving as his breathing came gradually down, taking the tissues that Matheo passed him to wipe up.

‘Fucking good, yes?’

Aaron nodded, smiling. Matheo leaned over and placing a hand on his chest, kissed him again, then straightened up and started to dress. Aaron needed to make this official somehow. He drew in a breath and spoke.

‘Maybe we could meet on a weekday next week then, go out, you know, for a meal or something. I can try and arrange time off an’ that?’

Matheo smiled back at him and his brown eyes filled with warmth.

‘Maybe. I’ll call you.’

After Aaron ran down the stairs and opened the door onto the crowded street. He should feel good, euphoric, even. But instead he felt unsettled. They could have spent the afternoon together, gone out to eat, or ordered in. They could have stayed in bed for another round. But Matheo had seemed suddenly distant, ready for him to leave.

Aaron looked up and down the street, hesitating. It was still early to go back, but Ed was training and he’d already taken enough of Emile’s time.

Last night had been awkward. Emile had a new boyfriend, Lucas, and he’d overheard them in the bedroom as he lay on his makeshift bed on the sofa, knowing that he was cramping their style. He’d heard Emile warning Lucas softly.

‘Try to be quieter.’

He’d heard Lucas moaning over and over and over during prolonged lovemaking, Emile’s deeper voice whispering in French. Later he’d closed his eyes, pretending to sleep as they’d snuck out together to the bathroom, giggling, high on adrenaline, running a shower. Lucas was young, athletic with dark hair and green eyes. Aaron felt a pang of envy in spite of himself, not of Lucas, but of the level of relationship they seemed to have.

He thought about Adam, missing home. Then he thought about Robert and frowned.

He would grab a bite to eat and then walk back. It would take him just over an hour, walking along the river, maybe he’d run some of the way.

Robert’s voice rang out on the stairs.

It was early evening. Aaron was getting the kids ready for bed in Doli’s room. He heard Robert’s footsteps getting louder.
‘I’m going to take a shower. I’ll be down soon.’

Chrissie called back.

‘You could at least say hello…’ Her voice trailed off so that it was too quiet to hear.

Then the door opened, Robert was in the room, dropping a travel bag on the floor, smelling of ozone and leather and sweat and running a hand through his hair growing longer over his collar, grinning at the kids. He bent his knees and reached for them with both arms, Josh wrapping his hands tightly around his father’s neck while he pulled Doli close, hugging her into his other side.

‘Ummm! I missed you both!’ He said, his voice tender, dropping a kiss against each of their heads in turn. He raised his eyes to Aaron’s face. Aaron saw his tongue flicker over his lips.

‘Alright?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Aaron answered.

Robert nodded. Turning back to the children, he stood up.

‘I’ll come and say goodnight, yeah?’

Then he was gone.

Aaron could hear the bedroom door close across the hallway. He breathed out. So that had been OK, hadn’t it?

Later he had to go down. It would be weird if he stayed upstairs all evening. He would go down and eat and then come up and watch TV in his room. He hesitated at the top of the stairs and then taking a breath, descended to the family rooms below.

In the kitchen, the table was set for two. Chrissie was sitting without a meal in front of her, watching Robert as he sat, fork raised about to start on a generous helping of Spaghetti Bolognaise. Robert looked up and for a moment their eyes met.

‘Aaron, sit down and I’ll serve you. Lachlan and I already ate, so I’ll leave you two gentlemen to it.’

‘I can get my own.’ Aaron said.

‘No, I insist.’

‘Let him get his own.’ Robert said. ‘Presumably he knows what he wants.’

But Chrissie had already started serving.

‘You’re always so grumpy when you come back from your trips.’

Robert raised his eyes again to Aaron.

‘No, just tired. It’s allowed.’

‘So after you’ve eaten, get an early night and then at least we can have a nice Sunday, if you know what I mean.’ She stroked his shoulder and Robert smiled back at her.

When she left, silence fell. Aaron ate his spaghetti, tasting nothing. His eyes flickered to the side of
Robert’s face. Robert ate with his eyes fixed in front of him. Aaron tried to form words in his head, feeling his heart rate accelerate. Finally he spoke annoyed at himself as he heard his voice shake.

‘Robert, I wanted to… about…’

‘Not here.’ Robert interrupted quickly turning to look at him, eyes glittering. ‘Later.’

Aaron nodded, looking away again, then Robert suddenly scraped back his chair and stood, emptying the remains of the spaghetti into the waste and putting his plate in the sink.

He left Aaron alone in the kitchen.

On Sunday morning, Aaron got up early with the kids and gave them breakfast, then got out toys for them to play on the carpet in the family room. Stepping back into the kitchen he found Robert standing by the coffee machine wearing pajama bottoms with a brushed velvet hooded dressing gown thrown on, open at the front so that Aaron could see his pale chest and stomach where his pajamas were low on his waist. Seeing him there, he turned to leave again, feeling uncomfortable.

‘Don’t run away. Just taking some coffee up for Chrissie.’

Aaron hesitated then spoke. Maybe this was the later that Robert had said the evening before.

‘So now maybe we can talk about…’

‘It was a mistake. Forget it. I already have. Why would I be interested in you anyway?’ Robert said quickly.

Aaron blinked. Robert started to pour the coffee. ‘Who are you anyway? A liar and a loser. On the run from something or other, no doubt.’ He leaned his head nearer lowering his voice. ‘If you’re desperate, La Marais is full of pathetic lads looking for it. But then, you know that already, don’t you?’

Aaron felt his fists balling as Robert went on.

‘Just remember, Aaron, the only reason your still here, is because of the kids. My kids. The only reason.’ And picking up the mugs of coffee, he left.

Aaron put his hands behind him, leaning back against the kitchen counter, shaking with anger.

Josh rushed into the room. ‘Doli won’t share! Come on! Aaron!’ He tugged at his sleeve.

‘What, love?’ Aaron blinked, seeing Josh’s face, but not hearing his words.

‘Come on!’

Aaron followed him out of the kitchen.

Monday the weather was grey over Paris. After Aaron dropped Josh at school he went back home with Doli, thinking about calling Matheo. They could spend an evening together, eat maybe and then go to the studio and lie on the white sheets together, skin against skin. He’d ask Chrissie for the time off. But he couldn’t shake Robert’s words and put his phone down, the call unmade. Anyway, Matheo had said he’d call him, hadn’t he, maybe he’d think Aaron was being needy.
Desperate, pathetic, even. Aaron scowled and lifted a hand to wipe his eyes.

He’d thought, stupidly, that somehow he and Robert had a connection. And then the kiss. Everything he’d been thinking over the past week had been wrong, all wrong.

But it didn’t stop him from wanting it, did it?

Only now, he hated himself for it.

At school leaving time, Aaron waited at the gates with Doli in the push chair, wearing an anorak to keep warm since the weather had changed. Josh came running, a smile on his face, back pack trailing on the ground.

‘Oi, mate! Look after that, eh?’ Aaron bobbed down, picking up the bag and dusting it down, giving Josh a hug. ‘School alright?’ He asked, doing up the zip on his jacket. Josh nodded and then Aaron saw his expression change, looking over his shoulder. Turning he saw the reason why. Robert, hands in the pocket of his leather jacket was striding towards them. Josh ran to him and Robert raised him in his arms, kissing his face.

‘Came to play football, didn’t I? It was what you wanted?’ Robert looked at Josh and turned towards the street with him, glancing back at Aaron’s legs and Doli, just checking they were following as he set off down the pavement, holding his son’s hand. Frowning, Aaron followed.

On the grass park, by the road, their voices were caught by the wind. Doli was sleeping heavily and Aaron parked her by the place they usually played, taking the ball out from under the push chair. Robert marked out two goal areas with sticks and leaves.

‘OK, son, me and you against Aaron. What do you say?’

They started gently, kicking the ball to each other, one, two, three, waiting for Josh to get his small knees and feet up to the ball and execute his kicks.

Then Robert, breaking the pattern, kicked the ball through Aaron’s goal.

‘One, nil.’ He winked at Josh and raised his chin to Aaron, his pale eyes glinting in the late afternoon light. Aaron shook his head.

‘So we’re starting, are we?’

‘Looks like we already started. And we scored so we get the ball.’ Aaron rolled his eyes. He could hardly believe how childish Robert was being. Robert gave the ball to Josh and Aaron let him run with the ball down to his goal again and score a second time. Now Robert had the ball again. He took a simple clean strike and scored a third time.

‘Told you my Dad plays better than Messi.’

‘Yeah. You were right.’ Aaron’s eyebrows flickered and he curled his lips, hanging back as Josh kicked again towards Aaron’s goal, Robert ran to help as the ball went astray, and Aaron unable to resist, intercepted and with a smooth kick, he scored.

‘Three, one then.’ He glanced up at Robert. Then bounced the ball on his knees up into the air a few times, before sending it to his head and with an easy header he scored again.
‘Three, two, and here comes the equalizer.’ He dropped the ball and ran with it fast.

He was being stupid and really he should be thinking about Josh, but Robert’s ridiculous attitude has got to him. He would get ahead just to prove he could, and then let them win. Only suddenly, Robert was tackling him between his legs, pushing him roughly on his arm so that he shoved him back hard, and then Robert grabbed on to his forearm and twisted it back, and all at once he was falling backwards, reaching out to Robert’s jacket to stop himself. Robert was falling too, over him, onto him, onto the cool damp grass, the weight of him suddenly over his body, his mouth open, his eyes staring into Aaron’s who looked back at him wide with shock. He could feel Robert’s heart against his chest beating faster than it should be from just kicking around a ball. Their mouths were so close, and time slowed, his head was swimming and for a moment Aaron thought they were going to kiss. He parted his lips.

Then Robert, driven by instinct, turned his head.

‘Josh! JOSH!’ It was a yelp of fear.

Aaron, still trapped under Robert’s weight, followed his gaze. Josh was chasing the ball which had skidded sideways on the grass travelling all the way onto the road where it bounced onto the tarmac in the path of the oncoming traffic.

Josh was running.

He was running towards the road so close now that Aaron’s stomach lurched with terror. Robert was up, bent double, accelerating towards his son and Aaron quickly leapt up too, with a glance at Doli still sleeping in her chair, he followed on his heels.

Josh stepped out into the busy road.

Seconds after Robert was there, running out onto the tarmac, sweeping him up into his arms, turning, holding him.

Aaron gasped in relief and turned back to look at Doli again. Then he heard the thud as the car hit.

Spinning on his heels again he watched as Robert was thrown forward by the impact, flying through the air and landing heavily on his back and shoulders on the road, so that Josh was flung from his arms into the grass verge. Robert’s body arched and his head flew back bouncing once and twice against the road and then he lay still.

Aaron raised his hands to his mouth as time froze, then ran to Josh. When he reached him, he sat up and Aaron cradled him in his arms. Josh twisted his head to the road.

‘No, Josh, don’t look, don’t look.’

But it was too late. Josh had seen Robert lying motionless on the dark grey surface of the road.

‘Daddy!’ he screamed ‘Daddy! Daddy!’

Robert had concussion and bruises. After twenty four hours they let him go home, recommending at least a week’s bed rest.

He lay on the sofa at home, with a blanket over him, while Chrissie stroked his hair.
Anyway, Aaron will look after you this week, won’t you Aaron, and then you’ll be right as rain.’

Aaron nodded. Matheo had just called, asking for a date. Reluctantly Aaron had put him off. Now he scowled at Robert fucking Sugden.

Robert squinted back at him, a white dressing round his head.

‘I haven’t lost my memory or anything.’ He said with a sneer.

Aaron nodded, glancing at Chrissie before looking back at him.

‘That’s alright then, mate, cos neither have I.’
Falling

Chapter Summary

Robert is at home recovering from concussion but behaves badly when Aaron helps him. Josh has problems at school. Aaron has a date.

Chapter Notes

sort of self harm cw

Robert focused on Aaron.

They’d told him to get complete bed rest for the concussion and to avoid any activity that involved concentration, but he’d got bored. He knew Aaron was home and he’d waited all morning, but Aaron hadn’t even once put his head round the bedroom door.

So in spite of feeling vaguely dizzy, he’d pulled on his dressing gown and made his way downstairs. Doli was playing with toys near the open kitchen and he’d bent to kiss her, holding on to the back of the sofa as he stood again.

He looked past her at Aaron.

He was running water into a pan from the sink before placing it on the stove, then he moved to the fridge where he opened the door and took out a packet of fresh pasta.

Robert clenched his jaw. Aaron, the male au pair, annoyed him. The kiss had been a mistake, a stupid impulse, but each time he thought back to it, rather than regret, he felt his pulse increase and a slight surge of adrenaline that felt good. It was dangerous having him around, but he also knew secrets about Aaron that would keep him from saying anything to Chrissie. He had to admit that he was right for the kids, too. Aaron was calm and caring with them and Robert could see how attached they’d already become to him. So he’d wait. He had this under control.

Robert’s eyes darted over him, taking in his neat, muscular frame, his forearms where the sleeves of his black top were pushed up near to his elbows, the white skin of his throat before it met the dark growth of his trim beard. He let his eyes wander down and linger below the waist and then over his muscular thighs in the tight jeans he was wearing.

He raised his eyes to his face.

Aaron was looking back at him, his deep blue eyes glittering, his mouth set.

Robert scowled.

‘Thought you were supposed to be checking in on me. I could have been dead up there for all you knew.’
‘You look alright to me, mate.’
‘Looks can be deceptive, you know.’

He saw Aaron’s eyebrows rise and fall, and the smallest twist of his mouth as he turned back to the food preparation.

‘You’re fine.’ Aaron’s voice was low.

‘So what? You’re a doctor now, as well as a child minder and a mechanic? Another hidden talent, eh?’

Aaron rolled his eyes and Robert felt his irritation build. He wanted to tell Aaron to drop the attitude yet again. Another wave of dizziness hit so he scraped back a chair and sat down. In a moment, when he felt steady, he’d go back to bed and just leave him to it.

‘How was Josh?’ he asked. He could feel a cold sweat breaking over him. Aaron’s voice came from a distance.

‘Well, he wasn’t too keen on going to school. I hope you and Chrissie made the right decision sending him back so soon. I thought Chrissie had told the teacher, but she hadn’t, so I filled him in on…’

Robert put his hand up to the table. He needed something. He noticed a jug of fresh orange juice on the kitchen counter.

‘Give me some of that.’ He gestured, interrupting.

‘Hold on a minute, mate.’

Aaron emptied the cooked pasta into a colander and steam filled the air. Robert put a hand over his eyes. He could feel his chest rising and falling and hear his breathing as if he was under water. Doli wound her way towards him and started tugging at his dressing gown, smiling, asking to be lifted up onto his knee. He placed a hand on her face.

‘Just a minute, love.’ His words felt slurred.

Aaron poured the orange juice from the jug on the side into a glass and then placed it heavily on the table in front of him. Robert blinked. Aaron was close, bending to lift Doli, Robert caught his masculine scent. Aaron placed her on her booster seat on a chair across the table.

‘Are you hungry? Let’s get you some lunch, eh? It’s your favorite,’ he was saying to her.

Robert’s hand swept forward to the glass, and he had it for a moment, before it slipped through his fingers, onto his lap. He felt the cold chill of liquid and pulp seep over his thighs and then his head falling back.

The noises subsided and his sight faded to black.

‘Je dois parler au docteur Garcia. Please, urgently!’

Aaron’s cradled the back of Robert’s head with his fingers.

He’d put Doli down and now she was playing again near the door. Then he’d called the number
Chrissie had left him on the fridge door quickly, trying hard not to panic.

‘Come on, Robert! Come on!’

He breathed out with relief as he saw Robert open his eyes.

‘Where’s Doli?’

‘Robert! You’re alright, mate! You just passed out for a minute.’ Robert leaned forward and Aaron moved his hand, keeping it lightly on his shoulder, watching him as the doctor came online.

‘Yeah Umm. Robert Sugden is your patient. He has concussion and he just passed out… Yeah he’s come round again now… should I…? OK. OK we’ll expect you. Thanks.’

He put his phone down on the table.

‘She’s on her way.’ He looked at Robert. ‘You need to go back to bed. Can you stand?’

‘Where’s Doli?’ Robert repeated.

‘She’s there, look. She’s playing. She’s fine. Stand up, mate.’

Robert made an effort to stand while Aaron watched him, biting his lip, and then seeing him sway unsteadily he stepped forward, circled his arm around his back under his shoulders. The velvet gown slid under his grip, so frowning he moved his arm again, under the material, holding onto Robert’s skin, still slightly damp with sweat beneath his touch.

‘Put your arm over my shoulder.’

Robert’s arm rested heavily over his shoulder and Aaron steered him carefully to the stairs.

He felt Robert’s head turn to look at him and kept his gaze ahead of him.

They negotiated the stairs slowly, stopping and starting, Robert with a hand on the rail, and then finally Aaron supported him into the bedroom, helping him sit back on the bed, leaning up against the bed head.

He felt weird being in this private space, Chrissie’s robe hung on a hook behind the door, there was a dressing table with make-up and trinket boxes and a vague smell of her perfume in the air. The door to the en suite bathroom was half open.

Aaron glanced down at Robert, wanting to leave now. He needed to go down to Doli fast.

But Robert’s pajama trousers were soaked with orange juice and pulp.

‘You need to change those.’ He swallowed, feeling suddenly stupidly nervous. He looked about the room, until he saw the chest of drawers.

Robert nodded.

‘Second drawer down.’

Aaron opened the drawer. Inside there were boxer briefs, socks, T-shirts and pajamas and a tray with boxes, gold embossed with designer names, Armani, Tiffany, Gucci, Cartier, maybe cufflinks, watches, tie pins. At the back of the drawer his eyes rested on a plain, simply shaped stainless steel and black male vibrator. Aaron had never used one, but he knew what it was from the angle of the
curve. He knew the spot it was designed to reach. So did Chrissie use it with him? Or did Robert use it when he was alone, or picking up other lasses? Once again he wondered if he met up with lads. And yet…

He pulled out some pajama trousers and a T-shirt. Better if he had a T-shirt when the doctor arrived.

He placed them next to Robert.

‘I need to go down to Doli.’

‘Help me first.’

Aaron felt his neck suddenly start to color up, rising to his face.

‘You… you can manage.’

‘I can’t.’ Robert answered and Aaron closed his eyes. OK, so he’d have to do this. His breathing light, he reached his hands to the waistband of Robert’s pajamas and started to pull them down, looking away, but from the corner of his eyes he could still see the pale length of solid thigh, the blonde pubic hair, Robert’s cock resting against his leg. He tried not to think, to notice anything.

He looked up to Robert’s face and when he met his eyes Robert winked. Aaron blinked back at him, dropping his jaw with disbelief and stood back.

‘You jerk! I don’t believe you!’

Robert smirked.

‘No I need your help! Really. But I bet you’ve done this often enough eh? Picking up lads on your Friday nights off?’

‘Drop dead.’

He turned and started to walk out of the room.

‘Aaron! Aaron!’ Robert called after him, but Aaron didn’t care. He ran down to find Doli crying, feeling abandoned, and picked her up to comfort her, glad of her cuddles as he tried to calm her down, calm down himself. He took her back to the kitchen to resume lunch. Then he called Chrissie, to let her know that he’d called the doctor and why.

About fifteen minutes later the doctor arrived. Aaron answered the door with Doli in his arms, and showed her upstairs to Robert’s room. As he opened the door, he saw that Robert had managed to successfully change his clothes and he left them to it, taking Doli to her room for her afternoon nap.

Chrissie arrived before the doctor left.

They spoke in the hallway.

‘Il est pénible, mais il est pas grave. He’ll be OK. He just needs to sleep more. The healing process for the brain needs time, so I gave him a sedative and then let’s see. Call me if something happens again.’

‘Thank you doctor. And thanks to Aaron here for looking after him.’ Chrissie said. She lowered her
voice. ‘He’s not exactly an easy patient.’

Aaron stood with his arms folded and nodded. He found it hard to meet her eyes. The kiss had been overshadowed by the accident, but now, after this afternoon he felt agitated and stupidly guilty. But he hadn’t done anything wrong. It was Robert. Robert fucking Sugden again.

After he went to his room and lay down while Doli still napped. She usually slept for an hour and a half after lunch. Sometimes Aaron slept too, or worked out, doing exercises and then showering. He used to run, and he missed it now. He’d tried waking up to go running very early before the kids were up a couple of times, but had always worried in case he got back too late and Chrissie wouldn’t notice and then the kids would need him, so he’d abandoned that and taken to push-ups and crunches and lifting a set of small dumbbells that Ed had got for him before when they were still together.

Now as he lay on his bed he tried to sort his head out, seeing Robert’s wink and smirk, the feel of his flesh as he’d helped him to his room, his well-endowed body uncovered on the bed, the unexpected toy in Robert’s drawer. He tried to clear his mind, but an image of using the toy with him formed itself. He shook his head angrily.

He stood up quickly and went to take a shower.

His skin was on fire as he undressed and stepped under the stream of water, reaching for the soap. His cock was rigid and flushed dark, twitching at his touch. He felt vaguely sick with desire and disgusted at himself at the same time. He closed his eyes, leaning forward with one hand against the tiles and ran the soap around behind and over his balls and then up his shaft, letting it slip from his fingers so that it bounced and skidded over the shower floor. Gripping himself with his fingers and thumb, he tried to think about Matheo, his lithe muscular torso and smooth olive skin. He pulled himself fast, squeezing the foreskin up and over his swollen cockhead and back down again, feeling his heart accelerate. But his mind was slipping to the bedroom close by, to an image of Robert sleeping there, opening his eyes and turning onto his back, his pale skin adorned with constellations of freckles, his cock now, in Aaron’s mind, shining, veined and ridged, arching up from his body above heavy balls, his lips parted ready for Aaron’s kiss, his tongue rasping against Aaron’s.

Aaron screwed up his eyes and opening his mouth came over his fist, the hot creamy white cum settling on his fingers for a moment, before being washed away by the shower water pouring over him and disappearing onto the tiles and into the drain.

He was done with Sugden now, he decided. From now on he would just ignore him and keep his distance.

When he got out of the shower he wrapped a large towel around his waist and picked up his phone.

‘Hey!’ He said when Mat answered. ‘You err, you know I cancelled our dinner out, but well, Chrissie, my boss is home now for the rest of the day, so I reckon I can meet up after all, if you want I mean, if you’re still up for it? What do you think?’

He could hear Matheo laugh gently down the line.

‘Yeah, Aaron. I’d like that. What time?’

Aaron breathed out.
‘So I need to bring Josh home from school and give him and Doli some tea then I reckon seven or eight? Is that too early?’ He bit his lip.

‘No, no, perfect. Text me when you’re leaving.’

‘Yeah, so, see you later, then.’

When the call ended Aaron lay down back on the bed with a smile of relief.

Aaron waited outside the school, hands in the pockets of his coat. Chrissie had Doli, so he was alone for once. He watched the kids streaming out and waited, frowning as the numbers dwindled and still no sign of Josh. Eventually he walked into the entrance of the school, speaking to the security guard on the reception.

‘I’m here to pick up Joshua Sugden. He hasn’t come out yet.’

The security guard made a phone call and then after a few minutes, Josh appeared. His teacher was beside him with a hand on his shoulder. Aaron frowned as he looked at Josh’s face, which had a red bruise above his eye, and there was a small dressing around the palm of his left hand. He squatted down in front of him, seeing the sadness in his face, and pulled him into a hug.

‘Josh, mate! What happened?’

The teacher sighed.

‘So we had a bit of an incident at the end of the day.’ He said. ‘Josh cut himself with some scissors and then, I’m really sorry to say, he cut another student, too. Then the other student hit him.’

‘What?’ It sounded so unlike Josh.

Josh pulled away from Aaron’s hug.

‘Is my Dad alive?’

Aaron pulled in his chin.

‘Course he’s alive! What are you talking about, eh? He’s sleeping at home. He’s getting better and waiting to see you. What did you think?’

The teacher nodded.

‘He’s obviously still upset by the accident. I think his Mum and Dad should contact me. If they have time, if his Dad is well enough.’

‘OK. I’ll tell them, and thanks!’ Aaron said.

Back home, Aaron explained to Chrissie what the teacher had said. Checking her phone she saw missed calls from the teacher.

‘Oh well, he’ll be fine.’

She put on a film for Josh who lay on the sofa quietly. Aaron frowned. All through tea, Josh was
silent, hardly eating, even though Aaron had made him sausage and mash which he usually liked.

Later Aaron ran down the stairs, washed up and dressed in a change of clothes, smelling of aftershave. They would eat, like a proper date, and after go back to Mat’s and lie on the bed together and have sex, make love, taking their time. It was a start. Aaron wanted to get to know this lad with his warm brown eyes. He’d had enough now of being alone. He’d had enough of Robert Sugden, too, under his skin, throwing him off kilter.

Josh saw him, and Aaron saw his face fall and suddenly felt his heart take a turn in his chest.

‘Where are you going?’ Josh wailed.

‘Hey! Just a minute, mate. Come here.’

Aaron sat on the stairs and patted a step next to him. From the living room he could hear Chrissie on the phone and Lachlan playing video games without headphones, the sounds of gun warfare reaching them from a distance. Doli was already asleep, and Chrissie had said she’d put Josh to bed herself, after he’d gone.

Now in the quiet space, just the two of them, Josh climbed next to him and sat, placing a hand on his knee.

‘Where are you going?’ Josh asked again.

‘I’m going to see a new friend.’

‘Is he nice?’

‘Don’t know. I suppose I’m going to find out. He has nice eyes. I think, anyway.’

‘Blue eyes? Like yours, like my Dad’s, and mine?’

Aaron turned down the corners of his mouth, opening his hands.

‘Umm, no brown eyes. And actually, your Dad’s eyes are a bit green, too.’

Josh frowned. The bruise on his face was shining now. Aaron turned his face towards him.

‘Tell me about what happened mate? At school? If, if you want to.’ He asked softly.

He saw tears start in Josh’s eyes.

‘It was my fault!’

‘What, you started it, you mean?’

‘No, Daddy on the road. It was my fault!’

‘No, no, no! Josh! Come here. It wasn’t your fault. It was just an accident. Accidents happen sometimes.’

Josh was crying now.

Aaron held his bandaged hand.

‘So what happened, with the scissors?’
‘I was angry.’

‘What?’

Josh was quiet.

‘Josh, did you do it on purpose? Did you cut your hand on purpose?’

Josh nodded.

‘I thought my Daddy died.’ He cried.

‘Never do that! Never do that! Oh my God! Promise me Josh!’

Aaron wrapped his arms round Josh and held him close.

‘You’re Dad’s fine. He’s OK? Trust me! He’s strong, like a Dad should be. And he loves you, more than anything.’

He looked at his watch.

‘Tell you what. How about I don’t go after all. You and me, let’s build a castle.’

Robert stood quietly at the top of the stairs. He’d woken up hungry after the sedative and then seen Aaron call Josh to sit down so he’d waited. Now he turned and went back to bed, thinking about Aaron, placing his hand over his mouth. When he heard them coming up, he called out.

Aaron opened the door, his shoulders squared, his eyes cold.

‘Bring Josh to me, will you?’ Aaron nodded, calling behind him, turning to go.

‘Wait!’ Robert said. ‘Aaron… Sorry. For being a jerk. It’s… it’s a default setting of mine.’

Aaron paused, blinking, looking away.

‘Forget it.’

‘Can we just start again? Friends?’

Aaron scowled. He wasn’t ready to trust Robert, no matter what he’d said to Josh before. He’d meet Matheo later, after Josh was asleep, having called him to postpone the date. That was all he needed to think about now.

‘I’ll think about it.’ He said.

Josh streamed past his legs and into the room, into his father’s arms
Aaron Dingle

Chapter Summary

Aaron tries to work out where he stands with Matheo. After a surprise encounter at home, he is unable to fight the reality of his feelings for Robert. Robert has a secret

Chapter Notes

Don't be deceived by the first half of the chapter; it's all robron at the end ;)

Aaron’s knee was doing that thing.

It was Friday night and he was sat with Emile and Lucas and other friends of Emile, sipping his pint, trying not to look towards the door of the crowded night club in Le Marais.

Emile and Lucas sat with their fingers entwined on the table. Every so often as they talked, Emile would lean forward and press his lips against Lucas’s cheek in front of his ear, and the younger lad’s eyes would close and his lips would part in a smile.

Aaron took out his phone, checking if he had any messages and then put it away again quickly turning to Emile as he suddenly leaned forward to speak to him.

‘Aaron, mon chéri, do you want to earn some extra money? I have a job tomorrow. Some cars that need scrapping. I want someone to break them up for the spare parts. You can do that, non?’

Aaron nodded.

‘Yeah, I can, but I think I’ll be busy.’

‘Ah! Our infamous artist friend! Hasn’t he finished your portrait yet?’

Aaron blushed.

It had been after ten when he’d eventually met up with Matheo on the Wednesday before. They’d eaten a light meal together and finally gone back to the chilly studio and to Mat’s disheveled bed. It had been what Aaron wanted but once there he’d felt distracted. At the back of his mind was concern for Josh, worrying in case he woke with another nightmare. Robert would be out of it on sedatives and he realized that he didn’t have enough faith in Chrissie to be there for him. And it wasn’t just Josh on his mind - as Mat reached for him, Aaron remembered the feel of Robert’s damp skin as he held him, helping him upstairs that morning.

After a mutual blow job he’d told a surprised Mat that he needed to go back.

‘But I’ll see you on Friday, won’t I?’ Aaron had said, pulling on his sweater and straightening the arms as Mat regarded him from the bed with his brown eyes narrowed under lowered brows.
He’d turned down the corners of his mouth.

‘Sure. Let yourself out.’

Now he wondered if he’d blown it, and his leg was doing that thing. It was getting late.

Lucas was trying to persuade Emile to dance and Emile was having none of it.

He turned to Aaron.

‘You dance, eh? Make Lucas happy?’

‘Err, not on your life, mate.’

Then there were two hands on his shoulders, and looking up his heart jumped as he saw Matheo standing behind him, grinning and greeting the others, glancing down at his face with a wink.

‘I’ll dance,’ he said, addressing Lucas.

He slipped off his jacket and handed it to Aaron.

Lucas stood with a smile, teasing Emile with his hips as he pulled off his T-shirt, revealing a smooth muscular torso.

As the two men walked to the dance floor, Matheo said something, leaning close to Lucas’s ear and, raising a hand, touched his bare shoulder. Aaron glanced at Emile who was chatting now with another friend, one arm thrown idly across the back of the seat, a bottle of beer in his other hand. He looked back at his own drink and waited, avoiding looking at the dance floor again. Instead he thought about Josh. And Robert.

On Thursday morning, Josh had slept untypically late.

‘He could stay home,’ Aaron had suggested to Chrissie as she checked over her appointments before leaving for work.

‘Why?’

‘Just... after everything that happened and what went down at school yesterday.’

Chrissie had hesitated.

‘So, Josh can stay?’ Aaron had asked again quietly.

‘I suppose so. It’s you looking after him, after all.’

So instead of school, in the morning Josh played quietly alongside Doli in the living area. Later he’d vanished and Aaron had searched the house with a frown, calling quietly, until he noticed the door to Robert and Chrissie’s bedroom open, and hesitating, with a soft knock, he’d opened it wider to look inside.

The blinds were drawn, but as his eyes adjusted to the dim light he could see Josh was in bed lying next to his father, their two blonde heads turned to each other, eyes open. Robert had a hand on his son’s cheek, his eyes shining. They were talking in low voices and, as Aaron watched, Robert kissed Josh’s forehead.
He'd turned to leave, but Robert had already noticed him.

‘Any chance of some lunch?’ He’d asked, his voice still thick with sleep.

Aaron had nodded.

‘I’ll bring some up.’

Mat was back, squeezing in next to Aaron, his thigh knocking against his. He was laughing, smelling strongly of sweat after dancing, and Aaron shuffled to make space for him. Lucas rejoined Emile who placed a hand on his glistening shoulder and then turned to Matheo.

‘Didn’t you finish your masterpiece, yet, eh? I need Aaron’s mechanical skills tomorrow.’

‘Il est pas un problème pour moi,’ Mat shrugged. ‘I have other work to do, anyway. Some graphic design project. I have to pay rent, non?’

‘Don’t people buy your paintings, then?’ Emile laughed.

‘Sure.’ He looked at Lucas. ‘Boyfriends, for example. You want me to paint Lucas?’

Emile laughed again. ‘No thanks.’ He winked, leaning to kiss Lucas’s neck.

Aaron felt weird but then Mat turned to him, slipping an arm around his shoulder.

‘Let’s go, eh? If we’re not together tomorrow, let’s make the most of the night. You’ll stay?’

It was what Aaron had wanted, to spend a night together, like real boyfriends. Is that what they were then? Mat seemed to blow so hot and cold but maybe he was just upset with him after he’d left so early on Wednesday. Maybe this had been his way of dealing with it.

Back at the apartment Matheo unlocked the door and let them in. He poured them each a glass of Cognac.

‘Wednesday, I err, had to go you know....,’ Aaron started to explain.

Mat shook his head and smiled.

‘Aaron. I like you, a lot,’ he said quietly.

He pulled his body close, moving in for a kiss.

Later, when they entered the bedroom and undressed, Matheo moved Aaron around so that he was behind him again. Aaron wanted to turn over, he wanted to watch Matheo’s face, but as he tried to turn Matheo steered him back to the same position.

‘Like this,’ he said gently.

Later, lying side by side, Aaron had reached for Mat’s thighs, moving his hands between them and stroked gently up behind his balls, searching with his fingers, feeling his mouth dry and his pulse race in anticipation.

Matheo held his wrist.
‘Je ne fais pas ça,’ he said softly. ‘Let me do this instead.’

He moved down the bed, placing his tongue and lips around Aaron’s pulsing cock head. Aaron lowered his hands over his hair, panting. Suddenly he was thinking of Robert’s hair, the soft short blonde hairs above the pale back of his neck, wondering what they would feel like to his fingertips. He thought of Robert’s mouth, his full lips, doing this. Mat moved his mouth expertly and Aaron came hard, blinking at the ceiling.

In the morning he left early to take the metro, following Emile’s directions to the yard. It felt good to be in overalls, to be outside, doing a trade he knew well. He was there all day. His head felt sorted when he’d done. Mat had said they’d meet next weekend. They were fine - They were boyfriends, weren’t they? It would all be fine.

‘You’re late!’

Robert glared at him, standing up from where he’d been sitting on the sofa next to Chrissie in the living room, wearing a T-shirt and cardigan over pajama trousers.

Aaron smelt of outdoors and ozone and machine oil. His face glowed from being in the fresh autumn air all day and his eyes were a deeper blue than ever.

As Robert walked towards him, he turned down the corners of his mouth, shrugging off his black coat, hanging it on the coat stand. Chrissie got up and carried an empty wine glass into the kitchen.

‘So where were you?’

‘It’s nothing to do with you!’ Aaron flashed back.

‘Out with the new boyfriend, were you?’

Aaron blinked back at him in confusion, wondering how he knew, what he knew.

‘Why? Jealous are you?’ He risked, looking back towards the kitchen.

He saw the startled look in Robert’s eyes, the blue green iris surrounded by a black halo suddenly growing, and his jaw clench.

‘I’m going up.’ He turned and, heart racing, went upstairs.

Monday, Robert was still home convalescing.

Chrissie had agreed with Aaron to take Josh to a doctor’s appointment. Since Doli was due a routine check too, she asked Aaron to go with them, so he could help with the children and then drop Josh back to school afterwards.

‘And Robert’s so much better, I’m sure he can survive on his own for a few hours.’

Waiting for the doctor, Josh sat with his hand tucked in Aaron’s.

‘You’re alright mate, just remember to tell him if there’s anything on your mind. You can tell
doctors anything, you know,’ Aaron had said.

When he came out he was smiling, and Aaron smiled back at him, exhaling. He must be okay then.

‘So he’s fine,’ Chrissie related what the doctor had said. ‘Just a little underweight. So before we go back to school let’s get some lunch at McDonald’s. That usually guarantees a good appetite.’

Afterwards, Aaron dropped Josh to school and Doli fell asleep in the fresh air on the way home.

At the apartment he fished for his keys in his pocket and steered Doli’s buggy in through the door. He straightened up sharply at the sound of voices from the living area.

‘Lucie, you need to go now,’ Robert was saying.

All of a sudden, a young woman walked into the entrance hall. She had long black hair and dark eye liner around her eyes. She was dressed in knee length boots and a short black skirt exposing a length of thigh, with a white blouse and jacket.

Robert followed behind her in his dressing gown, for once tied at the waist over his pajamas.

‘Hi,’ she said to Aaron, who blinked back at her. ‘I heard about you, the au pair, non?’

Before Aaron could respond, she saw Doli and bent down to look at her more closely.

‘Don’t wake her up,’ Aaron said quickly.

‘Oh mon dieu, elle est adorable, elle est si jolie. Mais elle ne te ressemble pas. She doesn’t look like you.’ She turned to Robert.

‘No,’ Robert agreed. ‘She looks like her mother.’

Lucie stood up slowly.

‘Of course.’

He handed her a coat from the rack and a black business satchel bag.

She turned then, and leaning up, kissed his cheek.

‘Bye, Robert.’

Then she looked at Aaron. ‘Au revoir.’

And she was gone.

Aaron could feel himself shaking with anger. He ran a hand over his face, avoiding Robert’s eyes, and bent down to pick Doli up, then stood again, holding her against his quickly beating heart.

‘It’s not what you think,’ Robert said.

‘And what’s that?’ Aaron answered, his breath coming short.

He walked up the stairs on his way to the nursery to put Doli down to sleep for her nap. He
watched her turn her face sideways and open her eyes, for a moment her eyelids fluttering and her lips moving before she subsided into deep sleep again.

When he came out, closing the door, Robert was in the hallway.

‘She’s from the office. She brought me some paper work. I can show you if you want. I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t do that.’

‘If you say so.’

‘Why won’t you believe me?’ Robert stepped closer putting a hand on Aaron’s shoulder.

Aaron was still shaking he realized, and now suddenly he felt his chest constrict.

‘Aaron?’ Robert said.

Robert was too close, and yes, Aaron was still shaking, only now he didn’t know why.

And all at once their mouths collided.

Robert was pushing Aaron up against the wall, his whole body pressed forward against him, his hands running up from his shoulders to his face. Their teeth and tongues pushed messily against each other, the force of the kiss bruising their lips, their breathing loud and unsteady. Aaron thought they’d have to stop to get their breath if nothing else, but the kiss went on.

He lifted his hands to Robert’s gown and then under it, feeling the heat of Robert’s moist skin on his back. He couldn’t think, he didn’t want to think. All he knew was that Robert’s body in motion against him, wanted him and he couldn’t stop this, didn’t want this to stop; not this time.

He shifted his hands to the collar of Robert’s gown and pushed it off over his shoulders, so that it fell to the floor. He could smell him, and see the pale expanse of his freckled shoulders as they continued to kiss.

He placed his fingers lightly on his back, moving down inside the hem of his pajamas so that all at once he was stroking over the solid curve of his arse, then grabbing a fistful of arse cheek, pulling him tighter against him at the hips and grinding. Robert pulled back, panting, eyes black. For a moment Aaron wondered if he’d gone too far but then Robert glanced towards his bedroom door and started to pull at Aaron, but Aaron curled his fingers round his wrists instead.

‘No, my room!’ he half whispered.

He steered Robert towards his room where he rolled with him down onto the bed, and pulled his sweater off over his head, lying over him, between his thighs, still in his jeans, holding his weight up from his knees and his arms resting on his knuckles either side of him. Then he kissed him again, this time setting up a rhythm with his mouth, his whole body moving into the kiss.

Leaning back, he put his weight on one arm while with the other he started to tug at the waistband of Robert’s pajamas, pulling them down to his knees, revealing his hard long leaking cock and length of pale thigh.

‘Oh God, you’re amazing.’ He wasn’t sure if he said it aloud or said it in his head.

He reached up and unfastened the button and zip on his jeans, using one hand to push them down each side to below his hips, releasing his own throbbing flushed cock. He looked into Robert’s eyes. Robert’s whole body was trembling as he looked back at him. His lips were parted and his
eyelids lowered, but there was something else, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

Aaron slowed down and kissed him briefly, more gently now, then asked.

‘Robert? What is it?’

‘I... I haven’t… with a man… before.’

Aaron looked back into his eyes.

‘It’s okay. I know,’ he said softly.

‘How?’

‘I just knew.’

Aaron kissed him again, brushing his lips more lightly over Robert’s.

You’re beautiful Aaron thought.

‘We can stop.’

‘No. I want this. I want… you.’

Aaron nodded.

He leaned his body down, lowering his hips, until his cock was resting against Robert’s and heard Robert gasp at the intimate touch between them.

He looked back into his eyes and when Robert smiled, he smiled back too, breathing out with relief.

He started to move, clenching his bum, rocking his hips forward, creating friction as their hard lengths rubbed against each other, the silky skin touching and sliding at the movement. Then he leaned further, resting his body against Robert’s up to the base of their rib cages, sealing their bodies together, so the space between them was so tight. He changed up the angle slightly and moved faster, listening to Robert moan now.

Robert’s hands were holding his biceps, his fingers pressing into his flesh harder and harder as they moved together.

And then Aaron couldn’t hold it any longer. He lifted himself and, chin down, with one hand, he wrapped his fingers around both their shafts together, working them against each other and then felt Robert’s hand over his, his slender fingers against his cock and Robert’s cock. It was too much, too sweet. He felt Robert’s body stiffen and he knew he was coming, mouth open, eyes wide looking at him, not losing him from his sight for a second. Aaron was coming too, so high and fast it felt like falling off the earth, looking back at Robert below him, not looking away either, shocked to be sharing this. Even as he started to come down he kept stroking them both through the waves, and they kept eye contact, until they were spent.

Their fingers and stomachs were covered in their mingled sticky cum.

Robert reached up his other hand to Aaron’s face and pulled him down to kiss him again, and again, soft grateful kisses, still panting into his mouth as his breathing came down.

The kisses made Aaron smile. Then he shuffled back, rubbing the arm that had carried most of the
weight, still shaking all over.

‘You okay?’ He asked.

‘Yeah. Yeah.’

Aaron looked around the room, reality hitting, suddenly conscious where they were, who they were.

‘We shouldn’t…,’ he started to say.

Robert raised a finger to his mouth to silence him.

‘Friday. Friday night,’ Robert said. ‘Spend it with me.’

He voice was hoarse.

Aaron nodded.

‘Alright - Friday night.’

Robert left the room to go and shower in his own bathroom and Aaron did the same, turning up the baby monitor first in his room, just in case Doli woke.

When Robert came out of the shower with a towel wrapped round his waist, he checked the door, and then opened the safe.

Inside was a flat yellow parcel that had arrived that day. On the front it was addressed to Aaron Roberts. Robert had signed for it saying he was Aaron. Now he opened it again, turning over the deep red brand new British passport inside with Aaron’s photo, looking a little younger than he did now, maybe a couple of years, but the name wasn’t Aaron Roberts. It was Liam Bradshaw. A good enough Yorkshire name, something he might have chosen himself if he’d been in charge of getting a fake passport.

Next to it was a note. Robert had read it over and over already. Now he read it one more time.

Aaron, here’s what you wanted. The family’s fine. Your Mum misses you, but she’s alright and the pub’s making her money, so you don’t need to worry about her. The garage is fine. Debbie’s taken over most of the business now Sarah’s better and Jack’s in school. Let us know if you need anything else and look after yourself. Cain.

Robert folded the parcel up again and put it back once more in the safe.

‘So Aaron Dingle. Nice to meet you again,’ he breathed.
Robert and Aaron meet up for sex in an apartment in La Marais. Aaron gets a shock.

Aaron put the six pack down on the floor and fumbled for the key.

Behind him Robert stood, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, shifting on his feet impatiently, looking from left to right down the corridor. They’d met just outside the building. Robert had called him after he’d parked his Porsche in an underground car park nearby, asking for directions.

Earlier in the week, Robert had said he had a place for them to meet, but then he’d seen the expression on Aaron’s face.

‘I thought you were okay with this? Did you change your mind?’

‘No. Did you?’

How could Aaron say he didn’t want to meet somewhere Robert went with anyone else?

‘Look. I’ll find us a place, alright?’

So he’d called Emile. He’d come up good with an apartment of a friend who was out of town for a few weeks.

‘You can’t tell anyone though,’ Aaron had said.

Now, as he slid the key into the lock, he heard Robert’s phone vibrate. Turning for a moment, he waited, watching his face as he typed a quick message on the key pad. Then Robert switched the phone off and lifted it, showing him the blank screen.

‘It’s just you and me,’ he said.

The door opened, and they went inside.

‘I need to pick up Josh.’ Aaron had said the Monday before. Afterwards, after showering, after getting Doli up when she woke, he’d looked out of the window at the grey cloudy sky.

‘It’s still early.’

Aaron knew Robert was searching his face, but he couldn’t return his gaze. Not yet. Not without giving too much away.

He’d held Doli in his arms like a human shield.

‘I just need to walk a bit.’
‘It’s going to rain.’

He hadn’t been sure if it was amusement he could hear in Robert’s voice.

From the corner of his eyes he could see Robert’s body. He’d dressed for the first time in almost a week, wearing a grey sweater and jeans, his hair soft from the shower. He’d smelt of some aromatic soap or other and of himself. When Aaron closed his eyes, all he could see was an image of him lying on the bed beneath him, his pale skin glowing, his smooth chest rising and falling. It was so wrong, but he already wanted more.

‘Okay.’ Robert had said. ‘I’ll take care of Doli. You go for your walk, then.’

He’d reached his arms forward to take his daughter, wrinkling his eyes at her face, and their hands had touched so that Aaron couldn’t help himself from glancing up at him at last.

Robert’s blue green eyes had looked back at him intently.

‘I’m not sorry,’ he’d said, his voice low. ‘It was worth it.’

Outside Aaron had pulled the hood up on his coat and walked.

He’d still felt high from the afterglow. Robert’s body had turned him on so much he couldn’t get his head round it. For a while all he’d been able to do was replay what had happened, frame by frame, rolling his eyes, trying to fight back the smile that kept forcing itself onto his face. His mind had swept back again and again to his climax, coming together, to Robert’s cock with a full hard on, the size, the length, flushed and leaking. He’d drawn his breath, remembering the feel of grinding together, the hard length against his stomach, between his fingers, Robert’s fingers on his hand and on their cocks too, the noises he’d made from his throat. And Robert’s eyes, the way he’d unswervingly shared his climax, as if he wanted Aaron to know it was because of him, just him.

When Aaron looked up, he realized he’d almost walked to the Trocadero gardens already. Robert had been right, a light drizzle had started, but he’d hardly noticed. He’d pushed his hands deeper in his pockets.

So many questions.

Robert had said that it was his first time with a man. He’d even needed Aaron’s reassurance. So why now? Why had he chosen him? Was he bi? Or was Aaron a novelty? Robert just looking for adventure? But it hadn’t felt like that. It hadn’t felt like that at all. He thought about the vibrator he’d seen in the drawer and rolled his eyes. So he must know where to find his G spot at least, even if he’d never been with a man before. The thought of Robert’s G spot suddenly had his legs go weak and the heat pooling in his groin all over again.

He’d looked around then, chic Parisians in black raincoats were opening umbrellas.

He’d thought about the girl from the office, at the apartment and the kiss on Robert’s cheek. The girl he’d seen Robert with that night in La Marais had been blonde.

And then he’d thought of Chrissie.

He’d pushed the thought away. If he thought about her, even for a moment, he would have to draw a line.
He didn’t want to draw a line.

He’d reached the bridge and stood, looking over the Seine, thinking about the Friday night to come.

After a moment he’d looked at his watch, if he didn’t turn back, he’d be late to collect Josh from school. No, he wasn’t going to think about this he decided, not until after Friday. Then he could call it all off, or Robert would anyway, and they’d go back to the way they were before.

It was an attic apartment. In the bedroom, there was a double bed covered with a white duvet under the flatter part of the roof, then a sloping ceiling over a painted wooden floor which was spread with a Persian rug. There was a small low table with a kettle and mugs in the corner. Above the bed there was a skylight window, the blind rolled back, so lying on the bed you could look up and see the stars over Paris.

‘Do for you?’ Aaron asked letting his eyes glance sideways at Robert’s face.

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Robert’s tongue flickered momentarily over his lips. Then he walked out of the room again. Aaron stood, holding the beers, listening. He could hear him opening and closing cupboards and then Robert came back in, his arms full of folded linen.

‘Give me a hand, will you?’

He started to strip the bed. Aaron put the beers down on the coffee table, and moved forward to help, holding the corners of a clean white sheet while Robert held the other side, tucking them down over the mattress. He wondered how often Robert had done this before.

And then he remembered Robert had never done this before, and caught his breath, watching his body as he leaned over the bed.

On the Tuesday Robert had gone to the hospital for a final check-up after the concussion. Aaron had picked up Josh from school and taken him to the barbers for a haircut. It was the first time he was getting it cut professionally in a proper man’s salon. Before Chrissie had done it herself in the bathroom at home.

Aaron could see from his eyes how nervous he was.

‘Look, mate. I’m going to have my hair cut too,’ Aaron had said. ‘I’ll go first and you watch.’

The barber was Aaron’s regular hairdresser. Originally from the Philippines, he was called Jeffrey. He washed Aaron’s hair, using shampoo to get rid of the gel while Josh looked on, looking somber.

‘Aaron, oh my God! He’s so sweet! He’s not yours?’

Aaron rolled his eyes.

‘Well obviously. That’s never going to happen, is it?’

‘Why not? Lots of gay men have children now you know.’

‘Well not me.’
‘No, no, no! Don’t limit yourself like that, dear. You never know what’s round the corner.’

Josh lingered nearby watching, biting his lips as Jeffrey started to cut Aaron’s hair using sharp silver scissors.

‘Come and sit next to me,’ Aaron said stretching out his hand. When Josh took his hand Aaron could feel the damp sweat of his palm. ‘It’s fine. It doesn’t hurt.’

When Jeffrey took out the electric trimmer and worked down around the sides of Aaron’s head, Josh’s eyes grew wide again.

After it was over, and his beard was trimmed too, Aaron rubbed a hand across the razor short hair and the barber reapplied gel to the top.

‘Gorgeous. So who’s the lucky man?’ Jeffrey had asked, then turned to Josh.

‘Now then my angel with angel hair. Let’s start.’

Josh reached out his fingers to Aaron, but from the half smile on his face, Aaron knew he was going to be alright.

‘I want it like my Dad’s,’ he told Aaron and Aaron nodded.

When they got home, Chrissie and Robert had stood, admiring Josh’s new look.

‘Wow!’ Robert had said.

Aaron, glancing up, had seen Robert looking straight at him, and blushed.

‘Sit down, will ya?’

Robert was sitting on the end of the bed, still in his leather jacket, one hand back in his pocket, the other holding the open beer can that Aaron had just handed him.

Aaron hovered. The enormity of what they were both doing there started to hit him. Robert was bad news. He was arrogant and selfish, and Aaron knew he’d be a fool to trust him. He knew this was dangerous. But it wouldn’t stop him, would it?

Robert took his hand out of his pocket and reached into the left inside of his jacket. He pulled out a packet of condoms and leaning backwards threw them on the bed behind him. Aaron felt his groin ignite and suddenly he was shaking. He’d thought maybe, but he hadn’t been sure. Now he knew they were going to take this to the next level. That that was what Robert wanted. Even though this was something he’d never done before. That Aaron would be his first like that.

‘So are you going to stand there all night?’ Robert asked.

‘Uh, no.’

Their thighs touched for a moment as he sat.

He took a gulp of beer and looked down until Robert reached out his hand and took the can firmly from his fingers, leaning forward and placing it down on the floor with his own.

Then he turned Aaron towards him, and moved a hand up to his face, his eyes on Aaron’s lips.
Aaron swallowed, looking back at Robert’s glittering pale eyes and then his mouth. His heart was hurtling at a crazy pace.

And then Robert’s mouth was on his and they were kissing, hungrily. Aaron felt Robert’s mouth opening hot and sweet against him, his tongue pushing against his own. He raised his hands to the front of Robert’s shirt, and held on, touching him through the material.

Aaron had called Matheo.

‘I was just thinking about you. I’m working on your painting right now, I have your photos in front of me.’

He’d forgotten about the photos.

‘Let’s not go to the club tonight. Let’s go somewhere else. Just you and me.’

‘Mat, yeah, sorry, about that… I can’t make it, mate.’ He hated lying. He was glad he was doing this on the phone and not face to face, knowing his eyes would give him away.

‘You’re standing me up?’

‘No, well, yes, but not exactly. I have to do something with …,’ he cast about for the right wording, but there was no right wording for this, ‘I’m busy with the family.’ It was only half a lie, but he still felt bad.

‘Okay then. So I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll help you relax after your hard work, eh?’

Aaron couldn’t think as far ahead as tomorrow. He agreed and ended the call feeling a mixture of guilt and relief.

They pushed each other’s jackets off, mouths still locked. Robert reached his hands to the hem line of Aaron’s black sweater but Aaron pulled back.

‘What? Is something wrong?’

Robert’s eyes were blown wide with hunger. His voice was softer than Aaron had heard before, he was panting, his body pushing forward as they sat.

‘Nothing, nothing. Just, uh, slow down.’ Aaron managed to say.

Robert nodded, showing he understood and Aaron smiled back at him. He leaned forward again, and this time he was the one kissing, but more slowly, this time his lips, his tongue. He reached his hands up and started to undo the buttons of Robert’s shirt, one by one, opening the material to expose Robert’s chest.

He curled a finger and raised it, stroking up over Robert’s nipple. Then stroked his tongue back into Robert’s mouth, hearing the noises start in his throat.

Looking down he could see the bulge in Robert’s jeans.

Robert raised a hand to his belt and started to unfasten it.
‘Strip!’ He said, his voice like gravel.

Both of them stood and undressed rapidly, eyes fixed on each other, dropping their clothes on the painted wooden floor, before lying back on the bed again side by side, naked.

Aaron had to hold himself back now.

They peppered shorter kisses against each other’s open mouths, until Robert reached his hand to Aaron’s cock. He wrapped his fingers around him and Aaron closed his eyes with a groan, moving his hips as Robert started to fist him.

When he opened his eyes again he could see the smirk on his face. Stupid smug bastard.

Aaron reached for him in return, and saw Robert’s wet lips open, his eyes turning darker and darker at Aaron’s touch.

And then Robert was moving, shuffling down the bed, and his mouth was kissing over Aaron’s stomach, his fingertips circling over his hips, and with a moan, his tongue was lapping up over his balls, onto his shaft, up to his cock head. Aaron’s hands were in his blonde hair, and his eyes were looking up at through the skylight at the stars.

Robert took just his heavy bellend into his mouth. Aaron could feel himself throbbing as he rested against the flat of his tongue. He thought about being the first cock Robert had tasted like this and felt his shaft thicken more as another wave of heat pulsed upwards along his length. He knew Robert would feel each movement in his mouth. As Robert’s tongue explored over his tip, then under the edge of his cock head, Aaron’s chest rose and fell. Robert ran his tongue up over the seam of skin to his slit, still exploring, as if he wanted to learn the shape and feel of Aaron’s cock, set it to memory. Then all at once he pulled back and Aaron felt the cold air against his wet flesh, gasping he raised his neck to see Robert running his eyes over his cock, wetting his lips.

‘Robert!’ He whispered, wanting his mouth back.

He let his eyes sweep over Robert’s body, his towering cock rising between his legs as he knelt.

Robert nodded back.

‘Wait a moment.’ He murmured.

With a shock he felt Robert’s hands pushing his thighs further apart and fingers reaching between his arse cheeks, moving until they found his entrance. Robert’s face was rapt, his tongue between his lips, watching what he was doing. Aaron shuffled his thighs wider, helping him. He pressed against Aaron’s rim with his middle finger, then moved his finger up to his mouth and spat on it before moving it back again. He worked with gentle pressure until his finger slipped inside the tight ring of muscle.

Without lube, even Robert’s finger felt like a huge intrusion. Robert pushed in further until he was buried up to the knuckle, searching with the fingertip.

‘Is this OK?’ Robert whispered. Aaron nodded blowing out through his lips.

‘Tell me where, then.’

When Robert’s finger found the nerves of his prostrate, Aaron blinked and nodded.

‘How?’
‘Yeah, careful, like that!’ Aaron whispered letting his head fall back, closing his eyes.

Robert took Aaron’s thick cock back in his mouth again, this time all the way to the base, still with his finger in place. He started to move his mouth over him.

‘Wait, Robert, wait! I’ll come.’

‘That’s the idea, isn’t it? You can. We’re here a while yet.’

So Aaron surrendered, and he was coming, a scorching sweet climax. He could feel his arse clench in waves around Robert’s finger. Robert released his cock from his mouth and used his other hand to stroke his shaft through, watching his cum spray in bursts from his cock head and spill onto his stomach.

Robert still kneeling between his thighs, took his own cock in his fist and with fast noisy strokes, his brow furrowed, he came too, leaning forwards, deliberately spilling his cum over Aaron’s stomach so that it mixed with his. He trailed a finger through it, tracing where it had landed in the creases of his scars.

His scars. Aaron couldn’t even think about that now.

Panting, he watched the direction of Robert’s eyes until Robert raised them back to him, meeting his own.

His eyes moved back to Aaron’s lips and then holding himself on his knuckles he leaned down and kissed him, humming again from his throat.

‘I’ll get a towel,’ he said in a low voice, smiling.

Aaron watched him as he stood and stretched, then walked from the room in search of towels. His body was still floating after his climax. He wondered how he was ever going to get over this.

Robert came back and threw a towel at him, then moved to the coffee table and picked up a couple of fresh cans of beer, placing one next to Aaron and opening the other himself, then he moved back onto the bed, knocking against Aaron’s shoulder as he sat next to him where he’d pulled himself up against the bedhead.

They sat in silence for a moment. Aaron letting his eyes glide sideways, over Robert’s body, as he gulped at his beer.

He wanted to ask questions. About Robert, about what this was, but he didn’t know how to start. He wanted to keep this Robert, relaxed and playful, a while longer.

‘So what would you like to do, now?’ He asked quietly.

Robert didn’t answer with words. Instead he put his beer down and answered with another long kiss, hand on Aaron's face, moving his mouth down to his neck and back again. The kiss lasted long enough for Aaron to feel his cock begin to stir once more, even so soon. Robert gently took Aaron’s beer away again, and held Aaron’s hand, steering it to his thighs, pulling it up between them, behind his balls.

Aaron felt his heart accelerating all over again.

‘You want to fuck?’ he whispered. ‘You want… me? You’re sure?’
Robert wrinkled up his eyes in a smile.

‘I want you,’ he answered. ‘I’m sure.’

Aaron nodded. Then Robert rolled onto his stomach and spoke again, eyes narrowed.

‘You like starting fires don’t you, Aaron? Well start one with me.’

For a moment Aaron missed it, the reference. And then his breathing stopped for a moment. The arson charge, running away, coming to France. It wasn’t possible. He couldn’t know. No one knew, only his Mum, Adam, Cain, Ed. It had been in the papers, but how?

Robert was watching his face.

‘What’s up?’ he asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘You sure?’

He knew he couldn’t trust Robert. He knew it. But he’d let this happen anyway. Robert’s eyes were still searching his face.

‘You know.’ He said quietly.

‘I know everything about you, Aaron Dingle.’
Stars

Chapter Summary

Aaron is upset when he thinks Robert is threatening him, after they go out to eat something and bump into some familiar faces. A first time for Robert, but before Robert goes home he gets a devastating message from Chrissie on the phone.

Chapter Notes

blood and a bit of violence cw

Aaron knew a threat when he heard one.

Like what was that?... *fuck me... but don't tell or else?* As if Aaron would have told anyway?

‘You know nothing about me, nothing! You got me wrong, mate, all wrong!’

And then he was moving off the bed almost falling, feeling his bare feet on the painted wooden floor in the attic room. Only half aware of what he was doing, he cast about for his clothes and started to pull them on rapidly, noticing that he was trembling all over, fumbling with his fastenings, reaching out to touch the wall just to remain standing. He could hear Robert repeat his name, an edge of panic in his voice, but it was as if he were far away, another time and place.

‘Aaron, Aaron, Aaron!’

His stomach felt nauseous. Robert could turn him in, and he would go to prison.

But it wasn’t that.

They’d done stuff. Together. His body was still hot from the feel of his mouth, his tongue, from his touch inside. All the time Robert must have been secretly laughing at him. He’d got one over him. He’d used him. He was disgusting. And Aaron had let himself be taken in so completely. He thrust his hand in the pocket of his jeans and found his phone, holding on to it like a life line, his mind casting about. There must be someone he could call. Someone.

He stumbled towards the door, but Robert was up now, two hands holding onto his arms either side of him.

‘Aaron!’ he said again.

And Aaron did what he knew best. Reaching up he snatched at Robert’s right elbow, pushing it impossibly high so that Robert suddenly twisted and Aaron grabbed his shoulder and turned him against the wall, jerking his right arm up behind him, while with his other hand he held the back of his head, fingers in his blonde hair for the second time that evening, but this time he rammed his face hard and fast against the wall, hearing the dull crunch as his forehead and nose collided against the plaster.
He gritted his teeth, panting, fighting the urge to keep on, knowing how dangerous this was, that Robert had just recovered from concussion.

Adrenaline coursed through him.

Robert’s body was motionless. Still holding his arm in a lock, Aaron pressed his other hand against the bare skin of his neck and turned his head to check if he was conscious. As Robert’s face came into profile, he saw the trail of blood from his nostrils and running from his forehead over his eye. Robert blinked, glancing quickly round at him, his tongue running over his lips.

‘Aaron, I’m sorry. I should have said before.’

‘Shut up!’

He pushed his face back. He couldn’t have Robert look at him now. His eyes were stinging. He bit down hard on his lower lip.

‘How long have you known?’

‘Since Monday.’

‘How?’

‘I have connections.’

‘So other people can find out, too?’

‘No, I swear. No one else knows.’

‘You were going to shop me! You were using this against me, in case I told Chrissie.’

‘No! I trust you. I trust you with my own kids for God’s sake. Do you think I’d do that if I had any doubt?’

‘Then why? Why tell me now?’

Robert was silent. Aaron closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. He should just leave now. Leave and not come back. If he was smart enough Robert wouldn’t find him. All this would become just another nightmare to forget. And then he felt Robert’s back move under his hand as his chest rose and fell with some internal struggle.

‘Because… because … we were going to … I wanted you to know first. I wanted to be honest with you about it before… because it mattered, OK?’

Aaron released his arm lock suddenly, standing back and Robert turned slowly, blood still trickling from his nose, over his lips.

‘It mattered.’ He said again.

Aaron didn’t want to look in his eyes. He walked backwards until his legs hit the bed and he sat down, wrapping his arms around himself. He couldn’t hide the fact that he was crying now. It was the physical intimacy that had done it. It hadn’t felt this way with Mat. With Robert it had felt so close.

‘How could it matter? It’s just sex to you. I’m not the only one.’
Robert ignored his words, instead sitting down next to him, his bare thigh pressing against Aaron’s. He reached an arm around his back.

‘Don’t.’ Aaron managed to say. But Robert kept his arm there.

‘I get it. You think you’re alone.’ Robert said. ‘But you can trust me, too. You’ve got me now. I mean it.’

Aaron struggled harder with his tears. He’d felt so alone for so long, just trying to keep it together, and Robert knew. Robert saw him, understood him in a way no one had since he’d left home. He rolled his eyes with a grimace, wiping his sleeve over his nose and mouth.

‘Maybe that’s worse.’ He said

Robert attempted a laugh.

‘Thanks.’

Aaron glanced at him. The blood was starting to dry around his nose, above his eyebrow.

‘You need to wash your face.’

‘I will. In a minute. When I know you’re OK.’

Aaron sat in silence. He could feel himself being pulled back under Robert’s influence. Start a fire with me he’d said.

‘Is it me? Or all blokes?’ He asked suddenly, looking at Robert’s face, watching him as his eyes flickered in response to the question.

‘Well not all blokes. I hope. But yeah, not just you.’

‘So why didn’t you? Before?’

‘Well, I almost … ,’ he answered, and then he stopped. ‘Can we talk about that later?’

It was Robert’s turn to retreat, standing up, finding his clothes, pulling on his boxer briefs. He stood with his jeans in his hands.

‘Look. Can we just start this evening over again? I don’t know about you, but I haven’t eaten all day. How about we go out, grab a take away and then come back and watch some sport or something. After that, if you want, I’ll go.’

Aaron felt too exhausted to think, but getting out of there seemed like a good idea.

He watched as Robert left the room and heard the tap running in the bathroom.

When they spilled out onto the noisy cobblestone street in La Marais, the place was crowded with club and restaurant goers and tourists. They weren’t far from Emile’s. Aaron knew his way around and he walked purposefully. Robert by his side had his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, his face still shining and slightly swollen from his run in with the wall.

Aaron came to a halt in front of a hot dog stand.
‘There’s falafel too, down the street, if you prefer, or this?’

Robert shrugged.

‘Well, it wasn’t exactly what I imagined eating. But it’ll do.’

They bought two hotdogs each, with mustard and ketchup and onions. And rather than taking them back, they ate them there on the street. Robert stood close to him. Aaron could see blokes looking him up and down, checking him out, and then both of them. He realized they probably thought they were a couple and glanced at Robert’s face, wondering if he’d noticed too, and if he had, whether he cared, being seen out in public with the male au pair. Robert was so full of contradictions it did his head in, just thinking about it.

Having ravenously finished the hot dogs, Robert wiped his fingers on a paper tissue, and then he fished out his phone and checked over his messages, typing rapidly. Aaron guessed it was Chrissie he was writing to. He thought about Josh and Doli, their faces in sleep, and suddenly stupidly missed them. He was risking so much here, but Robert was risking more. But for Robert this was a lifestyle, wasn’t it?

He watched his long fingers on the keypad of his phone then moved his eyes up looking at his pale throat, and then his full lips.

Robert spoke.

‘So are we done? Do we go back?’

Aaron hesitated.

‘Maybe we sh…’

He was going to call it an evening, put a stop to this now, before it was too late, and then he saw them, Emile and Lucas, walking straight towards them, only a few steps away. They hadn’t seen Aaron yet. Emile was laughing and pressing his mouth against Lucas’s cheek, an arm thrown over his young boyfriend’s shoulder. They were probably on their way to the club.

Aaron saw the momentary expression of surprise on Emile’s face, quickly replaced by a friendly smile. He’d told Emile why he needed the apartment, but not who. Emile had never met Robert and couldn’t know who he was, but maybe he’d expected someone younger, or different. He didn’t know.

‘Aaron!’ Emile said warmly, and they kissed in greeting, and then Lucas, too. Robert’s hands were back in the pockets of his leather jacket. Aaron stood flustered for a moment. Then Emile spoke again.

‘Et qui est ton ami…? Are you going to introduce us?’

It was unavoidable and Emile would know.

‘Yeah! Sorry! Robert Sugden. Robert this is Emile, and Lucas.’

If Emile was surprised, he didn’t show it. Instead he took Robert’s hand and Aaron watched as Robert stepped forward with easy confidence, kissing Emile and then Lucas on the cheek.

As they stepped back, Lucas started to speak, looking at Aaron.
Nous avons vu Matheo il y a quelques minutes… We just saw Matheo…

Emile grabbed his hand too fast, squeezing it to silence him and Lucas frowned back at him questioningly, as Emile spoke.

‘So I think you run a business… agricultural machinery… Aaron, that was what you said, wasn’t it?’

Aaron felt even more uncomfortable. He didn’t want Robert to think he’d talked about him with his friends.

‘I’m a scrapper, you could probably put some business my way.’ Emile went on. He fished in his pocket and pulled out his wallet, opening it, then slipped out a business card.

‘My number.’

Robert took the card, turning it over.

Aaron fidgeted, he just wanted to be gone.

‘Who hurt your face?’ Lucas asked suddenly, scrutinizing Robert’s shining skin, his swollen nose, the small cut above his eye.

‘It was an emergency stop.’ Robert answered lightly.

‘Anyway we need to err…’ Aaron pointed forwards, keen to get away, before Lucas asked any more difficult questions. And after a brief farewell, Emile and Lucas continued on their way.

For a moment Robert and Aaron watched them as they walked up the street, and then all at once, Robert arms were on his arms, pushing him suddenly towards the entrance of a boarded-up antique’s shop, and his hands were on his face, and his mouth was pressing so hard against his that he could hardly breathe. Aaron knew if Emile turned around he would see them, but he didn’t care. Instead he raised his hands, holding on to the leather of Robert’s sleeves, kissing him back.

When they pulled apart, Robert’s voice was low.

‘So, are we going back?’

As Aaron inserted the key into the lock for a second time, they both knew why they were both still there.

‘You really want to do this?’ Aaron asked.

Robert squinted back at him.

‘Yeah. I said so, didn’t I?’

For a while, they just lay side by side, heads turned on the pillows, looking at each other, the stars of Paris above them.

Robert’s glittering green blue eyes were fixed on Aaron’s, his lips parted, his throat flushed red. Aaron thought about how Robert lived his life so recklessly, getting away with it beautifully. Now
he was being reckless, too.

Aaron moved his own lips forward over Robert’s telling him silently. *Yes. I want you, your body, this.*

‘You’re sure?’ Aaron asked one last time.

‘Stop asking.’

Aaron nodded.

‘Then kneel right up for me. You can hold onto the bedhead.’

Robert did as he said.

He reached his hands to Robert’s hips and pulled them gently further back, then ran a hand up between his thighs.

‘Further apart.’ He whispered, and Robert shuffled his knees.

Aaron looked at his bowed neck, the pale freckled sweep of his broad back and the curve of his white arse above his spread solid thighs. Now he had perfect access to him and his heart raced.

He lowered himself, spreading Robert’s arse cheeks apart with his hands, and placed his mouth against his entrance, licking against his rim, listening to Robert pant as he reacted to the sensation. When he felt the timing was right, he pointed his tongue and pushed into the tight entrance to his hole.

He heard Robert gasp. He dipped his tongue further, lapping slowly in and out, getting to know his body for the first time, maybe the only time he thought.

‘Alright?’ he asked softly, kneeling back up, his heart racing, running his hand again up over his back and down again to his butt.

‘Yep. Yeah.’

So he coated a finger with lube and padded against his entrance, then with a gentle thrust, he pushed inside. He moved his finger, as Robert had done earlier in the evening, this time showing him how to caress inside, listening to Robert as he gasped with a mixture of shock and pleasure at the sensation. Very gently, Aaron added a second finger, knowing the stretch would already be strange and painful, listening to Robert swear quietly and feeling him shift, trying to make himself more comfortable.

He bit his lip. He wanted to see Robert’s face so badly when they did this, this first time.

‘Do you … do you want to turn over, lie on your back?’ he asked quietly.

He watched as Robert lay down for him, lifting his thighs high. Robert’s whole body was trembling now as he watched Aaron pull on a condom and stroke it down his length, adding lube, then reaching fingers forward to rub more lube against Robert’s rim.

Aaron knew from experience nothing would prepare Robert for this.

He lined up and with a single powerful but controlled thrust, he pushed inside. Nothing would take this away from him now.
Robert’s eyes scrunched up and his fingers reached up to Aaron’s arms, pressing hard into his flesh as he gasped. As Aaron went deeper, he swore, Aaron could just hear the edge of panic in his voice and stopped moving inside him. Instead, he leaned forward, covering his jaw, his cheek, his mouth with kisses, apologizing. He knew the burn.

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry.’ He whispered. ‘It’s going to be fine. Just wait, OK? Relax, Robert, yeah?’

And Robert’s eyes answered him, showing him he’d understood. Aaron gave him a small smile. His cock was pulsing at the sensation of Robert’s hot tight space around him, the heat soaring up through his shaft into his groin and down his limbs, his heart thundering. He fought against the need to move, blowing air into his cheeks, counting the freckles on Robert’s throat.

He pulled back slowly, and then thrust again, hearing Robert’s moan, watching his lips. And then he repeated the movement, starting up a rhythm, not able to keep himself from moving any longer, going faster and harder. He watched Robert’s eyes, blown with desire, looking back at him, and heard him moan each time he thrust forwards.

‘Alright?’ He asked in a whisper. ‘Do I need to move around a bit?’

‘No. No It’s perfect.’ Robert’s whispered back. ‘You’re perfect.’

Then Robert’s eyes grew wide with shock.

‘Fuck! I’m going to come!’

Aaron saw his eyes roll back and his mouth open. He thrust deeper, hearing him calling his name, ‘Aaron, Aaron, Aaron!’

With each thrust he felt himself climbing impossibly high. He was so close to the edge, feeling Robert around him. He watched as Robert’s hot cum sprayed at high speed over his stomach. And then he felt his stomach and groin suddenly tighten and he was coming too, so that his heart seemed to stop and he was floating as wave after wave carried through his body. And for that moment, it mattered. Robert was right. It mattered.

Afterwards, Aaron collapsed onto his back beside Robert, glancing sideways at him as he lay limbs boneless, eyes shining, looking up through the skylight.

‘Alright?’ he asked, blushing,

‘Yeah. You?’ Robert asked, looking back at him.

‘Yeah.’ Aaron answered, trying not to smile. How was he ever going to stop this now, he wondered?

Robert sat up, still shaking from the aftermath. He picked up his phone from the bedside.

‘I need to call Chrissie. I should be getting back.’

All at once Aaron felt his throat constrict. For the first time, he was jealous and he knew it.

‘You’re already late.’ Aaron shrugged. ‘Would another hour or so make any difference?’

Robert grinned, putting his phone back down.

‘I suppose you’re right.’
He lay over Aaron and pressed his mouth down against him for another kiss.

It was after three o clock when Robert finally got up and started to dress. His teeth were chattering with adrenaline. After pulling on his jeans, he leaned over Aaron and kissed him one last time softly, making it last, so that Aaron knew it was a promise.

‘Don’t see Matheo tomorrow. That’s his name, isn’t it?’ Robert suddenly said with a low voice.

‘It’s nothing to do with you.’ Aaron answered, but his voice lacked conviction. Right now, he had no deep need to see Matheo at all, although he would like to catch up with Ed, bend his ear, share what had happened with someone he could trust. He thought about Adam.

‘Just don’t.’ Robert repeated. He turned on his phone, then frowned.

He had a dozen missed calls from Chrissie. Even one from Victoria. He couldn’t understand it. Had Chrissie somehow found out?

Aaron saw his face change.

Robert ran a hand through his hair, pressing call.

‘Slow down… Chrissie… slow down! ’ Robert was saying.

‘Josh? He did what?’

Aaron saw the color drain from his face.

‘Which hospital? OK. So I’m on my way! I’ll be there as soon as I can.’

Aaron was already up, by his side as Robert frantically pulled on the rest of his clothes.

‘What happened? Tell me Robert? What’s happened to Josh?’

‘I don’t know. He’s in hospital. This is all my fault.’
Passport

Chapter Summary

Aaron and Robert arrive in hospital to find Josh in a critical condition. Robert rejects Aaron. Aaron has an encounter with the police. He finds out a secret about Robert.

Chapter Notes

unintentional overdose cw

‘It’s my little lad that I look after. He’s… he’s really poorly.’

Now he’d said it, he couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. Ed pulled Aaron close into his broad chest, so that his forehead was pressed into his jersey and Ed’s strong arms held him round his back.

‘I’m so sorry, Aaron. You have to think he’ll get better. Kids are really resilient, you know?’

Aaron nodded and Ed brushed his lips over Aaron’s hair. When he turned his head, all at once Ed’s lips were on his, pressing gently, his tongue seeking out Aaron’s. For a moment, Aaron’s eyes were closed, his mouth responding, then he pulled back, wiping his face with his sleeve.

‘Um, Ed, no, sorry, sorry.’

Ed winced.

‘No, I’m sorry. I guess I still miss you. Bad timing. It was insensitive. Forgive me.’

‘It’s OK.’ Aaron placed a hand on his wrist. He really needed Ed’s friendship right now, no matter what. He hesitated, struggling internally and then took a deep breath and finally the words were there. He couldn’t hold them in any longer. Emile knew, but it was Ed he wanted to tell.

‘I’ve been an idiot.’ He blinked, looking sideways at Ed’s face. ‘I… I slept with Robert.’

He could see the startled look, the disbelief, the judgement, maybe even some jealousy in Ed’s eyes. He could feel himself starting to cry again as his heart lurched. He’d wanted Ed to understand, but how could he? He didn’t even understand himself.

‘I shouldn’t have done it. I know I shouldn’t.’

‘You said he was a jerk.’

Aaron bit his lip and nodded in affirmation.

‘And… he’s a married man.’
Ed watched his face as Aaron turned down the corners of his mouth, his eyes still glistening with tears.

‘Didn’t stop me though, did it.’

‘You care about him! Aaron! You’re out of your mind.’

Aaron looked out of Ed’s apartment window at the grey Autumn clouds. He breathed in, steadying his heart.

‘It doesn’t matter anyway. It was a stupid mistake and it’s over. All that matters now is my little lad getting better. And then I’m outta here.’

It was forty-eight hours earlier that they’d taken the taxi from the attic apartment in Le Marais to the hospital. Aaron had insisted on going with Robert, and Robert had been too distraught to protest.

‘Just say you called me and I came, yeah? I need to know he’s OK, too.’ Aaron had said.

He wasn’t sure whether Robert had heard. He had such a faraway look in his eyes. Aaron wanted to touch him, comfort him. He thought about holding his hand there, in the back of the cab, but he was too shy. They’d just spent three hours in bed, taking it slow and steady and deep. After the first time, Aaron had blown him, getting to know his glorious length, feeling Robert’s hands in his hair, learning the shape of him, the taste of him, what did it for him, his heart swelling as he listened to Robert unraveling, and then swallowing down his cum, feeling his pulse under his fingertips stroking over his hips. And then he’d taken him again, a second time. And he’d been captured in that bubble of just the two of them, moving together rhythmically, like nothing he could remember before.

Now, dressed and in the taxi, he couldn’t dare to touch his fingers. When their thighs touched, Robert shifted, placing a hand over his mouth, looking out at the passing streets.

They’d found Chrissie in a corridor on the pediatrics’ ward. She didn’t seem to notice that Aaron was there.

‘Where were you? I was calling for hours.’

‘It was business.’

‘At three o clock in the morning? I’ve been going out of my mind. I even called Lucie. She said you hadn’t even had a skype meeting with Brazil last night. She didn’t know where you were.’

‘Well she wouldn’t know, would she? I was following a lead, someone I met from the trip to Valence. He was in Paris, so I took him out for a drink.’

‘Until three in the morning? And why was your phone switched off. Nothing you’re saying makes any sense.’

Aaron stood just a little behind Robert in the hospital corridor, hands in the pockets of his hoodie, looking down. He couldn’t raise his eyes to her face. What they’d done had been madness. Now, with no time to shower before they’d raced out for the taxi, he could still taste Robert on his lips, smell him on his skin. He couldn’t stand near to her, afraid she would be able to tell what they’d been doing.
'And what happened to your face? You haven't been in a fight have you?'

Chrissie searched Robert's bruised forehead and swollen nose.

‘No.. I had an emergency stop in the car. I'm fine. Just tell me about Josh, Chrissie. What happened? Where is he?’ Robert’s voice was full of urgency.

‘He’s with the doctors. He… he took some of your Tylenol. That they’d prescribed after your concussion. They say his liver is failing. Robert! I think he might not… they won’t tell me if he’s going to get better!’

Aaron’s hand flew to his mouth.

‘No!’ He cried.

He could see the full shock hit Robert’s face.

‘Where is he? Chrissie! Where’s Josh? I have to see him.’

Before Chrissie could answer, a door opened and a doctor appeared.

‘Mrs. Sugden.’ He looked at Robert. ‘Mr. Sugden? Alors, you want to see Josh. We have given him a 25 milligram dose of activated charcoal and now we are giving him an intravenous dose of an antidote called NAC. This will take the next ten hours and we will be able to see how his liver responds.’

‘But he’ll get better? He’ll be alright?’ Aaron couldn’t help himself from asking. The doctor glanced at him then turned back to Robert and Chrissie.

‘Your son is in a serious condition, we are doing everything we can right now. We have to wait. Let me take you to him.’

Aaron followed them into the hospital room, standing just inside the door. Josh looked small and fragile in the hospital bed. He had a drip attached to the inside of his wrist and a monitor attached to his finger measuring his pulse on a heart machine. His body looked wet with perspiration, his teeth and lips were still black from the charcoal drink they’d given him, making him look like a ghost with his white blonde hair. When he saw Robert and Chrissie he started to cry. Aaron’s heart went out to him, he wanted to hold him, knowing how afraid he must be feeling.

It was Robert who sat on the bed beside him, stroking a hand over and over, up through his hair, leaning to kiss his forehead.

‘Shhh! Now! Shhh! I’m here now, Josh. I’m not going to let anything happen to you, alright?’ Robert’s voice was so gentle it was almost hard for Aaron to catch his words. Chrissie stood crying, wringing a tissue in her hands.

Josh saw Aaron and called his name, stretching his fingers towards him. Aaron stepped forward, standing the other side of the bed.

‘I had a scary dream. Then I had a tummy ache, so I thought if I took Daddy’s medicine it would go away.’

Aaron stepped forward.

‘I know, darlin. It’s OK. You’re going to be OK. Look, you’ve got all these doctor’s taking care of
you now. And your dad’s here. He’s going to keep you safe.’

When Aaron left Ed’s apartment he paused on the stairs, pulling out the set of keys Robert had given him. He was still at the hospital, refusing to leave Josh’s side, so he’d asked him to pick up the Porsche from the underground car park where he’d left it for so long now.

Chrissie was home with Doli so that Aaron could run some errands, or at least that was how Robert had explained it to her.

He made his way on the metro back to Le Marais. While he traveled, he thought about Matheo with a frown, wondering if he’d be in the studio now. He’d messed up so badly. How had he picked Robert over him? He hadn’t even called on the Saturday, too busy worrying about Josh, and Mat hadn’t called him either. Aaron could hardly blame him.

After Josh had fallen asleep, they’d left the room.

‘So what did happen?’ Robert had asked Chrissie.

‘It was late. Nearly midnight. Lachlan and I were watching a film and he came downstairs. I sent him back to bed. But he must have gone in our bathroom and found your medicine. About an hour later, Lachlan went up and called me. Josh was throwing up and covered in sweat. He was so ill. That’s when I started calling you, but you didn’t answer, so I brought him here, by myself.’

‘But why didn’t you take him back to bed when he came down?’ Robert asked. ‘Why didn’t you go up with him?’

‘I sent him back to bed. He was crying, but you know what he’s like. If I’d made a fuss, he’d have taken advantage and it would just become a habit. Just because you spoil him...’

Aaron bit his lip listening. He should have been there, he thought. He saw Robert push his hands deeper into the pockets of his leather jacket.

‘Why are you like this with Josh? Why can’t you just love him? Like you do Lachlan? Or Doli?’

Chrissie’s eyes grew large.

‘I do! I do love him! How dare you! You weren’t even there! You’re never there! And if I recall, the last time you were in charge, he was running onto a main road in the face of oncoming traffic!’

Aaron wished he was anywhere but there, listening to this, but Chrissie went on.

‘God only knows I’m trying to trust you again. And I will find out where you were, and when I do, if your story doesn’t hold up, I swear you’ll be out of our home and out of the business so fast you’ll regret you messed with me one time too many.’

Then she’d turned to Aaron and apologized so that he’d felt flustered and felt himself going red.

‘It was so good of you to come, in the middle of the night, Aaron. At least I can rely on you.’

Aaron had caught up with Robert in the bathroom. He was holding onto the sink, his head bent. Aaron wanted to touch him, to be there for him. He knew how much he loved Josh. If his own heart was breaking for the lad, how much worse must Robert be feeling. And there was something
strange about the fight with Chrissie. Some things he hadn’t understood.

‘You know you can talk to me.’ He’d said softly, looking at Robert’s back, thinking about how he'd been earlier that night, giving himself up to Aaron’s caresses on the bed in the attic room. He wished they were back there. That somehow, he could turn back the clock so that this had never happened, and Josh would be sleeping safely at home.

Robert turned. Aaron was startled by his set mouth and tight lips. His eyes were blazing. Aaron took a step back.

‘You? What was I thinking? Being with you? You heard Chrissie. I could lose everything!’

Aaron blinked back at him as Robert ran a hand through his hair.

‘Josh… is so ill?’ He stammered.

Robert moved forward, a finger raised at Aaron’s face, eyes on fire.

‘All I know is that this was a mistake. Whatever it was between us, it’s over. Got it? You’ve had your pathetic little fling. From now on you’re the au pair and I’m Chrissie’s husband and this... this never happened.’

Aaron left the bathroom.

After, Chrissie had sent him home to look after Doli, since only Lachlan was there if she woke.

He’d tried not to think or to feel.

Only Josh mattered. Only Josh.

Aaron went down the elevator descending into the dark low roofed underground car park. He found the Porsche with the remote locking device. As he slid onto the leather upholstered driver’s seat he felt his groin ignite and closed his eyes, angry with himself. He’d been so gullible, taken in by the glamorous Robert Sugden with his swanky car and hips and fucking hot dick and arse. He rolled his eyes, panting, pulling at the material of his jeans, waiting for the unexpected erection to subside.

He slipped the key into the ignition on the left hand side of the steering wheel, putting the car into gear, listening to the roll of the engine. He could just take it. Emile would help him, either break her up, or just falsify plates and be away, gone for good. He frowned. But he still hadn’t got his new passport from Cain. He needed to wait for that at least. Just to get away safely from Robert. For good. His words at the hospital still stung. He didn’t want to think about them. When he’d gone to pick up the keys, Robert had barely spoken to him. Josh’s eyes had developed a yellow tinge and he was drowsy, slipping in and out of sleep. The doctors had said it was the critical phase. That he could go either way and now it was just a case of waiting. Aaron had kissed him while Robert watched, and then he’d left, without a goodbye.

He drove to the exit, putting the ticket Robert had given him into the machine and paying cash and he was onto the car elevator and suddenly in the daylight, waiting for a space in the traffic, oddly looking forwards to the drive in this powerful beauty of a car, even though a light drizzle had started.

There was a sudden bang on the roof, and a voice saying Robert’s name, but with a French accent; no ‘t’ at the end.
Then a face loomed in the window to the driving seat.

He looked for the control to lower the window down. And all at once the two of them were staring at each other in shock.

‘Merde! Tu as volé une voiture ! Mon loup ! You stole a fucking car?’

It was Matheo. Aaron’s head span. Mat knew Robert?

‘Get in!’ He said roughly.

Matheo quickly walked round the car and climbed in with a grin, fastening his seat belt.

‘Alors, Aaron. You’re taking me for a joy drive?’

‘Joy ride? No!’

‘I love this car! I missed this car.’

Aaron pulled out into the traffic.

‘So how do you know Robert?’ He asked, not able to hide the confusion in his voice.

‘Robert Sugden?’ Matheo frowned but his brown eyes were smiling. ‘Maybe I should be asking how do you know him? Non? Obviously well enough to be driving his car?’

‘He’s my boss. My family. The dad of the children I take care of.’

Aaron glanced over at Matheo’s face and saw him stretch his eyes and push his lips forwards with a slow whistle.

‘Oh My God! Well. I’m sorry then, for his wife.’

Aaron could feel his heart thumping and his hands grow wet around the wheel.

‘Why? Did you…? Did you two…?’

The thought that he’d got it all wrong. An image of Robert on the bed under him, his eyes half closed, his red lips parted. The pain when he first entered him. He couldn’t have got that wrong. Could he?

Matheo spread his hands.

‘No, my dear, no, though he looked for sure, nothing happened between us. He’s bi. Certainement. Sans aucun doute! But no. You remember I was away? I’d only just met him, actually.’

Aaron remembered it well. How could he forget? It was after the kiss. Their first kiss.

‘So Robert took me away. We traveled to Valence. In this very car. He gave me a job as a graphic designer for his company. I was drawing, designing a brochure at a very dull agricultural trade fair.’

‘So why did you say you were sorry for his wife?’

‘Ah!’ Mat leaned his head on one side. Aaron took the ring road. He was in no hurry now to get back home. He wanted to hear what Mat had to say.
Because it wasn’t my only role. I was a beard. Or sort of the opposite of a beard. For the beautiful Lucie. She’s his personal assistant.’ Matheo laughed again. ‘Anyway, I was supposed to be her boyfriend in public, in the daytime. But at night… well you can imagine.’

Matheo must have seen Aaron’s face fall, because he touched his arm gently.

‘Don’t worry, mon chéri, I’m sure he won’t leave his wife. Your family is safe.’

Aaron nodded. How could he explain? He thought about Lucie that day in the house. Had they made love, before Aaron came home with Doli, before they went to bed that first time? He’d lied again. Robert had lied again and again. He wanted to cry and he hated himself for it. He hated Robert now more than any time since he first met him. Why had he been such an idiot?

Matheo put a hand on Aaron’s knee, stroking up his thigh.

‘Let’s stop somewhere?’

And all at once it sounded like a good idea.

Aaron found a layby and switched off the ignition. He turned to Matheo, who pulled his face close, and they kissed, tongues circling hot and wet, while the grey rain poured down more heavily now outside.

Aaron could feel the heat in his groin returning from when he’d first climbed into the car, fueled by his anger against Robert. He pulled Mat’s hand to the front of his jeans, pressing his fingers down against his bulge with the flat of his hand. Mat didn’t need any further encouragement, with a skilled hand he released the button and undid the zip, then with his thumb he pulled down Aaron’s boxer briefs, tucking them under his balls so they were lifted, and running his fingers down his exposed hard thick shaft.

‘I missed you.’ Matheo breathed, unfastening his own trousers quickly so that his slimmer arching cock sprung out into the cool air of the car. ‘Why didn’t you come and see me on Saturday?’

Aaron couldn’t answer now. He mustn’t think about Josh. Now he had to hold on to this anger. He was sitting in Robert’s driving seat, his cock throbbing, flushed with desire.

He raised a hand and started to work himself, shifting his arse with a groan, leaning his head back against the leather headrest.

‘Non, non.’ Matheo unwrapped his fingers and pulled his hand away. Instead, he lowered his head, and even before his tongue touched him, Aaron was groaning.

‘Yes, Mat. C’est ce que je veux.’ He said in French.

Mat stroked his tongue over his cockhead, licking a stripe over his slit, again and again. Aaron writhed at the sensation. He felt so sensitive to the wet touch over his swollen glans. Lifting his arse, he pushed his trousers further down below his knees.

‘Continue!’ He insisted.

Mat wet his lips and smiled.

‘Qui es-tu? What did you do with my shy Aaron?’

Matheo moved his tongue back and Aaron gasped. He licked again against his slit then moved his
tongue sideways, flickering against the curved edge where his shaft met his cock head. Aaron thought about Robert, doing this on Friday night and scowled, letting the heat swell his whole cock. Mat moved his fingers to his balls.

‘They’re so tight.’ He whispered as he rolled them, then pushed down between Aaron’s thighs, looking for his hole.

‘Mon bébé.’

Aaron let himself slide down further to give Matheo better access, feeling the leather under his arse cheeks as he moved. He spread his thighs wider apart. And then he felt Mat’s finger at his rim, pushing inside. He could feel his ring of muscles squeezing round his finger tip and Mat’s finger just inside his entrance.

Mat used his tongue to start licking down the ridges of the length of his cock again, sending hot waves into his groin, down his thighs, making his arse clench rhythmically around his finger.

‘Mat! Go down on me. Use your mouth.’ Aaron growled.

He reached out his own hand to find Mat’s cock and started to stroke him fast, and Mat wrapped his wet lips around the tip of Aaron’s cock and started to slide down all the way, moving faster now, taking him into his throat all the way to the base, then pulling back up again, pressing his flat tongue against Aaron’s length as he moved, pulling his foreskin up and down with the motion.

‘Merde! Merde!’ Aaron growled, moving his head as the intensity built. ‘Je vais venir!’

He could see cars racing past in the rain through the windscreen. He didn’t care.

‘Fuck!’ He switched to English, placing his free hand over Mat’s brown curls, feeling his short beard against his skin each time he moved down.

‘Fuck! Fuuuck!’

He bucked his hips and then in his mind’s eye, he saw Robert’s eyes glaring at him, his mouth set, and suddenly with a shout he was coming, Mat’s finger fucking his hole now as he contracted around him. Mat lifted his mouth and used his fingers to stroke Aaron through so that his hot cum shot in the air, landing on Aaron’s chest and against the upholstery.

Aaron turned his attention to bringing Mat off, until he called out as well. ‘J’arrive aussi. I’m coming, hot boy! Fuck! Merde!’

Matheo’s cum spilled over his stomach and the car smelt of semen and sweat and salt as they leaned their heads close for a kiss, the noise of their panting loud in the closed space as they both started to come down again.

There was a knock on the driver seat window.

Aaron’s heart and breath suddenly raced again.

He couldn’t believe his eyes.

There was a police officer standing there in a raincoat with a hood, the rain dripping from the lightweight material, peering through the window at them both.

‘Shit!’ He hissed.
Both Aaron and Mat pulled their trousers up and fastened them like lightening.

Then Aaron opened the window.

‘Bonjour monsieur, is this your car?’

Aaron could hear Mat trying to suppress his laughter.

‘Yeah.’ Aaron answered in English.

He couldn’t be arrested. Not now. Not for this.

‘Alors, let me see your papers.’ The police officer switched to English too. ‘Your driving license and the car registration and insurance papers.’

Aaron fished about trying to find the papers, wondering what to do. He couldn’t show his license or they would know it wasn’t his car when they saw the registration papers. Now he’d already lied.

He found the car papers and handed them over, his hands still shaking.

‘And your license? Mr Sugden?’

‘I can’t find it.’

‘Or any ID then?’

Aaron shook his head.

‘So, do I arrest you for stealing a car, or public indecency?’

Aaron put a hand over his face. The only thing he could think of doing now was to come clean.

‘Look. OK. It’s not my car. It’s my boss’s car. Robert Sugden. He asked me to take it to his house. I didn’t tell you cos, well, you know, I’m with my boyfriend and.. anyway his son, he’s very ill in hospital. Please, don’t bother him about this.’

He looked up at the police officer who frowned back at him.

‘And you are?’

‘Aaron Roberts.’

‘Then I need to ask you both to step out of the car. And both your ID’s. You can sit in the police car, please?’

Aaron glanced back at Mat who raised his eyebrows. How could this be happening?

For one wild moment, he thought about giving himself up. He would be sent back to England. Serve his time. How long would he get? Maybe ten years for the arson and being on the run. Five years inside. It was too long. He didn’t want to be caught. He watched the police officer talking on the phone, turning his back, looking at Aaron’s ID card and felt himself being soaked by the rain as he walked towards the police car, Mat beside him, swearing quietly in French. He turned his face upwards to the sky and let the rain run over his face. Matheo shivered as the police officer, still on the phone, placed a hand on each of their heads as they slid into the back seat of the car. It was Aaron’s worst nightmare. He thought about Josh. He was glad he’d kissed him. Maybe he wouldn’t see him again.
Then the police officer was next to them again.

‘OK. So you’re lucky. Mr Sugden has verified your story. He says he knows both of you. Next time, though, get a room.’

Aaron nodded and took his ID card back and Matheo’s and they walked back again to the Porsche.

Both of you. Shit. Aaron thought. Now he would have even more explaining to do.

When Aaron arrived back home, Chrissie took in his damp clothes and hair.

‘You’re wet? I thought you drove here? Didn’t you bring Robert’s car?’

Aaron nodded and started to speak, but Chrissie quickly went on.

‘Anyway, Josh, he’s out of danger. Robert called. I thought you’d like to know.’

Aaron felt relief wash through him. He bit back his tears, thinking about his little lad, knowing he was going to be OK.

‘I can look after Doli, now, if you want to go, like, to be with him.’

‘Later.’ Chrissie said. ‘I’ll go later.’

She turned away and Aaron watched her puzzled. He thought about Robert’s words at the hospital, that she had some sort of problem with Josh, maybe there was something in it, after all.

He ran quickly up the stairs and to his room and sat on the bed, crying suddenly, stupidly, and not knowing why. He was so glad for Josh but at the same time he felt like his heart was almost breaking. Everything seemed to be washing around in his head now, Josh, Robert and his words to him at the hospital, what Mat had said about Lucie. He was probably exhausted he realized, he’d hardly slept since Friday night, the night he’d spent with Robert. He closed his eyes. He could remember the feel of Robert’s arms around him, his face, the way he looked at him across the pillows. How could he just switch it on and off so easily?

Aaron was nothing to him. Just another fuck on the side.

The encounter with the police had reminded him how precarious his existence was, how real the possibility of being caught was. And Robert knew. He knew his real identity. Aaron mustn’t forget that now. He couldn’t trust him. He would never trust him.

‘You think you’re alone.’ He’d said. ‘But you’ve got me now. I mean it.’

Aaron put his face in his hands. He hadn’t mean it. It was a lie, all of it. Just for a quick meaningless fuck.

He stood up. He needed to get away. He didn’t want to leave Josh and Doli, now more than ever, but they’d get over him. He had no choice. The only thing was he needed his passport from Cain.

He moved into his bathroom and closed the door behind him, then sat on the closed toilet seat and made a call.

Cain sounded puzzled.
'You picked it up.'

'No, I didn't.'

Aaron spoke quietly. Even though Chrissie and Lachlan were downstairs, he didn’t want to risk being overheard.

'I was notified, it was picked up at the address by Aaron Roberts. A while ago now. I can find the date.'

Aaron stood up and picked at the paint on the inside of the door, looking at his face in the mirror above the sink, then looking away again.

'Cain. Was there something with my name. Aaron Dingle?'

'No. What do you take me for? I’m not daft. I just wrote a short note, about your Mum and Debs and that.'

'You’re sure?'

'You think the police might have intercepted it?'

And then he asked, without even knowing why. He just asked, eyes on the ceiling.

'Does the name Robert Sugden mean anything to you?'

There was a silence.

'Sugden? He’s Andy and Vic’s brother. Scum. Left here around ten years ago. Vic’ll be able to tell you more. Pretty sure they’re in touch.'

Aaron’s legs suddenly gave way under him and he sat back down on the closed toilet seat.

'Why do you ask? Did you meet him?’ Cain went on. ‘He were a right piece of work.’

After, Aaron turned on the shower and let it run, still sitting, turning his phone over and over in his hand.

So Robert was from Emmerdale, Vic’s brother, they may have even met once, when Aaron was a kid. He could still hardly believe it. But also it meant one thing. Robert had his passport and he needed to get it back.
Aaron was there, waiting at the bottom of the stairs when Robert walked in through the door with Joshua in his arms.

He took him swiftly from Robert’s hands, turning him so that Josh’s head fell against his shoulder and rested there. His body felt cold after the journey from the hospital. Aaron frowned at how light he was to carry.

‘Come on, my lad, you’re home now, eh? Let’s get you tucked up and warm.’ He said softly into his ear, taking him upstairs.

In the bedroom, he gently peeled off the duffle coat that Josh was wearing over his pajamas, and pulling back the covers, placed him in bed. Josh lay still, but his pale eyes flitted around the room, rediscovering the familiar space and his childhood possessions. He turned and looked up at Aaron who leaned down to kiss his cheek, grateful to have him home at last.

‘Your beard is all scratchy.’ Josh complained.

‘Yeah, sorry. I need to go back to the barbers, I reckon. How about we go together when you’re up to it?’

Josh nodded.

‘Do you think my Dad would grow a beard?’

Aaron rubbed his fingers over his mouth, blinking as he looked back at Josh’s face.

‘I don’t think he could, love. Maybe just a bit of scruff. Face like a baby’s bottom, your dad.’

Josh giggled.

‘Funny is it?’

They both turned at the words to see Robert standing leaning against the door frame at the entrance to the bedroom, eyebrows raised, a smile on his face for Josh. Aaron blushed, looking away.

Robert walked into the room, picking up one of Josh’s toys and inspecting it. Unwashed from his vigil at Josh’s bedside for such a long time, his scent reached Aaron. Robert had hardly been home all week, preferring to stay at the hospital, just popping back a couple of times to collect a change of clothes. Now, knowing he would be back for good, Aaron wondered how he was going to cope.

He stepped back, moving away towards the door.
‘Don’t go,’ Josh said.

‘I’m not going far. But, you must be hungry? I’ll make you some toast.’

When he came back upstairs with a tray of toast and a glass of orange juice, he could hear a film playing quietly in the bedroom. He opened the door and saw that Josh’s eyes were closed, sleeping peacefully with the relief at being home at last. Next to him, lying over the covers, his blue shirt untucked at the waist, Robert on his side was sleeping too. He could see the dark rings under his eyes, and his unwashed hair tousled over his head.

His heart lurched. He wanted to lie down next to them and close his eyes too, as if they were his, his family and he fitted with them like a piece in a puzzle.

He placed down the tray quietly, looking at Josh’s face again. Even though he’d said he wasn’t going anywhere, he would have to leave soon enough. He had no choice.

‘Turn off the movie, Aaron.’ Robert murmured, eyes still closed.

Aaron jumped at the sound of his voice, glancing again at him swiftly, then picking up the remote he switched off the film and silently slipped back out of the room.

A couple of hours later Robert came down, showered. Aaron tried not to notice how his red sweater fitted over the broad curve of his shoulders and accentuated the pale skin of his throat. Chrissie had come home and had gone up to see Josh for a while. Now they were all in the kitchen together, Aaron preparing tea for Doli, while Chrissie took out a bottle of Chardonnay from the fridge, fishing for the bottle opener in the drawer.

Robert’s fingers were tucked in the pockets of his jeans as he leaned against the counter watching Aaron cut up vegetables. His jaw clenched.

‘I saw you took my car to the valet.’

Aaron shifted his eyes sideways, but continued to chop without answering.

Robert moved his hands and folded his arms.

‘That’ll be coming out of your salary then.’

Chrissie looked up with a frown from pouring the wine.

‘That’s hardly fair.’

‘Oh, I think it is. He knows why, don’t you, Aaron?’

Aaron felt a flush suffuse over his throat spreading up to his cheeks. Why was Robert bringing this up in front of Chrissie? He leaned down and noisily pulled out a pan, turning to the sink to fill it with water. But Robert wasn’t ready yet to give up.

‘So, your boyfriend’s an artist, is he?’

‘Not your kind of artist,’ Aaron muttered back.

‘Not a very good one at that. I’ve seen some of his work. Though I guess I could be tempted to buy, given the right subject.’
Aaron felt his mouth suddenly grow dry, and the color on his cheeks intensify to a burning red. Surely Robert couldn’t have seen Mat’s portraits of him?

‘Why are you picking on him?’ Chrissie interrupted. ‘You’re making the poor lad uncomfortable. And he’s been such a support to us since the day he started.’

Robert took the glass of wine Chrissie offered him, and took a mouthful.

‘Very conscientious,’ he replied, raising his glass to him. ‘That right, Aaron?’

Aaron put down the pan on the stove with a bang and walked out of the kitchen.

‘Aaron?’ Chrissie called after him. ‘Now look what you’ve done! What on earth has got into you? And you still haven’t….’

As Aaron ascended the stairs to his room her voice faded away into the distance. He wasn’t sure how much more he could take. He checked in on Josh and saw that he was still sleeping then went back to his own room and sat on the bed. Taking out his mobile phone he scrolled back and forth over the contacts. At the top, there was Adam’s name. His thumb lingered over it. Where would he be? In the Woolpack with a pint, playing darts, or in the kitchen at the farm with Moira, eating his tea, arguing with his mum about some piece of nonsense, dreaming dreams about starting up some business or other no doubt. For a moment, he bit his lip wondering if it was worth it, but he knew. If he went back in time, he’d do it all over again. Adam was safe and that was what counted. Nothing else. He placed his phone down on the bedside table and leaned forward, wrapping his arms around his waist. He moved a hand under his sweater and traced over a scar with his thumb, breathing slowly in and out.

Later, he heard steps on the stairs. Robert was bringing Doli up for her bedtime. There was a knock and when his door opened, he pulled himself up quickly, wiping his eye with the sleeve of his sweater pulled down over his hand.

‘So are you going to put this young lady to bed, or what? It’s what we pay you for.’

Aaron nodded, looking anywhere but at Robert’s face. How had they gone from the intimacy of the attic room to this? He’d touched Robert where no one else had touched him. How could he just turn that off? Somehow Aaron had to find that switch too, or he wasn’t going to survive this.

‘And what were you playing at, stomping out like that? Chrissie thought it was weird. She’ll get suspicious.’

Aaron looked at him now. Robert was glaring at him, his jaw clenching.

‘Well, there’s nothing to be suspicious of, is there, mate? That’s what you said, in the hospital.’ He could hear his own voice shaking.

There was silence between them. Doli squirmed out of Robert’s arms and, once released, left the room, making her way to the nursery. Aaron watched her go, he would follow in a moment and get her ready for bed, but for now he hesitated.

Robert spoke suddenly, teeth barred.

‘You went with him! After I’d told you not to see him. And in my car!’

‘You told me we were done!’ Aaron spat back. ‘He’s my boyfriend.’
Robert glanced behind him at the hallway and the top of the stairs, before turning back, his lip curled.

‘Well, have fun, then, with your boyfriend.’

Robert turned and left, going back down the stairs. Aaron’s heart was thumping and his world turning upside down all over again. Was Robert jealous, then? He couldn’t be, Aaron decided. In the hospital, he’d made it clear enough that he thought nothing of Aaron. *What was I thinking of? Being with you.* The way he’d said those words. Aaron put his hands over the sides of his face, remembering. It was because he thought Chrissie might find out.

But then maybe Robert wasn’t just afraid of being caught out, maybe it was more than that, maybe he was afraid of being caught out with a man.

He wasn’t out, and Aaron knew how scary that felt.

It could make you lash out. God only knew how he’d been himself.

He leaned his head right back, closing his eyes. He felt so confused. He just needed to stick to his plan. Robert had used him and Robert was dangerous. He knew it, deep down. He had to get away.

He picked up his phone and called Emile.

In the morning, Aaron opened Josh’s curtains to let the early winter sun shine into the room, watching him blink at the light. His skin was still slightly jaundiced. Aaron smiled at him softly.

‘Morning, my lad, how are you feeling today? Bit better, yeah?’

He helped him to sit up in bed, fluffing up his pillows. Josh asked for his action figures and started to play.

‘I’ll get you some breakfast and then me and Doli will come and join you, alright, darlin?’ He said gently and Josh nodded back.

Downstairs, Chrissie picked up the keys to the Range Rover about to leave for work, looking at her phone. Lachlan was finishing some toast. Robert was drinking coffee, reading the paper. He looked up and watched Aaron as he walked into the kitchen with Doli.

‘I got an email from school.’ Chrissie frowned. ‘Why didn’t you tell me there’s a parent’s evening tomorrow?’

‘Didn’t think you’d be interested, to be honest,’ Lachlan answered.

‘Of course, I’m interested. I’m your mother, aren’t I?’

Aaron noticed Robert’s face watching them both.

‘You’ll come, Robert, to the parents’ evening?’ Chrissie turned to him.

‘I think I need to stay home with Josh.’

‘Aaron can look after him. He is on the mend now.’
‘He’s only just out of hospital. He’s not well enough to be left with just Aaron. He needs us. He needs you.’ Robert said, standing up. ‘In fact, why don’t you stay at home with him today. At least today. You are his mother.’

Aaron saw Chrissie’s eyes widen for a moment.

‘You know we’re opening the new salon on Friday. I have to be there. I can’t supervise everything from home. You’re not the only one running a business. You stay today.’

She bent her knees next to Doli and kissed her goodbye.

‘Be a good girl for Aaron.’ She said. Then straightening, she turned to Robert and put her arms up around his neck. ‘I still haven’t forgiven you, you know. So don’t turn the guilt on me. You weren’t there when he needed you most.’ She said, but she kissed his mouth, and Robert’s arm slipped round her waist. Aaron looked away.

‘Come on Lachlan and I’ll drop you at school,’ she said, and they were gone.

Aaron lifted Doli onto her booster seat.

‘So you’re staying home today?’

Robert poured himself another coffee from the jug.

‘Not a problem, is it?’ He asked coolly.

‘No, I er, just was thinking what to make for lunch’ Aaron blinked. Robert was already moving towards the desk in the living area where Aaron could see him opening his laptop.

‘I’ll make lunch,’ he called back.

Aaron nodded and moved further into the kitchen, out of Robert’s line of vision moving his hand to his mobile phone in the pocket of his jeans. He would send a text. It would be OK.

The TV was on, showing a children’s program, Doli playing on the carpet and Josh, half watching, his head against Aaron’s shoulder, was drowsily slipping off to sleep once again. Aaron heard the faint ring of the doorbell, and then Robert’s voice from the bottom of the stairs.

‘Aaron? You’ve got a visitor.’

Aaron gently moved Josh so that as his head lay on the pillow his eyes closed completely in much needed sleep. He closed the gate at the top of the stairs so that Doli couldn’t follow him down.

As he descended, he could see the young man there. He’d been expecting him. Tall and athletic, his back to the stairs, he was talking to Robert who had his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

The visitor was wearing a heavy winter anorak with a fur collar and a beanie over black hair. He was holding a canvas backpack by one of the straps at his side next to his well-shaped long thighs clad in jeans. As Aaron got closer he turned and smiled with his deep green eyes, pulling off his beanie, releasing his dark curls.

It was Lucas.

For a second Aaron noticed Robert’s eyes sweeping down over Lucas’s body, like a reflex. He
caught himself wondering if Chrissie had ever noticed. He pushed down a sudden irrational knot of jealousy.

Then Lucas was greeting him, kissing him on the cheeks.

‘Salut, Aaron.’

It was the first time any of Aaron’s acquaintances had come to the house. He glanced uncomfortably again at Robert, who stood, waiting beside them.

‘Emile m'a envoyé. Je suis venu prendre la clé.’ Lucas explained.

Aaron hadn’t had time to return the key to the attic apartment to Emile. Now he blushed, with Robert there beside them, thinking back to that night. Would Robert realize which key Lucas was talking about?

‘I’ll go and get it.’ He answered, then hesitated, remembering how they’d left the bed unmade.

He needed to tell Lucas, but he couldn’t in front of Robert. He looked at him.

‘Er, do you mind giving us a minute…?’

Robert stared back at him, as if he didn’t want to leave, then shrugged and walked away back into the living area.

Lucas watched him go. As soon as he was out of sight, he raised up his back pack and opened it, pulling out a plastic bag and handing it to Aaron whose arm bowed with the weight of it.

‘Emile said you asked for these. He wants them back, though.’ He said in a deliberately low voice.

Aaron glanced inside the heavy bag. There were two large circular magnets wrapped in felt rags, a hammer and a crowbar. He closed the bag quickly with a nod.

‘Cheers, mate. Wait here.’

He ran upstairs, putting the bag under his bed, before opening his bedside draw and finding the key then going back down. He handed the key over and watched Emile fasten it into the pocket of his coat.

‘Can you tell Emile, we er, left the place a bit of a mess, on account of my lad getting ill…, tell him I’m sorry. If he needs me to go back to clear up I can try and get there some time.’

Lucas shrugged.

‘I don’t think it will be a problem. Maybe I can go. I have time, no lectures today.’

Aaron saw Lucas look towards the living area and Aaron realized that Lucas knew that it was Robert he’d been with. Emile must have told him. He felt ashamed. Even if Lucas wasn’t judging him, he was judging himself.

‘Is he gay, then?’ Lucas suddenly asked, his voice still low.

Aaron frowned.

‘Dunno. I think so. Maybe.’
He tried to force back an image of Robert, his eyes blown wide with desire, the feel of his open mouth exploring his skin like a newfound country, his breathing noisy and unsteady each time they touched.

‘So this…’ Lucas’s hand swept around taking in the beautiful entrance hall, the apartment, the family home. ‘It’s what? A marriage of convenience?’

‘There are the kids,’ Aaron faltered.

‘That means nothing, you know that.’ Lucas answered. He started to pull on his beanie over his hair, and changed the subject. ‘Will we see you on Friday? With Matheo, too?’

‘I suppose.’ Aaron hesitated again. ‘Look, Lucas, Mat, he, er, he doesn’t know about …. It was a one off, yeah? Just a thing that happened. It’s over now.’

‘Of course, and it’s not my business, anyway.’

Aaron went back up to Josh’s room. His mind traveled to the bag under his bed. He’d known he could rely on Emile. He’d already searched everywhere for his passport, and found the safe in Robert and Chrissie’s room. Either it was in there, or Robert must have taken it to his office. All he needed now was for the house to be clear and then he would find out. He knew how to break a safe. He wasn’t a Dingle for nothing.

In the night he woke and listened in the dark. He could hear Josh crying in the hall. He was calling for Robert in a low voice mixed with sobs.

‘Daddy, Daddy, Daddy.’

He slipped out of bed like lightening and opened his door, to see Robert was already there. He’d swept Josh up onto his hip and was stroking a hand over his face and down his arm.

‘I’m here, Daddy’s here. Have you got a pain? Tell me love?’ He was whispering. Aaron heard Chrissie’s voice from their open bedroom door.

‘Is he alright?’

‘Yeah, yeah. He’s OK.’ Robert called back. As he turned he saw Aaron there.

‘Look. Aaron woke up, too, eh?’

Josh’s sobs had subsided to hiccups as his father held him.

‘Me and Aaron will look after you.’

Robert took Josh back to bed, and Aaron waited in the doorway, watching him until Josh was settled, his eyes closed as sleep rapidly overtook him.

‘Right.’ He said, as Robert closed the door. ‘Night, then.’

But Robert’s hand was on his wrist as he turned to go to his room.

He turned back to Robert in the dark of the corridor questioningly, glancing towards Robert’s bedroom now, wondering if Chrissie was still awake, listening out for him coming back to their matrimonial bed.
‘Wait.’ Robert said.

‘What for?’

And Robert was leaning too close. He was going to kiss him, there, in the dark, in the hallway, with his wife a few feet away.

‘No!’ Aaron stepped back, whispering hoarsely.

‘Don’t be like that.’ Robert answered, sending Aaron’s mind into another spiral of confusion.

‘You said we were done.’ He stammered.

But Robert stepped closer again.

‘I was upset.’

‘You don’t get to do this. To mess me around again.’

Robert’s mouth was so close. His eyes in the dark gleamed steadily so that Aaron felt transfixed.

‘You just don’t get it, do you?’ Robert whispered. ‘I’ve fallen for you. Why else would I have… the first time … with you?’

And Aaron knew there was nothing he could do to stop this happening. He couldn’t fight this. He waited, wondering if Robert could hear the pounding of his heart. He could feel his breath first against his lips, and then the soft pressure of his mouth against his and his fingers holding onto the side of his face, a thumb stroking down his cheekbone.

When they pulled apart he fought to catch his breath, grateful to the darkness, hoping that it would hide how much he wanted Robert now.

‘Your room.’ Robert muttered.

He took Aaron’s wrist again and steered him into his bedroom, and then onwards into the en suite bathroom where he closed the door, pushing Aaron back against it, pressing his lips against him again, but this time so hard their teeth and lips collided and Aaron caught the metal taste of blood.

Robert pulled back for breath and Aaron panted.

‘She’ll wonder where you are. She’ll come looking for you.’

But Robert shook his head.

‘She won’t, and if she does she won’t find me here.’

He drew the bolt on the door behind Aaron.

He pressed his lips hard over Aaron’s mouth again, but this time he moved his whole body forward against him.

Aaron wished he could find some hidden strength in himself to resist. He thought about the two rare earth magnets hidden under the bed. Before he’d slept he’d taken them out to inspect them. They would help him break into the safe with a little luck, and what they couldn’t do, the crowbar and hammer would cover. The magnets were dangerous, he knew. They attracted each other so strongly, without careful handling the force could cause all sorts of damage.
Now he surrendered himself to Robert’s mouth, gasping as he moved it down over his throat. Each caress from his lips and his tongue sending a current racing through him, until the heat built unbearably and he was so close he had to pull at Robert’s hair, pulling him away.

He swiftly reached his hands to the waistband of Robert’s long sleeved pajama top and pulled it up and off over his head, then ran his fingertips over the smooth skin of Robert’s chest down over his softer belly.

He couldn’t wait. Not tonight. Another night he would take his time. The hours in the attic room weren’t enough. He wanted to learn every curve, every nook and cranny of Robert’s body, set it to heart. But not tonight.

Not with her, sleeping, or lying awake wondering what was taking him so long.

He pressed the heel of his hand down hard over the front of Robert’s pajama trousers, his fingers round him through the material, holding his length, feeling him pulse, Robert rewarded him with another kiss, his tongue moving fast and rhythmically against his own. Then Aaron quickly tugged his pajamas down, until they were lying on the bathroom floor and Robert was kicking them aside, pushing his hips forward again so his now naked body was grinding at Aaron through his own sweat pants that he wore to bed.

Aaron took hold of Robert’s elbows and spun him round so now Robert was against the door but face forward, and Aaron’s fingers were running down his crack, his mouth on the back of his neck, nipping against his skin.

Then he stepped back and stripped off his own T-shirt and sweatpants too, watching Robert glance back at him as he waited.

‘Quick.’ Robert gasped.

‘I know. I know.’

He looked around the room and found what he was looking for, stepping sideways opening the bathroom cabinet he took out a condom and a tube of lube. He handed the lube to Robert.

‘Hold this.’

Then he unwrapped the condom with a shaking hand and rolled it down his length. After, he took the lube back and squeezed it liberally over his fingers and cock, stroking himself until he was slick and shiny and then rubbing some over Robert’s rim, feeling his body startle for a moment at the cold sensation.

He held onto Robert’s arms, just swaying his hips against him for a while, listening to Robert hum with anticipation.

‘Alright?’

Robert nodded, lifting his open hands high against the satin white bathroom door.

And Aaron pushed inside.

He was so tight, so amazing. Aaron had to reach down and pinch his own thigh sharply, using the pain to distract himself from coming even before he moved.

Robert was groaning. It was too loud. In panic, Aaron moved one hand round up over his mouth
then the other down to his cock, stroking him fast, praying he’d be ready to come quickly too.

Then he started to thrust hard and fast, the lube doing its work.

Robert’s mouth was open against his hand, his head pushing forward as Aaron pulled him back against his jaw, so that his neck was red with the strain of it.

It was too sweet, each thrust accelerating Aaron higher then he could remember until he stilled himself, deep inside Robert, hovering at the very peak, trying to hold onto the moment for as long as he could. And then his climax hit and he was overtaken by wave after wave, his thighs shuddering suddenly with the force of it, while he swallowed down the noises escaping from his throat. He realized Robert had lowered a hand to his cock, and quickly batted him away, taking him in his fist once again and almost instantly Robert was coming too, his cum shooting up against the door and spilling hot and thick over Aaron’s fingers.

Then Robert had turned, his back against the door, and he was pulling Aaron into his arms and just holding him there. Both their chests were heaving. Aaron could feel Robert’s heart gradually slowing to a normal pace.

After his breathing had steadied, Robert found his mouth with his own and Aaron kissed him back.

Then he stepped away and they both cleaned themselves up and pulled their clothes back on.

It had been fast. Now, in the aftermath, Aaron couldn’t believe how reckless they’d been. He imagined finding Chrissie on the other side of the locked bathroom door.

‘We are never doing that again!’ He hissed at Robert.

‘You’re right.’ Robert nodded. ‘But tomorrow’s parents’ evening, so she’ll be out, and then we’ll need a Plan B.’

‘We don’t even have a Plan A,’ Aaron objected.

‘Who lets a detail like that get in their way?’ Robert grinned suddenly, and Aaron looking at him, couldn’t help himself from smiling back.

Aaron unlocked the door. His room, lit by his bedside lamp as he’d left it not so very long ago, was undisturbed. Robert opened the bedroom door to the hallway and they were met by a peaceful silence.

Robert turned back to Aaron who stood behind him.

‘Goodnight, Aaron,’ he whispered, leaning forwards for one last kiss before he went. ‘I mean… it was a good night.’

Aaron watched him go and went back to the bathroom to pee. He thought about Robert’s words, he could hear them over and over in his head I’ve fallen for you. I’ve fallen for you. I’ve fallen for you.

He bit his lip, trying to force down a smile.

‘You’re an idiot Aaron Dingle,’ he told himself. ‘It’ll all end in tears.’

But he knew it wouldn’t stop him, would it?
While Chrissie is out at the parent's evening Robert and Aaron spend time alone together. The next day Aaron cuts some ties but late in the evening reality hits back at him.

‘Tell me stuff, then.’

‘Why? What do ya wanna know?’

‘I dunno, tell me… about you… ’

Robert’s voice was so gentle and Aaron could see his eyes trace over his scars. For a moment, he panicked, wondering if he was going to ask about them. He wasn’t ready to talk about himself, give anything away. As if he sensed it, Robert settled further back onto the pillow beside him as they lay shoulder to shoulder on Aaron’s single bed.

‘Tell me about where you grew up, then, where you lived, before you came here to Paris.’

Aaron’s nodded, almost imperceptibly, turning down the corners of his mouth. So Robert wanted to hear him talk about Emmerdale. He got it. He wanted to talk about Emmerdale, too.

Under the lamp, on the bedside table, the baby monitor from Doli’s room winked quietly. Next to it, his phone, Robert’s phone, a ripped red and blue foil condom wrapper, more condoms, an almost empty bottle of OK lube, a Rolex watch, coins and a box of tissues. Some Euro notes had fallen onto the carpet, lying next to the tissues Robert had discarded after using them to wipe up over his stomach and chest. He’d leaned over Aaron so that their skin, still hot and damp, had stuck together, and he’d dropped a pouting kiss against his upper lip as he’d reached across for more tissues from the box.

Now he spoke again.

‘Come on, tell me.’

‘Ok, so, before I came here … it’s just a regular farming village, you know? There’s some pretty serious agriculture, and dairy. It’s all muck, not a lot of brass…. Some of the farms go way back. But I think it’s hard to make a living.’

Aaron saw Robert blink up at the ceiling. Aaron had heard of Jack Sugden, course he had. He wanted to tell him that he knew, but then he’d have to explain how, and Robert still had his passport, still had all the power.

‘Most of the blokes, my mates, they work on the farms. Or make like they do.’ He thought about messing about on the quad bikes with Adam, his mother bawling them out.

He wasn’t good at this. Just talking. He glanced at Robert’s lips, still red from their first furious coupling that evening, already wanting to kiss him again, and they wouldn’t have much time until Chrissie was back from the parents evening with Lachlan. But Robert wasn’t over with the
conversation yet.

‘Go on… What else?’ he asked.

‘What do you want me to say? There’s er… there’s the pub, actually me Mum owns half of it.’ Again, he glanced at Robert, trying to read his face. He wondered why Robert had stayed away so long. ‘It’s kinda’ like the heart of the village. Everything kicks off in there.’

‘Yeah?’

Their eyes met and held each other’s for a moment, until Robert turned onto his side, resting on his elbow, looking down at Aaron.

‘But you didn’t work on the farms? You didn’t want that, did you? You wanted something different, then?’

Aaron squinted at him.

‘I worked in my uncle’s garage. Like I told you before.’

Robert lowered his mouth over his, lips open, kissing him deep, slow and hard, before pulling back. Aaron wanted him even more, now. He shifted his hips under the cover, ready. But Robert hadn’t done with the questions.

‘Why’d ya do it? The garage? The fire?’

Aaron pulled himself up against the headboard. He hadn’t seen the question coming. Robert sat up too, next to him. The cover fell to their hips, and Aaron tugged at it, holding it up over his stomach. He had to keep Adam safe. That was what it was all about, everything. His mind raced. What reason could he give? But Robert’s eyes were locked on his.

‘I didn’t. I didn’t do it.’ He blurted out, and then again more slowly, spreading his hands. ‘I didn’t do it.’

He felt Robert’s arm slip round his shoulder and rested his head back suddenly against him, against the wall.

‘You believe me.’

He couldn’t quite take it in. It shouldn’t matter, but it mattered so much.

‘Of course, I believe you! Why wouldn’t I? I believe everything you tell me. I told you before, you’re not alone, Aaron.’

‘But, why…’

‘Stop talking now.’

Robert inclined his head and found Aaron’s mouth with his own, searching with his tongue and Aaron, his heart still pounding, responded, watching in wonder as Robert closed his eyes. Now, as he kissed him, Robert’s fingers gently stroked down over his shoulder, onto his chest and down over his stomach, tugging away the cover from where Aaron was still holding it loosely in his fingers, so that it slid sideways off the bed onto the floor.

Robert’s fingers continued to stroke purposely downwards to the base of his cock then round and further down, caressing his balls lightly before moving back to his shaft. He reached both hands
behind Aaron, and started to tug at the pillow.

‘Shift up.’

Aaron lifted his hips and Robert pulled the pillow under him, so his hips were raised higher as he sat, and then Robert pulled at his knees, shuffling between them. Aaron’s erect cock was shining as it pressed against the lean folds of his stomach. Robert slid back on the sheets. Aaron watched his body move, the pale white curve of his solid arse as he settled on his elbows on his stomach.

Then Robert put his mouth over him, taking him all the way to the base down his throat, humming noisily, his eyes closed, sucking back and forth. Aaron panted, tipping his head back against the wall again as his cock throbbed inside the hot space of Robert’s mouth.

Aaron started to plan where this was going to go next. He could pull Robert up over him onto his lap, take him like that.

But Robert seemed to have other ideas. He pulled again at his body, moving Aaron so he was lying now on his back on the bed, pulling the pillow down under his hips again.

Aaron could hardly breathe.

Was he going to do what he’d wanted for a while now, not knowing how to ask? He stayed still, not wanting to wreck it, just watching in awe as Robert reached for a condom. Then he frowned with dismay as Robert put it down again.

‘What?’ He asked gently as Robert shuffled back off the bed. ‘Robert?’

Robert standing, picked up his jeans and found his wallet, then opened it and took out a condom in a shiny black foil wrapper.

‘Got my own.’ He grinned. ‘It’s just you know, it’s the brand I use.’ He went on, moving rapidly back onto the bed on his knees. Aaron wiped an eye, amused, now, half curious, half relieved. He reached an arm forwards.

‘Show me then…’

Robert held the wrapper at arm’s length, playfully.

‘Don’t be a prick. Show me.. ‘  Aaron raised himself onto an elbow. He grabbed Robert’s arm and Robert gave in, pressing his lips together, shaking his head.

Aaron took the foil and turning it, he read the label.

‘OK. So … Really?’

‘Well you must have noticed by now.’ Robert gave a lopsided grin.

‘Noticed what?’ Aaron flirted.

They locked lips again and the laughter faded.

‘So.. do you want me or not?’ Robert asked, his voice full of gravel.

‘I want you.’ Aaron answered. ‘I want you. If this is what you want?’ He knew Robert hadn’t done this before, with anyone.
He waited while Robert rolled the condom down over his arching length.

Then Robert pushed him back again and raising his knees he reached for the lube.

Aaron’s heart was rocketing.

‘You sure about this?’ He asked again.

‘You know,’ Robert leaned forward, his cock at Aaron’s rim, pressing now against his ready entrance. ‘You know.’ He repeated as he pushed hard and then he was inside, sliding in slowly, so slowly and Aaron’s eyes were closed tight as he adjusted to the sensation.

He reached around Robert’s back with his hands, vaguely conscious that his fingers would be leaving bruises. There was nothing he could do. As Robert filled him, he knew there was no going back now, he was lost completely in this crazy bad decision, this affair, not a one off like he’d told Ed, not a casual fling, not to him, at least, not anymore. An affair.

Robert started to thrust hard and he was burning up. Their open mouths found each other hungrily.

‘OK?’ Robert asked.

‘Yes, yes.’ Aaron whispered back into his ear. ‘Go on, go on. It’s good, yeah?’

Robert started to thrust faster until Aaron wasn’t sure what was pleasure and what was pain, knowing only that he wanted it to go on forever, but that it wasn’t going to last much longer because the sweetness and heat was radiating from his arse into all his body, and pooling fast in his groin.

When his climax hit, he could hear himself starting to call out Robert’s name and swallowed it back, swearing instead. Then Robert was swearing too as he came deep inside him and they were still moving together, riding it out, until he collapsed over him, waiting there, still inside until their breathing started to come down and Aaron, getting crushed under Robert’s weight, eventually pushed him away.

Robert reached for his watch and put it on.

‘Fuck. They’ll be back soon.’

He stood, picking up his clothes and his phone and left the room naked to go and shower in his own bathroom, while Aaron, pulling up the cover, turned on his side. He would shower, too, he thought, but for now, his bed still disturbed and Robert’s scent on his skin, he drifted off to sleep.

In the night, he woke to hear Josh crying again in the hall, Robert’s voice, taking him back to bed. Josh was talking about another bad dream. He hated that he had these nightmares. He’d had them before, but even more now since being in hospital.

He thought about getting up, but then decided not, afraid that Chrissie might be awake too. He turned over, and noticed the sore slightly bruised feeling in his arse with a smile. He wondered if Robert felt sore, too. He sincerely hoped so. He wished Robert was with him, just to sleep next to him, that’s all. Not for the sex, well maybe for the sex, too, but just lying with his arms around him. He was being soft. His mind shifted to the plastic bag with the break in tools, still under the bed. They’d been there all the time when Robert was in the room. He still needed to crack the safe and get his passport back, but maybe that could wait, at least a little while longer. It just didn’t
The next day Robert stayed home again.

‘Do you really need to stay?’ Chrissie had asked in the kitchen over breakfast. Aaron blushed as she handed him a shopping list. He couldn’t meet her eyes.

‘You stay, then.’ Robert's mouth was set. He glared at her coldly, but she didn’t answer, instead packing her briefcase ready for work. Aaron saw Robert close his eyes in frustration. ‘I’m staying with our son. He needs to know we’re here for him. He’s started with the nightmares again.’

‘Well if he’s got you, he doesn’t need me.’

‘He needs you to be a mother to him. He needs you. More than Lachlan, more than Doli right now!’

But she left anyway, Robert frowning after her.

‘I don’t get it.’ Aaron said quietly.

Robert’s eyes focused on his face.

‘It’s not your business, Aaron.’ He said quietly and left the room.

Later Aaron got Josh up in his pajamas and while Robert worked, he helped the kids to decorate the Christmas tree, watching their cheeks flushed with excitement, glad to see the color returning to Josh’s face.

When Aaron went into the kitchen to start preparing lunch, Robert followed him. He pushed him up against the kitchen counter and kissed him, and Aaron kissed him back with his hands holding onto his wrists, an eye on the open door.

‘I’m working on plan B. I’ve booked us a hotel room, for Saturday.’ Robert said with a grin. ‘Not to stay, just for the day. Unless you’ve got plans. With your boyfriend?’

Aaron shook his head, looking back in Robert’s eyes then looking shyly away. He swallowed.

‘No plans.’

When Mat called him, Aaron squinted at Robert through the entrance to the kitchen as he sat in the sofa, working on his laptop.

It had been a long time since they’d talked, not since the incident with the car. Aaron held the phone tightly to his ear,

‘Où est-tu, mon chéri?’ Mat asked. ‘You’ve been so quiet?’

‘Yeah. I, err… I’ve been looking after my little lad, haven’t I?’

‘Robert Sugden’s son?’

‘Yeah.’
Mat lowered his voice. ‘Alors, when do I see you? I want you to do a final sitting, for your portrait, it’s been too long, non?’

Aaron closed his eyes, seeing an image of Robert moving over him, his pale shoulders shining with sweat, his lips open and eyes dark with desire.

‘About that. I don’t think we…’ He struggled to finish the sentence.

He heard Mat’s voice change, he could hear the disguised hurt.

‘OK. Je comprends. It wasn’t as if this was anything, anyway. Have a nice life.’

Aaron looked down at the floor wondering what he was doing.

Later Aaron came down from putting Doli down for her nap. Josh was sleeping again, too. He hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. He wanted Robert now, wondering if he could pluck up the nerve to suggest they go to his room again.

Then his phone rang once more and he answered. It was Ed.

‘I’ve been worrying about you. Look. I’m free tomorrow, Friday night, your night off, isn’t it? Let’s meet. We can talk.’

Aaron hesitated. Robert walked out of the living room, wearing his jacket over his sweater. Aaron turned away from him, listening to Ed talk.

‘Sorry, mate. I can’t leave Josh yet. Another time, yeah?’

He heard the silence.

‘Careful, Aaron.’ Ed said.

When he ended the call, Robert turned him and kissed him on the mouth. He lifted his hands to hold on to the front of Robert’s sweater.

‘Who was that?’ Robert asked in a low voice ‘Your boyfriend?’

‘Uh, No!’ Aaron answered.

‘Good.’ He looked away. ‘Look. I need to go out for a while.’

Aaron turned down the corners of his mouth.

‘OK.’ He shrugged. When Robert had gone, he swallowed, pushing down his disappointment.

In the late evening, Aaron sat in his room, leaning back on the bed, one hand playing with the string of his hoodie. The television was on. It was an international match and his mind kept drifting. He could have broken the safe that afternoon with the kids asleep and no one home, but he hadn’t. He closed his eyes, thinking about Robert. One more day and they would be in a hotel room together, just the two of them. He tipped up the bottle of beer that he’d taken up to his room, taking the last remains of the liquid, then looked at his watch, it was already nearly midnight, he should sleep really, but instead he decided to watch to the end of the match. He’d get another beer.
He stood up and opened his door. Everyone would be asleep now. He made his way quietly downstairs in his bare feet on the wooden floor.

There was a lamp still on in the living room, and then he saw the TV playing on mute, some film or other, it looked like a romance. Without thinking his eyes darted to the sofa. Robert was there with Chrissie, his shirt was off so that his broad pale back shone in the lamp light and his trousers were unfastened, lowered down over his hips. Chrissie’s blouse was open, her skirt up around her waist. Aaron could see Robert’s hand between her thighs. Her hands were on his shoulders as he kissed her, their bodies leaning close in motion together.

She opened her eyes and gasped. Robert turned, Aaron could see his wet lips, and saw his darkened eyes suddenly dilate as he saw Aaron standing there.

‘I told you we should go to bed.’ Chrissie muttered.

‘Sorry, er.. so sorry.’ Aaron stammered and turning he fled back upstairs.

On his bed, he placed his hands over his face, breathing noisily through the pain in his chest. What in heaven’s name had he been thinking? That, that.. Robert and Chrissie didn’t? That he didn’t love her? Somehow, he’d been making up this story in his head. But for Robert it was only ever about cheating, and Aaron had got it wrong, all wrong.

He started to pull on his training shoes, tugging at the laces roughly. He heard their voices on the stairs as they came up to bed and waited. Grabbing his coat, he crept downstairs and out into the night.
Love

Chapter Summary

Emile supports Aaron who tries to sort his head out, but Robert has other plans, but at the last minute everything changes and Aaron shares a declaration.

Emile answered the door, fastening up the belt of a thigh length dressing gown. When he saw Aaron, standing shivering at the entrance to the apartment, his face filled with concern.

He glanced up at the small silver clock on the wall. It was after three in the morning. Aaron must be in trouble or why would he be turning up in the middle of the night? He told him to sit down then turned to the open plan kitchen to put the kettle on for something warm to drink.

Looking up from the kitchen, he could see through to the bedroom where Lucas was asleep on their bed. The cover must have slipped off him when he’d got up to answer the doorbell, and he was lying naked on his front with his head on one side, one leg bent up at the knee. He stepped quickly to the entrance of the room and quietly closed the door, then handed Aaron a steaming mug of tea and watched him circle his hands around it, looking for the warmth.

‘How long have you been outside in the cold?’

‘A while.’

‘You’re in trouble? What happened? Did you get caught breaking into the safe?’

‘No, I haven’t even …, I didn’t break it, not yet.’ Aaron answered.

Emile sat, lowering his brows, looking more closely at Aaron’s face. He spoke gently.

‘Then there’s only one other explanation. You’re in love?’

He saw the tears starting to fall at his words. Aaron sat forwards over his mug of tea and nodded. Emile tried to hide a smile.

He took Aaron’s tea and placed it on the table, turning him and pulling him into a hug, a hand rubbing his back, Aaron’s chin on his shoulder.

‘Hey! It’s allowed to be in love, you know.’

It must be Robert Sugden. He’d felt it, that night they’d bumped into them in the street in Le Marais, the tension between them, and then he’d seen how Robert had pulled Aaron into a doorway and kissed him, when they’d thought no one was watching. So much passion; how could that not invite love in?

‘He’s married, isn’t he? I knew it and I still let it happen.’

‘Mon Coeur, this is Paris, more than half the city is in love with a married man. The pain is sweet, non? Don’t be so English about it.’
Aaron rolled his eyes, wiping them with a sleeve of his sweater.

Emile sat back, keeping an arm around his shoulder and Aaron let his head fall against him, taking comfort from this dependable older man.

Lucas appeared at the door of the bedroom, still naked, his athletic body swaying with sleep.

‘Pourquoi Aaron est-il ici?’ He asked Emile, blinking at them both.


Lucas raised his eyebrows sleepily, then walked through to the bathroom, while Aaron lowered his eyes.

Emile squeezed his shoulder again.

‘Look, give yourself some time out if you need it. Sleep now. Tomorrow you can hang out here. I’ll be at work, Lucas has exams. You’ll have the place to yourself.’

Aaron nodded gratefully. He hated leaving Josh and Doli, even for a day. But Emile was right, his head was so messed up and he needed time to think. He’d walked out of the door in the middle of the night with nothing but his coat, and he’d made his way here blindly through the Paris streets, crossing the bridge and following the Seine in the dark, the city Christmas lights reflected in the water, the Eiffel Tower shimmering in the distance.

As he’d walked, he’d known he was cold from the way his teeth chattered and his breath left a slowly evaporating white mist in the icy air. But his chest had burnt. Every time he thought about Robert touching Chrissie, being touched, wanting her, he couldn’t handle it. So he knew Emile was right, he must have fallen in love. And it didn’t make any sense, so he needed time to work it out and to work out how to fall out of love again. Being in love was a mug’s game.

Lucas came back through and touched his fingertips against Emile’s as he passed.

‘Come back to bed’ he whispered in French.

Emile nodded and dropped a kiss on Aaron’s forehead, before retiring into the bedroom, leaving him alone. Aaron lay down and wrapped his arms around himself. Tomorrow Robert had a hotel booked for the two of them, but the question was, did he really want to go? Or could he find the strength to end this now?

Robert sat in the Porsche in the dark, listening to the silence of the night.

His hands hesitated against the steering wheel. He’d been driving around for two hours now, looking for Aaron, motoring slowly past the park where they’d played football with Josh, alongside the Stade de Paris, then taking the route to the Trocadero gardens and into the city. When a police car appeared in the distance, he’d sped up. There were some rent boys, half-dressed in spite of the bitter cold, selling it near to the bridge, and the last thing he needed was to be picked up for curb crawling. He’d driven on until he reached Le Marais, and then pulled over, turning off the engine.

He closed his eyes. He could still see the expression on Aaron’s face when he’d seen him with Chrissie. Why, oh, why hadn’t he just taken it to the bedroom?
After, he’d waited for Chrissie to sleep, and then knocked gently on Aaron’s door. When he’d found the room empty, he’d gone back to the bedroom and dressed quickly. For a moment, he’d paused in the dark, watching Chrissie’s face, he knew what would make Aaron feel safe. A couple of minutes later he touched her shoulder and making up a whispered excuse about the burglar alarm going off at the office, he’d headed out.

Now he sat in the car, thinking about Aaron. Somehow, he’d crept in under the radar, breaking down the self-imposed rule of look don’t touch that he’d been following for as long as he could remember. He’d been trying so hard. And it had been working, hadn’t it? It wasn’t as if he was gay. But once they’d kissed, once they’d gone to bed that first time, it had been like the opening of a dam, and all the desire he felt was unstoppable.

And nobody knew. He looked around suddenly at the empty streets, shining in the cold night air.

Being with Aaron, the rough feel of his beard against his face and body, the shocking sweet serious pain when he entered inside him, discovering sources of ecstasy in his own body that he hadn’t known existed before, it had left him aching for more. And he’d needed to feel that hard body surrendered beneath him, to give as well as receive, drunk on his scent, on his voice in the dark, on his perfect tightness.

It was taboo, it was their secret, and it was spectacular.

Robert breathed deeply, running a hand through his hair, then moving it to the inside of his jacket, feeling in the inner pocket there with a satisfied nod. He wasn’t going to give him up. But Aaron was vulnerable, he didn’t need the scars on his body to tell him that. He pushed every other thought away. He just wanted him home and safe, he told himself.

That was all he wanted.

But he couldn’t find him.

He hit the steering wheel with frustration.

Emile and Lucas were making love in the bedroom, Lucas answering yes, and yes again, while Emile murmured to him at length in French. Aaron, blinking at the morning winter sun filtering through the shutters, couldn’t make out what they were saying, but he heard their conversation suddenly cease and Lucas moaning as he approached his climax. Then both of them were gasping noisily. Aaron turned on his side and closed his eyes, trying not to feel envious of their relationship, wishing himself back to sleep.

He shouldn’t be there at all. He should be with the kids. He felt a sudden stab of anxiety, what if Doli was crying and no one got her up, if they hadn’t realized he’d gone? But she had quite a pair of lungs, they would notice. And Robert would make them breakfast. Josh would love that, all the attention from his dad. Robert was so tender with Josh, Aaron couldn’t help himself from feeling in awe of their relationship, to be loved by a parent like that, by a father.

He had this stupid daydream that would sneak up on him sometimes. Even though he knew it was wrong, he couldn’t help the image forming; the four of them, Robert and himself sharing a double bed, getting up and taking care of Josh and Doli, a proper little family. It was pathetic and desperate, and now, when it came again uninvited, he chased it away with his angry beating heart. He turned gratefully to the bedroom door as Emile emerged with a towel in his arms on the way to the shower.
‘Sleep.’ Emile said to him with a grin. ‘It’s still early. Sleep will do you good.’

Aaron nodded and closed his eyes again obediently.

‘Where are you? I don’t understand it, Aaron has just vanished, and you know I’ve got my new salon opening today. What the hell am I supposed to do? Where on earth is he?’

‘Vanished? Really? No, wait. I remember now and I’d completely forgotten about it. I was meant to tell you.’ He thought fast. ‘He’s meeting someone at the airport. He’d asked for the time off. His uncle or someone coming into town for the weekend on an early flight. And I would have been home, but then there was the break in at the office…’ He looked around him at coffee shop, still half empty in the early morning, where he was leaning against a counter with an Americano in front of him. ‘And I can’t leave yet. I have to wait for a locksmith to fix the door.’

‘Can’t someone else do that?’

‘Err no… the police want me to go and file a report or something. Look, call the agency, maybe they can send someone for the day. Or if that fails, didn’t the neighbor have a teenage lass you could ask?’

‘I thought you didn’t want us leaving Josh?’

Robert closed his eyes for a moment.

‘He was a lot better yesterday, and he slept through. And I will be back as soon as I can.’ He meant it, but Josh needed Aaron as much as he did.

Robert drained his coffee and headed out of the coffee shop, stopping at the entrance of an apartment block nestled between a barber’s shop and a traditional café selling iced pastries. He looked at the names and numbers by the door, and pressed a buzzer, keeping his finger down for longer than necessary and then finishing with a series of short blasts.

He heard the echo of the intercom.

‘It’s Robert. Let me in.’

Matheo answered the door in shorts, his chest bare, his brown eyes blinking, his curly hair tousled from a night of sleep. Robert raised his fingers against his ribcage, pushing him backwards, step by step as he entered inside the studio. His eyes scanned the lofty space, looking through the half open doorway to the bedroom and noticing the empty unmade bed which presumably Mat had just left.

There was no sign of Aaron.

Matheo looked down at Robert’s hand still against his chest, then looked up again, eyes narrowed.

‘Pourquoi es-tu ici? Why are you here?’

His voice was shaking slightly, sensing the adrenaline firing now through Robert’s body.

‘You fucked in my car!’

Robert pushed him suddenly so that Matheo was forced to take a step backwards for balance. He spread his hands in appeal.
‘OK, but it was nearly two weeks ago, I know you love your car mais… why are you here, now?’

Robert had to think quickly.

‘The deals off. I’m not going to work with you, I’m not going to pay you another cent.’

‘Wha…? Merde! Because I fucked in your car? I need that money. I’ve put in a lot of hours. It’s hardly going to happen again, anyway.’

‘Why?’

‘Because… how do I know why? Nous nous sommes séparés.’

‘So, he ended it?’ Robert’s voice changed suddenly.

‘It was mutual,’ Matheo lied, ‘and anyway, why do you care? You want him for yourself?’

‘I’m not gay!’

‘Sure, sure, Robert. You tell yourself that.’

Robert pushed him again.

‘He’s my family’s au pair! He doesn’t need to associate with a lowlife like you.’

Robert gestured at the paintings of nudes stacked up against the walls with a sneer, and then suddenly halted, his eyes fixed on a painting, a work in progress, resting in front of some other canvases.

‘What’s that?’

He’d known, known from Aaron’s blushes that he must have been modelling for his artist boyfriend. But it didn’t make it any easier to be confronted with the evidence. The painting was skilled, the line and rich color, but more than that, Matheo had captured a look that Robert recognized so well, looking back from the canvas, a combination of defiance and vulnerability, Aaron’s strength and Aaron’s need all in one expression, in his eyes, in the the set of his beautiful body.

‘It’s not quite finished. I wanted a final sitting, but then…’

Robert looked about him, and saw some charcoal studies now, he started rifling through Mat’s sketch pads, looking for more. He found a polaroid photo next to the drawings and picked it up.

Matheo closed his eyes.

‘Look this is intimidation, I want you to leave now, or I’ll call the police.’

‘I’m going to buy them. I want to buy them all.’

‘Then I want a good price.’

When he saw the set of Robert’s face, he fell silent.

‘OK. You decide what they’re worth.’

‘Deliver them to my office, today.’
On the street, Robert stopped and ran hand through his hair. He just had no idea where Aaron could be. Maybe he’d booked himself into a hotel room. He needed to calm down and think.

He was in Bar West, standing by the bar, jostled by the arms and elbows of other club goers. Jackson had offered him a drink and they were playing kiss and chase. Aaron had said yes to the drink, looking at the light in Jackson’s eyes and then walked away smiling into the crowd, knowing that Jackson would follow. And he did. Placing a hand on his shoulder, Jackson turned him round to face him and leaned in for a kiss. Aaron closed his eyes, his heart fluttering as their tongues touched, feeling the thrill run down his body. But when he opened his eyes, it was Robert, Robert’s scent, Robert’s body pressed up close against him, both hands holding his face, his tongue stroking against his, and his pulse suddenly rocketed so hard, he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t keep his body steady. He could see Jackson watching them. He could hear his voice above the crowd.

‘You’ll love someone, and you’ll know when it happens.’

Aaron woke up.

He could hear the shower water running, then stop. He sat up swiftly, pulling the blanket around him, pushing the heel of his hand down against the hard on that had formed as a result of the dream. He’d slept in his clothes, now he felt hot and confused.

Lucas appeared, a white towel wrapped around his waist, his hair wet and sleek above his green eyes.

‘There’s fresh coffee.’ He said.

Aaron caught the smell of it. He’d really prefer a cup of strong tea, but…

‘Thanks.’

‘Don’t thank me. Thank Emile. He’d move heaven and earth for you. He really cares about you.’

‘Yeah. He’s been a good friend.’

Lucas disappeared into the bedroom, emerging shortly after, dressed, with a satchel bag in his arms, looking distracted.

‘So, I’ve got exams. You probably won’t be here when I get back… see you around, Aaron.’

‘Good luck.’

Aaron said after him as he went out of the door.

He decided a shower would be a good idea. He knew where Emile kept the bath towels in the airing cupboard and, taking one, stepped into the bathroom, stripping off his clothes. He stood under the stream of water, thinking about his dream, about Emile’s words, about the pain being sweet. Only it wasn’t what he wanted. Turning his face upwards, he scrunched up his eyes, feeling his heart race again. He wanted Robert to himself.

Outside on the street a voice called out to Robert. Looking up he saw Lucie walking towards him swiftly, wearing a woolen hat and scarf against the cold, a smile of greeting on her lips, shining
with freshly applied lipstick. When she approached, she leaned up for a kiss on the mouth and he could smell her perfume.

‘I’m on my way to the office, are you coming in? We could travel together. I’m so glad Joshua is well again, non? You must be so relieved.’

‘He’s on the mend. Thanks.’ He couldn’t focus on the conversation. He needed her gone so he could think.

‘We missed you at work.’

‘Everything seems to have been running smoothly enough.’

‘OK. I’ll rephrase that.’ She gave a low laugh. ‘I missed you.’

‘I’m sure you found plenty of things to entertain you. You were always good at that.’

‘What? Like skyping with Brazil?’

‘That, too.’

‘So, are we skyping tonight?’ Lucie raised a hand and touched the front of his leather jacket.

‘Err… No.’

‘But you want me.’

‘No.’ Robert said quietly, looking away.

‘Don’t deny it, Robert. I know you. You want me.’ She tilted her head on one side.

‘I’m sorry, but, you were there and … all too willing, it was easy. I felt absolutely nothing. When we went to Valence. I reckon you noticed by then, I’d already lost whatever interest I’d ever had.’

He watched her face change.

‘No. You must be lying. I see the way you look at me.’

She leaned up to kiss him again, but Robert pulled his head back, looking bored.

‘You’re seeing someone else. That Friday night, your fantasy skype meeting with Brazil. Who are you seeing, Robert? Who is she?’

Robert didn’t have the patience for this. He really didn’t care.

‘I need to get back to my family. Have a good day at the office.’

He turned and started walking away, feeling her eyes following him. It really wasn’t his problem, and he had more important things to think about. He pushed his hands back in his pockets and felt one hand fold around the polaroid picture of Aaron. He pressed his lips together, frowning. He couldn’t cope with the thought of Matheo looking at him like that, touching him. He wanted Aaron to himself. He would take his own pictures. But first he needed to find him.

His fingers folded around the photograph, crushing it and then he felt something else there. He quickly pulled it out. It was a business card. Emile’s business card. Of course! Emile had found
them the apartment. Aaron trusted him.

That’s where he’d be.

The only problem was, he didn’t know where Emile lived, and he didn’t know how to find out.

Robert’s telephone rang. He looked at the number in surprise, shaking his head with a smile and then answered.

‘Finally!’ he said. ‘It’s not the best of times, mind you. But I’ll forgive you, this once.’

Aaron stepped out of the shower and dried himself, then wrapped the bath towel around his waist and picking up his clothes, walked out of the bathroom.

He knew he was there, even before he saw him. Not that he could miss him. He was standing in the middle of the room, wearing his leather jacket, his back towards him, looking out of the window, his hands deep in his pockets. He smelt of sweat and leather and winter. He was so still, as if he’d been captured by the light filtering through the blinds.

Aaron should be angry, disappointed to have been discovered in this sanctuary. But he wasn’t. Everything made sense when Robert was near him.

‘How did you find me?’

Robert turned at his voice, and Aaron saw his eyes suddenly dilate, startled at the sight of him not dressed, raking up and down his shower warm body, his still wet hair. Robert’s eyes had an almost feverish look, and after a moment he looked away, his gaze roaming around the apartment before settling on a point just beyond Aaron’s right ear.

‘I … I saw Lucas on the street. He let me in.’

His voice was too light, and he was still avoiding Aaron’s eyes. Had something happened to Josh? Or was he upset with him for leaving like he had? Aaron stood, holding his clothes, watching him, trembling now and not knowing why.

‘Look. I’m sorry I left like that. I just needed some time, you know, in my head. It’s hard, being in the same house, you and her, and I saw you and I let it get to me, it just messed my head up for a bit, so….’

Robert interrupted.

‘I know, look. I …’ He moved his hands to the inside of his jacket and pulled out a flat yellow package. Aaron knew straight away what it was, expertly repacked, as if it had never been opened. It was his passport from Cain. ‘This came for you. I signed for it. Maybe it’s something important. You might need it.’

Aaron’s head reeled. Why would Robert say that?

‘And, I’ll get your stuff to you. If you let me know a forwarding address, or I can send it here if you think that’s better.’

The silence built between them. Aaron opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and shaking.
‘You don’t want me to come home, then?’

There was another silence. Aaron felt his heart falling away.

‘If you need money Aaron. Whatever you need…’ Robert went on. He closed his eyes.

‘My lad, Josh… and Doli…?’ Aaron asked. ‘How… what will you tell them?’

He was battling so hard not to cry. He mustn’t. He just mustn’t, not until Robert had gone.

‘Don’t.’

‘Is it cos of Chrissie? Did she find out?’

‘No.’

‘Then it's because of me.'

'Aaron, no. It's not you. Believe me.'

‘Robert, something’s happened? What is it? Just tell me? Talk to me.’

‘Why are you so determined to make this harder than it needs to be?’

‘Because I love you.’
Chapter Summary

Aaron stays with Emile and Lucas. Lucas struggles to understand why Emile is so concerned. Chrissie gets a surprise call. Robert is inconsistent.

Chapter Notes

CW Reference to self harm

It had all got so blurry in his head.

He couldn’t remember now if Robert had left him because he’d said that he loved him, or whether it was the other way around. Why had he said that? He couldn’t fathom it. As if Robert would feel anything for him? As if anyone could.

‘Aaron!’

He looked dazedly around and noticed that he was sitting on the floor in Emile’s apartment, leaning with his back up against the kitchen bar. Emile was gently removing the empty Vodka bottle from his hand. As he squinted up he could make out Lucas, too, standing behind Emile, arms folded, still wearing a beanie and anorak. The sky looked dark through the slats of the unopened blind. It must be late then, but he had no idea where the time had gone.

‘Aaron, come on, mon cher, can you stand? Let’s get you up!’

‘I can’t.’

In his head, he was explaining, that Robert didn’t want him to go back; that he’d lost his job, his home and his family, that he’d lost Robert. But he sealed his lips tight. He didn’t want them to know; if they knew they’d think he was needy and pathetic. That he’d been jealous and ruined everything. They’d work out that he deserved it. He hated himself.

‘Oui, tu peux.’ Emile insisted.

He bent his shoulders, and Aaron, on automatic pilot, wrapped his arms around him and let himself be pulled up to standing.

As soon as he stood, swaying dangerously, he felt his head turn and his stomach start to heave.

Too late for the bathroom. There were flashing lights in front of his eyes and he was vomiting pure alcohol and stomach juices, coating Emile’s arm and the kitchen counter and floor.

‘Merde!’ Lucas called, but Emile held onto him, head bent with concern.

‘It’s OK. Aaron. It’s OK. Let’s go the bathroom, eh? I’ve got you.’
And then he was kneeling over the toilet bowl, his temple throbbing. Emile’s hand was stroking deliberately against his back, while his other hand held his forehead, and he retched over and over, until at last the pain in his stomach blotted out the panic in his head.

He woke up feeling cold, listening. Had Josh had another bad dream? His eyes felt dry like sandpaper. He turned, blinking at the closed shutters over the window, and then felt his breathing shallow as he remembered where he was and why.

In his head, he thought about taking Josh home from school every day, he could hear the wheels of Doli’s buggy as he pushed her along the pavement, Josh chattering by his side, his fingers gripping onto the sleeve of Aaron’s hoodie. He pulled up his hand from inside the cover, and wiped his eyes as they smarted with fresh tears in the dark. It was the children he was crying for, not Robert.

Robert, in his room lit only by the bedside lamp, moving inside him with powerful sweet strokes, taking possession of his body, the slip of his pale damp skin under his fingers, the taste of salt and illicit sex on his lips.

‘Because I love you!’

He’d said it that morning. He couldn’t unsay it. Robert would just have to deal with it.

Aaron had raised his chin defiantly. He’d stood in front of him, waiting for him to say something back, watching his eyes widen, his face turn white. Robert had stepped back, further away from him, turning sideways, pushing his hands deep in his jeans pockets. And Aaron had known at that moment he was losing him.

‘You’re confused.’

‘I’m not. I know how I feel. I think you’re the one who’s confused.’

‘But this, us, it’s not real.’

Aaron’s chin had gone up again.

‘It feels real enough to me.’

‘This isn’t a love story.’

Aaron had lifted a hand to wipe his eyes.

‘I’m married. To Chrissie. I love Chrissie.’

‘You said yourself, she isn’t enough.’ He’d answered, but even then, he was no longer sure if it was Robert or himself he was trying to convince.

‘Aaron look, I’m sorry if I made you think this is something it’s not. But for me, feelings don’t come into it.’

‘Yeah, well, you’ve made that clear enough. But then, why did you come here? Why did you look for me just to end it? If it’s just sex to you… then…’

He’d taken a step forwards towards him.

‘…prove it.’
He’d looked at Robert’s lips and then his eyes again, seeing the conflict there. He could see how much Robert wanted him, but the fear there, too. Robert’s whole body was in motion, fighting against himself.

‘Aaron I…’ He started to say. Aaron waited for the end of the sentence, looking back at him, suddenly calm. But Robert looked away, hands back in his pockets.

‘…I have to go now.’

And Aaron knew it was over.

Emile had given him a pint glass of water and some tablets and a clean pair of pajamas. When Aaron pulled off his top he’d seen Emile’s expression change as he registered his scars. He hadn’t thought about it, that Emile wouldn’t have known.

‘Change in the bedroom, my dear, you can sleep there for now.’

Lucas was watching him, too. He was holding a cloth soaked in bleach that he’d used to wipe down the kitchen surfaces. Aaron wanted to apologize for the mess, for still being there at all, he sensed that Lucas had hoped he would have gone by now, but his brain and mouth coordination still hadn’t kicked in.

Instead Lucas addressed Emile.

‘So are we going clubbing or not?’

‘Je pense que ce serait mieux si j’étais ici avec Aaron.’

Lucas was clearly disappointed.

‘I thought we’d planned to celebrate my exams being over?’

Aaron saw Emile reach his thumb up to caress his young lover’s cheek.

‘You go, have fun. I’ll be here when you come home.’

Emile moved his hand down and pushed his fingers inside Lucas’s shirt stroking against a nipple, he leaned forward and kissed him, pulling at his top lip with his teeth, but Lucas pushed him away.

‘I’m going to take a shower then before I go.’

Lucas took some clothes from the chest of drawers with a glance behind him while Emile helped Aaron into bed.

Much later they’d woken him. Lucas, back from the club, smelt of alcohol and sweat. His T-shirt clung to his torso when he took off his jacket. He must have been dancing. Emile had made up a bed on the sofa and Aaron staggered back into the living room, his head dull from the hangover masked by the tablets Emile had given him earlier.

‘Allez, baisons nous.’ He heard Lucas say, before he fell asleep again.
Robert sat in the car, a hand over his mouth, his eyes staring ahead unseeing. He didn’t want to think about Aaron’s words, but he could hear them, see the tilt of his open hands, the way his blue eyes had looked at him as he spoke so plainly. ‘I love you,’ he’d said. It had come out of the blue.

He hadn’t meant it, not really. He couldn’t have. He was obviously confused.

He felt nauseous all of a sudden. It must be the lack of sleep. He’d spent the whole night looking for him, and then it had all changed with one little phone call. He’d had to end it, to protect Aaron. Not just Aaron, though. He had to protect the life he’d worked so hard for. Being with Aaron, going all the way like they’d done, it had been a mistake. It should never have happened. The phone call had brought him back to reality, reminded him who he was.

He needed to think about what to tell Chrissie, about Aaron not coming home.

He watched a couple of blokes walking down the street towards him. They were holding hands loosely, playing with each other’s fingers. He looked away.

He was straight, and he’d been curious for a long time, but he wasn’t the first straight man to experiment, and now he wouldn’t need to go there again, ever. Aaron would probably leave France now he had his passport, anyway. He swallowed as another wave of nausea hit him. He needed to get home to Josh and Doli. If there was someone from the agency there, he would sleep. And then he would need to get ready for tomorrow.

He remembered the hotel he had booked. For him and Aaron. For a moment, he even considered calling Aaron, maybe meeting for one last time.

She wasn’t arriving until the evening after all.

Chrissie put her handbag down on the passenger seat of the Range Rover and checked her make up in the rear-view mirror, before putting the key into the ignition of the car. The agency had finally sent over a temporary child minder but she was already late to the opening of the new beauty salon. The press had arrived, and she’d told her PA to open some champagne and keep them there until she arrived to give interviews. Publicity was everything in these situations.

When her phone rang again she called out aloud in frustration.

‘What now?’

But she answered it anyway, putting it on speaker as she started to reverse the car.

‘Chrissie, this is Lucie, from Robert’s business.’

‘Lucie, can it wait? It’s really not a good time. Did you get the door fixed?’

‘What door?’

‘From the break in?’

There was a silence, but Chrissie was too distracted to notice. She left the apartment car park, dazzled for a moment by the winter sun as she turned right onto the main street leading to the ring road.

‘What did you want, anyway?’
There was another silence.

‘It’s Robert.’

‘What about Robert?’

‘Look, it’s not my place to tell you this, but if it was me, well, I would want to know.’

Chrissie swore as a red light turned to green but the traffic didn’t move. She blasted her horn at the driver of a Citroen, kissing his girlfriend, lover, wife whatever, instead of paying attention to the road. She accelerated past him, with an angry glare.

‘Know what?’ She asked lightly.

‘He’s having an affair.’

There was a silence.

‘And you know this how exactly?’

‘I just know.’

‘So, have you seen them together?’

‘No.’

‘So, who is she, then. She told you? He told you?’

‘No, I don’t know who it is.’

‘Then you’re just speculating. I trust my husband, and I will be telling him about this conversation and you will be able to consider yourself fired. Remember I am part owner of the business too.’

‘Really, don’t worry about it. I already resigned. And Chrissie... Bonne chance!’

Chrissie stared emptily ahead for a moment, before a horn behind her suddenly drew her attention back to the road, it was the Citroen again.

All Robert wanted was to switch off his mind and sleep, but as soon as he arrived home, Josh clung to him, complaining of a stomach ache. He placed a hand quickly on his head checking for a fever, for any sign of infection, but he seemed cool enough, so he offered to make a hot chocolate drink, hoping that would relax his son.

He poured milk into a saucepan. The child minder that the agency had sent sat on the sofa with Doli in her arms, watching an animated movie on the Sony cinema in the living area, Doli wriggling impatiently in her arms. He asked Josh why he wasn’t watching the film too, but Josh was troubled. He kept asking about Aaron.

‘Will he be here by tea time?’

‘I don’t think so, love, he had something to do.’

‘Is he with his new boyfriend?’
‘I don’t know.’

‘Are you angry with Aaron?’

Robert turned and looked at his son, pulling in his chin.

‘Why would you think that?’

Josh looked back at him for a second, then looked away. He picked up an Angry Bird action figure from the kitchen floor and started to play.

‘Josh, don’t leave toys in the kitchen…’ he started to say.

The doorbell rang. The childminder turned her head towards him on the sofa. It wasn’t her house, after all.

Robert turned off the milk in the pan and went to answer it.

A bloke in his late twenties, wearing a jacket and glasses, was standing at the entrance. Robert reflected that he looked as if he needed a shave. He introduced himself as coming from social services, showing a card.

‘This is a routine visit in the circumstances. Is this a good time? You don’t mind if I come in?’

‘It’s not a great time, but come in anyway.’

‘This must be Josh?’

Robert looked down at his son, then turned his head to the living area.

‘Christine,’ he called. ‘Take Josh and Doli upstairs.’

‘Nous regardons un film..’ The childminder protested.

‘Then watch it upstairs.’ He answered firmly.

He took the bloke from social services into the kitchen, and turned the heat back on under the milk.

‘So, your son took some medicine by mistake. Who was home with him at the time?’

‘My wife.’

‘She’s not home now?’

‘She’s working.’

The social services man looked around.

‘You have a beautiful home.’ He turned back to Robert. ‘She’s not his mother, is she? Your wife?’

Robert narrowed his eyes. The milk seethed and started to spill from the edge of the pan.

‘She’s been a perfect mother for the past three years, she’s the only mother he remembers, and what happened was an accident. So you’ve done your job, and if all you came for was to stir up shit, you can run along now.’
In the morning, Emile made coffee for Aaron. Lucas had gone out to the bakery and came back with fresh croissant and pain au chocolat. Aaron watched him, now, as he soaked his croissant with coffee and ate, still feeling queasy after the night before.

‘So you stay here, until things are more sorted.’ Emile said. ‘And I can do with a scrapper, so you work for me, too. I won’t put you on the books, now. Maybe later, unless you plan to go back to child care. Take your time to decide.’

Aaron nodded. It was what he needed, time, to sort his head out.

Lucas picked up his plate and put it in the sink. He shrugged on his jacket, then picked up a sports bag. Leaning over he kissed Emile’s mouth. Emile caught his wrist as he turned to go.

‘Call me when you get a chance?’

When Lucas closed the door, he turned back to Aaron.

‘He usually goes home at the weekend. He hasn’t come out to his family. It makes it awkward, you know.’

Aaron nodded.

‘The age difference doesn’t help, and he’s still financially dependent on them, so I can’t push him to come out. I wouldn’t do that, anyway.’

Aaron’s face paled when he read the text.

*I’m at the hotel. If you still want to come.*

‘I need to go out for a while.’ He told Emile. He noticed Emile looked relieved. He was a burden, really, and he knew it. Emile was probably just hanging around at home for his sake, he was kind, it was in his nature.

The hotel room was small and basic but clean. The white sheets were folded crisply on the bed with two toweling robes tied by the belts to look like bows positioned at each side.

Aaron felt angry with himself that one sight of Robert and he could forget the last twenty four hours. He looked at him levelly.

‘Why am I here?’

The question was redundant. He knew why he was there. The heat in his groin and the way Robert was looking at him had already answered it for him.

‘It’s just a goodbye. That’s all.’ Robert’s voice was thick. He opened two bottles of beer and handed one to Aaron. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’

Aaron tilted his head.

‘I’m here, aren’t I?’ He said. They both drank.

He sat down on the bed. He should feel sordid and used, but with Robert he’d never felt that way. Yesterday he’d said he loved him, and the truth was, it had never been just sex between them, it had been lust, sure, but each time they’d got naked together, it had been more than that. There was
something, a connection between them, that he’d never felt before. Maybe it was just two Emmerdale lads far from home.

He looked up at Robert, scrutinizing his face.

It was weird to think of him that way.

When Robert sat beside him, he put his beer bottle down on the bedside table and wet his lips with his tongue. Robert cupped his face and kissed him, his thighs already spread, his hips moving.

Aaron kissed him back.

Robert’s hand was at his waistline, tugging impatiently at his top and Aaron took his cue and pulled it off over his head.

Robert’s hands slid down the muscles of his back.

He found the button of Robert’s trousers and unfastened it then placed his fingers on the zip and eased it open, then pushed his hand down, caressing, inside the material of his briefs till his fingers were playing at his balls and his palm was rubbing against his shaft.

He moved his other hand to his own trousers and released himself.

‘Touch me.’ He growled in Robert’s ear and Robert nodded.

When he felt Robert’s hand stroking against him, he moaned and bit his lip, raising his chin.

They both finished undressing and shuffled until they lay back side by side on the bed, their hands continuing to explore. Robert was touching his thighs, touching his arse cheeks, touching his balls. He circled his thumb and fore finger and pulled at his shaft, and Aaron panted and smiled into their kisses, free from all the thoughts that had been circling his head for the past day and a half. All that mattered was the ache he felt as Robert’s arms pulled him around, above him, opening his thighs now, bending his knees, so that Aaron rested between them, knowing exactly what Robert wanted.

He reached for the lube, caressing against his rim, then pressed against him with his cock head, back and forth, back and forth, feeling his entrance open, seeing the ravenous look in Robert’s half closed eyes.

‘One last time, eh?’ he whispered.

‘Just fuck me.’ Robert replied.

He pushed inside, acutely aware that he was bare backing, that this was reckless.

But he couldn’t stop, listening to his rising gasps as he thrust harder and harder. Sweat broke out from his forehead and ran into his eyes. Robert’s throat was taut as he rolled back his head. Aaron leaned down and kissed him.

‘Aaron, don’t stop!’ Robert whispered.

‘I won’t.’

He watched Robert abandon himself, closing his eyes this time, but not closing him out. They had hardly had time to get to know each other’s bodies, but Aaron knew, he knew the angle, the speed, and now he could feel Robert’s climax approaching.
He should pull out, to be safe. But when had this relationship, whatever it was, been safe?

All at once he was coming, hard and high, spilling deep inside his lover, feeling Robert clenching around him, and Robert was moaning and half laughing too, his eyes scrunching up tight, his cock spraying in bursts over his stomach with each rhythmic thrust as Aaron rode his climax.

They held on to each other as they came down, Aaron felt Robert's mouth breathing against his throat. He lifted a hand to his hair. It didn't feel like a goodbye. He wanted to tell him again, that he loved him, but he kept quiet, instead letting his lips brush against his forehead.

After, Aaron watched him dress.

He struggled with the words forming in his head, until finally he picked up the courage to say them aloud. After all, if this was goodbye, why would it matter.

I know what it’s like. I hated myself, too, you know? I thought if people knew I was gay, I wouldn’t be able to face them. I did some pretty terrible things, and I hurt people, because I couldn’t admit who I was.

I’m not gay.

Aaron hesitated, then spoke again, quietly.

It’s not going to go away.

I’m not gay. And this is exactly why this is over. Because as long as you and I are around each other, you’re going to be living with this illusion. You know nothing about me.

Maybe I know you better than you think. Maybe I’m the only one who knows you at all.

Aaron was spiraling downwards out of control. He'd try and bluff it, but it got harder and harder to pick up a fake smile, to join in the conversations around the tea table in the evening.

It was a relief going to the scrap yard in the early mornings, feeling the icy air against his cheeks, pulling apart machines, the sting of metal against his hands when he pulled off his gloves to separate a stubborn spare part. He noticed his hands getting coarse. Sometimes he would graze or cut himself over his knuckles or on his palm, or the flesh of his fingers, then he would pause and squeeze against the wound, watching crimson flecks smear across his skin, blowing air from his cheeks.

When Emile shut up the yard for Christmas he felt lost. On Christmas Eve, Lucas had gone home and Emile left Paris to stay with his family in Calais.

Come with me?

Nah, you’re alright, better not.’ Aaron had said. Emile hadn’t pushed it.

So Christmas day he was alone, and the worst thing was thinking about Josh and Doli, so he tried not to think at all. As he sat on the sofa, his mind went everywhere, he knew the danger signs, he’d been here before, his hands playing on his skin under his sweater, rough strokes of his fingertips, the contact of his nails. He gasped and rolled his sweater right up under his arms, sitting, panting and fighting against himself, against the voices of his demons. He took a shower instead and fist ed himself fast and rough, trying to think of nothing but a random stranger he’d seen on an advert on
TV, trying not to think about Robert. After he came, he bent his head against the tiles, letting the water run over his shoulders.

After Christmas, he started drinking more. He knew he was a third wheel for Emile and Lucas, he needed to make a plan and to move out, but meanwhile he started going out to bars, coming back drunk. In his mind he was giving them space.

‘Why are you doing this to yourself, Aaron? Is he really worth it? It’s time to move on, make some new friends, eh?’

Emile chastised him.

_He was lying naked on the couch in the studio, thighs open. His balls felt tight. He reached his hand down and pulled at his foreskin, wanting to fist himself. He looked up at Matheo but his heart raced when he saw Robert was there, staring at him, eyes blown wide with desire. Aaron reached up, pushing Robert’s leather jacket off his shoulders, pulling the grey sweater up from his waist, over his head, noticing the damp heady scent from under his arms as he raised them. He felt drunk from his body. Robert bent his head down past his belly, Aaron let his fingers tangle in his hair, his hips thrusting._

_When Robert leaned back, Aaron’s cock was wet from his mouth._

_Matheo was drawing them._

_'Don't stop.' he said._

_Robert moved back, flickering his tongue over his cock head. When he looked over his shoulder Aaron could see someone lying on Matheo’s bed. It was Lucas. He didn’t know why Lucas was there. Was he with Mat? Where was Emile?_

He woke suddenly, sitting up on the sofa, wiping sweat from his upper lip. He’d come home drunk again and fallen asleep.

Emile had made him coffee which he put on the coffee table and then he sat down next to him, placing a hand on his knee, Lucas sitting the other side of him. Aaron's body was still on fire from the dream.

All at once he leant forward and kissed him, his mouth open, his fist tangling with his shirt in a clumsy grip, pulling him close.

‘Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! That’s my boyfriend! What are you doing Aaron?’ Lucas called out.

‘Merde!’

‘Sorry! Oh My God. So sorry.’ Aaron slurred, raising his hands to cover his face.

'It's OK.' Emile soothed him. 'It's OK, Aaron.'

Later he heard them argue in the bedroom, Lucas's voice raised in protest, hurt and confused.

‘It’s like you're so concerned about him, but what about me, eh? You’re forgetting me, here. I’m here, yeah. I’m sitting right next to you, and you’re touching him. Where is your hand? Think
about it. Think about it, Emile!’

‘Lucas! Don’t be like this.’

‘No, really, I mean it. Don’t touch me, now! OK? I’m not in the mood.’

‘He’s in trouble, Alright? He needs some support.’

‘Why you, though?’

‘Because right now, he has no one else.’
Robert stood in the arrivals lounge at Charles du Gaulle airport, waiting, watching the faces of weary travelers light up as they were met by friends, family, loved ones. Mostly, at this time of year, they were coming on holiday, or coming home, for Christmas.

He held Josh’s hand firmly at his side, not wanting to let go of him in the crush of people. It was Chrissie who’d suggested he bring him along. He hadn’t been so sure, but he’d noticed the cold look she’d given him, and reluctantly agreed.

His mind had been on other things.

Mostly Aaron.

He’d made a mess of everything.

Earlier, meeting Aaron in the hotel, he couldn’t get it out of his head. His body still ached when he walked or sat. He still couldn’t believe how intimate they’d been. They hadn’t used protection, and then Aaron had come deep inside him. The sensation of it had shocked him.

He’d showered in the hotel, only to find he needed a second shower when he got home. He’d let the water stream over his hips, closing his eyes, thinking about the feel of Aaron’s light muscular body, the touch of his fingers against his cock, his beard brushing against his skin. It had knocked him off kilter and had him second guessing himself. Was it because Aaron was a man, or because Aaron was Aaron that he couldn’t stop thinking about him?

And then Aaron had said those things. Things he didn’t want to hear.

He clenched his jaw.

It was over, and it was definitely for the best for Aaron, and for himself, too. That was what he told himself.

Josh pulled on his hand, complaining that he was thirsty, that he couldn’t see. Robert raised him up into his arms, and at exactly that moment, she appeared, dressed in a white puffer coat with a big smile on her face.

Josh looked at her, his eyes wide with amazement, as his dad swept forward.
His arms, still holding Josh, were around her, his head bowed over her hair, and she was hugging them both back and they were laughing, so that Josh, caught up by the moment, started laughing, too.

‘Oh God, I missed you sooo much!’ She was saying. ‘And look who this is? You must be Josh? Look at you! Bet you’re a right tear-away like your dad, eh?’

‘Josh. This is your Auntie Victoria. And about bloody time, too!’

In the Range Rover, driving back, they got caught in the inevitable Paris traffic. Vic kept her eyes fixed sideways on her brother, noticing the soft creases at the corner of his eyes from the permanent smile on his face as he watched the road.

‘What?’ he asked, grinning.

‘What back at you!’ she answered, her eyes shining with amusement. ‘Let me just point out that you’re the one who stayed away all this time. You’re the one who runs off and gets married and only tells us after.’ She glanced back at Josh, who had fallen asleep on the booster seat in the back of the car, affected by the wait and the excitement and now the warmth and the motion of the car. ‘You’re the one with the secret love child and then another baby, so that I have a nephew and niece that I haven’t had the chance to spoil, yet.’

Robert reached out a hand and took hold of Victoria’s, giving it a squeeze.

‘Well all that’s going to change now.’

‘He’s gorgeous,’ she said, ‘A right chip of the old block, eh? Mum would’ve loved him, and Dad, too.’

Glancing back, she saw his smile fade for a moment.

‘You must have been through a lot recently. Having him so poorly in hospital. But he’s alright now, isn’t he? I mean, his liver, an’ that? The doctors have said there’s nothing to worry about now, right?’

‘Yeah. He’s fine. Just a bit on the thin side.’

‘He’s an angel.’ She looked at her brother more closely, scrutinizing his face. ‘And you’re alright, aren’t you, Robert? I mean, you’re happy?’

Robert nodded and smiled again.

‘Wealthy business man wheeler dealer, posh wife, beautiful kids, living in Paris. You’ve got it all really! Dad would’ve been proud of ya!’

‘Dad wanted me to be a farmer.’

‘Dad wanted you to be happy.’

Robert looked at the road ahead, then signaled to turn.

‘We’re here,’ he said.
He stood with an arm over Chrissie’s shoulder, watching the delight on Victoria’s face as she finally came down from the guest room, made up by Chrissie with flowers on the chest of drawers, and a view all the way to the glittering Eiffel Tower in the distance.

He handed her wine, and they raised their glasses.

‘To family!’ Robert said.

‘I’m only sad that Doli’s already asleep,’ Vic noted. ‘And Diane sends her love, and she wants you to know that if you’re not planning on bringing Chrissie and the kids to Emmerdale soon, then she’s asked me to take all the Christmas presents she’s sent back with me.’

‘Blame Robert for that!’ Chrissie objected.

‘Oh, I will, quite happily.’

‘And what about you, Victoria?’ Chrissie asked. ‘Tell us about your love life.’

Vic rolled her eyes.

‘Ah! Well, that would be Adam, Adam Barton. But I’m not really sure quite where that’s going right now. Another reason I’m here, you could say, apart from your good selves of course.’

Robert’s eyes flashed suddenly.

‘Why? He is treating you alright, then, this Adam bloke?’

‘Don’t worry. I can look after myself. I am a Sugden, after all.’

She smiled and they clinked glasses again. Robert took another sip of wine.

‘Andy’s alright?’ he asked quietly. He saw a cloud pass quickly over Vic’s face.

‘He’s fine, Rob. I think if you did come …’

‘Look, I need to put Josh to bed. Then we can eat,’ he interrupted.

Vic’s phone rang, and she turned to answer it.

Chrissie frowned at Robert.

‘When is Aaron coming home? This is getting a bit ridiculous. The timing is so bad.’

‘I’m not sure. I told you he has relatives here, too.’

‘He has a job that he’s being paid for. Just call him and sort it will you, before my patience runs out.’

The Christmas season ran perfectly. Vic divided her time between playing with the kids, cuddling Doli at every opportunity and admiring Joshua’s toys that he brought to show her one by one, and of course, exploring Paris, sometimes with Chrissie by her side while Robert worked, sometimes alone when they both worked.
Robert was putting things right. What had happened, it had just been a big mistake, and now everything was getting back on track. He finally told Chrissie that Aaron wasn’t coming back, explaining there was some family problem he needed to sort. She was angry, but they were getting used to the French girl coming in the day time to look after the children instead.

‘We can look for someone to live in later in the New Year,’ Robert suggested, and Chrissie agreed.

He made love to her.

He kissed her, caressed her, lifting her short nightdress up and off over her head.

He lay on his back and stroked her thighs as she straddled him, then ran his hands up behind her, cupping the curve of her backside, feeling her wet slit slide over the length of his cock as it lay over his stomach growing harder.

‘Come here, Mrs Sugden.’

She leaned forward, and he caught her nipple in his mouth, feeling the pointed tip grow and harden under his tongue, he switched to her other breast, sucking, playing, hearing her sigh and feeling her writhe up and down against him as she grew more and more aroused.

He slipped a hand down between her legs where she was still caressing herself over him, looking with the tip of his middle finger for her already swollen clitoris, and circled gently, feeling his finger getting soaked as she got wetter at his touch.

She raised herself up on her knees in invitation and holding his shaft he slipped it inside her, then watched as she rode him, arching her back as the pleasure built, her painted fingers resting on his stomach.

He was putting things right.

He loved his wife. The scent of her perfume, the glow of her skin.

He closed his eyes.

And it was Aaron that he saw. He felt a weird pain in his stomach, in his chest. He had a moment of panic, thinking he was going to cry, not knowing why or how or where the feeling had come from.

He moved his hand hastily back to the base of his shaft and came suddenly, open mouthed, blinking up at the ceiling, and then gasping with relief when he realized Chrissie had come too.

After, she lay down beside him with a satiated smile on her face and the back of a finger stroking over his nipple.

‘That was fun.’

He smiled, faking it, trying to give himself to the moment.

‘You threw yourself into it.’

She pouted and gave him a light tap with the back of her hand to tell him off.

‘Do you want to know a secret?’ She asked.

‘If you want to tell me.’
‘Lucie called me. She told me you were having an affair with another woman.’

He blinked back at her.

‘And you believed her?’

‘Well no, not exactly, but …’

‘But what, Chrissie? Either you trust me or you don’t.’

He was on safer territory now.

‘I do, I do. It’s just sometimes…’

‘What?’

‘You’re so secretive. And you stay out late, and I don’t know..’

‘Listen, I’m not cheating with another woman! At least now I know why she resigned. It was odd.’

‘She must have had a thing for you. I feel sorry for her really.’

‘Really?’ Robert squinted at her with a half-smile.

‘Of course. Because you’re mine, aren’t you? All mine.’

Victoria was making a treat for tea when Josh went missing. She’d asked for his help and he’d started alright, making fruit kebabs with dipping chocolate. He’d been threading the kebabs with the chopped fruit when all at once he’d got absorbed in the sharpness of the kebab sticks, and then out of the corner of her eyes she’d seen him, starting to scrape the point over the skin of his hand until the scratch drew blood. She snatched it away.

‘What are you doing you numpkin? That’s dangerous!’

And he’d run off.

She’d waited, thinking he’d just got bored and gone to play, thinking nothing of it, but when more time passed she suddenly felt uneasy, not really sure why. She left the kitchen, calling his name.

He must have gone upstairs.

‘Josh, Joshua?’

He wasn’t in his room, or Doli’s nursery and she started to panic, opening Robert and Chrissie’s door, thinking about the time he swallowed the Tylenol. But he wasn’t there, either. There was another guest room that she hadn’t looked in before, and so she opened the door, not knowing where else to look.

Josh was lying on the bed, his arms wrapped around himself. He blinked at her.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m waiting for him to come home.’

‘Who?’
‘Aaron.’

‘Who's Aaron?’

‘My au pair.’

He jumped up and ran out of the room and downstairs.

Just after New Year, Robert got into his Porsche, about to set off home at the end of the working day. He'd been to the manufacturing section of the company, at the industrial area around the Quartier Javel, where the agricultural machinery was built. There were other companies there too, car manufacturers, chemical companies, plastics. The road was blocked by an accident so he turned down a different street, driving very slowly because of the pot holes in the road. As he drove he saw a business sign for a scrapyard by a large metal gate. The sign looked familiar. He frowned, trying to remember where he knew it from, when the gate opened and a car drove out, but instead of turning onto the road, the car drove straight out, stopping in front of him, cutting him off, so he had no choice but to wait, and then the driver got out.

He knew him immediately, even though they’d only met once. It was Emile.

He walked towards Robert’s car, and Robert wound down his window, looking up at him, while Emile rested an elbow on the roof.

‘Tien, tien! Robert Sugden.’

It wasn’t a question.

‘Emile?’

‘How’s it going?’

Robert didn’t answer. Emile lowered his chin, speaking quietly, looking straight into Robert’s eyes.

‘You have a new lover, now? Another man, eh?’

Robert pressed his lips together, looking away.

‘So I guess not, then. Okay. Alors, this is my question to you, Robert. Aaron, you like him, yeah? And the sex was hot, I’m right, aren’t I? Sex with a man? Raw, rough, passionate, I’m wagering it was the best you ever had?’

‘Are you done?’ Robert snapped.

He could reverse out of there, except the road surface was so bad.

‘I’m not done. He’s a sweet boy, non? So why break his heart? Call him, yeah? Fix this.’

He saw it then, the concern in the Frenchman’s face.

‘Is Aaron alright?’

‘Ask him.’

He stood back from the car, and put his hands in his pockets, turning to go, but then turned back
and spoke again.

‘Monsieur Sugden, …Robert, I have a piece of advice for you. Sleep with your wife and keep her happy, buy her flowers and chocolates, whatever. But fuck your boyfriend, too, yeah? This is Paris. You want it, and he needs you. Call him.’

Emile got back in his car and steered it to the side of the road, where he parked up by the open gate.

Robert pressed his foot down on the accelerator, but still had to drive slowly, negotiating the rough surface of the road.

He glanced back in the wing mirror. And then he saw him. Aaron. His hands were deep in the pockets of his winter coat, a bobble hat on his head and he was walking slowly to the passenger side of Emile’s car. Even from the distance he could see that his face was pale, his eyes dark and his beard unkempt. But it was the way he walked that hit Robert hardest, like he’d lost the lightness in his step.

Aaron suddenly looked up towards his car, and froze for a moment with his mouth open. Robert couldn’t tear his eyes away.

He saw Emile lean over from the driver’s seat, pushing open the passenger door, telling Aaron to get in. And Aaron nodded and moved awkwardly onto the seat, still looking back at Robert’s car.

He put his foot down on the gas, and drove away.

When he got home, he poured himself a glass of whiskey while Chrissie put Doli to bed.

Vic looked at him concerned, placing a hand on his arm, searching his face.

‘You look shaken up. Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine. I’m fine. Really. Just cold.’

‘This is me, Rob. You know you can tell me anything?’

‘Just leave it, Vic. Alright?’

She watched as he sat, placing a hand to his lips.

Josh had a new nervous energy about him that he hadn’t had before. He started to fight with Doli more, reluctant to share toys, flying into rages with her that, more often than not, ended in tears of frustration. When he drew, or colored he would score through the paper with fierce dark zigzag lines. In the bath, he dug his fingers into the soap, so that Robert would find big chunks blocking up the plug when he drained the water.

At night, he started having the nightmares again, and Robert would find him, his pajamas drenched through, his hair wet, yelling with terror in the dark, but then he wouldn’t be able to wake him, and instead would hold him, telling him he was there, talking to him soothingly until he settled.

In the evenings, he would put Josh to bed, lying next to him until he slept, knowing that he needed that, but Josh would turn his back to him, huddling his shoulders against him so that Robert could see the sharp lines of his shoulder blades under his pajamas.
He found it more and more difficult to play, instead he started throwing things randomly, Lego parts, plastic model figures, and then one day he threw a toy matchbox metal car, and it hit Victoria on the forehead.

And that was it.

Robert went white, he held Victoria, checking her over, as she reassured him that she was fine.
Then, furious, he hunkered down next to Josh and pointed to the stairs, eyes blazing.

‘Go to your room! Now!’

‘No!’ Josh shouted.

‘You go now, or I take you!’

Josh lashed out, suddenly, smacking Robert’s face with his fist. Robert, totally shocked, wrapped one hand around his wrists, and with his other arm he swept him up by the waist. With an apology to Victoria, he took him swiftly upstairs to his room, where he sat down heavily on the bed.

He held on. He could see the anger still burning in Josh’s eyes, the red flush around his throat, and father and son, they eyeballed each other, neither giving in or looking away. Then Robert saw the tears smarting in Josh’s eyes.

His heart lurched.

‘What’s going on? You know I love ya! This has got to stop, yeah? I mean it Josh. Talk to me!’

‘He’s dead, isn’t he? He died, like my mummy in the car. He’s dead! He’s dead! He’s dead!’

‘Wha...?’ Robert let go of his arms in shock. They’d never spoken about Josh’s mother. He’d always thought he didn’t remember. And who did he think had died? But he knew, even before Josh said it.

‘Aaron’s dead.’

‘No, no, no, my love! He didn’t die.’

Josh lashed out again, bringing his hand down against Robert’s face once more. Robert grabbed him tightly again, then moved his hands to Josh’s cheeks, making him look back at him.

‘Look at me! Look at me! Josh, look at me. He didn’t die! Okay? Nothing happened to Aaron. Nothing!’

Josh finally stilled in his father’s arms, blinking back at his face, lips parted.

‘Then why did he leave me?’

‘He didn’t! He didn’t leave you. I asked him to leave for grown up reasons. I can’t explain. But he didn’t leave you, son.’

Josh’s body suddenly went slack in his father’s arms, his head falling onto his shoulder and Robert could feel his tears against his throat. He didn’t move or make a sound.

‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,’ Robert whispered into his face. He raised a hand to wipe his own eyes now, then held Josh tightly. ‘I’ll fix this. Alright? I’ll fix it.’
Robert stands in the kitchen, phone in hand, his thumb hovering over Aaron’s number. It was nearly a month since they’d spoken. Now he needed to call him for Josh’s sake. And for Aaron’s sake too. He’d been shaken when he’d seen him outside the scrapyard. Josh and Aaron, both of them were suffering. It wasn’t his fault, he’d done the right thing, but now he needed a plan. He needed to think.

Emile was an obstacle. Robert’s mouth twisted. He wanted Aaron away from him. The way he’d harked on about his and Aaron’s relationship on the road, leaning against Robert’s car, as if he knew something. Emile knew nothing, nothing at all about him. Aaron must have talked to him, about them. It was turning over and over and over in his head. What had he said?

Robert swallowed, running a hand through his hair. How could he do that?

He paced the kitchen.

So once or twice, he’d kissed a man before, he’d let that happen. But he’d always stopped before things went further. Now Emile seemed to know that, with Aaron, it had been different, that he hadn’t been able to hold himself back, that even now, a month later, Aaron was constantly on his mind.

At times, he craved him; the heat of his belly under his fingertips, the way his throat flushed when he’d moved his hand downwards, the sweet astonishing burn when he entered him, the way he’d kissed him afterwards, so that he wanted to stay longer than he should, just lying next to him.

Emile knew nothing. Robert frowned. If he needed to, he would bring him down.

But now he needed to sort things for Josh. He’d made a promise.

He heard Victoria coming downstairs into the living room. He looked back at his phone.

He pressed call, then waited, listening to the ring tone go on and on.

He was about to end the call, when the line picked up. There was a silence.
‘Aaron?’

He waited, listening to the silence, straining to hear.

‘Aaron, listen…’

Then the line went dead.

He straightened his shoulders as Victoria came into the room and quickly slipped his phone into his back pocket.

She reached up, putting an arm up to his shoulder, scrutinizing his face.

‘What’s up? There’s something with you and Josh. You can’t fool me, you know. What’s going on Rob?’

He hugged her then, and dropped a kiss on her hair, keeping his eyes closed as she held him.

‘We’re fine Vic, mother hen.’ He smiled at her. ‘He gets tired and overexcited.’

‘Umm,’ she frowned, unconvinced. ‘You’ll tell me, eventually.’

Robert poured a whiskey, while she watched thoughtfully, then she spoke again.

‘Listen, I was talking to Chrissie, and we thought, why don’t you all come back to Emmerdale with me when I go back in a fortnight? A holiday? Diane can see the kids and she’ll love them, and she misses you too, you know. We all do. Being here, well it’s just been amazing and I don’t want to lose this now. A new start, eh? What do ya think?’

Robert looked back at his sister, seeing the hope and the excited glow in her eyes as she appealed to him.

‘Yeah, if you want. I think we could do that.’

‘Really?’

‘Why not? It’s time, isn’t it? Time I came home.’

Emile glanced up from the book he was reading as Aaron placed his phone back down on the coffee table.

‘Wrong number?’

‘Something like that.’

He stood up.

‘I’m going to take a shower, if that’s alright with you?’

‘Sure. You know it is.’

Emile watched him with a concerned frown as he left for the bathroom. Lucas, in turn, watched Emile’s face, looking up from the notes he was taking for an essay, now the new term had started
again.

‘Everything he does you follow,’ he muttered.

Emile turned to him sharply.

‘He’s a friend. I’ve known him a year, a lot longer than I’ve known you.’

Lucas dropped his pen and stood up with a scrape of his chair. He moved rapidly to the kitchen bar with his back to Emile. He unscrewed the coffee filter from the machine, but it got stuck in his fingers and then came apart suddenly, spinning onto the surface, the grounds spilling in a wide arc over the counter and onto the floor.

Lucas swore and Emile glanced up, lowering his book again.

‘What are you doing, now?’

‘Seriously? I really wish I knew.’

He threw up his arms and went to the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

When Aaron came out of the shower, he was dressed in a tight fitting black sweater and tight black jeans. He looked pale and his eyes looked bloodshot. He sat to pull on his trainers, lacing them.

‘I’m off out, then.’

‘Are you sure? Stay in tonight.’

‘I’m better off out, really.’

‘Why don’t you call Ed, then? He spoke to me. He’d like to see you, to catch up.’

‘He’s got a new boyfriend, he told me.’

‘That doesn’t stop you seeing him.’

Aaron shrugged.

He grimaced as he stood, pulling the sleeves of his sweater further down over his hands before grabbing his jacket and making for the door.

When he’d gone, Emile went to the bathroom. He shook his head with a wry smile at the state Aaron had left it in, as usual. It was one more thing that Lucas complained about. He picked up the towel that Aaron had discarded to throw in the laundry basket, and then he saw it. The scarlet streaks of blood.

‘Merde!’

He would kill Robert Sugden. He’d changed his mind about wanting them to get back together. Now, he wanted to keep them as far apart as possible.

He went into the bedroom where Lucas was on his side on the bed, a frown creasing his brow, even though he was sleeping. Emile sighed, looking at his lovely athletic body and then lay down behind him, gently reaching a hand around his front.

Lucas stirred at his touch, then turned his neck back.
‘Where’s Aaron?’

‘He’s gone out, mon râleur.’

Emile could feel Lucas’s body relax. They lay in silence for a while. Emile closed his eyes, feeling himself drift. Lucas spoke again.

‘Will you come home with me, if I tell them, about us?’

Emile raised his eyebrows.

‘You’re thinking about coming out to them?’

‘Yes. I think maybe now is the right time.’

Lucas turned onto his back, looking up at Emile’s face, raising a hand and stroking lightly with the back of his finger against his shoulder, ‘I just want to take you home, you know, as my boyfriend, without lying or pretending anymore.’

‘Of course, I want that, too. If you’re ready.’

Emile kissed him, leaning over his body and Lucas kissed him back, raising his head from the pillow, moving his hands to unfasten the buttons on his shirt and the fastening on his jeans. Emile turned him back onto his side and lowered his jeans and briefs over his hips. He stroked a hand over the glowing white curve of his arse, resting his fingers at the base of his spine, circling there with his thumb while Lucas panted.

‘You’ve still got it in?’

‘Bien sûr.’ Lucas laughed. Emile reached down until he found the hard end of the butt plug. He’d inserted it into his lover early that morning before going to work, lubricating the stainless steel plug, working it gently in.

Now he took off his own clothes and lifted Lucas round onto his knees, pulling off his shirt, tugging his jeans further down his thighs, tugging at his hips, pulling them up high. His thumb slipped downwards into his crack, finding the plug. He turned it gently, listening to Lucas whimper with a smile.

‘Veux-tu que je te baise là, mon amour? Est-ce que c’est ce que tu veux?’ he asked.

‘Ouais’

Emile lapped around Lucas’s hole, letting spit slide from tongue around the plug, then he teased it slowly out, exposing his entrance, all ready to be fucked. Lucas rocked backwards and Emile flickered his tongue inside, listening to him moan. He reached for a condom and rolled it down over his length, then spat and stroked the wet liquid over him, before pushing two fingers inside, bringing his cock up close with his other hand.

‘Tu veux ma bite?’

‘Ouais’

‘You want it now?’

‘Ouais’
He pushed his cock past Lucas’s rim, all the way up inside till he was flush against him and Lucas was already pleading with him to move.

They heard the key in the door.

‘Non, bebe, non,’ Lucas wailed as Emile pulled out.

‘Shhh. Just a minute.’

He backed quickly off the bed on his knees, and moved to the bedroom door, meeting Aaron’s eyes, who blushed, looking down, as he closed it.

Lucas had turned onto his back, discarding his jeans now. Emile climbed back onto the bed and Lucas held his knees so he could enter him again. Emile thrust fast, but now for both of them there was a different mood. It was more about not leaving things unfinished.

After, Lucas reached for the plug lying now on the sheet beside them.

‘I can wear it again, tomorrow.’

‘I’m going tomorrow on a pick up. It’s a long distance away. An overnight. I’m taking Aaron with me.’

Lucas nodded, looking away.

Hi Robert,

I’ve attached the sales figures for December. I hope you approve. Thanks again for your advice about the pitch with Amaggi. It worked, and we got the contract, something to celebrate when I get to Paris?

I’ve finally managed to book my flight so I’ll be arriving on Sunday evening. You can see my ticket attached. Will someone meet me at the airport? Or should I just take a taxi to the hotel? I’ve booked in at the Hyatt because it looked like it wasn’t so far from the office.

Do you remember our Portuguese lessons? I’ll teach you more when I get there. If you want.

Um abraço,

Ricardo

The sales managers looked up when he came into their office. He sat on the edge of the meeting table in the middle of the room. When he folded his arms, his blue shiny shirt stretched and creased around his shoulders.

‘I need someone to pick up Ricardo from the airport on Sunday. Giles, arrange it, yeah?’

When he left the sales office, he handed a business card to the new personal assistant.
‘Connect me to this number, will you?’

He went back into his office and waited. In the corner of the room there was a package wrapped in brown paper tied with string. Matheo’s painting and sketches of Aaron. He would destroy them, but he hadn’t got round to it, yet.

When the call was put through, he lifted the phone.

‘I want to organize some business. I thought… this afternoon?’

‘I’m out of the city,’ Emile answered. He hung up without waiting for Robert to say more.

Robert narrowed his eyes. He picked up his keys and left.

It was Lucas who answered the door to the apartment. He was watching a film, dressed in harem pants and Emile’s dressing gown open at the waist. Robert stood with his hands in his leather jacket. As he always seemed to do, Lucas felt his pale eyes look him up and down and pulled the gown around his chest.

‘You’re looking for Aaron? He isn’t here. He’s out of town until tomorrow.’

‘With Emile?’ Robert made it sound like they were doing something wrong, and Lucas blushed, feeling like Robert was judging him.

‘They’re working,’ he replied defensively.

‘A bit odd, an overnight together? Why didn’t he take you? I’d imagine you could miss a couple of lectures if you wanted to. It would be,’ he opened his eyes wide, ‘… romantic.’

He turned to go, then turned back again, speaking in a soft voice. ‘How is the studying going, while we’re on the topic? Economics, I think you told me that day you came round for the key?’

‘Oui, pas mal.’

‘Well, let me know if you need any work experience.’

‘I can get that from Emile.’

Robert shrugged.

‘It’s up to you, I just think you might learn more in an international company. But I guess you know best.’

Robert was at the top of the apartment stairs when Lucas called out after him.

‘If you want to see Aaron, on Fridays we usually go to a club near here, we’ll probably be there tomorrow.’ He told him the name of the club.

Robert waved a hand behind him in thanks, and then disappeared down the stair well, while Lucas watched him go.
'I’m thinking maybe, Spain?’

‘Okay. It’s possible.’

Emile sounded amused.

Aaron rolled his eyes.

‘Why’s it funny?’

They were sharing a hotel room. Emile hadn’t said, but he didn’t want Aaron on his own. He wanted to be able to keep an eye on him.

‘Because why are you going anywhere? You have friends here. Ed is here, and you’ve got me, too. Paris is your home now. There’s no need to run away.’

Aaron turned his head on the pillow, looking across at Emile sitting up on the other single bed, a book open on his lap.

‘I dunno. I need to do something, though, don’t I? And maybe running away really is the best decision, after all. You know he gave me my passport back. I seriously think it was what he wanted me to do.’

‘Because he’s afraid of being outing?’

Aaron rolled his eyes.

‘He doesn’t even know who he is, not yet. And he has this perfect life and he doesn’t want to wreck it.’

‘But he had an affair, with you.’

‘Not just with me. It’s a lifestyle for him.’

‘You still love him. He called you, yesterday, didn’t he? But you didn’t answer. Is that why you started cutting again?’ Emile asked softly.

He saw the tears then, Aaron lifted his fingers to his eyes.

‘I don’t know why he called. He told me we were done.’

‘You think he wants to start again?’

‘How do I know? He used me Emile. He used me. But what we had, it happened so fast and it felt so real. I’d never, I mean, it was, amazing to me, you know?’

Emile nodded, listening quietly.

‘And I can’t go back to that. If he wants to see me, I don’t know if I can stop myself.’

‘Then just stay away from him now, yeah? All charm, but he’s trouble, damaged I think. You deserve better.’

‘But it’s not just him, is it? It’s the kids, Josh and Doli, and just…’ He looked across again at the
older man. ‘I’m homesick. Sometimes I think I should turn myself in and be done with it.’

Emile pulled back the cover from his bed.

‘Come over here.’

Aaron hesitated, then moved across to Emile’s bed, slipping between the sheets, feeling the heat and Emile’s pulse against his body. Emile wrapped his arms around him pulling him into his shoulder, holding him tightly.

‘Everything will be okay, non? Just give it a bit longer. I’ll put you on the books at the scrapyard. And then we’ll see. And I think you should distract yourself, you know what I mean? There are lots of young men out there. What do you say?’

All at once Aaron raised his chin, looking for his mouth. Emile looked at his lips.

Aaron waited.

From outside they could hear the noise of distant music from the hotel restaurant below. Aaron could hear Emile breathing.

And then Emile lowered his face and kissed him, circling his mouth rhythmically against Aaron's lips. Aaron raised his hand to Emile shoulder, feeling the thick muscles of the older man, a man who grew up with physical work. His heart started to race unsteadily and heat pooled suddenly in his groin. He opened his mouth to deepen the kiss.

Then Emile pulled back. Aaron heard him sigh loudly, shaking his head, running a hand over his face.

‘Non, mon cheri. I am not your distraction,’ Emile murmured. ‘Let’s just be friends, you and me. Tu ne veux pas cela, pas vraiment.’

Aaron nodded, biting his lip. He knew that Emile was right, that he was lonely and hurt, he was looking for something in the wrong place.

‘You’d better go back to bed, before I change my mind,’ Emile said gently.

When Aaron had fallen asleep, Emile picked up his phone and sent a text to Lucas, saying goodnight. He read Lucas’s message back

Bonne nuit, rever de moi

The following night was a Friday. Lucas persuaded Emile to go with him to the gay club, teasing him about being old when he complained of being tired after the trip away.

‘Come on, don’t stay long if you feel tired after we get there, but at least stay for a drink or two. You’ll see your friends. Every week you say the same thing, but you know you like it when you get there.’

Emile turned to Aaron.

‘What do you think? Shall we go?’
He was right of course. Once they were there, Emile was soon surrounded by friends at the table where he sat. Aaron went to buy some drinks and saw Matheo at the bar. It was the first time they’d met since they’d split and they greeted each other awkwardly at first. Then Aaron offered to buy Mat a drink, and he joined them at their table, sitting next to Lucas.

Aaron could tell Mat was cruising. It was difficult to chat with him across the table. Instead Mat’s eyes skimmed over the club goers, until he let them return more than once to a stranger who had made eye contact with him. Aaron watched them both as they exchanged nods, and finally Mat was up and they were making for the door.

‘Somebody’s getting their portrait done tonight,’ Emile commented with a wink.

Aaron snorted, taking a swig of his beer.

But he found himself looking around. Emile had said find a distraction, and he could, couldn’t he? He’d gone there before after Ed, before he met Matheo, before everything that had happened afterwards. Just a no strings encounter with a random guy, who’d maybe looked good, felt good. Sometimes it had worked out as a fast fix and not very memorable, other times it had been intense and dirty and lasted all night. Maybe Emile was right. It was what he needed now. A sudden image of Robert entered his mind, Robert’s body under him, the feel of his solid thighs under his fingers, the size of him fully aroused. He tried to push the thoughts away, instead letting his eyes roam the club, but there was nobody. He looked down again. He wasn’t ready, was he.

He felt Emile put his arm round his shoulder, still chatting in French with his friends.

Lucas, who’d been sitting on the other side of him, stood up.

‘I’m going to dance,’ he said.

He pulled his T-shirt over his head, his jeans low on his hips and moved to the dance floor.

Robert stood outside the gay club in Le Marais. It was midnight. He watched the still crowded street, waiting, looking at his watch. Chrissie had looked at him in amazement when he’d said he was going out.

‘Seriously? It’s after ten. Where are you going now?’

‘It’s the sales team at the office, isn’t it? It’s a birthday bash. I don’t want to go, but you know what it’s like, and they’ll no doubt be expecting me to pick up the bill. I won’t stay long.’

‘Why didn’t you say before then? Vic and I could have come, too.’

‘It’s a lads’ night out, you know the score. You really wouldn’t enjoy it.’

‘What like lap dancers or something?’ Vic had asked, her eyes wide.

‘Something like that,’ Robert answered, stretching his eyes at her warningly, he could always rely on Vic to back him up.

But the damage was done, he saw Chrissie’s face cloud over, so he’d bent down to kiss her.

‘Trust me,’ he’d whispered.
Now it was cold. He wore a wool jacket over his shirt and then his leather jacket. His hands were
depth in his pockets. He knew it would be hot inside, each time the door opened he could feel the
blast of hot air, hear the bass of the music playing.

And Aaron was there, inside. In the past month, he’d only seen him the once, from a distance,
outside the scrapper’s yard. Now he would see him close up, talk to him, buy him a drink maybe.
He’d make sure he was alright, putting the past behind them.

Aaron stood up, extracting himself from Emile. He moved nearer to the bar. He didn’t need a
drink, but he felt restless. He was generating a fair amount of attention, but he kept his eyes down
for the most part.

And then a lad caught his eyes and winked at him, and he felt an unexpected spark.

He looked away, and then lowered his eyes and looked again discreetly, checking the lad out,
trying not to be noticed. He was average looking, early twenties maybe, but he had nice eyes, a
nice arse, too. He could do this, maybe. He put his head up and made eye contact, taking a swig of
beer and giving an almost imperceptible nod. Almost. The lad walked towards him.

‘Hi. I’m a stranger in Paris. Want to show me around?’ he said in French.

Aaron raised his beer bottle to his mouth.

‘I’m not exactly a local myself.’

‘I didn’t mean the city.’

He looked Aaron slowly up and down with a grin.

Aaron blushed.

‘Slow down, mate.’

He glanced over at Emile, who raised his eyes at him.

The lad put a hand on Aaron’s wrist through the long sleeve of his black T-shirt, and suddenly
Aaron winced, pulling his arm away too quickly. The lad looked confused, and Aaron paled. He
really wasn’t sure what he was doing. Now he was thinking that this was a mistake. He didn’t want
to be touched; not by a stranger.

‘Sorry, err, look, maybe you should find another bloke to show you around.’

He saw the lad frown, and then his frown changed to a smile as he searched Aaron’s eyes. He must
have seen how nervous he was, because instead of walking away as Aaron had expected, he smiled
kindly.

‘Did I spook you? Really, it’s fine. Why don’t I buy you another drink?’

Aaron nodded.

‘But give me a little incentive?’
And he leaned forward. Aaron caught his scent; he smelt good. He had nice red lips and white teeth. Aaron looked away, then looked back again. Then he leaned forward too.

And the lad’s mouth was against his, their lips brushing, lightly at first and then with slightly more pressure, until Aaron felt his tongue tentatively exploring against his own.

All at once he didn’t want to say slow down anymore. He could take him now, in the bathroom, or up against the wall in the dark. He reached a hand round the boy’s back, moving it over his backside, holding on hard. He wanted the message to be clear, and he pressed harder into the kiss.

He would take him back to Emile’s. They’d be here another hour at least. It would be more than enough time.

He pulled back, and the lad raised his eyebrows.

‘So I’ll get you that drink, then.’

‘Nah, changed my mind. I’m taking you home. Are you coming?’

‘Where’s home?’

‘A five-minute walk away?’

And that was when he looked up.

And saw him.

He was standing, wearing a leather jacket and sweater over a shirt and jeans, Aaron vaguely registered he must be sweltering. There was an almost full bottle of beer in his hand, hanging down by his thigh. Lucas, still shirtless with his body glistening from dancing, was standing at his side with a frown on his face looking towards Aaron. Robert was frowning, too, no - not frowning - glaring, his blazing eyes almost slate black, his mouth set, his jaw tight and flexing as he looked straight at him.

From the corner of his eyes, Aaron could see Emile was up and walking through the crowd towards them.

‘Robert!’

‘I shouldn’t have come. I can see you’ve got company,’ Robert said, his voice like steel.

‘But why are you h...?’

‘You know what? It really doesn’t matter!’

He turned then to Lucas, leaning in to say something in his ear, placing his hand on his upper arm.

He hadn’t seen that Emile was there, yet, coming up in his peripheral vision.

And it happened so fast and unexpectedly, just as Robert was turning back towards Aaron, Emile’s fist crashed like a hammer into Robert’s face.

Lucas reached out instinctively as Robert reeled backwards from the blow, preventing him from falling back, and instead he swayed forwards.

And other club goers suddenly turned, gasping, hands on mouths.
Aaron saw Robert stagger, and then he saw him raise his arm, he saw the bottle of beer, but it was all too quick to stop him, he stepped forward pushing Emile, trying to get him out of the way of the blow, but Robert was already bringing the bottle down. Instead of Emile’s head, it smashed into his back, and the beer spewed out of the neck as he raised it again.

Aaron caught his arm this time. Holding it up with two hands then twisting it suddenly, so the bottle fell to the floor and rolled, spilling more beer in its path.

There was blood running from Robert’s nose. He tried to pull away from Aaron’s grip, kicking out with his legs, making contact with Emile, who was still bent over from the blow from the bottle, Lucas holding him now.

Aaron managed to grab Robert’s other arm and held him from behind, pulling him backwards and away.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’

He could feel Robert’s body trembling as he held him.

Looking around, he felt anxious. The police would come. He was sure of it.

‘He started it!’ Robert yelled.

‘It’s okay!’

‘It’s not okay!’

He could hear Robert’s breathing start to even, and slowly loosened his grip. Robert, sensing it, tugged himself away, wiping his nose with the sleeve of his leather jacket.

He turned back to Aaron, shaking his head in disgust and spread his hands.

‘What was I thinking? Coming here?’ He turned back to Emile. ‘And I’ll see you in hell!’ he yelled at him, gesturing downwards with his finger.

‘Go home, Robert,’ Aaron said. ‘Why did you even come here?’

‘I came for Josh.’

Robert looked away, avoiding eye contact with Aaron.

‘Wh… why?’ Aaron’s heart raced yet again.

Robert wet his lips with his tongue.

‘Because he needs you. He loves you. He wants to see you.’

Robert turned and finally looked at him.

‘Will you see him?’

Aaron shook his head, amazed, eyes blinking.

‘Course I will! Course!’

‘Sunday, then?’
Aaron nodded.

‘Sunday.’

Robert turned and walked away.

Aaron looked around at the crowd. The lad he’d kissed had vanished. Not that he cared. It was the last thing on his mind right now.
Eiffel Tower

Chapter Summary

Robert takes Josh and Doli to meet with Aaron. Victoria makes an unsettling discovery. Lucas is upset and asks Robert for help. A visitor arrives from the Brazil office.

Chapter Notes

Forgive me for the smut lol

Robert looked in the mirror, his face set. He reached up his fingers, the bruise had turned black over his cheekbone. It was less tender to the touch, the swelling fading at last. There was a hairline cut over his nose, now barely noticeable from a distance.

He’d taken a long shower, shaving, grooming, and now he was dressed in tailored trousers, a shirt and a waistcoat.

‘You look fancy for a Sunday evening,’ Victoria said when he went down. ‘Thought you were just going to the airport?’

‘You know there’s nothing wrong with looking smart.’

Chrissie glanced up.

When he leaned over to kiss her, she could smell his expensive perfume. He took out the keys for the red Porsche.

This wasn’t what he’d wanted. It was still Aaron, after all these weeks, after Friday, after today. He clenched his jaw. But maybe Aaron wasn’t so special. He’d just got caught up in the novelty. He just had nothing to compare him with.

‘Don’t wait up,’ he murmured as he left.

The day before Robert had woken to the feel of gentle fingers playing against his cheek.

He opened his eyes. It was Josh, standing by the bed, looking at him with a somber face.

‘Does it hurt?’

‘No, maybe, a little,’ he answered. He was lying on his side and craned his neck back, looking across the bed behind him, seeing it was empty.

‘Where’s your mum?’
Josh didn’t answer, his eyes still fixed on the swollen bruise on Robert’s cheek, the cut over his nose.

‘Were you fighting?’ he asked.

Robert reached out with a sigh and stroked a hand over his son’s hair, down his cheek.

‘I’m not proud of it.’

He saw Josh nod, and went on.

‘But I did find Aaron, and guess what? We’re going to see him tomorrow. Maybe have a game of football, if that’s what you’d like?’

He saw Josh’s cheeks flush, his eyes blinking. Robert wondered what was going on in his head.

‘Aaron’s better at football than you,’ Josh said.

‘Course he is.’ Robert’s eyes wrinkled at the corners with a smile. ‘I’m just an amateur.’

He reached forward to tickle Josh’s waist, closing his eyes and breathing out when he heard him laugh at last.

‘Is he handsome?’ Victoria had asked later.

Robert looked up sharply at his sister. They’d been making an omelet for lunch, Robert whisking eggs while Vic sliced the mushrooms. He turned on the heat under the pan.

‘Well, I’m hardly qualified to comment, am I?’

‘Obviously!’ Victoria rolled her eyes. ‘I’m just trying to decide whether to come with you tomorrow. The way Adam’s been acting on the phone lately, I might need to line up an alternative.’

Robert knew he needed to think fast.

‘Probably better not. It’ll be mostly about quality time for the kids and him. They haven’t seen him in a long while. It’ll just be kicking a football around in the park, anyway, and then on to a burger bar, or something like that.’

‘I can do football,’ Vic objected.

‘I’m not saying you can’t.’

Vic frowned, sensing a new irritation in his voice.

She added the mushrooms to the eggs in the pan, while Robert gave it a shake, then she started to cut oranges, putting the pieces in the juicer.

‘I know an Aaron. He’s not French like your au pair of course, well, he’s actually Adam’s best mate, or was, before he did a runner.’
Robert glanced at her. She turned on the juicer, raising her voice over the noise of it.

‘He’s gay,’ she said loudly. ‘They had this big bromance thing going on. I think he was just a bit in love with Adam, to be honest. Unrequited love, how awful is that?’

‘Look, just shut up will ya, Vic? Do I look even remotely interested?’

Vic took her finger off the juicer, so the room went quiet. Robert moved the pan off the heat and it banged heavily as he put it on the board on the counter. He ran the back of his sleeve over his face.

‘Does it hurt? Is that why you’re being grumpy all of a sudden? Or is it something else, something you’re not telling me? And why are you out getting into fights, anyway?’ Vic had asked.

Robert had a small plaster over the hairline cut on his nose. His cheek had started to swell since the morning, dark red and shining. Chrissie had put ice on it when she’d woken in the night, talking about going to the police before he’d shut her down.

‘Anyway, I hope you gave as good as you got,’ Vic said.

He hadn’t wanted to hear about unrequited love. What he couldn’t get out of the mind was the sight of Aaron’s hand, the night before, holding on to the back of that lad’s trousers, his fingers exploring, pressing into his curve. Was the lad a new boyfriend? He’d thought Aaron was in trouble, but all along he’d moved on. He half wanted to bail on the whole Sunday arrangement. But he knew he couldn’t for Josh’s sake. And he wanted to see Aaron, too. What he wanted was that hand on his own body, just like that, but this time without the trousers, fingers curling against his skin, pushing into him.

He gulped down a breath suddenly. Just maybe he could repair this with Aaron somehow.

‘Call the kids to eat. I need to make a business call,’ he said to Vic. He felt her eyes watch him as he left the room.

Lucas sat with his long legs crossed, naked, behind Emile. The room stank of witch hazel. Lucas rolled the cotton tissue he’d used to apply the lotion into a ball and threw it on the floor beside the bed. He blew gently over Emile’s bruised back, then leaned his chin forwards, onto his shoulder.

Emile turned his head and raising a hand, he grabbed Lucas’s hair, pulling tight enough against his black locks to hurt. Opening his mouth, he kissed his lover.

‘Just stay away from him now.’

‘I told you, I didn’t do anything.’

‘The man’s a pariah.’ Emile raised his voice. He’d heard Aaron earlier getting up, putting on the kettle in the living area. ‘And Aaron should stay away from him, too.’

He turned and pushed Lucas down onto his back, then moved over him, placing his teeth against an earlobe, slapping his thigh. He pushed his underpants down, under his balls.

‘We don’t have time for this. My parents will be waiting,’ Lucas said.

‘They can wait a little longer, then.’
Robert saw Aaron before he saw them coming.

He was waiting on a park bench not far from where they’d agreed to meet, sitting forwards, hands in front of him, turning his phone round and round with his fingers. He was wearing a hoodie under a black winter coat, the sleeves of the hoodie pulled down over his wrists. Every now and then, he raised his eyes, looking down the crossroads of paths that converged nearby, blowing air from his cheeks that were pinched red from the cold winter air.

For a moment, Robert had wished they were alone. He had an image of sitting beside him and taking hold of Aaron’s hand, maybe kissing him, there, on the park bench, in public, in front of anyone walking by.

But it was the kids they were there for. And it would never happen. Not in this life.

Now, he was pushing Doli in an umbrella stroller, while Josh walked slightly behind him on his heels, his arm clinging to the back of Robert’s coat. He was half hidden, tilting his head to peer forwards down the path.

The noise of the stroller made Aaron turn, and then Doli had seen him and stretched her fingers forward with a squeal of delight.

‘Aaron! Aaron!’ She called.

Robert stopped as he approached, and Aaron hunkered down, leaning forward, kissing her cheek, while she stroked her hands softly around his face.

Joshua stayed back, his hand still holding on to Robert’s coat. His eyes slid momentarily over Aaron and then away to the mossy lawn of the park and the grey trees.

Leaning back, Aaron glanced at him, then pulled something from his pocket.

‘I found this in the grass.’

He placed it on his palm.

It was a tiny shell, pearly, iridescent, fragile.

‘I wondered how it got here? It’s not like we’re near the seaside.’

Josh’s eyes fixed on the shell.

Aaron moved the shell to his finger and thumb, holding it up.

‘Take it, if you want?’

Josh hesitated, then let go of his father and walked towards him, eyes still on the shell, until he was leaning against his thigh and opening his hand. Aaron dropped the shell there, gently circling his arm around Josh’s waist. Josh turned and looked into his blue eyes. And all at once he wrapped his arms around him, burying his face in his neck.

‘There’s my lad!’
Aaron kissed his hair. He wiped the back of his sleeve against his eyes hastily, then looked up at Robert, who nodded slowly back at him.

Robert thought about Vic’s question, about Aaron being handsome. When he looked at Aaron now, the intense blue of his eyes, his face next to Josh’s, he could hardly breathe. He felt like he could look at him forever, that his eyes had found their holy grail.

‘Mate!’ Aaron said to Josh. ‘You ready for a game of football then?’

Josh stepped back, eyes bright, looking around.

‘Where’s the ball?’

Aaron stood up now, looking at Robert with a small frown.

‘The ball!’ Robert’s hand flew to his mouth. ‘I forgot the football.’

Josh and Aaron both looked at Robert, dismay on their faces.

Robert reached behind him to his back pocket.

‘So, it’s a good thing I happen to have… these… instead!’

He pulled out a bunch of tickets.

‘Booked them on line! We’re going up the Eiffel Tower!’

Josh and Aaron both blinked, Doli laughed without knowing why.

Robert stretched his eyes wide.

‘Aren’t I the best dad?’

Aaron looked at him.

‘You’re planning on taking a six-year old and a two-year old up the Eiffel Tower? On a cloudy day, threatening rain?’

‘Well, yeah. That was the plan.’

Aaron nodded.

‘We’d better get going then.’

They took the stairs up to the first elevator.

Aaron had been up before once, with Ed. Those early days before everything had gone pear shaped. It seemed a lifetime ago now. He looked across at Robert. Looking at his bruised face, thinking about his expression the Friday night before, how his body had trembled with anger and adrenaline. And now here he was, playing the model father.

‘Bet you’ve been up here a few times.’
‘Actually, never. Chrissie’s afraid of heights. So, this is my first time.’ Robert opened his eyes wider. ‘With you.’

The way he said it made Aaron blush.

The elevator was a crush and they couldn’t get near the sides so they didn’t even have a view. Josh held Aaron’s hand, while he held the folded up stroller, Robert held Doli on his hip in front of them. As more people crowded in, Aaron was pushed forward against Robert. He wanted to move back, but there was no space. He could feel the curve of Robert’s arse against his body.

When they came out of the elevator onto the viewing platform, Josh pulled at Aaron’s hand, tugging him towards the side. Robert watched them, releasing a wriggling Doli and holding her hand as they went towards them.

He looked at Aaron now in profile, next to Josh, pointing out over the miniature panorama of Paris spread below through the diamond gold lattice around them. When he and Doli approached, he reached an arm up to touch him, then let it fall.

They went all the way up to the top, up to the dizzy heights, taking the second elevator.

There was a telescope for viewing the city, Aaron helped Josh line it up to his eyes, Doli held on to her brother, asking for a go.

‘So did I do good?’ Robert asked when Aaron took a step back beside him.

Aaron shrugged.

‘I suppose. But, next time how about we just play football, eh?’

‘So there’ll be a next time?’

Aaron turned and for the first time they were looking directly in each other’s eyes.

‘If that’s what you want, yeah. Course I want that.’

And all at once Robert was moving close to him, reaching for Aaron’s face. He wasn’t sure what he was doing, only that he wanted Aaron, and being close to him now like this, he needed to touch him.

Aaron raised his arms suddenly and batted him away fiercely.

‘What do you think you’re doing, Robert?’ he snapped.

Robert looked back at him, shaking his head.

Then they turned, and Josh was standing there, looking at them silently.

‘Josh!’ Robert wasn’t sure what he’d seen.

‘Can I go to the shop?’

‘Course. Course you can!’
‘So is it serious? You and this Adam?’ Chrissie asked Victoria. They’d been to the flea market on Rue de Rossiers, where Vic had shopped for gifts, something nice for Diane, now they were back home, sitting at each end of the sofa, feet tucked under them, hands cradling mugs of warm coffee.

‘Nah. I don’t think so. I mean, I like him, but he’s so secretive sometimes.’

‘You think he cheats?’

‘God no! He’s not like Rob!’ She saw Chrissie’s face. ‘…used to be, not like Rob used to be. More illegal stuff, dodgy deals, that’s what I don’t like.’

Chrissie nodded.

‘Listen, I didn’t mean it. You’ve obviously changed him. I mean he’s never actually been married before, has he?’

‘Except that he had a child that I didn’t even know existed. And then he expects me to trust him.’

‘But he married you.’

‘Victoria, he married me because I was pregnant with what I later discovered was his second child, sometimes I actually think he orchestrated the whole thing. Pin holes in the condom, I wouldn’t put anything past him.’

There was a silence as Victoria thought of something to say.

‘More coffee? There’s some in the pot.’

Victoria went out into the hall where she’d left her bags from the flea market and bent to pick them up to take them up to her room, knocking some of the coats off the coat rack. When she started to pick them up, something dropped from Robert’s leather jacket pocket. She picked it up, and then let it go again suddenly, her hand flying to her mouth with shock, watching it settle on the parquet floor.

It was a polaroid photograph.

It was a nude male - not just nude - erotic.

And she knew who it was. She’d actually known him intimately once, though she couldn’t recall ever having seen him quite so aroused, and with good reason she knew now. It was Aaron; Adam’s Aaron, her Aaron, Aaron from Emmerdale.

So, Aaron the au pair must be their Aaron. But he was on the run from the police. Maybe he was dangerous.

And why did Robert have an erotic photograph of him? Was it linked to the fight Rob had been in? Had he been fighting with Aaron?

Robert followed Josh into the shop.

He helped him to choose a snow shaker with a tiny model of the Eiffel Tower inside.
Aaron waited outside with his hands in his pockets.

When Josh came running out to him, he smiled.

‘Look what I got. It’s for Auntie Victoria.’

Aaron looked confused.

‘Is she here?’

Robert opened his mouth, and Aaron’s eyes flew to his face.

Their eyes met and Aaron colored.

He knew.

Aaron knew. He knew he was from Emmerdale. He knew who he was. How did he know? And how long? Robert had been keeping it a secret, and now, he didn’t even know why. Had he known when they’d been sleeping together? Perhaps, not at first, but later, after the attic room, at home, and when they’d been in the hotel the very last time.

The strange thing was, Robert suddenly realized, it mattered. Aaron had known who he was, and he’d still chosen to be with him. He’d said he loved him.

He looked out at the star cage structure of the Eiffel Tower surrounding them, the grey rain crowds drifting in the huge sky that seemed to touch them there.

He knew how he felt about Aaron now, he just needed to tell him.

Robert placed a coffee in front of Aaron.

They were back down on the ground in a burger bar. Doli, exhausted from the fresh air and excitement, was sleeping in the stroller. Josh, still finding energy from somewhere, had run off to play in the ball pool. Aaron watched him as he threw himself backwards, sideways, forwards, his eyes glittering, his face flushed.

He glanced at Robert as he sat, then looked away again.

When Robert reached a hand forward to his wrist, he flinched, pulling his arm away. Robert frowned.

‘Don’t be like that.’

Aaron shook his head, closing his eyes as he rolled them.

Robert lowered his voice.

‘Why didn’t you let on? That you knew I was from Emmerdale? Say something?’

‘Why would I? It changes nothing. You’re still you. You’re still married and a dad and a ….’

Robert shifted forwards, looking for Aaron’s eyes.
‘But you get it now. That’s why I finished it. I wanted you away from the house, to protect you. I thought if Vic saw you, you’d end up shopped. She’d tell Chrissie who you are and you’d go back to prison. Everything’s changed now, now you know why I ended it. That I did it for you.’

‘No Robert. Nothing’s changed. Vic’s a mate. She wouldn’t have done that. I can’t even see how the two of you are related.’

‘Don’t. Look, I was wrong. I want this. I can help you, I can help find an apartment, I can pay the rent. You can keep seeing the kids and we …, we could, we could keep going, you and me.’

‘I don’t want anything from you.’

‘Aaron, listen…’

‘No, Robert, you listen! Let me make it clear! I don’t like you and I certainly don’t fancy ya anymore. I’m here for the kids, so leave off lording it about, will ya! Or next time it won’t be Emile who’s wiping that smile off your face!’

Robert blinked back at him. His voice was angry, too, when he spoke.

‘Cos you’ve moved on? The lad, at the club on Friday?’

Aaron rolled his eyes.

‘Because Emile is right. He told me to stay away. You’re bad news.’

Robert sneered.

‘Oh Emile! What did you do? Sleep with him on your overnight away? Yeah, Lucas told me about that.’

‘What? Emile’s a decent bloke. He’s worth a thousand of you. You’re poison. I wish I’d never met ya.’

Aaron stood up suddenly. And just as quickly Josh was at their side, holding onto him.

‘Don’t go!’

‘I’m sorry, love. I’ll see you again soon. I promise.’

Emile was preparing food when Lucas arrived home. He hadn’t expected him until late evening. He knew the Sunday meal was sacrosanct for Lucas’s family.

Lucas pulled off his beanie, and stood motionless in his coat by the door, arms down by his sides. Emile rose up in a single movement until he was next to him, holding him tightly.

He could feel his body start to shake as he tried to swallow down a sob, that forced itself anyway from his throat.

Emile rocked him.

‘It’s alright. It’s alright, Lucas. Tout va bien aller,’ he whispered in his ear.

‘They told me to leave you.’
Emile raised a hand to the back of his hair.

‘They said that I was confused. They said I’d had girlfriends before, so I must be wrong. I tried to explain, but they wouldn’t listen to me. They said things about you… I’m sorry. And my mother, she couldn’t even look me in the eye. She just starting talking about God, she cried all night.’

‘Lucas, Lucas, Listen. They’ll come round. They just need time. They love you!’

‘They told me if I don’t leave you, they’ll cut off my allowance and stop paying my university fees. For my own good, they said.’

Lucas wiped his eyes with his sleeve, catching his breath. He smiled weakly.

‘They said you were too old for me.’

‘Well, that at least is arguable.’

Now, Robert waited in the arrivals lounge at Charles de Gaulle airport. He hadn’t planned to be here, this wasn’t what he’d wanted, but he’d changed his mind, making a call to cancel the arrangements for the driver, taking the red Porsche. He told the valet that he wouldn’t be long, he’d checked on line and seen the plane was on time.

He wasn’t watching the passengers as they arrived. Instead he was thinking about Aaron. He wasn’t so special. He’d got caught up in the novelty. He just had nothing to compare him with.

There was a hand on his shoulder. He turned.

‘Roberto. You’ve been in a fight?’

‘Rico!’

He reached out a hand to shake, which Ricardo took with a smile.

‘Very British, I thought I just landed in France?’

His brown eyes danced. He pulled Robert into a hug, air kissing, his cheek brushed against Robert’s.

‘You must be tired,’ Robert muttered.

‘Not at all. Thanks for the upgrade. I slept all the way.’

Victoria would say he was handsome. No doubt about that. Robert had taken a risk recruiting a younger man to head the Brazil office, but there’d never really been any competition. He was young yes, but dynamic too, smart, and yes, good looking, a strong jaw outlined by a short growth of beard, a rounded rib cage in a narrow frame, and kind clever eyes.

When the valet dropped it off, they climbed into the Porsche.

‘Let’s go somewhere,’ Ricardo grinned. ‘The Eiffel Tower?’ he joked.

‘I was there today. First time, in fact.’ Robert pushed the image of Aaron away.
‘I thought you were going to take me?’

‘Well, I couldn’t wait, could I?’

Ricardo turned his face, studying Robert’s profile as he drove. Robert glanced sideways at him, for a moment taking his eyes off the road.

Robert slowed down in front of the hotel. He wet his lips.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow, then.’

‘Really? Take me for a drink. I told you I’m not tired.’

Robert nodded, he knew why he’d picked Ricardo up from the airport, so he drove on to a club he’d been to once or twice before, but not often enough to be known.

He slowed down outside and then handed the keys over for parking as they got out. The club was neither empty or full. Enough clientele for late on a Sunday night. The lighting was dim, orange lights around the bar, and colored lights circling over an empty wooden dance floor in time to low music. They found a booth at the back of the club, a high sofa back, a table in front of them.

Robert took off his coat while Rico sat and watched. He loosened his blue tie and pulled it off, too.

‘What do you want to drink? Whiskey?’

‘How about a Champagne cocktail? I am in Paris, let me make the most of it!’

When he came back with the drinks, they raised a toast. Robert spread his thighs, feeling the contact with Rico’s legs. Aaron wasn’t so special. He told himself again. He noticed his hand was shaking and drank faster, then called over a waiter for another.

They talked business for a while, Rico sharing the details of the Amaggi contract they’d won. Robert watched his mouth. When the conversation fell silent, Robert looked at his watch, then turned back.

‘So, what are your goals while you’re here?’ he asked quietly.

‘To get a promotion.’ Rico smiled at him.

‘And how do you aim to do that?’

‘Well, you’re the boss, aren’t you? You know the old cliché?’

Robert raised his eyes, wetting his lips with his tongue. Rico shifted his thigh, Robert didn’t move away.

He felt Rico’s hand on his leg and all at once his pulse was racing, his breath was short. He was resting back against the upholstered material of the sofa, he couldn’t move. Rico’s hand moved up to his cheek, and turned it gently towards him.

‘Robert?’

And he kissed him.

Robert felt his lips against his own, then they opened their mouths. Rico moved his jaw hungrily over Robert’s, sliding his tongue into his mouth. Robert raised a hand to his chest, gently pushing
him away.

He pulled back, looking around the club, eyes flickering.

‘It’s okay. No one can see here,’ Rico said, looking around too. 'I missed you, when you left Brazil.'

Robert’s chest was heaving. He’d planned for this to happen. He couldn’t have Aaron. Ricardo, on the other hand, was here, next to him. Rico had kissed him before, and he’d kissed him back. It had happened more than once. He’d lain down in the night in the hotel in Sao Paulo, imagining how it might be, a hand stroking himself, slowing it right down, taking his time.

Now Rico moved his mouth against Robert’s jaw.

‘Something’s changed, since Brazil.’

‘Nothing’s changed,’ Robert lied.

‘But, you want something now, something you didn’t want before?’

‘Yes.’

So he moved his hand up, stroking over Robert’s hard bulge already straining against his trousers. Robert shifted his hips. He felt Rico’s hand over his zip, then slowly pulling it down. He looked around the club, thinking anyone looking, really looking, would see. And then he felt his fingers, tugging at the material of his boxer briefs.

‘So I think you made love with a man, since Brazil.’

‘It’s none of your business.’

Robert swallowed, his heart thundering.

Rico’s cool fingers started to caress against the silky surface of Robert’s cock, he stroked strongly, using a circular motion.

Robert thought about Aaron. Then tried not to think about him.

Rico reached over and pulled his coat over his lap.

He undid the fastening at the top of Robert’s trousers, Robert blew through his lips. Rico ran his thumb softly over Robert’s wet slit, collecting pre cum, rubbing the liquid around his cock head. At the same time they kissed, moving their mouths rhythmically, tongues lapping together. Robert writhed his hips at the sensation of Rico’s fingers, his cock throbbed as his nerves fired with sweet currents running down to the base his shaft, heat building in waves in his groin.

‘Let’s go to your hotel,’ Robert said.

Rico said he needed a shower, and Robert waited for him, taking off his clothes, lying on the bed. He wouldn’t think about Aaron he told himself. Aaron had moved on. He didn’t want him. Robert needed to move on too, so he could forget. He lay down on his back and stroked himself slowly, waiting, his cock heavy and hard in his hand over his belly, his thighs open. He was already close.
That was how Rico found him.

‘Jesus!’ he whispered.

When he unfastened the towel around his waist, Robert could see how much he wanted him.

He moved over Robert and ran his tongue over his nipples and downwards over his body, slowing at the glowing tender skin by his hip bones. He let his hands caress downwards.

Robert’s balls ached at the unfamiliar touch, and when Ricardo’s cock, sheathed with a condom, pressed against him, he could feel himself opening. He looked away. His mind wandered. He wondered for a moment if he was gay. Then he felt Rico enter him and gasped at the burn, spreading his hands out against the white hotel bed sheet.

‘Go fast!’ he whispered.

It was sex, and he wanted the release.

But when he came, he saw Aaron’s face. He groaned, cum spilling over his stomach.

He imagined telling Aaron that he loved him and then turned his head with shock. He’d had an affair. But a part of him knew it was true. He did. He did love him. He felt sick.

‘He won’t see you without an appointment.’

Robert stepped out of the office and saw him standing there, coltish with his long limbs, a heavy backpack, probably full of books on the floor beside him.

‘Lucas!’

It was Monday morning. Ricardo was already meeting with the sales team. They’d shared a coffee when he’d arrived at the office, all very professional, neither of them alluding to the night before. There would be time enough for that.

Lucas took off his beanie, releasing black locks of hair that fell around his face.

‘Je voulais te voir.’

Robert looked at his watch.

‘You’d better come through then.’

In the office, Robert sat back against the desk and folded his arms, watching Lucas’s face as he stood awkwardly in front of him, his eyes darting about the room.

He waited.

‘What you said, about work experience.’

‘You weren’t interested.’

Lucas didn’t speak.
Robert looked at his nails then looked up again.

‘Does Emile know you’re here?’

There was another silence, then Lucas shook his head and turned towards the door.

‘This was a mistake.’

Robert stood, reaching forward, catching his elbow for a moment so that Lucas turned back towards him.

‘I can’t help you unless you tell me what you want.’

He could see his green eyes grow wider.

‘I need money. I came out to my parents this weekend and they cut me off. They won’t pay for my education. So you see, I need to earn something, I need to find a way.’

‘Why don’t you ask your boyfriend for help?’

‘I don’t want his money.’

‘But you want mine?’

Robert put a hand over his mouth.

‘Alright, this is what we’ll do. The company will give you a scholarship. For your university fees. And you’ll decide a couple of days a week or half days or whatever when you come here and learn the ropes, put that economics theory into some real practice. And if it works we’ll think about it again next year. If not, well, we won’t then.’

Lucas shook his head.

‘I don’t know what to say, except merci, I guess.’

‘What will Emile say?’

Lucas looked away again.

‘You’re not going to tell him, are you?’

Lucas turned to go, Robert’s eyes followed him.

‘Hey, don’t turn up to work in ripped jeans. Get a suit. A good one. This is my tailor.’ Lucas turned and took the card from Robert. ‘Put it on my account. Bet you scrub up well.’

Chrissie sat, her laptop open in front of her, a pout on her lips, her elbows on the table. She rested her face in her open hands for a moment, hesitating, then with a sigh, she picked up the phone.

She waited for the line to pick up.

‘Yes, I want to hire someone, a private investigator. Yes, it’s to follow my husband.’
Aaron looked up as the silver car drove onto the gravel driveway at the entrance to the scrap yard. It was quite a distance, but he could still recognize at a glance the old model Porsche 944, from the late 1980’s. He hadn’t seen this particular car before, and no doubt it had seen better days, but it was probably still worth a bit of money, so he was surprised, at first, that someone might be considering it for scrap. But then again, maybe it had gone the way of all cars. It must have, if someone was bringing it in.

He squinted as the car swerved into a parking position. Then his heart lurched. He knew, even before the driver got out, who it was. And he hated himself, because he didn’t want to feel like this. Not for anyone, not ever again.

So he turned back to the old Renault he was scrapping as Robert, hands deep in the pockets of his leather jacket, walked the distance between them.

‘Nice car. Where’s the red Porsche then?’ he muttered without looking up as he came closer.

‘Let’s just say this one’s more suited for the wilderness of this decrepit place.’

‘Are you scrapping her then?’

‘You must be joking, mate, I love that car, she’s worth fifty grand.’

Aaron turned his mouth down for a moment. He wanted to tell Robert he wasn’t his mate, but he let it go for now. Instead he stood up straight with a sigh, pulling off his gloves, running a hand down over his hi-vis.

‘So, what are you doing here then? Emile’s away if you came for business. You’ll need to come back at the end of the week.’

He was disconcerted when Robert smiled.

‘Actually, I came to see you.’

‘Why? I thought we’d said all we had to say on Sunday.’
Robert lowered his voice.

‘No, you said all you had to say. Not quite the same thing.’

Robert was a liar. He couldn’t help himself.

Aaron stood in the shower. He’d lost track of time, except that the water running over his back was still hot, and the bathroom at Emile’s was full of steam, catching in his eyelashes. It mingled with the alcohol vapor escaping from his lips. He’d had a skinful to drink, again, but instead of forgetting Robert, he was imagining that he was right here, with him. He shut his eyes. He would lather the block of soap, then run the suds down over his pale smooth chest, over the nub of his flushed nipples, down past his stomach, onto his thighs.

Eventually he would let his fingertips travel back, pushing upwards. It had only taken those few times for Aaron to know how hungry Robert was to be taken that way, to be penetrated. He’d waited for so long for it. And it was Aaron, he was the first one, the only one, to do that.

He scrunched up his eyes, and turned, raising his face to the water, pushing the heel of his hand down over the semi erection that had formed just thinking about him.

So, it was sex, not love. He’d just been blindsided by how good it had been.

The scent of Robert’s skin came to him unexpectedly, overwhelming him, stopping him from breathing.

If Paddy was around, he’d have told him to run a mile. ‘Mate!’ He’d have said, taking off his glasses.

And he’d done that too. He’d stayed away for weeks. But then Robert had taken them all up the Eiffel Tower. They’d been like a little family. He’d held Josh’s hand, while Robert carried Doli, and a complete stranger had smiled at them.

‘What beautiful children!’

Maybe they’d thought they were a couple. Two gay dads with kids. And Aaron had blushed, because he felt guilty, because he wanted that, it was his fantasy, back, all over again.

There was a knock on the bathroom door and Emile’s voice.

‘Aaron, J’ai envie de pisser! I’m coming in.’

The door opened and Aaron turned away, confused and embarrassed behind the glass shower door as the older man entered, brazenly looking his body up and down, a frown creasing his forehead.

Aaron wrapped his arms together across his stomach, holding his wrists with his hands.

Instead of taking a slash, Emile reached for a bath towel, and opened the shower door.

‘What are you doing?’ Aaron protested, rolling his eyes in panic.

‘Come on, mon cheri. You’ve been in here long enough.’

He stepped up behind Aaron, reaching forward to turn off the shower, so that his shirt sleeve was drenched under the falling water. Then he placed the towel over Aaron’s shoulders from behind,
and reached forward, taking his hand, turning it, looking at his wrist, then down at his stomach for fresh cuts.

‘You can’t just masturbate like everyone else does in the shower, eh? I think it would be a better relief than this that you’re doing to yourself, non?’

Emile steered him out of the shower cabin, rubbing the towel over his shoulders then wrapping another bath towel around his waist. He took him into the living area and sat him down, then made an expresso for them both and came and sat beside him.

‘Where’s Lucas?’ Aaron asked, he was sobering up now, helped by the coffee and Emile’s expression.

‘Shopping, apparently. Though with what, and for what, I have no idea.’

Aaron nodded. Emile had explained about Sunday, about Lucas coming out and his family’s reaction. He tugged at the corners of the towel, feeling it slipping from his shoulder. When he turned, Emile’s kind eyes were fixed steadily on his face.

‘So, what do we do? Shall we cheat on Lucas? Would that help?’

Aaron snorted. He knew Emile was being flippant, even if, scratch the surface and maybe he wouldn’t say no, for all the wrong reasons.

‘You love Lucas.’

‘Oh! Big word! I haven’t known him so long, Aaron. But, yes, I’m fond of him, for sure.’ He grinned, and then his voice was still again ‘Tell me about Robert. What happened yesterday? Up the Eiffel Tower?’

Aaron shook his head.

‘Not there, actually. It was after that. He said he would rent me an apartment.’ Aaron gave a small shake of his head. ‘He wanted us to start up again.’

‘But you don’t want that?’

‘I told him I didn’t want anything to do with him.’

The truth was it would have been so easy to say yes. That he wanted that. That he would always want him.

He saw Emile frown back at him, reading his doubt.

‘You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?’

Aaron suddenly sat forwards, elbows on his knees. He nodded.

‘I’m going to tell him, I changed my mind. I’m going to say yes, and stuff the consequences.’

Robert sat in the kitchen at home, his curled fingers playing absently with his top lip, a whiskey in front of him on the table which was set with places for evening tea.

Victoria was pulling a cottage pie out of the oven.
Robert glanced sideways at her, before his eyes flickered to the clock on the kitchen wall.

‘Bit early to eat, isn’t it?’

‘Five o’clock tea time? Don’t tell me living in France and being all posh has knocked all the Yorkshire out of you? You’ll be needing to get used to it for when you all come next week.’ Victoria objected. ‘Anyway, we didn’t expect you home at this time. It’s a first.’

‘Well, I wanted to see you all before I go out again.’

Robert had organized a work’s dinner for Ricardo, a restaurant booked for 9 o’clock. He’d had some grumbling about the short notice from some of the staff, but they wouldn’t say no to him. He hadn’t wanted a night out alone with Rico, not yet, at least.

‘So, are you going to be out every night this week with this Brazilian chap here?’

‘Probably. Why?’

Victoria put a hand on her hip.

‘Dunno. Just, and don’t take this the wrong way, I got the impression that Chrissie might be feeling a bit neglected.’

‘She likes attention. She’ll get over it.’

‘You could always ask him here. I could cook a proper dinner, something gourmet. He must have a family, too. He’d probably enjoy it.’

‘Vic, he’s a young man in Paris for the first time. I think he might have other priorities.’

‘Then why not take us all out with him? We could go clubbing.’

‘He’s gay. He likes gay clubs.’ Robert risked, without looking up at his sister.

He didn’t notice Victoria’s glance at him.

‘I like a gay club, now and again.’ She paused for a fraction of a minute and still watching his bowed head she went on. ‘Adam and I used to go sometimes with Aaron,…, the lad I told you about on Saturday.’

And she saw it, his shoulders tensing up, his mouth set.

‘This isn’t Hotten, it’s not all 70’s disco and drag queens and Northern Soul.’ He still wasn’t looking at her. ‘This is Paris. It’s a bit more sophisticated than that. Anyway, some of the Cabaret acts are pretty adult.’ He added.

‘Oh yeah? Sounds like you know what you’re talking about.’ She was having a laugh, but Robert scraped his chair as he stood up, crossing his arms, blinking at his sister.

‘I don’t go to gay clubs, Vic. Why would I? I don’t like them.’

‘It’s alright. Calm down!’

‘Well, shut up! And stop winding me up, then!’

Victoria watched her brother leave the room, her eyes wide. So, that hadn’t gone so well, she
pondered. She needed to know about Aaron and the photo, but she could hardly him ask directly, or maybe she just should.

Meanwhile perhaps she should speak to Adam. If Aaron was unstable, dangerous even, she didn’t like the thought of Robert not knowing, taking the kids to see him. He needed to be warned.

Robert’s fingers were shaking as he unfastened the buttons of his shirt in the bedroom, pulling it up roughly from his trousers. The conversation with Vic had unnerved him.

He didn’t like her talking about Aaron. He curled his lip. He should have waited for her to leave before he took the children to meet him. It just all felt too dicey. And the whole gay conversation had thrown him. Had she been fishing, or was he being paranoid?

He unfastened his trousers, and pulled them off, looking for a hanger. His arse was still sore from the night before. He hadn’t meant it to happen, with Rico. Well, he’d meant it for a while. He’d been angry, with Aaron. He pulled off his boxer briefs and then turned and looked in the mirror. There was a small blue bruise on his inner arse cheek. He knew it was from Rico’s hip bone as he’d shifted up, going fast into him. He didn’t like it. He didn’t want anyone to mark his body, except Aaron, he realized.

He didn’t want anyone, period. Except Aaron.

He grabbed a towel and stepped into the shower.

Aaron’s rejection had stung, but he’d reacted too hastily. He needed to talk to him again, apologize. Now, he wasn’t sure what expectations he’d set up in Rico’s mind, either. He might need to let him down gently.

Aaron and Emile were still sitting on the sofa. Aaron knew he should get dressed, but for the moment Emile’s arm was around his shoulder, his fingers squeezing absently against the knotted muscle on his shoulder, where the towel had slipped away, and he let himself take the comfort from his older friend.

Lucas, opening the door, pouted at the sight of them sitting together. Aaron thought Emile would move his arm, but he didn’t. Instead he looked at Lucas’s empty hands.

‘What did you buy?’ he asked.

Lucas’s face looked flushed, his green eyes had a slightly feverish glitter about them, but he looked tired too. He pulled at the fastenings on his coat, before answering.

‘I didn’t buy anything. I don’t have money, you know.’

‘So why shop?’ Emile asked with a frown.

Lucas spoke with his back turned, hanging his coat.

‘Why not?’

He moved then, and sank on the sofa, the other side of Emile, who, still with his arm around Aaron, turned to look at him.
‘Did you speak with your parents again?’

‘In the morning, yes. I don’t want to talk about it.’ Lucas swept a hand through his black hair.

‘And what about your birthday? Will they see you then? Not every day you turn 21.’

‘Not if I stay here with you. They were very clear.’

Emile shrugged.

Aaron stood and excused himself, saying he would dress, going into the bedroom. Lucas watched him silently. Then Emile turned back to him.

‘So where were you really?’

‘I told you.’

‘Tu m’as dit un mensonge, mon amour. You told me a lie.’

Emile said it quietly, then leaned forward and kissed Lucas, after, he moved his nose to his neck.

‘And you smell different.’

‘I need a shower.’

Lucas stood up quickly and walked towards the bathroom, Emile frowned.

‘And Aaron left the bathroom in a fucking mess again!’ Lucas called out.

Vic put a film on for Josh after Robert had left. Doli was already asleep and Chrissie still wasn’t back, something about a board meeting with her business. Vic really didn’t mind. Sometimes Chrissie was a bit full on, and she would send Josh to bed if she came back, but Vic liked sitting up with him.

He lay on the sofa, limbs spread, eyes sleepily following the action the screen, his white blond hair shining in the lamplight.

‘Shove up.’ Vic grinned, moving his legs and sitting down next to him. He wriggled round and it wasn’t long before he was resting heavily against her side.

‘Your Mum’ll be home soon, so just be ready to go to bed when she comes, or we’ll both be in trouble.’

‘She’s not my real mum.’ Josh yawned.

‘Well she might be new, but she’s still your real mum.’ Vic blinked back at him, giving him a squeeze. ‘You and Doli, you’re like me and your Dad.’

Josh sat up suddenly, looking at her.

‘Your Dad must have told you?’ But she could see that he hadn’t. Now she worried that she may have said too much, but it was better to explain everything, rather than leaving it like that, so she went on. ‘Your Dad’s mum died, and then our dad, your granddad, his name was Jack, married again to my mum, Sarah. And she loved us both, so she was your Dad’s new mum.’
She could see the amazement on his face.

‘And then there’s your uncle Andy, who you’ll see, too, when you come to Emmerdale. Tell you what, do you want to see some photos?’

She took out her phone and started scrolling through her albums, Josh’s chin against her arm now.

When he saw a photo of Adam, he asked who it was.

‘Oh, That’s Adam. My boyfriend. Or, at least, he, sort of, is, if he’s still waiting for me when I get back. It’s complicated.’

But suddenly Josh was on his knees, eyes bright, cheeks flushed.

‘Aaron! Go back! Go back! Look! It’s Aaron!’

Vic held the phone, watching his eyes.

‘That’s Ed!’ He rattled off. ‘He plays rugby. He was Aaron’s boyfriend, but then he had another one, he had brown eyes, but then he ended it too.’

‘Blimey.’ Vic laughed.

Josh suddenly moved closer to her still on his knees on the sofa.

‘Do you want to know a secret?’ He asked, then cupped his hand against her ear and whispered. At first, she thought she misheard him.

‘Daddy kissed Aaron in the kitchen.’ He breathed.

‘Tell me again.’

He slowed the words right down.

‘Daddy, kissed,’ he paused for a breath, ‘Aaron, in the, kitchen.’

Vic’s instinct was to say no, he was wrong. She felt stunned. The photograph? Rob? Maybe he was confused. Maybe it was like a greeting kiss, the French way, or … But she didn’t say anything. She remembered seeing Robert kiss Katie when she was a child, admittedly a bit older than Josh. She wouldn’t question him. She wouldn’t upset her nephew like that.

But what, in the name of everything holy, as Dad used to say, was going on?

After the meal, Robert walked back with Rico to the hotel. They’d both had quite a lot to drink, and were merry drunk, sharing a laugh and gossip about the antics of some of Robert’s office staff. When they came to the entrance of the hotel, Robert stopped, hands in pockets and looked around.

‘I won’t come in.’

He saw Rico’s face fall.

‘Oh. I’d hoped…’

‘Not tonight, yeah?’
He saw Rico take a breath, as if he was going to say something, and then release it again. Instead he reached up a hand and stroked down Robert’s arm, then leaned forward, and kissed his cheek, keeping the pressure for longer than normal, until Robert gently held his elbow, leaning back with a smile.

‘Goodnight, then.’ Rico said.

Robert smiled. ‘Don’t be late tomorrow, eh?’

Turning he hailed a taxi to take him home. In the taxi, he took out his phone and scrolled down to Aaron’s number, his thumb hovering for a moment. Then he looked at the time, it was after one in the morning. Aaron would think he was some lovesick teenager if he called him now, and anyway, he was probably sleeping like a baby. He grinned at the thought and watched the lights of the city sweep by as they crossed the river Seine.

The next day Robert walked into the bathroom at work, to be confronted by the sight of an almost naked long limbed Lucas, dressed just in tanga briefs, tripping as he stepped into a pair of trousers, his ripped jeans and T-shirt discarded on the floor beside him, and a white shirt and tie hanging on a hanger over the mirror. Robert’s eyes lingered over the curve of his arse cheeks above his thighs, before he spoke.

‘There are lasses who work here too, you know. You might feel a bit uncomfortable if they walk in on you. You can always change in my office, if you need to, there’s a dressing room attached.’

Lucas turned, fastening the trousers now, doing up the flies. Robert could see the abdominal muscles under the glow of his white skin as he stretched and then reached for his shirt.

‘Those aren’t tailored trousers.’ He went on.

‘No, your tailor chose them for me while I wait for him to make up a suit. Anyway. I can change at home until Friday, Emile is away.’

Robert looked at him sharply.

‘With Aaron?’

‘Non, pas cette fois.’ Lucas answered.

So Robert had driven to the scrapyard in the silver Porsche.

He saw Aaron in the distance through the rear view mirror, as he turned in to park on the gravel driveway. He was wearing hi-vis over a black winter anorak and hoodie, leaning over the engine of an old Renault he was scrapping for parts, the bonnet open. When he heard the car, he’d turned to look, resting back against the car, arms behind him with his hands on the metal work. Even from this distance Robert could see the blue of his eyes.

When Robert got out, he’d turned back to the car, not looking up until Robert was next to him.

Aaron was cool with him, but Robert was hardly surprised. He knew what he wanted, and he wasn’t going to let him push him away, not this time.
So he smiled.

‘I came to see you.’

‘Why? I thought we’d said all we had to say on Sunday.’

Robert lowered his voice.

‘No, you said all you had to say. Not quite the same thing.’

Aaron looked back at him, raising his chin.

‘Listen Robert, it’s doing my head in. I’ll take the kids on Sundays, like we agreed, but I can’t keep doing this. I don’t want to see you, anymore.’

He started to walk away, but Robert raised a hand to his chest, holding him.

‘Wait.’ He could see Aaron’s eyes glancing away from him, not wanting to look back at him. ‘I hurt you, Aaron, I get that. I did everything wrong. I thought, I thought I was doing it for the right reasons, finishing everything. With Vic here I thought I was protecting you. But I was wrong. And I’m sorry.’

‘Right. Well you can go now. You’ve said what you wanted to say.’

Aaron stepped away from Robert, setting off in the direction of the office across the yard.

‘Aaron, Aaron, don’t walk away! I thought it was about sex, all this time, but it wasn’t.’ He hesitated and then closed his eyes for a moment. ‘I slept with another man.’

Robert watched as Aaron froze mid step. He knew he was hurting him more, but he had to tell him. If he was going to get through to him, he needed to do this, to be honest with him, no secrets.

‘Congratulations.’

‘It didn’t mean anything.’

‘You’re pathetic. Why are you even telling me this? I’m not a priest. Just do one, Robert.’

‘I can’t.’

Aaron started to walk again. Robert closed his eyes again.

‘Because I love you! I love you and I want you, just you.’

Aaron turned. Robert could see the red points on his cheeks, the shock and the tears now making his eyes glitter as they reflected the winter sun.

He waited, watching Aaron as he swallowed in total confusion, then looked away.

‘You’ve got Chrissie.’ Aaron said eventually.

‘She’s not enough.’

He saw Aaron nod and breathed out at last.

‘I love you, Aaron. And I’ll wait. And we’ll sort something out. Jus’ don’t push me away again, OK?’
He stepped back. He wanted to kiss Aaron so much, but he knew now wasn’t the time.

‘Promise me? We’ll meet. Tomorrow. Somewhere normal, like a café, just a regular place. We’ll talk.’

Aaron nodded again.

‘OK?’

Robert walked backwards away from him, watching as Aaron rested back unsteadily against the trunk of the Renault, his face white.

‘I’ll call you, tomorrow, then,’ Robert said.

He heard Aaron answer.

‘Tomorrow.’

He turned. When he reached the car he looked back. Aaron hadn't moved. But they'd be alright. Everything would be alright after this.
White lies

Chapter Summary

As promised Robert and Aaron meet and Robert reassures Aaron about his feelings. After they go somewhere more private with inevitable consequences. Vic asks Robert for a serious talk. Lucas gets overheard lying over the phone to Emile. Aaron gets an international call and catches Robert out in another lie.

Chapter Notes

cw reference ot self harm

‘What, no breakfast?’

Victoria narrowed her eyes at her brother as he leant back against the kitchen counter with a glass of freshly squeezed orange in his hand.

‘It’s not like you! If it’s a hangover, you’d be better off with a cooked breakfast, you know.’

‘No hangover.’ Robert smiled, shaking his head.

So, what has put you off your food, then?’ Vic asked sharply.

Robert had come down late, after Chrissie had left for work and the babysitter had already set off, taking Josh to school. Robert was showered and shaved, and rather than his usual work attire, he was wearing jeans with a black sweater that contrasted with his blonde hair and his eyes. If it wasn’t so early, she’d think he was dressed for going on the pull.

‘Do I need a reason?’ he asked.

Robert knew why he didn’t want to eat. He had plans that didn’t involve food. He was only hungry for one thing, and he could eat later.

He licked juice off his top lip. Vic moved next to him, slipping a sisterly hand around his back. He circled her shoulder affectionately as she looked up at him.

‘Rob, I really need to talk to you about something,’ she said, ‘something important.’

His eyes flickered to the clock on the kitchen wall.

‘If it’s Chrissie again…’

‘No, no, she was alright yesterday, actually. Quite calm considering she never gets to see you. No, it’s something else.’

Robert frowned for a moment, looking down at her.
'Sounds serious. But can’t it wait?’ He saw the disappointment in her eyes. ‘How about we meet up later, then? I’ll finish up early and take you to that fusion cuisine place you’ve been going on about.’

‘Are you sure? What about your guest from Brazil?’

‘What about him? I can treat my sister, if I want to. And I can join him after.’

When Victoria started clearing the breakfast plates, Robert picked up his phone and keys. He put on his leather jacket in the hall and with a last look in the mirror he left.

It was around 11.00 in the morning when Aaron walked into the café.

There were tables outside, empty because of the cold. Even inside, the place was almost deserted. He’d never been there before and it seemed a strange choice for Robert. It was rough, and off the beaten track, with a billiards table where a couple of blokes were playing a game, drinking beers from the bottle.

He moved right to the back and sat down at a table against the wall, taking off his coat, pulling uncomfortably at the white shirt he was wearing. There was a solitary waiter standing behind the counter, which had glass shelves with pastries, and bottles of spirits hanging up behind him next to a coffee machine. The waiter ignored him, so he waited, feeling his chest rise and fall and trying not to think.

He shouldn’t have come at all. Robert had said talk, but what was there to talk about, really? Robert said things without thinking, anyway. He did things without thinking, too.

He’d replayed his words from the scrapyard a thousand times, wondering if he could have meant them. He wanted it to be true, however unlikely it was that someone like Robert would love someone like him. He still wanted Robert to love him back.

He felt a constriction in his chest. Robert had been with someone else. He’d wanted someone else enough to do that. And even if he’d said those other things yesterday, the loudest voice in his head was still telling him that there had been this other bloke who’d touched him, turned him on, kissed him, maybe a hand job, or a blow or maybe put his dick … there. He wanted to know, and he didn’t want to know, because it was killing him to think about it, going around and around in his head.

He wiped a hand over his eyes. He should order something.

And then Robert walked in, and he could hear his pulse rushing in his ears.

‘Cancel my appointments today.’ Robert looked at his watch. ‘I’m not stopping long.’

He went into the main office. When he saw Lucas, sitting with a laptop at the meeting table, he raised his eyebrows.

‘You’re enthusiastic. Didn’t expect you to come in today?’

Lucas squinted.
‘I just wanted to finish this spread sheet, then I’m leaving. I have a lecture to get to.’

Robert leaned over. He put a hand on Lucas’s shoulder and lowered his head to look at the screen, his cheek close to Lucas’s. For a moment, Lucas turned, looking at Robert’s profile, his lips, before moving his eyes back to the computer.

‘Tu sens bon. You smell good,’ he muttered quietly.

Robert raised his eyebrows, hiding an amused smile.

‘Thank you,’ he murmured back, then pointed at the screen.

‘There looks like some discrepancy in that column, has that been entered twice? Just double check it. Good job, though.’

He pulled back, allowing the fingers of his hand to brush against Lucas’s neck just for a moment as he straightened up.

‘Where’s Ricardo?’

‘Late!’ Giles looked up, bending his neck back from his chair. ‘I got the impression when he called that he had company.’ He stretched his eyes.

Aaron felt Robert’s eyes on him as he approached, grazing down his body. He saw his lips open.

‘What’s with the shirt?’

He could feel himself blushing. Just like he’d thought, Robert looked out of place in the run-down café, the men playing billiards paused for a moment to watch him, before returning to their game. Aaron picked up a peeling drinks mat from the polished wooden table in front of him, and turned it between his fingers.

‘If you must know, I had a job interview. An au pair job. A new family,’ he said not looking up. ‘A nice family,’ he added, stressing the word.

‘You’re joking!’ Robert was clearly thrown. When Aaron didn’t answer, he went on. ‘You wouldn’t want that. You’ve got Josh and Doli.’

‘Only, I haven’t, have I? Not anymore. Thanks to you.’

Robert sat down opposite him, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, the table between them. His pale eyes darted about the place. The door rattled. Another man came in, and went up to the counter where he ordered a coffee then sat down near the front by a window. Robert felt like he’d seen him before somewhere, but he didn’t care. All he cared about right now was Aaron.

He spoke more softly now.

‘That’s why we’re here, isn’t it? To sort stuff out.’

Aaron snorted, looking towards the street outside.

‘Honestly? I don’t know why I’m here. I should have run a mile.’

Robert’s tongue flickered over his lips.
‘I told you, yesterday.’

Aaron looked back at him for the first time.

‘Did you mean it?’

‘Course I meant it. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. You know me better than that.’

‘Say it again.’

Lucas went into the bathroom to change back into jeans. There was no way he was going to college dressed in suit trousers. Robert had said he could use his office, but he could hardly go in there now he’d left. He took off his trousers, and then his phone rang. He looked at the number and answered with a smile.

‘Emile! Tu me manques!’

‘You sure you miss me?’ Emile answered back. ‘What are you missing? Ma bite?’

‘Yeah. I want to suck it till you come over my face.’ Lucas grinned. ‘Come home.’

‘Tu me fais bander!’ Emile laughed. ‘Where are you anyway?’

‘I’m in college. I have a lecture in ten minutes,’ Lucas lied.

And then the door to the toilet stall opened and a man he hadn’t seen before stepped out. Lucas stretched his eyes in horror, clutching his jeans against his long legs.

‘Can I get to the sink? To wash my hands?’ The man said quietly. Lucas nodded and moved round, still clinging onto his jeans in front of him.

‘Emile, I need to go or I’m going to be late, bébé.’ Lucas’s heart raced.

‘OK, but I have a surprise for your birthday on Friday, so don’t make any plans.’

‘OK, sounds good. I’ll call you. Bye.’

The man raised his eyebrows at Lucas from the mirror as he ended the call. He looked around thirty maybe, handsome, with clever brown eyes and designer stubble around his chin.

‘Boyfriend? Or are you getting paid to talk dirty?’ he asked in English. Lucas could detect an accent, but, obviously, the guy knew enough French to have understood the conversation.

‘Il est mon copain, of course,’ Lucas scowled, pulling on his jeans now.

‘Jealous type, is he?’

‘What’s it to you?’

‘Just curious why you lied.’

Lucas stuffed his discarded clothes in his backpack. He saw the amused expression on Rico’s face, and his scowl deepened. The conversation unsettled him. Yes, he was lying. Emile had told him to stay away from Robert, but he was here for a good reason. All at once, he thought about Robert
earlier, the subtle fragrance of expensive perfume, but underlying that Robert’s own masculine scent and the feel of his fingers on his neck. He was sexy. It meant nothing, but it had aroused him.

Robert moved from his chair and slipped onto the seat next to Aaron, turning towards him. He paused, wetting his lips, making sure to look Aaron directly in the eyes. Then he spoke.

‘I love you.’

Aaron blinked slowly back at him, struggling to hide his reaction from his face. He nodded very slightly, pressing his lips together, fighting against his heart. But he knew Robert could see, he could see from the way his eyes softened looking back at him.

Robert leaned closer, his eyes searching. His voice grew even more gentle.

‘Aren’t you going to say something back?’

Aaron’s breathing was light. He wasn’t going to make another declaration, not after last time, not until he was sure.

‘You’ve heard it.’

‘Yeah but, maybe I wasn’t ready for it.’

Aaron looked back at Robert’s lips, then at his eyes again.

‘Not my problem.’

Robert smiled.

‘Fair enough. I can wait.’

For a moment, they sat in silence, Aaron not trusting himself to speak. A part of him wanted Robert to leave now, so he could just sit and go over what had just happened, what it meant. The billiard players put down their cue sticks and went up to the counter to pay for their beers. The man at the table by the window looked up from his newspaper, looking across at them, and then outside through the glass that reflected the inside of the café darkly.

Robert spoke again at last, his voice still low.

‘I still want the same thing. I still want you, Aaron. So, let me rent you an apartment. We can spend time together, whenever we want, whenever you want, I’ll be there for you. Because you know now…’

Aaron breathed out.

‘What about Chrissie?’ he asked.

‘We’ll work around her.’ Robert looked away.

Aaron’s heart pounded.

‘And the other bloke?’

‘I told you. It was a one off. It was nothing. It meant nothing to me.’
Aaron felt himself tearing up. He hated himself for it, but he had to know.

‘Did he, did he fuck you?’ he asked, his heart thundering, biting his bottom lip as he waited.

Robert looked up for a moment and then looked back at his face with concern.

‘No, what do you take me for? Course not. Course he didn’t. It’s only you I want like that. You know that.’

Aaron wiped his eyes on his shirt sleeve. He just had to be sure.

‘Then what if there are other blokes, or lasses?’

‘There won’t be.’

If Paddy was there, Aaron knew what he would say. ‘Do you not want to be more than just a bit on the side?’ He did want more. But this was what Robert was offering.

‘Come on, Aaron. What do you say?’

Aaron nodded, then.

‘Yeah. I suppose so. If you’re sure it’s what you want. But no more messing me around, Robert, cos I can’t do with it.’

‘I promise. I promise you Aaron. I won’t mess you around.’

Robert put a hand in his pocket, and pulled something out, placing it on the table. It was a bunch of keys.

Aaron looked at them and then looked at Robert’s face.

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s just a possibility. I checked it out, it’s fully furnished so… I thought we might take a look together.’

‘What now?’

‘Now’s as good a time as any.’

‘You knew I’d say yes, then?’

‘I hoped you’d say yes. There’s a difference. Let’s go, eh?’

Outside it was icy and grey with a chill wind blowing across the city from the North East. They walked a couple of streets, until Robert stopped at the entrance of an apartment building with well-trodden rose marble steps, cracked and worn smooth. Robert put the key in the door while Aaron glanced up at the high windows on the façade of the building above. Inside, out of the wind and cold, their throats and cheeks flushed with the warmth. There was no lift in the building. Robert turned to the stairs.

‘Come on!’
After three flights, he led Aaron onto a landing.

Aaron’s heart was beating fast, from the rapid climb up the stairs, the warmth after the cold, from being there with Robert, alone.

Robert slipped the key in the door and opened it, and they went inside.

There was a pattern of black and white tiles on the floor. From the corridor, Aaron could see through to the open door of a kitchen with a sash window. The light reached the entrance where they stood.

‘Shall we look around, then?’ He asked, glancing at Robert, but instead Robert turned to face him, and all at once he could see his eyes blown dark and hear the unsteadiness of his breathing through his parted lips.

‘No.’ It was barely a sound. ‘Later.’

Robert walked Aaron backwards against the wall.

Looking down, he took hold of the zipper at the front of Aaron’s coat and pulled it down. It sounded loud in the muffled silence indoors. Aaron watched his lips as he waited.

It was weeks now since they’d touched, since they’d kissed.

Robert eased the coat from his shoulders, and reaching sideways, he hung it on one of the coat hooks, then he turned back. His eyes searched Aaron’s face and then downwards over his body. He reached forwards again, this time unfastening a button at the top of Aaron’s shirt, working the collar open.

Aaron looked back at him and swallowed.

Then Robert moved his lips to Aaron’s throat, raising a hand to rest against the wall behind them.

Aaron breathed out through his mouth, inhaling Robert’s scent. He lifted his hand and let it fall against the back of Robert’s hair. He wanted this, he wanted Robert’s mouth against his skin.

The palm of Robert’s other hand opened over the material of his shirt, over the curve of his chest. Aaron’s nipples hardened under his touch through the white cotton. He swallowed down the sounds trying to escape from his throat, and instead he grasped at Robert’s short hair, trying to get a grip, trying to pull him up to his mouth, now. He wanted to kiss him so badly.

‘Rob, Robert,’ he pleaded softly.

And then Robert moved his head. Their eyes met again and then their lips were crashing together, their lips bruising against their teeth with the force of it, and Aaron closed his eyes at last, kissing Robert back and all he could think was don’t stop.

When Robert pulled back, Aaron kept his hand on the sleeve of his leather jacket.

‘Will someone come, an estate agent or…’ he asked.

‘No,’ Robert answered softly, ‘No one will come.’

Leaning back, he started to unfasten Aaron’s trousers and tugged at them, pulling them open, then he slid his hand down inside the front of Aaron’s boxer briefs till he reached his balls with his long fingers, then stroked up his shaft, making Aaron tremble as he caressed him. He curled his
forefinger and thumb and pulled back his foreskin. As Robert kissed Aaron again, circling with his
tongue, his hand moved swiftly.

He sank down to his knees, pulling Aaron’s briefs and trousers right down, then he reached
forwards with his tongue, circling the dark tip of Aaron’s cock. Aaron closed his eyes. Robert was
so hungry for him, and Aaron moaned in response as Robert’s tongue continued to lap over him,
over the edge of his cock head, over his slit. He knew he was going to come in Robert’s mouth,
spilling his load down his throat. Robert put his lips over him, sliding his mouth over his thick
shaft, taking him all the way into his throat and then drawing back, until Aaron shuddered.

Robert released him quickly, watching his wet cock twitch in the air, and a burst of thick creamy
cum spilt onto his cock head, trickling down. Robert knelt, panting, giving Aaron time. He waited,
a hand gripping tightly onto his thigh.

‘Ready?’ He whispered.

Aaron nodded, then Robert moved his mouth forward again, gently lapping up the cum, before
standing and kissing him again, so Aaron could taste himself on Robert’s lips.

‘Let’s go to bed.’

Aaron didn’t know where the bedroom was, but Robert did. He opened a door in the corridor to
reveal a double bed made up with crisp new white sheets. Robert must have been there earlier, he’d
made up the bed, maybe even shopped for the sheets, knowing they would be here, knowing that
this would happen.

They both undressed rapidly, then Aaron saw Robert looking at his body, at his stomach and
wrists, with the pattern of fresh cuts. He’d forgotten all about them, but now he could see the
distress in Robert’s eyes.

‘Aaron! What did you do?’

Aaron shook his head.

‘Don’t flatter yourself. It’s not about you,’ he said, his voice hoarse. ‘And not now.’

He saw the hesitation in Robert’s expression.

‘Not now, please,’ he repeated. ‘Later. Lie down for me, Robert, let’s lie down now.’

So Robert lay down on the bed and Aaron found a condom and lube from his wallet and put them
down beside them, then crawled on his knees between his thighs, which were shaking already with
adrenaline as Aaron lifted them. He used spit from his mouth and rubbed it over the tight skin of
his rim, making him wet. Then he slipped a finger inside, letting the side of knuckle stroke against
the tender skin inside the ring of muscle, listening to Robert moan.

Aaron kissed Robert again and raised one thigh up over his shoulder and lined up his cock with
Robert’s hole, just touching.

He could feel Robert already clenching and opening. He was going to spill more cum, even before
he entered him.

So, he waited again. He looked down at Robert’s flushed arching cock, the trail of pre-cum,
weeting his pale stomach. He knew the stretch Robert would feel, the burn. He wanted him so
badly now. He couldn’t wait long. He found the lube and stroked it over Robert’s entrance then
reached forward pressing Robert’s wrists down at his sides against the bed.

Robert looked up at him, speaking in a half whisper.

‘You know how much I want you?’

And Aaron looked back at him, biting his lip.

‘I know.’

Then he entered him, sliding slowly inside into the hot tight space, filling him, listening to Robert moan. In the day light from the window, he could see every freckle scattered over Robert’s body. He could see the sweat break out on his upper lip and the way his pupils dilated.

‘Oh fuck,’ Robert breathed.

‘You’re so tight.’ And more softly, ‘Am I hurting you?’

‘No.’

Aaron knew he was lying, he shifted his hips and slowly pulled back and out, then entered him again. He could tell from Robert’s moans that he was stroking over Robert’s sensitive nerves. He started to thrust hard, biting his lip, watching Robert’s balls, and his long cock hit against his stomach. Then he pulled out again. He was so close. The unopened condom was still next to them on the bed, and he wanted to come inside him, so he quickly tore the condom packet open and rolled it over himself.

Now he started to fuck deeper and faster. Robert’s eyes were fixed on Aaron’s, growing wider. Then he was saying his name.

He watched Robert as his eyes rolled back and his mouth opened. He could feel him clenching around him as he hit his climax, and he felt himself coming too. Robert was stroking himself as his cock started to release cum and Aaron pulled out quickly, pulling off the condom and then he pulled Robert’s cock against his own. He stroked them together as they both came and their cum mingled, running down over his fist and they gasped together as the pleasure rocked through their bodies.

Eventually, Aaron collapsed onto his back beside Robert who kissed his cheek and his eyes and his mouth. Aaron kissed him back. They lay dazed for a while, getting their breath back.

And then Robert turned to him.

‘Food, I need food.’ He said.

The room smelt of sex and pizza and pineapple.

Robert was asleep behind him, his arm resting lightly over Aaron’s side, his fingers brushing against Aaron’s nipple, red and sore now from Robert’s teeth and the rough handling from his fingertips. His arse was sore, too, and slightly sticky again when he shifted against the sheet. Robert had wanted to make love without a condom, but proved to be hopeless at pulling out in time, and now cum continued to seep out of him, in spite of the shower, which had only made things worse in the end.
Robert had washed him down with a flannel and soap, and then, when he ran it over his crack, he’d insisted he turned, which had led to them going again, Robert slick and wet, bare backing for the second time that afternoon.

It was reckless, Aaron knew. He knew he couldn’t trust Robert, he didn’t know anything about the random bloke Robert had been with, let alone all the lasses he’d had. But he chose to block it all out. He chose this. This afternoon. This bedroom. This Robert, who’d told him he loved him, even though Aaron was hard to love.

So, he closed his eyes, and thought about how Robert had reached round him in the shower, and run his fist lubricated with soap over Aaron’s cock until they both came hard and sweet again, Robert’s cum mixing with the shower water as it escaped from his pulsing arse down the back of his thighs.

He could feel his cock now, coming back to life at the thought of it. He discreetly moved a hand down to touch himself, giving his foreskin a couple of tugs up over his cock head.

He felt Robert’s breathing change against his shoulder and craned his head to look back at him.

‘Keep still, will ya!’ Robert complained, his voice like gravel, eyes still closed. ‘What ya doing?’

He moved his hand down and pulled Aaron’s hand away.

Aaron smiled, settling back onto the pillow, still damp from his hair, and closed his eyes. He could already feel Robert, alert now to new possibilities, nudging against the small of his back from behind.

And then his phone rang.

Aaron shifted to reach for it from the bedside table.

‘Leave it.’ Robert murmured, but Aaron had already seen the screen, and his body went tense.

He shifted up to a sitting position.

Robert shifted up quickly next to him, frowning.

‘Who is it?’

‘Dunno. International.’ He glanced sideways at Robert. ‘What if it’s the police? Maybe they’ve been chasing up a lead. Maybe they’ve finally got wind of my new number. Of where I am?’

‘Don’t be daft.’ Robert looked down at the number.

He threw back the sheet suddenly.

‘I’ve got to go.’

‘Robert!’ Aaron watched him dress. ‘Robert!’

‘I’m late.’

‘So, what do I do? The apartment. The key?’

‘Do what you want. I already rented it. It’s ours. It’s yours. But as you know, there’s nothing in the fridge but wine and chocolate. Sorry, selfish.’ He grinned.
The phone rang a second time.

‘Just, don’t answer it. Right?’

He slipped on his leather jacket, and put a hand on the door. Turning, he saw the expression on Aaron’s face, and walked quickly back to him. He spoke softly.

‘I’ll call you, yeah? I’ve got work until Saturday, and then we’ll spend time, Okay? Just me and you.’

He kissed him, stroking down his cheek with his thumb.

‘I meant everything I said.’

Aaron nodded and Robert, keeping his eyes turned to Aaron walked towards the door, then he was gone.

Outside Robert hailed a cab and quickly climbed in.

He knew who’d called Aaron. It was Victoria. She must have found out somehow that Aaron was in Paris, that Aaron from Emmerdale was the children’s au pair. Then she’d know that Robert had been lying. It was what she wanted to talk to him about. He hated lying to his sister, but as long as he kept her away from Aaron, he’d be alright, he told himself.

Aaron had stripped the bed. He would need to take the sheets to a laundry, since, having explored the apartment, it was clear there was no washing machine. He wanted a beer now, as well. So, his mission would be to explore the local area near the apartment, then later he would go back to Emile’s and pack. He wondered where to stay the night. Emile would be back tomorrow, and it might look ungrateful if he moved out before then.

He tried to keep the smile off his face. Robert had said Saturday. He wondered if he might make some excuse and stay the whole night, a first night together. And on Sunday they’d be together again with Josh and Doli.

And then he thought about Chrissie. Robert would be sharing a bed with her tonight and Friday. He closed his eyes, pushing the thought away. He was pretty sure that Robert wouldn’t be doing anything but sleep. Then he pushed that thought away, too. What he needed to do was decide about his job at the scarp yard, maybe he should keep it up. He certainly didn’t want a new au pairing gig, not now he and Robert had this place.

And then his phone rang again.

He looked at it where it rested on the bedside table where he’d left it. Don’t answer, Robert had said, but his hand shook as he picked it up anyway, just to look at the number. Why was this happening now, now, when finally, he could think about better times ahead with Robert.

When he saw the number, he blinked. It wasn’t the same number at all. It was Adam.

But why would he be calling? They’d only spoken a couple of times since Aaron had left England. Perhaps he wanted to warn him that the police had his line. Or perhaps it was a trick and the police were using Adam’s line to snare him.
But he couldn’t not answer.

‘Hey!’

‘Aaron! Man! I miss ya so much. How are you? I hope, I hope everything’s okay, yeah?’

‘Yeah, you too. What up?’

‘Listen. Vic is in Paris.’

Aaron hesitated. Should he say he knew or not?

‘She’s tried to call you, yeah? But you didn’t pick up, so she asked me to let you know it’s her number if she calls again. She wants to see you, man!’

After the call ended, Aaron sat down on the bed, looking out of the window at the sky, dark now, but for the glow of street lamps from the boulevard below.

He rubbed his hand over his face.

One afternoon, he thought, Robert couldn’t even last one afternoon without lying. He just couldn’t help himself.

So Vic knew he was here, and she wanted to meet. He could just call her back.

‘I’ve been waiting for an hour! I’ve already had to start or they said they’d have to give the table to other customers.’

Victoria waved her fork at Robert and then put it in her mouth, tasting the pomegranate, squash and pepitas mousse from the dish in front of her and then making a face as she chewed.

‘Sorry. Just couldn’t get away.’ Robert slid into the seat in front of her.

‘How is it?’

He indicated the food.

‘Different.’ She took a large slug of wine from the glass in front of her.

Robert grimaced.

‘Anyway, what was this important thing you wanted to talk to me about.’

‘Right. Well. Don’t go off on one but, are you gay?’
Robert struggles when confronted with questions about his sexuality. Aaron meets Vic at last. Lucas looks forwards to Emile coming home, then interrupts a surprise moment.

Chapter Notes

Part 2 coming soon :)

They were at Butler’s farm in the kitchen, Adam was laughing, his brown eyes shining, and it was infectious, so that Aaron found himself laughing too. They spilled out into the afternoon, taking the quad bikes, riding them fast over the fields, down to the barn. When they went inside, Aaron’s breath was already catching. Adam asked to see his scars. ‘They’re not about you,’ Aaron said, but he lifted his sweater up all the way above his rib cage, and Adam ran his fingers down over them. His cock grew painfully, and now his cock head was over the waistline of his trousers, and Adam’s thumb was running over him, ‘But you’re not gay,’ he was saying. ‘I’m bi, nobody needs to know, do they? Especially Vic,’ Adam answered. ‘I don’t want to wreck our friendship,’ Aaron said. ‘It won’t. It’s a one off.’ He looked up and saw Robert standing by the barn door, watching them. He wanted Adam, but he wanted Robert more. He panicked, saying his name out loud…

He woke up, his heart thundering, his cock rigid across his stomach, leaking pre-cum onto his skin. For a moment, he tried to get his bearings, not sure where he was, then he remembered, the apartment.

The dream unnerved him. Adam was a mate. He hadn’t thought about Adam like that since he was a teenager with a teenage crush, since before Jackson, before coming out. It must have been the phone call, hearing his voice after so long, that had confused him.

He knew what the dream was really about, it was Robert. It was always Robert in the end.

His plan had been to go back to Emile’s and pack, stay there one last night, and then come back to the new apartment that Robert had rented for them.

At least, that had been the plan.

Then the call from Adam had thrown him. Robert had lied again, or maybe not exactly lied, but lied by omission. Robert was selfish, and a coward. But Aaron got it, he knew what it was like to be afraid of being who you really are, but he knew Robert would never be really happy until he faced up to it. He was gay, or bi, and in spite of everything, Aaron wanted to be that person he could talk to. He’d had Paddy, hadn’t he? Now Robert had him.

So he’d dropped the sheets off for a service wash at a local dry cleaners that he’d found, and then, happening on a store that sold bedding, he’d bought a spare set of white linen sheets and a duvet
cover. If they were going to use this apartment, they couldn’t keep doing laundry every day, after all. They would be together, here, in this apartment, in this bed, getting to know more about every inch of each other’s bodies. No one had ever turned him on like this before, no one had even come close.

So he’d made up the bed.

It was Thursday evening now, and he’d changed his plans. He would stay here tonight and go to Emile’s on Friday, celebrate Lucas’s birthday, and then explain he was moving out. Then on Saturday night, he and Robert would be together.

He peeled off his sweater and trousers and climbed between the sheets under the warm duvet. Beyond the smell of new linen, he could still make out Robert’s scent in the bed. He’d closed his eyes then moved a hand down stroking over himself through the material of his boxer briefs, a half smile on his lips just thinking about Robert’s attitude to his cock, before falling asleep.

‘I’m straight. You know me. Why would you even think something like that?’

Denial. He could hear it in his voice. He knew that would be what she was thinking, too. The question had totally floored him. All the way there in the taxi, he’d been planning what to say, why he’d lied about Aaron, he’d got it all worked out and he’d walked into the restaurant pretty confident that he could handle the serious conversation she’d had planned. But this?

He was hit by a torrent of long, long buried feelings. His Dad’s footsteps on the landing, knowing it was too late for them to put their clothes back on as the door swung open.

And the conversation was going ahead of him at its own pace, getting away from him, so that he needed to keep up, to be convincing, when what he wanted to do was walk away.

‘There’s no need to get defensive! I won’t judge you if you are gay.’

‘Well, I’m not!’

His hands were clammy and he rubbed them down the front of his jeans. He’d just spent the afternoon in bed with a man, but he wasn’t gay. He wasn’t one of them. Gays, hanging out together in those clubs. He wondered if she’d somehow seen him, with Aaron, but he’d been so careful. Or was it possible that Aaron himself had said something? But even that didn’t make sense, not after today, and Aaron hadn’t recognized Vic’s number.

He closed his eyes for a moment. ‘I just have no idea why we’re even having this conversation. I’m married to Chrissie. I have two children by two different women. I lived with Katie. You know all this.’

He sounded desperate, even to himself.

And then Victoria played her ace.

She pulled something out of her bag.

‘Alright. I found this! By chance, I wasn’t looking for it. I’m not the sort of person who snoops or anything, you know me better than that, but it fell on the floor by mistake from your jacket. And I know there’s probably a very good explanation. But you can’t blame me.’
She placed a Polaroid photograph of Aaron on the table. He knew it of course. It showed him reclining naked on a sofa with a full hard on, hands behind his head. He should have destroyed it. The irony wasn’t lost on him. And he knew that body so well, knew the scent of it under his nose, the feel of the muscles of his stomach under the pads of his fingertips, the sharp stroke of his cock head entering him like an arrow, the pain and then, when it subsided, the excruciating sweetness.

He felt his sister’s eyes on him now, searching his face. He glanced away. He’d been doing so well, just looking at other men, just the one or two times he’d let himself be kissed, otherwise dealing with it, the desire, with his own hand, in the shower, in the office sometimes, or late in the dark, after Chrissie was asleep. And then Aaron had come along and ruined it all. He shook his head.

‘So first up, your Aaron was my Aaron all along. And I wondered, why would you lie to me, unless it was something really big?’

Robert’s chin was out.

‘And so, you found a photo, and then you jumped to the only obvious conclusion, which was that I was gay, and what? Having some kind of big gay affair with Aaron? Thanks, Vic,’ He spread his hands, ‘Really, thanks for your faith in me. I would’ve thought I could count on you, of all people.’

‘And then Josh told me.’

Now he was truly startled.

‘Told you want?’

‘He saw you kiss, in the kitchen. He told me he saw you and Aaron kiss.’

‘He’s six!’

‘Nearly seven. And all it means is that he wouldn’t lie, not about something like that.’

It was Victoria’s turn to put up her chin defiantly, and he looked away. They both knew what they were thinking about. The incident, with him and Katie, forcing her into silence when she was just a kid. He was ashamed of that, at least. He shouldn’t have done that to his sister.

He opened his mouth and was just about to speak when a waiter suddenly appeared. Vic turned the erotic photo of Aaron over on the table and smiled up at him politely.

In spite of everything he found himself admiring the Sugden in her.

‘What are you going to order?’ She tilted her head at Robert. But he stood up, scraping back his chair. He needed time to think.

‘I lost my appetite.’

‘Robert!’ She called after him, watching him walk away in the direction of the bathroom. Well, at least he wasn’t leaving the restaurant, she thought, but from what she could tell, she was right. Something was going on with Robert and Aaron, her brother was gay, or bisexual, or, labels didn’t matter really. He would come back having concocted some version of events that he would proceed to sell to her, she knew him too well. But she was right. She was sure of it.
Later, when they left the restaurant, he put Vic in a cab to go home, then waited on the cobbled street, watching it drive away. He’d done his best, and for the moment, she seemed maybe half convinced. He’d told her that the photo was some blackmail thing that Aaron had got himself mixed up with, that Josh was confused, that he’d lied because he’d been worried that if Vic knew who Aaron was, she’d let on to Chrissie, and the whole arson affair would get dragged up and possibly get Aaron arrested. He told her he didn’t believe Aaron had done it. That he was innocent.

That part had shocked her most to be fair. It was the only really true part of what he’d said, and it was the part that had her most puzzled.

‘But he confessed. Why would he do that?’

‘I don’t know. Protecting someone else, maybe?’

He’d watched her shake her head back at him.

‘Then who?’

‘How would I know? I don’t know him that well, do I, whatever you might have wanted to believe earlier.’

Now he didn’t want to meet Rico, he didn’t want to see his face, so he called him to cancel.

‘So, what do I do?’ Rico had asked.

‘Perhaps call the bloke you hooked up with yesterday night, after I left.’

‘What bloke?’

‘Come on, Ricardo.’

‘Okay, but tomorrow’s my last night before I go back to Brazil. You’re taking me out. You won’t let me down, Robert?’

He hung up.

What he really wanted was to go back to Aaron. He could. They could watch a late match, or some boxing, drink beer, go back to bed for a while.

‘I know it can’t be easy, being the son of a farmer,’ Vic had said.

His father had thrashed him, he couldn’t recall the blows at all, just the expression on his face. He pushed the memory away. He hadn’t visited it for years, and he wouldn’t again.

He wouldn’t go back to Aaron tonight, or the next night.

He looked at his phone and scrolled through his contacts instead. He found himself staring at Lucie’s number, and then looked up, and his thumb touched the screen again, finding its way back up to Aaron’s. They hadn’t talked, not really. Robert wondered if it mattered. Instead they’d talked with their bodies, turning each other roughly, gripping onto each other’s sweat streaked arms, backs, ankles, thighs, going hard, Aaron looking at him with his blue eyes. He pressed his lips together.

He wanted a glass of whiskey. Maybe he’d check into a hotel room on his own for a few hours. He could always call for female company if he wanted some later, and then he’d go home. In the morning he’d call Aaron.
‘Are you taking the children to see Aaron on Sunday?’

In the morning, Chrissie pressed he lips together, replacing the lid on her lipstick, glancing at Robert who was still lying in bed, reflected in the mirror over her dressing table.

He yawned, pulling himself up against the headboard, reaching for his phone.

‘That’s the general plan, unless you had something else you wanted to do with them.’

‘No, actually I was going to take Lachlan shopping, give him free rein with my plastic before we go to Yorkshire. I think he feels a little intimidated about the prospect of meeting the rest of your family. Maybe he’s worried they’ll all be like you. Though Victoria’s sweet, I’ll give you that.’

‘Not sure she’d appreciate that particular description.’

‘Well she’s been a lifesaver with the kids. Doli and Josh adore her. I’m really not sure what we’ll do when we get back. Hasn’t Aaron sorted out all his problems by now? Couldn’t we just talk to the agency, re employ him? Or do you think the agency would expect us to pay another fee?’

Robert had looked up sharply.

‘After he let us down?’

‘Well it was really bad timing and he gave us no notice at all, but I suppose I’m prepared to overlook the past for the sake of the children. Better than going through the whole process of finding someone new.’

She sat now on the edge of the bed by Robert, sweeping her hair forwards from the back of her neck.

‘Can you fasten my dress?’

Robert reached a hand forwards, he hesitated and then, instead of reaching for the zip, he slipped his fingers under the exposed satin bra strap, stroking over her back. He let his hand travel round the side, to the front, still inside the material of her bra. He found her nipple and squeezed, kissing the back of her neck.

She turned, looking at him in surprise.

‘The zip, Robert.’

He looked down finding the source of the zipper, he could see the waist band of her G-string under the open back of the dress.

‘Take it off.’

‘Now? I’ve just done my make up.’

‘You’ve been complaining all week, that you haven’t seen me. Well I’m here now.’

He started to lower her dress off her shoulders, then unhooked her bra, turning her towards him. He was still sore from the day before with Aaron. He had a sudden image of Aaron here in this bed, his cock erect, pulling him over his lap, his hands on his arse cheeks, spreading them, finger ing him before pushing up, inside. He felt his breath shorten.
He touched her then, between her legs, she was wet.

‘So do you want me to ask him, on Sunday?’ he said as he pulled the G-string down over her thighs, steering her round so she was lying under him.

‘Ask who?’

‘Aaron.’ He pushed inside her as he said his name, and she let out a shuddering sigh.

‘I’m struggling here.’

‘With what?’

‘Look, mate, we’ll just have to cancel Saturday night, I’ll call you, yeah?’

‘You said you wouldn’t mess me around. You gave me your word.’

‘I know, I’m not. I just, I think Vic knows. I tried to talk her round, but I’m not sure what she believed. I just need some time.’

‘Not my problem, Robert.’

‘Listen, I’m the one with a marriage and a business I stand to lose if this gets out.’

‘Still not my problem. Look, Robert, you’re either here on Saturday night, or we just forget the whole thing, I go back to Emile’s and you go back to your perfect little life, that’s how it works isn’t it? Make your choice, ... Mate.’

Aaron hung up and flung the phone down on the kitchen table.

He gave a savage kick at the carrier bags full of shopping that he’d just brought in and dumped on the floor when his phone rang. Oranges and apples spilled out and rolled over the floor, so he kicked them too. He hated this, hated that he’d put himself in this situation. He hated that his mood could be switched so simply by one little call and that now he’d be waiting like some saddo for Robert to call again, and that this was going to be his life from hereon in.

He hated that he wanted to cry, that he could feel himself deflating when he wanted to hold onto the white anger in his throat instead. Most of all, he hated that he was bottom on Robert’s list, below his marriage, his work, Vic, and probably everything else in his day. He hated that Robert wasn’t there with him, that he couldn’t touch him when he wanted, that he would sleep alone at night, knowing that Robert was sleeping next to his wife. He hated that Robert had told him he loved him.

He gave a short laugh. It sounded loud in the empty apartment.

He was having an affair with a married man.

Seriously? What the fuck had he expected?

He reached for his phone again and opened the recents. He would do this now, before he lost the courage.

He looked for the number and pressed call, then heard the line pick up.
‘Vic? It’s Aaron. Yeah! Look, sorry I didn’t answer yesterday. How about we meet up?’

Lucas shifted on the seat in the crowded lecture theater, losing focus while the professor’s voice droned on about oligopoly market structures. He looked at his watch, wondering what time Emile would set off. It was still early, first lesson of the day and he planned to go to Robert’s office afterwards and get some work done, before going back to the apartment. But now he was bored and thought about slipping out early. He shifted again, he couldn’t feel it when he was still, the plug, but when he moved... He put an arm down over his lap, looking sideways at the lad with a ponytail sitting next to him, hoping that he couldn’t tell.

He’d inserted it after midnight last night, lying on his back on Emile’s bed, raising his thighs up, using lube, an early twenty first birthday present to himself, imagining Emile was there with him.

They’d met at a university student party. He’d been on a second date with a lad he’d met in a political philosophy class, and Emile was with another student, but he’d seen his eyes following him from the start of the evening. They’d started talking, the four of them, time passed and they’d ended up in a bedroom together, naked, sharing a bed. It was Emile who’d suggested swapping partners, and when Lucas was on his hands and knees in front of him, Emile had told him to turn over. He’d come so hard on Emile’s cock, they’d both known it would happen again. He’d waited a week, watching his phone until Emile called, and from then on, Lucas had known this was the relationship he’d been waiting for.

Aaron hadn’t come home the night before. Lucas decided he must have either had a one night stand or found a new boyfriend. He hoped it was the latter. He sensed that Emile found Aaron attractive, and it was always at the back of his mind that something might happen between them.

Now he stood up, holding his coat in front of him as he negotiated his way along the aisle of seats apologizing quietly to other students. He went to the bathroom and shut himself in a stall, then lowered his jeans to his ankles, he had more lube, and needed to reapply it, then he’d drop by the tailor and see if his suit was ready, it was only an adjustment, not a full made to measure, after that he’d go to the office.

Aaron stood up, shaking slightly, a range of different emotions running through him as Vic walked into the bistro. He smiled at her, not sure why he felt so nervous, offering a hand in greeting.

‘Come here, then.’

She pulled him into a hug, and he breathed out, holding onto her briefly, before they pulled apart and she sat down. She looked around brightly, unwinding her woolen scarf and undoing her white puffer coat.

‘Nice place, I like it. Is the food good?’

Aaron raised his eyebrows.

‘Actually, dunno. Never been here before, a friend recommended it.’

‘Not Robert, I hope, after the place he took me to yesterday.’

Aaron blushed.
‘No, not Robert.’

Victoria looked at him closely.

‘Who would have thought? You, working for Rob? I wish I’d known earlier. I mean, we could have hung out, you could’ve shown me around, and now I’m going back next week.’

‘Yeah, well. I suppose if you come back…’

‘Adam misses you, you know. I think he was a better person when you were around.’

‘I miss him.’

He thought about his dream trying not to blush.

Vic reached forward with a hand to his wrist, her eyes filled with concern.

‘Rob says he doesn’t think you did it, the fire. He sounded quite convinced. If you didn’t, you could change your statement.’

‘I can’t do that, Vic.’

‘Why? And why did you confess, then? Just give up everything? There must be a reason.’

Aaron rolled his eyes. He spoke, not looking at her.

‘I did it. OK. That’s all you need to know.’

‘Then you must have had a good reason, cos I don’t believe you’d do something like that, not unless you’d been desperate. I mean I know you can sometimes lose it, but arson? And Cain?’

‘Please, leave it. It’s all in the past now, anyway.’

Vic sighed. Aaron looked at her. He knew what she was like, worrying over things until she found an answer. She wasn’t likely to let this go, but he had to keep Adam safe. He changed the subject, asking about what she’d been doing since she arrived. They ordered some food, and then the conversation turned to the kids.

‘Josh talks about you all the time. He really loves you.’

‘Well he’s my lad, isn’t he?’ Aaron nodded, looking down.

‘He misses you.’

He saw the hesitation in Vic’s eyes. After his call with Robert he was expecting what she said next. It was why he’d called her.

‘Josh says he saw you and Rob, together. Robert denies it. But you’d tell me the truth, wouldn’t you? Is something going on between you two?’

Aaron face colored again, he couldn’t help it. He felt his heart thundering. He didn’t know Josh had seen anything. He was concerned for Josh mostly, Robert could rot in hell, only it wasn’t that simple. Vic was looking at him steadily. He couldn’t out him. He’d been there hadn’t he. Maybe he was the only one who understood Robert at all right now. So he said what he’d planned to say all along.
‘He must have been confused. Robert’s married, isn’t he? I mean, as if?’ He swallowed.

He looked sideways at her, trying to gage her reaction to his words. He could see her biting her lip.

‘Well he used to be a real dirt bag. But I suppose you’re right. Chrissie’s tamed him. So, maybe I owe him an apology then.’

Aaron breathed out. He’d done it. Robert didn’t deserve it. In another life, they’d be out, together, out and proud, but not this life. This life, where he’d just keep on being Robert’s dirty little secret.

They talked about Emmerdale after that. Aaron eager to hear her news, sharing gossip about the folk there and for a while he forgot everything else. When Vic said she needed to go, Aaron stood up with her.

‘I’m going out with some mates this evening. Why don’t you join us? I mean it might be the gay scene, but you don’t mind that, do you?’

Rico stood with his arms folded in Robert’s office, looking out of the window at the Paris skyline. The morning winter sun reflected off the rooftops, with the soaring Eiffel Tower dominating the landscape.

‘Just one more day,’ he said, ruefully.

‘You’ll be back.’ Robert leaned back in his chair grinning at the young Brazilian. ‘I just hope you learned a few things while you were here.’

Rico tilted his head, narrowing his eyes at Robert.

‘Well, I learned something.’

‘About the business,’ Robert added.

Rico shrugged.

‘Of course, but I can’t help wondering if I did enough to get my promotion. What do you think Robert? The week started with a bang and then I don’t know. I’m just waiting to see if there’s some follow up. Maybe my trip can end as well as it started?’

Robert stood up and walked round the desk towards him.

‘I’m fairly sure you earned your promotion. What more do you want? A badge of honor?’

‘Just a little more gratitude, perhaps?’ Rico reached forward, and touched Robert’s shirt with his fingers. ‘You are taking me out tonight?’

‘Stop being so needy.’

He watched his eyes.

‘No hard feelings?’

Robert scoffed. But Rico leaned forward. Robert offered his cheek, then Rico looked for his mouth. Robert let him kiss him on the lips. He would be leaving tomorrow and it didn’t mean anything.
Lucas arrived in his jeans, pulling his beanie off his head. He was late and needed to change quickly into the new suit he was holding in its protective wrapping the tailor had given him.

‘Robert est ici?’ he asked.

‘Yes, but you can’t just…’ his p.a. answered, but it was too late. Lucas opened the office door and walked in.

He stood frozen. Robert was with the bloke from the bathroom, and they were kissing. Robert pulled back as soon as he saw him.

‘Lucas!’

‘Pardon, je ne voulais pas vous interrompre. I just…I came to change my clothes, like you said. I’ll use the bathroom.’ And he backed out the door.
The Birthday Part 2

Chapter Summary

Aaron takes Vic to a gay club to join the celebrations for Lucas's birthday party. Robert takes Rico out for dinner with Chrissie and the children for his last evening in Paris. After Chrissie and the kids go home, the two parties converge. Robert has a lot of making up to do with Aaron, and follows Aaron to his new apartment.

Chapter Notes

There's a lot of Aaron and Robert in the chapter but after half way through ;)

‘Bloody Hell!’

Aaron blushed crimson. It wasn’t the usual kind of gay club that they went to, and if he’d known, he wouldn’t have brought Vic along with them at all. It was Emile who’d got the tickets for Lucas’s birthday celebration. Not that there weren’t other lasses there, parties of friends and tourists savoring the highlights of the Paris gay scene. It was just, well, this was Vic, and Aaron was shy at the best of times. And right now, this was looking adult with a capital A.

‘We can leave them to it, go somewhere else.’ He spoke into her ear above the sound of loud music. ‘We don’t usually come to places like this.’

Vic laughed though.

‘I’ll be alright, perhaps if I just sit facing away.’

But there really was no facing away with the action being projected on supersize screens on all the walls of the club.

They could have known even before they went in, what with buff lads advertising on the street outside, riding around on skateboards, wearing nothing above their trainers other than short silver lame shorts with the name of the club emblazoned over their butts. Inside, lining the bar, there were glass doored shower cubicles, and it was these, or rather, what was happening inside them, that had Victoria’s eyes popping out of her head. Young men spotlighted under the luminously lit showers were lathering up with soap, slipping off their shorts, pleasuring their aroused bodies. When a second lad stepped into one of the cubicles, it became obvious that the action was going to get even more raunchy.

‘Just curious, but does it do something for you, then? Does it turn you on?’

He knew Vic, so probably he shouldn’t be surprised at her asking such a candid question, added to the fact that they’d all already had quite a few drinks. The true answer would be no, not now, but maybe later, thinking back on it, maybe alone in his own shower, fuel for a fantasy.
‘Not really.’

‘To be fair, Rob did warn me about the Paris clubs.’

Aaron held his bottle of beer mid-air as he was about to take a drink.

‘What would he know?’ he frowned. ‘He doesn’t do gay clubs. He thinks it’s all blokes with their
tops off dancing on the tables, anyway.’

On cue, Lucas stood and peeled off his T-shirt while Emile watched, his hands resting on his lap.

Aaron rolled his eyes and smiled apologetically at Vic.

Chrissie had arrived at the office with Josh and Doli, who were immediately surrounded by a flock
of billing and cooing staff. Robert wasn’t naïve, or not totally. He knew that for the most part the
reason behind all the fuss they were making was about sucking up to him as the boss, gratifying
his ego. But they were beautiful children, and they were his and yes, he liked the attention they
generated. More so than Josh, who moved towards him, reaching an arm out to hold on to the
material of his shirt for reassurance. He placed his hand gently around Josh’s cheek, then suggested
to Chrissie they went into his room.

He signaled for Ricardo to join them and with one hand in trouser pocket, he made the official
introductions.

‘You didn’t tell me your wife was so beautiful!’ Ricardo took Chrissie’s hand and kissed it. Robert
inwardly rolled his eyes. ‘Don’t lay it on too thick.’ He wanted to say, but he knew Chrissie
wouldn’t mind. She’d spent a lifetime playing this game, so he wasn’t surprised when she
answered with another cliché.

‘He didn’t tell me you were so charming,’ she parried. ‘Obviously why he’s been keeping us apart
all week. But at least we get invited to dinner on your last evening. Have you enjoyed your stay in
Paris?’

Robert placed both hands in his pockets now, leaning back against his desk.

‘It’s been memorable.’ He answered. ‘Your husband has been the perfect host.’

‘So I gather.’ Chrissie glanced over at Robert who raised his eyebrows, looking down quickly. She
couldn’t read his mind, the hotel room on Sunday night, lying on the bed waiting, watching Rico
as the towel fell from his waist. Even though it had been a mistake, he felt an excitement that he
knew would be reflected in his eyes, just because she didn’t know. And neither of them knew
where he’d spent the day before. His lips parted as he thought about Aaron, what they’d done.

Rico hunkered down to talk to the children.

‘Did you like the gifts your Daddy got you from Brazil? I helped him choose them, you know.’

Doli touched his face, while Josh regarded him with neutral curiosity, then turned to his father.

‘Where’s Aaron?’

‘He seems to think the moment you leave the house you’re with Aaron, all day, every day. I did try
to tell him.’ Chrissie murmured.
Rico laughed.

‘Who is Aaron?’ he asked, straightening up.

‘The children’s au pair, well he was, and we hope he will be again.’

‘A male au pair? Very modern.’

Josh asked again, ignoring the conversation going on between the adults.

‘We’ll see him on Sunday, love.’ Robert answered. And all at once he missed him as much as Josh. He should never have cancelled Saturday night. He wondered what he’d been thinking. Perhaps later he could call him, apologize, sort something out.

Robert’s personal assistant entered the room bringing in a tray of decorated cakes and heart shaped chocolate treats on sticks for the children under Robert’s watchful eye.

Chrissie sighed at him.

‘They won’t eat their dinner if they have those.’

‘Let me treat them. It’s not every day they come here.’

As they settled down at the table, eyes wide, Chrissie moved to the side of the room, and handled some packages wrapped in brown paper leaning against the wall.

‘Did you buy some paintings?’ She started to peel back a corner. ‘Originals? Who’s the artist?’

Robert swallowed. They were Matheo’s paintings of Aaron, and just like the photograph, he still couldn’t bring himself to get rid of them. He hated that Aaron had posed, but he’d seen the results, and they were good, and they were Aaron.

‘Local. Charity case. Thought I should do my bit.’ He walked towards her, putting an arm around her waist from behind, turning her back round so that she was facing him.

She laughed.

‘Why don’t you want me to see them, then?’

Robert moved his hands around her back, half closing his eyes and laughing.

‘Because you’ll call me out on my bad taste. You won’t approve, and I’m ashamed for being soft hearted.’

Chrissie fingered the collar of his shirt.

‘Maybe you should put them out with the recycling then.’

She kissed him.

‘I probably will.’ He chuckled back.

Doli laughed as Rico stole a cake from the tray, popping it into his mouth whole, pulling a face.

Robert turned, then looked back at Chrissie.

‘Where’s Vic, by the way? I thought she was joining us for a meal, too.’
‘Seems she had other plans.’

‘What plans?’

Emile had kissed Aaron in greeting when he came through the door, putting his overnight bag on the floor. Lucas folded his arms, waiting, until Emile kissed him briefly, too, then patted his cheek as he pulled away, before turning back to Aaron.

‘How’s your new apartment?’

‘I’m not there, am I.’ Aaron sat down heavily on the sofa, raising his feet on the coffee table, putting a hand over his eyes.

‘Trouble in paradise already?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

Lucas didn’t know what they were talking about, all he knew was that as usual, Aaron was the center of Emile’s attention.

‘Did you get the au pair job?’ Emile opened the fridge, taking out a beer.

‘Nah. They wanted to know why I left the last one so quickly. Needed someone they could rely on more.’

‘So it looks like you’ll need to stay with me at the scrapyard then.’

‘Something like that.’

Lucas went through to the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

‘Look, is it alright if a mate joins us tonight? I, err, already invited her actually.’ Aaron asked Emile.

‘Who?’

‘She’s Robert’s sister. But she’s mint. And listen. She doesn’t know anything, about Robert and me or any of it. So, you have to promise not to let on.’

Emile walked slowly towards the bedroom door, nodding.

‘Of course, pas de problème,’ he winked, ‘but if you excuse me now, I have a petulant birthday boy to sort out, as you see.’

Aaron hesitated then called over his shoulder.

‘He told me he loved me, then he arranged us to spend the night together tomorrow. And then after that, he just called back and bailed on me. What do you think? What would you do?’

Emile hesitated by the door, then moved back and put his hands onto Aaron’s shoulders from behind the sofa.

‘You know what I think of him. But I can’t tell you what to do, Aaron. You have to decide that yourself.’
I know. I just…

Just enjoy the party tonight. Think about it tomorrow.

He dropped a kiss on Aaron’s forehead, then went into the bedroom.

When Chrissie left with the kids after their evening meal, Robert and Rico went on to a bar.

She’s clever, but gullible at the same time.

Rico raised a champagne cocktail to his lips.

I love her. Robert answered, but he looked away. I wouldn’t have married her if I didn’t love her.

Rico sat forwards, he reached his fingers, just touching Robert’s gently.

Is that why you,…, put on the breaks after what happened on Sunday? You felt it was a mistake, because of Chrissie?

No. Robert answered. He looked back. Can we talk about something different?

Is there someone else, then? Rico asked then. Another man? The man you slept with, after Brazil? Did you love him? You’re bisexual.

Shut up!

Robert could feel the panic rising again. He moved his hand back from where Rico was still touching him. He didn’t want to think about this, not now, and he certainly didn’t want to talk about it.

So what were the paintings? That was an impressive performance. Male erotica?

Robert drained his glass of champagne and poured another. He decided to change the subject.

So, your last evening in Paris. What do want to do?

You know what I want to do, but, failing that, take me to a gay club.

What gay club?

The best one, of course.

Lucas made his way onto the dance floor. Aaron watched Emile’s eyes follow his progress through the crowds and gave a small laugh. He played it so cool, but Aaron had his number, Emile was smitten and he didn’t need the noises coming from the bedroom earlier to prove it. He’d had to put on his headphones, and when Emile emerged in a gown on the way to the shower, he’d given him a cheeky wink, only to be rewarded by a quick cuff around the head.

He thought about Robert, cancelling on tomorrow night. Emile had told him not to think about it yet, so he wouldn’t, but he missed him. He hadn’t chosen this. He was having an affair, and he’d never have what Emile and Lucas had.
He turned to Vic.

‘What’s Robert doing tonight, then?’ he asked loudly above the music, trying to sound casual.

‘Oh, out on a works do with Chrissie and the kids. They asked me, but, I’m glad I said no, really. Thanks for asking me here. I wouldn’t have missed this. And Chrissie, well, she’s a bit tiring, if you know what I mean.’

Aaron nodded and took another swallow of beer. He glanced across at Emile again, and frowned at his expression, then put down his beer, following his eyes.

He saw Lucas on the dance floor, and it looked like someone was making a move on him. Lucas had his eyes lowered and he was laughing while they chatted. The bloke, who looked around thirty, was attractive. He had a hand on Lucas’s shoulder, and then ran the back of his finger over Lucas’s chest. Lucas took hold of his hand and moved it away, still smiling.

Aaron saw Emile stand up, and stood up too, alert now to the possibility of trouble. He could remember Emile punching Robert.

The bloke was leaning close and talking into Lucas’s ear as Emile approached, Aaron close behind him.

He watched as Emile touched his arm and smiled, a smile only on his lips, his eyes, in contrast, hard as metal.

Lucas blinked. Emile extended a hand to the stranger, who frowned back at him.

‘Monsieur, nous n’avons pas eu le plaisir, mon nom est Emile.’

Lucas put a hand on Emile’s arm.

‘Emile, Emile! Tout va bien, rien ne se passe!’ Lucas said.

But Emile shook him off. Aaron could see Lucas was panicking.

The stranger was looking at his hand, but instead of taking it, he looked back at his eyes under lowered brows, swaying for a moment. Then he raised a finger and spoke.

‘Phone sex! It was you.’ he grinned.

As fast as Emile moved, Aaron caught him by the arms, holding him back.

‘Emile!’ Lucas shouted. ‘You’ve got this all wrong. He’s Robert’s boyfriend. Robert Sugden, non?’

Rico was drunk, but all at once he recognized the gravity of the situation.

‘Yes. I’m with Robert. What did you think? I was hitting on Lucas? We met at the office.’

Aaron was still holding on to Emile, but his grip had loosened, and he was shaking.

‘You’re Robert’s boyfriend?’ He asked, trying to make sense of what he’d heard.

‘I saw them kiss.’ Lucas fired back quickly.

‘OK! I’m not denying it. Yes.’
Rico spread his hands. He turned, searching behind him, and Aaron, following his gaze, suddenly saw him, he was at a table, paying a waiter for a fresh bottle of champagne delivered on ice in a bucket.

Aaron released Emile altogether and stepped back, a hand over his mouth.

Robert had said he had work, he’d cancelled their plans. He shook his head in disbelief.

‘How long?’

‘We met in Brazil.’ Rico answered and for the first time he looked more closely at Aaron.

‘And you fucked?’

Rico blinked back at him, shocked by the question.

‘What do you think? We’re adults, aren’t we?’

Aaron drew another breath.

‘You fucked him?’

‘Yes! But, who are you?’

‘The au pair, pal. I’m just, the au pair.’

‘Aaron, you’re Aaron?’

Aaron turned away, biting his lip. He felt sick. Everything, everything had been a lie then. He couldn’t make sense of it, except that with Robert, it all made perfect sense. Those first weeks, when Robert had come back from Brazil, all those first impressions, they’d been right. Robert was a cheat, a philanderer, a liar. He couldn’t help himself.

He could hear Emile rowing with Lucas now, it was like a din in his head. Emile was asking Lucas about what work, Lucas was saying something about Robert’s business, a scholarship, and Emile was accusing him of lying too. He was telling Lucas that he didn’t want to live with a liar, that trust was everything. He told him to go back to the apartment and pack his bags. He could hear Lucas begging him in French, telling Emile he loved him, that it was his birthday. He was crying. But Emile was already walking away back towards the table.

It was Robert. All Robert. All charm, but everyone around him ended up getting hurt. He destroyed everything. He ruined everything. Aaron wished he’d never met him.

He raised his eyes towards where he was sat at the table, and Robert looked up, and straight at him, and their eyes met. He saw the shock on Robert’s face, his eyes suddenly darting to Rico still standing near Aaron, and Robert’s eyes dilating. The guilt was written all over his face.

So Aaron turned.

He’d reached the door onto the street, when he felt a hand pulling on his arm.

‘Aaron! Wait! Aaron.’

He shook off Robert’s hold roughly and kept walking out into the night.

‘Get lost, Robert. Do one!’
‘Not until you’ve listened to me.’

‘There’s nothing to say! You’ve been seeing this bloke from Brazil. You lied to me.’

He spread his hands. Robert was shaking his head.

‘You’ve got it wrong.’

‘How? You told me you had to work. And, and, and, the next thing you’re here, with him. And he told me everything, everything you did.’ He knew his voice was breaking and he raised his eyes skywards, then wiped his sleeve over his face.

‘I don’t know what he said. But we’ll talk about it yeah? But what I said to you. It was all true. I love you.’

‘How can you love me? You don’t even know what love is?’ Aaron’s voice was trembling.

Robert stepped forward towards him.

‘Don’t come any closer. Not unless you want a bloody nose to go home to Chrissie with.’

Robert hesitated and Aaron saw it.

‘Yeah! Thought not.’ He called, and then turning, he walked away.

Robert shoved his hands in his pockets. Aaron had got everything spectacularly wrong. Then he felt a hand circling his arm.

‘Go after him.’

It was Vic.

‘Go after him. You love him. And he obviously loves you. I’ll tell Chrissie that I saw you, and that you had to, I don’t know, take your drunken Brazilian to outpatients or something. And when you’ve sorted out, you can come home.’

Robert looked down at her.

‘Vic, I…’ He didn’t know what to say.

‘Go on! We can talk later. You’re a pair of Muppets, and I saw straight through the twos of you since yesterday. But you’re wasting time. And Aaron needs you now, and I think you need him, too. So, get on with you.’

Robert hugged her. He set off after Aaron.

He made his way quickly to Emile’s apartment first, nearby in le Marais, but the building was dark, and from the silence it was apparent that Aaron wasn’t there. So instead, he made his way to the new apartment.

He had keys, and let himself into the building, but when he reached the apartment door, he closed his eyes, and putting the keys in his pocket, he knocked instead, then he waited, head bent
He knocked again. He was sure he heard a noise.

‘Aaron, open the door, will ya?’

He waited again.

And then the door opened, and Aaron was standing there, his face tear streaked. He turned without speaking and walked into the living room, sitting with arms folded on the sofa in the semi darkness lit from the street lights casting their luminescence through the bare window.

‘What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be with your boyfriend?’

‘What boyfriend?’ Robert stood still at the entrance to the room.

‘I don’t know. The one you met in Brazil. The one who’s fucking you.’

‘He’s not my boyfriend. He’s a work colleague.’

‘That’s not what he said.’

‘Then he was lying.’

Aaron wiped his face and looked up at him.

‘I can’t do this, Robert. I thought I could, but I can’t.’

Robert took a breath and moved closer.

‘What is it that you can’t do?’

‘This, all of it. Sneaking around. Waiting for your next lie, for the next time you let me down.’

‘Then I won’t.’

‘Won’t what?’

‘Let you down.’

Robert sat on the coffee table opposite Aaron, trying to catch his eyes, but Aaron looked away.

‘He fucked you, didn’t he? He was the one, the random you told me about.’

‘I told you, it meant nothing.’

‘Yeah, well, maybe it meant something to me. And you said you hadn’t done that.’

They both waited in silence. Then Robert spoke again.

‘Listen. I told you yesterday. I love you. He doesn’t come close. No one else comes close.’

Aaron looked at him for the first time.

‘Chrissie?’

‘She doesn’t come close.’
'Yeah, but you’re still married and I’m still your secret gay lover. One of many.’

‘It’s not true. You’re the only one, Aaron. The only one I want.’

He saw Aaron breathe out.

‘What are you doing here anyway? Shouldn’t you be back home, playing the perfect husband by now?’

‘Vic. She followed us outside. She heard everything. She’s going to tell Chrissie something about outpatients or something.’

Aaron scoffed.

‘Appropriate.’ Then he looked again at Robert. ‘So, you’re out? I mean, to Vic at least.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘And you’re OK with it?’

Robert moved then next to him on the sofa.

‘It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters.’

He turned his face towards Aaron, waiting, and Aaron turned his head. They were so close, Robert could feel Aaron’s breath on his lips. And then Aaron was looking down at his mouth and back to his eyes again, and slowly they inched forward until their lips were brushing together. Robert closed his eyes, knowing his own breathing was unsteady. He didn’t want to rush this. He needed to be sure that Aaron wanted it, too. That he was OK. So, he waited, until he felt his mouth pressing closer, and then moved his lips softly into the kiss. He gently raised his hand, holding the side of Aaron’s face, his thumb touching his cheek. And they kissed like that, quietly in the dark, and all that mattered was that they were both together, that they both wanted this.

They drew apart, looking into each other’s eyes.

‘So, can I stay over?’ Robert spoke in a low voice, raising his eyebrows.

‘What? Stay the night?’

‘Yeah, that’s what staying over means, isn’t it?’

‘You sure about that?’

‘I want to. If you want me to?’

‘Course I want that.’

Then it was Aaron turn to initiate the kiss, pushing his mouth forwards to Robert’s, closing his eyes, and this time moving hungrily with his lips, and raising a hand to grip on to the leather of Robert’s sleeve with his fingers.

When they broke apart this time, Robert’s chest was rising and falling with each breath he took. He could see Aaron’s narrowed eyes shining in the dim light. Then Aaron reached for his hand.

‘Come to bed.’
They undressed quickly, leaving their clothes on the floor, watching each other.

Aaron reached forward with his hands, holding onto Robert’s wrists, steering him onto the bed. He held on until he was lying down on his back, looking back up at him, lips parted, eyes narrowed. Aaron wanted him so badly he could hardly breathe, he moved over him, holding his body above him with his open palms on the sheets either side of him, and bending kissed his mouth again and again, as Robert raised his head up in response, kissing him back.

Aaron moved his head down, kissing over his throat and his chest, down over his stomach, then reached down with one hand, and stroked his fingers from the base of his long hard shaft upwards, watching him arch upwards away from his stomach in response. Then he curled his fingers round him and worked him back and forth, looking back at his face as Robert’s eyes rolled, feeling his cock throb. He leaned down again and kissed Robert once more, looking for his tongue, circling against him and he continued to tug at him, smiling when Robert started to moan.

‘Alright?’ He growled. Robert nodded, wrapping his lips around Aaron’s tip and then Aaron was lowering his hips, pushing slowly down into his mouth.

He wanted Robert so much, he wanted to feel everything, now he had him all night. He wasn’t going to hold back. No one had turned him on like this and he wanted to show it.

So he took hold of the base of Robert’s cock, holding him up and moved his own mouth over him, sucking him into his throat. He moved slowly, rhythmically, fucking into Robert’s mouth, making noises of appreciation from his throat. Robert’s hands were on his arse cheeks, and his fingers were pressing against his hole now. He knew how much he wanted him, all of him.

When he felt Robert pulse in his mouth, he moved off him quickly and turned again. Robert was grinning, his lips red and wet.

‘OK?’ He asked again, smiling back at him.

Robert raised his fingers to his chin, gently and rubbed them over his jaw.

‘More than OK.’ Robert replied, his voice hoarse. ‘Kiss me.’

Aaron leaned forwards for another kiss.

Then he moved his hand to the drawer and pulled out condoms and lube.

He squeezed the lube onto Robert’s fingers, then turned towards him.

‘Lube me?’

Robert stroked his lubed fingers over Aaron’s rim, circling again and again over his skin there, pressing gently until a finger slipped in through his entrance and he moved it back and forth as the tight wet muscles inside gripped against him. Aaron kept a hand working Robert’s shaft as he moved his hips, fucking himself down over Robert’s finger.
Then he moved once again, shuffling back, he unrolled a condom over Robert’s shaft, then shifted forwards over him.

‘You want to shift up a bit on the bed?’

Robert nodded.

He moved until his shoulders were slightly raised against the bedhead, then Aaron lowered himself down onto Robert’s cock head, pressing down harder until he opened up around him and Robert’s cock was sliding inside.

They were both panting as Aaron waited, then he shifted, moving again, taking more and more of Robert’s cock deep into his hole.

Robert groaned, wetting his lips. Aaron looked down at himself, his erect cock was shining, his balls resting on Robert’s stomach. He took Robert’s hand and pulled it to him, and Robert circled his fingers around his shaft.

‘I love you, Aaron.’ Robert whispered and Aaron shook his head, closing his eyes.

He started to ride, moving his thighs quickly, shifting slightly, setting up a powerful rhythm. This wasn’t just sex anymore, they were making love, maybe for the first time. He knew he was crying again. Robert was looking at him, and he let himself smile back at him.

Robert was moaning loudly and it made Aaron burn more, until he felt so close he knew he couldn’t hold it much longer. He held Robert’s hand on his cock, working himself with him, and then all at once he felt himself tighten. He knew he was going to come. As his muscles clenched around Robert’s cock, Robert called out. He could feel him grow even more and stiffen inside him.

Both their bodies went rigid together, then Aaron’s cum sprayed up hot and thick over Robert’s chest and chin. Robert reached forward and gripped his arms tightly, pushing up with his hips as he came inside him at the same time. He reached forwards for Robert’s arms too, holding on as his body flooded with the heat washing over and over in waves.

Eventually he moved off and lay down beside him, trying to catch his breath. Robert turned his mouth and, though they could hardly kiss, their chests still heaving, they tried anyway, open mouth to open mouth.

After a few minutes, Robert turned on his side, resting on his elbow, looking down between narrowed eyes at Aaron’s face in the dark.

‘Say it then. You know I want to hear it.’ He whispered with a smile.

Aaron narrowed his eyes back at him.

‘Not yet. You can wait.’
Aaron opened his eyes. He must have been sleeping deeply, because, just for those few seconds of surfacing in the cool quiet air, he’d thought he was home. His mind mapped the furniture in the dark, his Mum was in the next room, and beyond the window, the silent village street, with the hills of the dales beyond. He felt a familiar rush of grief, and saw Jackson’s face, eyes already closed, vanishing into the night. Instinctively he curled his fingers against the sheet, trying to anchor himself. Then he heard Robert breathing, and he was gulping air, catching up with the present, not in Emmerdale at all, but in Paris, naked, in Robert’s marital bed.

He lifted the cover and swung round to a sitting position on the side of the bed as a surge of adrenaline overwhelmed him. They shouldn’t be there. He shouldn’t be there. Not in that room. It was insane. He remembered the evening before. They’d had a few beers and then, when they’d eventually come upstairs, he’d pulled Robert towards his own au pair’s room, but Robert had stood rooted on the landing.

‘I want you in my bed.’

Robert had lowered his brows, his forehead brushing against Aaron’s, and they’d stood for a moment, facing each other, swaying. Aaron tried to think of a reply, but before he could speak, Robert moved his mouth close to his ear.

‘They’re not here, it’s just you and me. And I’ve been waiting all day.’

He’d kissed him, down, against the nape of his neck, sending hot currents through Aaron’s body as he’d reached a hand to the back of Robert’s hair. And even though he’d known it was wrong, he’d half smiled when Robert leaned back, looking at his eyes for an answer, and just like always, he’d done what Robert wanted. So, they’d made love here, in Robert and Chrissie’s bed, until sleep had overtaken them.

The room still carried the faint feminine smell of Chrissie’s perfume.

He should leave. There were other odors now, the distinct scent of Robert’s body clung to his skin.

Not the clean shower smell or the expensive cologne he wore, but the scent beneath that, masculine, full of pheromones. He’d picked it up from day one of meeting him so long ago, when he’d got back from the airport after his trip to Brazil, so that he’d felt the attraction, and the danger, even then. Now it was heady, mingling with sweat and the alkaline sweetness of spilled cum. He
could taste it on his lips, and he was aware of how it made him horny all over again. He rested the palms of his hands against his thighs and rubbed them down hard against his muscles, inhaling, then blowing air from his open mouth.

Robert turned on his side. He shuffled up, running a hand through his hair, reaching for his phone to look at the time.

‘Don’t you ever sleep?’

‘I did, I just, I woke up and couldn’t go back.’

‘Did I snore?’

Aaron glanced back at him over his shoulder.

‘No, you did kick me a few times though.’

‘Sorry, Chrissie kills me when I do that.’

Aaron couldn’t answer. The mention of her name, there, in that room. He raised a hand to his face, pinching between his eyes with his fingers.

Then the sheets rustled and he turned to see Robert leaning forwards, moving towards him on his knuckles over the bed, the cover falling away from his naked waist.

‘Seeing as how you’re awake then, I have a few ideas how we can pass the time, if that’s what you want?’

He looked into Aaron’s eyes searchingly, and then his mouth, and Aaron looked back at him, then at Robert’s mouth, too. He knew how those full lips burnt against his skin.

‘Alright, then.’ He swallowed. He could hear how his voice was already cracked. He shouldn’t be there, but he’d never wanted anyone like this before.

Robert’s lowered eyes shone back at him with a smile, then he inched nearer, closing the space between them, until their lips met.

Later he woke again to Josh’s voice, crying on the landing outside the room. He knew Josh mustn’t find out that he was there, and his heart raced. He lifted the cover and slipped out of bed. Pulling on his track suit pants, he moved towards the door.

But Robert was there ahead of him, hastily stepping into his own pajama trousers.

‘Go back to bed.’ He hissed, then unlocked the door and opened it. Aaron could see Josh standing there, his pale face lit by the glow of the night light plugged into a socket in the hallway, the tears on his face reflecting silver and red. Their eyes met, and his crying halted abruptly.

‘Were you sleeping with my Dad?’

Robert glanced back at Aaron, still standing in the dark bedroom behind them, chest bare.

‘No, silly, he just came to get an aspirin.’

Aaron saw Josh’s mouth open. His eyes were wide. Then Robert placed two hands firmly on his
shoulders and turned him, walking behind him as he steered him back towards his room.

‘Did you have another dream?’ he was asking. He saw Josh nodding his blonde head. ‘Maybe you’re missing Doli, hey? And Vic? I miss them, too.’

Aaron looked across the hall to the open door of his own room. Inside he could see the untouched bed, the sheets pristine. He wondered if Josh had noticed, too. They’d planned that he would go back there early, in case Josh woke and looked for them before breakfast. Now, his phone alarm rang suddenly inside the room from where it was resting on the bedside table next to Robert’s bed. It was too late.

They’d messed up, big time.

‘They’re going away. We’ll have the place to ourselves. Nobody else.’

Robert had come to the scrapyard, parking the vintage silver Porsche on the gravel driveway. Aaron had been inside the portacabin, manning the phones while Emile was out on a pickup, but he’d seen Robert coming, heard his footsteps ringing on the metal stairs. He’d known from Vic that they were going to Emmerdale, all the family, and the news had thrown him on so many levels. There was the homesickness, more powerful than a virus, leaving him winded and drained, and then a heavy dose of anxiety about what they might say, maybe inadvertently giving something about him away to his Mum, to Adam, to Paddy. Or maybe they’d talk about him to Robert, and that would be even worse.

But more than all that, he couldn’t help feeling that once there, Robert, showing off his gorgeous wife, would somehow realize what he was risking, and then that would be that. He’d come back, and just bin them.

And maybe he’d be right.

‘Come to say goodbye, then, have ya?’ Aaron had asked, putting down the pen he’d been playing with on the desk. ‘I know you’re going away with them, tomorrow.’

They hadn’t seen each other since Robert had stayed over the Friday before, a week to the day. Robert had told him to be patient, to trust him, and he’d tried, he was trying.

He knew Rico had left for Brazil because Vic had told him when they’d met up on the Monday. He still had so many questions about that. He sensed that Robert just wanted to let it go, and he wasn’t good at talking about stuff, anyway. But it still hurt. He was still confused.

Now he looked at Robert as he stood in the open doorway in a maroon suit, the grey morning light behind him. He had his hands in his trouser pockets, and wet his lips with his tongue before he spoke.

‘I’m not going away. I talked them round. I’m staying here to be with you.’

Aaron had stood, trying to get his head around Robert’s words, and then Robert closed the gap between them, leaning close, kissing his mouth softly, the noise of their breathing loud in the prefabricated steel space. Aaron kissed him back.

They’d heard voices outside. Customers, bringing something to scrap.

Robert sprang back quickly.
‘Come home. I’ll be waiting for you.’

‘You can come to the new apartment, can’t you?’ Aaron’s heart was still racing.

‘No, Come home. I’ll need to be there, if they call. It’ll just be easier.’ He turned. ‘Tomorrow, then.’

Aaron nodded, looking away, knowing his eyes would give away how much this meant to him.

‘Tomorrow.’

As Robert was leaving, Emile drove into the yard with the pick-up truck. He wound down his window when Emile jumped down and approached. He could see the dark rings around Emile’s eyes and the stony set of his face.

‘You’re not welcome here, Monsieur Sugden.’

Robert looked up at him, his hands still on the steering wheel.

‘I came to see Aaron.’

‘He deserves better than you.’

Robert shook his head, closing his eyes for a moment.

‘Believe it or not, I do care about Aaron. And you were the one who told me to carry on the affair. Anyway, he won’t be working with you after this, he’ll be coming back to his au pair job, with my family.’

‘And you’ve told him that, have you? He’s agreed? You think he’ll cope? Living with you and your wife, again? Then you don’t know Aaron at all.’

Robert frowned.

‘It’s none of your business.’ He looked ahead of him at the road. ‘I’ll give your regards to Lucas, shall I? Nice lad. Nice looking, too.’ Robert squinted up into the watery sunlight at Emile again and went on. ‘He has this birthmark, you know the one I mean?’

He watched Emile’s face, looking for the reaction and was rewarded when he saw his eyes dilate suddenly. It wasn’t enough, he wanted to turn the screw, watch him suffer so he spoke lightly, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel.

‘If I wanted him, I would have him, I’m just not sure that I’m interested in your sloppy seconds.’

When he saw Emile’s mouth twist, he pushed his foot slowly down on the accelerator, moving his other from the brake pedal. ‘You’ve got some customers,’ he added, nodding towards the portacabin behind them, and then he drove away, watching in his rearview mirror as Emile pushed his fists in his coat pocket, staring after him, receding into the distance on the driveway.

When Aaron rang the bell, it had felt strange, like he was a guest in that familiar place that he’d lived in before. Then the door had opened and Josh was standing there, leaning into his father’s side, looking up at him with his wide blue eyes.
It had taken a nanosecond of confusion, before Aaron had put down his overnight bag and hunkered down, pulling him into a hug.

‘Are you my au pair again now?’ Josh had asked.

‘I never stopped.’

Aaron hugged him again, raising his eyes to Robert who mouthed an apology for Josh being there.

‘Is Doli here, too?’ He asked Josh.

It was Robert who answered, raising his eyebrows.

‘No, just us lads together. So, come on in, make yourself at home.’ Robert said.

Later, in the kitchen, while Josh played in the living area, Robert heated up some food.

‘Sorry, about Josh. It wasn’t what I’d planned,’ Robert said.

‘No! No! You know how I feel about him. It’s perfect, Robert, honest. But, …, just why?’

‘Turns out he couldn’t fly without me. He’s on my passport, and we needed an affidavit and the paperwork saying his mum was deceased and other stuff. Chrissie’s not actually a legal guardian. She, err, she hasn’t adopted him yet.’

Aaron blinked, turning down the corners of his mouth. He could tell it mattered to Robert, Chrissie, Josh. The word, yet, hung in his mind, like a warning.

Robert turned to the fridge, pulling out a couple of bottles of beer, handing one to Aaron. He glanced at the door, then back to Aaron.

‘She was a dancer, his mother. That sort of dancer.’ He stretched his eyes. ‘I met her in London, in a club. I’d been away from home for a while. It was nothing. I didn’t even know she was pregnant until Josh was born. I moved in and I tried to make a go of it, but I’d already joined the Whites firm, and, well, it was never going to work.’

‘You met Chrissie.’

Robert nodded.

‘When we moved here to Paris. I left them. I left Josh, I knew she was drinking, but I still left him there with her. After, there was the accident, drink driving, a pile up. And she died. I got a call in the night. His grandmother wanted him, but I went to court for his custody, even Chrissie didn’t know, but I had to bring him home. She was pregnant then with Doli. Needless to say, she wasn’t impressed.’

Aaron reached out and touched his arm.

‘He’s lucky to have you.’

‘Is he? I’m not so sure about that.’

‘You’re an amazing dad.’
Aaron wanted to kiss him, but with Josh being there, so close, he couldn’t risk it. He thought about what Vic had said, that Josh had seen them, before. They would have to be so careful this time. The last thing he wanted to do was upset him, and Robert wouldn’t want that either. So instead he stroked a hand quickly down the arm of his shirt sleeve.

‘I’ll just go and put my bag in my room, then.’

Robert nodded, watching him go.

In the room, his bed was made up with clean sheets, the bedside table was bare now, except for the lamp, the baby monitor for the nursery now gone. It looked bleak. He thought about Robert, there on the bed with him. It had been so complicated. He sat down, putting his bag next to him, opening an empty drawer, closing it again. Emile hadn’t wanted him to come at all. Since he’d sent Lucas away he’d been surly, cradling a glass of brandy in his hands, his eyes dark, sitting on the sofa alone. He seemed to hate Robert now more than ever.

‘I know he’s messed up, but so have I. Haven’t we all at some time or other?’

Aaron wasn’t sure. Maybe Emile had never made a mistake. He was so calm and constant, it was why he was such a good friend. Aaron wasn’t sure how he would have survived up to now without him.

‘Je ne lui fais pas confiance,’ Emile answered, ‘I don’t trust him, not with you, not with anybody.’

He caught Aaron’s hand, and pulled him towards him, kissing the side of his face. He had shadows under his eyes, now that Lucas had gone. Aaron knew he wasn’t sleeping.

‘Don’t go, or if you have to go, just be careful. That’s all I’m saying.’

‘Call him. Call Lucas. You know you want to.’ Aaron said quietly. ‘You miss him.’

‘C’est fini. I’m not like you. I don’t give second chances.’

Emile suddenly reached in his pocket, pulling something out.

‘Your phone.’ He smiled. ‘You thought you lost it last night. I found it down the side of the sofa.’

Aaron took it, breathing out with relief.

‘Thanks! I was worried about that.’

‘You see, Aaron. I’ve got your back.’ Emile took another sip of brandy. ‘And I’ll be waiting here for you, when it’s over. My door’s open. You know that?’

Josh had eventually lost the battle with sleep, his head resting on Aaron’s lap, his legs bent between them on the sofa, so that Robert held his bare feet where they pressed against his thigh. It was late, but neither of them had had the heart to send him to bed, not when his eyes had shone so intently, and his chatter with Aaron had continued so unceasingly. In front of them, on the coffee table, alongside their empty beer bottles, there were scattered figures of abandoned superheroes, and, like melting ice flows on the black glass, the debris of the pop-corn that Robert had made in the kitchen earlier, with the sleeves of his black sweater pushed up on his forearms, while Aaron
had leant back against the counter watching him.

Aaron glanced across at Robert’s face before quickly looking away. He knew he’d stolen this, but right now, for this fragment of time, they were playing house. Robert had said he loved him, and even if he couldn’t mean it, or if it was a passing thing that would be swept away soon enough, he couldn’t fight it. This was his fantasy, he was here, and it was the only place he wanted to be.

His hand rested gently on Josh’s shoulder. He’d been all elbows and knees, turning, half feverish with the need to sleep, until Aaron had pulled him close, then he’d stilled, and his breathing had changed, and Aaron knew from the weight of his body that he was out for the count.

‘I’ll take him up, then.’ He spoke quietly.

‘I can do it, you’re the one interested in the match.’

They were watching football, European League, the volume low. Aaron’s team was losing, but he really didn’t care, not tonight.

‘No, I want to. And they’re more likely to score anyway if I’m not in the room. I sort of jinx it. Never watch a match with me unless you support the opposite team.’ He glanced at Robert’s face again, letting his eyes settle somewhere around his chin.

Robert folded his hands loosely and shifted back on the sofa, thighs spread, as Aaron moved forwards, gently taking hold of Josh in his arms so that his head fell onto his shoulder when he stood with him.

‘I’ll clear up here then, get us another beer.’ Robert said, standing too. ‘Hold on.’ He leaned over, running a finger over the side of Josh’s face, kissing him as Aaron held him in his arms, then he moved his face upwards, and all at once he placed his mouth against Aaron’s lips. Aaron felt his heart suddenly pounding, and his face flush. Josh stirred in his arms and then settled again.

‘Don’t be long, eh?’ Robert said.

Robert had arrived early at work on Tuesday. Home was all about getting ready for the flight to England on Friday and Robert had already mentally started making other plans. Friday night was imprinted on his mind. Aaron, taking control in the bedroom, he couldn’t shake the feeling of his lips, the touch of his skin, the sound of his low voice in the black blanket of the night. Now, he just needed time.

He unlocked the main door, and then went to his office. He’d driven there in jeans and a sweater, but he would change into one of the suits he kept in his office dressing room. As soon as he opened the door, he saw the sleeping bag on the floor and frowned, looking suddenly behind him at the empty office. Someone had been sleeping there, but where were they now?

He opened the door into the reception and listened, then closing his eyes for a moment made his way to the bathroom. Once inside he heard the water running, and walked to the furthest end of the room where the shower stalls were located, designed as wet rooms with a step down in the tiles to prevent overflow, and curtains on rails.

He could see the outline of a figure in one of the showers. He knew who it was, and shaking his head, he moved the curtain aside.

Lucas turned. His tall smooth athletic body shining with the film of water running down his torso.
He ran both hands up over his wet hair pushing it back from his face.

‘Merde! Robert!’

‘Why did you sleep in my dressing room?’

‘Parce que, je n’ai pas d’autre endroit où aller.’

Robert frowned.

‘You must have, friends, family.’

‘Emile était mon ami et ma famille. Il était tout. I told you before, my family, they don’t want a son like me.’

Robert looked away then, hesitating.

‘But you didn’t stay here at the weekend. Where were you, then?’

‘I stayed with Matheo. But we couldn’t get on. I don’t want to talk about it.’

Robert looked back at him. His body was classically beautiful. His youthful shoulders were broad and although he bordered on thin, he was muscular under his pale skin. He was unselfconscious with his nudity, his cock hung against a thigh, Robert registered that he was circumcised, his darker cock head exposed. And he had a birth mark, like spilt purple ink blown with a straw, running down down from one side of his groin, over one ball and down across his inner leg. For a moment, Robert wanted to reach forward and touch it with his thumb.

Matheo the artist, he must have wanted to paint that body. He wondered what had happened between them.

He lifted a towel and handed it over with his arm outstretched.

‘Here,’ he said, and turning, walked back to his office.

Robert quickly started to change into his suit. He was shrugging his arms into his shirt when Lucas walked in with the towel around his waist. He noticed Lucas’s eyes on his chest as he started to fasten the buttons. Lucas dressed too, discarding his towel, leaning down as he stepped into briefs then pulled on his trousers. Robert could smell soap on his skin.

He took out his phone, calling for a delivery of croissant and coffee.

‘You can’t stay here. You do know that.’

He watched Lucas fasten the cuffs on his shirt, head bent over. He saw a single tear on his cheek.

‘I can’t go home.’

‘I know.’

‘You don’t know!’ Lucas raised his sleeve, wiping his eyes.

‘Lucas. I know.’ Robert said again.

He turned away, pushing his hands in the pockets of his trousers, looking out at the grey office sky.
'Look. Find a room, a pension for a few nights. I'll cover it. But then sort it out. Talk to Emile. Explain what you’re going through. He’ll listen.’

'Why, why would you do that for me?'

'Because I don't want you sleeping in my office.’ Robert turned away.

When Aaron came downstairs after putting Josh to bed, Robert handed him a beer and Aaron sat back down on the sofa.

‘He alright?’ Robert asked.

‘Yeah. Sleeping like a baby.’

He opened the beer, then glanced sideways at Robert, looking at his throat.

‘What’s the score?’

Robert grinned.

‘You really don’t want to know.’

Aaron rolled his eyes.

‘Maybe we should watch something else, then. A film or something?’

Robert saw the expression of confusion on Aaron’s face.

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. It is a bit weird though, you and me, here.’

‘I didn’t think you’d find the prospect so horrible?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Look, I know it’s a bit strange, but this could be a gift for us, for the first time we get to have a go at being normal. I reckon we both need that.’

Aaron raised his chin. Robert had told him he loved him, and now this.

‘What’s normal?’

‘Just having a beer together, watching a film, ordering a pizza. Just hanging out in general, you, me, Josh. No pressure. It’s got to be worth a go, surely?’

‘Yeah. When you put it like that...’

Robert raised his beer towards him and they clinked bottles together, Aaron once again trying to hide his smile.

Then Robert picked up the remote, and handed it to Aaron. But when he took it, Robert didn’t let go, and Aaron looked up at his eyes and saw the question there, so he leaned over, into the kiss that Robert was asking for. Robert’s hand went to his cheek. Aaron opened his mouth, meeting Robert’s tongue with his own. He reached up his hand, holding the sleeve of Robert’s sweater with
his fingers.

Half way through the movie, they both laughingly admitted they had no idea what they were watching.

'Shall we go upstairs then?’ Aaron said.

In the morning, on Monday, it was Aaron who got Josh up, giving him breakfast, walking him to school, just like the old days, only without Doli in her pushchair this time.

Robert had stayed in bed.

‘I’ll work from home.’ He’d said, and Aaron had nodded, biting his lower lip, trying not to meet Robert’s eyes.

If Josh had remembered seeing Aaron in Robert’s bedroom in the night, he didn’t mention it. Instead, he chatted over his cornflakes about a new friend at school, some fight they’d had, how they’d solved it. Perhaps he’d forgotten he’d been up at all in the night, Aaron thought, children often did.

But while they were walking, all at once, Josh took his hand.

‘Did you have an accident, too?’

Aaron felt confused.

‘No. What accident?’ he asked, looking down at Josh, seeing his face looking serious.

He saw Josh raise a hand to his stomach.

‘Here.’ He said, and Aaron’s breath grew light as he held onto Josh’s hand tighter all of a sudden.

Josh did remember then, and he’d seen his scars through the gap in the bedroom door.

Aaron cast about. He didn’t know what to say. How could he explain to Josh? He couldn’t even explain to himself, only that it was about pain, and relief and grief, and keeping stuff locked up inside, and that long term it made him feel worse, not better.

‘No, err, it was just, something happened, a long time ago. It’s alright now, anyway.’

He saw Josh’s face looking up at him now, still puzzled.

‘Honestly. It’s fine,’ he went on. ‘Look, why don’t we play football again with your Dad when we pick you up from school?’

He saw the smile then on Josh’s face.

‘But not near the road.’ Josh said.

‘No,’ Aaron agreed, ‘definitely not near the road.’

He put his key in the lock, opening the door to the silent apartment. Robert wasn’t up then. So he
took off his coat and hung it on the hook, then went into the kitchen and made two cups of tea. He took them quietly up the stairs.

When he opened the bedroom door, Robert was sleeping on his side, his blonde hair against the pillow, his pale eyelashes against his cheek. As Aaron put the tea down on the bedside table next to him, Robert turned onto his back with a sigh, opening his eyes, his lips parting with a smile.

‘Good morning,’ Aaron said.

‘Yeah? Looks like it,’ Robert grinned.

‘I’ve taken Josh to school,’ he went on, ‘and I made us tea.’ He tilted his head towards the mugs.

‘Quite the domestic goddess, then,’ Robert shifted up against the pillow. He saw Aaron’s small frown. ‘Anyway, it wasn’t tea I had in mind.’

‘No? So, err, what exactly did you have in mind then?’

Robert reached out a hand, catching Aaron by the forearm over the sleeve of his sweater.

‘Well we’re on our own now, aren’t we, so if you come here, I’ll show you.’

Aaron sat on the side of the bed, and let Robert pull him down towards him into a kiss. Robert’s skin was warm from sleep, while Aaron’s was cool from the walk in the morning air. Robert half closed his eyes into the kiss, and Aaron tried not to smile at the humming noises coming from his throat.

‘Lie down, come on.’ Robert urged gently, his voice still gravelly from sleep, so Aaron kicked off his shoes, and, fully dressed, he eased himself under the cover, next to Robert’s naked solid body.

They kissed again, their tongues circling against each other, lying sideways, and Aaron ran his hand down over Robert’s arm, then onto his hip, stroking over his bed hot skin, down onto the curve of his plump arse cheek, and then to his thigh. Robert’s hands held his face. He pulled at his lips with his teeth.

‘Fuck.’ Robert groaned.

Aaron could feel Robert’s cock. It was already fully erect between them, and he had to lean back and take in his impressive length. He swayed, moving Robert onto his back, pushing between his thighs and grinding against him, lowering his nose against his cheek, breathing him in.

Robert’s hands moved under his sweater at his waist against his skin, and Aaron ran his hand down over Robert’s arm, then onto his hip, stroking over his bed hot skin, down onto the curve of his plump arse cheek, and then to his thigh. Robert’s hands held his face. He pulled at his lips with his teeth.

‘Strip.’ Robert growled.

Aaron tossed up his chin, laughing, and threw the cover aside, glancing back at the open door to the hallway, knowing it didn’t matter anymore, and then he undressed quickly, letting his jeans and boxers join his sweater on the floor. After he moved his knees, hovering, his hard, flushed cock
standing erect above Robert’s body as he watched Robert’s eyes shining back at him, his mouth open, his red lips wet.

‘Come on.’ Robert urged.

He couldn’t complain. He couldn’t wait either. He pushed his hands under Robert’s thighs, tugging at him, pulling his back lower down on the bed for better access. Then pushed out his tongue, spitting on the palm of his hand, reaching between his arse cheeks with his fingers until he found what he was looking for.

‘Kiss me.’

‘That’s not what you say.’

‘You know what I want.’ Robert whined.

‘Then say it properly. Say, rim me, Aaron.’

‘OK. Rim me,’ Robert grinned, ‘Aaron.’

‘Then turn for me, Robert.’

Robert shifted over, and Aaron pulled his arse higher in the air towards him. He was so hard it was all he could do to resist just sticking his dick into Robert’s hole right then and there, and going hard. But he wanted it to last. He wanted to taste Robert, too, to feel his tightness pulsing over his tongue.

‘Just, shift your legs open a bit more, will ya?’

He reached down then, letting his fingers caress Robert’s balls, reaching forwards to his long shaft and tugging him back and forth a couple of times, listening to him pant.

Then he lowered his mouth. He let his tongue flicker over Robert’s rim, curling it, so that the side of his tongue caressed against the sensitive puckered skin. He watched Robert arch his back, listening to him groan and pulled back, then he leaned forward again, this time using the flat textured surface of his tongue, lapping over and over with wet strokes, until he felt Robert opening up, and he slipped the pointed end of his tongue inside.

Robert’s taste filled his senses. He couldn’t believe that he had this time, that they had all day.

‘Wanna play?’

‘I thought we were playing?’ Robert bent his neck, looking back at him, then watched as he shuffled backwards completely off the bed.

‘Aaron?’ He protested at being abandoned, ‘Aaron?’

Aaron open the top drawer of the dresser, his hand searched quickly, he knew what he was looking for, then he found it, the stainless steel and black male vibrator. He’d thought about it a few times since that day he’d first seen it, now he brought it back to the bed in his hand.

‘Did you use it?’ He bit his lip. ‘With her, I mean?’

‘No, never, just once or twice, alone, thinking about you.’

Aaron turned down the corners of his mouth. Robert was lying, it was what he did, but he was too
turned on right now to care.

‘So let’s give it a go, shall we? Batteries working?’

He watched Robert nod.

‘Turn over on your back, then.’

Robert hesitated then turned and Aaron tugged him again until he had him positioned how he wanted him, on his back, hips just over the end of the bed. He pulled out a condom and rolled it down over the vibrator while Robert watched. Aaron stood by the side of the bed between Robert’s thighs and lifted one of his legs by the back of his knee till it was resting against his shoulder, and Robert held up his other leg, so that Aaron, looking down, had full access to his entrance. He squeezed some lube over his fingers and stroked them over Robert’s rim, listening to him gasp, watching his eyes as he looked up at him.

‘You ready?’

Holding the vibrator by the base, he turned it on, then pressed the narrow end against Robert’s hole. Robert reached for his cock, stroking himself over his tip with his palm, then all at once he was opening up, and Aaron was pushing the toy inside, back and forth, back and forth, going deeper each time, watching Robert open wider and wider as the stainless steel penetrated inside him.

‘Fuck!’ Robert groaned.

‘There?’

Aaron watched as Robert nodded, working his cock with faster strokes now as Aaron moved the vibrator carefully inside him. Aaron’s own cock was leaking in the air. He pushed faster with the toy, and then couldn’t wait any longer. He stopped, gently pulling it out, then pulled Robert’s legs up higher around his waist.

‘I want you.’ Robert gasped.

Aaron nodded.

He quickly lined up, and then he was slamming deep into Robert’s hole, thrusting hard, with fast, urgent strokes, his hard dick rubbing against Robert’s prostate with each movement. Robert was moaning and swearing in turn. Aaron loved the way his voice would climb an octave. He was drunk on this. He was going to come.

He turned his head, and then suddenly saw Robert’s wedding photo on the wall. Robert followed his eyes and frowned, as suddenly Aaron stopped, pulling out.

They waited.

‘Don’t.’

Robert panted.

‘It’s just me and you.’

Aaron nodded, blinking, not trusting himself to speak. It shouldn’t matter, it was just a picture, it wasn’t as if he didn’t know, who he was, what he was to Robert. Robert reached up his fingers,
turning his chin.

‘Look at me Aaron. Look at me! Remember? No one else comes close.’

Aaron closed his eyes, he wanted to believe it, he really did. In the end, it didn’t matter. He let his eyes sweep over Robert’s body, his throat wet with sweat, beads of moisture on his upper lip. He wanted him so badly. He wanted Robert to want him back, just him, no one else.

He held his cock and then all at once entered inside him again, leaning forward all the way over Robert’s body, reaching his fingers down until they curled around Robert’s long leaking cock, and now he was making long deep powerful strokes.

And at all once they were coming, together, and Aaron was hurtling into a blinding white space, where there was nothing, but him and Robert and infinity, and he wanted to stay there forever, and ever, and ever.

After a while, he was falling. He could hear Robert saying his name, holding his face, his full lips caressing his own, his hands on his shoulders, his arms, as he lay pressed down against him, trembling with the after effects of adrenaline. He was trying to steady his breathing, his heart still jumping in his chest like a fire cracker.

‘The tea must have gone cold.’ He muttered eventually into Robert’s chin.

‘Probably. How about we go downstairs and make a fresh brew? Then we can try out the sofa for round two.’ Robert grinned.

Later in the afternoon, they went to get Josh together, walking the Paris boulevard with the weakening sun filtering through the leaves of the lime trees lining their route. They walked fast, hands in the pockets of their jackets, their elbows bumping against each other.

They saw an old fashioned motor bike with a side car, and Aaron told Robert about the time he and Adam had taken the quad bikes over the moor, and ended up stuck in a bog, and then Robert told Aaron about a time he and Andy had got blathered on his Dad’s whiskey, and then they’d driven one of his new tractors into a barn, and pretty much demolished it. After, they’d worked out how to turn it, and driven it out again, but the barn was pretty much flattened by then. In the morning, when his Dad had woken up, they’d acted all innocent, like they had no idea how the barn had got so totaled. They’d spun this tale about UFO’s being spotted over the moors, watching their father’s face. He hadn’t believed them of course, but he couldn’t prove anything. He’d still got them to work somehow, rebuilding the barn, so he must have worked it out.

‘You miss it, then? Emmerdale?’ Aaron glanced at Robert’s face.

‘Not really.’

‘You never came back? You stayed away, and even now, Vic, Chrissie. You didn’t go?’

‘Because I had a good reason to stay behind.’ Robert stretched his eyes at Aaron, who shook his head in response.

‘And your Dad,’ he added more gently, ‘you even missed his funeral?’

He watched as Robert stared down the street ahead of them, his jaw clenching.
‘I was there actually. I’ll tell you. One day.’

Aaron pursed his lips.

‘Well, I miss it. I miss it a lot. And sometimes I think,..., this is forever, that I’ll never be able to go back, you know?’

‘I know.’ Robert said softly.

He slipped an arm around his shoulder, there in the avenue, and pulled him close. Aaron glanced sideways at him, and for a moment, he almost let himself believe it. Robert loved him.

They picked up Josh and went to the park, and the three of them kicked around a football in the afternoon sunshine. The grass was still slightly wet from the spring rains that had come and gone all the past week. When Josh kicked a wayward shot, Aaron ran for the ball and slipped on the grass, landing heavily on his back.

‘Aaron!’ Robert was bending over him, offering a hand, helping him up. ‘You’re OK?’

‘I’m fine.’ Aaron smiled, blowing out air from his nose. ‘Really, Robert. I’m fine. A bit muddy but…’

Robert kept a hold on his arm as he stood. Aaron looked back at him then turned to see Josh, standing watching them, waiting for the ball.

On Thursday night, they made love in Robert’s bathroom.

Aaron knelt in front of Robert and blew him against the bathroom wall, until he tasted pre cum leaking into his mouth as he took him all the way down into his throat, Robert moaning, his hands in Aaron’s curly hair.

Then he made him stand in the bath, with one leg up on the side, as he pushed his nose and mouth deep into his crack, and after, standing on the bathroom floor by the side of the bath, he entered him, and fucked him fast, while Robert’s fingers rested against the tiled wall for balance.

Later they showered together. When they’d washed, Robert wrapped his arms around Aaron, and held him, so there was no space between them as they stood under the stream of water.

‘I mean it. I love you.’ Robert whispered in his ear.

And Aaron held onto his waist, repeating his answer in his mind, hoping Robert could hear him saying it back, even if he couldn’t say it aloud. Not yet. And if he couldn’t say it now, when would he?

Each night he slept a little deeper, waiting for the early alarm when he would leave Robert’s bed and creep back to his own room, which didn’t feel like his room anymore, more like a transit lounge on a long-distance journey, a temporary stop between the departures and arrivals of the night and day.

But tonight, he woke in the dark before the alarm, opening his eyes suddenly, feeling his heart rushing, not knowing why. Robert’s arm lay heavy with sleep over his waist under the covers.
Then there was the voice in the dark, calling his name, again, and once again.

‘Aaron, Aaron!’

It was Josh.

‘I’ve got a stomachache.’

Aaron made out his shape by the bed. He could just see his eyes. He quickly pulled himself up to a sitting position.

‘OK, love. Just go back to your room, and I’m coming right now.’

‘Come with me.’

‘You go, and I’m coming. I promise.’

Josh hesitated, then turned and left the room. Aaron blinked into the dark, they must have forgotten to lock the door.

He threw back the covers and reached for his jeans. If Josh knew, then it would be all up. Now Robert would have to choose him, wouldn’t he?
They called on Friday just after lunch.

Aaron half walked, half jogged down the avenues on the route to the school, hood up against the light drizzle, hands buried in his pockets.

‘I’ve come to pick up Josh Sugden. They said he’s not well?’

They handed him a visitor’s card and pointed him in the direction of the nurse’s room. When he knocked, and went in, the nurse stood up from her desk.

‘He’s having a lie down.’

She took him into an adjoining room where there was a sick bed. Aaron stepped forwards, placing a hand on Josh’s head as he turned to look up at him with pale eyes.

‘Hey there! What’s up with ya, mate?’ He asked gently.

‘He’s complaining of a stomachache. But we’re not sure what’s causing it. Physically he seems fine. He says his Mum’s away?’

Aaron nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

The nurse lowered her voice.

‘It strikes me, it’s a touch of anxiety. Perhaps he’s missing her.’

‘Right.’ Aaron tried to keep his voice light, but he could feel his own stomach lurch. He turned back to Josh.

‘Come on. Shall we go home?’

But Josh turned away on his side, pulling up his knees.

‘Josh, look, if you don’t feel up to walking, I can call a cab, mate? What do ya say?’

He watched Josh as he nodded his head in assent, and then took out his phone, walking into the corridor to make the call.

Back home, Aaron asked Josh if he wanted to lie down on the sofa, but instead he went wearily up the stairs to his room, Aaron following him. He perched beside him on the bed, picking up the remote as Josh lay down, asking if he wanted to watch something, but Josh shook his head, and once again he turned on his side, facing away.

Aaron bit his lip.
‘You can talk to me, you know, if you want?’

He could see Josh’s eyes blinking as he stared out across the room.

Aaron looked around, trying to find something, anything, to make a connection, to help him open up.

‘Or, are you hungry? I can make you a sandwich? Peanut butter?’

Josh turned his head, his blue eyes sharp, questioning.

‘Did you marry my Dad?’

‘No!’

He’d guessed it. It was about Josh finding him in bed with Robert the night before. But still he felt his breath shallowing. The question stunned him. He really didn’t know what to say. How could you explain this to a child? How could this ever make sense?

‘Is Mummy coming home?’

Josh’s eyes were still fixed on his face, scrutinizing him, the same way that his father did sometimes. Aaron swallowed.

‘Yes, of course, with Doli, I don’t know exactly when, in another few days I guess.’

‘Where will she sleep, then? Will she sleep in your room?’

‘No, course not!’ Aaron took a deep breath. ‘She, err, she doesn’t know that I slept in her room. I won’t tell her. I don’t think your Dad will tell her. I’m sorry, Josh. It was wrong. Sometimes grown-ups do things that are, just wrong, you know?’

When he looked back at Josh’s face, he could see the tears pooling in his eyes. Aaron felt like crying, too. He was the adult here, but he’d burdened Josh with this. He hated himself for it. He reached to hold on to him, but Josh pulled away, wrapping a hand around his waist, tears flowing.

‘I’ve got tummy ache,’ he sobbed all at once.

‘I know, love, I know. I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. Come here!’

Josh surrendered to Aaron’s need to comfort him, wrapping his arms around Aaron’s neck, his face buried against his shoulder, while Aaron held him, wondering what on earth he should do.

Earlier, before morning, Aaron had stretched out a hand, fumbling in the dark for his phone, turning off the alarm that had woken him. He’d run his hand over his face. He hadn’t really slept since he’d taken Josh back to bed after he walked in the room, discovering them both together. Instead, he’d been chasing a thousand thoughts round and round, and it was doing his head in. Josh knew. Robert would be forced to leave Chrissie, to be with him, to choose him now. Where would they go? Maybe Robert would move permanently into the new rented apartment for a while. They’d decorate, make it their own, make up the spare room into a bedroom for Josh. He’d have to drive Josh to school, as it was too far away to walk anymore.

He closed his eyes. He had to stop these thoughts.
He raised a hand to his chest, fingers open over his heated skin, feeling his pulse hit his fingertips and the rocking of his broken breathing as his rib cage rose and fell. None of it was real. Robert was using him, and only a fool would think otherwise.

But Josh knew, and it would change everything.

Robert wouldn’t leave Doli, he was sure, and so they’d need somewhere bigger, and Chrissie wouldn’t give her up, maybe Josh, but never Doli. Then Robert wouldn’t leave, period. He’d talk Chrissie round. It was what he did best, talk, twisting everything with his words.

Aaron felt the sheet beneath him as he turned. His skin was alert to every sensation, every texture, even the slightest movement on the bed. Since he’d been there, Robert had wanted to explore every inch of his male body, learning about this new kingdom, and Aaron was learning about himself, too.

‘Tell me,’ Robert would whisper, his voice thick with desire. ‘Tell me what you want me to do, tell me what feels good.’

Aaron would unravel then, at each touch, each kiss, watching Robert’s eyes. He could hear him in his head, telling him; ‘This is your body, this is how it feels, here, and here. It feels good, it feels amazing, to both of us.’

He slipped out from under the sheets now, and padded quietly to the bathroom to pee, feeling the strained muscles of his groin protest for a moment as he released the flow. His fingers had the sour pineapple smell of stale semen and sweet lube. He should shower, but the sound of it would disturb the quiet morning, so instead he took a flannel and ran it with soap under the tap, then wiped over his stomach and chest. He looked at himself in the mirror, seeing his eyes heavy lidded with sleep but bright, his cheeks flushed. He looked like someone in love.

He mustn’t smile. He frowned at himself warningly.

He rinsed the flannel again with more soap, and then ran it down between his arse cheeks, then with clean water again, before drying quickly with a towel and, slipping back into the dark room, he climbed back under the sheets.

He turned on his side towards Robert, lying facing him. He would go to his room in five minutes, ten minutes maybe. The bed would be cold, just like every other morning. It was getting harder to leave.

He watched as Robert’s eyes opened.

‘I’m just going.’ He murmured at him.

‘Don’t’

Robert raised a hand and held his chest, running a thumb over his sore nipple, still red and sharp from their love making the evening before.

He moved his face forward and they kissed, a slow, thick, morning kiss. Aaron’s nose pressed against Robert’s freckled cheek, breathing in the smell of his skin. He closed his eyes.

‘Don’t go yet.’ Robert repeated, stroking a hand down the muscles of Aaron’s arm, holding him. Their knees touched as they lay on their sides facing each other.

Aaron should tell him about Josh, coming into the room in the night, finding them both together
there in Robert’s bed. But not now. His body felt weightless. He’d tell him later.

Robert slipped a hand under his thigh and tugged it up, so that it rested over the side of his body, pulling him closer. Aaron could feel the heat emanating from their bodies in the space between them.

‘I was dreaming about your arse in my face.’

Aaron snorted.

‘I didn’t want to wake up. But now I’m glad I did.’

Squinting, Aaron could see Robert’s lopsided grin against the pillow, his voice was thick with sleep. Their foreheads touched, and they kissed again, a short kiss, and then another, and another, and then Robert’s hand was holding the back of his head, pulling him closer and they kissed again, this time their tongues circling, and the kiss lasting on and on and on, neither of them wanting it to end.

Aaron could feel the heat spread in his body. Their cocks were nudging against each other’s stomachs, their shafts touching against each other now, and Robert hummed, rocking his hips forward increasing the contact so that his length rubbed against Aaron’s.

Then he moved his hand down between them. Aaron felt his cock fire at the sensation as Robert wrapped his fingers and thumb around him, and slipped his skin up over his cock head and then back, rhythmically working him, until he moaned into his mouth. Then Robert held them both together, and Aaron had to pull back his head to breathe, letting his moans sound out across the pillow.

Robert stopped, panting, his breathing noisy. Aaron shifted back spreading his hips, opening his knees, pulling at Robert’s body. He needed him now.

He felt Robert’s fingers searching under his balls. Aaron’s rim stung as he finally touched him there.

Robert, noticing him flinch, leaned right back and reached behind him for the lube.

‘We’re not overdoing it, are we?’ He whispered.

‘No, no!’ Aaron gasped, eyes wide. ‘It’s fine.’

Robert touched him again, and this time he felt the cold gel as Robert spread it gently over his entrance. Then he leaned back again and took more lube, and Aaron watched him in the semi darkness as he reached down and stroked it back and forth with his curled fingers over his morning erection, up, over his shaft and cock head.

Rein in your cheating husband

Chrissie looked at the text message on her phone for the hundredth time. It had been sent days ago, during the flight from Paris to England, while her phone had been on flight mode, so she’d only received it when she’d switched on after landing.

She’d tried to call the number back, but all she got was an automated voice message, telling her that the line was no longer in service. The line you have dialed no longer exists or is temporarily
She frowned, thinking back to Lucie, wondering if she was stirring up trouble again. But why, after all this time? She’d called her anyway, waiting in the baggage hall, swallowing her pride. She made up some excuse about a potential p.a. job, only to be told rather coldly that she was working in the West Indies for a yachting contractor, that she had been since she left the White’s firm, and that the call would be costing Chrissie a small fortune in overseas charges.

So she’d called Robert.

‘Are you there yet?’ He’d asked.

‘Well, we’ve just been picked up from the airport by your brother, Andy, in some sort of farm vehicle I gather, so we’re on our way. Hopefully, we’ll all arrive in one piece.’

Andy had interrupted loudly.

‘Yeah, and tell the great wazz that he should’ve come with you! And brought Josh!’

‘Did you hear that?’

‘I heard.’

There was tension in Robert’s voice. She knew the brothers weren’t talking, even if Robert had never explained the rift between them, but that wasn’t why she’d called.

‘How’s this important contract coming along? Your meeting this afternoon?’ She asked.

‘Fine.’ Robert answered. ‘How’s Doli?’ He changed the subject.

‘Fortunately, asleep right now. She did cry a lot on the plane, even though Victoria tried her best, we still managed to make enemies of all the other passengers. Missing her Daddy, no doubt, like the rest of us.’

She heard Robert chuckle.

‘Anyway, what are you doing?’

‘Making popcorn.’

‘Who’s with you?’

‘Nobody, only Josh and Aaron,’ Robert had answered.

‘Lucky you, you’ve even got the child care sorted. No one else then?’

‘Who else would there be? We’re going to watch a football match.’

‘Well, lucky escape for me, then.’

She could hear the rattle of a heavy saucepan.

‘Look I’ll call you from the B&B. Or maybe tomorrow, when I can tell you all about my first impressions of the glittering metropolis of Emmerdale.’

Robert laughed again.
'Be good, Robert,' she added.

'Aren’t I always?'

When he put down his phone, Robert glanced back at Aaron, who was leaning against the kitchen counter, arms folded, watching him while he made the popcorn.

'Chrissie.'

Aaron rolled his eyes.

'I gathered.'

'You’re not jealous, are you?'

'Why would I be?' Aaron’s chin came up, and he turned down the corners of his mouth. ‘She’s only your wife.’

'Don’t.’ Robert said, stepping closer, looking through the door to where Josh was playing in the living area. ‘You knew what this was. You knew what you were getting into.’

Aaron shook his head, picking up a bowl of popcorn.

'Just drop it, Robert.'

Chrissie looked out of the window at the dark rolling hills and valleys of Yorkshire, the dry-stone walls. Who would have sent that message then? And could she trust Robert? She had already looked over the report from the private investigator she’d hired, and it had turned up nothing. The only people he’d seen or been out with were work related, entertaining Rico before he left for Brazil, and meeting Aaron to sort out things for his return as the family au pair. No secret lovers or rendezvous. So why did she have this feeling of unease, as if she was missing something. She decided to look again.

Robert pulled Aaron’s body around 180 degrees, so that his back was towards him, and Robert’s lips moved softly against his spine.

Aaron closed his eyes. He could feel Robert’s greased cock pressing against his back.

‘Get dirty with me,’ Robert whispered.

‘What? You want me to slide down on that, do ya?’

‘On my tongue.’

Aaron shook his head. He knew Robert was smiling, and twisting his head, he kissed him again, then, with his fingers spread, he pushed Robert back on the bed, and throwing off the bed cover, he turned and straddled him, facing down to his feet.

Robert placed his hands over Aaron’s arse cheeks, opening them, his head raised so his chin was against his chest, taking in the sight of his lubed hole. Aaron shuddered as Robert stroked a finger over his rim again, then let it slip inside. When Robert added a second finger, fucking him back and forth, slowly going deeper, Aaron rewarded him with a groan.

‘I thought you said tongue?’
‘Come on then.’

Aaron shifted back up to Robert’s face, where he moved over him, until he could feel his nose pressing into him, and his lips and hot breath against him. Robert cupped his arse, helping him move his hips, flickering his tongue down from his balls and then over his hole, making hungry humming noises from his throat. Then he pushed his tongue inside while Aaron made noises from his throat.

Then Aaron moved down over Robert’s body, and reaching for Robert’s cock, he slowly eased himself down over him, and, with his hands stretched forwards over Robert’s thighs, he started to ride.

Robert was swearing, but his voice had done that thing, where he sounded like a boy. It made Aaron’s heart beat even faster.

His body rocked on Robert’s as they moved together. Robert cock stayed deep inside him and the base of his hard shaft slipped inches in and out of him. He stroked his hands against Aaron’s back. Aaron reached down his hand and started to tug at himself as he came close.

And then Robert stopped, panting and tipping his body he rolled Aaron onto his back again, pulling up his knees. They were both gasping, Robert looked down at him and then kissed him over and over. When he pulled back his face, Aaron could see the creases at the edge of his eyes.

‘OK?’

‘Just keep going, will ya?’

Robert nodded then, his eyes sweeping down the length of Aaron’s body under him.

Then he started to move fast.

Aaron could see the sweat on his lip, on his forehead. His fingers curled into the muscles of Robert’s upper arms.

He gasped, Robert’s name on his lips. He was coming, Robert’s eyes watching him as he went deeper and faster and faster.

Aaron’s muscles went stiff and contracted, then his rigid cock was firing, shooting his load in a white spray up over his body. Robert kept thrusting fast as he watched, timing his movements to carry Aaron through each wave, so that Aaron thought it would never stop, until Robert pulled out. He was coming too, using his hand to stroke himself through his climax as he spilt stripes over Aaron’s body. And Aaron reached to stroke himself, Robert’s cum on his fingers.

After, they laughed with the euphoria of it, both of them shaking, Robert falling back onto the bed so they lay side by side, looking up at the ceiling, chests heaving.

‘Say it, then.’ Robert turned to him.

Aaron knew what Robert wanted to hear.

‘What? That it was a bloody good shag? I’ll give you that.’

‘I love you, too.’ Robert laughed.

Aaron looked sideways at Robert’s face then, seeing the smug grin on his face.
For a while after he drifted. He mustn’t sleep. He would need to shower, in his own room, then get Josh up for school. But he must have nodded off, because when he opened his eyes, Robert was resting on his elbow, looking down at him.

‘How many lads did you sleep with before?’

‘What?’

‘How many lads?’ He spoke softly.

‘I don’t know, do I? Wasn’t counting. A few, ten maybe, maybe a few more.’

‘So Ed, and,’ he didn’t mention Matheo, instead he asked, ‘one night stands?’

‘Most of them, I suppose.’

‘Who was your first?’

‘His name was Jackson.’

He looked up at Robert, he didn’t even know why he was talking about this, but somehow, he felt ready, in that space, with his skin still warm from their lovemaking and the dawn light beginning to flood the room.

‘Did you love him?’

Aaron nodded.

‘Yeah. Yeah, I did. Maybe not right away, but in the end.’

Robert’s eyes kept watching him. Aaron absently counted the freckles on the side of his face in front of his ear, then let his eyes drift down following the trail over his throat. His shoulders had even more freckles. He reached up a hand and placed the back of a finger against them.

‘I wasn’t out, and he sort of helped me, come to terms with it, being gay. It was complicated.’ He went on. ‘Then later it got pretty bad. He had an accident that left him quadriplegic. It was my fault. And he topped himself in the end. I helped him. Then …’

He looked away.

‘Aaron. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to rake something up.’

‘It’s alright. You weren’t to know.’

‘Was that the reason for, you know, the cutting?’

‘One of them.’

Robert found his fingers and threaded his own through them, his brow furrowed with a deep frown.

‘I tried to kill myself.’

‘Stomachache? Aaron! Didn’t it even occur to you? Or to those idiots at the school? It could be his
liver!’

‘Wha, What?’

‘OK. Just, get him to the hospital and I’ll meet you there. Take the Range Rover. Aaron, call me, when you get close.’

Josh cried as Aaron settled him into the back of the car, checking the seat belt.

‘It’s alright love, your Dad just wants them to check you’re OK.’

Robert was already waiting when they got to the hospital, hands on his waist, his jaw flexing. As soon as he saw them, walking towards the entrance, he stepped forward, and took Josh gently by the face, looking carefully at his eyes, his nails, his skin, searching for any signs of jaundice. Then taking his hand, he led the way to the Hepatology department.

Josh’s doctor was waiting for them. He organized for Josh to have a blood test and then an ultrasound.

After, they sat down together with the doctor again.

‘So no nausea, vomiting?’ The doctor asked. Robert looked at Aaron who shook his head.

‘No, none.’

‘And when did the stomachache start?’

‘In the night. Around two o clock.’

Aaron could see Robert’s face.

‘I should have told you. Robert. I’m sorry. You were…’ He glanced at the doctor and looked back at Robert again. ‘You were asleep. He just went back to bed. It didn’t seem serious.’

Robert was still looking at his face, shaking his head. Then the doctor spoke again.

‘Well the good news is, his liver is fine. In fact, physically, there’s nothing wrong with him. So all I can think is that maybe something’s happened to upset him. It seems possible, that he’s suffering from anxiety and it’s manifesting itself as stomachache.’

Aaron watched Robert’s face as he turned to Josh.

‘Love, are you worried about something? You’d tell me?’

Josh looked up at Aaron, then back at his Dad.

Aaron didn’t know what to say or do.

Josh looked down.

‘I want to go home.’

They were quiet on the journey back. Robert had left his red Porsche in his regular underground parking slot near his office and taken a cab to the hospital, so he let Aaron drive them all home in the Range Rover. Looking back in the rear view mirror, Aaron could see Josh had fallen asleep. When they got in, he’d tell Robert that Josh had come into the room in the night, seen them in bed.
That it was clearly the reason he was upset.

Once home he carried Josh sleeping up in the elevator to the apartment and laid him down to sleep, pushing his hair back, kissing his head, before returning back downstairs.

Robert was sitting on the sofa, leaning forwards looking at his phone. He put it down and stretched out an arm, taking Aaron’s wrist, pulling him down next to him. Aaron could see the odd expression on his face, as if he was sorry about something, it was weird, the way he was looking at him. He felt his heart beating.

‘Look, I’m sorry. I should have told you, about the stomachache, and…’ he would tell Robert now, get it over with. But Robert interrupted before he could go on.

‘Chrissie’s coming home.’

‘Wha…?’ Aaron blinked back at him. He’d not been expecting it, not so soon.

‘Tomorrow. She texted. It’s probably best if you go back to the apartment. Come in the daytime to look after the kids. Just keep you out of Chrissie’s orbit from now on.’

Aaron stood up quickly. Robert stood too looking at his eyes with concern.

‘We always knew this was just going to be for a few days.’

He stepped towards Aaron, reaching out a hand, but Aaron stepped back again.

‘No don’t.’

‘Don’t ruin it.’ Robert frowned.

‘We just spent the week in your bed, and now you’re just going to go back to playing the loving husband? But I’m the one ruining things? And you’re sending me away, again? I can’t keep doing this Robert.’

He watched as Robert looked down at the ground. He wasn’t even going to try. None of this was real to him, he realized. In the end, for Robert, it was just about getting what he wanted, it didn’t mean anything. He felt himself falling.

‘And anyway, Josh knows. I kept trying to tell ya, all day. He caught us in bed together. So how are you going to talk your way out of that one, when he tells Chrissie? Eh?’

Then he saw he expression change on Robert’s face. And his heart fell.

‘This was a mistake. And if you do anything to jeopardize my marriage! You set this up so that he would see us, didn’t you? Because you’re selfish and pathetic, and you wanted me to choose!’

Aaron swallowed, looking back at him.

He couldn’t speak anymore. Instead he turned and walked away.

Aaron opened his eyes. He must have been sleeping deeply, because, just for those few seconds of surfacing in the cool quiet air, he’d thought he was home. He was in Emmerdale. His Mum was in the next room and beyond the window, the village street, the sweep of the dales. He realized that his head was hammering and his mouth was dry, when he shifted a wave of nausea hit him. He
must have been really drunk before he came to bed, but he couldn’t remember. Then he heard someone breathing, and he was gulping air, catching up with the present, not in Emmerdale at all, but in Paris, naked. He turned his face on the pillow, Emile was next to him.
Denial

Chapter Summary

Robert panics when Chrissie arrives home and is suspicious. Emile, meanwhile, supports Aaron. Robert tries to talk Aaron round, and reacts badly when Aaron stands up to him.

Chapter Notes

cw? M/F action, just in case you want to skip over that bit. mention of self harm

‘She’s downstairs!’

‘Yeah. And we’re upstairs. And Josh is at school, and Doli’s asleep. Come on, what are you waiting for? She doesn’t suspect anything.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Believe me. Get yer kit off, and come here.’

Robert had stepped into Aaron’s room, closing the door behind him and now he was leaning with his back against it, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. His eyelids were lowered and his lips were open as he grinned.

It was madness. It was such a risk, but Aaron had never wanted him so much. He rolled his eyes, shifting off the bed where he’d been reclining, moving toward Robert, not caring, hardly able to breath.

He rocked on his feet, undoing the zip on Robert’s blue wool jacket in a single movement, slipping it off his shoulders, watching him blink back at his face. Then he reached for the hem of his white T-shirt, lifting it over his head, exposing the long pale sweep of his upper body. He placed a hand on the smooth soft skin of his waist and leaned in for a kiss, listening to Robert hum quietly from his throat as their mouths pressed together.

Then he slipped a hand sideways to turn the key in the door, but Robert caught his wrist.

‘No,’ he whispered, ‘leave it open.’

Aaron felt his groin firing.

She could come up, catch them.

Robert’s hands were at the waist of his jogging pants, grasping at a fistful of material, tugging them down with his briefs to Aaron’s knees.

Aaron’s cock was rock hard, shining, bouncing against Robert’s soft belly skin. Robert caught his
balls in his fingers, rolling them, the pressure from his dancing fingertips sending a current of heat deep into Aaron’s body. He moaned into Robert’s mouth, knocking against his teeth as they kissed, feeling the stretch of his smile, knowing he was smiling back, that what they were doing was so, so wrong.

But he couldn’t fight it, didn’t want to. Not right now.

He found the button of Robert’s jeans and slipped it open, lowering his flies, and Robert’s hard length uncurled into his hand, already leaking.

They stroked each other, feeling the silky skin sliding fast over their lengths.

Robert swore under his breath. Aaron leaned back, flashing his eyes.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah!’ Robert murmured, laughing.

A phone rang down in the hall, echoing up the stairwell.

Chrissie’s voice was crisp, matter of fact, as she answered.

‘Ignore it.’ Robert breathed.

Chrissie called his name.

Aaron felt his heart pounding. Even Chrissie should be able to hear it.

His fingers loosened their grip for a second, then Robert reached round them both, closing round his hand, keeping it there. Robert’s long cock rubbed against his own as he wrapped his fingers around their shafts, and pulled. They both panted loudly in the silent room, trying to keep the noise down. They couldn’t stop now, they’d gone too far.

Chrissie called up the stairs again.

Aaron felt his groin suddenly tighten. Robert stilled his hand for a moment, and their eyes held each other. It felt like forever. It felt perfect. How could anything feel this good?

Robert moved his hand again. They hit their climax, together, chests heaving against each other, Aaron felt the hot cum running down over his fingers, smelt it in his nostrils as he fought for breath. He could hear Robert’s low ragged laughter.

Chrissie called once more.

‘Where are you?’

Aaron pulled up his jogging pants like a shot, but Robert waited, opening the door with a hand fumbling backwards against the door handle, his spent wet cock still swollen and swinging, still half undressed.

‘What’s the rush? Tell them I’ll call back.’ He shouted down, his eyes on Aaron’s face.

‘You love this, don’t you?’ Aaron whispered, searching for a towel.

‘So do you, and don’t deny it. You and me, dig deep enough, we’re the same. Two Yorkshire lads, far from home.’
Then Robert’s hand was round his neck, his fingers pulling him close, and their mouths crashed together, bruising their lips.

Aaron lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, remembering. He couldn’t recall if he’d already been in love then, or not. It had all been physical at first, an undeniable, all-consuming attraction, sweeping away his better judgement, his better self. And then at some point, love had kicked in.

But falling in love was a mug’s game.

Emile must have opened the shutters because he could hear snatches of music from the cafés on the streets of La Marais below. He winced, turning away from the light, his head still throbbing. As he turned, he caught the scent of sandalwood and spice on the bed linen, Emile’s scent.

He lay still.

His body felt hot and slightly feverish as it battled against the overdose of alcohol from the evening before. Funny, he could remember that distant afternoon so vividly, but he couldn’t remember anything from last night. He thought about Emmerdale, about Adam. He wanted to go home, to go back in time before any of it. But it was pointless, because however far back he went, the pain was still there, oil stains blurring the print on folded newspaper, wrapped around a take away supper.

As if Robert could ever choose him, love him.

He turned onto his side, then scanned the bedside table, looking for his phone, noticing the box of tissues, the lube, a couple of condoms in their foil wrappers. His hand shook as he reached out and lifted his phone, then blinked at the screen.

There were no missed calls, no messages. No surprise there, then.

He lowered his hand, letting the phone slip from his fingers onto the bed beside him and closed his eyes, watching yellow spots of light dance under his eyelids. He could hear Robert’s voice now, the accusation, saying that he’d deliberately had Josh find them together, after everything, after the week they’d spent together in his bed. Aaron still counted as less than nothing to him. He swallowed, and Chrissie would be arriving home in a few hours now. So what was the point?

The door opened and Emile came in carrying a tray, wearing sweatpants, his feet and muscular chest bare. His hair was damp and he smelt of clean water and shower gel. Aaron sat up rapidly, pulling the sheet up with him, blushing fiercely.

Emile sat down easily on the side of the bed next to him, placing a mug of black coffee and a tankard of water from the tray onto the bedside table.

‘Alors, mon chéri, I guessed you might be needing these.’

He put the tray down, then picked up Aaron’s hand and opening it, dropped two capsule tablets into his palm. ‘Take these, drink your coffee, and then we’ll go for a run, eh?’

Aaron couldn’t look him in the eye.

‘Emile, I’m, I’m so, so sorry, last night….’

‘Pour quoi?’
Aaron bit his lip.

‘Wait. You don’t remember, do you? And what do you think? You think we had sex? Aaron, you know me better than that, non?’

Aaron blinked back at him, confused.

‘I thought...’

Emile’s eyes were kind and amused all at once.

‘I was flattered, really, but what sort of person would it make me if I took advantage of a friend who’d clearly had way too much to drink? No, mon coeur,’ he frowned then, ‘it was all about Robert Sugden, I know that.’

Emile raised his hand and touched Aaron’s face gently. Aaron exhaled as a wave of relief engulfed him, but, just for a moment, he felt his body respond to the touch, he was lying naked in the older man’s bed, knowing that he’d slept there like that by his side, and now, trying not to focus on his strong shoulders and arms reflecting the daylight. He thought about Robert’s pale torso, his freckled smooth skin, how it slipped under his fingers, damp with sweat, when they made love.

‘Yeah, well. I’m done with Robert now. You were right about him and it’s over, finished. I’m never going back there.’

‘Yes, you said that last night. Mais, maintenant, boire ton café. Then, we go for a run.’

‘I don’t think I’m fit.’

Aaron wondered if he could walk, let alone run.

‘Trust me.’ Emile winked. He stood up and moved across the room, opening a drawer and pulling a black T-shirt out, he tugged it down swiftly over his head while Aaron watched the muscles of his back, then looked away.

When he’d gone, Aaron pulled back the sheets and shifted off the bed, looking for his bag, picking up his clothes scattered on the floor of the bedroom. All at once, the door opened again and Aaron looked over his shoulder. Emile apologized and quickly closed the door again, but Aaron had seen his expression as his eyes flickered over his naked body. He felt a rush of weakness in his limbs, his stomach. Emile and Robert were polar opposites, but he must have been blind not to see it before. Emile wanted him.

Robert had run a hand through his hair, and turned in circles in the hall, moving towards the door that had closed behind Aaron as he left, and then away again.

He hadn’t meant it. He knew Aaron hadn’t deliberately left the door unlocked, he wouldn’t do something like that, he knew him better than that.

He’d just panicked.

He wanted him, he wanted to be with him. And not just in the bedroom. He couldn’t say why exactly, but he needed his approval. Then, when Aaron was around, he felt calm somehow, in a way he hadn’t felt with other lovers. And the expression in his startling blue eyes kept Robert’s own eyes fixed on him. Whenever Aaron looked up and back at him, Robert wanted to reach for
him, even when Josh was there with them.

In bed, they’d finally had the time to explore and to play, to be adventurous. He thought about Aaron lying over him, the cover long fallen away onto the bedroom floor, the contour of his body. That week they’d found new ways to touch, caress, stimulate each other, trying out positions, angles, surfaces to fuck on or against. Sometimes their love making was punctuated by bursts of unexpected laughter, until the pleasure got too intense, going hard, and their eyes would hold each other’s, shocked at how good it was, how amazing it felt as they moved together.

Maybe it was just something about it being his first time with a man? The testosterone making everything so heady. What was it Emile had said? That he bet Robert had never had sex like it. Maybe he should sleep with more men. He’d been with Ricco, too, though, and it had been good. But with Aaron it was different. He didn’t want anyone else, he realized. Maybe for the first time in his life, he just wanted one person, he just wanted Aaron.

He sank down on the stairs, feeling the silence of the apartment close around him, curling his fist and raising it to his lips.

Now, Chrissie was coming home and everything had to go back to the way it was before. Even though it would be hard, he had to make sure that would happen. Later he would call Aaron, talk him round. They would spend time at the apartment, together, alone, but for now he had other priorities.

He looked away into the distance.

Now it was about damage control.

He would need to wash the sheets.

He heard a sound on the stairs and turning felt Josh’s hand on his shoulder, steadying himself as he sat, knees together, beside him, and then he circled his small arm around Robert’s waist, holding onto his shirt. Robert pulled him close, kissing his hair.

‘How’s the stomachache?’

Josh nodded.

‘Alright.’

‘Your Mum and Doli are coming home tomorrow.’

He looked down at his frowning son, and taking a deep breath, he spoke again, choosing his words carefully.

‘Josh, Aaron told me that you saw us, saw him, sleeping in my room.’

Josh looked away.

‘Was that what upset you? Is it why you got the stomachache do you think? You can be honest with me, but it’s important that you know it was a mistake, my mistake.’ Robert kept his eyes on his son, watching his face.

‘Then why did he sleep there?’ Josh’s cheeks flushed.

‘Because I asked him to. But it was wrong, and…’ he hated himself, but he had to do it. ‘Your
Mum, she mustn’t know. We mustn’t tell her. Do you understand? Neither of us can say a word, OK?”

He could see the confusion on Josh’s face.

‘Are you Aaron’s boyfriend, then?’

‘No! I told you, mate. It was a mistake. I’m married to your Mum, to Chrissie.’

Josh searched his eyes.

‘Marry Aaron instead.’

Robert snorted, squinting incredulously, Josh shifted away on the step, keeping his fist clinging to Robert’s shirt.

‘What? Don’t be daft.’

‘I want Aaron. Aaron loves me. Marry Aaron!’

Robert could feel the panic then, constricting his chest, turning to anger.

‘Never going to happen! And no amount of manipulating and fake stomach aches is going to change this. Chrissie is your Mum, so get used to it.’

Josh stood up suddenly, his mouth twisting, glaring back at Robert. They eyeballed each other.

‘I hate you! You love him, too, Daddy! I saw you kiss him! I saw you!’ His voice was breaking as he spoke. He turned to run up the stairs but Robert reached for his wrist, holding him tightly as Josh pulled against him, trying to get free.

‘You can hate me all you like. It still doesn’t change anything. I love Chrissie, and you won’t tell her! You hear me? Josh? Or everything will change, and it’ll be your fault! It’ll all be your fault!’

He saw the shock then in Josh’s eyes and let go suddenly, watching his son stream up the stairs.

‘Josh! Josh! I’m…’ he ran a hand through his hair, feeling his eyes sting, fighting the lump in his throat.

Emile had been right. It felt good to run, at first feeling his head, numbed by the pain killers, jolting from the shock of his feet pounding the streets under him, and his chest burning with the struggle to take oxygen deeper into his lungs, into his bloodstream. It was good to run with someone else, rather than running alone, he realized. Emile set the pace, going slightly ahead of him at first, turning, now and then, to make sure Aaron was keeping up.

Aaron could feel the toxins from the alcohol working their way out of him as he started to sweat, his skin and hair getting damp. He wondered if he could work Robert out of his head the same way.

They jogged up the stairs and into the apartment, both panting for air as they came into the living room, hands on hips as their bodies started to cool down again.

‘Was it good?’ Emile asked.
‘It was mad, but unbelievably, I feel a lot better.’ Aaron breathed. He felt light headed.

Emile laughed.

‘So, you take a shower first, I’ll start cooking a breakfast for us. Now you’re hungry, non?’

Aaron looked at his phone, still fighting his breath, Chrissie would be landing about now. He stepped towards Emile, reaching out a hand to his wrist.

‘Or together, I mean…’ he searched Emile’s face, ‘…we can take a shower, together?’

Emile’s eyes suddenly looked serious.

‘Is this about Robert?’

‘No, it’s about you. I want to, and I think you feel the same.’

Emile closed his eyes for a moment. Then he placed a hand on Aaron’s shoulder, squeezing gently with his thumb and fingers.

‘Non, Aaron, it’s not a good idea, give yourself some time.’

‘You don’t want me.’

‘I didn’t say that. But I want your head to be in the right place, and right now, I don’t think it is.’

Aaron turned away, blushing. He’d made a fool of himself. Then he felt Emile’s hand on his shoulder again, gently steering him back round. He leaned forwards and then Aaron felt his face brushing against his and a lingering kiss on his cheekbone.

‘Mon enfant troublé,’ he murmured in French. ‘Tu me rends fou! Now get a shower before I change my mind.’

Rein in your cheating husband

Robert sat in the office, for the hundredth time chewing over the text that Chrissie had showed him. There was an email open in front of him, Les Jardins de Courances, just South of Paris outside the city. They were reviving some long disused watercress beds, organic farming, and wanted a consultation about small scale agricultural machinery. Someone needed to go down there at some point and check it out. But Robert was distracted.

Chrissie was still on his case.

He’d noticed the cool reception from the moment she’d entered the arrivals hall with Doli the Saturday more than two weeks ago now, the guardedness about her eyes, the pout on her perfectly lip-sticked mouth. He’d been careful enough, washing sheets and towels, airing the bedroom, cleaning up the litter of his love making with Aaron, the used condoms, discarded tissues, half empty bottles of lube, taking it in his car to a trash collection well away from their home on the Saturday morning before she’d arrived back.

But when he’d reached for her, he’d noticed the tension, and finally he’d got it out of her, as she’d looked closely at his face, her eyes open wide with accusation.

‘Did you call the number back?’ It had been his first question.
‘Course I did. It was an unavailable number.’

‘Well it was obviously kids, messing about, then, randoms playing a stupid prank.’

‘Then why the unavailable number? It doesn’t make sense.’

‘You can’t seriously think? Come here. You know me! You know how much our marriage means to me.’

‘Do I?’

He just couldn’t believe that Aaron would do that to him. But who else? Maybe deep down it was what Aaron wanted, him and Chrissie apart so that they could be together. But Aaron? It didn’t make sense. He needed to see him, to speak to him, and he missed him. But he had to wait, be patient, until things got back to normal between Chrissie and himself. Since then everything had been awkward, Chrissie’s eyes on him every time he answered a call on the phone, or arrived fifteen minutes later from work than he’d said he would, after sitting in Paris traffic, cursing the rush on the ring roads and the darkness of the Paris tunnels.

He couldn’t call Aaron, he couldn’t risk it. The days passed. And when Aaron didn’t show to look after the kids he’d had to tell Chrissie something.

‘I asked him to leave.’

‘Why?’

Robert shook his head, raising his eyebrows with exaggerated disappointment.

‘He brought home a bloke, and Josh walked in on them, in bed.’

‘No! How could he do that?’

‘I know. I was appalled.’

‘Oh my God! Poor Josh! Was he traumatized? Should I talk to him?’

‘Leave it. I already did and he’s fine, and I spoke to his therapist, too. They said best not to make a big thing of it.’

‘I just can’t believe Aaron would betray our trust like that.’

‘I’m sorry Chrissie, but it looks like your choice of au pair wasn’t such a great idea after all. I’m not blaming you, but, this time round, let’s choose together, eh? You know you’re not always the best judge of character.’

Now, Robert put the lid down on his laptop and instead opened a folder with recent company accounts. Frowning, he picked up the phone.

‘Is Lucas here? Can you ask him to come to my office?’

He’d almost forgotten he existed, but he raised his head at the knock on the door and watched him come in with narrowed eyes.

His lips looked dry. Looking at him from where he was sitting at his desk, Robert wondered if he’d
lost weight, his hip bones defined in the material of his tailored trousers, the shirt loose across the
spread of his lean chest.

‘I thought I said a few days?’ Robert was holding the room bill for Lucas’s pension, pulled out
from the folder in front of him. ‘I was doing you a favour, but you’re taking a liberty with me,
Lucas, I don’t like it.’

He tossed the bill down on the table, and leaning back and folding his hands. Lucas rubbed long
fingers against the damp dark curls sweeping at his neck.

‘Sorry. I stayed a bit longer than I thought.’ He avoided Robert’s eyes. ‘Anyway, I did leave over
a week ago, I just, I forgot to tell them I wasn’t going back. Maybe you can ask them to deduct
those days.’

Lucas looked out of the window at the clouds moving swiftly across the sky, pushed by a wind that
had been building in strength since the morning.

‘You spoke with Emile, then? You sorted it?’

Lucas closed his eyes.

‘No. I was, err, I was crazy to think…’ Robert watched his face struggle as he shifted on his feet.
‘He didn’t want to listen. He stopped answering my calls.’

Robert frowned.

‘So where are you staying, then?’

‘I went home.’

‘Then they’ve accepted things? Your Mum and Dad? Told you it would come good.’

‘No, I’ve accepted them. They wanted me to follow some therapy. Conversion. My Mum, she, err,
knows this priest, so I started...’

Robert snorted, laughing. And then he saw Lucas’s face.

‘Well good luck with that.’

Robert stood up and walked around the desk, towards Lucas, moving closer to him. Lucas took a
step back, but Robert moved closer again, hands in his pockets.

‘You’re gay. You can’t seriously think a priest can make any difference? I thought you were
smart?’

‘You seem to turn it on and off.’

‘I’m not gay.’

‘Well then, everyone’s happy. You have your wife. I have my family, and Emile has Aaron.’

Robert could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

‘Get out, Lucas.’
It was Emile who opened the door, but Aaron knew it was Robert, even before he heard his voice.

He was standing at the threshold, his body all energy. The light from the apartment window caught his blonde hair, his jaw bone, and bounced back from the leather of his jacket where his fists were buried deep, his elbows angled at his sides. His eyes glittered as he stared back at Emile, so that Aaron could see the too familiar indigo halo around the pale centre. He’d seen it softer, the iris blown wide and reflecting stars as he looked up from the pillow under him.

Aaron stood quickly, fastening the zip of his track suit top all the way up. They’d just come back from a run. His hair was still damp with sweat.

‘Let me in.’

‘He doesn’t want to speak to you.’

‘And who the hell are you? His mother?’ Robert looked over Emile’s shoulder as he stood blocking the entrance.

‘It’s alright, Emile. I can handle this.’ Aaron’s voice was calmer then he felt.

Emile hesitated, then stepped aside, opening the door wider.

The living area shrunk around him as Aaron watched Robert step inside, seeing his jaw flex and unflex. Emile moved to the kitchen area, opening a bottle of water from the fridge, watching them both.

Robert’s mouth was set, glaring at Emile.

‘Get rid of him.’

Emile looked at Aaron questioningly.

Aaron nodded.

‘Et-tu sur?’ Emile picked up his jacket, he moved towards the door. ‘Je ne serai pas loin. Appelle moi si tu as besoin de moi.’

When he’d gone, Robert shook his head, showing his teeth.

‘What the hell were you playing at, Aaron? Rein in your cheating husband?’

Aaron stood, hoping Robert couldn’t hear his beating heart, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

‘Haven’t got one.’ He answered quickly.

‘The text.’

‘What text?’

‘Chrissie got a text.’

Aaron turned down the corners of his mouth with a shrug. He tried not to notice the freckles on Robert’s pale cheeks, the light blond line over his upper lip where he obviously hadn’t shaved.
‘I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about, mate.’

‘Then who sent it?’

Aaron’s eyes flickered towards the door.

‘No idea.’

He waited, feeling Robert’s eyes on his face, not looking back. Instead he gestured towards the door.

‘Is that it? Cos if it is, you can go now.’

‘Look, you know what my marriage means to me. Chrissie. How I feel about her.’

Aaron closed his eyes. He hadn’t seen Robert for nearly three weeks, and now this. He didn’t know what he’d expected. Maybe this was helping. This was who Robert really was, after all. He tried not to think about being in Robert’s bed, Robert’s cool hands on his hips as he lay pressed close behind him, the feel of his breath against his spine.

‘I know.’

What else could he say?

Robert took his hands from his pockets, stretching them wide.

‘Look, I had to stay away. I couldn’t risk it. You know that. I can’t lose her Aaron. And now, she doesn’t trust me.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

Aaron met his eyes at last, Robert held him with his gaze.

‘I miss you, alright?’

Robert reached forward with his hands, reaching for Aaron’s face. In a flash Aaron raised his arms, knocking his hands away, watching Robert’s mouth fall into a pout.

‘Just, bear with me, will you? Give me some time. What are you doing here, anyway. With him?’

Robert inclined his head towards the door. ‘Go back to the apartment.’

‘Emile’s a mate. He helps me sort my head out. I need that right now.’

Aaron was battling so hard. He wondered if Robert could hear it, sense it, he needed to shut it right down.

‘I miss you!’ Robert’s eyes were on his face. ‘Meet me, Aaron, meet me at the apartment. Friday afternoon. I’ll tell Chrissie it’s work, an overnight.’

‘No.’

‘You don’t mean that. Meet me.’ It was almost a whisper.

Robert moved closer again, his body suddenly softening from the hard angles, his head inclined. Aaron looked at his lips. Why did he want them so much?
When he spoke, he could hear the tremor in his voice. He put out his fingers, splayed on the kitchen counter.

‘No. I never wanted this. I never wanted to make a fool of Chrissie. And now I don’t want to be reminded of it, seeing you.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning we’re done. Whatever this was. It’s over. I deserve better than you. Go back to your wife, Robert.’

‘And you’re not going to be texting me the minute I’m out that door, saying you made a mistake?’

‘You won’t be hearing from me, not anymore.’

Emile was just inside the apartment building, arms folded over his chest, waiting. The spring sunshine from the street outside cast lozenges of light, shimmering with specks of dust above the dusty black and white marble floor.

Robert didn’t see him at first as he came down the stairs, until he stepped out of the shadow.

‘What do you want?’

‘I thought your wife would have had you on a tighter leash by now?’

‘It was you, wasn’t it? You’re brave.’

Robert face paled, he was shaking, but he stepped closer to Emile, his teeth barred. ‘Shouldn’t you be looking out for Lucas?’ Robert saw it, the flicker in Emile’s eye. ‘That’s what this is really about, isn’t it? That he came to me, that I helped him, when you couldn’t. Admit it. You do know he likes me. You should see the way he looks at me. Honestly, I think he’s a little in love, and who could blame him?’

Emile laughed, shaking his head.

‘You really are something else, eh? Aaron doesn’t really know you at all, does he?’ He lowered his voice. ‘But I see you for what you are. Stay away from him! Would you rather I told her to her face?’

‘You need to leave this now, Emile, I mean it. I’m warning you, mate.’

‘Well, Monsieur Sugden, my plan is to do whatever it takes to keep you away from him from now on, and if that means telling your wife, then I’ll do it. So actually, I suppose, I’m warning you, mon ami!’

Robert walked into the kitchen, where Chrissie was on the phone, frowning at the new au pair as she chopped fruit for Doli and Josh who were sitting at the table.

She placed her hand on the mouth piece.

‘Not like that. You don’t need to peel them. The vitamins are all under the skin.’
Robert took the phone from her hand and placed it down, then pulled at her wrist, while she questioned him with her liquid eyes.

He led her swiftly out of the kitchen, up the stairs and into the bedroom, closing the door, then he moved towards her, stripping off his jacket, dropping it on the floor. He reached for her face.

‘What are you doing?’ She laughed, pulling back from the kiss.

‘I miss you.’ He breathed.

His hands moved under her skirt, travelling over her rounded thighs, then down into her panties, over her soft mound, finding her slit where he pressed a finger into her. She was wet - he always made her wet.

‘Lock the door, then. The au pair’s downstairs. She could come up.’ Chrissie gasped.

‘She won’t come up.’

He moved his hands, finding the zip of her skirt, unfastening it and letting the material fall to the floor around her ankles, then he tugged her close, pressing her up against the bulge of his trousers, stroking his hands firmly over the plump flesh of her behind, letting a finger run inside the strap of her G-string, following the crease down behind, while she looked at him with questioning eyes, until he moved his fingers front again, this time finding her wet clitoris. She moaned as he circled there.

He knelt quickly, slipping off her panties, stroking upwards into the wet space with his tongue, while she placed her hands in his hair, then unfastening his trousers, he pushed her back on the bed, spreading her thighs wide.

He entered inside. His fingers searched under her blouse, inside her bra, until he found her nipple and squeezed between his finger and thumb, as he moved rhythmically. He watched her lips open and heard her soft whines.

She was close, she must have been ready for days, her anger and suspicion keeping the heat simmering inside, and now he felt her gripping around him, letting it all go, she was coming, releasing a series of staccato sighs. His balls tightened and he stiffened, and he felt his load leave him in a pulsing stream inside her. It was like drowning.

After, he moved off and lay back, looking at the ceiling, wondering why he still felt angry himself, pushing away the image of Aaron’s face, his chin set in a hard line, his eyes stone cold, as he faced him down that morning.

She turned on her side, resting a thigh over his legs, stroking his chest.

‘That was unexpected.’

‘You’re not complaining, are you?’

‘No. Listen. I’m sorry I’ve been all jealous and stupid. I hate myself when I get like that.’

‘Well you have to trust me, then.’

‘I do trust you. I do. Nobody knows you like I do. You’re my husband, and we have all our lives to spend together.’
Robert sat up, moving quickly off the bed on his way to the bathroom.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I have a meeting.’

‘Can’t you put it off?’

‘No. It’s important.’ He looked at his face in the mirror above the sink. ‘But I’ll be back, later.’

He grinned at the mirror, but his eyes weren’t smiling.

Aaron stepped out of the shower, picking up a towel from where it was folded over the radiator in the bathroom. He ran it first through his hair, raising his elbows as he rubbed vigorously over his curls. He caught sight of himself, sideways on in the full-length bathroom mirror, still partly blurred with steam, partly blurred with his tears. He had to stop now. Time to stop.

He could make out the concave pale curve of his armpits in the glass and the swell of his chest, overrun with droplets of water.

Closing his eyes, he inhaled, a sudden recollection, another bathroom, another mirror, Robert standing behind him, his solid thighs pushed up against him, hands around his front, stroking downwards slowly while they both watched. Stop.

He wiped the mirror suddenly with the towel exposing more of his body, his hip bones, his legs, muscular from the running he and Emile had kept up daily. Slowly, he turned full frontal. His balls were tight and dark in his sack, his cock was shining, wet with the residue of water from the shower. He stroked the towel down, his cock pushing back against the pressure. Then he dropped the towel. It had been so long since he’d touched himself. He parted his lips.

Emile was just beyond the bathroom door. He could hear the TV playing.

He moved his hand stroking up over his length, feeling the heat firing up behind his balls, clenching his butt cheeks for balance, gasping.

Then he stopped, looking at his swollen cockhead.

He could open the door, call Emile, and bend forward over the sink, feeling the older man part his arse cheeks and penetrate him.

He reached for the toweling dressing gown and slipped it on. Then walked into the living room, where Emile looked up from the sofa. He sank down beside him.

Emile looked at his eyes.

‘Est-ce tu t’es coupé ? Have you been cutting yourself?’

‘No.’

‘Show me.’

Aaron sighed, and placed his hand inside the robe, opening it over his chest.

‘Show me lower down’
Aaron moved his hand down, widening the area of exposed skin to where his belly rested in tight folds over the muscles of his abs where he sat.

‘Show me, lower down.’

He turned his head, then, looking at Emile’s mouth.

Then he took the length of toweling tying the robe together, and pulled gently. The robe fell away, and he panted. He was naked now, and Emile’s eyes were looking down at his hard, shining cock, his swollen balls.

For a moment, they sat in silence, while the sound of French voices droned on from the TV.

Then Emile spoke.

‘Is it time, then?’ he asked. His voice was thick.

‘It’s time.’ Aaron answered.

Emile leaned forwards, his hand reaching behind Aaron’s neck, and pulled him into a kiss.

The apartment was wrecked, chairs broken, the chest of drawers on its side, drawers scattered over the bedroom floor. Robert tipped up the bottle of champagne that had been in the fridge since he’d first rented the apartment, swallowing, wiping his sleeve over his mouth. It was nearly empty now, but there was another one.

He pulled his phone from his pocket, searching his contacts, and frowning, sent a text. He would wait.

He was sitting quietly in the fading evening light when the bell rang, and stumbling, he opened the door.

‘How’s the power of prayer coming on?’

Lucas frowned.

‘Where is this place? Why did you call me?’

‘Why do you think? I don’t need God.’

Robert placed one hand over the front of Lucas’s trousers, with the other he held his face.

‘The question is, do you?’
Friends with Benefits

Chapter Summary

Aaron and Emile get closer. Aaron has a surprise encounter with Robert. He's shocked to learn that someone he hasn't seen in a very long time will soon be visiting Paris.

Chapter Notes

CW reference to self harm

They hadn't had penetrative sex that first time, or for a good while after. Maybe Emile had been cautious, sensing it was still too soon after Robert, that Aaron's head still wasn't in the best place. But he saw Aaron's thirst, too, recognizing his desperation for release, somehow. And he judged that maybe sex was better than self-harm, and that Aaron needed his help with that.

It was Aaron's eyes that he'd noticed, when he came out of the shower and sat down next to him on the sofa, wearing only a bathrobe. If Aaron had been cutting, he'd wanted to know, then he could try and stop it from happening again, even if it meant getting in the shower together with him every day.

So he'd asked Aaron to show him, and rather than wounds, Emile has seen his erect cock, pulsing over his belly as his chest rose and fell, craving to be touched.

Even though there were still tears in the corners of his eyes, Aaron had pushed his chin forwards, as if he were challenging him, silently.

‘What are ya going do about that, then?’

So the older man had calmly taken control, first helping Aaron channel some of the heat into a kiss, stroking his fingers gently over his throat for a while, finding his larynx and moving upwards over it with the lightest of touches from his thumb. He used his mouth to open Aaron’s lips, and slowly went deeper with his tongue. The only sound in the quiet room was the voices from the television on low, speaking in French, and the wet sound of their lips as they broke apart to breathe, and then pressed their mouths together again.

Then, noticing Aaron’s breathing settling, Emile patted him to lean forwards and helped him slip the robe off his shoulders, tugging it away from under his hips, so that now he was naked.

Aaron reached out and Emile waited, letting him touch him through the lacquered nylon of his sweat pants, allowing him to feel the rock hardness of his own length.

‘Tu comprends que je te veux?’

Aaron nodded back, looking at his eyes.

Then he gently moved Aaron’s hand away, taking charge again. He steered Aaron back to a
reclining position so that his hips were on the edge of the sofa, and after that placed a hand
between Aaron’s trembling thighs.

He lowered his mouth to Aaron’s again and circled his tongue, French kissing. Aaron’s hand was
around his neck pulling him closer. He touched Aaron’s balls, rolling them lightly, listening to him
moan from his throat. Then finally he curled his fingers around the base of Aaron’s cock and
stroked upwards over his flushed thick shaft, starting to work him.

He didn’t need Aaron to tell him how close he was.

So he waited, holding his hand back, suspended in the air, as Aaron panted, and moved his eyes
from Aaron’s face to his cock, watching it strain and pulse with each heartbeat, liquid spilling from
his bell end.

‘You?’ Aaron panted. He was blowing air unsteadily from his parted lips. Emile pressed his mouth
in front of his ear, stroking his cheek with his own.

‘Oui, Oui, bien sûr, all in good time.’

He dropped down onto the rug, moving between Aaron’s thighs. The position was perfect. Aaron,
knowing it, gripped his legs behind his knees, opening himself up to the older man. Emile used his
fingers to trace the line of his crack, then moved his mouth closer and licked upwards over Aaron’s
hole. He lapped at him again and again, going deeper over and into his entrance each time, feeling
him stretch open under his tongue.

Emile leaned back and tugged his own track suit down. He stroked his cock rapidly, then moved it
forwards, brushing against Aaron’s entrance with the tip of his cockhead, battling against his desire
to push inside.

Aaron was asking him to, impatient now.

But he pulled away. The condoms were in the bedroom anyway. Not this time. Not with Robert’s
visit so fresh, and Aaron’s eyes still red from crying in the bathroom.

So instead he spat and spread the liquid against Aaron’s clenching hole, then slipped two rigid
fingers deep inside.

Reaching forward with his other hand, he took Aaron’s cock again, this time working him fast,
moving his two fingers back and forth inside him. And in moments, Aaron was coming, his eyes
rolling back, grunts of release coming from his throat. Emile knew it was good as he stroked him
through, watching the creamy cum firing from Aaron’s cock, feeling the sticky heat as it ran over
his fingers. Then he stood, and fisted himself fast until he came too, while Aaron lay still, looking
up at him, his mouth open as his ragged breathing started to even out.

When it was over, he bent down and kissed Aaron’s mouth, amused to see him blushing after what
they’d just done. He grabbed tissues from a box on the coffee table, handing some to Aaron,
wiping himself clean too, then he reached for a blanket folded over another chair, and spread it
over Aaron, sitting beside him. He wrapped an arm over his shoulder and pulled him close.

‘C’était bon, n’est pas?’ He asked in a low voice.

Aaron nodded.

‘Yeah. C’était bon.’ He acknowledged, speaking French back.
Emile dropped a kiss on his forehead with a laugh. Aaron’s eyes were closing. The shower, the orgasm, the warmth under the blanket and Emile’s body next to his own, he didn’t need Robert, this proved it. It was over. He wouldn’t be seeing him again.

That night Aaron moved officially from the sofa into Emile’s bed. After three weeks of waiting, it felt right, it felt like a relief.

‘But we’re not actually boyfriends or anything.’ Aaron had said to Emile, looking up at the ceiling. ‘Better to be mates, eh? Like you said.’ He glanced sideways at Emile’s face. ‘… cos I don’t think I could handle anything like that right now.’

And Emile had agreed.

‘Ce n’est pas un problème, I said a long time ago, you need to maybe look for some distraction, put yourself out there again. But just sleep now, Aaron, OK?’

Ed came round for dinner with his new boyfriend, Benoit. Emile cooked, and they drank beer and sat at the table long after the meal was done, exchanging anecdotes, talking rugby and politics and Paris, the low ripple of male laughter rising and falling in the small apartment as the light from La Marias and the distant sound of music from the cafés below filtered into the room.

Aaron found himself glancing at Emile as he talked, watching his mouth, imagining taking him home. His Mum would like him, Paddy would like him too, when they got over his age. Adam, too, probably, maybe. He was a straight forward working man, and kind. But he couldn’t picture him out of Paris. And anyway, he couldn’t go home. Not for years yet, not until his record was forgotten and, even then with a new identity.

Emile reached out a hand, still talking, and touched his shoulder for a moment.

When it got late, Aaron offered to make coffee, and Ed joined him, leaning back against the counter while Aaron loaded the dish washer, his sleeves pushed up.

‘So, Emile? You two are an item?’ Ed asked, quietly, glancing over at the table.

‘Not exactly, well, sort of, mates with benefits, maybe.’ Aaron straightened up. ‘It’s a bit weird. You don’t mind, do you? Him being your mate? I mean, I wouldn’t have even met him if it wasn’t for when we first came to Paris and he helped us, because of you.’

‘No, course not. I’m glad. And at least it’s all over with Robert. I was worried there, for a while.’

Aaron pulled a face. Ed, watching him, frowned.

‘You are over him, aren’t you, Aaron?’

‘Yeah, course I am.’ He turned to pick up the expresso maker. ‘How does Ben take his coffee?’

When the coffee was ready, Ed picked up a couple of the cups, turning to take them to the table where Emile and Benoit were still chatting about rugby.

‘How’s Adam, by the way?’

‘Adam? He’s OK, I think.’
‘So he stays in touch with you?’

‘Sure. On and off.’

‘Well I hope he’s grateful. You gave up a life for him. I hope he appreciates exactly what you did. And makes the most of it, each and every day.’

‘I’m sure he does.’

‘Good then.’

It was late when they left. Aaron and Emile stood by the open door, saying their goodbyes, and then stood listening to the footsteps and laughter on the stairs, until there was quiet. Emile pushed the door closed again.

‘Ce sont des bonnes personnes, de bon amis, n’est ce- pas, Aaron?’

Aaron nodded, then ran his hand over his face, looking out of the window. Maybe it was the mention of Adam, because all at once he felt homesick, a wave of nausea hitting him in the solar plexus, almost taking his breath with it. And for a moment he could almost hear his voice, only it wasn’t Adam, it was Robert. It was still Robert. And he hated himself because he was still there, in his head, after everything. He raised a hand to his stomach. Emile waited, watching him, Aaron could feel his eyes on his face. He had never rushed him, Aaron knew he wouldn’t do it now. He turned to look at him.

‘Can we go to bed, now?’

‘But of course. Mates with benefits?’

Emile smiled at him.

‘Oh God. You were listening?’

‘I heard.’

Emile turned off the light. He took Aaron’s hand and led him into the bedroom.

Aaron wanted to make up for the conversation. He moved down the older man’s body, his fingers lightly on his stomach, and lay between his thighs. Taking his cock between his lips, he blew him, giving him the full treatment, while Emile rested his fingers on his shoulders then moved them to his hair, pushing him down gently as his hips bucked, swearing softly in French. Then after, he returned the favor, and Aaron came hard in his mouth, holding on to the sheet like a ship in a storm with his curled fingers.

Robert’s lips were so dry that they’d chapped, stinging when he ran a tongue over them. He reached for a tissue and held it against his bottom lip, seeing the faint spots of blood on the white cotton paper. He dropped it by the bed, where other tissues lay scrunched on the floor beside a used condom and an empty champagne bottle on its side. He rested his shoulders back against the headboard of the bed with a groan, recalling fragmented scenes of the past night. He needed a long shower, but a shower wouldn’t erase the mistakes he just kept on making.
He glanced sideways, closing his eyes with disbelief at what he’d done. Lucas lay sleeping on his stomach with his arms above his head, his face turned away. There’d been a moment the night before when Lucas had turned to leave, but he’d persuaded him to stay. He was good at it, persuading people to do what he wanted them to do, making them think they wanted it too.

Lucas turned his head, opening his eyes.

‘Listen mate, this was a mistake. You need to leave, now.’

‘Nous pourrions baiser encore une fois.’

Robert grimaced.

‘Never going to happen. I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, but this was a one off.’

He watched Lucas’s green eyes dilate and then narrow.

‘You used me.’

‘I don’t recall you playing hard to get. Bet you’ve done this often enough.’

‘You think because I’m gay that I’m into casual sex?’

‘So you’re gay again today, are you? You want to know what I think? I think you’re into older men. Maybe you need to go and confess to your priest.’

Lucas scrambled off the bed and started searching for his clothes on the bedroom floor, negotiating the still overturned furniture. He stepped into his jeans, pulling them up and fastening them with fumbling hands. Robert looked away.

‘At least I’m not stuck in the closet like you. Everyone in the office thinks you’re straight. It’s a joke! Aaron, Ricco, this? I think you need a priest as much as I do!’

He tugged his T-shirt on over his head. Robert saw the pink points of his nipples against his pale skin moving with the lean muscles and bones of his chest as he raised his arms. He had a sudden image of Aaron, dressing, here, in the same room.

‘I am straight.’ Robert countered, but the mention of the office concerned him. Lucas knew too much.

‘Look, you didn’t want this, any more than I did. Let’s just pretend it never happened. Don’t come back to work, Lucas,’ he paused ‘I think we can agree that whatever arrangement we had, it’s over, now.’

‘But, what do I tell my family? I made them a promise and I broke it. What if they kick me out, again?’

‘I’m sure you’ll think of something. Make something up.’

When Lucas had gone, Robert took his phone. For a moment, his thumb hovered over Aaron’s number. Then he called Chrissie.

‘Hello you? How’s your business trip going? Were you lonely last night? Getting drunk in the hotel bar, no doubt.’

‘Something like that.’ He answered. ‘I miss you.’
‘You need to get out. Meet some guys your own age.’

‘Alright, but, you never said that to Lucas.’

The silence went on longer than Aaron had expected. They never brought him up. It was as if he’d never even existed. Finally, Emile reached for the remote, muting the sound on the TV and dropping it back down again on the coffee table.

‘He was my boyfriend. Whereas we, we are …’ He gestured with his hand in the air.

‘Mates with benefits. Yeah, I know what I said.’

‘Look, you’ve done it before.’

It was Aaron turn to be silent before he spoke, his eyes on Emile’s face.

‘When me and Ed split up I was gutted, and I had no one to turn to. I had no one to turn to, because everyone I cared about was back in England. So, yes, I put it about for a bit.’

‘I was around at the time. I remember.’

‘You were, and you were a mate.’

‘So now, I’m being a mate again. Go fuck someone, Aaron, yeah? This is Paris. You’re young. Have fun, Aaron. Get him out of your head. You deserve better.’

So Aaron went out cruising on his own after that.

The only problem was his heart wasn’t in it. So, instead of meeting new lads, he would sit over a bottle of beer, chatting with acquaintances, sometimes seeing Ed and Ben on a night out together, and avoiding the signals sent his way through smiles or winks across the clubs he frequented, or the occasional offer of a drink. He would stay out late, because it was what Emile wanted, and when he did get back, often enough he’d already be asleep. Aaron had a suspicion that he was deliberately holding out on the benefits in a bid to help him move on with his life.

He met Matheo by chance, and they had a beer together.

He watched his eyes as he scanned the punters, and knew he didn’t want to be a part of that scene anymore. There had to be more to life than random hook ups. His thoughts drifted to the week he’d spent with Robert and Josh, the way Robert would turn on his side in the early mornings, and look at him in the dawn light, his eyes shades of indigo under lowered lids, his full lips parted in a smile. He’d looked at him like there was no one else in the universe, and all he’d wanted then was for time to stand still.

‘What’s Lucas doing?’ Mat asked, interrupting his thoughts.

‘I don’t know, mate.’

‘He and Emile? That’s over, yes? I never see him. He seems to have vanished. I wanted to paint him.’ Matheo leered.

Aaron rubbed a finger over his eyelid, looking away. He really wasn’t interested. He decided to go
home early for once.

When he opened the door of the apartment with his key, the lights were low, the bedroom door was open, and Emile wasn’t alone. He heard them first, the sound of skin slapping against skin, the grunts and gasps, and then, as his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw them, Emile standing naked, his hips moving fast while his hands held onto the sides of a man he’d never seen before, bent over the end of the bed.

He felt his mouth suddenly go dry. Confused, he turned back to the door to leave again. He had no rights over Emile, but still, he hadn’t expected it. He felt shocked. He felt like it was his bed, their bed, that this was wrong, some kind of betrayal, even though he knew it wasn’t rational to feel that way.

He heard Emile’s voice, calling after him.

‘Aaron, arrête, attends!’

He shielded his eyes, Emile was walking towards him, his swollen cock sheathed with a condom, sweat shining on his strong upper body. He pulled off the condom rapidly, holding himself as he approached.

‘You came early. I didn’t think you’d be back.’

‘It’s OK. I’ll just, I’ll err, go and come back again, sorry.’

He inclined his head back towards the bedroom.

‘No,’ Emile searched his face. ‘Come. Come and join us.’

Aaron felt his heart accelerate.

‘Wha..?’

Emile lowered his voice then.

‘It’s OK. Aaron, trust me! Join us. Paul, he’s a friend.’

‘I don’t…’

‘Aaron.’

Emile put out his hand, and Aaron looked down at it. His heart was pounding in his chest. He pressed his lips together, then raised his eyes back to Emile, who looked steadily back at him. Then he breathed out suddenly. Taking Emile’s hand he let himself be led into the bedroom.

The stranger was lying languidly now on his back, one knee up, while his other leg still rested over the edge of the bed, tugging at his long erect cock. He raised his eyebrows, looking up questioningly at Aaron and at Emile. He was probably in his mid-thirties Aaron guessed, with a mandala sleeve tattoo on one arm and another just over his groin.

‘Aaron, this is Paul.’ Emile said.

He turned and pushed Aaron’s jacket from his shoulders, then pulled his T-shirt over his head and unfastened his black jeans, easing them down from his hips. He leaned forwards, swaying, kissing Aaron’s neck, placing a hand gently against the side of his head. Then he moved his mouth to Aaron’s lips, circling his tongue, waiting for him to respond. Aaron could smell the familiar scent
of sweat and sex from him, Emile’s skin was warm. He raised his mouth and kissed him back, hesitantly, holding on to his strong arms lightly with his fingers, closing his eyes.

‘Come, take off of your shoes, come and lie down.’

He sat awkwardly for a moment on the bed, and then Emile pulled him gently down, so he was lying naked between the two older men. He was glad of the lamp light, the times he had slept with strangers he’d usually kept his top on. In this semi darkness at least his scars weren’t so visible. Emile’s reached his familiar hand down, touching his cock and Aaron felt warm currents run through him as he started to work him to hardness. The stranger, Paul, put up a hand to Aaron’s face and, looking for his mouth, started to kiss him. His lips were warm, they felt good. When he pulled away, Aaron lowered his eyes, looking more closely at the stranger, Paul’s cock, feeling suddenly aroused by the size and shape of him.

Then Emile moved off the bed, and Paul’s hand replaced his on his cock, and his groin was on fire, while he watched Emile roll a fresh condom down his length, then move back on his knees, pushing Aaron’s thighs open.

He felt cold lube as Emile reached his fingers to stroke over his entrance.

Now, after all this waiting, this was how it was going to happen.

There was the momentary pressure as Emile knocked against him, and suddenly he was opening up, feeling split inside as he stretched wide at the massive intrusion of the older man’s cock, sliding quickly deep inside him.

His mouth was open, gasping, then he felt the other man’s mouth over his cockhead, his tongue swirling over him, then sucking as Emile pulled back and then smacked into him a second time.

He reached up a hand and held onto Emile’s wrist.

Emile raised a hand, pushing Paul back, out of the way. Then he was thrusting fast. Their eyes were fixed on each other. Aaron could hear the noises coming from his own throat, he didn’t need to touch himself, he was going to come like that on the older man’s cock. All at once he was on the edge, and Emile, feeling it, paused, while the room spun dizzyingly around him. Then Emile lunged again, and his climax hit, and he was hurtling into a white space, time suspended, until the pounding of his heart banging against his rib cage, beat by beat, brought him back to the present.

Emile’s hand was on his face, and his mouth found his and kissed him tenderly.

Aaron remembered the third man was there. He must have come on his fist, because now he was wiping himself down with tissues.

Emile pulled out, backing off the bed, quickly removing the spent condom, tying it, and throwing it away. The two men spoke in French as Paul dressed. Aaron watched silently as he kissed Emile quickly with a pat on the shoulder and left.

‘I didn’t wreck your evening, did I?’ Aaron asked.

Emile ran a hand over his face, shaking his head.

‘Non, Aaron. You didn’t wreck my evening.’

He moved back onto the bed, and lay down again, wrestling with the cover to pull it up over their waists. They lay side by side, looking up at the ceiling.
Then, after a while, Aaron turned and looked for Emile’s mouth, his face raised, becoming more insistent until Emile rolled him back again with a grin, moving over him once more.

‘Do you see him often, then?’ Aaron asked later.

‘No. It’s been maybe a year.’

‘And are there other… friends?’

Emile turned his head to look at Aaron, who avoided his eyes.

‘Some.’

‘Did you see them when you were with Lucas?’

‘No, I don’t cheat.’

‘Right.’

Aaron stretched his eyes, digesting his words.

‘So, what if I said, I don’t want you to see other men?’

Emile shrugged.

‘Then I say, OK. Whatever you want.’

After a moment, Aaron spoke again.

‘Why would you do this, everything, for me?’

‘Go to sleep.’

Aaron paused on the corner of the cobbled street, bending to retie a shoelace, looking back the way he’d come to see that Emile had stopped and was talking to someone, his lightweight tracksuit top tied around his waist now, his black T-shirt darker down his back, damp with sweat.

They’d run quite a distance, choosing a route that took them South and then back along the bank of the river, before returning home. Now they were a couple of streets away, and the place was filling up with the Saturday crowds, locals brought out by the late spring sunshine to browse the antique sellers and sit in the cafes, and even more tourists than usual, as they flocked to Paris, taking advantage of the Easter break.

Aaron waited, then watched as Emile picked up a jogging pace, catching up with him. Emile kissed him on the cheek and wrapped his fingers around Aaron’s, walking on, holding his hand. Some tourists looked at them curiously, and then away again. He remembered his words to Paddy, so long ago now, about not wanting to be part of the freak show. Here, in Paris, with Emile, it was all too easy to just be himself at last.

They would have a late leisurely breakfast over newspapers, then in the evening they’d been invited to Ed’s, who’d said he had some news. But in the afternoon, they’d go back to bed to make love and sleep, and make love again, Emile speaking in French to him.

Now they needed to buy provisions. There was a small local supermarket which sold the
international tabloids, as well as the groceries they were running low on, so they split up, Emile going to buy fresh bread and pastries, patting Aaron’s arm before he went on his way.

There were four aisles in the supermarket. Aaron picked up the newspapers, glancing briefly at the sports headlines before placing them in shopping basket, then he moved further into the store, spending a while choosing bacon and cheese from the chiller. Emile liked all the smelly stuff, but he preferred a good plain cheddar, preferably pre sliced, individually wrapped. He went round the corner to pick up some marmalade for toast. And then stopped dead in his tracks.

Robert.

Doli was in his arms, her body abandoned to the deepest sleep that only young children get to enjoy, her arms hanging loosely at her sides against his leather jacket, her head sideways on his shoulder, while her dark hair was already damp at the hairline and where it rested against Robert’s neck. And Josh was with him too. He had a hand curled into Robert’s leather sleeve. They were looking together at chocolate eggs on the shelf, Robert’s eyebrows raised as he encouraged Josh to choose something he liked.

He heard his voice.

‘Go on, it’s Easter, you’re meant to live on sugar!’

Then Josh turned, and Aaron took a step back from the aisle, out of sight, his heart pounding. He heard Josh say his name. It was too late.

For a moment he swayed on his feet, blowing air from his lips, but he didn’t have time to overthink this. He walked back round the aisle.

‘Aaron!’ Josh said again.

He was just stood there, his hand gripping tighter at Robert’s sleeve, his eyes as wide as Aaron had seen them. Aaron looked straight back at him, trying not to focus on Robert in his peripheral vision.

‘Hey! Mate! How are you?’

Josh blinked back at him, looking up at Robert’s face, then back again.

Aaron floundered, what could he say? He looked at Josh’s T-shirt. It was a football strip. Liverpool.

‘Couthino! Nice one!’

‘He’s going to transfer to Barcelona.’ Robert said.

‘Not if Klopp has anything to do with it.’

Their eyes met for the first time. There was a silence. Robert was looking at him so intently. Aaron was trapped.

He let himself wonder about the T-shirt. Where had it come from? Was Robert still in touch with the Brazilian businessman, Ricco? Maybe he’d sent it to Josh as a gift, or maybe he’d come back to Paris and … he didn’t want to finish the thought.

‘So you were just, in the area then?’ Aaron spoke again at last, looking sideways at the packets of
pot noodles on the shelf beside him.

‘Chrissie, err, she wanted to shop for antiques so…’

‘Right.’

‘You’ve been running?’ Robert’s voice was soft. ‘You look..., well.’

Aaron closed his eyes for a second, then raised a hand pointing towards the cashier’s desk at the bottom of the aisle and raising his basket. ‘I’ll see ya, then.’

He walked quickly away, feeling Robert’s eyes blinking after him and joined the line, willing it to speed up, so he could get out of there. When he looked back, the aisle was empty. He closed his eyes, breathing out at last. Then he felt a tug at his sleeve. Looking down, he saw Josh looking up at him his eyes wide, and then he reached his arms around him. Putting down the basket, Aaron hugged him back, stroking his blonde hair.

Josh searched his face.

‘Auntie Vic’s coming back for my Dad’s birthday. This time she’s bringing her boyfriend. Dad asked her to.’ He said.

Aaron blinked, trying to digest his words. If he’d been shocked to see Robert and the kids there, now he was stunned.

Adam! Adam was coming to Paris?

He opened his mouth, but Josh had let go and ran quickly away, disappearing around the furthest aisle. A voice was complaining that he was holding up the line, and he realized it was his turn, and started emptying the basket onto the cashier’s counter.

As he paid, from the back of the shop, he could hear Doli fretting as she woke up, Robert’s voice soothing her, talking to her. His voice was getting closer, they were coming this way.

He packed the groceries, his hands shaking, then turned to leave. Just then, Emile came in through the door of the supermarket, holding a paper bag with bread and pastries under one arm.

‘Allons y, Did I buy too much?’

He reached for Aaron’s hand, but Aaron stepped sideways, he could feel a prickling at the back of his neck, thinking that Robert’s eyes were on him. Emile frowned, looking at his face.

Aaron opened the door to the street. Emile glanced back behind them, and then followed him out of the store. Clouds had drifted over the morning sun, and as they walked, the first drops of rain started to fall.
For Good

Chapter Summary

Adam arrives in Paris and Aaron is made up to see his friend, but resents Robert's interference. Emile runs into Lucas. Emile tries to support Aaron as he knows best. Robert springs a surprise on Aaron, Vic and Adam.

Aaron held his knife and spread butter on a slice of white toast, raised the toast to his mouth, then set it down again untouched.

He moved his eyes from his plate to the window.

The rain was more persistent now, it had driven the tourists into the cafés, restaurants and shops below. Outside was quiet, broken only by the occasional shout, and footsteps running for shelter, made louder by the steamy air above the cobbles.

Emile cleared his throat.

‘So, you know, I forgot, I need to go out again, after all.’ He stood, collecting breakfast dishes, moving towards the open kitchen. ‘I promised a friend to help with a late tax return. You can read the papers while I’m gone.’

Aaron listened to the din of water hitting stainless steel as Emile washed his hands at the kitchen sink. He looked down at the tabloids, untouched on the table. Normally by now they would be spread open, the ink smudged with greasy thumb prints, as Aaron turned the pages while he ate.

‘Alright.’

Emile dried his hands, then came closer to pick up his phone from the table. He touched Aaron’s shoulder.

‘A couple of hours.’ He murmured.

At the door to the street, he pulled up the collar of his jacket, looking out at the rain with a frown. He’d find a place to pass the time. Right now, Aaron needed space, and, even if he didn’t know why, when he was ready to share, he would be there to listen.

After the door closed, Aaron stood up and went to the window, watching Emile’s figure, head down, hands in pockets, as he made his way down the shining street and out of sight.

He let his eyes flicker briefly over the visible entrances to the Paris café’s, and wondered where his family were. Maybe they were close by, eating lunch.

His family.

They would never be that again.

Chrissie would have joined them, sweeping in, smelling of perfume. Robert would raise his mouth as she bent to kiss him.
Aaron sucked in his breath, stepping away from the window.

He wiped his sleeve over his eyes and sank down on the sofa, fighting a losing battle as the first sob escaped from his throat. He’d thought he’d moved on, that his head was in a better place, and now he’d seen Robert for the first time in a month, and here he was again. He’d been over it and over it, till there were so many versions in his head, he couldn’t think straight anymore.

But it all came down to the same thing in the end; Robert had used him, time and time again, not caring who got hurt, and Aaron was better off without him. He hated him, he decided. He breathed more evenly, letting the feeling take root. He hated him, and it was a relief. He would roll the hate round and round until it burnt itself out, and then, eventuall, he would feel nothing, nothing at all. And it would finally be over. For good.

His nose was running and his cheeks were wet. He wiped his arm over his face, and then grimaced as he looked down at his sleeve.

And now Josh had said that Vic’s boyfriend was coming to Paris?

He looked at his phone.

No messages.

He must have been mistaken. If Adam was coming, he would have called. He felt the tears start to well up all over again in his eyes.

Aaron walked quite a distance from the metro, hood up against what was forecast to be the last of the spring rains.

He hadn’t been to this part of Paris before. In the early days, when he’d first arrived with Ed, they’d soon gravitated to the gay district around Le Marais, and then they’d rarely ventured further. He wasn’t really a city boy at heart. Sure, before France, he’d looked forwards to Friday night forays into Leeds, even the occasional outing to Manchester or London, but nothing could beat that feeling he got when he sat on the train, and knew that it was heading home.

Now he walked quickly, flexing his fingers in the pockets of his hoodie, looking from left to right, hoping he’d find the place easily enough. Strange to think he was going to see the one person, along with his Mum and Paddy, who’d made that home mean so much to him. And in the end, he’d turned out to be the person he’d left home for, for good.

He looked up and read the name over the door. The Moose. This was the place, then.

There were a couple of stainless steel tables with chairs outside on the pavement, none of your usual linen dressed tables and umbrellas. The windows were painted and impenetrable, the double door had a glossy mustard finish, with a stained silver catch.

Aaron pushed back his hood and puffed out air through his cheeks, then took a step forward and, as the door swung open under his hand, he walked in.

He saw him straight away, sitting forwards, his face lit by a grin, big brown eyes lowered over his drink, listening to something that Vic, sitting beside him, had just said, and then the burst of happy laughter. Adam, here in Paris, at long, long last.

He felt himself settle into his skin, like he knew who he was for the first time in a lifetime, and
took a step forwards, a little cocky swagger. It took less than a fraction of a second to see who else was there, and he froze, thrown off kilter all over again.

Robert was sitting the other side of Vic.

And Robert had seen him. Their eyes connected, then Robert was raking up and down his body, raising a pint of beer to his mouth which left a thin line of froth above the cupid’s bow of his top lip. He licked it off with his tongue, and sucked it away with his bottom lip. Then he looked away.

‘Aaron! Christ! Get over here, man!’

Adam had risen to his feet, his voice rich and full of warm amazement. Victoria stood too, a fond glow in her eyes.

It was Victoria who stepped forwards first, pulling him into a hug. He returned it awkwardly. Robert remained seated, one arm slung back over the upholstered bench chair where they were sitting, his other hand holding on to the neck of his pint glass as he looked up at him. Aaron glanced at him again, avoiding his eyes this time, taking in the floral blue print of his shirt, unfastened at the neck, then he quickly looked back at Adam’s face.

Adam was going to pull him into a hug, but Aaron couldn’t do this, here, now, with Vic and Robert watching them. So instead he grasped Adam by the wrist, inclining his head towards the bar.

‘Guess ya owe me a pint, then, mate. Come on!’

He saw the confused look on Adam’s face, but they moved together towards the bar, and then finally away from the others, turned to face each other.

Adam frowned.

‘Aaron, what’s up?’

‘I’ll tell ya what’s up!’ Aaron snapped. ‘I had to find out from Robert’s lad that you were even coming to Paris! That’s what’s up, mate! After all this time, an’, an’, everything, you couldn’t even call?’

Aaron shook his head, rubbing his eyes with his fingers and thumb over the bridge of his nose, while Adam blinked back at him.

‘I wanted to surprise you!’

‘You know I don’t like surprises!’

‘Alright, you’re right. I guess I just didn’t want to get you into trouble. I thought maybe they would be listening to our calls.’

Aaron rolled his eyes, and gave a short fake laugh.

‘Yeah! And maybe this place is staffed by Interpol. Look, there, and there!’

He saw Adam’s face cloud over, his head tilting sideways. He wasn’t sure himself where the anger had come from, just that he’d missed him so much, he could hardly bear it.

‘Alright you’ve made your point.’ Adam was saying.

Aaron shook his head. Adam spoke softly this time.
He’d been nursing this anger for almost a week now, ever since Josh had spoken to him, and he’d waited and waited for Adam to contact him, half sick with anticipation and at the same time trying to convince himself that it couldn’t be true. Then Vic had sent the text, and he’d replied.

Now, face to face with his best mate, he couldn’t keep it up. He just loved him too much.

‘It’s fine, come here.’

They hugged. Aaron blinked, feeling the familiar size and shape of his best friend in his arms, breathing in his manly scent, overlaying how it had always been, when they were younger. A part of him didn’t want to let go, but Adam was pulling back, so Aaron dropped his hands quickly, not wanting to seem clingy. Not wanting this to ever be awkward.

He turned to hide his face while he wiped his eyes.

‘Are you buying me that pint then, or not?’

Robert watched them, sitting with Victoria at the other side of the pub, his thumb stroking down the side of his glass.

‘What is he then? An ex-boyfriend? He’s not bi, is he?’

Victoria followed his eyes.

‘What! Adam? No! He’s just the love of his life.’ She laughed. ‘And my boyfriend may I remind you? But what about you? Cos when I left, you and Aaron, well,…’

‘Don’t. I already told you. It was a stupid mistake. I’m not gay.’

‘Or bi?’ Vic wanted to ask, but she let it go. Now wasn’t the time or the place.

They watched as Adam and Aaron made their way over to the darts board, placing down their drinks and getting ready for a match.

‘It’s over now, anyway. My family is my priority. Chrissie and the kids.’

Victoria looked closely at her brother’s face. The sound of Aaron and Adam’s laughter peeled across the room. Robert was still watching them.

‘Tell me more about Adam.’

‘What’s there to tell? He works with his Mum up at Butler’s. Just your regular farmer’s lad, really.’

‘Where’s his Dad, then?’

‘Oh, he died in a traffic accident, over a year ago, now. His Mum, Moira, had an affair, with Cain. It was tragic really, they were just making up. Adam hates Cain, needless to say.’

‘Cain? Cain… Dingle?’ Robert looked like he was trying to remember his name. ‘ Didn’t he used to own the garage?’

‘That’s right. I thought you used to work with him, once upon a time, didn’t you?’
Aaron was washing his hands in the men’s bathroom, when he looked up in the mirror to see Robert, hands in pockets, watching him.

‘Twice in one week? The market, and now here. You’ll have to careful, people might start talking.’

Aaron avoided looking back at him, instead he looked back his own reflection as he scoffed, giving a slight shake his head, pressing his tongue against the back of his bottom teeth.

When Aaron didn’t answer, Robert spoke again.

‘Anyway, I reckon you owe me a pint.’

He waited a second time.

‘I mean, it was me that invited your mate, here, wasn’t it? Without me, this little romantic reunion would never have happened.’

Aaron placed his hands on either side of the sink.

‘He’s Vic’s boyfriend. If she wanted him to come, you’d have hardly said no.’

‘You sure about that? Cos by my reckoning it’s been over a year. Best mate? And he couldn’t even get on a train from Leeds to come and see you until now. Poor lonely Aaron.’

Aaron span round quickly, seeing the glint of satisfaction in Robert’s eyes. He realized that Robert had wanted to rile him, he fed off this stuff. But it had worked.

He took a step closer to Robert, lips drawn, his eyes flashing.

‘Well, it just goes to show that you’ve got no mates at all. What are you even doing here, Robert? Nobody wanted you to come. Now that Adam’s here, even Vic hasn’t got time for ya.’

Robert’s eyes flickered. He looked back at Aaron’s face, focusing on his mouth.

When he spoke again his voice was lower.

‘Alright. I’ll buy you a pint, then.’

‘I don’t want anything from you.’

He turned to go, but for a moment he saw something else, something vulnerable as Robert blinked after him. He couldn’t be doing with thinking about that, but the anger was gone, and instead of the nothing he’d wanted to feel, there was another sort of feeling, and he had to fight to bury it.

Emile was at their regular club when he saw Lucas for the first time since they’d split. He was waiting at the bar for a drink, leaning on one elbow with his back to where Emile was sitting with friends.

Emile regarded him from behind. He noticed that he’d lost weight, the jeans, usually tight around his butt, sagged, his shoulder blades looked sharper under the cotton of his T-shirt, and his arms leaner. The dark locks of his hair that he always wore long, had grown even longer, falling in twisted waves, now down to his back. For a moment, Emile imagined slipping his fingers under his
hair, pushing it sideways to reveal the familiar long pale neck, tracing his fingers in a zigzag over the bumps of his spine.

As if he’d sensed him looking, Lucas turned and their eyes met. Emile saw Lucas’s eyes dilate, before looking quickly away. Picking up his beer he raised the bottle to his lips, resuming the conversation with the friends around him.

When he glanced across at the bar again, Lucas had gone. He scanned the room and in a moment, he’d found him. This time, he was near the dance floor, a muscle Mary in shorts and a tank top hitting on him. It had always been the same. He watched as Lucas raised his eyes, shaking his head politely, and then walked away.

Emile looked down at his drink with a frown, then stood up, lightly touching the shoulder of the friend sitting beside him. Carrying his beer, he walked across the crowded room.

‘Lucas!’

Lucas turned and they stood face to face.

Close-up he could see how the ball joints of his broad shoulders stood out, his T-shirt falling below his collar bone.

‘N’as-tu pas mangé?’ Emile asked.

Lucas bit his top lip, opening his hands with a small shake of his head. He coughed, then answered.

‘Si, je vais bien.’

Emile stared back at him. It was more than three months since they’d met, or spoken. His voice was heavy with concern.

‘Alors, pourquoi es-tu si maigre? Tu n’as pas l’air bien.’

Lucas lowered his eyes, and ran a tongue over his lips, Emile’s brow furrowed.

‘Don’t your family feed you? Or, are you ill?’

‘I’m not at home anymore.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s a long story.’

Emile made a decision, he looked around. He would sit down with Lucas and get him to talk.

He turned back and opened his mouth to speak, when Matheo appeared behind Lucas out of nowhere. He stepped forwards and reached a hand round Lucas’s stomach, fingers splayed, pulling him back against his hips. His eyes glinted as he rested his bearded chin on Lucas’s shoulder, regarding Emile, then looking sideways at the younger man.

‘Is it enough?’ he asked, ‘Shall we go back to the studio?’

Lucas bent his head, avoiding Emile’s eyes.

He didn’t speak, instead he nodded.
Mat smiled politely at Emile, who stepped backwards and raised his beer to his mouth, taking a slow drink. He watched them as they turned, Mat with fingers curled around Lucas’s arm as he steered him towards the exit.

Adam was sitting with his hand resting around Vic’s thigh, grinning up at Aaron as he sat down opposite them.

Robert had gone to the bar where he was waiting to be served.

‘You know what I fancy to go with this beer? A plate of chips.’ Vic said.

Adam laughed.

‘You see that? You can take the girl out of Yorkshire, but you can’t take Yorkshire out of the girl. I know something else I wouldn’t want to take out of you, babe!’

Adam turned his face sideways and kissed Vic on the lips, still chuckling. Watching them, Aaron blushed, fiddling with his hands and looking away, uncomfortable with the public display of affection between them.

Vic stood up.

‘Anyone else fancy something?’ She asked.

‘French fries, isn’t it?’ Adam was still giggling.

‘No, they do actually say chips.’ Aaron had folded his fingers looking slightly embarrassed.

‘Pommes chips, or pommes frites.’

‘Get you talking French!’ Adam laughed. ’You know what, Aaron, it suits you. Paris is amazing! Beats getting smashed in Hotten on a Friday night, eh? I reckon you did alright.’

Aaron opened his mouth. Adam went on, oblivious.

‘Maybe I should join ya? I mean, it worked for you, didn’t it?’

‘No, it didn’t Adam! You have no idea what it’s been like!’

He looked up, Robert was walking towards them, drink in hand, his eyes narrowed as they travelled between their faces.

Aaron gave a small sigh, feeling his shoulders fall.

‘No point us falling out is there?’

‘Aaron I’m sorry, mate. I didn’t think.’

‘Just drop it.’

‘No I mean it. What ya did for me, man? There’s not a day goes by when I don’t think about it. I’m really grateful.’

Robert put his beer down on the table, Aaron couldn’t help himself from looking up at his face. He saw the tension in his jaw, but he was looking back at Vic at the bar, still waiting to order. She
And suddenly Aaron’s heart was racing all over again. Robert and family. It was what mattered to him, wasn’t it? The kids, Vic, even Chrissie in a warped sort of way. Was that what it was about? And he’d told Aaron he mattered, too, once upon a time in an attic room, high above the streets of Paris, looking at stars. But he wouldn’t go home to Emmerdale. He’d planned it, and then at the last minute he’d sent Chrissie alone, and they’d had that time, together. Aaron could feel his head spinning. In some ways, they were both exiled. But with Robert, he didn’t know why. Maybe, he didn’t know him at all.

Vic was walking towards them, carrying a basket of chips. She placed them down on the table.

‘Get stuck in.’

They moved their hands forward, and for a second Robert’s fingers touched against his own. They both drew back as if from a flame. Aaron glanced sideways at Robert’s lowered face, and saw him look away. He saw his chest suddenly rise and fall under the blue patterned shirt.

It was late when Aaron unlocked the door to Emile’s apartment, the living room was in half darkness, and he could see the light flickering from the TV, hear voices low volume. Emile was sitting on the couch, wearing his thigh length dressing gown. Aaron noted somewhere in the background of his mind that Emile was showered, his dark hair damp, a towel thrown over the arm of the sofa.

‘Sorry, I didn’t phone or anything. You weren’t waiting up for me?’

Emile shook his head, reaching for the remote.

‘Non, I just lost track of the time.’

Aaron took a bottle of water from the fridge, waiting for Emile to question him about the evening. He’d already decided not to mention Robert being there. He could do without the scrutiny. He knew well enough what Emile thought about him, but he could tell him about Adam. He caught himself smiling as he drank down the water. Then he glanced at Emile again, watching him abandon the remote on the table. He wasn’t asking any questions, after all.

‘So, did you go to the club, then?’ He volunteered.

‘Yes.’ He stood up ‘Look, I’m tired so I’m going to bed. You come when you’re ready, ok?’

Aaron nodded, watching him go. His mind drifted back to the evening as he found himself replaying the banter with Adam. He’d missed him so much. Images of Robert flashed into his mind, and he frowned, pushing them away. But he’d see him again, now that Adam was here. They’d all meet up and then continue from where the night had left off. In spite of himself, in spite of everything, he felt the stirring of butterflies in his stomach.

He had a quick shower, then stepped quietly into the dark bedroom and opened a drawer, taking out a clean T-shirt and boxers, which he put on. He slipped into bed, where Emile was facing away on his side, already asleep and stared up into the darkness, listening to Adam’s voice in his head.

_They were falling fast, their bodies tangled, slanting sunlight blinding him from the wide blue sky._
His fingers were twisted in the material of Robert’s shirt, his ankle threaded round the back of his calf. When they hit the grass, the football span away and out of sight. His body bounced, once, twice, on the soft earth. Robert rocked over him, their hips and cheeks colliding.

Now he was still. He could barely breathe, but he could feel Robert’s heart beating against his chest, and his own heart, too, racing in a staggered rhythm. He looked up. Robert’s eyes were fixed on his, and as he looked back into the crystal refraction of green and blue, their heartbeats synchronized into a single pulse.

Aaron lifted a hand, tangling his fingers in his hair. Robert kissed him then. Aaron raised his head from the ground to kiss him back. He didn’t want the kiss to stop, he knew he was dreaming, that he could make it last. He could feel the hardness of his cock, he could stay in the dream and turn this into full blown sex.

‘Hey? I thought it was me? I thought I was the one?’

Aaron turned his head and squinted upwards in the direction of the familiar voice.

Adam was walking towards them, the football under his arm.

‘I thought so, too. But, I was wrong.’

Aaron opened his eyes.

The bedroom resurfaced around him.

He turned his face on the pillow, looking at the few early flecks of grey in Emile’s black hair, the slight sheen of sweat on the skin of his jaw reflecting a shaft of dawn sunlight shining in through a gap in the shutters. The room was quiet, except for his own labored breathing. Emile’s arm was bent behind his head. Aaron realized he was awake, his eyes open in a narrow slant, looking at his face.

Emile raised his other hand and ran the back his fingers over the muscle of Aaron’s shoulder beside him.

‘You were dreaming.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Are you in love with him? Your friend, Adam?’

‘Wha…? God no! He’s straight.’

He blushed, remembering the dream now, reaching a hand down, he could feel his erection in his boxers.

Emile shrugged.

‘I think many gay men get a teenage crush on their straight best friends. I’m pretty sure I did.’

Aaron really didn’t want to talk about it.

‘He’s coming, tomorrow, today I mean, to the yard. You don’t mind, do you?’
‘Course not, I’d like to meet your friend.’

Aaron hesitated.

‘He doesn’t know. About us.’

There was a short silence.

‘What’s there to know?’

Emile lowered his arm, then. Their faces were close. Aaron waited, feeling his breathing shallow.

After a moment, Emile spoke again.

‘He was there, too, wasn’t he?’

They didn’t need to say his name.

‘I just worry. I don’t want you to get pulled back there. You’ve been doing so well.’

‘Well don’t. Don’t worry. I told you it’s over, for good. I’m not going back there.’

Emile’s mouth moved forwards then. His lips caught Aaron’s top lip and he pulled against it slowly with his teeth. Aaron moved his chin forwards, asking for more. Closing his eyes, he opened his mouth and felt their tongues meet.

He could hear the low rumble of a delivery van on the normally pedestrian cobbled street below.

‘Tu ne veux pas retourner dormir?’ Emile whispered.

Aaron shook his head.

‘No. Do you?’

‘Your dream got you horny, then?’

He slipped his hands under Aaron’s T-shirt, pulling it up and off over his head, then to the waistband of his boxers, tugging them down over his hips and to his knees, until Aaron helped him, kicking them off.

Emile ran a hand down over his naked body and found his mouth again. This time they circled their tongues. Aaron raised a hand, resting his palm against the material of Emile’s T-shirt over his muscular chest.

Then Emile undressed quickly, too and Aaron could feel the heat of his skin.

After, Emile bent his head to Aaron’s chest.

He licked against his nipple, flickering against the hard nub with the side of his tongue. Aaron moaned softly. It felt good, sending currents rippling down into his groin. He reached up with his own hand and touched his other nipple, self-stimulating, pinching it with his finger and thumb, and arching his back, until his cock started to pulse in response.

Emile slid a hand down between his thighs, up over his balls.

He made a V with his fingers and dragged them up over Aaron’s shaft, stroking harder as he
reached the tighter dark red ridge of his bell end. Then he curled his fingers round him, stroking his thumb over his slit to collect the clear liquid leaking there, using it to lubricate his foreskin as he tugged at him.

‘Doigte-moi.’ Aaron groaned.

Emile grinned, loving that Aaron would ask in French. That they’d built that trust. He did what Aaron wanted and pulled his thigh forwards to open his crack, and then padded with his fingers until he found his entrance. He played there, letting his fingers press against the tight muscles until he felt them relax, then he pushed a single finger inside, twisting gently, looking down as Aaron’s chest rose and fell, and his stiff cock twitched in the air.

‘Baise-moi.’ Aaron breathed this time.

‘Alors, passe moi une capote.’ Emile murmured.

Aaron leaned back, moving his fingers over the bedside table until he found a condom, then passed it to Emile. Looking back over his shoulder, he reached a second time, finding the lube dispenser, and put his thumb over the depressor to collect lube on his fingers. He moved his hand down behind him and circled over his rim and pushed a finger inside preparing himself.

He moved up onto his hands and knees as Emile positioned himself, stroking down over Aaron’s arse cheeks. Then Emile lined up, and with a grunt, he pushed inside.

As Emile started to thrust, for a moment Aaron pictured Adam, it wouldn’t be the first time, but he quickly let the image go, and then there was Robert in his head. He thought about the bathroom, he could have kissed him maybe, taken him into a cubicle, dropping his trousers with Robert tight up behind him.

Emile went faster and harder. Aaron thought about Robert’s cock in his mouth instead, his own cock swinging hard between his thighs. He bit his bottom lip, scrunching up his eyes as Emile’s thrusts dragged groans from his throat. He was afraid suddenly that he would say Robert’s name aloud, or that Emile would see into his head. But the fantasy had taken hold now.

He was going to come.

Emile pulled out, and Aaron turned quickly on his back, fisting himself hard. Emile pulled off his condom and joined him. Then Aaron rolled back his neck, coming hard, his cum spraying up over his stomach and chest and then his over his hand. Emile followed quickly.

They both laughed.

‘Good?’ Emile asked in English.

‘Oui j’ai, er.., bien jo.. joui.’ Aaron stumbled over his words.

‘So at least the French lessons are working.’ Emile grinned.

They kissed, then Emile lay back down, beside him. Aaron turned his head to look at the older man.

‘You know you mean a lot to me?’ he said.

Emile laughed again.
‘I know, my friend. And when you’ve gone, I’ll miss you.’

Aaron blinked, wondering why Emile had said that, now. But in his heart, he knew it was true. Maybe it was seeing Adam again, or spring coming to an end, but he felt like something new was going to happen in his life, any day now. He could feel it.

Adam was around for a few days longer. Moira couldn’t do without him for long, so they’d known it was only a flying visit from the start. He visited the scrapyard and he liked it. Aaron even got him helping out there for a while. When Emile came over to meet him, he took Adam’s hand in greeting then leaned forward to kiss his cheeks, and Aaron could see the panic in Adam’s eyes.

‘It’s alright, Adam. It’s not a gay thing. It’s a French thing.’

Adam, being Adam, didn’t pick up on the close relationship between them. Aaron wondered about telling him, but what would he say? That Emile was his friend, that they lived together and had sex when they felt like it. It was complicated, but it was really, quite simple, too. But for some reason, Aaron decided to leave it alone.

For a couple of days, he didn’t see him at all. One of those days was Robert’s birthday. And then it was the last evening.

Aaron saw Adam and Vic as soon as he walked into the bar. He walked towards them, glancing around the place.

‘No Robert?’ he asked, trying to keep his voice casual.

‘Said he’d got some business to take care of. So, it’s just us three tonight.’ Vic answered.

‘Reckon he copped out of it after that drinking game yesterday for his birthday. Chrissie kept telling him to slow down.’ Adam laughed.

Aaron turned down the corners of his mouth. But suddenly he felt flat.

‘Well, let’s play a game of darts then, I’ll take you both on. How about it?’

As he walked towards the darts area, he frowned at himself. He hadn’t wanted to see Robert anyway. He was done with him for good, he told himself, and now he could focus all his attention on enjoying his last night with Adam.

The darts game was long over, and they’d settled into armchairs, reminiscing over old times in Emmerdale, when Aaron looked up and saw him.

He was making his way towards them, putting his phone in his pocket, wearing a suit jacket and shirt and tie over jeans, his blonde hair long over his collar. As soon as their eyes met, Robert smiled. Aaron looked away quickly.

‘I thought you weren’t coming?’ Vic said.

‘Well, I couldn’t miss your last night, could I?’ Robert replied.

‘Nice one, mate.’ Adam responded. Aaron fidgeted for a moment, then he was on his feet.

‘Was it something I said?’ Robert joked.
‘Nah, I’m just, going to the bar.’ Aaron tipped up his almost empty glass, pointing in the direction of the long busy bar where a crowd of customers were waiting to be served.

‘You’re not putting your hands in your pocket, are you?’ Robert raised his eyebrows.

Aaron hesitated, knowing Vic and Adam were watching him, but he wasn’t big on pretense.

‘You can get your own.’ He answered, and, seeing Adam’s puzzled face, he quickly walked away.

Robert followed him to the bar to get himself a drink.

‘I’m sorry Aaron, look, I know I got stuff wrong. I’m just trying to put it right.’

‘Stop trying,’ Aaron ran a hand over his face. ‘Just leave things be, won’t you? You and me won’t need to see each other ever again after tonight, anyway. Don’t complicate stuff, Robert. Alright?’

Robert’s tongue ran up over his top lip, his eyes searching Aaron’s. Aaron looked back at him. For a moment Robert looked like he was going to say something, then Vic appeared.

‘Have you lot seen the time? Rob? I think we ought to get back. It’s an early flight. And I want to see the kids to say goodbye, too.’

‘They’ll be asleep.’ Robert and Aaron both spoke at the same time, and then looked at each other.

‘Should we order a taxi to the airport?’

‘No, I’m going to take you.’

‘I don’t want to put you out.’

‘Well, I had a surprise for you, but I suppose I’ll tell you now.’ Robert was speaking to Vic, but his eyes were on Aaron’s face.

‘I’m coming with you.’

Vic looked back at him with astonishment.

‘You what?’

‘I’m coming with you. I booked my ticket on the same flight. I’m coming to Emmerdale. Just for a couple of days. There’s something I need to do.’
Les Jardins de Courances

Chapter Summary

Robert returns to Paris from England feeling conflicted. Meanwhile, Emile tells Aaron something about his past. Josh has a request. Aaron softens towards Robert but insists to Emile that he won't go back there.

Chapter Notes

So I decided to split what had become a weirdly long chapter into two, so the next chapter is what you've been waiting for I think, but this one has to happen for future plot LOL. Anyway, it's been a very long wait, so at least it's something xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was Diane who suggested he slept there. Chas wasn’t impressed, but Diane had won her round.

‘It’s just for a couple of nights, after all. It wouldn’t feel right having him stay in the B & B. I know he hasn’t been here for years, but he’s family and I know it’s what Jack would have wanted. So long as I’m here, this is his home, too. And Aaron wouldn’t mind while the other rooms are being refurbished.’

Robert had kept quiet, looking down at his plate, and Chas reluctantly agreed.

‘Thanks for the lovely meal, but, it’s been a long day, so I’ll go up now, if that’s alright with you?’

‘Course, pet! And, Robert…, your Dad would have been so proud. If he could have seen what you’ve made of yourself, all the mistakes, all behind you now.’

Upstairs, Robert kept his hand on the bedroom door handle, feeling the polished shape of it under his palm. Another hand would have rested there, countless times, a kaleidoscope of going out and coming back, until that last day. That day there would have been a hurriedly packed bag, a one-way ticket to Paris, the room, abandoned, echoing with the clatter of footfalls running down the stairs and into the hallway. Then silence.

He looked round at the dark furniture, the double bed. There was an oval mirror on a stand and a tall chest of drawers, on top of it a single white fossil. He picked it up and turned it, tracing the chalky surface with his thumb, then placed it down again carefully.

There were pale ring stains from spilt tea in the lacquer on the bedside table. Robert sat down on edge of the bed and put out his fingers, feeling the satin of the bed cover, then he opened the top drawer, narrowing his eyes.

It was half empty, just about all of it fit only for the bin; deodorant, an obsolete nokia, some petrol receipts, a single rusty razor blade.
Robert swallowed.

There was a photograph too, of a younger Aaron, clean shaven, a chavy track suit. His hair was shorter than Robert had seen it. Robert picked the picture up. Aaron was holding a baby. You couldn’t see his face clearly, only the startling blue of his eyes reflecting from the cracked shiny surface of the polaroid.

Dropping it back in the drawer, he leaned down over the bed and pressed his nose against the pillow, breathing in.

At the knock, he stood quickly. It was Chas, with a saccharine smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

‘Everything to his lordship’s liking then?’

Robert opened his hands, looking anywhere but back into her eyes, ignoring her tone.

‘Yeah, yeah.’

It was the first time they’d been alone since he’d arrived with Vic and Adam.

‘Didn’t think I’d see the day when you’d grace us with your presence again, especially not after you sent your wife on her own when we were all expecting you. You really let Diane down that time, you know, not that I was surprised, or sorry.’

‘Well, I’m here now, aren’t I?’

‘More’s the pity.’

He’d never known her well, but there’d been a time when they’d been civil enough with each other. She’d even been a bit flirty with him once upon a time, back in the day, before the stuff with Katie, then Debbie. He could vaguely recollect her at Andy and Katie’s wedding, he had a feeling that Aaron might have been there, just a child at the time, which was weird.

He ran a hand down over his face.

‘You see, what I don’t get is why you didn’t say owt, about Aaron? You could have told Diane that he was alright or something, put all of our minds at rest, but you didn’t. Suppose we should have known. When has Robert Sugden ever cared about anyone, except Robert Sugden?’

‘I honestly didn’t know who he was, not at first.’

‘Then after that, when you did?’

He saw it then, her eyes glancing around the room. He wondered how often she came up here, missing her son.

‘He’s alright then?’ She asked finally. She wasn’t looking at him now. It must have taken an effort to ask.

Robert tilted his head and sighed.

‘Yeah.’

She hovered, then turned at the door to go.

‘He misses here, he misses you.’ Robert said quietly to her back, ‘he makes out like he’s OK, but
he’s homesick.’

Chas turned back, looking into his eyes. He looked away.

‘… but then, I really don’t know him so well, he was just the au pair after all, and now, not even that. So ask Adam, Vic, see what they say. Excuse me, will you? It’s been a long day.’

She hesitated a moment longer.

‘Don’t think about touching his stuff.’

‘Why would I? He’s nothing to me.’

When she’d gone, Robert sank down again onto the bed. He shouldn’t have come at all. But he was there for a reason so he’d do what he came for, and then leave, and after that he’d never need to set foot in that place again.

Aaron leaned until his arms were resting against the tiled walls of the shower, and let his forehead press against them. He closed his eyes as Emile worked the soap into a lather over his back, massaging the tight muscles either side of his spine.

They’d had a big break up job at the scrapyard. He’d gone at it with a hammer, and now he could feel the soreness ebbing away under the hot water. But it wasn’t just the job; saying goodbye to Adam and Vic again, and knowing Robert was going to Emmerdale, it had felt like another weight falling on him.

‘Why would he go?’ He’d asked Emile at the yard, taking off the hi viz jacket and hanging it up in the cabin after the job was done.

Emile had shrugged from his desk, watching his face.

‘Why do you care?’

Now Emile moved the soap downwards, kneading against the knots in his back with his thumbs until Aaron shifted slightly with the pain.

Emile grinned.

‘Viens, hard guy ! Cela n'a pas fait mal, n'est-ce pas ?’

Aaron smiled into his forearm, tilting his head sideways to speak.

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Bien!’ Emile stood back, and slapped his rump. ‘Then keep still.’

Aaron shuffled, his skin smarting pleasantly, opening his thighs a little wider. His balls felt tight, wet with the soap that had slipped down over his back, and yes, he wanted Emile to touch him there, and what would happen after that.

‘What time do we need to leave?’
‘Nous pouvons être en retard.’

They were going to Ed’s engagement party. It was good news, Aaron was glad for him, even if it was a bit of a shock when he’d first heard. That Ed had finally managed to move on and find his happy ending.

‘Surprised you, being all ancient like, didn’t get hitched by now.’ He said to Emile, teasing, his mouth still pressed half up against his arm.

There was an awkward silence, then Emile put the soap down on the tray.

‘There was someone. We were together ten years, I thought we always would be. I bought this place, for him, for us. He died two years ago.’

Aaron turned and reached a hand gently to his wrist, the water suddenly sounding loud as it splashed onto the porcelain floor under their feet.

‘I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. How…? If it’s private then you don’t…’

‘It’s OK. He slept with other men, but he was careless. He wasn’t always safe. He contracted the HIV virus and then one day the drugs, they just stopped working. The infection grew in the muscles of the heart, it was very quick, in the end.’

‘Oh my God! That’s, that’s awful!’

‘It’s OK.’

Emile turned off the water, reaching for the bath towels.

‘Life goes on.’

Robert slipped off his jacket and unfastened the top button of his shirt, leaning back in his first-class seat with a sigh of relief as the train finally pulled out of St. Pancreas station on its way to Paris.

He’d done what he came to do, Leeds and London, and now, he was going home.

_Home_, that was the word he was telling himself. But then why was he already planning to spend the night at the apartment that he’d rented? The place he’d thought of as a hideaway for himself and Aaron before he’d acted like such an idiot, and Aaron had given up on him.

He raised his curled fingers to his lips and looked out at the fast vanishing cityscape rushing by.

He had to close his eyes. It was so, so dangerous this feeling, the memories trying to force themselves into his mind as raw as they’d ever been. This was what he got for coming back.

This was where Josh was born, and this was where he’d abandoned him, going to Paris to marry Chrissie when he’d found out she was pregnant with Doli. But he’d come back for him, hadn’t he, when his mother had died? Fighting a custody battle, and then taking him back to be a part of his family. A proper family. He’d been trying so hard.

His phone rang, and he picked it up, grateful for the distraction. He’d been expecting a call back from Giles about the contract for Les Jardins de Courances, but when he looked at his screen, he frowned.
It was Christine, the new au pair.

For a fleeting moment, he felt annoyed, wondering why she wasn’t calling Chrissie, then his heart accelerated at the thought that something serious might have happened.

When he answered, it wasn’t Christine on the line, after all.

‘Daddy?’

‘Josh? Has something happened? Are you ill? Where’s Christine?’

It was too many questions and Josh didn’t reply, so he spoke again, more gently.

‘Josh, love, just give the phone to Christine… if you’re ill … let me talk to her.’

‘She’s upstairs with Doli. I’m not ill.’

Robert breathed out, turning now to the window, as the speeding train approached the countryside at last.

‘Why are you calling me then?’

‘My hair needs cutting. My teacher told me.’

Robert looked at his watch.

‘Look, I’ll be back in Paris soon, I’ll take you myself, OK? Tomorrow?’

‘You don’t know Jeffrey, though.’

‘We’ll go to my barber.’

Josh was quiet.

‘I love you, Josh.’

‘Are you in England? Why didn’t you take me with you?’
‘I’ll take you next time.’ Robert lied.

Robert’s fingers hovered over the contacts in his phone as the train hurtled forwards under the darkening sky. Soon they’d be entering the channel tunnel and then Paris. It was meant to have been the place where he could leave behind the past, his fresh start. But he’d made a mess of everything all over again. He put his phone down, and closed his eyes.

Aaron moved his hand to the towel around his waist, tucking it in more securely, then picked up the new white shirt, unwrapping it from the cellophane. He pulled out the pins at the collar, shook it out then pulled it on over his shoulders, fastening up the front buttons starting at the top and working down.

He should iron it first really, he knew his Mum would have complained about the creases. He’d never been quite comfortable in a shirt. He remembered the way Robert had looked at him that day in the café when he’d come from the interview, and later, in the apartment where they’d never really stayed, the way his breath had sounded so loud, and the blackness of his eyes as he’d undone each button, one by one.

The cuffs had awkward fastenings, and he stood struggling with them.

Looking up over his shoulder, he saw Emile watching him through the open door from where he stood against the kitchen counter, already dressed in suit pants and a dress shirt of his own, tight under the shoulder and around the biceps.

Emile lowered his coffee from his lips.

‘Come here. I’ll help you fasten those.’

So Aaron turned and walked into the living room towards him, then held out his arm while the older man frowned over the buttons.

‘I’m sorry.’ Aaron murmured looking down at Emile’s hands.

‘They can be difficult. It’s the starch and the buttons holes are small.’

‘No, I mean, asking…before, about…you know…’

He watched Emile’s head bent over his sleeve. He spoke without looking up.

‘Ce n’est pas un problème, Aaron, vraiment!’

But all at once Aaron was crying. Emile, noticing, raised a hand to his chin, pulling up his face, while Aaron looked away as the tears started to fall down his cheeks.

‘What? Aaron?’

‘I’m so sorry. I just… I can’t think of you going through all that.’

‘Non, non, non, mon cheri! Sshhh! It’s OK. My life, my grief.’

‘I know how hard it is. I lost someone, too. And it’ll get you sometimes, I remember, I’d think I was fine and then one thing, one small thing and I could feel it, you know, getting the better of
Emile pulled him close, wrapping his arms around him tightly, and they stood like that for a moment.

When they pulled apart, Emile wiped a thumb down over the tears on Aaron’s cheeks.

‘People die. Everyone dies eventually. We have to accept it, non? And yes, it’s hard when it’s someone you love, but the good times, they never leave you, you never lose them, not in here.’

He placed his fingers against the white shirt at Aaron’s chest.

‘Was it why? With Lucas. Why you ended it? The lies? Were you worried or something?’ Aaron asked.

He saw the frown on Emile’s face, but instead of an answer, Emile leaned forward and kissed him.

Aaron opened his mouth, closing his eyes, kissing him back, so that their tongues circled, his body, already aroused in the shower, quick to flare back into desire.

This time, neither of them mentioned being late to Ed’s party.

Instead Emile’s fingers slipped around the towel at Aaron’s waist, looking for the fold, then finding it, he tugged it away and it slid down onto the floor at their feet.

Aaron felt Emile’s hands stroke down over his bare skin and cup around his arse cheeks, his fingers slipping into his crack as they panted into the kiss.

Then Emile took a step back, unfastening his belt, lowering the zip of his trousers, pushing them down to his knees. When they moved close again, their warm skin and the hard length of their cocks rubbed against each other, tangled with the cotton of their shirt tails.

Then Emile spoke.

‘Attends!’

He kicked off his trousers and went to the bedroom, returning quickly with a condom and lube.

Maybe he saw the expression on Aaron’s face, because he spoke again.

‘I’m not positive. You would know, yes? And I think you know I would have told you. I had money, I took drugs to stop that happening, and we were always, always safe.’

‘Course.’

He stroked a thumb over Aaron’s face.

‘You still want to?’

‘I want to.’

Emile held Aaron’s hips and turned him, so that his elbows rested against the kitchen counter. He felt the cold sensation of lube, Emile’s fingers lingering as they padded against his rim, giving him time to relax and open up.

He could feel Emile’s sheathed cock now, pressing against his lubed entrance.
‘Don’t mess the shirt up, eh?’ He added, with a half-smile over his shoulder. Then Emile started pushing gradually inside him, and his eyes were closing as he breathed out air through his lips. His cock grew harder as Emile filled him, stretching him wide, firing him up. Emile reached round, circling the base of his cock with his fingers still sticky from the lube, then sliding smoothly up and down his length and over his head, until he was throbbing.

He let go then, and holding Aaron’s hips went fast and deep, thrusting harder and harder. Aaron spread his hands on the kitchen counter, head bent, eyes screwed shut, gasping as he got close.

It would be so easy to love him, everything, everything was good, he was good, the sex was good. But it was always there, in his head, doing him in. Robert. Why couldn’t it compare? Not the burn, not his racing heart?

He wondered where Robert was in Emmerdale, why had he gone at all, after avoiding it for so long? Emile had stopped moving, buried all the way inside him, then he slowly started to pull back so that Aaron could feel the ridge of his cock head sliding down over his sensitive nerves. He was at the edge, waiting, all the heat pooling now.

‘Es-tu pret?’ Emile murmured.

His cock head was poised just inside Aaron’s entrance. He reached his hand round once more. Just a light touch of his fingers on his balls, then he moved them up over Aaron’s cock again. Aaron hummed, trying to find his voice.

‘Now.’ He managed to say.

Emile nodded.

There was the sensation of Emile’s length slamming back deep inside him, and he let himself go, spinning dizzily over the edge, his muscles tightening over and over around the older man’s cock as he listened to him swear in French. Then his cock jacked, spraying cum in waves, painting the side of the kitchen counter, then running over his length and thigh.

After, Emile rested against him, stroking his hands down over his shoulders and arms. Aaron turned back to face him, and they smiled at each other, chests still heaving.

Emile gestured.

‘We spoilt your shirt after all. Borrow one of mine.’

Robert heart beat ricocheted in his rib cage. His hands were wet. As he opened his eyes in the dark, he could feel the sticky heat under his armpits. It had been the sound of his own voice that had woken him, saying a name aloud, now just an echo in his head. He looked around the carriage, wondering if the other passengers had heard him.

He knew the dream well enough.

This was what he got for going back. Just like the last time, when he’d seen his father’s coffin lowered into the ground, watching from a safe distance, knowing that it was the last goodbye and not even that, because he’d never have that, would he?

He hadn’t hung around, then, but after, he’d started having the dreams again, waking, kicking out in the night. Chrissie would get mad at him for it. It had happened once with Aaron, too, that week
they’d stayed together. He’d woken in the dark with Aaron’s eyes watching him, the cool palm of his hand held up against his chest, waiting, like he might do with Josh after a nightmare, for his breathing to steady.

‘You alright?’ He’d asked across the pillow.

‘Yeah. You?’ Robert had answered.

‘You kicked me a couple of times, but no damage done. Was it a dream?’

Robert had reached a hand to his face.

‘This is the dream.’ He’d whispered with a smile, before moving in for a kiss. He could still taste it.

No one could know, not even Aaron, the mess in his head, that nineteen-year old, bawling his eyes out in the middle of the empty road, with the smell of burning petrol and the dry fields of the moorlands beyond.

He’d stood there, bleating, hadn’t he, wanting with all his being for his father to say he didn’t mean it, that he wanted him to stay, whatever he’d done, whoever he was. But it didn’t matter what he wanted.

And Andy was there, too, his own brother, just letting it happen.

He used to cry easily in those days, he’d cried over Mum, over Katie, over Dad getting shot, and then that day, he’d cried himself blind. He told himself it was with anger, at the injustice. He’d parked up eventually in a layby in the dark, his ribs hurting. Then he’d told himself he was done with crying, he wasn’t going home again, he’d told himself that instead, he’d prove them all wrong.

He wiped his hand down over his face.

Since then, he hadn’t cried, and he hadn’t called Emmerdale home.

He wasn’t like Aaron, was he? Aaron wouldn’t be truly happy until he was back.

A steward came by, taking orders for drinks and food.

‘Just a whiskey, a double, no ice.’

‘Stay away from my son.’ Chas had said.

Diane had gone in search of Andy, wanting him to say goodbye, as if Robert cared, and so they were alone in the backroom at the Woolpack.

You can’t keep secrets in Emmerdale, Robert of all people knew that, so he also knew the best policy whenever you wanted to hide something was to do it plain sight. Vic hadn’t said anything except about the au pair job. But everyone had questions about Aaron, so he’d answered them, keeping it simple.

Then he’d overheard Chas and Adam, waiting at the door in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs.

‘He can’t stand him.’ Adam had said.
‘Why?’ Chas had asked.

‘I’ve no idea. I mean he’s a bit of a smug pratt, admittedly, but I dunno, Vic loves him.’

‘Well, it’s not like Aaron needs a reason. He’s a weasel. Always was. And people like him don’t change.’

She’d never been one to mince her words, maybe where Aaron had got it from, saying things as he saw them, or not saying anything, not saying I love you after that first time, even though Robert wanted to hear it, before he’d wrecked it.

So now she was warning him off.

‘You are aware that the population of Paris is over ten million? Why on earth would I wanna see him?’

‘Just make sure you don’t.’

The train raced on towards Paris.

Robert picked up his phone.

Emile was bargaining with a bloke who’d brought in a car to be scrapped.

Aaron took off his gloves and wiped his oil streaked face with a frown, trying to follow the French. He thought it was all going alright, until Emile shrugged and turned away, and the man got back in his car, clearly irritated, and with a quick rev of the engine, drove hastily away.

He watched Emile’s back as he walked towards the office. He’d been like this since the party, closed off, distracted. Aaron wondered if it was because of what they’d talked about, maybe old memories had resurfaced, painful memories. Or maybe it was about seeing Lucas there.

He’d been a bit shocked when he’d seen him. He’d lost weight and more than that, there was something haunted about him, like the confidence had been knocked out of him somehow. Aaron had said hello, but Lucas had barely heard him. Later he’d seen Emile approach him and they’d exchanged words, but he hadn’t heard what they’d said, and then Lucas had left shortly after, and Emile hadn’t said anything to Aaron about it.

Maybe he should have asked.

He started to follow Emile inside, when his phone vibrated, and laying down his gloves on the steps to the cabin, he fished it out of the pocket of the jogging pants he wore to work in.

It was a text message. From Robert.

He blinked at the screen.

Send me the number of your barber. Josh wants a haircut.

That was it. It was ridiculous that it could make his heart quicken.

He read it, and reread it, as if he was trying to find more, something, anything in the words. He wondered where Robert was, his eyes, his mouth as he typed.
He drew in a breath, looking around the yard, then turned back to his phone and searched for Jeffrey’s number. For a while he deliberated over the answer.

Sure

...he typed finally, and then pasted the number. Then scrunching up his eyes for a moment, he pressed send.

He waited. A simple ‘thanks’ would have done, but this was Robert. He looked up to see Emile standing in the doorway at the top of the stairs.

‘Aaron, I need to go home, to Brittany, just for a few days or maybe a bit longer. My brother’s in some trouble. Come with me, if you want? I have a place there, a house with a garden, perhaps you’d like it, too? Getting away from the city? I’ll leave tomorrow.’

Aaron bit his lip, looking away. Maybe if Emile had asked a few minutes earlier, but now….

Emile nodded.

‘OK, then. Look, there’s a lot of work to do here anyway, you can hold the fort for me, until I get back.’

Josh sat on the seat in the barber’s, looking at his reflection in the mirror, eyes huge, his pale cheeks tinged with pink as he tried to force down the smile from the corners of his mouth.

Jeffrey held the length of his hair at both sides with his fingertips, tutting with disapproval.

‘Oh, my angel, who cut your hair? Why didn’t you come back to me sooner?’

Josh’s eyes moved sideways to his father. Robert was half perched on the seat next him, arms folded, long legs crossed at the ankles.

‘That would have been his child minder,’ he said.

Jeffrey slipped a pair of silver scissors from a velvet case.

‘And maybe we should persuade Dad to have a haircut, too, dear? What do you think?’ he addressed Josh.

The door opened with a rattle, and Aaron walked in. His hands were in the pockets of his hoodie, unfastened over a pale blue T-shirt over black jeans. Robert stood up. The pink from Josh’s cheeks spread down to his throat.

‘Look!’ Jeffrey beamed. ‘Now both your Dad’s are here, angel!’

It was Aaron’s turn to blush, but he kept on walking towards them, and hunkered down on the other side of Josh, touching his shoulder gently and smiling at him in the mirror.

‘Hiya! Missed you! You’re getting a haircut, then, eh?’

Josh reached out his hand and curled it into the material of Aaron’s hoodie, no longer able to keep the smile from breaking on his face. Then Jeffrey held his head, tilting it at an angle, and started work with the scissors.
Aaron stood up.

He nodded at Robert, his eyes sliding away from his face.

‘Alright?’

‘Yeah, yeah. I am now.’ Robert answered. ‘You?’

Aaron nodded, he spread his elbows.

‘So how was your trip?’

‘Good. Successful, I think. I’ll find out soon, I hope, anyway.’

‘So, it was business then?’

Aaron could feel Robert’s eyes on his face. Now it was all beginning to make sense. Of course, Robert would go back if it was work related. Why else would he? But they were talking, at least.

‘Yes. And, um, I saw your Mum by the way…’

Aaron looked down.

‘She’s well. She misses you.’ Robert said gently.

Jeffrey was humming as he snipped away at Josh’s hair. He stopped and broke into their conversation.

‘Aaron, dear. Persuade this angel’s father to have a haircut, too! Don’t you think he needs one?’

And all at once Aaron’s eyes were skimming over Robert’s blonde head, noticing the length of the locks falling on his forehead, touching the edge of his cheek bones, his neck.

He was blushing yet again.

‘I dunno. Looks alright to me.’ He swallowed. Jeffrey held his scissors poised in the air, and then returned to the task of trimming Josh’s hair with a chuckle.

Robert smiled. Aaron put his hands in the pockets of his hoodie, shaking his head as he tried not to smile back.

‘How about lunch after this?’ Robert said. ‘Josh would like that, if you think, if you have the time?’

Aaron looked at his watch.

‘I can’t, I’m sorry.’

‘Look. I know I did stuff, and it changed things but… We can get on now, can’t we? For Josh’s sake, cos he really wants to see you more, and I think you want that, too.’

‘Yeah, yeah. I do. Course I do. That’s not what I meant. I’ve just, I’ve got somewhere to be.’

On cue a car drove up outside, the engine running. Aaron glanced at it through the window. Emile was leaving for Brittany, he would drive Aaron to the yard and drop him there before going on his way.
Jeffrey put down his scissors and took a soft brush to dust away the blonde hair from Josh’s neck and shoulders.

‘Mate! You look amazing!’ Aaron said as Josh jumped down from the chair and looked at himself in the mirror again.

Then he turned to Aaron, and wrapped his arms around his middle, holding him tightly, as if he never wanted to let him go. Aaron hugged him back, pressing his mouth against his freshly cropped head of hair.

‘I’ll see you again, yeah? Soon. I promise. Give a kiss to Doli from me,’ Aaron said.

He glanced over one last time at Robert, before walking away, out of the door.

‘Was that’s Robert’s boy?’ Emile asked, as Aaron got into the passenger seat of the car and pulled on the seat belt.

Aaron wiped the back of his arm over his eyes. His heart was still thumping. It had gone so well. Robert had actually been … nice, normal, even.

‘That’s my little lad, yeah.’

‘But is it a good idea to see Robert at all? I thought we’d agreed. We’ve been through all this.’

‘Just keeping it simple.’

‘Aaron I’m going away and you might be better off keeping out of his way.’

‘Look. I told you. It’s over. It’s finished. It’s done. We don’t need to have this conversation. Really!’

Emile took hold of his hand and raised his fingers to his lips.

‘OK.’ He smiled.

When he dropped Aaron at the yard, he got out of the car and kissed Aaron’s cheeks goodbye, French style.

‘There’s one more job, it’s a drive out of Paris. It may take more than a day, but it’s good business, will you do it while I’m gone?’

‘Course.’

‘Good. The place is Les Jardins de Courances. I wrote everything down.’

‘Remind me again why we’re going?’

‘Because organic is the new agriculture. If we can sell them some of the smaller machinery, they’ll be a good reference, especially round Paris. The market is on the verge of an explosion, and we want to be leading it. I’m quoting you, of course.’

‘Nice to know you actually listen to what I say.’
Robert spoke with his eyes closed, but Giles could see the smirk of satisfaction round his mouth.
He imagined how Robert would bang after a successful business deal. No wonder he’d had
mistresses.

‘They dropped off the sample machinery yesterday, so what we need to do is take a tour, build the
strip-till so we can show them what it does, and then go over that and the other equipment. Then
we make an offer.’

Robert fumbled in the inner pocket of his leather jacket and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. He’d
had too much whiskey the night before, sitting in the dark after Chrissie had gone to bed. Now he
was paying the price.

By the time they’d hit the ring road, he was already asleep.

The château was in sight when Robert opened his eyes, a silver river in the distance. Giles had
been before so he knew his way around. He drove them past the visitor’s entrance, beyond the lake
and down towards the agricultural gardens, where a high, limestone wall seemed to stretch on
forever.

The Porsche rocked over the ground as the lane turned into a farmland track of grass and loose
stone, and then Giles turned and they were face to face with a rural farmhouse building that served
as the business office.

And then Robert saw it, parked up on the gravel drive way next to a Land Rover and other farm
vehicles. The pick-up truck. He knew who it belonged to. It was Emile’s. He remembered their
last encounter at the bottom of the stairs to his apartment, and felt his headache return with a force.
He glanced sideways at Giles. Even if Emile hated him, surely he wouldn’t out him. Someone who
prided himself on his holier than thou principles, he wouldn’t do that. But the day had suddenly got
worse.

They walked up the steps and into the entrance to the building, Robert with his hands in the
pockets of his leather jacket. The door opened into a classic rustic farm kitchen, looking nothing
like the office that Robert had expected.

But he barely noticed.

Aaron was leaning back against the kitchen sink, ankles crossed, wearing a white T-shirt with a hi-
viz vest open at the front, holding a mug of tea.

Chapter End Notes

There's not going to be any hiv positive plot btw. It's complicated enough as it is lol
The tension builds between Robert and Aaron as they work side by side at a location outside Paris, Josh is in trouble at school and causes a fight between Robert and Chrissie, Aaron checks on Lucas who is not doing well. The next day Robert and Aaron find themselves alone outdoors and in a sticky situation :) 

It felt like the first day of summer.

Robert was overdressed for the weather. He’d always liked to layer up. Andy used to laugh at him back when they were they were kids, when they worked together on the farm, side by side. Robert would get cold and bored, and slack off, leaving Andy to get on with the graft by himself.

‘If you put a bit of back into it, you’d soon feel warm enough!’ Andy would say.

Later he’d complain to Dad, then Mum would stick up for him, saying he was smart and meant for better things. But he’d see the expression in Dad’s eyes, the shake of his head.

‘Robert, why can’t you just…’

It was how so many of their conversations went, so he’d learnt to stop listening, even though he heard every word.

Today though, the weather had heated up rapidly since the early morning start. He could feel it in his pulse.

He shook off his leather jacket, and then his floral shirt, behind the half open door of the hallway.

As he unfastened the buttons, he bent his chin down over his chest, squinting in the semi darkness, his tongue touching against his lips, his skin damp with the humidity.

From the kitchen, he could hear muffled voices talking in French, Giles and the estate manager from the property, going over the plan for the day. He shrugged his shirt off his shoulders, leaving just the white T-shirt beneath, tugging at the light cotton, loosening it from where it clung to his skin, then he reached out a hand to take a pair of farm works overalls from the peg on the wall.

Something, a feeling, made him look up.

Aaron was watching him silently through the gap left by the door.

He froze, waiting, watching Aaron’s face as he scanned upwards over his body. Then their eyes met.

For a few seconds, Robert forced Aaron to hold his gaze.

The estate manager was opening a map, spreading it out on the table, pointing, still talking with Giles In French.
Robert looked into Aaron’s blue eyes as he stared back at him.

He saw him swallow, and then all at once, he lost him as he dropped his eyes, then turned his back, placing the mug he’d been drinking tea out of into the kitchen sink. Robert could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his neck and ears had colored.

He bent his head, stepping rapidly into the overalls, hiding a smile.

Aaron’s heart had skipped a beat when Robert walked in to the farmhouse kitchen at Les Jardins des Courante.

It was the shock of seeing him there, he’d told himself. It was just the last place he’d imagined they’d meet. And for once, Robert had looked as startled as he was.

‘What are you doing here?’ Robert made it sound like an accusation.

Aaron’s chin had gone up.

‘Scraping, mate, or I will be in a minute when I get started. What are you doing here, Robert?’

When he said his name, Robert turned back quickly to the man standing behind him, as if he’d only just remembered he was there. Aaron recognized the tiny flicker of fear on Robert’s face, the momentary alarm that he might be outed. Like everything with Robert, it just served to make him angrier, as if he’d ever do something like that, after everything they’d been through. He wasn’t worth it.

‘The champagne cream teas are up at the castle, you’ve come to the wrong place.’ Aaron added.

‘We’re here on business.’ Robert answered quietly.

Aaron scoffed, pushing out his lips, gesturing with the mug of tea in his hand.

‘Course you are.’

And then the estate manager had walked in. She’d been here when Aaron arrived earlier, so he’d already met her, but now there were new introductions and the talk had turned to work. As far as Aaron could tell, they were supplying machinery and had had some parts delivered ahead that they were going to assemble on site.

‘It’ll take a couple of days, I reckon.’ Robert said to her, his eyes resting on Aaron’s face. ‘Hope that fits in with your plans.’

Now, Aaron glanced over his shoulder to see Robert walk back into the room in green overalls. He shook his head, it bothered him, in his stomach, and he didn’t want to think about why.

He wondered how he could get away from there. Maybe he could say he’d forgotten something, some tools, or he could fake an emergency phone call, some reason, any reason to leave.

Robert’s work colleague went to put on some overalls too, and the manager left to get out the jeep. She’d be driving Robert and Giles down, while Aaron followed in the pick-up.

So, all at once they were alone in the kitchen and a quiet descended.
Robert stood at the other side of the long wooden table, blonde head bent over his phone.

Aaron fidgeted, pulling his work gloves from the pocket of his Hi-Viz vest, then tucking them back in again. Then he leaned on one hand against the kitchen counter, putting his other hand on his hip, and bent a booted leg, trying to look nonchalant. He wished he wasn’t wearing work clothes, he wished he’d shaved, trimmed his beard. He wished he was anywhere else, or Robert was anywhere else.

From the corner of his eyes he noticed him putting his phone back in his pocket, and he raised a finger, scratching at his neck, feeling the irritation getting the better of him.

He spoke rapidly so that his voice wouldn’t shake, trying to keep it light, tasting the spit on his tongue.

‘Why don’t you leave the graft to what’s his face, Giles, or whatever his name is? You can be on your way, back to your office and just do what you do all day when you’re there. You don’t need to be here. I mean, you’re not saying you’re actually going to do some manual labor?’

He could feel the color rising in his face, but his eyes flashed.

A smile played across Robert’s mouth.

‘What? You think I’m not up to it? With arms like these?’

Robert raised an arm, squeezing a bicep. Aaron snorted and shaking his head, he looked down.

‘I am the son of a farmer, you know. Where d’ya think I grew up?’ Robert leaned forwards towards him, resting his elbows against the back of a kitchen chair. Aaron rolled his eyes, but Robert lowered his voice.

‘Peel back the layers, I’m just a country boy at heart.’

‘What heart’s that then?’

He saw Robert look quickly towards the door, then back at him.

‘Drop the attitude, Aaron. I thought we’d got past all this.’

Aaron’s shoulders dropped. Robert was right, he was being an idiot. Wasn’t that what they’d agreed at the barbers with Josh, that it was time to move on?

He looked away again, then Giles appeared through the door.

There was a steep muddy incline down to the flat beds where the watercress would have grown as a crop. The ground looked black and wet with patches of water growing vegetation.

Aaron jumped out of the pick-up, and surveyed the old irrigation pipes, red with rust and overgrown with weeds and grass. They ran parallel to the bed, with smaller pipes running down and over the wet swampy earth at ninety degree angles.

At the far side, there was a grassy bank with a bridle path, and on the other side of that the river. The higher level of the river water was kept at bay by a wooden lock with gates and paddles, a little further down.
‘It’s safe, isn’t it?’ Aaron asked, unfastening the tail gate of the truck to get out tools for the scrapping.

The estate manager followed his eyes.

‘Don’t worry. It hasn’t been opened for years, not since the watercress beds stopped being cultivated. It’s probably silted up by now. But we’re excited to revive the crop,’ she added, turning to Robert. ‘We aim to become the main supplier for the Paris organic markets.’

Robert stood with his arms folded.

‘Bet you’re glad you’ve got your wellies.’ He smirked.

Aaron curled his lip.

‘The best idea would be to put some charcoal additives in the soil,’ Robert said turning back to the estate manager. ‘We can recommend some brands. It’ll make a big difference over the next few years, increase your yield.’

Aaron listened. In spite of himself, hearing Robert being so knowledgeable about the farming and the land, it impressed him.

Robert narrowed his eyes, looking at Aaron’s face.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Nothing.’

Aaron knew he was blushing again. He turned, hoisting a large pair of metal cutters from the back of the truck, but not before he saw the smug smile again, playing in Robert’s eyes. He felt a rush of heat through his body, not from the morning sun.

‘He’s been in a fight, Mrs. Sugden, so we think it would be best if you take him home for today.’

Chrissie scowled, holding the phone at a distance as she let out a sigh of frustration. Why did this have to happen when Robert was out of Paris? She looked at the time. In half an hour, she had a meeting with her accountant about profits at the new salon. She’d probably have to postpone it.

‘Surely this is something you can sort out, I mean, don’t you have a school counsellor or someone who can talk to him? We pay you enough money.’

She’d been through all this with Lachlan at his school, admittedly when he was a lot older, and for different reasons, but she did know how the system worked at least.

After a short silence, the teacher spoke again.

‘This isn’t the first time, in fact, it’s been going on for weeks now, and we’re concerned. For today it really would be best if you collect him.’

‘Oh, alright then. I’ll be there as soon as I can.’

‘Where’s my Dad?’ was the first thing Josh said when she arrived at the school.

‘Where do you think? He’s working, of course. You can’t expect him to come running after you
every time you get yourself in trouble.’ She’d spoken sharply, and then regretted it. She could see Josh’s swollen cheek, a ring of blood encrusted round his nostril. But then the teacher said Josh had started it.

As she walked him to the car she spoke again.

‘Look, if there’s something disturbing you, you know you can tell me?’

She cast about, trying to find a reason for this change in Josh’s behavior.

‘Is it Christine, the new au pair? Don’t you like her? Doli likes her.’

Josh didn’t answer. Then Chrissie remembered what Robert had said, about Josh walking in on Aaron at the apartment with a man.

‘Listen, your Dad told me you saw something at home, before Aaron left. Was it that? Did that upset you?’

Josh stood still suddenly, looking up at her silently.

Chrissie tried again.

‘Do you want to tell me what you saw?’

She waited, suddenly feeling like a good mother, that Robert would be pleased with her if he knew.

Josh opened his mouth.

‘Can I have ice cream when we get home?’

Chrissie sighed.

‘Just get in the car,’ she said.

‘You gonna just stand there watching? Or you gonna give us a hand?’

They were assembling the strip-till under the shade of a large tree on level land above the watercress beds.

‘Yeah, right.’

Robert had tied the top half of the overalls around his waist by the arms, his white T-shirt streaked in patches with oil, Aaron could make out the glow of his pale skin through the cotton, the darker shade of his nipples. He stood beside them in his long rubber boots, one hands pushed deep into the pockets of his working jogging pants while in the other he held a cup of tea from the flask he’d filled at the farm house.

‘On a break, mate. Got my own work to finish off, haven’t I?’

‘Skiving off, more like.’ Robert squinted up at him.

‘ Wouldn’t have had you down for this kind of work. Wouldn’t have thought you’d want to get your hands dirty.’
Robert leant back on his knees, the overalls stretching over his thighs.

‘Oh, I like to get dirty. Thought you’d have known that about me? By now.’

Aaron glanced at Giles, biting his lower lip, then hunkered down to help.

‘Let’s just crack on then.’

It was late afternoon when they packed up for the day. Back at the farmhouse, Aaron watched from the corner of his eyes as Robert lathered up with soap, bent over the kitchen sink, cleaning the oil and dirt from his hands and face. After, he turned and walked towards the hallway, through the half open door he saw him bending his elbows over his head as he tugged at the back of his T-shirt, pulling it off completely, so that Aaron could see the broad sweep of his pale back, his skin glistening in the shadows.

Giles was asking him something about the scrapping trade, but Aaron hadn’t heard a word he’d said.

‘Sorry, mate,’ he blushed, ‘Come again?’

Robert was fastening the buttons of his floral shirt as he walked back into the room.

‘Worth a few blisters, hey? Not that I’ve got any, bit too tough for all that.’

Aaron washed out the flask of tea, leaving it by the sink.

‘What do you say we, err, head down a bar when we get back in Paris? I reckon we’ve earned ourselves a couple of pints.’

Giles agreed.

‘Why not?’ Aaron answered and then grimaced.

Just mates, having a drink, where would be the harm in that? They’d moved on, hadn’t they? Wasn’t that what Robert had said? He tried to ignore the signals his body was sending him.

Robert handed Giles the keys to the Porsche and he went out the door, then Robert picked up his leather jacket, hanging it over his arm.

They’d had a good day, a really good day, Aaron thought, and tomorrow might be the same.

‘I think I’ll give that drink a miss,’ he said suddenly.

Robert stopped and stared back at him.

‘Why? You worried what Emile’s going to say?’

‘I just don’t need the hassle.’

‘It’s not like we’ll be doing anything wrong.’

Aaron looked at the floor.

‘See ya tomorrow, Robert.’
Robert pushed his hands in the pockets of his jeans and nodded.

‘Alright, tomorrow.’ He said softly. And then he was gone.

The scent of paprika drifted into the living area where Josh lay on his stomach on the sofa, wrinkling his nose, an arm trailing over the side against the rug, watching a rugby match on TV, blinking as his eyes grew heavy.

Christine was putting Doli to bed, but he’d refused to go up, and Robert had persuaded Chrissie to let him hang on a bit longer until the match was over. He’d poured him a tall glass of milk, and placed it on the coffee table, moving it closer.

There was a scratch across Josh’s cheek, just under his eye. The skin shone around it and Robert guessed it must be sore. Robert knew he needed to make an appointment, go in and talk to his teacher about it, but not now; now he had other things on his mind.

Chrissie took a large mouthful of wine, sitting at the kitchen table, regarding her husband from behind as he stood at the stove. She moved her mouth sideways, he looked pretty pleased with himself. He must have done something, made some money, finalized some spectacular business deal. She stroked her painted finger nails over her cleavage, and her diamond rings caught the evening sunlight from the long window onto the kitchen, with a view over Paris to the heights of the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

Robert turned and raised his eyebrows at her.

‘Let me taste, then.’ She laughed, standing up and moving behind him. He held the wooden spoon to her lips.

‘Mm. Goodness!’ She coughed, laughing, taking a large gulp from her wine glass.

‘Well, I hope you’ve cooked plenty of rice!’

‘I thought you liked it fiery!’ Robert said turning back to the pan.

Chrissie put a hand on his shoulder from behind, stroking down against his back. He was horny, she could tell. It seemed a while since he’d been in this kind of mood.

‘You know I do.’

She tugged at his shoulder until he turned his head again to look back at her.

‘What’s got into you, hey?’

There was a dull thud from the living area. They both looked towards the living room, then Chrissie frowned, walking through the open door to find the milk soaking into the rug where it had spilled, the glass on its side, still rolling.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, child! Why can’t you be more careful, for once?’ Chrissie snapped at Josh. He sat up, eyes heavy lidded surveying the mess that he’d made.

She pouted at Robert, still standing at the entrance to the kitchen, with a tea towel over his shoulder.

‘This is your fault! I told you he should have gone to bed. Now look what he’s done?’
'It’s only milk.’ Robert answered.

Chrissie turned back to Josh sternly.

‘Go to bed!’

‘The rugby...’

‘I said go to bed!’

‘Chrissie...’

‘Either you want me to be a parent, or you don’t. Make your mind up, Robert! Go to bed, now! When will you ever do as you’re told?’

Josh stood, swaying slightly on his feet.

Robert stepped into the room.

‘Come here! I’ll take you up.’ He reached out his arms and lifted his son up. Josh wrapped his arms around his father’s neck, closing his eyes as he let his head fall onto his shoulder.

‘I saw Ed. He scored a try.’ He muttered. ‘He’s getting married to his boyfriend. They said on TV.’

Chrissie rolled her eyes.

‘Aaron ruined that child.’

Robert paused, on his way to the stairs.

‘How? Because he’s gay?’

He should be tired. He’d stopped off at the corner market to pick up bread and eggs, queuing behind a long line of tourists, brought out by the hot weather, and now he was taking the stairs two at a time on his way up to the apartment, his fingertips touching lightly against the banister rail as he passed.

He’d quite liked it those first few days after Emile had left, having the apartment to himself. He’d crack open a beer from the fridge and sprawl in shorts and bare feet, with his legs up on the sofa, remote in his hand, watching the sport on TV, unwashed dishes left waiting in the sink.

When he went to bed he’d spread out, still with Emile’s comfortable scent lingering on the sheets, his checked flannel shirt hanging on a hook behind the door.

In the mornings, when the alarm had gone off, he’d lain there on his back in the quiet, looking up at the ceiling, trying to ignore Emile’s voice in his head, speaking in French, coaxing him up and out for a morning run.

Then after a few days, the novelty of being on his own had worn off.

But tonight, it was different. He placed his key in the lock, and went in, dropping his bag by the door. He took a glass from a cupboard and opened the fridge, finding a bottle of water, then drank it down quickly.
The air in the apartment was hot and stuffy, so he paced over to the window, opened it, then closed it again against the noise from the cafés below. There was an air conditioner, but Aaron didn’t know where the remote was. There was nobody home, so he put a hand to his waist, slipping off his jogging pants, then he pulled his T-shirt up over his head, letting it drop on the floor. He stroked a hand upwards over his stomach, as he went back to the fridge for a beer this time and sank down on the sofa, feeling the texture of the upholstery against the back of his thighs as he reached forwards for the remote and switched on the TV.

He slid a hand absently inside the waistband of his boxer briefs and fiddled with his cock as he zapped through the channels, looking for the international sports. Then, all at once, he was full on hard. He moved his hand, biting down on his lower lip. He didn’t want to do this. He definitely didn’t want to do this. He closed his eyes.

He could see Robert, Robert in those overalls on his knees, his white T-shirt smeared with dirt as his long fingers turned the wrench around the titanium screws as he worked on the strip till. His arms getting pink from the sun, freckles spreading across his damp skin.

Aaron put both his hands up over his face and breathed. He didn’t want to do this. His boxers tented over his erection. He moved his hand down again stroking up over his balls through the material.

Then his phone rang.

‘Emile? Ca va?’

He stood quickly, walking over towards the dining table, then backing away from the window, pacing the room.

He was going to ask him about the job at Les Jardin Des Courances, course he was.

‘Oui, et tu vas bien, Aaron?’

‘Yeah Everything’s fine. I’m fine.’

Would he tell him? About Robert being there?

‘Listen, I need you to do something for me.’

‘Sure. What is it?’

‘I got a call from Lucas, il ne semblait pas normal, et quand j’ai essayé de rappeler, il n’a pas répondu. Would you go around to Mat’s for me. Just to check on him?’

‘Course. You mean now?’

‘Well, it doesn’t have to be now, but soon? This evening?’

‘I need a shower, and then I’ll go.’

‘Thank you. I think, maybe, I should have listened sooner.’

When Robert came down, Chrissie could see he’d changed into a short sleeved polo, his showered hair touching the collar. He didn’t look at her. Instead, he picked up the keys to the red Porsche and started walking towards the door.
'Where are you going?'

'Out.'

'I thought we were eating?'

'That was before.'

'I’m just trying to be a good parent. I thought that was what you wanted?’ She called after him.

‘If you wanted to be a parent, you’d have filled these in by now!’

Robert picked up the adoption registration papers from the hall table, and slammed them back down in disgust.

‘If you don’t want to be a proper family, Chrissie, just what is the point?’ He spread his hands, then turning to the door, he let himself out.

‘This is a surprise! What are you doing here?’

Matheo opened the door and stood aside, letting him in. Aaron was struck by the familiar faint smell of cognac and linseed oil as he stepped into the studio. Just being there brought back an almost physical recollection of the times he’d spent there previously, only now, it felt sordid somehow, so that his stomach churned, and he wanted to get away.

As he looked around, he frowned. The place had changed.

‘Are you not painting, anymore?’

The canvases, easels and acrylic paints had all gone. The ceiling to floor windows, that had made the studio feel like a goldfish bowl, were now covered in dark blinds, so that the natural daylight that Matheo had relied on for his afternoon portrait painting was blotted out, replaced by electricity, and Aaron noted tall umbrella lamps on stands, angled around a new leather couch in the center of the room. Following the angle of the couch Aaron saw a table, whatever was on it covered by a large green tarpaulin.

Matheo followed his eyes.

‘What’s…?’ Aaron swallowed. ‘You’re making films?’

They both knew what was going on.

‘Art house, mon cheri, I wanted to experiment.’

‘Course you did.’

He felt the sick feeling in his stomach grow. He couldn’t wait to get out of there now.

‘Where’s Lucas? Emile was asking.’

Aaron saw Matheo glance towards the bedroom. He’d promised Emile, so he couldn’t let him down. He walked over to the room and opened the door. Lucas was asleep on the bed, the sheet bunched around his waist as he lay on his side facing away from the door, he could see the shadow of his ribcage through his back and frowned.
‘Lucas!’ Aaron called his name gently, while Matheo came up and stood at his shoulder behind him.

Lucas turned, opening his eyes, regarding Aaron blankly and then shifted his gaze to Matheo.

‘You alright? Emile, he’s... he’s worried about ya, mate.’

‘Say hello to Aaron, Lucas.’ Matheo said.

Lucas blinked sleepily, then tugged the sheet away and stood, naked, swaying slightly. Aaron looked away, embarrassed. Matheo put an arm around Lucas, who leaned his head down sideways until it rested on his shoulder. He was taller than Mat, but his broad frame looked fragile now beside the artist.

‘Why are you here?’ he asked Aaron.

Aaron shook his head.

‘Just checking you’re OK.’

‘Why?’

From the corner of his eyes, Aaron could see Mat’s hand stroking over the side of Lucas’s hip to the top of his thigh.

‘Look. You could come back with me, to Emile’s. You don’t have to stay here.’

Lucas wet his lips.

‘You took him from me, you keep him.’

Aaron pulled in his chin.

‘That’s not what ha...’

‘Why don’t you go now?’ Matheo said.

Aaron closed his eyes.

‘Look, mate, call Emile. He wants to help you.’ Aaron sighed, and then turned and left.

Robert waited in the car outside Emile’s apartment, the engine turning lightly. There were no lights on. Were they out, or had they just turned in for an early night? Would Aaron be sleeping now on the sofa?

He could call him or text. He tugged at his lips with the side of his fingers. Would it be better to wait? What if Aaron pushed him away? He needed to see what the next day would bring. Some things were worth waiting for, Aaron was worth waiting for. He breathed. And this time he would get it right. He wouldn’t wreck it ever again.

Late afternoon the next day, the sun was still warm and casting dappled shadows through the trees onto the ground where Robert and Giles were bent over the assembly of more farm equipment.
Aaron was once again standing over them.

Robert grinned, half addressing Giles.

‘Been slacking off all day, this one. Glad we’re not paying him.’

‘Yeah, right, mate, if you say so.’

Aaron tossed out the dregs of his tea and screwed the cup back on the flask. He hesitated, then lifted a hand and pointed.

‘You, err, just dropped one of those nuts into that gear box, by the way, be tricky that, getting it out again.’

He saw the frown on Robert’s face and then he swore.

‘Don’t help, will you?’ He snapped.

‘I won’t.’ Aaron winked.

He turned back towards the watercress bed. He could feel Robert’s eyes on him, on his hips, so he walked deliberately, adding a saunter to his step, conscious of his whole body as he moved. At the incline, he paused for half a second, then took a run down the slope, heels in the mud, until he was in the flatbed again, and picking up his tools from a tarpaulin sheet he’d laid out earlier, he went back to breaking up the pipes.

When he looked up again, Robert and Giles had stood up and were talking, gesturing at the machinery, Robert looked at his watch, then nodded and Aaron saw Giles walk away.

They were alone.

Aaron shifted his boots in the wet black earth under his feet. The air had thickened after the heat of the afternoon, and a quiet descended. Robert was sat cross legged next to the machinery, head bent, he hadn’t even glanced in Aaron’s direction. Aaron spat as a cloud of insects, drifting in the humid air, hit his face. He ran a gloved hand over his mouth, and then squinted up at the sky and looked around. He wasn’t going to finish today. He threw the cutters down on the tarpaulin and taking off his gloves, set off towards the incline.

Robert didn’t look up, but he called out, raising his voice from where he was sitting.

‘You done, then?’

‘Yeah! I guess so. It’s gonna need another day.’

‘How about that drink then? I know you didn’t want to, yesterday, but, why not today?’

Aaron had reached the bottom of the incline. He couldn’t see Robert now. It was always tricky going up over the mud, he’d worked out that it helped to go quickly and at an angle.

His foot caught in a root, and he tripped, landing face down into the muddy slope.

For a moment he just lay there, panting, swearing softly under his breath.

Then he slid his hands down over the shiny mud, until they were parallel with his chest, and pressing his palms deeper against the sticky surface, he levered his chest up off the ground, and looked down at himself in disbelief.
His nose and chin, arms, Hi-Viz and the exposed central section of his T-shirt were coated in silvery black slime. Even his working joggers.

He felt a shadow fall over him, and raised his chin and then his eyebrows, looking up.

Robert was standing there looking at him, his jaw dropped, eyes wide, frozen with amazement. Aaron blinked back at him, and then suddenly Robert’s face changed and Aaron watched him tight lipped as he started to laugh.

‘Alright, show’s over mate. Just, give me a hand up then, will ya?’

‘Not sure! Think I need a photo first. This is priceless.’ Robert took out his phone from his overall pockets.

‘Yeah well, when you’ve quite finished.’

Aaron stretched out a hand, shaking it impatiently in the air. Robert zipped his phone back into his pocket and took it. He wrapped his fingers around Aaron’s, placing his thumb over his knuckles, and for a second they were still like that. It was the first time they’d touched for weeks. Aaron felt his heart pounding suddenly, hearing the rush in his ears. And then, with a twitch of his nose, he leered up at Robert and pulled.

There was that moment when it could have gone either way, and then gravity kicked in, and Robert was losing his footing.

‘Aaron! Aaron! AARON!’

He flew for a moment, then landed on his back, sliding down the mud, trying to break his progress down the incline with his hands.

He came to a halt looking utterly shocked, blinking up at Aaron who was still on his knees in the mud beside him.

Until he found his voice.

‘What the f…?’

And Aaron kissed him.

He pressed his mouth hard, down against Robert’s, leaned back for breath, then kissed him again.

Robert lifted his arms, moving his hands to hold onto Aaron’s face.

As they breathed out, tasting each other properly for the first time in weeks, they both closed their eyes. Aaron could hear the tiny hitches from Robert’s throat as they kissed. He tried not to smile, but Robert was smiling too, and their lips spread and teeth bumped together as a chuckle rolled and escaped from their joined mouths.

Then Robert, with a soft growl, tumbled Aaron over onto his back.

A black bird sang loudly.

For a moment, Robert waited. Aaron’s cheeks and beard and clothes were still streaked with mud which had smeared onto Robert’s face. Then their eyes moved to each other’s lips again, and Robert pressed down into another kiss, while Aaron slipped his muddy hand up around his neck, and tangled his fingers into his hair, holding on tight.
They circled their mouths, their tongues caressing deeper and stronger.

Aaron pushed Robert back by the chest and started to tug the overalls down over his shoulders and arms, waiting as he slipped on his knees in the mud, half laughing through his staggered breath. When he'd regained his balance, Aaron reached up to the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it off in a single fluid movement over his head.

He placed his hands on Robert’s pale skin at his waist, stroking with his fingertips, then moved his hands round to the front of his body, up over his belly to the curve of his chest.

He pressed his mouth against Robert’s lips again, breathing him in, pushing up hard against him with his hips, raising them from the ground.

‘Turn over,’ he croaked.

Robert was leaning over him on his knuckles in the mud. For a moment, he looked around. Anyone could see them, not from the field above, but from the bridle path by the river. They’d seen people sometimes walking there while they worked, twitchers with binoculars and fancy cameras.

‘Turn over, Robert.’ Aaron repeated gently.

Robert turned, and Aaron, blinking, shifted onto his knees again, feeling the damp mud through the material of his trousers.

He leaned over Robert, tugging the overalls further down, over his hips to his jeans underneath. Then he reached his hands round Robert’s waist to his front and unfastened his belt, and buttons and pulled down his jeans, releasing his cock, and exposing Robert’s solid swaying arse in front of him.

For a moment Aaron just knelt, looking at him, jeans and overalls bunched below his thighs above his knees, the white curve of his arse cheeks glowing in the sunshine, mud smeared over his neck and in his hair.

Then he stripped off his Hi-Viz jacket and pulled off his mud coated T-shirt, tossing it aside.

He worked down his own trousers and boxer briefs to his knees with his thumbs.

Then he placed his hands over each of Robert’s arse cheeks, painting black stripes as he moved his fingers down, and with his thumbs he parted his crack.

‘Fuck.’ Robert gasped, turning his head back over his shoulder.

Aaron blew air from his cheeks. His cock was so hard it was pulsing in the air, leaking beads of liquid as it swayed in front of him.

He needed to shuffle back, but his knees skidded on the slippery slope and he moved his hands to grab onto Robert’s waist, stopping the slide. He pushed his knees harder in the earth, then moved his hands back, spreading Robert’s cheeks again, and lowering his mouth to Robert’s already winking hole, he spat, and then pushed his tongue against him, then moved his mouth back and spat again, flickering his tongue over and round, spreading the spit and groaning at the wet taste of him.

Robert’s arse quivered under his hands.

He moved back, getting ready.
Robert bent his head round, and stretched his eyes, shuffling his knees.

‘Alright?’ Aaron checked.

‘Yeah, just err, don’t, I mean, you won’t get mud in, you know, me,’ he paused, ‘...my arsehole, will you? Or,...’ He stretched his lips over his teeth, rolling his eyes, ‘...your foreskin for that matter, it just, it wouldn’t be good.’

‘Christ! Yeah! I mean, No! Course! I’ll be careful.’

Robert nodded and turned again. Aaron could see his thigh’s trembling as he waited. He pushed his hips forward, trying to push inside without using his hand, his cock hitting against Robert and sliding up across his crack a few times.

‘Come on, Robert.’ Aaron whispered. ‘Open up for me.’

And then he was moving in, past Robert’s rim, and Robert let out a noise from his throat, shaking his head, making Aaron smile.

He waited, feeling Robert’s tight space enfold him, and breathed with the relief of it. As he waited, he lowered his mouth over Robert’s back, peppering open mouthed kisses from his lips against his damp skin, then leaned back again and with a tap on Robert’s hip to let him know, he started to move.

With each thrust, in and back, and deeper in, and back again, he could feel the tight space squeeze over his hard length and feel the heat of it making him thicker, harder, closer. He went faster, listening to Robert moaning, holding on to the flesh of his butt cheeks, feeling his heart pounding so fast in his chest, he could hardly breath. His dick felt as huge and hot as the universe, as if his whole body was just an extension of the painful sweetness of stroking inside Robert’s body.

He imagined if they’d die there together on that muddy bank, dicks erect, frozen in time with rigor mortis. Maybe they’d be discovered thousands of years later, like those peat men, bodies preserved in bogs.

He laughed, his body shaking, and Robert bent his neck back to look at him, and that was enough to send him over the edge. He stilled suddenly, his stomach tightening, and then he was coming, suddenly seeding in spasms inside Robert’s hole.

He was saying Robert’s name over and over.

He could feel Robert clenching around him as he came, too, smell the pineapple scent of cum mixed with sweat, and the smell of the damp earth in the outside air.

After, they both lay down beside each other, shoulder to shoulder, fishing for clean edges of clothing to rest their heads on, instead of the mud.

They both laughed as their breathing came down.

Then Robert turned his neck to look at Aaron beside him, watching him as he stared up, blinking, at the blue sky.

He spoke in a hushed voice.

‘I missed you. I missed you so much.’
Aaron turned his face to look back at him.

Robert swallowed before he spoke again.

‘We can do this, we can manage this, you and me, together. I can’t do without you Aaron, I’m useless without you, you know that.’

‘I know.’

Robert stared into Aaron’s eyes.

‘I still love you. I can’t stop.’ He hesitated and then went on, ‘I’ve never had this before. Not with anyone.’

Aaron looked back at him for a long time. Anyone could come, anyone could find them there, naked on the ground together, their bodies streaked with mud and sweat from their lovemaking. Robert could be outed. He didn’t seem to care. For the moment, nothing mattered, just the two of them.

*Leave her.*

*Leave her, and choose me.*

The words formed in his head. He wanted so badly to say them aloud.

His lips moved for a moment, his eyes roaming over Robert’s face.

Then he turned his face away.

He swung up into a sitting position.

‘We’d better get out of here and dressed, and get a move on. They’ll be sending a search party.’ He said lightly, biting hard against his lower lip. Robert shifted too, twisting his mouth as he looked at the mud plastered over his elbows, and everywhere else on his body.

‘There’s a tap up by the lean-to, we can wash up, though God knows what we’re going to wear.’

‘I’ve got some spare kit in the pick-up, and I think your jeans are OK.’

They were just finishing dressing, Aaron tucking a clean T-shirt into his jeans that he’d taken from the truck, Robert fastening the zip of the hoodie that Aaron had given him, when they looked up.

A vehicle was driving down over the track into the field. It parked up and someone got out, hidden behind the side of the pickup, and then they appeared, walking round the vehicle towards them .

‘Emile!’ Aaron said. ‘I …’

Robert raised his eyebrows, looking away as he fastened the zip on the hoodie.

Emile looked from one to another of them

‘Je suis désolé, I interrupted something.’

‘We’d, umm, I, err, I fell in the mud and then Robert...’ Aaron's voice trailed off.

‘So much for keeping things simple.’
Aaron’s eyes met Robert’s, then Robert pointed at the jeep that they’d borrowed from the farm. He was going then.

‘I’ll be in touch? Yeah?’ He said softly. He turned to Emile.

‘Don’t give him a hard time. He doesn’t deserve it.’
Chapter Summary

Robert and Aaron rekindle their affair, and spend the night together at the apartment that Rob had rented for their assignations. But clouds are gathering as circumstances bring him closer to being found out.

‘Why are you wearing Aaron’s clothes?’

Josh inspected the purple top that his dad was wearing over jeans. He could see from where the zip was unfastened at his throat that he wasn’t wearing a T-shirt underneath, which was wrong, because you always wore a top under a hoodie, like a jacket, it was a rule. And his father never wore those sorts of clothes anyway.

He had a nosebleed and Robert, just arrived home, was holding him round the middle, head bent over the sink in the kitchen.

They hadn’t let him go to school that day. Because of fighting, Chrissie had explained over breakfast with a sigh. His father had already left for work, so he’d gone back upstairs to his room, slamming the door, then tipping all his toys off the shelves onto the floor with long sweeps of his arm.

After, he’d stripped the bed and lain, face down on the mattress, just breathing.

He’d turned his head and reached for a tiny snow shaker of the Eiffel Tower, sitting on the bedside table. He shook it and held it close up against his face, squinting at the silver rain inside. If he looked hard enough, maybe, like magic, he would see them, climbing the stairs up and up and up, under the sparkling sky.

His father stank of sweat, mixed with a pungent reek of the outdoors, of earth, and something else, something familiar.

Josh tilted his head sideways, inspecting his face, noticing the mud in his hair.

‘Why are you wearing Aaron’s clothes?’

He asked again.

Mid morning, Christine, the au pair, had come up, wanting to take him with Doli out to the park, but he’d pushed her out of the room, his face hot with anger. Later, she’d brought him his lunch.

By late afternoon he had cabin fever, so he’d made his way down, curling his toes against the marble stairs.

In the afternoon sunshine, he could still smell spilt milk and detergent from the wool carpet as he entered the living room.
He stepped up onto the sofa, and started to jump.

He went higher and higher, throwing cushions like confetti across the living room floor. When a cushion collided into Doli, making her cry, Christine had called out to him in despair.

‘Arrête ça! Arrête! Why are you trying to hurt your sister? I’ll tell your mother!’

‘She’s not my mother. And it was an accident!’

Then his nose had started to bleed.

The blood ran in scarlet rivulets over his top lip as he gulped for air. He stood suspended, arms spread with his fingertips hovering, like a bird preparing for flight.

That was when Robert arrived.

Doli stopped crying the sight of him as he touched her face, then reaching out his hands, he’d swept Josh off the sofa, and taken him to the kitchen where he held him, head bowed, over the sink.

Robert turned on the tap then gently pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, so that Josh, looking down, could see the red drops of blood, reluctant to mix with water, cling to the shiny, stainless steel basin, before surrendering to the inevitability of being washed away.

‘Keep your head down. It’ll stop in a minute.’

Josh turned back, tasting metal, feeling sick now.

‘Why?’ He persisted.

He saw Robert’s eyes flicker with a half-smile.

‘It’s not a mystery. He must’ve left it behind. I was working outdoors and got dirty, so I found it and put it on.’

‘Where?’

Christine appeared at the entrance to the kitchen, carrying Doli on her hip, they both stood silently, watching.

‘Get me some ice, will you?’ Robert instructed. Christine opened the fridge door.

‘Where did you find it?’ Josh asked again.

‘Stop asking questions and just concentrate.’

There was the shock then, of the frozen cube against his spine, water tricking down his back under his T-shirt. Josh rolled his shoulders with a shudder.

Robert chuckled.

‘My Mum used to drop keys down my back when I had a nosebleed.’

‘Aunty Vic’s mum?’
‘We’ve been over this, she was my Mum, too. She loved me. That was what mattered.’

Josh nodded his head over the sink. The bleeding had stopped.

Robert lowered him till his feet touched the floor, and opened a cupboard, taking out a pack of cotton, he broke off a piece and used his thumb and finger to twist it into a plug, then turned him around.

‘Look up.’

He pushed the cotton up gently into Josh’s nose.

‘No more jumping on the furniture, yeah? What were you thinking?’

He stroked a thumb across the scratch on Josh’s cheek, the swelling had gone down now. Josh tried to make him look at his eyes, rather than his cheeks, but Robert was distracted, still smiling, only half there.

‘And don’t get into any more fights at school. Just walk away next time.’

Josh leaned against his father, nuzzling his head against his stomach, then opened his eyes and squinted at the purple cotton of the hoodie.

‘Aaron loves me,’ he said.

But Robert wasn’t listening, he was asking Christine where Chrissie was, it seemed she’d decided on a spontaneous dinner out, a treat for her staff at the new salon.

‘Right, can you take Josh to lie down for a while? I, err, I’ll need to go out too, in a bit.’

As he left the kitchen, Josh looked back to see Robert bent over his phone, texting, his eyes still smiling.

‘You’re angry.’


‘But…’

‘I think you should sleep on the couch from now on, that’s all I said. It doesn’t mean I’m angry.’

‘If you don’t want me here…’

‘I want you here. Nothing’s changed, Aaron. Go and get a shower now, mon chéri, you smell bad.’

Aaron looked for a laundry bag in the kitchen drawer, biting his lip. He’d have to make a trip to the launderette, sooner rather than later. It was the sour smell of the mud, on his clothes in the work bag, on his skin. The apartment was small, and they both knew from doing physical work, how easy it was to stink the place out with unwashed work clothes.

Emile opened the dish washer and started loading it with Aaron’s breakfast stuff. Aaron glanced up around the apartment. He ran a hand over his face, feeling guilty about that too; he hadn’t known
Emile was coming back, he would’ve cleaned up if he had.

‘It’s different this time.’

Emile knocked the coffee dregs from the filter into the bin.

‘Because I know what this is, now. I’ve come to terms with it. I can deal with it better.’

‘Good.’

Aaron waited, watching Emile as he took a cloth and wet it under the tap, then started to wipe away toast crumbs and tea stains from the kitchen surface.

‘I’ll take that shower, then.’

But he still hesitated, watching Emile, biting his lower lip.

Emile straightened, still holding the cloth with both hands, turning towards Aaron, who searched his eyes. He didn’t know why he needed his approval, but he did.

‘I’m fine this time.’

Emile threw the cloth in the sink, wiping his hands on a tea towel. Aaron could feel his eyes smarting, he pulled down the sides of his mouth and opened his hand in the air.

‘I just, I need us to be OK.’

For a moment Emile stood, looking steadily back at him, then he shook his head and stepped forwards, beckoning with his fingertips.

‘Viens ici!’

He pulled Aaron into a hug, and Aaron breathed out, resting his chin on Emile’s shoulder as they swayed. A faint bass beat of music from the cafés below filtered into the apartment where they stood.

‘I think, I think you saved my life, you know? I wasn’t coping, but you were there for me.’

Emile leaned back. He patted Aaron’s shoulder, then wrinkled up his nose.

‘Tu pues comme un égout, prends une douche.’

Aaron exhaled, letting the tension leave his body, they were going to be alright, Emile was fine, they would be fine, and then his phone pinged.

He felt Emile’s eyes on him as he looked down and read the message. It was from Robert.

I can get away. Forget the drink, I’m taking you out for dinner. I booked us somewhere special.

Aaron tried to force back the smile from surfacing on his face. A second message followed the first.

Wear something nice.

‘So, do I cancel the take away, then?’ Emile asked.

‘No, just, err, stick it in the fridge. I’ll have it when I get back.’
Aaron turned and walked into the bathroom to take the long overdue shower, while Emile stood still, watching him go. When the door closed behind him, he opened the whiskey and poured himself a shot.

Aaron hesitated as he walked towards Robert, seeing him first, standing at the corner in front of the market, the evening crowds weaving between them so he saw him like a series of still shots, filtered on a camera roll, shining on a high exposure.

He was wearing blue - blue summer tailored pants, tight over his backside, the material stretched over his thighs, and a blue shirt, with a tie, and a vest made of silk that reflected the evening sun. He must be hot in the warm weather. He must have come from some late afternoon business meeting or other, or some event, Aaron decided, warning himself against the small voice whispering in his head, that this was for him, that Robert had dressed up just for him.

This was a date, an actual date, and they’d never had this before.

He noticed the admiring glances from passersby. Only a few hours before, they’d been naked together, outside, under the open sky. He could still hear the noises that Robert had made from his throat when he’d reached his climax, giving himself up completely.

Then Robert looked up and saw him, and raised his eyebrows in greeting, and Aaron looked away as he approached.

‘It's not exactly what I imagined you wearing, but it works for me.’

He’d only got the white shirt, but at the same time, he knew he was in shape, from the running and from the manual work, day in day out at the yard, he knew the shirt showed his body well enough, but suddenly he felt nervous.

‘There’s err, not a dress code or owt is there? Cos I can always go back and get ..’ he gestured back with his forefinger down the street towards Emile’s apartment.

‘It’s fine.’ Robert smirked and, slipping his fingers inside the front of his vest, he pulled out a folded tie.

‘Everything’s covered.’ Robert went on.

Aaron felt the familiar flare of anger, Robert being so arrogant. It was almost a relief as he snapped back at him.

‘Yeah, well put it away. I’ll do as I am. I don’t need a poxy tie, do I? I don’t want to go somewhere like that.’

For a fleeting second he saw confusion on Robert’s face.

‘OK. Where do you want to go?’

Aaron felt his heart thumping, this was a date, Robert had asked him out on a date, dressed up for it even, but maybe this was a mistake, after all. He just didn’t go to the kind of places that people like Robert went to, all he really wanted to do was go somewhere he could kiss him.

He looked at his lips as he answered.
‘I dunno... a local...’

‘A gay bar?’

Aaron blinked, the way Robert said it; but he’d been before, with the Brazilian business man that he’d slept with. The thought of it made him feel worse. He should just walk away, it was madness even thinking he and Robert could ever work.

Two lads walked by holding hands. It was that simple.

Then Robert touched his arm.

‘Look. Sorry. I just... I thought you’d be hungry.’

Aaron looked away again for a moment, before meeting Robert’s eyes full on.

‘I am hungry,’ he answered.

He watched Robert’s pupil’s dilate and his eyebrows fly up as he took in what Aaron was saying.

‘Alright. I can change the time of the reservation. We can always come back if we decide to eat later.’ They started walking and Robert lifted his phone, opening the Uber app to find a car.

Chrissie left the Range Rover in her regular car park near the salon, and chivied her staff into two taxis to get to the restaurant that she’d booked in the Le Marais district, which was always lively in the summer, and promised a good night out.

She wasn’t really feeling it, but now she’d made the commitment and there was no going back, so her lips were tight as she directed the driver from where she was squeezed up in the back seat.

She took out her phone again, not apologizing for elbows, and grimaced over the text message from Robert. So he wasn’t going to be home either, she sighed, which sort of defeated the whole point of her plan. The truth was she’d wanted to punish him for his tantrum the evening before, for going out and leaving her alone when she’d been expecting, well, some adult time together in the bedroom.

They’d always had good sex, right from the start when they met working together in London, when Robert had been her Dad’s golden boy. It had only been days after they’d met that they’d done it that first time, in the office, right under her Dad’s nose, and she’d had to put her hand over his mouth to quieten him down as he grinned back at her, eyes wide, shirt off and trousers round his knees as they’d fallen onto her desk.

After that they couldn’t keep their hands off each other, she’d got pregnant with Doli, he’d proposed, and then they’d moved to Paris.

When he brought Josh home, it had changed everything,

She’d thought she’d known him, known everything about him, but this made her feel like she didn’t know him at all, because how could he have kept this hidden, so much about himself? And if he’d kept this a secret, what else was there that he was hiding?

Josh was a lovely child, but deep down, everytime she looked at him, she was reminded of the broken trust between them.
So that was when the jealousy had started.

She bit at the corner of a nail. It was time to move on. Robert was right, she was being unreasonable. She’d even hired a private detective, and all he’d been able to show her were photographs of Robert out on business dinners with clients or his guest from Brazil or meeting with Aaron, to talk about the kids no doubt when Josh was missing him after he first left. So she’d let the investigator go, trying to let the jealousy go with him.

She thought again about Josh. She needed to be a better mother. He was Doli’s brother after all, and Robert was right, it was her stopping them from being a proper family.

It was time to do something about it.

The taxis lined up, dropping them as near to the pedestrian cobbled streets as possible, and she handed over her plastic. She was waiting for a receipt, when something made her look up.

Further down the street it was Robert, bending down to get into one of those Uber cars that had the Paris taxi drivers up in arms. She frowned, if he’d had drinks in this area for his business night out, why not eat in the area, too? There were so many good restaurants.

She squinted, trying to make out who was in the car with him, in spite of herself she was right back to where she’d started, half dreading, half expecting it to be a woman, but it wasn’t, she could tell from the shape, it was a man in a white shirt. For a moment she thought it looked like Aaron, which was silly, as obviously it must be a business client.

She turned to pick up her receipt and when she looked back, the car was too far out of sight, getting lost in the Paris traffic.

The air was stuffy in the apartment, they ought to open a window, even the walls felt warm as Aaron brushed against them. Outside the weather was close, silver clouds gathering in the summer late evening sky.

He could see sweat glistening against Robert’s hairline in the dim light of the entrance, on his throat above his collar and tie. Dust particles hovered and vanished in a strip of orange sunlight from the kitchen window.

Robert wet his lips.

Aaron could hear him breathing loudly, he steered him back against the wall, and reached up fingers to unravel the blue tie, watching his throat move, listening to the rip of silk against silk.

He kept his focus, unfastening the buttons of Robert’s vest in silence, and then his shirt, tugging it out of his trousers, then he slipped them both off over his shoulders and arms, until they fell onto the tiled floor at their feet.

Fumbling, he unfastened the top buttons of his white shirt and lifted it off over his head.

As their skin touched, the sweat on their bodies caught, causing friction.

Unable to bear it any longer, Aaron raised his mouth, and they kissed.

For a while they just stood there, neither of them wanting to stop, knowing that they didn’t have to, just savoring the feel of each other’s lips, exploring with tongues, as if the afternoon had never
happened, and this was the first time after weeks.

Aaron’s hands rested on Robert’s waist and he let his thumbs stroke softly there.

Robert mapped his body, moving his fingers from where he held his face, down over his shoulders, to stroke over his biceps, tracing the hard curve of his muscles there, before continuing down until he held his wrists.

When they eventually pulled apart, Robert kept his eyes closed for a while longer, and Aaron watched his face, moving his hands to the swell of Robert’s chest, resting them open palmed, skimming lightly over his skin with his fingers.

‘I was going to take you on a date,’ Robert whispered.

Aaron shook his head.

‘Honestly, I’m not bothered. We can do that another time.’

He stepped forwards again and pressed up tight against Robert’s body, grinding through the material of his dress pants, feeling Robert’s bulge hard against him, as he kissed his jaw and then his mouth.

Robert reached up and took hold of Aaron’s hand, threading his fingers in his own, searching his eyes, then, still holding on to Aaron’s hand, he led the way into the bedroom.

Aaron felt like a teenager, only not, because he hadn’t done this as a teenager, only with girls and then Jackson, really. And that hadn’t been the same, because he hadn’t known what he was doing. But the way his heart was pounding, the giddy feeling in his head, and the treacly heavy heat at the base of his stomach, maybe that was still like a teenager.

He glanced sideways at Robert as they stripped, pulling off shoes and socks, stepping out of their trousers, until they were both naked, and they fell onto the bed, rolling together as they relished the feeling of skin against skin, their entire bodies touching.

They stilled, Robert lying on his back beside him now, deepening their kisses, falling into a rhythmic circling. Aaron moved his head back, looking down at Robert’s eyes blown wide and dark with hunger. Then Robert moved, shuffling his shoulders, sliding down to tilt his hips, so that his cock raised higher over the shining pale skin of his belly.

He grinned, his lips open and wet, looking at Aaron smugly under lowered lids, as if he knew how fucking hot he was.

Aaron shook his head.

‘You expecting me to do something about that?’

‘Obviously, aren’t you?’ Robert’s voice was full of gravel.

Robert reached up a hand and stroked his fingers through Aaron’s hair, then his face changed as he pulled his hand away holding a small speck of white mud.

‘Didn’t you shower?’

‘Course!’
‘Clearly, not well enough! Do I need to check out other places? Like there maybe?’

Robert’s eyes glinted as he made a dive with his hand under Aaron’s arm, and he rose onto his haunches, crossing his arms loosely in self-defense, trying not to laugh.

‘Or here?’

Robert narrowed his eyes, breathing hard, and reached down to Aaron’s thighs, then slid his fingers up until he was gently cupping Aaron’s balls.

They fell silent, Aaron feeling his throat thicken, watching Robert’s tongue as he wet his lips, his eyes flickering from Aaron’s face down to his erect cock.

He raised himself on his knees, pushing his hips forwards as Robert curled his fingers and thumb around his shaft, squeezing his silken skin over the hard length. Looking down he could see his bellend deepen in color at his touch.

‘You’re so beautiful.’ Robert whispered, as his hand moved.

‘Don’t talk soft.’

Robert lifted his own cock with his other hand, letting it go so it slapped against his stomach.

‘You sure about that?’ He asked. ‘Come here.’

Aaron shifted then between Robert’s knees, and leaned over him.

He moved his mouth down over Robert’s pale throat, his chest and belly, and took his tip between his lips. Finding his seam with the side of his tongue, he lapped gently upwards to his slit, lingering there, listening to Robert pant, tasting pre-cum. He drew back and touched again with his tongue till he could feel Robert throbbing. Merciless, he moved his mouth right down, taking Robert deep into his throat. Then he quickly released him, listening with satisfaction as Robert let out a loud involuntary moan.

Kneeling back again, he put his hands onto Robert’s knees and pushed them apart, shuffling forwards between his thighs.

He reached out to find lube and a condom on the bedside table.

‘Alright?’

Robert nodded, running his hands over Aaron’s thighs, pressing hard into the muscles, Aaron could see the urgency now in his eyes.

He tore open the condom wrapper, pinched the tip of the condom and rolled it down over his cock. After he coated his fingers with lube and slipped his middle finger up between Robert’s arse cheeks massaging against his rim.

‘I missed you.’ Robert whispered, moving his hips against Aaron’s fingers.

‘Did you?’

He tugged Robert’s body closer, up over his thighs until his hips were flush under Robert’s plump arse cheeks. Then taking aim, he pushed slowly inside.

They rocked together.
The angle caught them both by surprise with how good it felt.

Aaron looked down and watched his swollen dick disappearing into Robert’s tight entrance and picked up the pace, feeling the sweet heat shoot from his shaft down into his groin and balls and stomach.

He knew when Robert was going to come from the switch in narrative from swear words to saying him name over and over, his pale eyes widening into pools of indigo.

They’d had the week in Robert’s bed to get good at this. He slowed down for a moment, watching Robert move his lips, his eyes begging him.

When he came, for a while he felt weightless, then Robert’s arms were tight around his back, the stickiness of warm cum between them on their skin, and his lips were whispering in his ear, telling him that he was hot, that he was amazing, that he was the best.

He lay still, listening to his heart beat, as Robert’s chest rose and fell beneath him.

Outside they heard the first rumbling of thunder. Turning his head, he could see sparks popping in the silver clouds massed above the city and the first drops of rain.

He waited. He knew if he moved right now, he might cry. Just like a teenager, he reflected.

Then Robert slapped his rump.

‘You get a towel, and I’ll grab us some beers.’

Emile waited, watching the sky turn orange and grey, listening to the first rolls of thunder. Outside the coffee shop, tourists looked up at the sky. He heard their uncertain laughter as the first drops of rain started to fall. He raised an espresso cup to his lips, turning his eyes back to the shabby apartment entrance, nestled between a barber shop and a traditional pastry shop across the street, the store windows reflecting colors like oil on water.

There was a touch on his shoulder and he looked around, eyebrows raised, only to relax again when he recognized one his many acquaintances. They kissed cheeks.

‘Emile! Quoi de neuf? Est-ce que tu viens sortir en clubbing ce soir ?’

‘Non, pas ce soir.’

They chatted briefly, Emile’s eyes still wandering across the street as the talked, and then said goodbye.

Emile placed his coffee cup down, paid his bill, and kept waiting.

And then the apartment door opened and Lucas stepped out onto the cobbled street. Emile watched as he nearly collided with a rabble of restaurant goers, raising his slim hands in the air in apology before lowering his head once more, looking nervously right and left.

It took less than five seconds for Emile to leave the shop and arrive at his side.

‘Thank you! For answering my text.’ Emile said in French.

Lucas’s nod was almost imperceptible.
Emile stepped closer to kiss him in greeting, he felt Lucas’s fingers curl around the sleeve of his shirt and instead of pulling back, he let his face rest against the hard angle of Lucas’s cheek, listening to him breathe.

Robert brought them bottles of cold beer from the fridge, cracking them open, handing one to Aaron as he leant back against the headboard, sheet bunched around his waist. Robert slipped back beside him, so that their shoulders pressed together. Aaron turned his head and watched Robert take a drink, and tried to force down a smile.

‘How are the kids?’ He asked.

Robert told him about Josh getting into scrapes at school, about the nosebleed.

‘Why?’

‘I don’t really know.’

‘Well you should know. You need to find out.’

‘I’m going to see his teacher, I will.’

‘When? Don’t leave it Robert, it’s too important. Just do it.’

Robert took his hand and kissed his fingers.

‘So, going back? How was that?’

Robert took another swig of beer, then wiped his mouth.

‘It’s alright. If you don’t want to talk about it.’ Aaron added.

‘No, it’s OK. I know how much you miss it. But it wasn’t why I went.’

Aaron wanted to ask why then, why did he go back, after so many years? But he couldn’t. Instead he turned down the corners of his mouth, then asked a different question.

‘So, why’d ya leave?’

Robert’s face fell still. Aaron wondered if he shouldn’t have asked. Robert didn’t talk about stuff as a rule, but to be fair, he was the same. Neither of them were good at this, it was easier just to focus on the physical, let their bodies do the talking.

Robert looked into the distance, his lips pressed tight.

‘My Dad sent me away, told me to drive and keep on driving and not come back. Somebody died, it was an accident, but he said it was my fault.’ Robert’s eyes flickered to Aaron’s face then looked quickly away again. ‘Andy was there, too, but he was always the favorite. I was always the disappointment.’

Aaron shook his head.

‘God!’
‘There’s more but…’

Aaron wanted to touch him, to show him he was there for him.

‘I don’t blame him for giving up on me.’

Aaron shook his head, not knowing what to say. He raised an arm to his eyes, wiping them quickly.

Then Robert spoke again.

‘Do you remember there used to be that old ice skating rink in Hotten?’

Aaron’s head spun for a moment, trying to catch the change of direction in the conversation.

‘Anyway, you asked me how it was, going back and that’s what I discovered, that’s it’s gone now, replaced by a supermarket. I used to go sometimes, as a kid.’

‘I can’t imagine you ice skating.’

‘Yeah? I used to be quite good. Until that one time I went after skiving off school, drank a half a bottle of Vodka that I’d nicked from home, completely wasted, smashed my face into the side, ended up in Hotten infirmary.’

‘That explains the face then.’

‘Is that right?’ Robert grinned.

‘I don’t remember it anyway, I mean you’re practically ancient so…’

Robert moved his hands threatening to pinch Aaron’s waist, and Aaron drew back, objecting with a bark of laughter. He knew now what Robert had done, he just didn’t know how. Somehow, he’d lightened them up, brought them back to the here and now, to this space and time.

‘Careful, I’ll spill beer on the bed, and you wouldn’t want that!’

‘Put it down, then.’ Robert answered under lowered lids.

‘Like I’m gonna do that?’

Robert shrugged, leaning back again. Aaron relaxed. Then, timing it to perfection, Robert snatched the bottle away. He wrestled Aaron onto his back across the bed, Aaron still struggling as Robert wasn’t going to let up now he’d discovered Aaron was ticklish. Aaron pleaded for him to give it up, but Robert pinned him down with his weight. As they struggled, laughing, their bodies rubbing together, the heat flared up, and now their cocks were hard again, sliding against each other. They both stilled, looking at each other, then Robert moved his mouth slowly down into a kiss.

Later they drank more beer and played a round of cards. Robert kept cheating and laughed when Aaron lost his rag. Finally, Aaron picked the cards all up, abandoning the game, and tidied them into a deck, placing them back on the bedside table.

They sat naked opposite each other then, on the sheet, knees touching, Aaron still visibly annoyed, until Robert reached forwards and held him under the elbows, pulling him closer.

‘Move up onto my lap.’ He whispered in his ear. ‘Come and sit over me.’
So Aaron moved, opening his thighs over Robert’s legs, a dragging heavy heat in his groin, feeling his pulse low down.

Robert moved his hands under him. They kissed, pulling lips with teeth, pushing their tongues against each other.

Aaron knew this time was going to be slow.

Emile hailed a taxi and took Lucas north, away from the district, wanting to find neutral territory, directing the driver to one of the popular parks. By the time they arrived, the sky was ripped by flashes of lightening. Emile opened a black umbrella and gently held Lucas’s elbow, ignoring the exodus as people fled the rain, except for one or two diehard visitors, practicing tai chi under the shelter of a pagoda.

He steered Lucas to a pavilion café and took him inside. The vast glass and gloss white space was almost empty, just a bedraggled wedding party, the bride in ivory wiping her eyes where her make-up had run.

Emile sat Lucas down and went to order pizza and blonde beer, then came back, placing a beer in front of him. He noticed the pink skin of his knuckles as his fingers surrounded the beer bottle and raised it to his lips.

‘What are you taking?’ he asked softly.

‘Bonsai, mkat, cocaine.’

‘Es tu accro? Can you stop?’

Lucas didn’t answer.

‘Comment puis-je t’aider? How can I help you?’

The pizza arrived, Emile wasn’t really hungry, either, but he pulled apart the slices and took one, pushing the plate towards Lucas as if it was the most natural thing. He lowered his gaze, listening to the distant back and forth of thunder still rolling outside, and only when Lucas had picked up a slice of pizza, and taken a bite, chewing slowly, he looked back.

‘And your studies?’

‘I missed my exams.’ Lucas coughed. Emile tried not to focus on the shadows round his eyes, how thin his arms were.

‘You can retake them, though. Or repeat the year. No need to give up yet.’

Lucas shrugged.

‘I have no money.’

‘But your family. I heard they started to support you?’

Lucas placed the pizza down, and swallowed.

‘You said they’d come round, but you don’t know them.’ All at once his shoulders were shaking, and his hands were covering his face.
Emile moved quickly round the table to be by his side, an arm around his back, pulling him against
his shoulder, his cheek against Lucas’s raven black hair.

‘Shh, now, shh!’ He waited.

Lucas spoke into his shoulder.

‘You were right, about me, not to trust me. My parents trusted me, but then I slept with him
anyway.’

‘Who?’

‘Robert. Robert Sugden. They wouldn’t take me back, then, when I told them, and I didn’t want to
lie, because the priest had been really, really clear about that. But after, everything, all of it, was
over.’

He needed to pee, and Robert came with him to the bathroom, standing behind him, swaying with
his lips against the side of his neck and a hand spread over his stomach, as he stood over the bowl
still shaking with the aftermath of adrenaline, so that he had to close his eyes and actively switch
on his muscles to release the flow.

The temptation was to lean back against Robert and close his eyes, drift off into the sleep that was
beckoning so sweetly now.

But when he’d done, Robert squeezed his shoulder, telling him to get out of the way so he could go
too, leaning with one hand resting against the tiles on the wall. Aaron washed his hands and
splashed water over his face, but before he could reach for a towel Robert was nudging him into
the shower.

‘We’ll order pizza, hey? There’s an all-night delivery.’

‘Shouldn’t you be getting back?’

It was already after three in the morning.

‘Yeah, but I don’t want to. And I’m sure you won’t miss kipping on a sofa for one night. In fact,’
he went on, tuning on the stream of water and pushing his head under it, then stepping back to
shake out his flattened blonde hair, ‘maybe, if it’s not too soon, we could talk about you moving in
here, eh? Not now, I know, but…’ He tugged Aaron towards him now, so the water cascaded
suddenly down over his shoulders as their stomachs stroked together, ‘… when you’re ready.’

Aaron suddenly felt himself tremble, it was tiredness and probably hunger, but it wasn’t just that.
He realized that Robert didn’t know about Emile.

‘I didn’t sleep on the sofa,’ he said quietly.

Robert twisted away, lifting a bottle of expensive shower gel. Aaron watched the beads of water on
his freckled shoulder as he moved.

‘What toppings do you fancy?’ Robert asked, turning back.

In the end, they slept before the pizza got delivered. Robert opened his eyes in the dark, his arm
around Aaron, who was sleeping with his face on Robert’s chest, his beard scratching against his skin. He heard the doorbell ringing from the intercom to the street entrance, and then his phone vibrated. After a moment, he reached out his arm and switched it off, soon he heard a Vesper driving away. He pressed his lips against Aaron’s hair, frowning, listening to the still falling rain.

‘Rob! Robert! Wake up. You need to go.’

Aaron watched him dress in the half-light. He wondered what excuse he’d make up this time. He’d think of something, like he no doubt had many times before, with other lovers. He wished they could live in some alternate universe where there were no clothes, no doors, no goodbyes, no one else. Watching Robert’s face, he realized that his mind was already elsewhere, racing to the next episode of his life that didn’t include Aaron in it. He wanted to reach out and tell him he was still there, but he felt guilty for being needy, and then he felt angry for feeling guilty.

So, he turned away on his side.

Rather than hearing the door close, he felt Robert’s hand on his arm, and when he tilted his head back, Robert leaned down and kissed his forehead.

‘I’ll call you, OK?’

Aaron nodded, and then Robert was gone.
Blood and Water Part 2

Chapter Summary

Robert winds himself up. Aaron goes back to Emile’s and he makes a decision about his future with Robert. Emile steps up his attempts to help Lucas. Josh is forced to stay at home one more day and makes a discovery

Chapter Notes

So seriously, please don’t hate me, cos I know I promised the reveal, but I’m really, really bad at editing and in the end, it just worked better to have one more chapter first; but Blood ad Water part 3 will be up one day soon - so you can either wait for that and read the two together, or read this and then read the reveal in the next chapter.

It was Aaron who’d told him about the champagne. A throw away remark, that day when they’d first arrived at Les Jardins de Courances.

He’d probably forgotten all about it, but, like everything that Aaron said, Robert had taken notice. So now, already half wasted on the whiskey from his office, he left the driver in the car park listening to a phone in program on Radio Ici and Maintenant, and headed to the visitor’s restaurant.

There was a Please wait to be seated sign in French. Robert had been to enough Paris restaurants to know what it said, but he ignored it. He really wasn’t in the mood. Instead he singled out a linen covered table with a view of the landscaped gardens and the snaking river beyond, and plonked himself down, hips forward, legs spread out against the leather seat.

He clocked the waiter, who was wearing a short-sleeved black button up shirt with a black apron, and snapped his fingers. The waiter looked round and then turned back to the table nearby, but Robert saw him nod as he took down the order. Then he disappeared, only to reappear opposite him a few moments later.

‘A bottle of Moët and Chandon.’

‘Un piccolo?’

‘No, err, a Magnum.’

The waiter scanned the entrance, perhaps expecting to see other guests arriving late to share the champagne. Robert tapped a finger on the table, watching his almond shaped eyes.

‘How many glasses?’

He noticed him raise his hand to touch a filigree silver chain that drifted against the olive skin of his throat, and knew with a certainty that a conversation now could lead to sex, maybe in the restaurant bathroom.
For a moment, he felt sorry for himself, thinking about all the years he’d wasted just looking. Then he thought of Aaron, and pain hovered around him, like the mist of whiskey on his breath.

‘One glass,’ he murmured, too quietly for the waiter, who leaned forwards with a frown so that his silver necklace swung in the air. Robert thought about Aaron’s throat, about his adam’s apple and how it felt under his open lips, about the fact that he’d fallen in love with a man.

‘Wait. No. Forget the glass, just bring the bottle.’

‘So, tell me more about this fella of yours. You say, he’s got a girlfriend?’

‘No, a wife, and two kids.’

‘Mate!’

‘You’re judging me.’

‘I’m not judging you.’

‘Yeah, you are.’

‘Do you want my advice?’

‘Well, you’re going to give it to me anyway.’

‘My advice is to run a mile! Listen, the man is confused.’

‘Funny, just like I was then?’

‘No, that’s different!’

‘How’s that different? I’ll tell you how it’s different; because I had you, cos I could talk to you, when I had no one else to talk to, and now he can talk to me.’

‘Please tell me you’re going to walk away before you get yourself hurt?’

He was going to tell him that he already had been hurt, but he’d got past it, and they were alright now, and no one was going to get hurt anymore,

but then he woke up.

Aaron opened his eyes. Paddy’s voice was running around in his head, though what they’d said in the dream was rapidly fading. He tried to reach out for words, phrases. He had a feeling in his stomach that it was important.

The rain had stopped and a pale, yellow sunshine was filtering into the room from the open shutters onto the wreckage of the sheets. The bed stank of the aftermath of their lovemaking, of
Robert. He wished he was still there; they hadn’t had that once, a morning in bed together. He touched his chest and let his fingers run down over his skin to his belly. Maybe now that he’d finally accepted this for what it was, Robert could get away and they could go somewhere for a few days, the seaside, perhaps.

He tried to see into the future, like he was sitting on a beach trying to look out beyond the horizon on the sea. He thought about Josh and Doli, and a wave of nausea hit him, so he swung himself up and sat on the side of the bed, head bent over. He knew how he wanted it to be with them, no secrets, no lies, but it was never going to happen, was it? No matter how hard he stared at that thin blue line.

When he stood up he felt light headed and all at once he realized how hungry he was, he hoped that Emile had taken him at his word the night before, and put the take away in the fridge. He reached for his clothes and started to dress.

He’d thought he hadn’t heard him, but he’d heard him. What he’d said. In the shower. Like everything that Aaron said, Robert had taken notice.

He’d just not wanted to wreck it, when he’d barely got Aaron back for two minutes. So he’d turned his back to hide his face, making the excuse of reaching for the shower gel, while he went against every urge he had to ask him what he meant, to bring everything crashing down around them. Then after, he’d spent three hours drifting in and out of sleep with Aaron in his arms, the words rattling in his ears, batting them away like pellets in a pinball machine.

But he’d heard them, and the moment he stepped out onto the street, they consumed him.

_I didn’t sleep on the sofa_

He pictured Emile’s apartment in his mind, trying to find a second bedroom, but he knew there wasn’t one. He kept trying to find another explanation; maybe he slept on the floor then, or they bought one of those air beds, or he slept in the fucking bath.

He turned and turned back again on the spot. He wanted to walk back into the apartment, confront Aaron and have it out, demand answers. He placed his hands over his face and took a deep breath into his nose, then opened his mouth to release the air slowly.

There was only one explanation. One bedroom, one bed, two gay men. It was simple math in the end. And Aaron had said it. Which was why it had to be true.

Because Aaron was honest, always wanting to tell the truth. He was surprised he’d lasted this long having an affair without running to Chrissie to clear his conscience.

Poor, tragic Aaron.

Somebody walked past with a small dog which trotted towards him, only to be tugged away by the leash, as the dog’s owner gave him a wide berth. Perhaps they thought he was drunk. He wished he was.

He had to move, standing was making it worse, so he started to walk rapidly down the rain-washed boulevard. He should call Chrissie, go home and have breakfast, but he couldn’t face it. His chest was burning. He tried to retreat into images of Aaron from the night they’d just spent together and lost himself in his eyes. It wasn’t just sex. Aaron loved him. He loved him, didn’t he? He’d told him he loved him, once. He stood still again and raised a hand to cover his eyes as he screwed
them shut. He was crying. Like that stupid, pathetic nineteen-year-old that he’d buried back in the Dales. He couldn’t help himself. He felt the tears leaking from his eyes.

He was crying because he’d fallen in love with Aaron Dingle, and it hurt.

Josh sat on the stairs, his backpack beside him. He’d packed his books and pencils and filled his water bottle, fitting it into the net side pocket, and now he was waiting.

From upstairs he could hear Christine the au pair singing to Doli and laughing as she dressed her after breakfast. He scratched at his knee, where a patch of dry skin had turned red. When he looked down he could see a pin prick of blood, and he smeared it into a circle with his thumb.

He didn’t know where his dad was, but he could see the keys to his red Porsche hanging up in the hall. He knew he kept the silver Porsche in a car park near his office. Chrissie didn’t like those underground parks. When she drove the Range Rover onto the lift that took them down into the darkness she’d complain about the poorly lit space. But he liked it, he felt safe in the heat away from the crowded city streets, under the low ceilings with all the fancy cars. When Robert was with them he would point out the different models, gliding a hand over the paint work of a Bugatti or a Bentley Conti on their way to the elevator, and Josh would copy him, learning the feel of hand pressed aluminum under his fingers.

Chrissie was on the phone.

‘Look, this is ridiculous!’ He heard her saying. ‘He’s seven, not seventeen. You can’t keep him away from school indefinitely.’

‘I know you’re waiting for a parent meeting, my husband is going to come, but believe it or not we are both trying to run businesses, we can’t just drop everything at a moment’s notice.’

‘Yes, yes, I understand that. Well, thank you, I’ll pass that pearl of wisdom on to him, and meanwhile, thank you for nothing.’

He heard her sigh of exasperation, and then her voice calling his name, louder than necessary. She must have thought he was still upstairs. He didn’t answer.

Instead he hugged his knees, resting his cheek sideways against them.

Robert called Chrissie, told her that he’d ended up playing poker somewhere, an all-nighter, that he was sorry.

‘You don’t play poker,’ she’d said, and then, ‘You’re not going to start gambling, are you?’

Robert wet his lips.

‘Maybe if I’d won I would feel tempted, but I didn’t. Obviously don’t have the face for it.’

‘Oh my god. How much did you lose?’

He walked towards the office window, raising a blind and looking down at the morning streets, busy now as Parisians hurried on their way to work. He’d known she’d swallow it, and really, it
was a pretty smart idea, giving her something else to worry about as a smokescreen to the fact that he’d spent the night with a lover. Not with a lover, with Aaron.

Aaron lying on his back looking at him, while Robert caresses downwards, four fingers grazing into his pubic hair glistening with sweat, until he touches his root and Aaron pulses, releasing a bead of transparent liquid that falls, leaving a shiny single trail over his swollen hood. Aaron’s hands reaching up around his neck, their mouths bruising.

He stepped away from the window.

‘How much?’ Chrissie asked again.

‘Only pocket money.’

He was bored now. He needed time to think.

‘Anyway, you do realize that you were supposed to go to school for a meeting about Josh. They’ve recommended a therapist. They won’t let him go to school, which is madness.’

Robert closed his eyes with a grimace, how could he have forgotten? And again, Aaron’s words in his head, telling him not to leave it.

‘I’ll call them.’

‘Well, he’s your…,’ Chrissie started, then quickly changed direction, ‘… I told them we both have businesses to run. I could have told them my husband is an addicted gambler and dirty stop out, but I’ll let them form their own opinions about you, I suppose.’

When the call ended he thought about texting Aaron. He could have taken him for breakfast he realized, or they could have spent the morning in bed. But the problem was since Aaron’s words in the shower, every conversation he started with him in his head ended badly, ended with Aaron walking away.

Lucas dressed rapidly, fastening the buckle of his belt around his ripped jeans that hung too loose at the waist, then slipping on a long-sleeved T-shirt over his head. When he reached for his phone, Matheo woke up. He pulled his arm out from under the blonde lad who’d shared the bed with them that night and flexed his fingers, trying to restore the circulation.

‘Où vas tu? C’est si tôt, n’est ce-pas ?’

‘J’ai besoin de prendre l’air.’

‘Isn’t it raining?’ Mat frowned.

‘No, it stopped a couple of hours ago.’

‘OK. Embrasse moi.’

So Lucas leaned down and Matheo kissed him, grazing his upper lip gently with his teeth.

‘Don’t be long. I’ll miss you.’

He turned back to the sleeping lad beside him, then tilted his head again,
'And bring something to eat when you come, croissant, pain au chocolat, I’ll fix some coffee.’ he added.

Outside, Lucas shivered in the cooler morning air. He walked away from the pedestrian streets to where a car was waiting in a no parking zone, engine humming, then opened the passenger seat and climbed in.

He turned his head to Emile, who nodded at him, then waited while he fastened his belt before pulling out into the traffic.

Emile drove them to the Turkish quarter, negotiating the one-way system. He parked in a side alley. Then, walking shoulder to shoulder with Lucas, turned into a quiet narrow street and took him into a café that served breakfast. The place doubled as a bakery and the heat from the ovens escaped over the rusty turquoise tables through the open windows into the street where children played with bicycles.

Emile ordered for them, then sat down. They waited while the proprietor busied himself behind the counter. Emile unfastened his cuffs and slowly rolled up the sleeves of his felt checked shirt, exposing his muscular forearms tanned from manual work outdoors.

Lucas watched him, then looked away.

‘We won’t be long?’

He fidgeted, running a hand through his long hair, pushing it back from his face.

Emile shrugged, placing his elbows on the table and lacing his fingers.

‘Why? Do you have an appointment?’

‘No.’

‘Then it doesn’t matter.’

The proprietor was cooking eggs with cured beef in a shallow saucepan. He placed it on the table between them, with a basket of fresh bread. He put a plate of sliced tomatoes and thin green peppers next to it. Emile broke off a piece of bread and used it to scoop up some of the eggs, then put it in his mouth.

‘Oui, C’est bon.’ He raised his eyebrows, nodding to the cook.

Lucas hesitated, then took some bread too. Their hands brushed over the pan, and they both looked up, eyes meeting. For a moment neither of them spoke or moved their hands.

Then Emile started to eat again, watching Lucas as he dipped his bread tentatively in the egg mixture.

‘Remember that weekend when we went to Cavalaire? That was a good breakfast.’ Emile said with his mouth half full.

‘Until that bee stung your tongue.’

‘Merde! That was painful!’

‘It was a small bee. You made a big fuss.’
‘But I think afterwards you liked the tongue?’

A memory; a hotel room, Lucas’s long legs over his shoulders, heels moving over his back, the taste of him, and wondering why this green-eyed coltish lad wanted to spend time with someone nearly twice his age, then holding down his writhing hips, listening to him come.

Lucas dropped his eyes.

Emile wished he hadn’t said it, but when he looked at his face, he saw a smile. The proprietor brought them two small dishes of clotted cream and honey, and glasses of black tea.

As they ate, they fell into awkward conversation, but at least they were talking, and at least Lucas was eating, Emile reflected.

There were crumbs, sesame seeds from the bread, on the corner of Lucas’s mouth. Emile looked at his chapped red lips and raised a hand, brushing the crumbs away with his thumb.

Lucas pulled back his face, rose to his feet.

‘I need to leave.’

‘No, you’re not going back there. It’s finished now.’ He said it calmly, as if it was a fact, as if Lucas had already agreed.

Just as he spoke, a man walked in, and crossed the floor straight towards them. Lucas blinked. Emile always knew everyone, wherever they went it had always been the same, but now was the worst time possible; he would have to go, without saying a proper goodbye. Maybe it was for the best.

He turned, but Emile reached out and caught his hand, holding it between both of his own.

‘Wait. Lucas. Wait!’

Lucas looked down at their hands, then back into Emile’s eyes.

‘This is Julién, he’s an addiction counselor. He’s here to talk to you. I’m going to leave you alone. And when you’re done, don’t go back to the studio, go to my apartment. I have to work, but I’ll meet you there in the evening. You’re going to be safe from now on. It’s over.’

Aaron took the metro to Hotel de Ville and then walked. He still felt loose limbed, a bit wobbly on his feet after the night they’d just spent. He was vaguely aware of some bruising, well, down there like, his thighs and higher up, near the base of his spine. He didn’t mind, trophy bruises; he wondered if Robert had some, too. He smiled - he flippin’ well hoped so!

They weren’t the only trophy. He raised a hand to his neck, inside the collar of his white shirt that he’d had to put back on because he hadn’t any other clothes at Robert’s apartment. Robert had marked him, a massive love bite that had him writhing in the production, Robert’s long fingers wrapped around both their dicks at the time.

After, inspecting it in the mirror, he’d yelped.

‘Err, thank you for that! - going to look very professional at the yard!’

‘Like I give a flying fuck!’ Robert had called back loudly.
Aaron could see him reflected in the bathroom mirror through the open door, unruly blonde bed hair, resting on his elbow against the pillow. Aaron had patted his face dry with a towel, hanging it back on the rail, watching it fall to the floor anyway, leaving it there with a shrug.

‘You’re so full of yourself.’

‘I’d rather be full of you!’

As Aaron entered the bedroom, Robert lifted his hips off the bed, not subtle, the sheet falling away from where it was bunched around his waist, eyes wide, grin wider. Aaron had felt his dick already kicking back into life.

Robert reached for his wrist, pulling him down beside him, and then he’d kissed him for a long, long time. Aaron closed his eyes and lifted his face, kissing him back. Robert raised a hand to his cheek, his thumb stroking down over the edge of his beard.

His voice was full of gravel when he spoke.

‘I meant what I said, earlier. I still love you, Aaron. You know that, don’t you?’

‘I know.’

After a while he’d maneuvered him to the edge of the bed, telling him to lift his thighs, feeling the heavy weight of his calves against his shoulders. Robert watched him, his pale eyelashes glistening, lips parted. With one hand, he’d held his balls out of the way, while with the other, he’d eased two fingers inside, moving them slowly back and forth, listening to Robert pant, crowing inwardly – that he was the one who could do this.

Then he lined up, pushed inside with just his cock head. He blew air from his cheeks, making tiny thrusts in that space where he knew he’d feel huge and a bit uncomfortable. He could see the water leaking from the corner of Robert’s eyes, his fingers wrapped tightly around his wrists. He pulled out, hearing Robert protesting ‘No!’ Then he rapidly unrolled a condom down his length, Robert watching. Their eyes met and he nodded, then slipped back inside, going deep, and then deeper, and filling him, as he’d wanted.

They came together. Aaron had to bite his tongue, choking back the words I love you. It was too soon after the reunion, less than twenty-four hours. But he did, he’d never stopped.

Now he took a right turn, and saw Emile standing in the street, and felt that familiar wave of relief at the sight of his handsome face, like seeing family, coming home. Then he frowned, wondering what he was doing there.

He was standing outside a coffee shop, one hand in a pocket while with the other hand he rolled his keys over and over. He looked like he’d been there a while, and he looked like he was waiting.

Aaron followed his eyes. It was the entrance to Mat’s apartment.

Emile saw him and greeted him with a kiss on the cheek, squeezing a hand on his shoulder.

‘What are you here for?’ Aaron asked, but Emile raised a finger to his lips, his eyes back to watching over the road.

Suddenly there was a commotion as the door opened, and a group of people spilled out.
It took a moment for him to work out what he was seeing. Matheo was yelling, arms behind his back, a big man in a jacket had a hand under his shoulder, steering him quickly out onto the cobbled street. As Matheo twisted, trying to free himself from the hold, Aaron noticed a glint of metal from handcuffs behind him. A blonde lad, also handcuffed, was being led by another plain clothed policeman, while one man and one woman in the dark blue uniform and caps of the French police force, accompanied them all.

Mat, bristling, suddenly narrowed his eyes and stared across the street.

Aaron looked up at Emile. He was staring straight back in his face, chin slightly raised, his mouth set.

Mat’s voice echoed as he shouted.

‘Pourquoi as-tu fait cela? Pourquoi? Tu ne le voulais pas, il est assez grand pour se débrouiller tout seul. Tu es une merde. Fuck you! You are so going to regret this! Burn in hell!’

Then Mat’s voice was receding, and the crowd that had gathered started to disperse.

Aaron could feel his heart pounding. He knew Matheo had had this coming, but there was part of him that could imagine himself being arrested, just like that, the police arriving without warning. He’d almost forgotten he was a fugitive on the run.

He looked back at Emile’s face.

‘Was Mat right? Was this you?’

Emile tilted his head, his mouth still set.

‘He had it coming, mon chéri, he had it coming.’

‘Where is Lucas?’

‘He’s safe,’ Emile answered, and then he nodded, exhaling. ‘He’s safe now. And,’ Emile added, ‘I asked him to stay with us.’ His eyes looked up towards the studio. ‘He has nowhere else to go now.’

‘So, is it back on with you two?’

Emile shook his head.

‘It’s too soon for anything like that.’

Aaron nodded, he’d made his decision.

‘Well, listen, I’m going to move into Robert’s apartment, so you two will have some space.’

He watched Emile frown, and raised a hand to his collar as he saw his eyes flicker over his throat.

‘You don’t need to do that.’

‘No, he asked and, I want to. It’s not because of you and Lucas.’ He hesitated then went on. ‘I love him.’
He was running on pure caffeine. He should sleep, but he didn’t want to. He should eat, but when his PA left a breakfast for him on the table in his office, he took one taste, and then tipped the lot into the trash, flinging himself back heavily on his swivel chair, eyes darting about the room.

He couldn’t escape Aaron’s words still running on a loop. And with the words came images; Aaron’s body, someone else, Em…., he couldn’t think his name even. He looked at his computer screen, trying hard to focus, scanning down his mail list without seeing, and then his eyes fixed on a single message. Ricardo had sent the monthly figures from the office in Brazil.

He opened it, unconsciously reading the figures, deciding that they were good, but could be better, then read over Rico’s message. Rico had ended informally.

*When are you coming back to Sao Paulo? I miss our Portuguese lessons.*

A memory; the air outside humid and after being stuck in Sao Paulo traffic, cooling down inside the brand-new office. Rico closing the office door and Robert, looking up from his computer, noticing not for the first time how the material of his shirt stretched over his back, the extra curve of buttocks for his slim frame. Rico sitting back down beside him, his scent distracting.

’Soo, time for a Portuguese lesson.’

‘Yeah?’

Robert’s fingers still on the keyboard.

*Boa como o milho.*

The words spoken slowly, deliberately.

Robert distracted by the noise of the air conditioner, thinking that they needed to call back the guys who installed it.

‘You’re hot. It means you’re hot.’

Rico wasn’t taking about the weather.

Robert holding his breath, moving his head a fraction, not away, but closer.

Rico’s mouth parting slowly, his breath as hot as the Brazilian air outside.

It was taboo, wasn’t it?

Rico’s tongue touched his own, and heat flared in his groin, his hips lifting from the seat.

After that it happened a few more times, the Portuguese lessons. Kisses turning into petting over the tight material of shirts, over nipples outlined under cotton, over the bunched cloth of their trousers, later zips slowly lowered, fingers massaging over boxers. Robert, into it. Then, the last day, sitting in the same office, Rico lowered Robert’s boxers, and eased his fingers between his thighs, until they were dancing under his ball sack, their open mouths pressed together, lips sliding wetly. Rico moved his hand cautiously, caressing the shaft of his dick, and then Robert reached his long fingers down, and moved Rico’s hand away.

Rico swallowed, confused. Robert could feel the blood coursing through his body, knowing that Rico could see it too. ‘You are gay? Or bi, Roberto? I’m not wrong?’

‘I’m not gay.’ Robert said, as Rico put a hand on his arm, looking down at his erection.
‘I’ve never…’

Then his phone rang; Chrissie, and after that he’d come back to Paris.

It was physical attraction. It had been a dangerous game with rules, but it hadn’t been the first time, though maybe the first time he’d played it so consistently, with such concentration.

Aaron was different.

Aaron had changed everything.

Robert ran a hand through his hair.

His fingers hovered, and then he typed.

*No plans to travel just yet. But you can send me something in Portuguese.*

It was early in the morning in Brazil with the time difference, but the reply came almost instantly.

*The subject read;*

*Apenas para os seus olhos*

There was an attachment. A photo.

Robert clicked to open it. Rico leaning forwards slightly, tongue out with a grin on his face, sitting naked on a bed, skin shining in lamplight, fingers on the shaft of a full flushed erection.

The message read.

*Skype with me, Roberto*

Robert put his fingers to his lips. He was angry, and now he’d been handed a weapon. He could hurt Aaron, just like Aaron had hurt him.

He stood up, pacing, then reached for the whiskey, pouring himself a glass with a shaking hand despite the early hour, drinking it down in one. He moved back to his desk and sat, moving his fingers to the keyboard.

The problem was, though, he didn’t want anyone other than Aaron. But he wasn’t good at this. He messed up, didn’t he? It was what he did. What he always did in the end. May as well do it now, then. His hand hovered over the skype contact button and he held his breath.

It was a simple image that came to him in the end; Aaron holding Josh asleep against his shoulder, turning to take him up to bed. It was how he was the very first time he set eyes on him, and then later, when he’d stayed when Chrissie was away. Robert had leant down to kiss his son, and as he’d moved his face away, he’d caught Aaron’s scent, and then he’d kissed him. Aaron’s eyes had closed slowly, his dark eyelashes against pale skin, his lips perfect, responding gently to Robert’s pressure. And when they’d pulled apart, he’d smiled.

‘I’ll just take him up then.’

‘Don’t be long?’

He shut his computer, and breathed out, closing his eyes, keeping them closed.
He hadn’t wrecked it. They would be alright. He’d work through this, they’d talk and he’d tell Aaron that he was hurting and he wouldn’t push him away. Aaron wouldn’t leave him.

When his phone rang, he looked at the screen and then waited, listening to the ring tone, counting heartbeats, and then he answered.

‘Woke up eventually then, did you?’

‘Is it alright to talk?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘I just wanted to say, to, err, let you know, that I decided yes, I will move in. If you were serious, I mean, if that’s what you still want?’

‘Of course, it’s what I want. You know it is. So, when?’

‘Well, I might just get some stuff and go over this evening. No point in hanging around. Not like I’ve got a lot to pack, or unpack for that matter. I’m not expecting you to come over or anything. I know it’s difficult, and they’ll want to see you at home, so, whenever, you know?’

‘I’ll try and get away as soon as I can, yeah? Where are you now?’

‘Back at Emile’s’

‘Is he with you?’

‘No, he went down to finish the job off at Les Jardins de Courances. Robert, listen, there’s stuff…, I mean, when we see each other, I, err, we can talk, can’t we?’

‘Course, you can always talk to me. You know that.’

‘Right then, I’ll get packing.’

There was a silence.

‘I love you, Aaron.’

Robert waited, counting heartbeats.

‘I know.’

When the call ended he could feel himself falling, he wrapped his fist around the whiskey bottle, pouring another glass, and scrolled down his phone, looking for the number of his driver.

Josh made a passport. He used colored paper for the sleeve and wrote his name, Joshua Jack Sugden, in his best handwriting on the inside. He printed FATHER, and next to it he wrote Robert Jacob Sugden, then he wrote MOTHER and sat back for a minute, before leaning over again and writing Imogen. He didn’t know her surname, but he knew his Dad hadn’t married her. He wasn’t sure what she looked like, it was only at night when he was dreaming that he’d see her, a pale face turning back to look at him, before the moment when the car spun, flying weightless in the dark.
He scored a line through her name.

He needed a photograph, which would be downstairs in one of the desk drawers, or maybe in the safe. He opened his door and stepped onto the landing. He could hear the noise of the TV, grown up voices speaking in French. Christine must be watching something while Doli played.

He held his breath, and then slipped into his parents’ bedroom.

He was strictly not allowed to go in their room, especially after the medicine incident and getting ill, so he eyed the en suite bathroom, keeping his distance, before making his way across the room to where the safe was hidden inside the closet, negotiating his route like a mountain climber, gripping with his fingers against the chest of drawers and the corner of the bed as he progressed.

When he pressed against the closet door it opened on a spring, and kneeling, he played with the handle of the safe, pressing numbers randomly, until he gave up, sitting back on his heels.

He looked up, his father’s clothes hung above him, suits, jackets, pants, shirts from white to dark and then patterned. He reached up and ran a hand under the silky material.

And then he saw it, tucked right at the back in the corner, behind boxes of shoes; a plastic bag from a supermarket, which when he reached forward felt squishy. He knew what it was, even before he looked inside, and he pulled it out, tipping out the purple hoodie.

He pressed it to his nose, it still smelt of Aaron, and of his Dad, too.

It should have gone in the laundry, but his Dad had hidden it.

Josh hugged it to his chest, and then put it on, losing his hands in the sleeves.

After, he went back to his room. He folded the hoodie carefully and put it under his bed. He wrote *Aaron* in his passport. He wrote it on the back page, and very, very, very small, so that you could barely see it.

A secret.

But he knew it was there.

He picked up the passport and tore it up, then threw the pieces in the bin.
Chapter Summary

Robert does his worst, but does he regret it? Aaron visits Ed, who cautions him, and has a suggestion.

Chapter Notes

cw blood
There's some F/M in the chapter
Disclaimer; The time is out of order a bit

There was silence and darkness, and then there was the taste of salt, and the sting of the sun on his skin, and underneath his belly, wet sand.

Then the boom of waves, and the voices of surfers speaking in Portuguese, carried on the evening wind.

There was a hand on his shoulder, pulling him back, a patchwork of shade and sun as he squinted upwards.

‘Come on, love, time to go.’

And he was lifted up, wrapping an arm around his father’s neck, safe against his hot skin. He padded fingers down the path of freckles over his face and throat, like breadcrumbs in a fairy tale.

‘Where’s Rico?’ He asked, looking backwards at the retreating horizon of the sea, just a thin blue line, almost invisible now.

‘He’s waiting for us. He’s home,’ Robert answered.

‘Aaron! You can’t be here!’

He spoke somewhere between a whisper and a voice, one hand still holding onto the open door. It helped, in a way, even though it hurt; that he was so ready to close it in his face. It helped keep his mind sharp, helped remind him of where he was stacked in Robert’s perfect little life.

‘I know you’re upset, just go back to the apartment, yeah? I’ll come and see you in the morning. Aaron, I promise!’

Still the half whisper.

Aaron watched his eyes as they flittered to the top of the staircase behind them, where he’d just got up from his marital bed, where he’d been lying, with his wife.
‘Kitchen,’ he growled.

And with a twist of his shoulder, he stepped past Robert, hearing him close the door and follow behind him.

‘She’s not even asleep, if she comes down and finds us … Honestly, I’m here for you, Aaron, you know that, but, this has to wait, right?’

Aaron nodded slowly, pulling down the corners of his mouth. He knew he was wavering, because now his surroundings were catching up with him; the place where he’d spent so many weeks as an au pair, as a part of this family, and Robert in front of him in pyjamas, barefoot on the terracotta tiles, the cotton stretched smooth over robust thighs, running a hand through his blonde hair.

He had to hold on to the reason he’d come.

But instead he was remembering; another night, after they’d taken Josh to bed, coming downstairs, dressed like this. They’d sat on the sofa, and Aaron had leaned closer and kissed him, peppering his lips, while Robert had made those crazy hitching sounds from his throat.

After, they couldn’t wait. He’d lifted Robert’s T-shirt up and off, and they’d sunk down together onto the floor, the wool from the carpet staining Robert’s back with a spreading red rash that had faded only slowly through the night.

Aaron had worried about Josh waking up with one of his nightmares.

‘It’s later when he wakes. Come on!’ Robert had whispered, and Aaron had nodded, knowing his pattern of sleep, knowing he was right.

So, he’d tugged off Robert’s pyjama trousers, and taken his dick between his lips as he lay there, wetting him with his throat, until he released him, shining and glorious in the lamplight.

‘The man’s confused…’ Paddy’s words from his dream that morning came to him.

But it hadn’t ever been like that, really, had it? Robert had never been confused, he knew what he wanted. Just the rapid rise and fall of his chest, and the way his feverish skin changed colour wherever Aaron’s fingers touched him, drawing white lines and swirls on his skin, like the wake of waves on water.

Now he stood in the centre of the quiet kitchen, and Robert wasn’t meeting his eyes.

Really, when you calculated it, they’d had such a brief amount of time.

‘How did you know?’

‘Know what?’ A hint of impatience now in his voice.

‘It’s what you said, when you opened the door, you said I know you’re upset. So how, Robert? How did you know? What did you do, Robert?’

‘What’s wrong? You look sad. Are you ill?’

Chrissie put a hand up to Robert’s cheek, frowning at his pale expression. He was wearing his
leather jacket, hands in his pockets. Robert wet his lips, his eyes sliding away from her gaze.

‘No, nothing. It’s fine. I’m fine. Just, I had a drink or two before I left, something to celebrate the contract. And after staying up last night... Here, I got some gifts for you and the kids.’

Chrissie took the offered paper bag, on the front a black and white etching of the castle and gardens with the river beyond, and LE JARDINS DE COURANCES in bold gothic font. Inside was a designer brooch in silver filigree, T-shirts for the kids, a butterfly costume, and a snow shaker.

‘For Josh, he likes them I think. Expect they’re both already asleep?’

Chrissie inspected the brooch.

‘Ah! It’s so beautiful! You’ll have to take me there one day.’

She raised her eyes back to Robert’s face, and frowned again.

‘Come here! You know you really don’t look well. Did you lose more money than you told me on your gambling spree? Or, is there something else?’

She placed a hand over his shirt at his chest and stroked gently, looking wistfully at his face, then slipped both hands around his back under his jacket and drew him closer into a hug.

‘Robert, you’re shaking. Perhaps we should call the doctor?’

He pressed his cheek into her hair, eyes staring into the distance, hands still in his pockets.

‘No, I’m fine. Like I said, I’m just tired.’

‘Take off your jacket then, here.’ She put out her hands and helped him as he shrugged it off, still talking as she took it to the hanger in the hallway.

‘I think you should go up and take a hot shower, get an early night, but before that, there’s something I wanted to show you.’

Robert sat suddenly on the sofa, his legs giving way. Chrissie sat beside him, leaning forwards and picked up an official looking envelope.

‘What’s that?’

‘The papers, for the adoption, all done and ready to post. You were right, I was being anxious and resentful. You’re my husband and Josh is a part of you. I want us to be a proper family, the four of us. It’s what you want, isn’t it? It’s why you’ve been upset with me, and you were right all along. I trust you and I know that now. And, I’ve really missed you.’

She looked at Robert’s face, seeing his eyes suddenly smart with tears.

‘What? Robert? It is what you want?’

‘Course it is.’ He breathed, pressing against her with his chin on her shoulder.

He felt his phone vibrate against his body from his trouser pocket, and leaning back, pulled it out and looked at the screen to see the number.

It was Aaron.
‘Sorry. I need to take this.’ He said to Chrissie and stood, walking towards the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

‘Hey?’

‘Robert, I’m so sorry, I know I shouldn’t call, but I’m in the hospital…’

Robert stood still, letting the shower water wash over him. In his head, he kept playing and replaying conversations with Aaron. It would be alright. Aaron would move into the apartment, and just like last night, he would go there, and they would have quality time together. And today - today would just be a memory. Not even a memory.

The bathroom door opened and Chrissie walked in, wearing a silk gown over bare legs, her face make-up free, and her hair brushed so that it shone, reflected in the mirror.

‘I thought you might be lonely.’

He raised his eyebrows, watching as she released the tie on the gown. Robert knew she was waxed smooth, even though he hadn’t slept with her for days.

‘What’s the point of owning beauty salons?’ She would say. He would grin, ask her to tell him details about sugar waxing, whether she got off on having another woman touch her there. She would shake her head, trying to explain that there was nothing remotely glamorous about paper knickers, and as she talked, he would nod and lightly caress between her thighs, stroking up over her mound watching her moisten as she waited for his fingers to slip inside.

She shrugged the gown off her shoulders, turning sideways to hang it on the back of the bathroom door so she could show off the silhouette of her body.

Then she opened the glass door of the shower and stepped in, moving in front of him and wrapping her arms up around his back.

‘My poor exhausted gambler husband!’ she teased, swaying slightly against him.

He looked down at her raised face, and after a moment, lowered his lips to hers, planting a quick kiss on her mouth and then resting his cheek against her hair, allowing himself the comfort of feeling her body against his own.

‘Why don’t you let me take care of you?’ She asked. ‘Although heaven knows you don’t deserve it.’

For a moment, he considered telling her he had a headache, but it would be so transparent if he rejected her now.

‘You’ve got bruises. What happened?’

He squinted downwards to where her hand was on his upper arm. He hadn’t noticed them, but he knew what the bruises were; from Aaron, holding on too tight. He knew he had others, the back of his thighs from Aaron’s hips.

‘It’s normal, working outdoors.’

‘I don’t even know why you went, Giles could have managed on his own. Anyway, my turn to
manage.’

‘Yeah?’

She walked him in small steps back against the tiles, laughing, painted nails teasing against his
shower wet belly. He closed his eyes, willing himself to get hard.

‘I know you’re tired, I’m just going to help you relax, that’s all,’ Chrissie coaxed.

When she knelt, he stroked his fingers in her rich wet hair, trying not to think about Aaron, about last night, about that day. But as he grew erect under the soft caresses of her tongue, he could feel the panic rising. And all at once, he lifted her chin.

‘No!’

He eased her back to standing, saw the question in her eyes, and shifted his gaze away until he was staring at beads of water clinging to the glass walls of the shower.

‘Robert?’

‘Chrissie, there’s some…’

For a moment, he wondered what it was that he was going to tell her, his heart propelling him forwards with chaotic beats that made his breathing unsteady.

Out of nowhere, a wailing cut through the air. It was coming from the monitor in the bedroom, they both listened, knowing the drill, waiting, but rather than subsiding, Doli’s crying only intensified, enhanced by the static echo of the machinery.

‘I’ll go.’ Robert was already at the shower door.

‘No, you’re exhausted. It’s my turn.’

Chrissie reached for a towelling robe as Robert watched her. All at once he reached out, gripping her shoulder.

‘Wait…, just…, wait, Chrissie. What I wanted to say was - thank you.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘No, really - thank you, for giving us a family, me and Josh. It means everything.’

‘We already were a family. No one can take care of you like I do.’

She kissed his lips, patting his still wet cheek, and left to take care of their daughter.

Robert went to bed, and for the first time for a long time, he faked sleep.

He was still awake when he got the text from Aaron, telling him that he wanted to talk, that he was at the door.

***
He knew from the pattern on the bedsheets that they were in his bedroom at the Woolpack. The heavy curtains were drawn, making the air as thick as the longing in his throat.

Robert strummed lightly with his fingertips, tracing the maze of finer skin from the scar tissue crisscrossing over his belly. He moved down until his lips were caressing there, and Aaron rocked his hips, his fists curled into his hair which felt damp with sweat.

He wanted his mouth over his dick now.

He pushed his hands forcibly against Robert’s head, heard him laugh low in his throat. Then Robert’s tongue was wet, going around and around and over his glans, and he pulsed deliciously.

Robert moved down over him, head bobbing, he could feel the build. Then Robert’s hands slid under his knees, lifting his thighs, opening his hips wider, and, still blowing him, his fingers found his entrance and eased inside. And all at once he was dry coming into his hot mouth, the muscles in his groin ripping sweetly apart.

‘…Vous écoutez la Radio Ici et Maintenant.’

‘À venir - Les sports, comme la boxe, peuvent-ils aider les personnes souffrant de dépression? Appelez et partagez vos expériences ou posez vos questions au Dr Martin sur 666-00-666…. ’

Err, No, ta…’

Aaron stretched out a hand, and swivelled the dial on the radio by the bed, tucking his other hand in comfort over his aching balls.

When he found a music channel, he lay back again, conscious now of the raised temperature of his damp body after the dream. He lifted the cover and looked down, checking that he hadn’t messed up the sheets. He wasn’t even supposed to be in the bed after Emile had relegated him to the sofa, but it was daytime, and Emile was at work, and he knew he wouldn’t mind.

He’d had a long, sweet kip, catching up on what he’d lost the night before. He smiled an amused smile at himself; still dreaming horny dreams about Robert.


He bit his lip. They were moving in together, not getting married.

Not even moving in together, just Aaron setting up a space, where Robert would come to him, and maybe sometimes he’d bring the kids. They could decorate the small room, like a nursery for Doli, buy her a little girl’s bed, she was just about old enough now to give up the cot. He felt a sudden wave of sadness, wishing he was still the au pair; he could have sat with her, helped her make the adjustment. It was a milestone for a little lass, and he was missing it.

And Josh, who had Robert’s eyes. He sighed, shaking his head. Josh needed Robert so much right now. He hoped he was down at the school, talking to the teachers, sorting stuff out. They’d talked about it, and he’d said he would.

Aaron turned on his side, stroking his cheek against the pillow.

‘Il est deux heures. Maintenant, les manchettes: - Le président Macron a publié une déclaration concernant …’
He reached out again to turn the radio back to Emile’s channel before switching it off. He needed to get up; Ed had phoned and he’d agreed to go over for a coffee, take advantage of Emile letting him have the day off. After, he’d come back and put the rest of his stuff together, take the metro back to Robert’s apartment - his and Robert’s apartment.

It was a leap in the dark really, but he was ready.

Robert left the restaurant through the exit leading into the garden, and found his way up onto the path running alongside the river.

He set off walking, carrying the heavy Champagne bottle by the neck, every so often standing still to swig down a mouthful. The bubbles hit his chest hard from the inside, making it difficult to breath, making his ribs feel like something was trying to break out. He went at quite a pace, sometimes slipping on the damp earth of the path, as if he could outwalk himself.

He halted on the raised bridle path, held by the sky, blue all around him, and looked across at the landscape of agricultural fields. Some were coming into crop with barley, potatoes, kale - probably for the livestock. He knew what they all were. He was the son of a farmer. He could hear Diane’s voice in his head.

‘Your Dad would be proud of you.’

He squinted into the afternoon sun, and swung the bottle upwards to his lips, wiping at his mouth where the liquid ran down onto his chin.

No one could ever know the truth, not anyone, not even Aaron; that look in his father’s eyes as he’d hurriedly dressed, the sky falling darkly around him as the punishing blows of his father’s fists rained down on his face. It wasn’t just about catching him with a boy, it was more than that.

He had a sudden image, Katie with her hair tied up in a ponytail. He’d hated it when she’d worn it like that. It always meant she was leaving, going somewhere. He’d lie cramped up in their bed in the caravan, and find the right words to make her walk back to him, to lean over him. Then he would untie her hair and feel it fall around his face as he kissed her. She’d worn it like that on that last day, so he’d known as soon as he’d seen her that she was leaving for good. She’d loved him, but he wasn’t worth it in the end.

He closed his eyes.

He’d wanted to take Aaron to a restaurant; he still wanted to - screw what the world would think. But what if Aaron decided he wasn’t worth it? What if Aaron didn’t want someone like him?

When he had a choice?

He curled his fingers around the neck of the champagne bottle, glad of the weight of it.

‘Err, Sorry! Didn’t know you were here, mate!’

Aaron blushed to his hairline. He’d just barged into the bathroom at Ed’s apartment, an apartment that used to be his too, so familiar that, even now, he felt almost at home.
What he hadn’t known was that Benoit was still there. He cursed Ed who was in the kitchen making a brew. Why hadn’t he told him?

Now he blinked at the sight of Ed’s fiancé, naked from behind, where he stood in front of the washbasin, his triangular torso, with the small hips and round buttocks of a rugby player over muscular thighs.

‘No worries.’

Aaron tried to focus on his mouth as he smiled, not notice his abs, and pert cock peeping from dense pubic hair as he turned, gesturing with a toothbrush. He backed up rapidly from the bathroom, closing the door on Ben, and, fingers in the pockets of his track suit pants, went light footed back into the kitchen.

It wasn’t long until Benoit appeared again, fully dressed now, straightening the collar of his long-sleeved polo shirt.

Ed offered him a cup of tea from the pot he’d made for Aaron and himself, but he wrinkled his nose.

‘Non, je vais maintenant m’entraîner. À bientôt.’ He leaned forwards, and as he kissed Ed’s mouth goodbye, their fingers briefly entwined. Aaron noticed the glint of their engagement rings, then swallowed, thinking about Robert’s wedding ring. Sometimes he would feel it, the warm metal against his chin, against his inner thigh, pressing against the tender skin near his entrance. Chrissie’s ring. Robert never took it off. ‘Au revoir, Aaron!’

Benoit smiled again at him as he picked up his jacket and sports bag.

Aaron nodded a farewell, leaning back against the kitchen counter, folding his arms and waiting while Ed walked with him to the door.

Was there was a part of him that enjoyed the thrill of it; the sneaking around, being wanted by a married man?

He raised his eyes to the ceiling.

Robert would never leave Chrissie, he’d made that clear, and he’d made his decision, so he wouldn’t think about Robert being married anymore. The thing was…, he bit his lip, sometimes he reckoned now, that, whatever they had, it couldn’t be that sweet.

‘I’m straight.’ Robert had said, and he understood, he really did. But maybe, if they spent more time together, and Robert could talk to him, properly, just maybe he’d feel ready to come out.

And Aaron would be there for him when that happened.

When Ed walked back into the kitchen, Aaron smiled with affection at his ex.

‘You two seem really happy, I’m made up for you.’

Ed looked back at him, sizing him up.

‘You look different. Good different. Something’s happened. Did you and Emile make it official? More than mates with benefits?’

Aaron blushed.
'No, err…,' He gave a small grimace, waiting for the inevitable reaction as he continued. ‘I got it back on, with Robert.’

The river was high, swollen by the rains from the night before so that it was almost level with the path in places. Robert rounded a bend, walking with his chin down over his chest, until glancing up, he saw the familiar manmade structure of the lock.

He turned his head quickly. There were the watercress beds, the mud incline where a day ago he and Aaron had made love out in the open. He frowned, only now realizing just how public the place was, how easy it would have been for someone to catch them. Then his eyes carried upwards, and on the field beyond, he saw the pick-up truck.

He scanned back and forth over the beds, searching until he saw him, surprisingly close by, in the low land just in front of the lock - Emile.

It was why he was here. Why he’d come in the first place. Hiring the driver, following the bridle path all the way along the length of the river.

He clenched his jaw.

He’d wanted to see him. Alone, without Aaron. He wanted to see him for himself. This man who’d fucked Aaron.

He was wearing a checked cotton shirt, sleeved rolled up, with a white cap backwards on his head to stop the sun from burning his neck. He had heavy works gloves on his hands. He’d just placed a cutter down on a stretch of tarpaulin beside him, and was tugging at a length of rusty irrigation piping that he’d almost freed. His long rubber boots were ankle deep in the mud that oozed wetly following the rain from the night before.

Robert let his eyes scan quickly around the surrounding fields again. There was no one. His first thought was what an idiot Emile was to even think to finish the scrapping job following the storm the night before. His second thought was to hide.

He looked around, the only place would be up behind the wooden beam of the lock gate. But to get there he would have to walk along the exposed track of the path. He glanced down again at Emile, who was still tugging at the cut length of piping, and decided to risk it, keeping to the path nearer the high flowing river. If he slipped, he would be in the water, but he could swim, couldn’t he? He swayed as he walked, using the champagne bottle to balance his weight. And then he arrived, sitting down heavily with his legs out in front of him, leaning his back against a post, his upper body hidden by the hefty square of wood that extended outwards beside the path.

He breathed heavily. The champagne bottle slid from his fingers, falling on its side, only a third full now, liquid slopping from the neck onto the wild grass. Then he looked down again at Emile, even closer now, and narrowed his eyes.

He must have wanted Aaron all along.

He thought about them kissing. Did Aaron tilt his chin upwards, asking for it? Did he lower his eyelids, so that you could barely tell whether his eyes were open at all?

Robert’s eyes never left Emile.

And then he saw him slip.
He’d managed to tug the newly cut section of pipe free and then turned to place it down, but his body skidded backwards on the mud. His leg had caught against the remaining pipe, jagged from the cutters.

Robert heard him cry out with pain, then swear in French, then watched him twist round to look.

A dark stain was seeping fast over his torn trouser leg above the rubber work boot. Robert knew it was blood. Emile tried to move his other leg, slipping more in the mud, grimacing with pain. He looked around, scanning the field opposite where his pick-up was parked, and up over the bridle path where Robert had been standing only a few moments earlier.

And then he shouted.

‘Aidez-moi! Je ne peux pas bouger! Je me suis fait mal à la jambe!’

He waited, listening and Robert listened too, holding his breath, hearing only the rush of water where the subsidiary from the river ran into the reservoir, and then bird song, high above them, making him look up into the pale sky.

‘Aidez-moi!’

He looked back at Emile, saw him shake his head, then heard him swear again.

He looked down and saw the green Champagne bottle by his side. He reached for it, and took another drink.

The night before, just like the first time, Aaron behind him, both of them kneeling. Aaron positioning him, then moving the flat of his hands around the front of his chest, stroking downwards, pausing to pluck at his nipples, sending electric shocks coursing through his body. Aaron’s cock stiff, his cock head sharp, painful, pressing against his crack. He’d reached a hand under Robert’s thighs, and Robert had panted, pushing back, wanting penetration, while Aaron’s fist was slick, deliberate on his shaft. Robert had twisted his neck, searching for Aaron’s mouth, needing to kiss him, even though he could barely breathe.

‘Now?’ Aaron had whispered.

He really didn’t need to ask, just like Robert hadn’t needed to say; ‘Hard, go hard.’

Then the speed and the exhilarating sweetness.

After, Robert had cleaned up with one tissue after another from the nearly empty box by the bed, chin on his chest, looking down.

He’d felt Aaron’s eyes on his face, watching him, so he’d dropped the tissues down onto the carpet, then reached out and held his wrist.

‘I love you.’

They’d searched each other’s eyes, the room quiet.

‘It’s alright. I can still wait.’

And Aaron had nodded back, trying to fight down a smile.
Emile tugged off his gloves with his teeth, then rapidly unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. He used the jagged edge of metal to rip into it, and used two hands to make the tear bigger until he’d managed to separate a strip of material. Bending he ran it round his thigh and pulled it tight, using it as a tourniquet above the bleeding wound.

Robert raised a thumb sideways to his lips. He could hear his pulse surging through his ears. He could help, he ought to help.

He was so smashed, he wondered for a moment if he would pass out. He should drink water. He looked regretfully at the river. And then he looked back at Emile. He should never have touched Aaron.

Maybe he could really teach him a lesson, really scare him. He shifted his hips round on the soil and looked at the mechanism of the lock behind him. If he could somehow get it to work.

‘I’m going to move into the apartment he rented for us. I told you about the place, before.’

Aaron watched Ed’s eyes, waiting for his reaction. He wasn’t surprised when he saw the doubt there.

He’d come around to the idea, eventually.

Ed had ditched the tea, brought out the beer and snacks instead.

Now Aaron played with a fistful of peanuts on the palm of his hand, picking up a couple and putting them in his mouth.

‘It’s in quite a nice district.’ He stretched his lips, exaggerating the word nice. ‘Typical Robert, really, he loves to chuck money at stuff.’

He looked across at Ed, and coughed, then threw the remaining peanuts in his mouth.

‘It’s on the metro line to Hotel du Ville. I won’t be far.’

Ed was still looking at him steadily. Aaron wrapped his arms around his waist where he was sitting. Glancing outside at the Paris sky, he could see grey clouds gathering, maybe it was going to rain again.

‘Alright, I can see you’re thinking it, so just say it, you don’t think I should move in.’

Ed drew in air, slowly and then sat forward.

‘Well, not really.’

Aaron shook his head, while Ed continued.

‘Don’t. Listen. I have another idea. Benoit has moved in with me, and his apartment is empty. Why don’t you move there instead? He’s looking for a tenant.’

Aaron turned down the corners of his mouth.

‘And why would I do that?’
But he already knew. If things went wrong…

‘Look! Nothing is going to happen, right? We’re sorted this time. So, thanks but, no thanks. And can we stop talking about it now? You’re the one getting married, and I’ve hardly seen ya’, so spill…’

The thing was, Robert knew how these things worked. He sold machinery, he’d even been to college to train as a mechanic once upon a time. And anyway, any idiot could open the lock, it really wasn’t that complicated.

He recalled the estate manager reassuring Aaron that the lock probably wouldn’t open because of being silted up. And he hadn’t said anything at the time, but he’d known she was wrong. She’d assumed that the gates would need to be opened. But Robert knew as soon as he looked across at the structure, that that wasn’t how it worked. The gates didn’t need to be opened at all, because there was a massive sheet of metal, a paddle, attached to the wooden gates, that acted as a barrier. And behind it was a hole, a gap in the structure, so raise the paddle and the gap would be exposed, and the water would come flooding through.

All he needed was to operate the winch on the bank of the river by the lock.

Robert’s eyes raced, and found what he was looking for, the ratchet to turn the crank. He turned it.

And for a moment nothing happened, and then the winch started to raise the paddle.

Maybe it was the noise that alerted him. Emile turned suddenly, face startled, and as he turned he staggered back and fell. He used his elbows, struggling to pull his body up, moving back over the mud, raising his good knee, looking for something to grip onto.

And then suddenly plumes of yellow water were pouring from the gate, just as Robert had known they would, and the watercress beds were flooding.

He heard Emile cry out again, heard the desperation in his voice.

‘Aidez-moi! Je me noie! Je me noie!’ The water had reached up to chin now, and he was holding his face up out of the water. The gravity of the situation hit Robert, and he staggered to his feet. He needed to close the paddle, and fast. He groped for the wrench in the grass, found it and turned the winch. As he looked down, he could see Emile’s eyes rolling back trying to locate the sound. His chin was up above the water which lapped against his mouth, so that he spluttered and coughed.

Robert shook his head, a hand in his hair; it was too late - by the time the paddle closed the water would be too high. He was going to drown.

‘…Vous écoutez la Radio Ici et Maintenant.’

‘Le temps est 18.00 Maintenant, les manchettes: - Mort par noyade….’

Robert had told the driver to stop the car. He’d thrown up on the verge at the side of the road just before they reached the busy ring road signaling the entrance to Paris, just in time to hit the worst of the traffic.

Now he closed his eyes, resting his head against the window, willing sleep to take him.
‘What are you doing?’

He must have drifted off for a while. As he shifted upwards against the bedhead, he’d looked sideways at Aaron, who was leaning up on his elbow beside him.

‘Were you watching me? Bit creepy!’

Aaron had lowered his eyes, so that Robert could see his lashes against his cheek.

‘Na, but, don’t you think it’s weird?’ Aaron had asked.

‘You watching me sleep? Yeah, it’s out there…’

‘Not that, I mean, us, you and me, like, what are the chances that we’d have actually met?’

‘You what?’

‘I mean, you’re from Emmerdale and I’m from Emmerdale, yet here we are in Paris, and what’s the population?’

‘Think I skipped the probability classes at college, ask me a math question about money, and I’m your man but ….’

‘Alright, forget it.’

But he’d kept his eyes on Aaron’s face as he looked away.

‘What? You think it was meant? You think ‘fate’ brought us together? All our lives have been leading to this moment?’

‘I didn’t say that. I didn’t even say it was a good thing.’

Aaron gave a small shake of his head, shuffling to get up out of bed, picking up a towel to wrap around his waist.

Robert had felt his heart thumping, suddenly, unexpectedly.

‘You don’t regret it, do you? I know, it’s not ideal. I mean, not what you’d have wanted, really?’

‘It’s alright.’ Aaron had answered softly.

‘Well, I don’t. Regret it. Not for one second.’

And Robert had reached for his shoulder, rolling Aaron down again onto his back, and he’d kissed him, over and over.

Addendum

He looked at the high drop from the path down to the beds, and decided to take it at a run.

He could get to him in time. A hand under his chin to hold his head above the water, he could swim with him to the side, then take him in the pick-up truck, quicker than calling an ambulance.
He heard voices.

Looking across at the field he saw a car, and the estate manager and people running with a rope. He dropped onto his stomach, feeling his pulse echo in the cold ground under him. As he watched his vision blurred, he was watching a kaleidoscope of pale blue skies and jade water and figures running, lifting a limp body above the level of the flood. He pulled back his teeth, scrunching his eyes tight, willing himself not to pass out, to sober up.

He looked behind him, and saw the almost empty magnum champagne bottle in the grass, and kicked back at it, watching it roll down towards the river, then turning his head, he saw it carried by the current downstream.

When he turned back, they were loading Emile onto a stretcher. He couldn’t see him move, he didn’t know if he was alive.

He rose to his feet, and ran.
'You were there, weren’t you?’

‘No!’

‘You knew that he was there, and so you went on purpose to find him, because you thought he was going to tell Chrissie about us, because he knew we were back on when he caught us yesterday, and he’d threatened you.’

‘No!’

‘Stop lying Robert! Why can’t you just tell the truth, for once in your life?’

‘I’m not lying. Why would I do that? Why do you think I would want to hurt someone? What sort of a person would that make me?’

Aaron scrutinized Robert’s face. He wanted to believe him so much, but his eyes shifted around the kitchen, instead of looking straight back at him, and so he stood, feeling this ache spreading around his chest.

He’d just walked all the way from the hospital, where Emile was lying still half unconscious, with tubes feeding oxygen attached to his face. They’d told him to get some rest and come back in the morning, that they’d phone if there was any change. It had been the estate manager who’d contacted him, after the accident. Only they weren’t sure how it could have been an accident.

Then the police had wanted to question him, because he’d been working there in the watercress beds the day before, because he worked for Emile, lived with him, and he’d felt the familiar nerves he always felt on coming into contact with a copper. So, he’d sat in a consultation room just off the ward, with his hands balled in the pockets of his joggers, while a constable of the gendarmerie asked him questions.

He’d said as little as possible of course, not just because he was a criminal on the run, but because, well, he was a Dingle, wasn’t he? He’d been weaned on it, seeing the police as enemy number 1.

‘And before scrapping, you trained and worked as an au pair? For the Sugden family? Would they
Aaron had turned down the corners of his mouth, shrugging his shoulders.

‘Why not?'

After, they’d asked him if he knew anyone who might have something against Emile, who might want to harm him, and he’d shrugged again, shaking his head.

‘No-one.’

When they left, he took out his hands from his pockets and rubbed them down the front of his jogging pants, and then he called Robert.

‘I’m so sorry, I know I shouldn’t call, but I’m in the hospital. It’s Emile, he’s been in an accident.’

‘Accident? Really? God! Is he OK?’

‘They won’t say exactly. But, he’s gonna be alright, that’s what they said, anyway.’

The tears started then. It was the relief, hearing Robert’s voice after the stress and anxiety. He wished he was there, he just wanted his arms around him more than anything at that moment. He wiped his hand down over his running eyes and nose, turning to hide his face as a family walked down the hospital corridor past him.

‘But you’re sure he’s going to be alright, yeah?’

‘He nearly drowned, and he was unconscious, then he came around for a while, but he’s sleeping now, I think it’s what they’ve given him. His leg’s a mess and he lost a lot of blood, somehow. I should have gone with him, or been there instead of him.’

He sniffed, looking upwards.

‘You couldn’t have known, I mean, accidents happen.’ Robert said.

‘Yeah well, it might not have been an accident.’

‘Why would you say that?’

‘The police interviewed me, they seem to think it might have been deliberate, yeah and, just a heads up, they might call you, or Chrissie.’

There was a silence. Aaron turned sideways on tiptoes to make room for a porter with a trolley, who gestured at him, saying something in French about the mobile phone. Aaron nodded, lowering it as if he was going to switch off, and then, as the porter disappeared through a security door, he raised it again to his ear.

‘Robert?’

‘I said, why would the police want to talk to us?’

‘For a reference or something like that, from when I was au pair. Listen, I think it was Matheo. He threatened him, and I think he must have got to him, somehow.’

‘Matheo? Why? Why would he go to Courances? And what would he know about how to work a lock?’
‘I think maybe he put someone up to it. Emile got him arrested this morning.’

‘And you told the police that?’

‘Course not.’

There was another silence. Aaron knew he needed to let Robert go. He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to think about Chrissie, there, somewhere near him.

‘You, um, you can’t come tonight? To the apartment?’ He blew air from his lips, feeling a tear fall over his cheek. He knew the answer, even before Robert said.

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s alright.’

‘Aaron, look, if there’s anything I can do, anything at all, …you know.’

‘I know.’

And he’d hung up.

And then he’d felt stupid, and alone and homesick.

And he thought about Adam, and the fact that he never called him. The last time they’d spoken he’d said something vague about setting up a business, although God only knew where he’d got the capital from, so no doubt he was getting on with that. Everyone was getting on with their lives, without him.

And what was he doing? Stood in a French hospital close to midnight, waiting on a secret lover.

He decided to go down to the canteen and have a coffee and a toasted sandwich, and then he’d walk back to Robert’s apartment, where he’d already left his stuff. He’d been so chuffed about it, but the problem was, when Robert wasn’t there, it just felt empty.

A nurse let him check in on Emile before he left, reassuring him that he would be awake in the morning, and then Aaron set off, deciding to walk back. He felt better, for being outside, and after the storm the night before, the air was clear, so looking up he could even see some stars normally obscured by the ozone from the city. He zipped up his black hoodie and put his hands in his pockets as he stepped quickly, following the main arteries and avenues on his way to the district where the apartment was, hoping he wouldn’t get lost.

He thought about Robert - he always thought about Robert; replaying scenes from the night they’d spent yesterday, thinking about being back on, about how they’d made love outside in the mud, and Emile had caught them, and if he’d arrived any earlier how bad that would have been.

And then he’d frozen suddenly, in the dark, flexing and unflexing his fingers in his pockets, as a wave of unease surged through him.

His mouth suddenly went dry.

Surely not…he thought…It couldn’t be, he couldn’t have...

He swallowed, glancing up and down the empty streets in the suburb, not far now from his
destination. But the problem was, now that he’d thought it, the idea was growing, ballooning in his chest, squeezing out the air, so that all at once he was struggling to breathe. He tried to think back to the phone call, Robert had sounded so concerned. But there was something.

And then he realized what it was, what he said about Matheo and the lock, like, how had he known the lock had opened, there could have been any number of reasons for what happened to Emile, especially after the storm? He bit his lip, closing his eyes and breathing hard.

He wouldn’t have done that! He just, he wouldn’t!

But now he needed to know, and if it turned out it was true, then he was going to kill him with his bare hands.

He spun round, and heart thumping, started to walk south towards Robert and Chrissie’s home.

Robert shuffled closer, so that Aaron could smell his still bed warm scent. He wanted to believe him. He needed him to be telling the truth. He waited, while Robert raised a hand cautiously to his cheek, the back of his fingers running down lightly over his skin. He knew he mustn’t cry, but it was hard.

Robert’s eyes scooted one more time to the kitchen door, and then he stepped closer still, until their bodies were brushing together, and then he swept his other arm around his waist, pulling him into a proper hug.

‘I get it. He’s your friend, and you’re upset,’ Robert whispered against his ear. ‘But it’s going to be alright, Aaron. Who knows, maybe the police will find something out about Matheo, like you said, or, or, or maybe, it really was just an accident.’

Aaron felt his body go limp, he’d been holding so much tension. It was all he wanted, just to be here in Robert’s arms. It was like water in rock, he’d carved a route to his heart, and you couldn’t reshape that, no matter what.

He raised a hand, gripping onto the material of Robert’s t-shirt against his chest, and let his chin fall onto his shoulder as they swayed together. He could feel their cheeks brushing together, and breathed Robert in, squeezing his eyes tight.

‘I’d better go, then, hadn’t I?’

He ached to kiss him.

But he wouldn’t, not here, in the kitchen, not with Chrissie upstairs, although they’d done it before, and so much more.

‘Hold on a minute.’

Now it was Robert who didn’t want to let go. Aaron shook his head, opening his palm softly to push back against Robert’s chest, gently disentangling himself.

‘Sorry, I came here, and said all that stuff. I don’t trust people easily. I know it’s not easy for you.’ He pointed a finger upwards, indicating the bedroom, then looked down as he added, ‘You’d better get back, to Chrissie.’
And then he noticed something.

And frowned.

It was resting on one of the kitchen chairs, half tucked under the table. At first, he barely registered what it was he was looking at, it was just a bag after all, made from some quality no doubt recycled brown paper with a fancy handle, but then the words, written in Gothic Print leapt out at him; LES JARDINS DES COURANCES

He stared at it for a moment, and then his eyes flickered back to Robert’s face and he could see him blinking fast, his tongue running over his lips.

He raised a finger to his lip and then pointed at the bag.

‘When did you get that? Not yesterday, or the day before.’

He knew.

Then Robert dropped his eyes.

And Aaron’s hands flew to his head.

‘You were there, today! You were there! It was you! Wasn’t it? It was you!’

‘It’s not what you think! It wasn’t like you said! I only meant to scare him! And then the water wouldn’t stop, and he’d cut himself, so he fell… and then they came and rescued him.’

Aaron swayed. He felt dizzy, sick. His eyes searched instinctively for the sink, just in case. When he spoke, he couldn’t keep his voice steady.

‘You left him there bleeding, when you could have helped him, and then, when he didn’t die fast enough for ya’, you opened that lock, because only you know how to do stuff like that!’

‘No! I never wanted him to die. When I realized he was in danger, I closed the lock again, and, I…’

‘You lied to me, and I was so thick I believed ya’! You’re a murderer!’

‘No!’

‘You told me your dad sent you away from Emmerdale because someone died, and that he thought it was your fault. But he was right, wasn’t he? You killed someone. That was why you didn’t want to go back.’

‘No!’

‘So, did they find out your secret, too? Can’t take being gay, so you kill people?’

It was so quick - a reflex learnt over years of anger and lost trust. His fist suddenly balling, and then the blur of time and motion, and the contact.

His punch caught Robert right on the mouth, and then there were flecks of blood flying, and Robert reeling backwards.
Aaron watching him, ready to walk away, cradling his knuckles torn by the impact of Robert’s teeth.

But amazingly, Robert didn’t fall, instead he staggered forwards again, and Aaron caught him in his arms.

And for a moment they stayed like that, Aaron’s pulse racing as Robert’s blood smeared across his flaming cheek.

‘No!’

Aaron held Robert by the elbows and lifted him away. He hated himself for hitting him, but it changed nothing.

He turned, pulling a bag of ice out from the freezer, wrapping it in a tea towel, still knowing his way around this kitchen that had felt like home for so many months. He placed it on the table where Robert sank down on a chair, then moved to the sink to run his knuckles under the cold tap.

It was Robert who spoke first, over the sound of the running water.

‘You alright?’

Aaron closed his eyes and kept them closed. He held himself, shoulders squared.

‘When are you going to face up to who you really are? You’re gay Robert. It’s not going to go away, you know?’

‘I’m not gay.’

Robert said tersely, wincing as he held the ice against his mouth.

Aaron rolled his eyes, already sore from crying.

‘I’m not gay, I’m not like you, alright? And I didn’t… I didn’t do it because he threatened to tell Chrissie, I did it because of what you said, about not sleeping on the sofa… I worked it out, OK? You were sleeping with him. I bought champagne and I got drunk. It’s not an excuse but, at least, it wasn’t what you think.’

‘So, what, you necked a load of champagne, and you think that makes what you did alright?’

‘You’re just not listening. I said it didn’t. It was a mistake.’

He could hear Robert’s voice tremble.

‘I couldn’t take it, thinking about him, touching you. You had sex with him, sharing a bed with him, you left your boyfriend in bed, and then you came to work at Courances, and you came on to me!’

‘It wasn’t like that, he’d been away for a couple of weeks.’

‘Well no wonder you were gagging for it…’

Aaron blinked. This wasn’t what he’d expected at all, and now he was starting to feel confused. None of it made any sense; Robert who had so many lovers, so many affairs - even when Aaron
had first started as an au pair, and the high-octane sex they’d had, right from the beginning. He leant back against the kitchen counter, gripping on with a hand behind him, trying to anchor himself as he shook his head.

“We were over, and he was here for me, I needed someone, a friend. Yes, we slept together, but, it was never… it never meant anything. You have a wife! A wife! Sound familiar? You’re married Robert, married! How do you think I felt, every single day? What you did? It’s not normal.’

Robert stared back at him.

“Well that’s the difference between us then, because you see, Aaron, in my head, we were never over. Once you got under my skin, it didn’t matter how hard I fought it, how much I stood to lose, I couldn’t get you out. I love you and, I can’t stop.’

Aaron swallowed.

‘You love Chrissie.’

‘I love you more.’

Robert had stood up again. He moved towards Aaron. He knew he wanted to kiss him, to make all this go away and he waited, holding his breath, because he wanted it too. Just to feel Robert’s mouth against his own. He hated himself for it. He thought of Emile, lying in the hospital bed. Robert raised his hands to hold his face. It was his signature move, and all at once Aaron snapped, batting his hands away.

‘No, you’re lying, you’re just trying to twist things.’

‘Keep your voice down!’

‘What, because your missus will hear? Let her hear! I wonder what she would think, about us? About what you did? Maybe I should tell her!’

‘You wouldn’t do that. Cos that would be a big mistake!’

And that was the moment when Aaron knew that it was over. The threat. Of course, Robert would shop him; he’d held that over him for all these months, like a card kept carefully hidden in his hand. He’d never loved him at all. It had all been a dangerous and thrilling ride for him. And Aaron was nothing, he could have been anybody really.

He could feel Robert’s eyes on his face, and then he was stumbling over his words.

‘I didn’t mean… What I meant was…, she’s going to adopt Josh, she’s agreed, and she’ll give him the family he needs. You have to see that?’

‘Right. Then that’s that, then.’

He started to walk towards the door. He had to get away now. There was no reason to stay anymore.

‘Wait, Aaron! Wait!’

‘No. It’s done now, Robert. You know it and I know it. It’s over.’

‘I meant it, I love you! And you said you loved me too, once, remember?’
‘I did… I do... I love you, but, it’s not worth it. You’re not worth it.’

What he hadn’t expected was when he opened the door, Josh was standing there.

His hair was tousled and his face was on fire, and in his arms, he was holding a bundle.

Aaron opened his mouth in shock, and wiped fiercely at his cheeks, trying to rid them of the tracks of tears that kept on coming.

Josh stretched out his arms.

‘It’s your hoodie. I wanted to give you it back!’

So, Aaron knelt, and pulled him into a hug, and they stayed holding on like that, until Aaron blew air from his cheeks, and let him go. He took the offered hoodie, and nodded, a hand in Josh’s hair.

‘Thank you, darlin’! Be a good lad now, eh?’

Without looking back at Robert, he walked through to the entrance of the apartment, and he was gone.

Chrissie was on the stairs as he left.

She stepped into the kitchen, where Josh was leaning against Robert, holding on.

‘Was that Aaron? Why was he here, at this time of night? Why are you up? Your mouth? Did something happen?’

There was a silence, and then Josh spoke.

‘It’s a secret,’ he said.

And then he started to cry, looking up at Robert’s face.

‘Daddy, Daddy! Sorry! Daddy!’

Robert gripped his shoulder tightly, holding him closer.

‘It’s alright, love. It’s alright...’

He shook his head, moving his mouth silently, and then he spoke.

‘I’ve… I’ve been having an affair.’

Chrissie blinked back at him.

‘I’ve… fallen in love.’

She was shaking her head.

‘I’m so sorry. I’m in love with, I love…’ his mouth was so dry he could hardly speak, ‘I love Aaron.’
‘That’s not possible! It’s not funny. Stop it!\’

‘It started months ago, and, um, I thought, I thought I could get over it, but I couldn’t. He stayed here, when you were in England, in our bed. That’s how Josh knows.’

‘It’s not true! Robert!’

Josh was crying so hard, his whole body was shaking, and Robert dropped down, and held his face, soothing back his hair.

‘I’m sorry darling. I should never have made you keep a secret. You’re my brave and beautiful son who I love. And I messed up, but I’ll fix this, and everything will be alright. I promise.’
Wish you were here - part 1

Chapter Summary

Robert, Aaron, Josh, Emile and Lucas are all affected in the aftermath of the affair reveal. Robert asks Aaron for help.

Chapter Notes

mention of self-harm CW
Just a little M/F in this chapter, too
Sort of lost my mojo so I decided to post this part of the story so far and hope it spurs me on

‘What do people write on postcards?’

‘What’s that, love?’

Robert surfaced above the water where he’d been swimming lazy lengths for a while now.

Josh waited, sitting cross-legged on a towel of tropical birds laid across a sunbed. He held his pen up against his lips as he watched his father progress across the pool, the t-shirt he was wearing in the water billowing around him, making shapes.

When he judged he was close enough, he asked again.

‘Postcards, what do people write on them?’

Robert raised himself up on his elbows against the side, sending a dark streak of water over the decking.

‘Whatever you want. About the weather, places you’ve seen, things you’ve done.’

‘Gostaria que você estivesse aqui!’

Rico, lying on a sun lounger nearby, lowered the book he was reading, peering over the top of his sunglasses.

Joshua looked back at his father questioningly.

‘Wish you were here.’ Robert translated.

‘Good student! Our Portuguese lessons are working!’ Rico grinned. He turned over onto his stomach, letting his book fall from his fingers.

‘Who are you writing to, love?’
‘Doli, Auntie Vic, Matthieu from school, people like that...’

Later, at bedtime, Josh opened his drawer and pressed the postcards into Robert’s hand, watching his eyes.

‘Look at them. No secrets!’

Robert raised his hand in a hi-five.

‘No secrets!’ He echoed.

It was something they’d agreed, when they left Paris, not to have any secrets from each other, not after everything they’d been through.

And with everything else so uncertain.

So, they’d sit every night on Josh’s bed, taking turns to read, and then sharing with each other what they couldn’t tell anyone else.

No secrets; I miss Doli, I miss Doli too, so much, I miss the rain in Paris, I don’t like my Portuguese teacher, I peed in the pool, I saw him kiss you, ok listen, I might be dating Rico, but I’m not in love, I’m just trying it out, we’re not sharing a room, I’ll tell you if that changes, right? I fed my feijoada to the dog, I know you’re the tooth fairy, I saw you put the money under my pillow, I just pretended to be asleep, I don’t remember my mother’s face, I’m scared you’ll die one day like she did, come here, I’ll never leave you, I love you more than anyone, if you don’t take me to see Gabriel play, I’ll never speak to you again, OK? No secrets, he’s the worst football player ever! He’s the best!

‘Look at them?’ Josh watched Robert’s face as he held the postcards.

While he read the last one, Joshua held his wrist tightly, watching his mouth, until he looked up.

‘Will you send them for me? Send them all?’

‘I don’t know, darlin’. Maybe it’s not such a good idea...’

‘Send them all. Please! Promise you’ll send them all!’

He reached up and held his father’s cheeks, making him look at him.

‘Promise?’

‘Alright, alright,’ Robert sighed. ‘You don’t talk about him,’ he added softly.

‘You don’t talk about him, either.’ Josh answered.

And it was true. But what could he say that a seven-year-old would understand? That he’d found someone that had unlocked the meaning of life for him, that he’d lost him, that nothing would ever be the same again?

Later, when Josh was eventually asleep, he looked again at the postcard.

Wish you were here, written in Josh’s spiky print and then a long line of X’s getting smaller and smaller, and a drawing, the three of them, holding hands.

Then an attempt at an address, Aaron Roberts, Near the Eiffel Tower, Paris.
Robert picked up a pen, and drew a line across it.

Then he wrote in his own hand - Aaron Dingle, The Woolpack, Main Street, Emmerdale, Nr. Hotten, Yorkshire, England

He called Rico’s maid and handed the postcards over with some cash, asking her to send them.

Chrissie had told him to leave, so he took a taxi and stayed in a hotel.

Later he regretted not taking the red Porsche, because he never saw it again. He tried calling Aaron, once, twice, three times, then he tried Chrissie.

When she didn’t pick up, he called Aaron again, and again, no answer.

He wiped his eyes, staggered to the bathroom, and threw up, dry heaving until his chest hurt, and the swollen bruise on his cheek where Aaron had hit him throbbed deep down to the bone. Then he lay across the bed fully dressed on his back, staring up at the plaster ceiling, until his eyes could see through it to the greasy grey black night sky of Paris, and he kept looking, beyond that to the silent moon and the stars, and beyond again to the vapor breath of the Milky Way, and then out into the empty endless cosmos.

‘Why don’t you come home?’ Victoria asked.

‘No.’

It had been raining all afternoon in Paris. A memory came to him – an illicit kiss behind the tractor, then riding the quad bike, cutting the engine and pushing the weight of it under the lean to, while the rain blustered over the farm, shit colored mud sticking to his boots, the smell of diesel and cattle and hay and waterproofs, Andy’s echoing voice and whistles, calling the dogs into the shelter of the barn, and still the taste of boy on his lips when he went indoors and up the stairs to his room.

‘Well, do you want me to come there for a while? Just while you get yourself sorted?’

‘No, you wouldn’t be comfortable.’

‘Err, excuse me, I can be comfortable anywhere, me, and what about the kids?’

‘They’re with Chrissie for the moment, I don’t really have somewhere for them to be, and she’s not letting me see them. She says, she says I’m not fit to be a father.’

‘Can she do that?’

He hesitated, because he thinks she’s right; he’s not fit.

‘My lawyer says she can’t.’

‘You’ve got the business.’

‘She called her Dad over, and he’s running the place now. They even changed the locks on the premises.’
'Well, I think you’re very brave. I’m proud of ya. At least you’re out now, people know that you’re gay.'

‘I’m not gay, Vic.’

He waited, listening to her processing his words in the silence.

‘So where is Aaron, then? You two are together, finally?’

‘He, err, I don’t think he knows. And even if he did, he’s washed his hands of me.’

‘And you’re alright with that?’

‘What choice do I have?’

There was another silence then.

‘I wish you were here! Home - where you belong!’

‘I’ll speak to you later Vic, yeah?’

He put down the phone with the keys on the kitchen table, and walked into the bedroom. It was the first time he’d been back.

He opened the bathroom door, the room had a musty smell, Aaron must have folded the towels before he left, and they rested side by side over the edge of the porcelain bath, faint rust flecks that were faded blood stains on the blue cotton, a souvenir of how they’d spent that last night. There was shower gel and cracked soap on the tiled floor of the shower.

He lifted the seat of the toilet and peed, then flushed and washed his hands, watching silverfish escape under the skirting board from the corner of his eye. Then he went back into the bedroom.

The room was bare. He’d not really noticed before how shabby it was. Just like the folded towels in the bathroom, Aaron must have made up the bed before he left, the cover neatly turned down. He opened the drawer by the bed, and closed it again, then shut his eyes and sank down until he lay with his head on one of the pillows.

Now, this close, he could still smell him.

There was one thing in the room that hadn’t been there before, leaning against the wall, wrapped in brown paper that had been peeled back and re stuck together with duct tape, then tied with string. The paintings. They’d all been there in the office when he’d gone to get his stuff, Chrissie, Lawrence, policing his every move, Giles and his PA, and other staff from the sales team, wide eyed, confused spectators. Maybe she’d seen his hesitation as his eyes drifted towards them, and a killer instinct had crept in, because next thing, she was striding towards them, and then ripping off the paper to reveal the erotic art work underneath.

‘There he is; the man you fell in love with!’

It felt like his whole life had been a journey to that moment, standing there, swallowing, at the center of the room, while everyone looked away. But if he could have raised his eyes right then, he was sure the only person he would have seen was his father, and he would know the expression on his face, he’d seen it before - in a bedroom, in a farmhouse, in another country.
He wanted to go home to Chrissie, to make her understand, and take him back. He had another memory, lying naked, his hand between her open thighs, his thumb penetrating her, moving gently in and out as she lay at right angles to his body, leaning on an elbow over his stomach, her long dark hair spread across his skin. Her painted fingers wrapped around his dick, working him up and down over his length, until he came closer, and closer.

Doli, still only a few weeks old, grizzling over the baby monitor, the sound laced with static. She was gearing herself up, and soon she was crying in a hello-is-anybody-there manner.

He’d raised his chin onto his chest.

‘Shall I go?’

‘She can wait,’ Chrissie had said. He’d glided his thumb up over her clitoris, and she’d gasped as her orgasm hit, then he’d shuddered, spilling cum like lava over her fingers.

‘I made the worst mistake of my life. Please. I love you. I swear, I swear I’ll never let you down again.’

‘You’re gay, Robert.’

‘I’m not gay. You’ve got to believe me. It was nothing, he means nothing to me.’

‘See you in court.’

He must have slept.

Maybe it was the scent on the sheets, because in his dream, Aaron’s voice was in his head, calling Josh in from outside where he was kicking about with a football in the rain, only when he looked, Josh was older, his shoulders wide above a skinny rib cage, and when he called out ‘Coming Dad,’ he could hear his voice had broken. Aaron turned back to him. He looked into the depth of his blue eyes and kissed him, and then he woke up.

‘Come on old man, let’s be having you.’

‘Oui, oui, continuez comme ça, et je vais te montrer le vieil homme!’

Emile sat forwards on the side of the hospital bed, reaching for the crutches while Aaron looked on. He knew he wasn’t supposed to help, that Emile had to manage the balancing act himself, as he held them both in his right hand and pushed himself up on his good leg, then swapped one of the crutches to his left hand, slipping his arm through the grip and then holding on to the bar so he could lift himself to standing.

He nodded then, signaling to Aaron that he was ready to follow him.

Outside, his sister was waiting in the car. She’d come to take him on the long journey to Brittany where he was planning to stay with his parents for a few days, until he was fit enough to manage the stairs and return home to Le Marias.

‘And after I’ve gone, you can go to your new apartment, non? I’m sure Robert will be getting
resentful that you’ve given up all this time. You’ll be missing him.’

Aaron shook his head.

‘I think all those painkillers must have sent you soft.’

Emile paused, resting forwards on the crutches and his good leg, studying Aaron’s face.

‘Alors! Did something happen?’

Aaron looked out of the hospital window at the grey Paris sky, and shrugged.

‘Just the usual. You were right and I was wrong, again. So, it’s over. And you know what, I’m glad. I was bored.’

‘Bored?’ Emile echoed. He pulled down the sides of his mouth. ‘Comme... tu t’ennuyais de lui?’

Aaron avoided meeting his eyes.

‘Look, can we not do this now? It’s you we need to focus on. And finding Lucas.’

Lucas hadn’t answered any attempts to contact him. He hadn’t been in touch with Julien the counselor, and Aaron knew that Emile was going out of his mind with worry, wondering if he’d gone back to Matheo, who’d been charged after the raid, and then, with nothing to connect him to the attack on Emile, released on bail.

But Emile stopped, leaning heavily on one his crutches, pushing his arm further through the other one so his hand was freed up.

‘Come here, mon cher, come near me, Aaron.’

Aaron stepped back to his side, concerned he might be in pain.

Without warning, Emile’s hand was on his waist, pulling up his sweater, exposing a scattering of fresh weeping wounds on his belly.

Emile closed his eyes.

‘Merde!’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘What were you thinking? I thought we’d got past all this. Why?’

‘I’m so sorry, it’s just, you were hurt, and yes, something happened, it all spiraled, it was just the once…’

‘So, I’m not going with my sister, we’ll send her home and I’ll call my parents and tell them I’m staying here with you.’

‘No, you need to go! They’ll look after you. You go, and while you’re gone, I’ll look for Lucas.’

‘I’m not leaving you like this. Every time, it’s the same, mon cher, you get with him, it falls apart, you fall apart, too. When will this end?’

The elevator arrived and they stepped in.
‘Listen, I’m fine. You were here in hospital, and yes, I was upset, stuff happened with Robert, but my head’s in a better place, now. I’ll look after myself! I’ll go running if I feel I’m not coping, you know that works.’

The elevator arrived at the ground floor, and when the doors opened, Emile’s sister was there to help, and they moved towards the car, neither men talking while she chatted to them about the Paris traffic, the weather, the journey ahead.

At the car, Emile rested against his crutches, next to the open passenger seat.

‘How can I leave you like this?’

‘I’ll be fine. I’ll call you every day.’

Aaron could see the struggle on his older friend’s face as he shook his head.

‘Kiss me, then.’

Aaron kissed him on the cheeks and then the mouth. A kiss goodbye. Emile reached up, touched his cheek.

He climbed in the car, and Aaron stood and watched as it drove away.

‘Le numéro de téléphone portable que vous avez appelé est actuellement indisponible, réessayez plus tard.’

A week earlier Lucas had sat in the dark in Emile’s apartment, holding his phone to his ear, listening once again to the automated message, feeling numb.

There had to be some mistake. He tried to remember what Emile had told him over breakfast, but his head wasn’t clear. And now he wasn’t picking up his phone.

His knees bumped against the coffee table that was pulled closer to the sofa than it used to be when he’d lived there, a lifetime ago. Emile was tall, but Lucas was taller. People looked at him, on the metro, walking into a room - girls sometimes, talking behind their hands. Emile would laugh, pull softly at his earlobe.

‘It’s because they think you’re attractive, which you are.’

Only, he wished he was invisible.

And now he was. Invisible and alone.

He rocked forwards, still holding his phone loosely in his white fingers. He could feel the press of the packet of pills in his jeans pocket against his hip, and pulled it out, turning it, running a thumb over the braille indentations on the white surface of the box. He was supposed to take 25 mg morning and evening for the first week and then double the dose, it would help with the cravings, the doctor at the center where Julien had taken him had said. He wondered if it was too early to take another one.

He couldn’t work out where Emile could be.

‘Don’t go back to the studio. Wait for me in my apartment.’ He was sure that was what he’d said, but maybe he was wrong.
Or Emile had forgotten. Or he didn’t care.

Lucas stood up and walked into the bedroom, then, without turning on the light, he moved to the bedside table and opened the drawer, tugging roughly when the painted wood resisted. He searched with his fingers until he found what he was looking for; a leather rectangular box. Breathing heavily, he took it out and opened it, then fished out the heavy gold chain and pendant.

He knew what it was.

He’d found it one night, searching for condoms in the height of passion, and opened it, showing it to Emile, who’d gently taken it from him, and put it back, stroking his cheek with work rough fingers while he found the condom that Lucas had been looking for, and held it out to him.

‘I’ll tell you, later, now ride my cock, mon amour.’

After, still bathed in sweat, they’d turned on their fronts, side by side, propped up on their elbows, and Emile had taken out the box and shown him. He’d held the gold pendant in the palm of his hand while the chain ran through his fingers.

‘It’s Arabic script, but made into a design, you see?’

Lucas had nodded, watching Emile’s eyes.

‘When Khalid was dying, I bought it for him to wear. Maybe I thought it could protect him, save him, I don’t know. I didn’t want him to die, that’s all.’

Emile looked back into Lucas’s eyes, reaching up to his cheek with a smile.

‘Don’t look sad.’

‘You still miss him.’ Lucas had looked back at the pendant.

‘I miss him,’ Emile nodded, ‘but I met you.’

And then he’d slapped the fleshiest part of Lucas’s bare arse, and lowered the pendant back into the box, returning it to its place, and closing the drawer.

Now, Lucas weighed it in his hand.

He bit his lip, then, with a sudden sob, he slipped it into his pocket.

After a final look around, he opened the door, and ran swiftly down the stairs and out into the night.

Josh hung onto the new au pair’s sweatshirt, trying to get her to stand still as she moved around the kitchen. She was preparing an afternoon snack of sliced fruits, the sweet scent of apple making his stomach hurt.

He could see her phone in the back pocket of her jeans, but as he reached for it, she grabbed his wrist with an angry frown.

‘Qu'est-ce que tu crois faire?’
‘Je ne fais rien!’ He answered fiercely.

He wanted to call his dad, but how could he explain?

He wanted to ask if he was with Aaron, and when they would come and get him.

He drifted into the living room.

Lying on his back on the sofa, he pulled the snow shaker from his pocket, and held it close to his eyes. He played with the curve of the glass dome against his cheek.

As he rolled it, it slipped under his fingers, flying up and bouncing against the smoked glass of the coffee table.

Josh sat up, but it was too quick. It winged its way sideways onto the oak floor, and spun, round and round, and then Christine was coming from the kitchen, carrying plates of fruit.

Josh opened his mouth.

Christine’s feet tripped on the spinning shaker, and she danced around it trying to stop herself from falling.

Josh saw it slip back. He saw her heel move down, heard the crunch.

Glass shards and silver sparkles in a pool of water seeped over the floor.

Josh raised both hands to his head.

‘You broke it! You ruined everything!’

‘No, Joshua, you broke it. Not me. This was your fault, yours! Everything is your fault!’

He swallowed. He felt dizzy, as if his body was melting away, just like the water still shining on the polished floor. He wondered if he was dying, like his dream, flying through the air in the car.

‘Dad! Daddy!’

It was barely a whisper, but she heard.

‘Your mother will be home soon.’

Then there was the shock of warm water flooding over his trousers and onto the upholstery.

And Christine shrieking.

‘Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!’

He collected the keys to Benoit’s apartment from Ed. It was still in the district of Le Marais, so he wouldn’t be far from Emile when he returned, and if he needed him, he would stay until he was fully recovered. He’d spent most his time at the scrapyard, or looking for Lucas, but tonight he’d needed to see it, to start imagining a new future for himself.

He let himself in, and stood in the silence, still with his coat on, looking around.

The apartment was slightly smaller than Emile’s; the kitchen was separate with a fold out table to
eat on, then a box living room, a small bedroom with a double bed, fitted storage and an en suite bathroom. It was fine. It felt safe.

In the kitchen, he leaned against the counter, blowing air from his cheeks, while he moved a hand to his waist under the layers, under his sweater to his skin.

He wasn’t sure how he’d fallen so hard.

Robert standing close behind him, holding him, hands around his front. If he shut his eyes, he could shut him out. But when he did his lashes were already wet, again, salt water itching on his cheeks.

The door buzzer sounded, an unfamiliar sound making him feel like an intruder in Benoit’s apartment. There was a small balcony from the kitchen and he moved swiftly, keeping his body at an angle and out of view as he looked down at the street, where rain spattered against the empty steps leading up to the building.

The buzzer went again. He moved to the intercom by the door.

‘I’m outside. Let me in.’

His breathing shallowed and he hesitated. The buzzer rang again in a couple of short blasts.

‘Open the fucking door!’

He pressed the release catch, and as he opened the apartment door he could already hear Robert’s feet echoing as he came quickly up the stairs.

Then he was standing there, looking around, his pale eyes glittering, his mouth set.

Aaron stood, shoulders squared. Robert’s hair and coat were scattered with raindrops. There were some on his freckled cheeks, for a moment he felt a ridiculous urge to reach out and brush them away with his thumb.

‘How did you find me here?’

‘I followed you, of course, from the scrapyard. How else would I find you? You’re not answering your phone.’

He’d blocked Robert’s number, the messages each time he’d called sat in a folder in his voice mail, so that every time he looked he had a moment of panic, that he might be tempted to listen, or worse, to call him back.

‘What is this place?’ Robert asked. ‘Somewhere to hide out? What are you hiding from?’

‘Get lost!’

He swung the door to close it, but Robert placed his foot in the way, stopping him.

‘I need your help! Chrissie, she won’t let me see the kids, not even Josh, that’s why I’m here. I know you want nothing to do with me, but she’s got some lawyer making up lies, saying I’m not fit.’

‘Maybe you’re not fit.’

He saw Robert flinch. He knew that it wasn’t true as soon as he said it, Robert was a brilliant dad,
caring, devoted. But he couldn’t think like that because then everything started to get confused in his head. He raised a hand back under his coat to his waist.

‘Remember when Josh took the overdose, and he went to hospital, and then after the social services came around? I’m going to say it was her fault, but I need you to back me up. I need you to make a statement for my lawyer, say that she was neglectful that night, and then in general, not just with Josh, but Doli too.’

‘But, but, she wasn’t neglectful.’

He couldn’t actually look at him, not directly, at his face. It wasn’t his problem how Robert was, he told himself, but, from the corner of his eye, he could see the dark circles under his eyes, the dryness of his lips.

‘OK, I get it, you won’t do it for me, but do it for the kids, they need me. Josh, I tried talking to him on the phone...’

‘Well, surely she has no rights over Josh, can’t you just go there and get him and take him away?’

‘If I do that, she’ll make sure I never see Doli again. Please, I can’t lose either of them.’

He was begging. Somehow, he’d managed to come into the apartment, standing just inside the entrance.

Aaron, though, was struggling. He knew he was close to tears again.

‘But, I can’t stand up in a court, anyway, can I? Think about it, I’m on the run from the law.’

He saw Robert’s face fall, in spite of everything for a moment he wanted to kiss him, hold him and not let go.

‘How did she find out about us? Did she go through your phone?’

He thought about the text messages between them, the photos.

‘It doesn’t matter now, does it?’

Robert looked away. Aaron knew he was right.

‘I need you to go now.’

‘Alright. But first, I want to know one thing.’

Robert put his head around the door to check on Josh. He was lying on the bed limbs akimbo like a star fish, a light sheet thrown over him in the heat. He stepped quietly into the room and placed the back of his hand against his cheek, then, leaning over, he kissed his son. Josh sighed and for a moment, his eyelids fluttered.

The nightmares had stopped. Robert knew that it was because of the time they were spending together every single day. He’d done the right thing for his son, that was all that mattered now.

It was close to midnight and at the bottom of the stairs, Rico held out a frosted bottle of beer.

‘How about we swim? The water will be warm.’
So they went outside and, stepping out of their clothes down to their bathing shorts, they slipped into the pool. The black water felt like silk, blood warm against their skin, and the night sky was filled with stars. Discs of silver light rippled over the surface from the outdoor lighting. They both moved silently, treading water, circling until they were close, calves touching in the depth as they approached each other.

After a while, he felt Rico’s hands tugging at the sides of his bathing shorts under the water, and he helped him, turning his hips, knees, ankles, until he reached down, discarding them completely, tossing them into the darkness onto the decking. He turned back and waited while Rico removed his shorts, too. Then they moved gradually, elbows aloft, into a slightly shallower part of the pool, and gravitated towards each other, until their naked bodies made contact.

Rico reached out and held onto Robert’s arm, dissolving droplets of water on his skin. He reached his other hand into his damp hair and pulled him into a kiss. They breathed through their noses, wet cheeks, jaws, lips touching, circling tongues, caught in a silver halo over the black water. They broke apart.

‘Tonight?’

Instead of an answer, Robert kissed him again, moving his lips down, gliding over his wet collar bone.

Rico gripped his arm and steered him against the weight of the water to the side of the pool.

Robert lay back against the soft wood of the decking as Rico moved his body over him, lavishing more kisses on his mouth, grazing his teeth against his still sun sore nipples. His heart pounded. His body was on fire, and he could hear himself breathing loudly in the silent night. Rico raised himself up, his hand down between their torsos, humming as he took hold of Robert's needy cock, while droplets of water fell onto his skin. Then he moved his hand down, fingering his aching balls, and Robert tilted his hips until Rico was sliding a finger down his seam and, going further, he found his pulsing rim.

Robert looked up over his shoulder, at the ink night sky over the city, at the moon and the stars, and beyond to the vapor breath of the Milky Way.

Memories, conversations, playing out in his head. Questions he needed to let go of. The rain in Paris.

‘You loved Adam, and you forgave him, and you gave up so much, just for him, why couldn’t you forgive me? Did you love him more than you loved me?’

‘But, it’s not the same!’

‘Isn’t it? You tell me.’
Wish you were here - part 2

Chapter Summary

Aaron and Robert struggle in the aftermath of the reveal. Aaron goes to a gay club. Robert resolves to fight for Aaron.

Chapter Notes

TW CW Self-harm
TW CW Blood and a little violence.
At this rate I’ll finish by Christmas so even though this is three months late be kind lol

He leant against the wall on the cobbled pedestrian street in Le Marais, one leg bent up behind him, almost inhaling the first of two hotdogs wrapped in paper, the first thing he’d eaten in days.

Not that he could taste anything, apart from the sting of chili sauce on the corner of his mouth. His tongue felt as if he’d been force-fed with sand after all the whiskey he’d been drinking, day after day. Enough to anaesthetize his brain, you would have thought, well, another epic fail.

In the end it wasn’t the alcohol induced dreams, but Vic who’d snapped him out of it, good ole Vic, he could always rely on her to take no hostages.

‘Have you been drinking, again?’ She’d asked bluntly when he’d answered the phone after another liquid brunch – lunch – tea -dinner. ‘Cos that’s not going to help you get the kids back. Or get Aaron back, for that matter!’

‘I’m on it!’ he’d answered, trying to sound convincing. But he heard her snort; she wasn’t buying it, she knew him too well.

‘Chrissie’s going think you’re a headcase. Honestly, Rob, if she’s got a lawyer saying you’re unfit, prove her wrong!’

He was working on his answer, but couldn’t get it out before she continued.

‘And make it up with Aaron. I don’t know what you did, but I’m pretty sure it was your fault, so apologize. Properly. It’s pretty obvious; you love each other.’

After Vic had ended the call, he’d grabbed a towel and finally taken a long hot shower, the water hissing in the silence of the apartment, and as he worked shower gel down his front over his sore belly, he’d realized that more than anything he needed to eat.

And that was what had sobered him up.

That, and the dream.
It always started the same, only he knew there was more to it. If he could just stay asleep a little longer.

*Aaron’s voice in his head, calling Josh in from outside where he was kicking about with a football in the rain. Josh older, his shoulders wide above a skinny rib cage, and when he called out, ‘Coming Dad,’ he could hear his voice had broken. Aaron turned back to him. He looked into the depth of his blue eyes and kissed him.*

He’d felt himself surfacing and rolled onto his side, momentarily focusing on the empty whiskey bottle by the bed, turning again in disgust, fighting to go back.

*There was a hand holding his, freckles on honey cheeks and rich auburn hair. Doli. She was there too, then, with them, watching Josh as he picked up the muddy football and tucked it under his arm.*

He’d woken up and stared at the silent ceiling, his heart racing. There was still something else, though. Something he was missing. Maybe he’d thought about it longer than he should.

He’d climbed out of bed, tugging at his boxers, pulling a wool cardigan on over his bare chest before moving aimlessly to the kitchen. He’d popped a couple of painkillers out of the packet on the counter, and taken a bottle of water from the fridge, twisting the top open with shaking fingers, looking outside at the tops of the plane trees, motionless above the silent street.

He wanted them back; the kids and Aaron.

He would get them back.

And while his lawyer was working on building a case to get custody of the children, he’d come here, to Le Marais, not just to eat, but to look for Aaron.

Aaron opened the kitchen drawer so rapidly the cutlery inside it bounced, then, gulping for air, he slammed it back into place, and turned dizzily. With a few steps, he was in the bathroom, opening the glass cabinet on the wall. He knew what he was looking for; he’d already thrown some out, but yesterday, on his way home, he’d stopped at the mini market and hovered at the stack of shelves with all the shaving gear, and he couldn’t stop himself, could he?

His lips were closed tightly in a scowl as he reached onto the shelf.

He started to count - *five, six, seven* - his mind was wandering all over the place - *six, seven* – it felt like there was a hot stone wedged somewhere under his rib cage - *seven, after seven, eight, then what? Why was he even in Paris? All these months so far from home, ten, eleven, twelve…, Robert, Robert in his head…., he looked down, saw the blood on his fingers, felt just the beginning of the endorphin rush that he knew would rescue him even if it was just for… – *Shit. Shit!*

He scrambled for his phone in his pocket with his other hand.

‘Aaron? Tu vas bien?’
For a moment he couldn’t speak, he could hear voices, laughter, the scrape and clatter of dishes around a table. It sounded like a crowd. Images of home, his home, his Mum, Paddy, Cain, Zak, Lisa, Belle, Adam.

‘Tu vas bien? Aaron? Talk to me!’

‘Um, yeah,’ Aaron coughed. ‘Fine, I’m fine. Listen, sounds like you’re busy. I’ll call later.’

‘Where are you?’

Aaron looked around the tiny bathroom.

‘Yours.’

There was another burst of laughter. Someone male was singing. Emile said something in French, then the voices faded. Aaron could tell he’d moved, maybe to another room.

‘Drive up and join me here, non? Shut the yard. We can come back together.’

‘I’m fine.’

It was a lie, but maybe just saying it would make a difference. He was fine, he would be fine. He started to slowly uncurl his hand with a grimace, he’d held on too tightly, that was all. A splash of scarlet landed in the porcelain sink. He quietly picked off some sheets of toilet paper, holding them over the wound, then stepped backwards into the living room.

‘Did you pick up the scrap from Corbeil this afternoon, like you said?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How much did you pay? Did you use the cash, or the credit card?’

Emile was asking about the yard, asking for details, following up one question with another, and then another. Aaron knew what he was doing, it was why he’d called. This wasn’t the first time. After a while he could feel himself calming down.

‘I went to the university,’ he volunteered, ‘to ask about Lucas.’

He knew Emile wouldn’t ask, but it was always on his mind.

‘Any joy?’

Of course, he knew the answer, Aaron would have told him right away. He didn’t want to go into detail anyway, it hadn’t been the best of experiences.

He’d found his way to the economics department, then felt too shy to go inside, so he’d stopped some students, stumbling over his French.

‘Connaissiez-vous un étudiant appelé Lucas ? Grand avec des yeux verts.’

They’d shrugged, saying they’d never heard of him. He’d been going to leave, when a group of boys had approached him, speaking in English.

‘Were you asking about Lucas?’

‘Err, yeah? Do you know him? Have you seen him at all?’
‘Who are you? His boyfriend?’ One of the lads had asked. There was something about his tone that should have warned him.

‘Erm, no. I’m a friend of his boyfriend.’

There was laughter, snickering. Aaron stood still. He got it now. Maybe he was just surprised because weren’t these kids supposed to be educated? There were posters up around the campus - respect, diversité. Whatever - he really didn’t care about these idiots.

‘He dropped out months ago.’

‘Ok. Thanks.’

They’d stepped a few paces back, putting more distance between them and him. He knew they were cowards, so he was unimpressed when they spun around again, more laughter, some name calling. One of the lads had bent over, patting his backside, there’d been other gestures.

He’d gone back to the building and reported them to the bloke on the door, not for himself, but maybe there were other kids, like Lucas, dealing with this shit. He could have been a better friend to Lucas, something else to feel guilty about.

Emile interrupted his thoughts.

‘Where’s Ed? Maybe you should go and stay with him until I get back?’

‘Maybe.’

He didn’t want to tell Emile that Ed and Ben had gone away for a romantic weekend. He’d only worry more, so instead he changed the subject.

‘I thought I’d go to the some of the clubs again tonight. Who knows, Lucas might turn up.’

‘OK, but rest, run, and eat first, Aaron, I’ll call you again.’

Rest, sleep, it sounded like a good idea right now. Aaron went into Emile’s bedroom and stripped off his work trousers, leaving them where they fell on the rug, then crept between the sheets.

He winced as he moved a hand under his shabby work sweater which still stank of the scrapyard.

He closed his eyes, struggling to keep away memories.

They were in bed. Josh was at school, Chrissie out with Doli for once. She must have called him, because he’d turned up unexpectedly, walking into the kitchen in his work suit and tie, still smelling of outdoors. He’d taken Aaron by the wrist and led him upstairs without a word, then they’d both undressed until they were naked, watching each other’s bodies, and slipped side by side between the sheets.

A quiet had descended, Robert’s skin cool against his side.

He lay on his back, Robert resting against his elbow, watching his face. Aaron swallowed, then turned his neck to look back at him. He focused on Robert’s lips, trying to breathe. He wanted to be kissed all over, for Robert to read his mind, to just know that that was what he wanted.
He wet his lips and waited, watching his mouth, the curve of his cupid’s bow, the hidden freckles in his bottom lip. Then he did what he’d not done before - he reached his hand up behind Robert’s neck, rubbing his fingers hard through his hair. The back of his neck was tight as he lifted his head off the pillow and pressed Robert’s face downwards towards him.

The first kiss was far too brief. He ached for another, not just his mouth, all of him.

He tried not to think what would happen if Chrissie came home and found them.

Instead he pulled Robert back for a second kiss, scraping his teeth over his lips, he wanted to own him, own his mouth, his tongue, just him, no one else.

Robert raised his face again, his eyes already blown wide like the sea in the dark, reading his expression.

Then he lowered his mouth over his cheek, his jaw, his throat, journeying downwards as Aaron gasped. He moved his hand and held Robert’s ear, watching his blonde head travel over his body, feeling his skin ignite from the brush of his lips, the heat of his breath.

Aaron bent up a leg at the knee as Robert’s mouth touched his belly, angling his body in expectation. Then teasingly Robert stopped and moved back up to kiss his lips again.

Aaron pushed at the side of his face, wanting more.

‘Go on, then,’ he whispered gruffly.

Robert’s ragged laughter exploded in a burst of air against his ear.

‘Only if you turn over.’

The words made him blush, but he rolled onto his stomach, elbows bent, forehead against the sheet below him. He could feel Robert’s breath against his spine. Then Robert was shuffling down the bed on his front, moving up between his thighs.

In the quiet of Emile’s bedroom, he pushed his boxers down to his knees, remembering.

He’d felt Robert’s hands stroke over the large muscles of his clenched behind, and rolled into the mattress with a groan, feeling his tight foreskin move over his trapped erection.

Robert slipped his thumbs into his crack, opening his cheeks. He curled his fingers against the bedsheet.

Emile’s door buzzer went off, grating into the silence.

He turned his face sideways, listening, loosening his fingers.

It was getting dark now. He could hear music starting up in the café below.

His pulse ticked under his wrist.

Nothing.

Whoever it was, they must have given up and gone away. He closed his eyes again.
‘Fuck, Aaron! Fuck!’

Robert’s voice was graveled, his moist breath blew against Aaron’s skin as he swore. Aaron turned his face sideways, waiting, then felt the first pressure of his tongue against him. Robert’s tongue found his rim, and lapped over him. Aaron moved his face back, his shoulders arched and neck bent forwards, as Robert’s tongue continued to stroke over him building current upon current of heat, rippling through him. He tightened his fingers around the bed sheet. Robert set up a rhythm so that Aaron’s whole body moved, the pleasure intensifying.

Robert buried his chin deeper, humming, the sound vibrating through Aaron’s body. His throat felt thick as he swallowed. He could feel himself opening up.

Then Robert backed off and moved up onto his knees. Aaron looked over his shoulder and as their eyes met Robert grinned at him a ridiculous boyish intoxicated grin, and he smiled back under heavy lids, how could he help it?

Robert slapped his side and held his slippery waist, turning him over back onto his back. He shifted his hold to his ankles and manhandled him swiftly, positioning his feet in the air over his shoulders, his open hips raised off the bed.

He felt exposed as Robert looked down over his flushed body, gloating over his straining cock.

Robert put two fingers in his mouth wetting them with saliva as Aaron watched through narrowed eyes.

Then there was a sound from downstairs and all at once he was toppling his thighs down and raising himself up, balancing on his elbows, swallowing fast.

‘What?’

‘Sssh! Shut up!’

They both listened, Aaron ready to spring into action, abandon the love making and to dress quickly in the clothes scattered on the carpet by the bed.

The sound came again, notes getting louder then fading. It was Robert’s phone, left behind somewhere, the living-room or the kitchen.

‘Ignore it.’ Robert whispered. With a sly wink, he reached a hand around Aaron’s cock, and worked him, a persuasive circular motion. ‘Ignore it,’ he repeated.

Aaron let his mouth fall open and nodded. They couldn’t stop now. The phone fell silent.

Robert’s fingers were back in his mouth, then he was wrapping an elbow around Aaron’s knee for leverage. His long fingers finding his rim, padding until they breached the ring of muscle already relaxed from his mouth, and then he twisted and slid inside into his space, fucking into him, back and forth.

Aaron still on his elbows, closed his eyes, rocking against him. His grunts turning to moans until he panted out Robert’s name twice to warn him. He was close.

Then Robert was moving again, shuffling his knees forwards, ripping open a condom and quickly unrolling it over his cock. He tugged at Aaron’s hips so he fell backwards again, and he pulsed
Aaron reached one hand to grasp at Robert’s damp wrist. With the other hand he reached down and helped him to steer Robert’s cock inside.

He ground upwards taking Robert in all the way to his root, owning him, feeling his cock head battering inside him, faster and faster.

Robert stared into his eyes. He wanted to look away, because the longer he stared, the higher his body took him, and it was scary, not knowing the limit of own his body anymore. It was noisy; their breathing and bodies as Robert pounded into him.

Then suddenly Robert stilled. They both stilled. Their eyes remained fixed on each other, and his stomach went rigid. He came blindingly.

‘Impressed?’ Robert had growled later, a mischievous glint in his eyes, climbing back up his body, squeezing his hand over his spent cock as he discarded the condom over the edge of the bed.

He’d laughed quietly back, the corners of his eyes still wet with the euphoria, his heart still pumping sweetly, his limbs still boneless. He licked his top lip, then answered, finding his voice.

‘It was alright.’

‘You’re such a liar. You can say it, you know. I’m the best you’ve had.’

‘Shut up!’

Then Robert had kissed him, back arched, a lover’s kiss, deep and tender, and just for that moment there was no one else in the world.

And then he’d gone to find his phone, and Aaron was left alone, looking up at the ceiling in his au pair’s room.

He reached for the tissues, wiping himself down, then turned on his side and squinted at his phone, setting the alarm for a couple of hours later.

For a moment he lay there. He must have switched off the alarm on his phone and fallen back asleep because it was the door buzzer that had woken him this time. At Ben’s apartment, a week ago, it had been Robert, now he wondered if he was back. But their conversation had been so final, he’d been so clear, he doubted it. The quality of the sound outside had changed as the evening advanced, mixed melodies and beats of music coming from different cafés, and ripples of laughter and applause for street entertainers for the night crowds, probably blowing giant rainbow bubbles through hoops from buckets of soapy water that exploded, vanishing into the air.

He got up, stumbling into his work pants, stripping off the now minging sweater and grabbing a hoodie thrown over a chair, pulling it on over his head. He pressed the intercom and listened.

‘Salut, c’est Paul, l’ami d’Emile.’
He breathed out.

‘Il n'est pas ici.’

‘Je sais, je suis venu te voir, pas lui.’

He frowned and pressed to open the street door, then opened the door to the apartment and waited, listening to the footsteps coming briskly up the stairs.

The bloke looked vaguely familiar, as he came into view. He couldn’t quite place him, but then Emile had so many friends. But the visitor was less hesitant, smiling with kind eyes, he leaned in to kiss Aaron’s cheeks in the French style of greeting.

‘Ca va?’

Aaron blushed, aware he was unwashed, stinking of sleep and sweat and going solo.

But the visitor breezed past him into the apartment, and then took off his jacket.

And that was when Aaron’s mouth fell open.

The tattoo – the mandala sleeve tattoo. Paul was Emile’s fuck buddy, and the last time Aaron had seen him Paul had had his mouth around his dick.

He felt his cheeks flame, not knowing how to meet his eyes.

‘Sorry, but, why are you here again?’

‘Emile, he asked me to come by.’

They were interrupted by Aaron’s phone, the man himself.

‘Look, um, grab a beer from the fridge while I get this, yeah?’

He ducked into the bedroom and answered, not letting Emile speak before hissing down the phone.

‘Why is he here?’

He could hear traffic. Emile must have gone out for his Friday evening, maybe with his brothers or sister.

‘I called Ed, and he’s out of town, and you need company.’

‘What sort of company?’

‘Not that! Or, not if you don’t want. You said you were going clubbing, take him with you.’

When he went back to the living area, Paul was leaning back against the kitchen counter with the beer that Aaron had offered, and another bottle.

He extended his hand to pass it over.

‘Santé!’ Paul grinned, clinking bottles.

Aaron nodded in reply and they both drank. He cast about for something to say, they hadn’t even exchanged a conversation during their last encounter.
‘So, what do you do, Paul? What’s your job?’

‘I work for the railway, at Gar du Nord, as a guard, whistles, platforms, signals and so forth.’

‘Right.’ He didn’t know what else to say. ‘Listen. I need a shower. Then we’ll go out, yeah?’

‘Of course.’

Robert scrunched up the oily paper from the hot dogs and glanced around, searching for a bin. It was almost midnight and the streets were crowded with club goers. A dark-haired bloke with a pale forehead met his eye and winked, and he turned his head in another direction.

And then he saw him.

He was walking swiftly, wearing a warm jacket against the cold, his hands tucked in the pockets.

Robert took a step forwards towards him, and then back again, mumbling an apology as he knocked against a passerby, before looking sharply up again.

Aaron had already disappeared behind another food stall, and Robert held his breath as his eyes scanned the other side. Then he emerged, still moving quickly.

He was about to call out, when he faltered. There was someone with Aaron, a man in his mid-thirties, muscular, attractive. He felt a stab of jealousy. He had no reason to assume they were anything more than mates, and Aaron had been in Paris for months before he started work as an au pair, of course he knew people, had a life that Robert wasn’t a part of. But as he watched them walking side by side, he knew he wanted to be that person.

Then all at once they turned down some steps into a club, and were lost from sight.

He had to decide what to do, but he was already being propelled forwards towards the steps headlong into the dim light and heat, into the closely packed crowd, with the undercurrent of testosterone, and the beat of dance music.

‘Our son is dead,’ She’d said.

A vision of long limbs in motion over him, the rise and fall of a rib cage and staccato breath, dark pink nipples moist with sweat, a pulse beneath the ball of his hand.

He’d called because, well, just maybe Lucas had gone home or had been in touch with his parents.

‘My name is Emile. I am, I was,’ he corrected himself, ‘… your son’s boyfriend. I’m very worried about him.’

‘Our son is dead.’

He’d paused, processing her words, then spoke as kindly as he could.

‘Not dead, no, but missing, in trouble maybe, I’ve reported it to the gendarmerie, and you love him too.’
She’d hung up.

‘Merde!`

Emile’s sister had looked up from crumbling blue cheese over a dish of steamed mussels.

‘You’ll find him.’

He nodded. He wanted to believe her, but time was passing.

There was a cat walk set up for some sort of show, dancers probably, possibly strippers. It was Friday night and this was Paris, and he should have known from the price at the door there’d be some sort of entertainment. He’d been to gay clubs, but only twice before, once with Rico, and that first time when Emile had hit him. But this was the first time since he was out, whatever that meant. He still wasn’t sure. Whatever, right now, he was here for one reason; he was here for Aaron.

He searched the crowd. He could see the bloke who Aaron had come out with at the bar, holding a bottle of beer, but Aaron wasn’t with him. His eyes continued to search, and then all at once someone approached him.

It was the same guy from the street earlier.

He stood too close.

‘Salut! Je t’ai vu plus tôt dans la rue. Je peux t’offrir quelque chose?’

‘No.’ Robert answered shortly, with a dismissive shake of his shoulders. He looked past him, still trying to find Aaron amongst the club goers.

‘Oh! English? Miaou! Alors, let me buy you a drink, non?’ He leaned even closer. ‘I’m not looking for something serious, yes? Maybe I send you in the air? Es-tu actif ou passif?’

This was annoying. Who was this bloke anyway? Couldn’t he see he wasn’t interested? He pursed his lips, about to put him in his place, and then suddenly from nowhere, Aaron was there, one hand in his pocket the other holding a bottle of beer, his chin out and eyes flashing, walking quickly towards him. Robert could tell he wasn’t too pleased.

He wet his lips with his tongue and turned to the stranger.

‘Oh look! Here’s my boyfriend.’

He felt his heart jump, just saying the word. The man was startled for a moment, looking between them.

‘Pardon. My mistake. I thought you were alone.’ He said and turned swiftly, walking away.

‘Boyfriend?’

Aaron was staring at him, incredulous.

‘Alright. No need to go off on one. I had to say something. Anyway, what was he asking, active,
Aaron rolled his eyes.

‘Top, bottom.’

‘Right.’ Robert blinked, processing Aaron’s explanation. ‘But, even if I, when, I mean, I’m not passive.’

Aaron snorted.

‘Don’t worry about it. It’s just the French words for it. Did he ask you that? Did you come here on the pull? Why are you here?’

Aaron voice grew sharp. It was a week now since he’d last seen him, at Benoit’s apartment, and he’d made it so clear that day. He wanted nothing more to do with him and Robert knew it.

‘You loved Adam, and you forgave him, why couldn’t you forgive me? Did you love him more than you loved me?’

‘But, it’s not the same!’

‘Isn’t it? You tell me.’

‘I’m not having this conversation. Just, don’t come near me again.’

And that was how they’d left it. Now he needed to explain. Just like Vic had said. He needed to get Aaron to listen if he wanted him back.

‘No, course I didn’t come on the pull. Look what I just said - boyfriend - well, obviously it wasn’t true, but, you have to know that, what I want is…’

The music struck up loudly drowning his words, and a light show started over the cat walk. The entertainment was obviously about to begin. Robert tried again, speaking louder.

‘I want you. I want you back!’

‘What?’

‘I want…’ He shook his head, this was ridiculous. He gestured with his thumb.

‘Can we take this outside?’

‘What?’

The dancers, toned guys dressed in shorts, were walking onto the stage. They weren’t Aaron’s thing, naturally, but he glanced in their direction, maybe momentarily curious as applause and whistles broke out from the audience.

And then suddenly he was walking swiftly away from Robert who frowned after him with confusion.
Then he realized why Aaron had walked away. Matheo was there, on the edge of the dance floor, grinning at the show while he glanced around, no doubt cruising for talent.

And Aaron was walking towards him.

Robert could see he was already shaking with rage.

It all escalated so quickly

‘Where’s Lucas?’ Aaron shouted at Matheo above the noise.

The volume of the music lowered slightly as someone went on stage, speaking with a microphone, saying something in French about the performance about to begin.

‘Lucas?’ Matheo sneered, shaking his head, one eye still on the podium. ‘Probably selling it in Rue Saint Denis.’

‘You do know this is down to you, you didn’t give a second thought to what was going on in that poor kid’s head.’

‘Oh, there was never much going on in his head. Well,’ He pointed, ‘…not this head.’

And then Matheo laughed and turned away.

It was a big mistake.

The volume of the music picked up again.

Robert saw the second where Aaron looked down at the bottle in his hand, and then he’d raised it and with a single blow brought it smashing down against Matheo’s head.

Matheo staggered, open mouthed as he turned back to Aaron once more, reaching out to some of the bystanders as he tried to steady himself, and then he lost his balance, toppling at their feet a space opening suddenly around him, and Aaron stood there over him, shaking and still holding on to the shattered bottle.

A hand clamped to his waist, steering him away through the crowd to the steps leading out. He tried to shake off the hold, but a low voice hissed at him through teeth.

‘They’ve called the gendarme, and you really don’t want to be around when they get here, do you?’ Then, ‘Drop it, drop the bottle, there, in the garbage.’

‘They’ll find it. It’ll have my prints.’

‘Honestly? You’re worried about prints? Did you count the witnesses?’

A few hundred meters away and they turned into a side street and stopped, and finally Robert released him, letting his arm fall away from his middle.

‘What the hell got into you back there? What were you thinking?’

The adrenaline was still coursing through him.
‘I thought I told you to stay away from me? Oh right. That wasn’t why you were there. You were on the pull.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! I came to find you, of course, I did. And it’s a bloody good job I was there.’

They heard a police siren in the distance, maybe an ambulance.

‘Look, maybe it would be best if you come back to mine. Lie low for a few hours.’

Aaron sneered and shook his head.

‘I’ll take my chances, mate.’

‘But why? Matheo, I mean I know he’s unpleasant and an idiot, but why, Aaron?’

‘This is your fault, too.’ Aaron answered tersely, and for a moment Robert mouthed in confusion before Aaron went on. ‘Lucas was in trouble, Mat got him hooked on drugs and was using him for some pathetic porn stuff, and then Emile managed to get him away, that day, the day that you tried to kill him, and Lucas waited, but when Emile didn’t show he vanished. Now no one knows where he is.’

Robert shook his head.

‘So yeah. Whatever happened to that lad, it’s down to you, Robert!’

‘I didn’t try to kill Emile. I already told you, I meant to scare him, that all. It was accident.’

‘So you said. If he’d died. It would have been murder, Robert. Murder!’

‘Don’t say that. Do you really think that I’m that selfish, that psychotic, that I’d actually want to kill someone? It was an accident.’

This wasn’t what he’d wanted. He hadn’t expected the conversation to turn this way at all. They’d already been over all of this.

‘Anyway. You can talk! After what you just did? Yeah?’ He lashed out, and then immediately regretted it, seeing Aaron face turn suddenly pale.

‘Aaron, I didn’t mean it. I love you’

‘You don’t know what love is.’

‘I do! It’s the way I feel about you.’

He took a step closer to Aaron and when he didn’t move away, he reached forwards. For a moment the back of his hand, his fingers, brushed against Aaron’s. In the dark light, he heard him sigh.

Their eyes met searchingly.

Robert repeated his words from the club, his voice low.

‘I want you. I want you back. More than anything.’

He saw Aaron swallow as he looked back at him. He hadn’t moved away. That had to be a good thing, yeah?

He shuffled closer until he could hear Aaron’s breath, and looked down at his lips, then moved a
hand to the front of his waist.

Aaron flinched away.

Confused Robert looked at his fingers, sticky and wet. Blood? He opened his mouth. There was blood on Aaron’s sweater at his waist.

His first thought was that he must have missed something. That Matheo must have hurt him, or it was glass from the broken bottle.

‘Aaron! You’re hurt!’

Aaron looked down, running a hand over the front of his jacket and sweater. It pulled up, exposing his waist. Robert drew in a breath when he saw the cuts, all fresh wounds. He knew what they were.

‘Oh my God. Aaron! You’re a mess! What have you done?’

‘It’s nothing to do with you.’

Aaron wiped his eyes as tears started to course down his cheeks.

‘You need treatment. Please! Let me help! We can go to the hospital!’

‘Drop dead! I don’t want anything from you!’

‘It’s my fault, isn’t it? Just, just tell me what I can do.’

‘Don’t flatter yourself. And if you want to do something, just stay away from me from now on. I wish I’d never set eyes on you!’

Aaron’s phone vibrated. When he looked he saw a message from Emile.

_I took a ride with a friend and came back to Paris. Where are you? Paul is here and told me what happened at the club. Come home. Please. I lost Lucas. I can’t lose you as well._

‘I need to go.’

‘Aaron, please!’

‘This is the last time, Robert. Please, will ya’ leave me alone. I can’t do this, not anymore.’

‘Aaron, wait! Listen. I think you should go home to England. Go home. Your Mum, she can help you. And Adam’s got a new business. You can work with him. You can get better. You’ll be happy.’

Aaron wiped the back of his hand over his tear streaked face, already walking backwards and putting more and more distance between himself and Robert.

‘You know I can’t do that, Robert. I can’t go home.’
‘You can! I know you can!’

But with a shake of his head, Aaron turned and walked away.

Robert was left in the dark side street. He leaned back against the wall. Vic had been wrong, then. Aaron wasn’t going to forgive him, and it had made him ill.

He’d fallen in love. Maybe for the first time in his life. And now, however painful, he had to let go.

He didn’t want to.

He raised his hands, holding them over his eyes as he leant over, crying there on his own in the dark.

Maybe he hadn’t said the right words.

He hadn’t said how much he missed him, that he felt empty without him. He hadn’t said those things.

But he’d made him ill.

Because he was a terrible person, and he knew it. And Aaron knew it.

He wiped his eyes, drawing himself up.

He’d buy a bottle of whiskey and take it back to the apartment, and drink until he slept.

It was the same dream. It always started the same, only he knew there was more to it. If he could just stay asleep a little longer. He closed his eyes. Aaron’s voice in his head, calling Josh in from outside where he was kicking about with a football in the rain. Josh was older, his shoulders wide above a skinny rib cage, and when he called out ‘Coming Dad,’ he could hear his voice had broken. Aaron turned back to him. He looked into the depth of his blue eyes and kissed him.

There was a hand holding his, freckles on honey cheeks and rich auburn hair, Doli, she was there with them, too. Aaron was smiling, swaying gently. That’s what it was then, what was missing. Aaron was holding something, not something though - he looked back at his eyes and then down into his arms, and his heart soared.

‘Come on, Rob, let’s get him inside.’ Aaron said softly. ‘It’s freezing out here!’

Someone was calling. That must have been why he woke. He squinted at the time, already past four in the morning, and frowned.

And then suddenly he was gripped by fear, holding the phone to his ear with a shaking hand.

‘Chrissie?’
‘You’ve taken him, haven’t you? If you think you’ll ever get to see Doli again after this.’

‘Hold on? What do you mean? Taken him?’

‘Josh - You’ve taken him.’

‘What? What are you saying? Where is he?’

‘Oh My God! I don’t know. I’m so sorry. He was in his room, and then I got up to check on him, because he’s been having those nightmares since, well, since you left, and then, when I looked, his bed was empty, and I searched everywhere. I thought he was hiding, or he’d been sleep walking, but I can’t find him, Robert! I don’t know where he is. He’s gone!’
Letting Go - Part 1

Chapter Summary

Aaron helps Robert search for Josh. Emile has advice for Aaron, but will he take it?
Vic arrives in Paris.

Chapter Notes

mention of self harm and blood cw
as usual ended up splitting what would have been a long chapter into 2 parts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’d found him on the doorstep, suit jacket open, shirt undone at the collar, showing freckles that had multiplied with the new spring sunshine.

He’d held up the car keys he was holding in his hand absently as he spoke, looking not at Aaron at all, but down the street at nothing in particular.

‘Listen, I came to tell you…,’ he started, and then shook his head and for the first time met his eyes. ‘Can I come in? I mean, for a coffee? Just a coffee.’

‘Sure. Why not?’

The elevator seemed to take forever. Aaron shuffled, his work clothes stank, his scruff was too long, his fingers were black. He slipped them in the pockets of his hoodie.

‘And Josh? He’s err…?’

‘He’s fine.’

He nodded, watching the floor counter creep up, exhaled with relief as they lurched to a stop.

He followed Robert’s eyes as he scanned the tiny apartment. He’d seen it before, but just the once, and just in the doorway that time.

‘It’s umm, it’s nice.’

‘Yeah well, I suppose I was over couch surfing. It’ll do anyway.’

He opened a window.

‘Look, would ya mind if I just take a shower? You can get started on the coffee.’ He gestured to the kitchen.

‘Course.’
It was the silence that felt wrong when he stepped out of the shower, a long bath towel tucked in around his waist. He turned his head and listened, then turned the door handle from the bedroom into the living area, looking beyond that to the tiny kitchen.

He’d gone then.

Water dripped from his still damp hair onto his shoulders as they fell. He looked in the kitchen, two empty mugs on the marble counter, a jar of instant coffee like a promontory on a lonely sea.

He gave an involuntary huff, rubbed the knuckle of his thumb across his forehead. He regretted the shower now, regretted the three weeks of silence since they last spoke, regretted the fact that he couldn’t get the image of those new freckles out of his head.

He was so full of regret he didn’t hear the low hum of the elevator coming back up again until the click of the gears on the floor outside. He flung the door open with a scowl of annoyance.

Robert, eyes dancing, arm held high dangling a velvet paper vacuum pack.

‘I can’t believe you’ve lived in fucking France so long and you still don’t buy real coff…’

Aaron interrupted, there was nothing he could do to stop himself, his arms reached up to his lapels, his eyes focused on his lips.

And he kissed him.

There was that moment, Robert’s body stiff with shock, when Aaron thought he was going to be rejected. He scrunched his eyes tight, confusion flaming his throat down to his chest, keeping his lips pressed against Robert’s because he honestly didn’t know what else to do.

Then Robert dropped the coffee, moved both hands to Aaron’s face, and kissed him back - like he’d never stop.

The dust of coffee grounds rose into the air so that ever after the aroma would transport Aaron back to the taste of Robert’s mouth that day.

He raised a foot, half tangled in the falling bath towel, and kicked the door shut behind them.

Later he realized that Robert had come to say goodbye, but at the time he was too much in love to notice. He was still too much in love, maybe he always would be.

‘And does that make you angry?’ His therapist asked.

‘No, he did the right thing. For once.’

‘For…,’ she looked at her notes, ‘… Josh?’

‘Absolutely.’ He looked at her as if challenging her not to see it as he saw it.

‘But what about you?’
Three Weeks previously....

Emile folded the waistband of Aaron’s jogging pants right down, until they rested below his hip bones. Aaron’s sweater was discarded next to him on the sofa.

He watched his older friend in silence, taking in the dark curls of his bowed head, his tongue at the corner of his mouth as he concentrated.

He loved him. He knew it was soft, but there it was. He didn’t love many people, but this one, yeah, this one was a keeper. He was a good man, one of the best.

And okay, maybe the lines had got blurred a bit sometimes, like now, as his efficient fingertips messed with his love trail. He shifted slightly where they were sitting, hoping that he hadn’t noticed.

Emile raised his eyes suddenly, as if he’d read his mind.

‘They look a little better, non?’

He looked down. Emile lifted the last dressing over the cuts on his belly. Black stitches like cat’s whiskers, but yes, the redness had gone down.

He picked at the residue of grey glue on his skin, only to have his hand steered firmly away.

‘Don’t touch! You’ll make the infection worse!’

Emile pulled out a surgical glove from the box on the table and flexed his fingers as he stretched and snapped it on. Then he reached for the tube of antibiotic cream and squeezed out some of the yellow ointment.

At the hospital, they’d talked to him about therapy.

‘I’ll be fine,’ he’d said later to Emile as they made their way down the corridor to the car park exit.

‘All the stuff with Robert, I let it get to me.’

Emile had shrugged. Aaron knew he was angry even though he was doing his best to hide it.

‘This isn’t because of Robert. This is about you. You have to accept it and get some help like the doctor said, non? C’est tout ce qu’on peut en dire.’

Aaron knew he was right. He’d call and make an appointment… tomorrow.

Now Emile unwrapped a couple of fresh gauze bandages.

From the coffee table, Aaron’s phone vibrated. Emile picked it up and passed it over. He looked at the screen and frowned - Victoria. It was a couple of days since the incident in the night club, and he knew Robert had been calling him, even though his number was blocked. He could see the notifications diverted to a folder in his messages. Now Robert was getting Vic to call on his behalf.

It was low, but it was Robert.

He tossed the phone back onto the table unanswered, avoiding Emile’s eyes.
Emile gently folded the waistband of Aaron’s joggers back up and removed the surgical gloves.

‘Put your top back on, you don’t want to get cold. And if you’re going to do something about that, use a towel.’

He slapped his cheek playfully with a grin as Aaron colored. Emile had noticed his semi arousal. It must be his raised temperature still from the infection.

‘You’re horny. It’s human. Tell me if you want some help,’ Emile added with a wink over his shoulder as he limped over to the kitchen to put the first aid kit away.

Technically they were both single, but the problem was, no matter what he said, it was Robert’s hand he missed, Robert’s mouth, Robert’s heat.

‘You’re not driving, are you?’

He was snuggled down under a blanket, eyes half closed, watching a replay of some international match on the TV.

Emile had huffed and grumbled about being low on groceries, and then announced he was going out.

‘Give me a minute. I’ll change and come with you.’

‘I’ll be fine. You rest, non? Let those antibiotics do their job.’

It was the buzzing of the intercom that woke him. Emile no doubt wanting a hand to carry up the shopping.

He threw off the blanket and staggered up, pressing the button.

‘Alright. Give me a sec and I’ll be right down.’

He looked around, searching for his running shoes. The buzzer went a second time.

‘Alright!’ he muttered aloud, hopping as he pulled his trainers on over his heels. The buzzer went a third time.

‘Aaron Roberts? C'est la police nationale. Pouvez-vous nous laisser entrer ?’ He reeled, trying to catch his breath. It must be the bottling at the club. They’d caught up with him.

They were going to arrest him, fingerprint him, find out who he really was, that he was on the run. It was over.

Within minutes he could hear their footsteps on the stairs. He picked up his phone and slipped it into the pocket of his jogging pants, keeping hold of it.

There were two uniformed officers, both women.

He bit his bottom lip, looking at their faces.

‘You are Aaron Roberts? Can we come in? We want to ask some questions about Joshua
Sugden. You worked with the family as an au pair, non? He went missing from his home on Friday night. We wondered if you can tell us anything that might help us and his family with our search.’

Aaron raised his arms, pressing his fingers into his forehead.

‘Josh…? Yeah, of course. Anything,’ he choked. ‘What do ya need to know?’

When they’d gone he paced the small living room twice, then took his phone and pressed call.

‘Aaron?’

It was half yelp, half sob.

He felt his own face start to fold, forced himself to speak.

‘Where are ya?’

He listened to Robert’s answer.

‘Okay, jus, wait there, right? I’m on my way.’

Emile drove out to the airport. He hadn’t told Aaron where he was going, because, well, some things were private. And anyway, Aaron had enough to cope with.

It was the first time he’d driven since the accident and he tried to ignore the twinges of pain running down from his thigh as he negotiated the relentless Paris traffic. He didn’t need to go to the airport; he wasn’t meeting someone off a plane or going somewhere.

But he was running out of places to look.

‘Connard!’

He swore under his breath at a Range Rover that cut in front of him at the turn off, then followed the crawling line of traffic until he was in front of the arrivals lounge, where he wound down a window, placing his elbow there, and started to look, not at the visitors fresh off their planes spilling out of the terminal, but towards the other side of the road, the concrete access to the short stay car park, the bus stops.

At last, he saw what he was looking for in one of the Espace Fumeurs - lads, four or five of them, and, with them, sitting with an arm thrown back over the hard-plastic seat, an older guy who had to be their pimp.

They weren’t so pretty, these boys, just pasty, regular youths still with some puppy flesh. They were dressed in shabby sweatpants low on their hips, loose zip up jackets, easy to undress.

He was hit first with relief that Lucas wasn’t amongst them, and then crushing disappointment.

But he wasn’t done yet.

The lads were horsing around, in their hands king size drink cartons, probably laced with something stronger.
He moved his arm, letting his hand drop down outside the open window of his car, and then raised his first finger in a signal, still looking ahead at the road.

He pulled his arm back in, and glanced sideways: it had worked, one of the boys made eye contact and he nodded. Next thing his passenger door had opened and closed, and the lad was sitting next to him, smelling faintly of sweet alcohol, tugging on the seat belt.

Two women weaved in front of the car on their way to the car park pulling a case, one of them he recognized as the driver of the Range Rover.

‘Where do we go?’ Emile asked the lad once the road was clear.

‘I’ll show you.’

Robert sat in his car, his fingers curled over his lips. He was fighting against nausea, dizziness, the minute by minute surge of adrenaline that in turn sharpened his focus and left him exhausted.

He’d been driving since the previous morning, following a plan; the route to the school, the park where Josh and Aaron played football, the Rugby stadium, later making wider sweeps, the Trocadero gardens, and the route to the Seine. He traced back and then retraced each road. Every so often he parked up and went on foot, following footpaths, passing under bridges, circling the concrete skirts of the sports arena. His shoes slipped on damp grass, his eyes and ears alert to every movement, every sound.

Wherever he was, he was plagued with the idea that he was in the wrong place. Each time his phone rang he had this spike of hope and dread that almost choked him.

The morning before, when Chrissie had first called, he’d gone straight to the house, arriving moments before the police, just enough time to run upstairs, scan Josh’s room and then go in to Doli.

He’d lifted her and she’d cried at being woken up, then cried more loudly when she recognized him, pushing his face away.

‘Alright, my girl, alright. I love you so much. I missed you too,’ he’d murmured softly, but holding her firmly, one hand on her back as she arched away. She’d stilled, grabbing the material at the front of his shirt in a fist, then buried her head against his battered leather jacket.

Chrissie was weeping too.

‘This is my fault,’ she’d kept saying.

He’d wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close until her head rested against his other shoulder.

‘You got thin,’ she’d said. ‘You haven’t been looking after yourself.’

Now, all the while he was searching, something else was going on, some deep level processing he couldn’t stop; Josh, Aaron, two threads twisting and lengthening together, unwinding from a spool in his head.
‘What is your son like? Describe him,’ the police inspector had asked.

‘He’s hyperactive, impulsive a lot of the time,’ Chrissie had answered.

Robert raised his eyebrows. ‘He’s actually really smart…’

‘He took some medicine when he knew he shouldn’t, and we had to take him to hospital, he damaged his liver, it’s better now but…’

‘That was a mistake. He wasn’t feeling well so he was trying to deal with it, like a grown up, he got it wrong, but - that was down to us.’

‘He got in some fights at school, they suspended him.’

‘He’s a kind, loving little boy.’

‘And he’s anxious, he has nightmares, sleepwalks…’

‘He was in a traffic accident when he was younger, his mother died, she bled to death and when the emergency services got there they said he was still trying to wake her up, I mean, he’s very brave, and anyway, he’s getting better.’ Robert had stood, spreading his hands. ‘Look, he’s just a regular kid. He likes football, cars, I mean, he collects shells and fossils and, and… those snow shaker things for fuck’s sake. Just, please, I need to find my son!’

He closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the car head-rest.

Emile followed the boy’s directions and after about fifteen minutes they were on the edges of an industrial estate, stopping under a railway bridge. Emile knew the place, it wasn’t so far from his scrapyard.

As he killed the engine, the lad was already slipping down his running pants, tucking underwear under his balls.

He reached a hand over to Emile’s belt, but Emile caught his wrist.

‘Wait.’

He could see the annoyance on the boy’s face, maybe a glimpse of anxiety, fear even. Of course, he wanted to get this done, get back to his crew, get back safe.

Emile guessed he was not yet twenty.

He showed him some money, not enough to scare him, then put it back in his shirt pocket.

‘I’m looking for someone, if you answer me honestly, this is yours, okay?’

The lad pulled his clothes back up.

‘Es-tu un keuf?’*

‘Non.’
‘Un père?’

‘Non,’ he answered again, this time with an eye roll, ‘I’m looking for my lover.’

He didn’t know if his explanation would help, or not.

‘Does he want to be found?’

‘Do you have a girlfriend? Yes?’ He watched the boy’s face. ‘If she was missing, you would want to find her, right?’

He didn’t answer. Emile nodded and started to show photographs from his phone; Lucas out in the city, at home drinking coffee, on the bed with fuck me eyes meant just for him, now the object of strangers, but he showed them just in case.

The boy wet his lips.

‘Yeah, maybe I saw him somewhere.’

‘Where?’

He had a young prostitute in his car, and he knew he was lying for the money.

‘Somewhere. Let me think.’

He could offer more money, what was the kid going to do with it? Hand the regular to the pimp, spend the rest on drugs? He could ask where his family was, how he’d fallen into this profession, offer advice, no, more, call the police even. Anything. Or nothing. It was futile; he’d been here before.

He turned his face to the boy, pulling the money out of his pocket again.

‘It’s okay - you don’t know.’

The passenger door was already open as the lad made his escape.

Emile restarted the engine, his leg protesting.

There was a tapping at the window. He pressed the switch to wind it down again.

‘I pray that you find him, monsieur.’

Another catholic boy then.

‘Thank you,’ he answered.

He looked at his phone, a message from Aaron.

*I’m with Robert- Explain later*

Chrissie put Victoria’s suitcase in the back of the Range Rover.

‘It’s really good of you to come,’ her voice was teary. Vic gave her a quick hug.

‘Course I was going to come, as soon as Rob called me, there was never any question. I just wish
we had some good news by now.’

‘What if they never find him?’

‘They will, they have to!’

‘I’ve had your room made up, everything’s so chaotic, but Doli’s excited to see you, and I thought we could order food if that’s alright with you?’

‘Err, yeah, but, about that. You see, Robert’s asked me to go to his place. He wants me to sort it out he said, get it ready for Josh… I thought I could pack some of his stuff, clothes, toys and books an that, make it feel cosy. I can take a cab…’

‘But, Josh needs to come home.’

‘I think, with everything, Robert wants to look after him now, not because you haven’t been, of course. And I know you’ve been working with lawyers about custody and that, but, this has changed things, don’t you think?’

Vic bit at her bottom lip, looking across at Chrissie’s face as she negotiated the traffic.

‘You know, it has changed things, put things in a different perspective,’ Chrissie answered. ‘And I’ve been thinking, maybe I should give Robert another chance. What do you think?’

There was a knock on the car window.

Another breaking wave of adrenaline, Robert raised his head, blinked, and leaned over to look.

It was Aaron.

He opened the passenger door and Aaron climbed in. He turned and they both reached out, cheeks colliding, holding on tight. Aaron curled fingers into the back of Robert’s jacket.

‘I’m alright.’

But Aaron kept holding him.

‘Aaron, please, yeah?’

Aaron nodded. He understood. Robert was trying to keep it together and it wasn’t helping. They both sat back, Aaron wiping a hand quickly over his face.

‘You’ve not slept.’

‘I’ve been everywhere, again and again, the school, the park ….’ Robert listed the places he’d been.

‘Come on, I’m here now. We’ll look together.’

‘It would be better if we split up, you take your car, we can cover more places.’

‘You’re not fit to drive.’
‘I am.’

‘Look, I’m not arguing about this Robert, I’m telling you, you’re a hazard, now shift over will ya!’

He’d already opened the passenger door again and then walked round the car, ducking into the driving seat as Robert slid across, and with a quick check to familiarize himself with the controls of the silver Porsche, he started the engine.

After a couple of hours of searching, Robert was deteriorating.

Aaron swung into the forecourt of a fast food restaurant, he’d barely parked up, when Robert had opened the door, and leaning out, started dry heaving onto the tarmac.

Aaron ran a hand up between his shoulders.

‘I’m fine.’

‘I know right?’ Aaron snorted. ‘Just sit there. I’ll get us some coffee, something to eat wouldn’t go amiss.’

When he came back, Robert had lost the fight and finally fallen asleep. Aaron took out his own coffee and a carton of French fries and then slipped the paper bag of remaining food onto the back seat.

He balanced the fries on the steering wheel, taking a bunch and chewing them quickly, then sipped at the scalding coffee, looking out into the dark, thinking about Josh.

It had started to drizzle, and the temperature was dropping as night told hold.

Robert’s head lolled against the headrest. And then his eyes opened and he frowned. His voice was half slurred when he spoke into the quiet.

‘What about you? I didn’t ask. It was bad Friday night.’

Aaron pressed his lips together, still looking ahead, just a fraction of a nod.

‘I’m alright. I went to the hospital with Emile.’

‘Good.’

Robert moved his hand over onto Aaron’s lap, looking for his. He laced his fingers through Aaron’s. When Aaron tried to wriggle free, Robert held on tighter.

‘Alright! - I know you don’t want me, but… a truce, yeah?’

‘It’s not that, it’s err, I’ve got grease from the fries.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I don’t mind greasy fingers.’ For a moment there was a flash of the Robert he was more used to, then his eyes closed again.

Aaron looked at their hands.

He felt a tear run down over his cheek until he could taste the salt on the corner of his mouth. They were disastrous, they were toxic to each other, and even worse than that - they were literally dangerous to others, they could never work together, and it was ridiculous to want it, but even so, even when he knew all that, why did Robert’s hand feel like home?
Someone flashed him with headlights. It was waiting only, and they wanted to park. He raised his coffee and took another sip, with a steely glance in the rear view mirror. He wasn’t going anywhere thank you very much, he shifted his shoulders slightly against the seat to get more comfortable, not until Robert woke up.

Aaron looked at his watch. he knew the session was nearly over for this month. That he'd come back for another, that with each visit he was getting healthier and stronger.

He seemed to have talked a lot about Robert this time. Some sessions he reckoned he hardly mentioned him at all.

‘So does that make you angry?’ His therapist asked. ‘That he left like that?’

‘No, he did the right thing. For once.’

‘For…,’ she looked at her notes, ‘… Josh?’

‘Absolutely.’ He looked at her as if challenging her not to see it as he saw it.

‘But what about you?’

It was always that question. That was the one that made the waterworks start. Even when he’d promised himself that he wouldn’t this time around. He wiped at his eyes.

‘What about me? He loved me, like nobody’s ever loved me. Other people don’t see it, but I do. If he hadn’t gone, I wouldn’t be here now. I’d still be in Paris.’

Chapter End Notes

* ‘Es-tu un keuf?’ - are you the police?
Chapter Notes

cw reference to previous recent self-harm
There is no criticism with regards to timing that you could level at me that I haven’t already leveled at myself, probably also content haha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wedding venue was lavish, white linen under a canopy of delicate vines in the dining room, and outside in the rose garden where the ceremony would take place, a gravel path led past sculptures and a fountain stocked with golden carp.

It was hard to imagine this was the heart of Paris, except for the intermittent sound of airplanes overhead leaving from Charles de Gaulle airport.

Aaron fidgeted in his hire suit. His new black dress shoes, his one concession, pinched his feet. He’d already scuffed them on a flower plinth as he stood aside looking beyond the flow of arriving guests.

He caught a glimpse of blonde hair, knew instantly it was someone else and turned abruptly away.

He found a row that still had a vacant seat, not apologizing as rugby players with their wives or girlfriends were forced to stand while he made his way past.

They’d been in bed when he’d asked.

‘What? A gay wedding? Are you serious?’

It was the way he said gay, drawing back his lips that not long since had been worshipping the width of Aaron’s cock.

‘Do you want me to let you in on a little secret? There’ll be guests there who aren’t gay.’

‘But with you, you mean, as a plus one?’

‘Not with with me, obviously…’

He’d started to backtrack, the color rising in his face. He wished he hadn’t even brought it up. The word boyfriend popped uninvited into his head and then, rejected, lodged like indigestion between his ribs.

‘There’s bound to be lots of press there,’ Robert added, still watching him.

‘Never mind, forget it.’

He’d swung his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his jogging pants, but Robert had pulled his hand out from under the sheet, catching his wrist.

‘Wait!’
Robert’s eyes were flecked with amber reflecting the night sky of Paris. And after a moment, he’d leaned over, sighing silently into the kiss.

Robert had been right though - alongside the rows of seats there were journalists and photographers checking equipment, or already taking snaps of the sports celebrities and other noteworthy Parisians.

He wriggled his fingers into the pocket of his suit pants and pulled out his phone. He’d promised Emile he’d take pictures and send them to him at the rehab clinic where he’d been camped out for the last few weeks.

In front of him a little girl resting on her father’s shoulder watched him solemnly. When their eyes met, she turned away, reaching instead to touch her mother’s hat.

‘Maman, c’est tellement joli, je peux le porter? Maman...’

She reminded him of Doli. He imagined her there in some frothy dress, Josh following her with grave eyes under white eyelashes, pushing back his hair in that way he had. Robert sharp jawed on the seat beside him, the certain pressure of his thigh while they waited.

Another plane arced across the sky.

He turned his head looking around again. There were some acquaintances from when he and Ed had been together, but he didn’t really know anybody, not properly. He shouldn’t have come at all.

Then there was a hush, and everyone stood up. A swell of applause, and the cellos struck up festive chords, people holding up their phones to film. The little girl raised her voice and pointed.

‘Maman, regarde! C’est oncle Benoit!’

The grooms had arrived.

Aaron looked through the lens of his phone, Emile would ask to see this.

He frowned, trying to steady his hand, Ed and Ben in blue wedding suits with button holes. Aaron puffed out a smile - Yes! Ed was glowing. He played with the zoom with his thumb, trying to capture his face, too close – too distant – better – and then the whole image obscured by some daft prick climbing on a seat to get a better look.

He moved his hand sideways. The sun struck the screen so that all he could see was light reflecting on the grey black surface. He angled it again, and the moving outline of Ben’s profile came into view.

And then the shock, his undisciplined heart seeming to skip a beat.

Because he was there.

Instead of a suit he was wearing jeans and his patterned blue weekend shirt; the one he wore to take the kids out on day trips, that he’d been wearing the first time they met, when Chrissie brought him home from the airport. And just like that day, over it, his black leather jacket, hands hidden in the pockets.

He hadn’t seen him yet, scanning the guests on the opposite side of the aisle.

And then he turned his head and Aaron felt his body captured in his gaze for a moment before their
eyes met. He swiveled round and landed somehow on his seat.

The little girl in the row in front pulled on her ribbons, he watched them unraveling.

Ed and Ben exchanging vows, and words like love and life and forever drifting over the garden against the distant hum of another jet engine above. His skin under his tight shirt felt sticky with the heat, but he closed his eyes – nothing mattered anymore - Robert was there and maybe finally they were going to get their happy ever after.

‘Didn’t think you did gay weddings?’

He’d followed the surge of guests. There would be half an hour and then the wedding breakfast. Some stray confetti had blown onto his suit jacket, and Robert extracted his hand from his pocket, raised his fingers to Aaron’s shoulder, gently brushing it off.

‘Thought I’d jilt you at the aisle?’

‘Just didn’t think you’d remember to be honest.’

‘The other night, in the kitchen, the invitation was on the fridge.’

Boom! there it was - the scent of coffee. Aaron blushed remembering, played with the gravel with his shoe.

‘How’d you get in anyway, you’re not dressed for it? You’ll need a tie for the dining room. Maybe we can ask a waiter or something, they’ll keep spares, won’t they? What do you think?’

He took too long to answer. Aaron saw clouds race overhead.

‘I’m not stopping.’

‘Somewhere to be?’

Aaron felt his heart thud warningly as Robert looked down.

Then he’d stepped in, pulling him close, fingers pressed against his back. There, in that public place he felt the kiss as their cheeks collided. He kept his eyes open, guests passing them as they made their way to the wedding breakfast. And then Robert let go.

Nearby the bells of Sainte Antione started ringing as he watched him walk away.

A Few Weeks Earlier...

How do you get inside a child’s head, see things, through his eyes?
'I ran away once myself, you know, when I was around Josh’s age.'

‘Did you?’

Robert opened his eyes a fraction. He could see Aaron’s hand resting on the gear stick still in neutral, the long sleeve of his black top pushed up to just below his elbow. He wanted to touch his forearm, take strength from it. Suddenly, inappropriately, he had a memory of Aaron’s fingers inside him, felt a longing that cut off his air supply.

He turned his head, looking out of the window at the side streets in the arrondissement where they were still parked.

Aaron had once dropped Josh here to play with a pal from school, so they’d come on the off chance. It was all very vague. If they’d seen or heard anything from Josh, surely, they’d have been in touch with the police. But vague was all they had right now.

The family were still at breakfast when they’d rung the bell at the gate, caught on camera while Aaron explained they weren’t selling anything, Robert already stiff backed. A young woman had answered the door, a man quickly coming to her side. He’d put a proprietary arm around her shoulder and looked them up and down while Aaron addressed them in his broken French.

They looked... what? Normal? Robert could hear the fluting tones of a child Josh’s age as he played inside, in the background the soundtrack of a kid’s film from a screen somewhere.

Jack’s voice, in his head: -

‘What’s wrong with you?’

He’d walked back to the car, fists bunched in the pockets of his leather jacket, leaving Aaron on the doorstep. He’d climbed in the passenger seat. When Aaron moved in beside him, he’d kept his eyes shut.

‘They don’t know anything.’

‘I told you they wouldn’t.’

He couldn’t lose hope.

*How do you get inside a child’s head, see things, through his eyes?*

‘I was eight, so a bit older than Josh, Dad and my mum were going through it, Vic had been in hospital and Mum got depressed, and I don’t know, maybe she pushed Dad away. Then she got a job and he went all weird on her, all I can remember is the fighting. I would sit on the stairs and listen to them having shouting matches, try to make sense of the words.’

‘All I wanted was for it to stop, but it didn’t, so in the end I ran away.’

Aaron’s hand touched his knee briefly. He followed it with his eyes when he moved it away.

‘Three days. I hid out in a barn, and there was this old ex-army bloke, Derek was his name. He looked out for me, he talked and he listened, unlike my family at the time. Anyway, in the end he was the one who got me to see sense and go home.’

‘And then my Dad let me down. He got Derek sent down, even though I begged him not to. He wouldn’t listen. And I lost my belief in him somehow, nothing was ever quite the same after that.’
In his peripheral vision he saw Aaron shake his head.

‘I let Josh down, didn’t I?’

‘No.’

‘I wanted to be a better person, but I’m just the same. I messed up and I let everyone down, Josh, Chrissie, Doli…’ he glanced sideways at Aaron’s serious face. ‘… you.’

He could feel the tightening around his chest, thought about opening the car door, but where would he go? And then Aaron shifted and his strong arms wrapped around him, and even though he knew he didn’t deserve his comfort, he ducked his head down, burying his face in the warmth and scent of his neck.

---

Emile stood over the toilet bowl, leaning his hips forwards as he peeled off the sticky condom, letting it fall into the water where he flushed it away. He waited a moment to assess his bladder.

Over his shoulder he could see the reflection of a sleeve tattoo in the mirror above the sink.

‘You can take a shower, yes? You know where the towels are?’

In the bedroom he changed the sheets, then opened a drawer and took out track suit pants. He winced as he pulled them on, his leg was healing, but kneeling for sex didn’t help. RICE Aaron kept reminding him - rest, ice, compression, elevation and that means leg up not leg over, he’d warned him sternly. He wouldn’t have approved. He smiled ruefully - he wasn’t sure he approved himself.

He hobbled over to the kitchen, putting coffee beans in the grinder, then opened the fridge door and peered in at the emptiness. He still hadn’t done that shopping.

‘I have pasta I can heat up if you’re hungry?’

Paul had emerged, drying his hair.

‘Any news about Lucas?’

‘Non. Nothing. Vanished. What do the police think they are doing? Collecting parking tickets when there are people in trouble.’

Emile scowled, he’d had a fine in the post, and it hadn’t helped his deteriorating mood, and what with the pain, and the text from Aaron saying he was with Robert yet again, he’d called Paul over with no clear plan, even though the plan was always the same in the end.

‘Did I tell you about how we met? The first time? I’d had breakfast in the café on Rue de Turenne, you know the one?’

Paul nodded.

‘So I was on my way back, and on the corner there was a bus creeping forwards at the lights with the doors open, and there he was on the step, unzipped anorak, black hair long enough to hold in your fist, and a mouth much too big to match the size of his dick trapped in jeans. And then our
eyes met and I realized he’d seen me checking him out.’

‘When the bus started to move, he jumped off, and maybe caught his foot or something because he fell, legs bending like rope.’

‘And I caught him, my hands just above the waist. He smelt of Paris and…. youth, you know?’

‘So, you took him home.’

‘No, he was a polite boy, he said Merci monsieur, picked up his bag and walked away down the street, but after a distance he turned and looked back. I mean he looked …’ Emile gave a low laugh, ‘…so I knew who he was at least.’

‘Then about three weeks later I went to a friend’s place to play cards and he was there. Now and then I looked up, and I liked the feeling that he was in the room. He was quiet. He always is.’

‘The night went on, I think I lost some money, and then I went to find the bathroom and next thing he’d followed me. I pushed open the bathroom door and instead of waiting he came with me into the room, unfastened his jeans and we were pissing side by side.’ Emile chuckled, ‘…So I’m there, with my knees trembling a little, my mind racing, I’m trying not to think what it would be like if I put my fingers in his flow, if he accidentally soaked my balls right to left, left to right. Then he was done and fastened up, washed his hands in the sink, and left me there alone.’

‘But now he was under my skin. Every day, I ate breakfast on the Rue de Turenne, watching the buses that passed by. I started having conversations with Khalid again in my head, you’d like him too, I’d tell him.’

‘More weeks passed, then I was running one morning and he passed me on his bike, so I found some courage and called out, how about breakfast together I said. He told me he was on his way to a lecture and I stood and watched him cycle away down the street. Enough, I said to myself, enough.’

‘But he must have cycled round the block because he came up behind me, said he could do lunch.’

‘And after a few dates more I invited him home. He’d only had a couple of lovers before during high school. We took our time. It was special, non?’

Emile put down the mugs of hot coffee on the table in front of the sofa.

‘You love him.’ Paul said.

‘I never told him that.’

‘Sorry, did I make you uncomfortable?’

Robert sat back.

‘Don’t be daft.’

Aaron rolled his eyes. He would have gladly held on. For a lifetime. But he couldn’t tell him that.
There were kids with skateboards, launching themselves into the avenue under the lime trees. They both watched through the closed windows of the car.

He had a memory of racing quad bikes over the heather on the moor with Adam, the big sky, his infectious laughter over the pop of the engines. After, the mud, Moira scolding, raiding the fridge at Butler’s for ice cold beer, Adam’s pajamas flapping round his thighs while the washing machine ran a short cycle.

‘Maybe were all runaways, of a sort,’ he offered.

‘That’s deep, Sigmund, you’ll be writing a column next.’

‘I meant us.’

Robert wet his lips, looked away so he could only see his profile.

‘Yeah well, no more running away for me. All I need is my son back, and that’s it, then. My children are the only thing, the only thing that matters from now on.’

Aaron swallowed.

‘Good.’

Robert turned and for a moment their eyes met. Their worlds had collided, and there’d been so much collateral damage, but it was time for it to stop. No more blame, just Josh now.

They both nodded under lowered eyes, and Aaron started the engine.

‘Where are we going?’

‘To keep searching. And we’ll find him this time.’

Then Robert’s phone started ringing.

For a moment they both ignored it.

'Is it the police?”

He thought it was a bundle of rags, and then it moved. So he thought maybe a cat, or a stray dog that had somehow made its way down into the darkness and warmth, though he wasn’t sure how, because surely it couldn’t have come on the elevator or the car lift, maybe an air vent then, but really, it wasn’t his problem, and right now not his priority.

He pressed the remote to unlock the car and heard the soft thud of the release mechanism, and then looked down one last time to watch his footing on his way in the dim light.

He saw his eyes first, indigo blue, half hidden by the hood of an anorak pulled down low over his face, and then the shape of sharp cheek bones, silver in the shadows.

He sucked in his breath.
A child, it was a child.

He hunkered down, almost toppled sideways on his leg where the muscles were torn.

The child’s eyes turned pale and dilated as they looked back at him, and he spoke as gently as he could.

‘N’ayez pas peur ! Est-ce que quelqu'un sait que tu es ici ? Es-tu perdu ? Es-tu fuyant ?’

‘J'attend mon père, il viendra bientôt.’

Emile frowned. He could hear the child spoke French with an accent. He looked around the dark car park unsure what to do.

‘Depuis combien de temps attends-tu ?’

He moved a hand to his pocket to find his phone, he should call the police.

He saw the child startle at the movement.

‘Why don’t we call your father? What’s his number?’

‘I don’t remember.’

The child wrapped fingers round a filthy back pack. Emile saw his eyes shift towards the lift shaft; he was going to run, and if he did, he wasn’t sure whether he could catch him.

He stood very slowly and side-stepped, positioning himself between the boy and the elevator.

Then the child pointed behind him.

‘Regards! Mon père !’

He turned to look, and the child bolted.

He dropped his phone so that it landed with a clatter and skated over the concrete ground and scooped the child up in his arms.

He was light like a bird, but writhed frantically, and swung the backpack high so that it hit the side of Emile’s face, and he let out an involuntary growl, not at that, but at the pain in his leg as he tried to keep his balance.

He couldn’t hold him. He felt the child slipping from his grasp, his hood falling back and exposing the shock of white blonde hair.

He crouched, picking up his backpack, and started to run.

Suddenly, Emile knew who he was. He’d seen him at the barbers just once. Even if he hadn’t, he would have known from the features of his face.

‘Joshua!’ His voice echoed in the dark underground carpark, ‘Je suis l’ami d’Aaron!’

Josh stopped in his tracks and turned, eyes wide, still walking backwards.
It wasn't the police, it was Vic. Calling to ask if there was any news yet.

'Have the police called?' she asked.

'Well they can't call, can they, if you're keeping the line busy!' 

'Alright. And listen I'm doing the groceries shopping is there anything Josh doesn't like?' 

'Spinach,' Robert and Aaron chorused. 'And eggs,' Robert added, 'He'll eat the white...'

'...but he doesn't like the yellow,' Aaron finished his sentence for him, eyes on the road. 'He's a really picky eater to be honest.' 

'Well they don't sell them separately now, do they?'

'Get off the line, Vic.'

In the silence that followed, Aaron glanced sideways at Robert, saw his jaw clench, his face the color of white paint. He wished he could do more, knew he was locked in a private agony, until they found Josh.

'Son capain? T’es un putain de menteur! il aime mon père!' 

'Not boyfriend, friend.' Emile switched to English quickly, trying not to reflect on Josh’s impressive ability to swear in French, ‘I know your dad, Monsieur Sugden, non? I have his number, we can call him, Wait! Wait there!’

He eyed his phone on the ground.

'If you know him, then, what does he look like?'

‘Okay, well, he’s very handsome, non?’

Josh was watching him intently.

‘And clever. And strong too - except sometimes he doesn’t believe it himself, but the truth is he’s really strong where it matters most, here, in his heart.’ He bumped his chest with his fist to show Joshua what he meant. ‘And if he loves someone, he doesn’t let go.’

He saw Joshua nod, and smiled back then grimaced as he bent a knee to reach his phone. He took the pressure on the ball of his hand and crept his fingers forwards, eyes still fixed on where Josh was waiting.

Then his fingers found something that wasn’t his phone, and he glanced down for a second. It was a gold chain, a necklace with Arabic script.

His hand closed tight around it.
Emile looked up. Joshua was running straight towards him, colliding with him so that he almost lost his balance, and then he grabbed his hand fiercely, small pale fingers trying to pry open his fist.

‘Give it back! Give it back! It’s keeping me safe. That’s what he said!’

‘Who said?’

‘The boy with black hair, the dead boy...’

Emile felt reality shift, he was floundering, trying to breath, like at Les Jardins de Courances, drowning all over again. He squinted at the child's face, trying to compose himself. The child. Yes. The lost child, who needed his help.

He raised his hand so that the necklace hung down and swung suspended in the air, and for a moment they both watched it.

‘Here.’

Emile raised his other hand, slipped it over Josh’s head. And let go. He had to let go.

‘Put it under your coat, like this, yes?’ He untucked the hood of the anorak from under the chain. 'That way you can’t lose it again and I promise you, it will keep you safe, like the boy said, yes?’

He reached for his phone at last.

‘And now, let’s call your daddy, and he can come and take you home, right?’

Josh stared at his face and he saw the fear starting to slip from his eyes replaced at last by tears streaming silently down his cheeks.

‘It’s okay, everything will be okay, non?’

And then the child was leaning against him and Emile slipped a hand around his back and held him securely and with an effort he stood, lifting him in his arms. He raised his phone, swaying gently with the child in his arms, scrolling for the number until he found it and pressed call.

Robert's phone rang again.

He looked at it, tight lipped, and shook his head.

'What now. I haven't got time for this.'

'What?' Aaron asked.

Robert held up his phone.

'Emile.'

'But, why wouldn't he just call me?'
Josh was watching the phone and his face as they listened to the ringing tone on and on and on.

'It's okay, non?' Emile reassured him. 'Merde!'

And then there was the pick up.

‘Monsieur Sugden? Yes, I… that’s not …wait… your son! I found your son!’

***********************

‘What did they say at the hospital?’

Victoria opened the door and let them in, Josh half asleep in Robert’s arms, Aaron at his shoulder.

‘He’s fine. They put him on a rehydration drip, now he just needs some rest.’

Josh turned his neck, looking around.

‘Where is this?’

‘This is where I’ve been staying, where you’re going to stay with me from now on, yeah?’

Robert moved through the apartment, stopping at the entrance to each room, looking carefully at Josh’s face, knowing he needed to see every space to feel safe again. Aaron walked with them. It was weird, being back in that place when the last time he’d been there, he’d pictured a future for them both, moving in, having a room for the kids, playing at families.

But since then, everything had changed. Even the apartment had changed. Vic had made sure of that.

‘So, I chucked out all the empties.’ She rolled her eyes at Robert as they hovered in the kitchen, ‘and I did a big grocery shop and got you some kitchen essentials, god only knows how you cooked anything, don’t tell me ‘cos I can guess you were living on take-aways.’

She opened the fridge to illustrate her point, now packed to overflowing with fresh food, so different from the empty white space stocked only with alcohol and chocolate on Aaron’s last visit.

They moved next to the smaller bedroom, which was empty except for a couple of boxes open to show some of Josh’s toys and books.

‘This is going to be your room, okay?’ Robert said. ‘I know it’s hard to imagine it now, but I
'I’ve ordered you a gorgeous bed and a desk and shelves to put your stuff,’ Vic explained. ‘It’ll all come tomorrow and you can decide where you want everything to go, can’t you?’

Then she lowered her voice, glancing up at Robert.

‘By the way, I moved the package that was here onto the kitchen balcony, you know the one, you’ll have to find somewhere else for them now Josh is here,’ she added mysteriously. For a second, she looked at Aaron, but without meeting his eyes.

Aaron opened his mouth to ask what, but Robert was already moving to the main bedroom, with new drapes half pulled over the shutters, new covers on the bed.

Josh looked at Aaron.

‘Is this where you and my dad sleep?’

Aaron gulped.

‘No,’

‘Yes,’ Robert glared at him behind Josh's head.

‘Well, sometimes,’ Aaron qualified.

At least that was half true - *Had been true*. ‘I don’t ...,’ he was going to say ‘live here.’

Robert shook his head. ‘Not now!’ he mouthed.

‘Anyway, time for a bath!’ Victoria piped in, and rescued them, for a while at least.

Josh wanted them both, too exhausted to manage on his own. They crammed into the steamy bathroom, sleeves pushed up, Aaron balanced on the end of the bath, damp patches on his jogging pants from where Josh had splashed. Robert all long limbs perched on a ridiculously small stool, the front of his blue shirt open at the throat, clinging to his chest in parts where it was also wet.

Aaron, glancing sideways at his eyes while he shampooed Josh’s hair, could see they’d cleared at last, losing the feverishness of the past twenty-four hours. Robert passed over the shower head and their eyes met in a smile in the misty air. Half an hour of perfect peace. He swallowed, because here he was all over again, wanting it to last.

He twisted down onto his knees onto the bathmat, Robert’s legs with nowhere to go nudging against the side of his rib cage. He reached for the nailbrush with one hand, holding Josh’s fingers in the other.

‘You could grow potatoes in these, mate,’ he growled softly.

When Josh giggled, Aaron looked up and winked, put soap bubbles on his nose and Josh stuck out his tongue trying to reach to lick it off.

The room was quiet while he scrubbed, then Robert leaned forwards.
‘So, can you tell us what happened, love?’

They waited. The bubbles on the surface of the bathwater swayed. Aaron watched Josh’s face, saw him drop his chin to his chest, felt his fingers hold on tighter to his palm where they rested. He squeezed them back.

‘Or you can tell us later, when you’re ready? Maybe after a sleep? What d’ya say, Daddy?’

Robert’s eyes flickered to Aaron’s face, taking his lead.

‘Course, yeah, later, course.’

Aaron put a hand on Robert’s knee, pressed it for a moment reassuringly, then used it to lever himself up.

Then Robert reached an arm up and Aaron helped him to stand too, and they were bundling Josh up in a towel, and steering him into the bedroom where they helped him dress in clean pajamas and put him into the big bed.

When Aaron bent to kiss him, Josh held his face, protesting at his beard as it rubbed against his cheek.

‘Yeah?’ Aaron teased, but kissed his cheek gently.

‘Love you loads, you know that. Now sleep, you little demon!’

He slept almost immediately. Robert spoke in a low voice looking up from where he was still sat on the side of the bed.

‘If you want to change your kit, you can wear something of mine? Just help yourself. There are jumpers in that drawer and some sweatpants I think, underwear in the top. You could take a shower? I know I need one.’

Aaron’s eyebrows flew up.

‘Oh! Well, You get yours cos, erm, I can’t actually take a shower for a few days, doctor’s orders.’

He raised a hand gesturing vaguely towards his stomach, saw Robert slowly close his eyes in self-reproach.

‘God, I’m sorry. I should have known.’

‘It’s alright. Forgot about it myself to be honest. But it’s another reason I should probably get off now, change the dressings, they’ve half come away anyway.’

‘No. Don’t go! If Josh wakes up and asks for you… Look, I’ve got stuff in the first aid kit. What do you need?’

He was up, nudging Aaron back into the bathroom, and steering him to sit again on the side of the now empty bath, then reaching up to a high shelf and getting down a box with gauze pads and various ointments and waterproof tape and a host of other stuff.
‘Do you err, can you… I mean do you want me to erm…?’

‘I’m fine,’ Aaron replied softly. ‘I can manage, alright?’

Robert nodded pulling the door to behind him as he left.

For a moment he just sat completely still, staring at nothing. Then he let his eyes focus on the room, condensation still beaded on the walls, on the glass of the shower cabin. This was where they’d last spent the night together, holding reality at bay, where one conversation had led to a whole domino effect of disasters. It was why they couldn’t be together.

He put his thumb in the waistband of his jogging pants, eased them lower down, grimacing at the state of the dressings and started to pull them off. Then, wincing, he raised his arms and worked off his black sweater, placing it next to him before bending to reach into to the first aid box.

‘A clean towel, and I got you out some clothes - hard luck my choice, and Vic’s made a stew when y…’

He looked up, Robert walking into the room.

For a moment they both froze as Robert’s voice trailed off.

And then,

‘Sorry, I should have… I shouldn’t have…’

‘It’s alright. Rob! It's alright! They look worse than they are, really! They were all pink but they’re a lot better now.’

He could see Robert nod, trying to agree but his shoulders were starting to shake. Aaron knew he was shocked, watched as he placed the towel and clothes on the stool and then raised his hands to his face.

‘Robert, it’s not your fault! Today’s a good day. A very good day! A happy day! Will you just… oh come here, will ya!’

Robert moved closer, crumpling onto his knees in front of him and he reached his arms around him, taking a fistful of his blue cotton shirt. Robert held onto him, his hands slipping against the moist skin of his back. Aaron let his lips open against Robert’s cheek and when he moved his head their open mouths found each other. It was barely a kiss, just salt, and a fleeting pressure, and a whole lot of pent up sadness. In a moment they’d both pulled back, bending their heads so their foreheads touched.

Robert moved a hand, his palm gentle as he stroked his bicep.

‘I know I’m not allowed to, but I love you so much.’

‘I know. And the same, I always will.’

Robert nodded.

‘And you’re going to be a great dad. The very best. It’s just the exhaustion, you’ve hardly slept!’
Aaron came quietly out of the bathroom, checked up on Josh who was still sleeping deeply since they’d drawn the shutters and drapes, with just a lamp for some light. He was washed, and had clean dressings on his wounds, and was wearing Robert’s burgundy sweater over grey jogging pants that were definitely spacious and he’d had to fold up the bottoms over his bare feet.

He was so shattered, he was beginning to feel spaced out, but in a good way. Maybe, just maybe, this was a turning point for them both. They could be mates, after all, he’d managed it with Ed, hadn’t he? And he’d be like some adopted uncle with Josh, staying close, taking him out.

They ate in the kitchen with Vic. A light stew and warm bread. He could see the slight tremor when Robert held his fork, knew it was down to exhaustion. He touched his arm without thinking, Robert raised his eyes, gave him a smile back. Outside the sun was starting to set.

‘So where are we all sleeping, then?’ he asked.

‘Well I’m not sharing with either of you two, I’ll stay with Josh, and the sofa in the living room pulls out into a double bed, so you’ll have to make do.’ Vic looked at their faces over her fork. Aaron kept his face down. He could cope with that, couldn’t he? Mates sharing, a part of the new normal. He nodded to himself.

‘So what was this place, then? A bolt hole for your secret love tryst, somewhere Chrissie couldn’t find you out?’

‘It wasn’t my idea.’

‘No, it’s got Robert’s pawprints written all over it, but didn’t stop you going along with it? I’m not judging you.’

‘But what I don’t get is why’d you end it, I mean Rob left Chrissie and then, just when you could actually be together, the twos of you split?’

‘Vic!’

‘It’s complicated.’

‘Well enlighten me?’

He laid down his fork.

She was still talking but he’d stopped listening. Instead he stepped out onto the balcony. He was too tired for this. He turned to see Robert had followed him.

‘I’m sorry, you know what she’s like... Come back inside?’

‘Alright, just give me a moment, yeah?’
They heard the buzzer of the door go and Vic call out. ‘I’ll get it.’

Aaron looked up at the darkening evening sky, shades of pink and turquoise as night reclaimed the city.

‘Come inside,’ Robert said again softly. Aaron glanced sideways at his face and then frowned. He could see his eyes sliding down behind him, and twisted his neck to look. A package wrapped in brown paper,rips half repaired with masking tape where it had been opened before. He’d seen other packages like it, a long time ago in a studio set up for art.

He turned, looking at Robert questioningly, saw his eyes dilate, and pulled in his chin.

'Just leave it,' Robert said weakly.

He bent and pulled back the paper from one corner.

He already had a feeling he knew what it was. He was right. The erotic portrait and sketches done by Matheo of *himself*.

From inside they heard Vic calling out.

‘Rob! It’s Chrissie!’

Neither of them moved. Robert swallowing, wetting his lips, looking from the paintings back to Aaron’s face.

‘I can explain…,’ he said.

*RICE* - rest, ice, compression, elevation.

He’d been sitting alone in the apartment for so long he’d lost all sense of time, his fingers stiff around his phone, open at his contacts, with Robert’s name glowing fluorescent. He had no right to ask.

The boy was safe, and that was good.

As for him, he was left with ghosts. He knew he was asleep, even though his eyes were open.

*The shuffle of cotton as Lucas bent his neck, unfastening his shirt, pulling it off over his head. The sudden longed-for weight on his lap. If he raised his hands, he could trace his spine, feel the sinews of his ribs under his fingertips.*

‘Don’t be afraid, baby. Did you give up hope, my love?’

Lucas’s voice whispering back.

‘Yes.’
Chapter End Notes

there is a part 3 letting go but mostly Rob at Aaron's apartment ;)}
Letting Go part 3

Chapter Notes

cw blood and violence but not graphic

I had to split this in half again and this part is a bit plotty but had to be got through. Also I have nothing to do this week but write so no more long delays after this, sorry for the previous wait xx

There would be an inquest into the death, the police officer was saying. Robert’s French was good enough to catch that much, but then he zoned out, an orchestra of other noises swimming in and out of focus in his head, the rattle of trolley wheels, jarring of metal trays, footsteps, a distant phone ringing on and on … for pity’s sake can’t someone get that? … he wanted to speak but couldn’t find the strength, he was still trembling and cold.

There was a light tugging on his right arm, another voice:-

‘Restez immobile un instant, s’il vous plait, Monsieur Sugden.’

His eyes flickered downwards and he watched the nurse as she disconnected a tube and placed a new one into the yellow valve protruding from the back of his hand, then she reached up to turn on the tap on an intravenous fluid bag.

He lowered his chin. There’d been a team trying to stem the bleeding; they’d hacked at his shirt with scissors to get him out of it, cut through the waistband of his jeans and underpants, disposed of them all in a surgical waste bag. Now there were tide marks of blood up and under the swell of his pecs where they’d washed the wound with saline water.

Like he’d been in some shipping accident and washed up on some icy land.

He felt tearful, raised his hand to his face to hide it, he needed his game face - he always needed it.

‘Je reviendrai pour prendre une declaration officielle’

He heard the police officer say, and then the sound of his footsteps receding. The phone was still ringing on and on, and another sound, a man crying, staggered sobs.

For a moment he felt relieved because at least it wasn’t him.

He reached out his left arm, and touched Emile’s wrist, fumbling for his hand.

They were in this together.

‘Hey,’ he managed to speak at last. ‘Hey! It’s alright, everything’s going to be alright.’
Robert had made up the sofa bed with a clean double sheet, chucking on a couple of pillows, side by side.

Aaron had ignored him, unzipping the side of a sleeping bag that Robert said he’d had since his days in London, giving it a shake and letting it settle around him on the armchair, patting it down around him like armour.

Silk lining the label said, but it still smelt of nylon if you asked, and vaguely of Robert too, which was disturbing.

‘You’re being ridiculous,’ Robert said. ‘Just come and lie down, I promise I’ll stick to my side, you won’t even know I’m there.’

But he shouldn’t make promises he couldn’t keep. He made them too lightly – promises and apologies, one leading to the other more often than not.

‘I swear, it’s not what you think!’

That’s what he’d said about the paintings –

‘I didn’t buy them cos I wanted them, idiot! I bought them because I didn’t want anyone else to have them. I didn’t want them in circulation. I was protecting you. I did it for you.’

But when did Robert do anything that wasn’t for himself?

The only reason he’d stayed in the end was for Josh.

He let his heavy eyelids fall, alert to where Robert was in the room even with his eyes shut- the sound of the light switch - the creak of the sofa bed as he landed on it.

Then he’d opened his eyes above the hem of the sleeping bag, found the shape of him in the dark.

He knew his sleep patterns, learning them like learning the tides in some strange, beautiful country. How he’d doze after sex wherever he found himself, amused and unapologetic for the weight of his limbs when Aaron shifted in protest. Then later, when deep sleep called him how he’d turn onto his back, one hand up above him, the other held out sideways looking for contact, like he was afraid of losing Aaron in the night.

Now, he tugged the coffee table closer and placed his bare heels on it, kneeing the sleeping bag. He felt stiff with a dull ache in the small of his back, knew it was from sleeping in the car the night before. It was like his body was howling at him to get horizontal and get some proper rest. He ignored it.

He shouldn’t think about sex, but his mind went there like a reflex - a room, a bed, the still night.

‘I’ve never come like that before,’ Robert had once said, while Aaron looked at the sheen of sweat suspended above his upper lip, limbs still trembling.

He’d said it like something marvellous had happened, and he wasn’t shy to talk about it.
'In a good way?' he’d asked gruffly, needing the validation, even though he’d known already, you could hardly hide that, and Robert hadn’t even tried.

‘Course! What did you think I meant?’

Was that why he’d fallen in love? He’d got all tangled up in the physicality of it all, they both had.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but instead of sleep, his mind turned back to the evening they’d just spent. The worst thing was before he’d found the paintings while they sat together eating in the kitchen - maybe it was the northern tone of their voices, or the taste of the food, or the finally letting go of breath with Josh sleeping safely across the hallway, or Robert with his hair still damp after his shower, fork poised, listening to Vic natter on about how she was starting some fast food business in a van - maybe it was all of it, or none of it, just the exhaustion playing tricks with his mind - but for a moment he’d forgotten they were in Paris. He’d thought he was home.

And then after he’d discovered the paintings, Chrissie had arrived.

He’d stayed in the kitchen, leaned his back against the counter.

‘We got him back!’ she’d exclaimed, hands already on Robert’s arms.

‘Yes! Thank God!’

Aaron had watched as they embraced in the hall, Robert’s open hand holding her hair at her neck.

And then she saw him, slowly let her arms fall from Robert’s elbows.

‘I thought you said you weren’t together?’

Her eyes were wide open, searching Robert’s face.

‘We’re not,’ Robert answered. ‘Aaron’s here for Josh.’

‘Where is he? Let me see him… What did the doctors ….’

And they were disappearing into the bedroom where Josh was sleeping.

‘Aren’t you going to finish that?’ he’d heard Vic say.

He’d blinked, looked down at his plate.

Then sat down and picked up his fork.

‘What?’

Vic had sat opposite watching him with two hands around a mug of tea.

‘I said Adam’s set up a new business. Weren’t you listening?’

Robert and Chrissie were coming back, heads bowed, Robert saying something about the police being at the hospital, and how they were coming the next morning to talk to Josh.

As Chrissie raised her face their eyes had met, and for a second her expression switched to one of
pure hatred. He wasn’t a coward, he’d raised his chin and looked back at her until she turned away, catching Robert by the elbow again.

‘Let’s go in here,’ she indicated the living room. He could see her wedding ring as she raised her hand. ‘We need to talk.’

They’d stepped inside and the door closed behind them.

‘As I was saying, he’s set up a new business; scrapping, after he was over here and saw where you worked,’ Victoria went on.

Aaron stabbed with his fork at a piece of carrot.

‘How’d he get the money together for that?’

‘He found an investor. Local wealthy businessman, or something. You could look glad for him.’

‘I am glad, really glad. Good on ‘im.’ And he meant it. ‘He never calls me,’ he added.

‘I’m sure he wants to. We all do. But we still worry about you getting caught. He once said how he wouldn’t be able to bear it if you ended up in prison.’

He got it. It was one of the things he’d been warned about by Cain before going on the run.

‘I know it’s hard, Aaron but the most important thing is to not have direct contact with family or friends,’ he’d said. ‘They’ll monitor us, knowing that sooner or later you’ll get in touch. That’s how they catch most people. You have to be disciplined, right?’

He shook his head, but his attention wasn’t really with Vic anyway; it was focused on the closed door.

He stood up suddenly, put his plate in the sink and turned on the tap to rinse it. Then the door opened and Chrissie came out again and for a final time. And then she’d gone, not even a goodbye to Vic.

He should have left too, he thought now, but he’d decided to stay, because of Josh. Well – that was only part of it - he admitted it to himself now in the dark, mostly he’d stayed because he could.

Because deep down he still wanted to feel that Robert was his - just his - even if it was too late.

Finally, he gave in, it wasn’t like he’d consciously made the decision but his body had made it for him, his sleeping bag sliding to the floor as he took the couple of steps to the sofa bed and let the relief of finally lying down flood through him. He had time to register the scent of Robert’s shower gel and the warmth he was generating, then tucking a hand under the t-shirt Robert had given him to sleep in, just above the dressings on his stomach, he pressed his head back into the welcome softness of the pillow.

And then Robert turned and he instinctively knew he was awake.

‘Glad you saw sense,’ Robert’s voice murmured.

Since it was dark, and he knew Robert couldn’t see his face, he didn’t give himself time to think,
and instead just asked the question he’d been wanting to ask all evening.

‘What did Chrissie say?’

‘She wanted to give it another go.’

Even through his exhaustion he felt his heart accelerate.

‘And…?’

He felt the bed shift as Robert turned on his side to face him, so close his knee nudged up against Aaron’s thigh.

He heard Robert shift his head closer across the pillow, felt the warm breath from his nose and mouth against his cheek, felt his heart thumping against his ribcage in his chest. He was so tired he felt drunk.

He turned his face sideways towards him, and waited, and as Robert inched his chin closer in the dark, he closed his eyes again and snatched at the kiss, moist and hot, tongues touching lightly. Then he breathed through his nose into another, even slower, wet, until Aaron felt his groin pulse deeply in the dark. Robert raised his hand, touched the back of his knuckles lightly against the fine cotton of Aaron’s t-shirt at his chest finding the bump of a nipple. This wasn’t supposed to happen.

Another broken promise.

‘No!’ he turned his face away. ‘Well done, you broke up your family. I’m not your reward, Robert.’

He wanted to cry, it was the exhaustion he told himself, not that he wanted him, he did - but not like this, not as some consolation prize.

He waited for him to say something, instead he heard his breathing change, and realized he’d finally fallen asleep, and within seconds he’d joined him.

Josh didn’t know where he was. He’d woken in the dark. He wanted to call for his Dad. The yell was tight in his throat, but he held it in, swallowing over and over. There was something there. Something or someone coming to get him.

He needed his Dad like a tower in the dark to rescue him. Or Aaron’s arms around him.

_Daddy! Daddy! Aaron! Daddy!_ he called to them inside his head.

He shrank into the mattress, tongue dry, eyes flickering to the corners of the room. The rectangular shape of the window loomed with strips of orange light penetrating the dark.

Was someone else there; a grown up? Lucas? Wasn’t he dead? He’d told him to get to the underground car park, past the pastry shop and the barbers, he’d said, over the road and down the cobbled street with the café with the rainbow flags - _Courir! Petit! Courier!_ Lucas had said. He’d stood for a moment, then seen Lucas’s eyes roll back in his head. And he’d run.

_Daddy! Aaron! Daddy! Daddy!_

It wasn’t Lucas there in the room, it was Auntie Vic – he didn’t know her, not really, he was afraid to wake her up.
He scrambled to the edge of the bed, slipped onto the rug, made it to the open door, out into the hallway. There was another door ajar. He peered in.

He felt relief flood him as he made them out, sleeping on a strange sort of bed. A part of him knew he wasn’t allowed, but the pull was too great.

There was just enough space between them. He wriggled himself down, shoulders squeezed in by their powerful arms either side of him.

His eyes already closing.

Aaron was dragged awake by a poke in the ribs from a sharp elbow and a small heel kicking against his hip – Josh getting into the bed between him and Robert, all spidery limbed.

He heard Robert’s slurred voice murmuring in the dark.

‘You’re going to be too hot, love.’

Josh’s eyes were already closed and Aaron lifted a hand to smooth back his hair, pressed a brief kiss on his forehead. He felt Robert’s arm rest heavily over both of them, in spite of everything, it felt so right, he frowned, then he must have slept again.

Captaine (formerly known as Inspecteur principal) Adrian Cornet of the Paris Police nationale sat in his car in the dark, the Eiffel Tower reflecting LED illuminations of red and purple on his windscreen. He should go home and take a break; the case would most likely be closed in the morning, and he’d finish his report and pick up a new assignment.

And yet, so many things didn’t sit right.

Three days earlier he’d just come on duty when the call had come in about the missing child. At the time, he’d felt his heart sink.

It was partly his own fault – he was tired. Instead of a sound night’s sleep he’d decided to hit the clubs in Le Marais, taken just enough G-juice to be buzzing, then on the street he’d seen a tall blonde guy who’d made his mouth water. Never backwards, he’d called out, and fair enough, he’d been blanked, perhaps the bloke was straight.

Once in the club, though, he’d seen him again and his hope had lifted. He smiled wryly, not just his hope had lifted, the blonde was even hotter close up, white skin and freckles like peeling gold leaf caught in the club lighting. He’d been pushy, offering a drink, suggesting a no-strings fuck.

Turned out he had a boyfriend, also hot, blue eyes, trim muscular body, fantastic ass. He would have held out for a threesome, but looked like they weren’t at that stage of the relationship yet, so he’d let it go. Maybe it was the police officer in him, because even though he was already looking for someone else, he could still tell you exactly where the blonde and his boyfriend were in the crowded club, and the exact time on the clock when the brunette brought a bottle down on someone’s head with enough force to have the victim crashing to the floor.

He’d watched them take advantage of the chaos to make their exit, and then turned away. He wasn’t on duty. His eye was caught by a bloke in leather. He’d taken him back to his apartment, fucked him, still thinking about the blonde, then kicked him out.
Early next morning he’d stood with his junior officer, waiting at the entrance of the swanky apartment, thinking about the missing child.

If the child had been older it would be a fair assumption that he’d run away, but six-year-olds didn’t run away, not between three and four in the morning.

And then the door opened, and standing in front of him, with a little girl in his arms, side by side with a beautiful wife, was the blonde from the gay nightclub.

For just a moment he’d been caught off guard, distracted from the task, and in the sober light of morning recognized with both a small thrill and a sinking stomach that the night before he’d been punching well above his weight. He’d composed his face and put a hand out to shake.

‘Je suis Capitaine Adrian Cornet, et voici mon collègue officier de la paix Marion Sidot.’

‘Robert Sugden, my wife Chrissie. You need to find my son!’

He’d interviewed them naturally.

‘So, your husband wasn’t home when your son went missing?’

‘No, we’ve been separated for a few weeks, he had an affair.’

She left the sentence hanging, as if she wanted to say more but had decided against it.

He’d hung back for a moment on the stairs going up to look at the boy’s room, and touched the blonde’s arm ahead of him, still holding his sleeping daughter, making him turn.

‘Monsieur Sugden, if you want someone else on the case, just say?’

‘Case? - Nothing matters except my son!’

‘And, sorry,’ he’d asked, ‘...but does your wife know that you’re gay? Does she know about your boyfriend? She said you had an affair, was he the one with you at the club?’

‘I’m not gay, and he wasn’t my boyfriend. Just someone I’d met that evening.’

At the time he’d smiled internally half mocking himself for wounded pride – That the blonde had invented a relationship to avoid being picked up.

In the bedroom he’d lingered after the others had left. The boy’s anorak and backpack were gone they’d said. The room was immaculate, action figures, table football, die cast model cars, Porsche, Ferrari, Jaguar some of them collectable items worth a small fortune themselves, all positioned up in a toy multi storey park complete with car lift.

Then there were the snow globes. He’d picked one up, and for a moment peered into the miniature winter world. A romantic castle set with frozen mirror lakes and frosted gardens, he’d turned it up so the snow drifted and pooled in the curve of the glass.

‘Château de Courances,’ he’d read the label on the base. He hadn’t been there since he was a child himself.

He’d placed it carefully back.

Now the boy had been found at last. But he wasn’t well enough to make a statement yet. Case closed, any officer would have appreciated the break. Except, he drummed his fingers on the
steering wheel of the car and narrowed his eyes, Monsieur Sugden had lied.

Even with his son missing at the time, he’d lied...Why? He picked up his phone.

‘Aaron Roberts, the au pair in the Sugden case, can you run another check on him, let me know what you find?’

Aaron woke with the peace shattered, buzzing with alarm.

Vic was at the door pulling on a dressing gown. The light was on. ‘What’s wrong? What can I do? Should I get a glass of water or summat?’ She was asking.

He turned his head at the wailing. Josh crying frantically, on his feet, his eyes glazed. Robert already up and on his knees beside him. He raised a finger to his lips to ask Vic to be quiet.

‘It’s alright, Josh, I’m here, you’re all safe, love, Aaron’s here, too, look.’

‘Where is it? It was keeping me safe,’ Josh wailed, his fingers frantically tracing his neck. Then he was on his way to the bathroom where he found the bin bag where they’d put his clothes before the bath, and started burrowing through it, pulling out his t-shirt and then his anorak.

‘What? What is it love?’

And then Aaron remembered at the hospital, the nurses had given him something and he’d just put it in the pocket of his trousers hanging now on the hook behind the door.

He eased his hand in the pocket, pulling out the necklace, a chain with a kind of pendant. He hadn’t even thought about it at the time, he’d been too concerned about Josh.

‘Is it this?’

As soon as he showed Josh, he took it, holding it tightly in his fist while his tears subsided.

‘But what is it, love?’ Robert asked, perplexed.

‘The boy gave it me, the dead boy.’

‘Which boy?’

‘You know,’ Josh frowned impatiently, looking for all the world just like his dad, Aaron reflected. ‘You sent him to get me...Lucas.’

He’d had to tell Aaron in the end, otherwise he’d have never let him go that night. They’d stood in the kitchen with the door closed while Vic read Josh to sleep, the sickly sweet smell of warm milk from an empty saucepan lingering in the air. He’d had his back to the counter, one hand behind him holding on, while Aaron faced him from the other side of the room.

It had been a turning point really, the expression on Aaron’s face, and it had haunted him over the
following days, helped him make his mind up.

‘You did what?’ he’d asked.

Robert had run his tongue over his lips, and said it again.

‘I slept with him.’

And Aaron had nodded eventually to himself, as if it confirmed a private theory he had. He was right, of course.

‘Where? Not... not here?’

It was hardly a breath as he answered.

‘Yes.

‘We weren’t together at the time, and he wasn’t with Emile then either. But I knew it would hurt Emile if he knew, and that’s why I did it, I wanted to hurt him, because of you.’

He’d watched the light go out in Aaron’s eyes as he looked back at him. Knew, as well as he’d known anything that he’d lost him now, that any hope he might have built up from how close they’d got over the weekend looking for Josh was smashed, Aaron’s anger over the paintings was nothing to this. And he didn’t blame him.

‘It didn’t mean anything, it was just...’ he raised his shoulders, ‘...sex.’ He closed his eyes pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment...’You slept with Emile.’

‘Don’t you dare. Lucas was vulnerable and you knew it. You used him, just like you use everybody.’

‘He kidnapped my son!’

‘But did he? I just, I don’t think he’d do that.’

Robert closed his eyes for a moment.

‘No, neither do I, I think you’re right. Which is why I have to go and look for him, now. Please, Aaron... stay with Josh. Please.’

‘I’ll call Emile,’ Aaron said in a low voice, turning towards the door.

Robert opened his mouth... He didn’t want Emile to go with him. Emile, the paragon of virtue, so perfect he’d never set a foot wrong in his life. And yet he’d found Josh, he should be grateful. And after what he’d just told Aaron, how could he object?

‘Tell him to meet me at the car park in half an hour, I’ll go and get dressed.’ Robert said. He stayed there for a moment as Aaron left the room, hands still behind him holding loosely onto the kitchen counter. He looked out through the balcony door at the sky where the morning star was just visible, the lights of a plane passing quickly just above it, heading West chasing the dark.

*Capitaine* Adrian Cornet of the Paris *Police nationale* placed the half eaten kebab on the passenger
seat of his car with a grimace of disgust, and cracked open a wet wipe, cleaning carefully over his fingers and then around his mouth.

The lights of the Eiffel Tower still reflected on the windscreen, and a light wind had picked up, carrying seeds from the city plane trees up into the air where they floated about. He hoped he wouldn’t come down with hay fever or worse an asthma attack, checked the dashboard for his nebulizer, and then his mind switched again to the missing child, maybe it was the clouds of seeds that reminded him of it - the snow shaker of Les Jardins de Courances.

There’d been an accident there, a near drowning he remembered. Out of curiosity, he picked up his phone to search. He’d just opened a page with a newspaper report when his phone rang.

‘Nothing on Aaron Roberts,’ the officer at the other end said. ‘A few months back he was stopped for public indecency, blow job in a stolen car, but it wasn’t stolen - just borrowed - and he wasn’t charged for it.’

‘Who was with him?’

‘Ah, well that’s more interesting…, ‘

He was pretty sure he could guess, that it would be Robert Sugden, the father of the missing child, who’d been found now anyway. But turned out he was wrong about that.

His eyes drifted back to the newspaper report still on his screen.

If he was back at the station he would pull up all their pictures, start making a web of all the connections between them, and figure it out.

Instead he started his engine and slipped his car into gear. Time to pay someone a visit.

He’d seen Emile’s hand fly out sideways towards him, and then he’d fallen back over Lucas’s body. Emile must have hit him so hard he’d winded him was what he first thought, and he must have cracked the back of his head against the wall behind them as he fell, because there was a ringing in his ears, and even though he could see Matheo and Emile’s mouths moving, he couldn’t hear what they were saying anymore.

He managed to pull himself up in the stairwell but every step felt like a mammoth effort, like he’d somehow turned to lead and he was dragging himself upwards. He could see the sky outside through the window, the stars seeming to swim in and out of focus. He frowned, his forehead thumping heavily, remembered walking up the steps of the Eiffel Tower, and it seemed like he was there again, with Doli in his arms and the umbrella push chair, and Aaron just ahead of him holding Josh’s hand, the day beyond them sickeningly bright.

And the heat!

He felt the burning in his side, and wondered why the Eiffel Tower was on fire? Inside him was burning, he was burning alive. He moved up one more step. He was losing his balance. He could just make out the shape of Emile next to him then he was toppling sideways into the older man’s arms.
‘Help!’

Emile’s arm wrapped around him, his other hand cool against his forehead, then soothing in his hair.

He watched his mouth as he spoke.

‘Alright, alright, Robert, you’ve been shot, but you’re going to be alright, yes? you’re going to be alright.’

‘Where’s Aaron?’ he breathed, then a yelp as he looked round, ‘Aaron?’

He had a sense of mortal danger, he was going to die, and he’d never see Aaron again.

He knew he was slipping out of Emile’s hold, his head turning as he fell again. He caught sight of Matheo raising the Beretta a second time. His lips formed a ‘no’ and then Emile had left him.

He saw Emile twist the gun from Matheo’s hand, and push the muzzle up under his chin.

There was a moment when time froze.

And then the explosion as Emile pulled the trigger.
Somebody Loves us All

Chapter Summary

In the wake of being shot, Robert makes a life changing decision. Aaron gets a special delivery.
Tw: mention of blood, reference to self-harm scars

Chapter Notes

So really not good timing, sigh.
Also this is ridiculously long, the content becomes heavily focused on the boys in the second half, but the first half explains Rob’s motivation I guess and just pulls all the threads together. (you can always skip bits haha)

‘Learning someone; it’s like learning a language, non?’

‘Don’t be so French.’

In the hospital the lights were harsh. They’d given him one of those handheld buttons to press to self-administer pain relief. It was probably morphine, the irony wasn’t lost on him, but whatever it was, he wished it would work.

Emile leaned forward, his scrapper’s hand touching gently against Robert’s wrist.

‘Non, listen to me. You start by recognizing a few words and phrases and then those fit together and start to make meaning. But then there are the longer parts, they confuse you. You get angry, you see other people who seem to know the language better, and that makes you jealous. But you persist, because you want to in your heart, because it’s beautiful, non? And at some point, the language becomes a part of you, the way you think, breathe, exist.’

At first, he’d thought he was talking about Lucas, and then he realized.

‘You mean Aaron,’ he said.

‘I know you love him so much.’

Emile looked at him in that way he had, it was one of the things that Robert had always found most disturbing about him, like he could see him in focus, when he struggled so hard to see himself.

‘It’s not easy for everyone, coming out. But he’s not the answer, Robert. You have to learn your
He slept and woke, slept again, woke to the sound of voices; conversation in French, laughter.

He turned his head on the pillow and saw by the bed next to him a family of generations; grandparents, parents, teens, a young child in someone’s arms leaning over as she handed a card reverently to the patient lying there who lifted his arms for a kiss.

One of the adults turned to him and asked something in French that he was too groggy to process. They took the chair from beside his bed, scraping it on two legs away from him before offering it to one of the older visitors to sit.

The chatter rolled on without rhythm. More laughter. His mouth was parched, beside him he could see a transparent jug of water and an empty glass. He shifted, felt a stiff swollen pain like someone had sewn a hot stone into his right side, closed his eyes again. If they would just pipe down, maybe he could go back to sleep.

Finally, there was quiet.

He glanced sideways again to check that everyone had finally gone, but there was one person left, a woman, sitting steadfast by the bed, he saw her eyes looking at the patient, saw her smooth the pillow and straighten the sheet; it was obviously his mum.

Robert turned his face swiftly away, he could feel a panic surge through him, like he was falling fast, and everything he used to count on to hold onto was lost, his beautiful home and wife, his high-powered job, his flash cars – all gone. He couldn’t even protect his son, or give him the mother he deserved.

The fire doors swung open, and he saw them, Aaron holding Josh’s hand as they walked the length of the ward towards him.

He drew in a breath and rubbed the heel of his hand over his eyes, reached for the automatic button to crank up his bed. Breathed again to steady his heart.

‘Grapes.’

‘Original.’

‘And something to read in case you get bored.’

‘Death Wish? Seriously?’

‘Yeah, it’s about some vigilante who takes the law into his own hands or summat, the man in the shop recommended it; it was this, Crime and Punishment, or Revenge of the Sith,’ Aaron ticked them off on his fingers, ‘… but Josh said you’d already read it, all the rest were in French, I can go back if you like…,’ he gestured in the hypothetical direction of the bookstore with his thumb.
‘No, it’s fine, thanks,’ Robert chose to ignore the sarcasm, instead he turned to Josh.

‘Hey! There you are, mate! Oops, other side, love.’

Josh ran around the bed and buried his head in his father’s elbow where he could reach.

Aaron picked up the jug by Robert’s bed and poured water from a height into the glass, held it to Robert’s lips.

‘Emile said you were an idiot, ‘un gros idiot,’ was actually how he phrased it,’ he said while Robert regarded him from over the rim.

‘I always liked it when you spoke French, don’t spoil it.’

Josh looked up, eyes questioning their faces, and Aaron fished a pack of Trump cards, retro sports cars, from his pocket.

‘Look, there’s a table over there, how about you go over and open that? An’ I wanna know which car has the most cylinders, right?’

‘I’m guessing the Pantera,’ Robert played along.

‘Duh! Ferrari!’ Josh rolled his eyes.

They both watched him skip across to the seating area, saw him settle on the floor and prize open the casing on the cards.

‘What did you tell him? Has he been alright?’

‘Told him you’d fallen down some stairs; more lies stacking up. And no, he hasn’t been alright, he’s so anxious he threw up in the night. Well done, you risked your life, and what would he have done then? When are you going to make him your priority?’

‘I am!’

Robert swallowed, there it was, the panic again, building in his chest, he needed to do something, he’d be better if he could get up, anything but confined to this bed; he leaned forward felt a rush of pain so deep it winded him, then Aaron’s hands were on his back and chest, tenderly steering him back against the pillows; ‘Rob? Robert? Should I get a nurse?’ He shook his head, pressed the button on the pain relief.

Aaron dragged a chair back from the neighbouring patient without asking, sat heavily, a hand still holding Robert’s bicep, watching his white face where Robert could feel the sweat on his forehead. He nodded to reassure Aaron he was alright.

‘Emile said you lost a lot of blood.’

‘And they gave me loads back,’ he made an effort to smile, ‘…probably better quality; so, if I start to exhibit new personality traits, be a better person, you’ll know why.’

He could see the tears starting to well up in Aaron’s eyes. He’d known this was coming.

‘Hey! I’m alright, yeah? I might have been a bit of a drama queen at the time, but turns out it was just a scratch.’

‘Emile said you saved Lucas’s life.’
'He’s exaggerating.'

‘He wouldn’t. Said you gave him mouth to mouth.’

‘First Aid Course; Hotten Leisure Centre, when I was a teenager on the swimming team. Knew it would come in handy one day, Emile panicking like an old woman...’

‘And then you shielded him from the bullet. He said that Mat was the one who kidnapped Josh, and then he topped his-self, I can’t believe he did that. And you... I mean... It must have been horrible.’

Now the tears were spilling over from Aaron’s blue eyes.

Robert pressed his thumb down again on the button on the pain-relief. His wound was still raw, they’d given him blood like he said, and they’d patched up his lowest rib where it was splintered by the bullet. They’d stapled him up, inserted a drain, but he was lucky. A second bullet would have finished him off, he knew who he had to thank for that.

‘Wipe the gun clean, and put it in his hand. Do it now,’ he’d said to Emile. ‘You’ll be no good to Lucas banged up.’

They’d had to lie, to keep Aaron safe from himself.

‘He’s not been well; he needs you to be strong, infallible,’ he’d appealed to Emile, ‘Please. Don’t tell him. Or not yet.’

‘This is down to me, innit?’ Aaron was saying. ‘If I hadn’t bottled him, none of this would have happened. I brought him into our lives to begin with...’

‘Now who’s being un gros idiot?’

He wanted to hold him, but all he could do was reach out until Aaron placed his hand limply in his. He squeezed his fingers tight, stroking a thumb over his pale knuckles.

‘He was a maniac, just no one spotted it. This has nothing to do with anyone else, least of all, you.’

Except it was a lie, not the bit about Aaron, but he was the one who’d set it all in motion, the floodgates, Cornet had said. He was a disaster; he’d caused so much hurt.

And then Aaron pulled his hand back, wiping his eyes quickly with the sleeve of his hoodie as Josh appeared, face flushed, beaming and holding up a card in triumph.

‘See! Ferrari, twelve cylinders, look! The Pantera only had eight, look!’

‘Really? How did I get that wrong?’

Then Josh wanted to play, so Aaron perched him on the side of the bed, and pulled his chair up closer, and they played together for a while, like a proper little family Robert thought, watching Aaron’s still damp eyelashes lowered on his cheek as he looked down at his cards. Only he’d caused both of them so much grief.

After a short while, Aaron said they should stop because Daddy would be getting tired. He gathered the cards up.

‘They’re going to send me home in a couple of days if I my stats are alright; will you come and pick me up? You can fetch the Porsche; it must still be in the car park.’
'Yeah, alright.'

Robert kissed Josh’s forehead before he slipped off the bed.

‘And Aaron, kiss Aaron, too,’ Josh said, watching their faces keenly.

There was an awkward moment, Aaron’s throat flaming above the neckline of his sweater, then he bent over quickly, a hand on the rail behind Robert’s head, and their cheeks pressed together, so Robert could feel the heat coming off him, a fleeting sensation of his scruff against his skin.

And then he took Josh’s hand, and Robert watched them as they walked the length of the ward together away from him.

He wanted nothing more, he saw it clearly now; Aaron, Josh, access to Doli so they could spend loads of time together as she grew up. He wasn’t sure if the pain in his rib cage was from being shot, or from his heart, as they exited out through the fire door into the afternoon.

_He’s having one of those apocalyptic nightmares, like he used to have, his foot down hard on the accelerator, yelling at Katie in the passenger seat telling her to try again when she can’t get through to Andy on the phone. He’s knows he’s dreaming, because he can hear trolley wheels, and the phone ringing on the ward, over and over. The motion of the car as it rattles across the fields is making his breathing unsteady in his throat, a blur of green trees, everything’s racing in his head, and there’s the caravan ahead. The explosion of a shot gun rips the air, he’s pulling on the brake and tumbling out of the car, running to his father lying bleeding on the ground, Andy’s voice over his shoulder reciting – ‘oh my god, oh my god, oh my god’...._

He woke in a cold sweat, breathing hard.

‘You were dreaming.’

A steadying hand on his elbow. Emile sitting by the bed.

The influence of the dream was still strong enough that Emile and his dad drifted into one person in his head.

‘It’s all my fault! I opened the floodgates!’

There! He’s said it. It’s out there, what he did.

Then Emile slipped an arm over his shoulders and pulled his face into his chest.

‘Je sais, je sais, Robert, it’s alright, tout va bien se passer. It’s alright.’

They’d been over it, what happened, before they gave their statements to the police. Of course, it
had started with a fight - Robert hadn’t wanted Emile there - Emile hadn’t wanted Robert.

They’d met up in the underground car park and taken the lift, emerging onto the street to follow the route that Josh had described, knowing where it would take them.

Robert had been conscious of Emile’s limp as they walked over the cobbles that shone golden under the streetlamps. He felt a twist of guilt, but Emile had got naked with Aaron, and he still resented him, even if he’d found Josh, even if he was a saint.

‘Seems that your boyfriend kidnapped my son, I should have called the police,’ he’d said.

‘Non, I don’t believe it.’ Emile had replied flatly. ‘He’s not the type to do something cruel like that, and you know him, Monsieur Sugden, don’t you, almost as well as I do?’

They’d both stopped and turned to face each other, cheek bones and chins lit white in the darkness.

‘Why don’t you just man up, say what’s on your mind? Fine! I slept with him! He was happy enough about it as I recall, but you, you have a problem with me whatever I do.’

‘No, Monsieur Sugden. You have a problem with you!’ Emile had answered. ‘And you can’t even see it!’

Except Emile was wrong; he did see it - he’d spent most of his life seeing it reflected in other people’s eyes.

When they’d reached Matheo’s apartment, he’d taken the stairs at a run, not waiting for Emile to catch up.

He’d found Lucas unconscious in the filthy stairwell, his lips and fingertips blue, skin cold and clammy. He’d hunkered down and laid his fingers against his neck, found a faint pulse, shouted down to Emile to call for an ambulance. Then he’d tilted back Lucas’s chin, started rescue breaths, watching for the rise and fall of his chest.

Glancing up he’d seen Matheo’s face appear over the bannister at the landing above, a sports bag in his hand like he was planning on doing a runner, a dressing over the crown of his head where Aaron had bottled him on Friday night, and then he’d disappeared again.

‘What did you give him? What did he take?’ he shouted after him. ‘Why did he take my son?... He’s breathing now,’ he added to Emile as he came up, standing as Emile stripped off his jacket and placed it gently under Lucas’s head.

Robert frowned up the stairs, he could already sense the danger; only someone desperate would leave someone so ill without trying to help.

‘Matheo?’ he shouted again, listening.

When he reappeared, he’d stood on the top step of the flight of stairs, holding a handgun.

And ridiculous as it was, Robert had laughed.

‘Put it away. You’ve always been a loser, now you’re a loser with a gun.’

‘Did you call the police?’ Matheo asked.
At his side, Emile stood up.

‘Non, juste une ambulance. Qu’as tu fait, Matheo? De quoi as-tu peur? What did you do?’

‘I wanted revenge, I wanted to hurt you, and Aaron, all of you. You ruined my life. Lucas told me how much Aaron loved the boy, and you love Lucas. He knew where the house was because he’d been there before. I told him if he helped me, I’d help him in return. Only he let the boy go. And then he must have overdosed.’

Robert lunged forward on adrenaline fueled by anger, not caring about the gun, but Emile grabbed him, holding him back. They heard a siren in the distance.

‘You’ll say Lucas did the kidnapping, technically it’s true,’ Matheo said.

‘No.’ Emile said.

‘Then you’ll lose him, you didn’t want him anyway.’

Robert heard the click as the cylinder loaded, and saw his finger squeeze against the trigger as he raised the gun and aimed at the unconscious Lucas.

He’d stepped in front of Lucas to shield him from the bullet.

He’d seen Emile’s hand fly out to push him out of the way, but it was the force of the bullet that had him flying.

And Matheo had raised the gun again, and that was when Emile had taken it from him. And pulled the trigger.

Emile throwing up, blood pooling like tar on the grey concrete steps, the sharp sweet scent of it like a mist in the air around them. And the ringing in his ears, so his own voice sounded like it was travelling through glass.

‘Wipe the gun clean, and put it in his hand. Do it now,’ he’d said to Emile. ‘You’ll be no good to Lucas banged up.’

Then another siren, voices, someone taking his pulse.

‘I have to go with Lucas, Robert, I’m so sorry!’

Robert could only see parts of him in focus; morning shadow on his jaw, his scrapper’s hands, the sleeve of his shirt marbled with blood. He was shutting down with cold, but he had to speak: -

‘Tell…Aaron…,’ he stuttered.

‘I will.’

What about the old cliché - ‘Tell him yourself,’ wasn’t that what he supposed to say? Was this it, then? The moment everything stopped? A cold grey concrete stairwell while the rest of Paris woke up to the scent of coffee and the thrum of morning traffic?

‘Wait, Emile...’
There was another thing he needed to tell him.

‘I did it; it was me … was me wh…,’ he tried to force out the words between chattering teeth.

‘I know, it’s okay, non? But I have to go now.’

And then he was gone, following the paramedics carrying Lucas on a stretcher down the stairs. And Robert was left alone, except for Capitaine Cornet.

The temptation was to close his eyes and just give up, he wasn’t a quitter - but he’d had so little sleep.

...a wide sky at twilight, the sudden lift of a skylark flying up to roost in dark branches...

‘Allez! Monsieur Sugden!’

... the feel of springy peat beneath his feet, the path was uneven, his footfalls echoed by the irregular beating of his heart, ... he’d been clearing out the ditches before the fresh planting began and for once his dad was pleased with him for making the effort, ‘you did good, son, proud of you,’ ... in the distance he could see the lights on in the windows of the farmhouse ...

‘Monsieur Sugden!’

... he was almost there when he saw him... waiting on the bridge with his elbows resting on the wooden parapet... he was wearing a suit, tie pulled loose, throat just asking to be kissed... he looked like he’d been waiting there a while... now he turned towards him, blue eyes searching his face ... ‘Why are you here?’ he asked, ‘Where are the kids?’ ...

He slammed awake into a wall of pain and unforgiving light.

‘So here we are, just the two of us.’

Cornet crouched over him, pressing down with both hands against his waist.

The paramedics had left gauze but the blood had already soaked through it. Robert saw the detective grimace and look around him, and then, alternating hands against Robert’s torso, he eased off his jacket followed by the white cotton polo neck he’d been wearing under it. He folded the polo quickly and laid it over the gauze, returning the pressure over the wound.

Robert blinked.

He could see beads of sweat on the detective’s collar bone, dripping down onto his chest hair, forming rivulets like marks on a grey contour map.

‘My question in the night-club; looks like I’m the actif one after all,’ the detective grinned down ghoulishly from above him.

And unexpectedly, Robert heard himself laugh.

There was a scraping rushing noise on the stairs, voices, and then something being placed under his head and over his face, a sharp nick in his right elbow, and then he heard counting, un – deux – trois, and he was being lifted. The last thing he saw was a grey body bag on the landing above being lifted onto another stretcher, and after that nothing.

‘I know it was you, I’ve known for quite a few weeks.’

Robert pressed his shoulders back against the pillows on the hospital bed, looked away, he had to ask…

‘Aaron told you?’

‘No, he’s too loyal for that, but I worked it out. How he pushed you away, he was so distressed.’

Robert scrunched his eyes shut.

‘So why didn’t you report me to the police? You could have done that.’

Emile cracked a wry grin.

‘It was quite French of you, non? A crime of passion? And also, Aaron is my friend, I didn't want to hurt him more. He was struggling enough.’

Robert nodded.

‘You fell in love with a man, you nearly burnt down Paris, non?’

‘That’s not…. you don’t know me.’ He was close to saying he’d always been like that, a disaster, then decided to keep his mouth shut; the edge of panic; that feeling of vertigo creeping up on him again, so that he pushed it down, swallowing fast.

‘Robert, if you are gay, or bisexual, first you can say it to yourself, you know? And then when you’re ready, say it to the people you love. Say it to Aaron, he needs you to let him in. To your son, Joshua. The world won’t stop.’

‘My world already did stop. I lost everything, my wife, my home, my job.’

‘That wasn’t your real world. You’ll work it out. Anyway, I’m not judging you….’

‘Much!’ Robert rolled his eyes.
‘I just killed a man.’

‘He deserved it after what he did to my son. And anyway, that’s different, you did it to protect Lucas, and me.’

‘Did I? I think it was anger I felt. And now I have to live with that. I don’t think Matheo was evil, I think he was lost, he didn’t deserve what I did. But you were right. Lucas needs me now, and I can’t go back and change the past, so I will look now to the future. I will find Lucas a place in a rehab hospital, and from now on, I’m going to take care of him. And you saved his life, I will always be grateful to you for what you did.’

Emile stood up.

‘And now I need to go back to him. Kiss me, and then try to sleep, yes? Your son needs you home.’

He leaned over and kissed Robert lightly on the mouth. Laughing as he saw Robert’s eyes fly down the ward to see if anyone had noticed. He patted his shoulder.

‘You’ll get there,’ he said.

Capitaine Adrian Cornet arrived at the hospital to collect signatures for the statements in the kidnapping case.

He was feeling quite smug. He’d solved it by himself, even if he was late. Well not quite by himself; he’d had a little luck.

He’d never been lucky in love. It came with the territory; unsocial hours, the pressure of unsolved cases; most of his straight colleagues had failed or failing relationships.

And he wasn’t straight. At work he kept his sexuality on the low down, not exactly hiding it, but not advertising it either. For sure, times were changing, these days there was lip service to la diversité, but scratch the surface and there was the old familiar bigotry, and anyway, he preferred other kinds of lip service.

So, when he was off-duty, or sometimes on duty, he took his pleasures where he could find them - or buy them.

That’s why a few weeks before the Sugden case, he’d picked up a rent boy, pushing back the front car seats, unfastening his uniform shirt. He had extra sensitive nipples, told the boy to use his teeth – but gently, non? Non, a little harder, Oui, like that. He’d unzipped his fly.

The boy was lukewarm. He sighed; he needed to spice things up.

He’d pressed play on some illegal porn he’d downloaded from work, confiscated in some raid or other, rested his phone against the dashboard.

‘That boy, the younger one, he’s missing,’ the rent boy said, leaving his dick wet as he pulled his mouth away to speak. Cornet closed his eyes slowly, this wasn’t what he’d intended by mixing
work with pleasure, but the officer in him had to ask.

‘How do you know?’

‘I picked a man up at the airport, he showed me a photograph, said he was his boyfriend and he was missing.’

‘And the man? Name, description, car registration, car make?’

The rent boy shook his head.

‘I think… late thirties, handsome, oh, and his leg was hurt.’

He’d pulled him back down by the hair over his softening head, and then gone for a fast finish.

Back at the station he’d done some research just out of curiosity, found out about the raid, and that someone called Emile Guyony had reported the crime, and that the artist Matheo was waiting for sentencing and no doubt a fairly long prison stint. He also found out that Emile had filed a missing person’s report.

He didn’t mention it to the officers following the cases because then he’d have to explain, and anyway what did it add, and after he’d forgotten all about it.

Until he’d found the snow globe for Les Jardins de Courances connected it to Emile, and the police report connecting Aaron Roberts, the au pair, with Matheo.

‘How did you know? You just turned up,’ Robert asked him, handing back his pen.

‘Just good detective work. Although, you know if you’d told me before about your relationship with Aaron Roberts, your au pair, I might have found your son earlier. I know he wasn’t harmed, but it was a risk you took. Why did you protect him? Because you weren’t out? Or another reason? What’s interesting is there is no history of Aaron Roberts before he came to France. In fact, he doesn’t exist. But you know that.’

He went on.

‘Do you know who Aaron Dingle is?’

Robert squinted.

‘Aaron Dingle? There used to be Dingles in Emmerdale where I come from, shady lot.’

‘I did a search, newspaper reports in the United Kingdom around the time your au pair first came to France. Aaron Dingle was involved in an arson attack.’

‘And did you check with Interpol?’

‘Why do you ask?’

Robert folded his hands.

‘Just the obvious place to look.’

They held each other’s eyes for a moment. And then Cornet laughed.
‘Come on, Monsieur Sugden. Enough cat and mouse. I think you know as well as I do, the case on Aaron Dingle has been dropped, someone else, someone already serving a life sentence, confessed to the arson just a few months ago. I suspect in exchange for a generous gift to his family outside. So, this Aaron Dingle obviously has a friend who cares about him a lot. And if you ever happen to meet him, you should tell him, if he’s in France, he can return to England whenever he wants.’

‘He would need a passport, backdated, and an official record of his entry into France, just to be sure.’

‘And you’re asking me because…?’

‘Just a hunch, but I think you might be the man for the job.’

Cornet laughed and turned to go, then turned back.

‘Off the record, it wasn’t suicide was it? You couldn’t have done it; you were already hurt. Emile shot Matheo, didn’t he?’

‘Like I said before, he killed himself.’

‘Alright, you don’t have to tell me. Case closed. Look after that son of yours, and have a good life, Monsieur Sugden.’

Lucas had overdosed. When the paramedics arrived, they’d cut down through his trouser leg, injected naloxone into his thigh to counteract the drugs, and then in the ambulance on the way to the hospital he’d suffered an ischemic stroke, the doctors said. They took him to the critical care unit. They were worried that his low weight might have weakened his heart, warned Emile to prepare for the worst.

He’d gone outside into the hospital garden, and sat still with his hands in the pockets of his trousers, watching the stream of cars arriving and leaving the short-stay car park. Some luxury cars, some fit for his scrappers yard, like his stupid heart.

He’d thought Lucas was going to cheat, so he’d ended it quickly, hoping it was before either of them was in too deep. He’d thought it would be better that way. Lucas was young and he’d thought he’d move on quickly. Thought it was only his heart he was risking.

When he’d lost Khalid, it had taken him years to get over it. Now here he was again, the same situation.

He reproached himself. He’d projected his own fears onto Lucas because of what had happened. Lucas was twenty-one, he’d been relatively inexperienced when they’d first met, and he’d assumed he would want to experiment when the novelty of their new relationship wore off. He’d looked for the signs, watched him interact with other men, he’d been polite but never shown any actual interest.

And what if he had? Monogamy was over-rated. They could have had an open relationship. He
could have talked to him about it, told him that yes, if he wanted to try sex with other men, he
would be jealous, but he could navigate that as long as he was the one Lucas came home to.

Instead he’d finished it. He hadn’t seen the most important thing; that Lucas was Lucas.
He thought about the catholic boy, and his prayer, he wasn’t religious but he hoped God had been
listening.

Emile looked up at a sky scattered with white clouds, then took out his phone and called Lucas’s
parents. He waited for the line to pick up.

‘Oui, Bonjour, C’est Emile, l’ami de Lucas…’

He listened to the silence.

‘Allô? Vous êtes toujours là?’

They didn’t speak, but he told them anyway that their son was in critical care at Saint- Joseph’s,
that he might not make it, then he heard them hang up.

The first time he woke up, Lucas had called out for his mum.

And Emile had soothed his face.

‘I will be your mother, now,’ he said.

He found out later that they had called back, speaking to the hospital to find out whether he was out
of danger.

He’d climbed onto the bed beside Lucas, putting his legs out beside Lucas’s long legs, and
wrapping an arm around his shoulder. Lucas’s head had fallen against his cheek and rested there.

‘So, you see, they do love you,’ he’d said, kissing his hair. And Lucas had nodded and closed his
eyes.

Later the nurse had come with a bowl of warm water to give him a bed bath.

‘I can do it, I’ve done it before and I know how,’ Emile had said.

The nurse said it was against regulations, so he’d sat while she washed with a flannel over his
forehead and cheeks and the boyish moustache and scruff from not shaving for how many days,
then down over his throat. She moved a towel and the sheet as she moved over his body, keeping
him covered except for the area she was washing, using fresh warm flannels as she went. Emile
could tell Lucas was tense from his breathing, but he knew he’d feel better for it when it was done.

He couldn’t help wondering when he’d last been touched in a non-sexual way, wondered if Mat
had been big on affection; somehow, he doubted it.

The nurse was professional, knowing how to put her patient at ease by distracting him with talk
about her son the same age who was going to the rugby match that afternoon, and did Lucas like
rugby? while she washed his most intimate parts deftly and then another fresh flannel down his
thighs to his feet.

Lucas told her that one of Emile’s best friends was a Rugby player with Stade Paris, glanced at his
face so he smiled back, and she was impressed, maybe a signature for her son? she asked. Then she
was done.
But we need to wash your hair, she said, and went to fetch fresh water, a special basin and shampoo.

‘Perhaps if Lucas says yes, you can do that?’ she’d said to Emile.

The basin was flat with a rim all around it to collect water and a drain going into a pipe which took the excess water off into a bucket. It had low section that slid under Lucas’s neck where he lay flat on the sheet.

Emile ran the jug of warm water over his hair and added shampoo, then massaged Lucas’s scalp. He used his thumbs down behind his ears and under to the back of his neck, felt Lucas drift as his touch relaxed him.

He was so quiet, Emile leaned over and looked down at his face, and for the first time he saw his eyes smiling back. He stepped around the corner of the bed so he could see him the right way up, keeping his hand still open against his head.

‘Tu aimes ça?’ he asked.

‘Oui, j’aime ça,’ Lucas answered, his smile growing wider.

Emile nodded; they were going to get past this. They had a long journey ahead, but they were going to be alright.

‘Who’s going to look after you when you go home?’

‘My sister, and, erm…,’ he took a breath, alarmed at how fast his heart was suddenly beating, ‘… my boyfriend.’

‘So, you’ll have plenty of support…”

She was still talking, but he’d tuned out.

He’d said it, and the world hadn’t stopped. It wasn’t true, but he may never get to say it again, and it felt fine; no, it felt so much more than that; like he’d been carrying round a heavy load for years of his life, and for a moment at least, it was gone.

Over the past few weeks he’d learnt a lot, he was still learning, but most of all he’d learnt what love was. He loved Josh, and Doli, of course, but Josh needed him most, especially after what he’d been through.

And he loved Aaron.

He loved him so much…

He knew now what he had to do.
‘We need a clean break.’

This was harder than he’d thought. He was sitting in the driving seat of the silver Porsche outside the hospital, Robert installed next to him in a tracksuit top over pyjamas, his hair flat, and a sad but pacific smile on his face.

He hated how just having him there made him feel complete, like when he wasn’t, half of him was missing. He frowned; what had he done before Robert?

Yesterday, he’d sat on the side of the bath at Robert’s, a towel loose around his waist, feeling the narrow edge press up under the muscles of his backside. The low volume of a film playing from the TV in Josh’s room had filtered into the quiet. His furniture had come and he’d helped Vic get everything set up, but the room still looked temporary, and Josh like a guest just passing through.

He’d lifted the corner of the towel and wiped over his eyebrows where the water had dripped down from his hair. He was twenty-three years old.

And Robert; Robert was doing his head in.

He’d rehearsed what he was going to say, even scribbled down notes - the dog-eared piece of paper ripped from the back of an old work ledger of Robert’s and now folded in his pocket.

‘I mean not break as in break up,’ he went on unsteadily. ‘It’s not like we’re even together so we can hardly…’ He glanced over at his face. ‘What is it? Is it the meds? Are you high?’ he interrupted himself.

‘No, I’m just listening.’

‘Right, well listen to this,’ he carried on more forcefully. ‘When we get back to yours, I’m not coming up, I’m going back to Ben’s apartment and I’m going back to sort the yard out, and I’m going back to my life, which doesn’t include you!’

He waited.

‘Well?’

He saw Robert take a breath and open his mouth…

‘And don’t even think about starting with all the - Josh needs ya! Cos it’s not me he needs it’s you. He’s been through a whole load of trauma, he needs you looking out for him, he needs you to take him to a therapist, you to sign him up in a new school, to take him to play football in the park, he needs you to step up and be a proper dad!’

Robert opened his mouth again.

‘I…’

‘No, Robert. I mean it.’ He looked out from the windscreen, as a taxi arrived and a heavily pregnant woman was helped out, steered by her husband presumably towards the hospital entrance where they disappeared. He sighed. ‘It’s just confusing for him because he thinks we’re together,
and we’re not. And he’s anxious about it. Yesterday he was asking me about where I kept my stuff. Asking about when Vic goes, whether we’ll be moving back into the big bedroom. You need to sit him down, and tell him the truth, it’s the only way he’ll start to feel safe. I mean I was an au pair, not a dad.’

He saw Robert nod, felt his shoulders suddenly deflate.

‘You were a great au pair.’ Robert said softly.

‘Until you ruined it.’

Their eyes locked in silence. Aaron fixed on the freckles on Robert’s nose, moved down to his mouth, noticed that he needed a shave; the light blonde growth on his upper lip and chin.

‘I need space in my head, for me, I need it, Robert,’ he said quietly.

‘Alright.’

‘I’ll leave the car here, Vic can drive it round to the car park later, I won’t come up. You don’t mind, do you? I’m going to take the metro, the stop’s just up the road.’ He pointed with his chin. Robert nodded vigorously, he hadn’t the foggiest where it was, Aaron realized, even after all the months he’d had the apartment. He shook his head, trying not to smile.

He helped him up the steps to the building entrance, one hand under his elbow, the other holding his overnight bag, put the bag down and buzzed up.

‘We’re here, can you come down and help Rob come up?’ he said into the crackling intercom.

A couple of yellow leaves spiraled down from the plane tree on the path in a late summer drop, up the street, a dog barked.

Aaron tucked his fingers in his tight front pockets.

‘You’re not on your own. You’ve got Vic.’

‘Yes.’

‘Right then.’

‘Right.’

He leaned on his toes into a cheek kiss, eyes closed. He raised one hand into a fleeting touch against Robert’s chest through the warm cotton of his pyjama top, lowered it. For a last time, he met Robert’s eyes, red rimmed, looking back at him, and then Robert nodded.

‘Bye.’

And with an intake of breath he turned and scampered down the steps, onto the street and started walking away.

After he’d steadied his breathing, he swiveled round to look, still walking backwards, saw Robert give him a thumbs-up.

He blinked back a smile, and then turned and continued on his way.
But he still had to look one last time. He was a fair distance now. He saw the entrance open and Vic come out, Josh ducking under her elbow at the door. Josh bounced around, then he jumped onto the low wall at the top of the steps and leaning, wrapped his arms around his father’s neck. He saw them both in profile as their foreheads touched, the sun breaking out with their smiles like a toothpaste ad. He huffed out a laugh watching, raised his sleeve to wipe his eyes, and then they disappeared inside, and he turned, alone, walking down the Paris avenue, until the lunchtime crowds surrounded him.

Three Weeks later

He was proud of him. He missed him, but he was proud of him.

Ed was buying shoes for the wedding and they were in some swanky boutique where a bloke in a white shirt and grey waistcoat was measuring his feet, while Aaron stood next to them, pulling faces at himself and checking out his profile in the long mirror opposite.

‘So, he hasn’t tried to wheedle his way back into your affections?’

‘He never wheedled!’ Aaron objected, pulling his chin in.

He heard Ed chuckle.

‘So, when you say you told him you needed space - did you mean something permanent or just time out?’ Ed reached for the shoe horn, manoeuvring his heel back into his designer trainers.

‘What date did you say they’d be ready?’ he asked the sales assistant.

‘No, I meant it’s over,’ Aaron squinted, then for emphasis he added, ‘For good.’

‘Fine,’ Ed laughed softly again. ‘I just wondered because you haven’t stopped talking about him all morning.’

‘Bollocks!’ Aaron said.

Ed stood, still laughing, running his palms down the creases in his skinny jeans over his powerful thighs. He picked up a black shoe from a display stand, turned it over examining the sole.

‘These are nice,’ he said to Aaron. ‘Have you got something to wear for the wedding?’

So, Aaron tried a pair on and bought them, even though they pinched his feet, pulling the wad of cash wistfully out of his wallet. He bought them more to prove to Ed he could focus on something other than Robert than for any other reason. Not that he consciously told himself that.

They went for lunch, and while Ed prattled on about wedding favors and button holes, and a honeymoon booked in the Maldives, Aaron fidgeted.

He could hear Robert’s voice in the hospital, saying he was a better person after the blood transfusions.
‘What?’ Ed asked, breaking into his thoughts.

‘Err…?’

‘You laughed; did I say something funny?’

‘Erm, no, look I’m going to get this,’ he gestured at their empty plates and called a waiter over.

‘Call it an early wedding present.’

When he was putting his change back in now seriously empty wallet, his eye was caught by the shine of three condom wrappers in a row in one of the slots. They’d been there since, well, forever.

Did condoms have a use- by date? Maybe he should buy some. And why was he even thinking about it, they were over, right?

He took the metro home, hurtling through tunnels with what felt like every lapdog in Paris, while the sound of dubstep filtered down the corridor from the next carriage. A bloke sitting across the aisle looked up from scrolling his phone and made eye contact, stroking his knuckles a few times down over his beard in a clear signal of interest. Aaron flicked up his eyebrows in a silent rejection to his advances, and looked away.

He was proud of Robert.

Vic had called a week ago to say she was leaving for Emmerdale, and he’d thought he might get in touch after she’d gone, but he hadn’t, and he was proud of him for that.

She’d said Rob had found a play therapist for Josh, taking him every day, that in the afternoons they played football in the local park and fed the ducks. He’d stepped up for his son; Aaron was proud of him for that, too.

The train pulled into a station and he looked up, one more stop.

He did miss him. He chewed his lip thinking about it. He missed him when he was horny, which was a lot of the time. But not just then. It was like this constant ache, he missed his stupid sense of humour, and the way he’d blurt stuff out totally oblivious to how it might sound or even who it might hurt, but then you’d catch a chink of the real Robert, the one who was selfless and kind, the one who’d take a bullet to save someone, or try to tell you he was fine, when he really wasn’t.

And he admitted it to himself, he’d lied to Ed. It wasn’t over. It couldn’t be; not yet. And that was why deep down, he knew he’d been alright, because otherwise he’d be falling apart.

Someday soon, they’d be back on. And this time would be different; no Chrissie, not an affair, no drama, just the two of them and Robert would love him, just him, and he’d love Robert back.

He looked up, oh for fucks sake, he’d missed his station. Holding the bag with his new shoes under his arm he shouldered his way towards the sliding doors, waiting for the next one where he’d get out and cross the platform on his way home to Benoit’s apartment.
He’d come home from the scrapyard and found him on the doorstep, suit jacket open, shirt undone at the collar, showing freckles that had multiplied with the sunshine.

He’d come up for coffee, and then Aaron had kissed him, and Robert had kissed him back.

And then they’d made love. Fast and urgent. Robert still wearing his unbuttoned shirt.

He’d pulled him back onto Benoit’s sofa, the weight of his freckled thighs straddled over his lap as they lost themselves in kisses.

Then, coming up for air, he’d worked Robert’s shirt over his shoulders, and for the first time saw the red raised collagen below his left rib from the gunshot.

‘Will it be alright?’

‘How?’

‘I mean, doing this?’

Robert was already breezing wet kisses down the side of his throat.

‘All healed up, it’ll be fine.’

He’d caught his breath as Robert arched his back, shaking off the sleeves of his shirt until it fell to the ground. When he leaned in again there was that wonderful moment of friction as their cocks touched, nudged up against each other’s bellies, and they both grinned into the kiss.

Aaron reached down, circled his thumb and fingers around Robert’s root, nice quick strokes, hearing him hum, then he’d opened his thighs wider, wanting access under him, and for a moment, Robert lost his balance.

‘Aargh-yeeow.’

‘Oops sorry, did that hurt? We can stop.’

‘You are joking?’

‘Okay well, maybe if we lie down, we can do it like that. You need to work on your core.’

‘Thanks, didn’t know you were a physio as well as a child care expert.’

They took it to the bedroom.

Aaron kept a steadying hand on Robert’s shoulder as he manoeuvred himself gingerly onto his back against the sheet.

‘Come on, turn on your side, it’ll be more comfortable like that.’

He’d prepared him with lube, and moving one hand under his shoulder so he could hold him round the front, he used the other to steer in his tip.

He had to wait for the whole rush of heat that followed to subside before he moved again.

Robert twisted his neck back, his eyes glittering with anticipation.
'Hold on,’ Aaron breathed.

Their mouths met, tongues playing.

He thrust his hips forwards, sliding in deep, Robert’s heart rocketing under his hand on his chest.

Then he pulled swiftly back, and he was rolling into the rhythm of it at a breakneck pace, listening to Robert’s staccato grunts.

He was taking them higher, stopped, his cock quivering against what he knew was Robert’s sweet spot, from the way he’d grabbed his hand, squeezing the life out of his fingers.

He knew he could bring him to that deeper orgasm that they’d discovered that first time together, doing this.

‘Ready?’

Robert nodded. They were both so close. Timing it right, he thrust upwards again, picking up the same fast pace.

Robert turned his face, looking for another kiss.

‘I missed you,’ he breathed. ‘I missed this.’

There was that moment when time seemed to stop, holding their breath. Then Aaron felt the shudder as Robert’s stomach caved, and the sharp sweet scent of cum burst into the air, and with a final deep thrust upwards, Aaron was joining him. The force of the climax rattled through him like arrhythmia. He had that weightless moment where it was all white light and then that floating down of pure bliss.

After, they lay motionless.

‘Blimey!’

‘Blimey – that was good, or Blimey that was a mistake?’

A long time later, looking back, Aaron recalled the hesitation before Robert answered him with a kiss.

Both their bodies were covered in a sheen of sweat. Aaron’s ribs still rising and falling trying to reclaim the rhythm of regular breathing. Robert flushed, his spent cock reflecting the light from the falling sun like copper.

He felt shy about meeting Robert’s eyes, even though they’d just made love, maybe because they’d just made love.

He wasn’t sure yet what it meant. He’d initiated it, he’d wanted it, and Robert had pretty obviously wanted it, too. But where did it leave them?

He could feel Robert watching his face; waited for him to speak, to say something, anything other
than blimey.

‘Stop staring.’

He could hear Robert’s smile when he answered.

‘Just enjoying the view.’

‘It’s a bit weird though, innit? You and me, doing this again.’

He darted a look at Robert’s face, saw the small frown come and go across his forehead, dropped his chin. He didn’t know what he expected, some great declaration of love? He’d had it, and Aaron had been so emphatic in his refusal and then at the hospital, he’d asked for space. He could hardly blame Robert now for not repeating it.

Robert reached a hand out to Aaron’s stomach. Their eyes met, Aaron blinking his permission, and gently with his fingertips Robert touched his scars. They’d healed well, and with time he knew they’d fade more, but for now they were still purple against his pale skin, with pinched pinpoints where the stitches had been.

‘I’m fine. Better than you, anyway.’ He knew Robert worried about him, deflected it.

‘You’ve got your mates, right? Emile? I mean, I know he’s been busy with Lucas in rehab. But he is looking out for you though, isn’t he? And Ed, too, and what’s the name of his boyfriend?’

‘Ben, this is his apartment.’

‘Course.’

‘They’re the ones getting married,’ Aaron blushed suddenly, ‘And yes, they’re around,’ he went on hastily, ‘but I’m fine. I told you.’

‘You would be if you went home.’

‘And you’ve been inside, have ya? Nah? Thought not.’

‘It wasn’t exactly crime of the century, you’re not a Kray twin, they’ll have forgotten you even exist by now. I’m certain of it.’

He heard him, but he didn’t want to hear him. Not now with the sheets still warm and damp, and the starry sky just visible through the half open shutters.

‘And your Mum, she misses you. All the weird Dingle clan.’

‘Oi, you.’

‘You see? You know I’m right.’

He wanted to stop him talking so he slipped a leg between Robert’s thighs pushing him with his fingertips against his chest until he gradually settled onto his back. Lowered his chin to admire his wide nipples. He could feel Robert’s cock hardening again against his hip, wet his lips.

‘Anyway, you won’t go to...’ Robert was still talking.

He stopped him with a kiss, snatching at the cushion of his lower lip with his teeth, holding on just for a moment before sending his tongue exploring inside his mouth, felt the rush of Robert’s breath
against his cheek.

He moved his mouth down to the tender part of his throat beneath his jawline. Down further to swipe his flat tongue over a nipple.

‘All I’m saying is…,’ Robert swallowed looking up at the ceiling, ‘… you won’t go to…’

‘Shut up,’ Aaron muttered, moving back up to his lips to silence him.

He snaked his hand down between them, arched back slightly for room to stroke his finger up over the glittering blue vein than ran the length of Robert’s cock.

Just for a moment he wondered how Robert had been going to finish his words. *Won’t go to prison or Won’t go to England?* It didn’t matter. Ever since he’d stepped off the ferry in France all he’d wanted was to go back home. Until now - until this. This possibility of a fresh start.

He wrapped his fingers around Robert’s cock, gave him a couple of slick tugs, watching his open mouth, taunting him with raised eyebrows, then paused to bend his head and spit before going faster with his hand, until Robert gasped suddenly, and he let go.

‘You can’t bury your head in the sand forever,’ Robert persisted, his voice weak now.

‘Found somewhere better to bury my head.’

They both laughed, cos yes, that was bad.

Aaron stretched over for a condom wrapper, dangled it before cracking it open.

Robert swallowed, lifted his arms up above his head, watching as he unrolled the condom down over his length.

Then Aaron clambered forwards, their eyes locked as he pulled up Robert’s long legs around his waist.

The stretch with Aaron was never not a shock, even though this was the second go. They both waited, Robert blinking to clear the water that had sprung from the corners of his eyes, still watching Aaron’s face.

‘Wimp!’ Aaron said.

Robert grinned, showing his beautiful glistening white canines.

‘Prove it!’ he said.

‘I had this dream that we had a baby girl, you and me, a baby of our own, you know, it was raining and you were holding her in your arms, sheltering her, at least, I think it was a her,’ Robert’s tongue wetting his lips before he went on, dropping his voice, a sudden unexpected crooked smile, ‘…could have been a him.’

They were lying on their sides face to face in the quiet. Aaron stroked his cheek against the pillow,
“Yeah, well, even with a split Johnny that’s not going to happen, sorry to disappoint you but...”

Robert raised a hand skated his fingers over Aaron’s bicep, eyes creased in a smile as he looked back at him.

“You’d be a great dad, though.”

“I was a great au pair.”

“Until I ruined it.”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

They moved their mouths forwards into a kiss, and then another.

“I quite like the idea,” Aaron said twitching his nose, “But you’re the one getting pregnant, there’s one more condom, or we could save that for next time,?” He bit down on his lower lip and added, “…bareback, if you like?”

He moved in for another kiss, but then Robert’s mouth stilled and he tasted salt. He leaned his head back to see better, Robert’s eyes glistening suddenly in the lamp light, his lips tight.

“Rob? What is it?”

Robert shook his head.

“Tell me! Is it like a delayed pain? Did I hurt you? Or...?”

“No,” Robert wiped the eyes with the heel of his hand, he started shuffling up. ‘I need to go. Where’s a towel? I need to get a shower.’

“Wait!”

But his legs were already over the side of the bed, like he’d been spooked, and then he was standing, opening up cupboard doors until he saw a bath towel and grabbed it.

“Robert, please! Did I do something wrong?”

“No!” Robert turned back to him, sounding horrified by the suggestion.

“Then what?”

He saw Robert stand with his hand on the bathroom door, his jaw flexed as he looked down at the floor.

“Nothing. Leave it, Aaron! I’m just late.”

He sat up with his back against the bedhead, heard the water start. He heard Robert bump against the walls of the cabin, the clatter as the soap dropped, the temporary change in the tone of the hiss of water and more noise, so he could picture Robert as he dipped down in the narrow space to recover it.

He was running back over the evening, over what they’d said, trying to make sense of the switch in Robert. What had made him upset.
And now the sudden rush to get back. He’d said Josh was with Doli at Chrissie’s, that he’d be fine, that he’d probably fall asleep as long as he picked him up before morning.

Could it have just been the sex? It had got pretty intense, and especially coming anally like that, it could do that; they’d both had a little cry after sex before during that week when he’d stayed when Chrissie was away. And, he reminded himself, for Robert it was still a relatively new experience.

Or it was something he’d done. It probably was even though Robert wouldn’t say it.

Robert had the towel around his waist when he came out. He walked over to the bed and perched next to Aaron, taking his hand, leaning forward he pecked a kiss on his mouth.

‘Don’t,’ another kiss, ‘over,’ and another, ‘think,’ one more, ‘everything!’

He raised his eyebrows, searching for his eyes.

‘It’s not you, I’m just tired,’ he went on. ‘You try looking after a six-year-old day and night on your own.’

‘Well, I did, remember, alongside a two-year-old, and both of them belonged to you.’

Robert smiled and shook his head.

‘Yeah well, you’re better at it than me, I’m just learning. But anyway, you’re alright, aren’t you? Otherwise how can I leave, yeah? I can’t be worrying about you, Aaron.’

‘You could have just said you were tired; did I make you tired?’

‘No. You made me happy. You’ve been the best thing about Paris.’

Aaron flickered his eyebrows up.

‘Only Paris?’

Robert frowned back at him; Aaron gave in to the smile he was trying to stop from surfacing.

And they both laughed, Robert reaching for his face for another kiss.

Robert stood and drifted through the open door to the living area, collecting scattered clothes and then he started to dress, while Aaron watched. He’d already got that sinking feeling he always got, reminded himself that Robert was single now, that everything could be different from now on, that this could be the beginning of their fresh start.

‘What did you come to tell me, by the way? We got a bit distracted, well, my fault, and you never said?’

Robert was fastening the strap on his watch, his fingers stopped moving. His eyes shifted sideways towards the door.

‘What? Oh, yeah. I’m selling the car. Thought you might be able to recommend a trader.’

‘I think Emile’s more your man for that.’

‘You’re right.’
He came back over and sat again, kissed him one more time. The skin on his cheek was soft and this time Aaron noticed it was faintly perfumed; he’d obviously found Ben’s moisturizer. He so fancied himself, but he reckoned that was alright. He reached up and held his wrist, his thumb stroking against the tender underside.

After the kiss Robert lingered, just looking over his face, like he was capturing every detail in his head.

‘You’re being weird,’ Aaron said, swallowing.

What he wanted was for Robert to ask him on a date. He wanted it so badly he felt all those negative feelings about being needy swimming up inside him again, making him feel woozy.

Robert stood up and he watched him turn to go.

He opened his mouth, feeling his heart race recklessly. He was going to say - I love you, but he bottled it.

‘I’ll make you a coffee next time, then.’

He waited, and then Robert turned back, his eyes glittering again, or maybe it was just the reflection of the lamp light.

‘I’ll hold you to that,’ he said.

And then he’d gone.

He’d asked Chrissie to give him a moment alone with his daughter.

Delighted to have his undivided attention, she’d brought him all her favourite toys and pressed them one by one into his hands. He turned each one with his fingers, each precious offering, but his eyes never left her face.

‘This one, Daddy,’ she’d said, her hand holding his knee. He marvelled at how she’d found her voice, turning into a whole little person, sharing her take on the world at last.

He’d planned what he wanted to say to her - that he was sorry for taking her brother away, that she was better off with her mum. That he loved her, more than life, but he had to do this for now.

In the end he just watched her play until Chrissie came back, and then he stood up, wincing slightly as the motion pulled at the almost healed wound on his waist.

‘We’ll visit as soon as Josh is more settled, I promise.’

‘Only your promises don’t count for much.’

He couldn’t blame her, he wouldn’t, instead he reached for her hand and caught it as she raised her chin and looked back.
‘I suppose he’s going with you.’

‘No, Aaron’s not coming,’ he said quietly.

‘Then why?’

It was one last appeal.

He glanced round again at Doli still playing, then back at Chrissie.

‘I love you both.’

A hot tear spilled down on her cheek.

‘But not enough!’

Outside he climbed swiftly into the passenger seat of the waiting car.

‘We should get a move on, there isn’t much time left.’

‘The airport?’

‘Ye..., erm, actually no, there’s a wedding at Chateau de Dommerville, Rue de la Plaine, take me there, will you?’

It was foolish, no, more than that; it was selfish - but he had to see him one last time.

The wedding venue was lavish, white linen under a canopy of delicate vines in the dining room, and outside in the rose garden where the ceremony would take place, a gravel path led past sculptures and a fountain stocked with golden carp.

He was late, the wedding had already started and the place was packed. He scanned the rows of guests.

And then he saw him, wearing a suit, looking as beautiful as he’d ever looked, stealing his breath away.

And for a spinning moment of time, in some parallel universe, he could almost imagine a wedding where they were the grooms, with a happy ever after.

‘Didn’t think you did gay weddings?’

Aaron had followed the crowd of guests until he was next to him, and now he looked at him under lowered eyes, almost flirting.

Some stray confetti had blown onto his suit jacket, and Robert extracted his hand from his pocket, raised his fingers to Aaron’s shoulder, gently brushing it off.

‘Thought I’d jilt you at the aisle?’
‘Just didn’t think you’d remember to be honest.’

‘The other night, in the kitchen, the invitation was on the fridge.’

He saw Aaron blush.

‘How’d you get in anyway, you’re not dressed for it? You’ll need a tie for the dining room. Maybe we can ask a waiter or something, they’ll keep spares, won’t they? What do you think?’

What could he tell him? How could he say goodbye? What he wanted to tell him was how beautiful he was, and to be happy from now on, because he deserved it. And that this had been the most difficult decision he’d ever made. And most of all he wanted to tell him again how very much he loved him, and how he always would.

‘I’m not stopping.’

‘Somewhere to be?’

He didn’t answer. Instead he stepped in, pulling him close, holding him for one last time. There, in that public place he kissed his cheek. And then let go.

It was the day after he’d seen Robert at Ed’s wedding that Adam called.

‘Yeah, I know I should have called Aaron, I was going to come over with Vic, an surprise ya, yeah, but then, with Robert gone she...’

‘Gone?’

‘He’s gone to South America, to Brazil, with his lad. I thought you’d know, man? You being there. Split up with his wife apparently. Gone to start a new life. Diane’s dead disappointed in him. I dunno, I know you never rated him, bit of a tool, I’ll give you that, but, well, he seemed alright to me, Aaron? Are you there, bro? I think there’s something wrong with the line, I can’t hear y....’

His legs were going from under him, there was the wall, he held out a hand against it.

The doorbell buzzed.

‘Adam, I’m here.’

He pressed the intercom, shifted the phone to his other ear, heard a voice saying registered delivery.

‘Adam?’

The line had gone dead.

‘Fuck! Sorry, not you, mate.’
He’d opened the door to the delivery guy, signed for it, it was for Aaron Dingle after all; a stiff white envelope.

The delivery bloke left and he sat and held it for a moment.

His phone was ringing again.

With his hands shaking, he managed to open the envelope from one end and slipped the contents out.

The phone still ringing.

There was a passport. He opened it and read the name DINGLE, AARON

And a one-way ticket; Eurostar Paris Gar du Nord to Leeds.

The phone stopped dead.

He looked again in the envelope, and pulled out a handwritten note.

*Go home now,*

*Rob x*
Chapter Summary

Robert tries to make a go of things in Brazil, and Aaron settles back in Emmerdale, mutual pining - and some anger - ensues. As always the best bits are towards the end.

Hope this all makes sense and isn’t too disjointed. I think the next chapter will pull it together, anyway let me know what you think x

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘♬ It’s Monday, it’s 9 am and that was Cher turning back time to 1989 with If I could turn back time...’

It was so long since he’d thought about it - let himself think about it. At least, he only ever remembered the end of what happened, like he’d blotted the beginning and middle out completely. He could barely recall the lad’s face, just colors, angles. They say you only remember the bad stuff.

They’d been muck-spreading, and then come inside out of the sunshine. No one was home, so he’d turned on the radio.

They took turns swigging milk, he’d put his mouth suggestively over the neck of the pint bottle, rolling his eyes for added effect. He’d got a reaction - ‘Ya mucky pup!’

Thick slices of toast jumping out from the toaster, lathering on the butter; it smeared onto his chin as he took a bite. He’d hiccuped, tipping tea bags in the sink.

He’d dodged a grubby thumb reached forwards to wipe the butter off, raised an arm in mock defense, gargling as he laughed, spilling brown tea onto the farmhouse kitchen floor.

There was a play fight, an arm lock.

They’d twisted around until their temples knocked together; cross eyed he could see the pin points of blackheads on his cheek.

He was so handsome it hurt his stomach.

He wanted it to happen so much; he’d wanted it for days, and now he was half terrified that he’d been misreading the signals all along, that it was all one-sided...
‘Sorry, did I wake you, Senhor Sugden?’

The scent of perfume, the fleeting sensation of a full breast beneath a blouse against his shoulder.

‘I just wanted to take your son’s tray. Shall I bring him a blanket?’

Josh was beside him sleeping in the window seat. He reached across, gently removed his earphones. The screen in front of him flickered silently as the movie played on.

‘Please.’

On Josh’s knee, a snow-shaker rested, the miniature Eiffel Tower on its side in a snowdrift. He’d insisted on buying it before they boarded from a souvenir shop in the duty-free lounge.

‘I thought you had one?’

‘I broke it. You weren’t there. And no-one else could fix it,’ Josh had said.

‘And you? Can I get you anything? Another drink?’

‘Just water.’

‘Nice picture. Who’s that? Family?’

She gestured at his phone in his hand.

‘Erm, no…It’s my son’s au pair. I mean - was - was my son’s au pair…it’s over now.’

There was a panic-room in Ricardo’s house. On the landing upstairs, behind a full-length mirror.

Robert caught sight of himself with Josh in the reflection, both a little jet-lagged but still in high spirits. He watched himself reach out a hand to cup Josh’s face.

This is who he was now; a good father. In the suitcases across the hall where his bedroom was, there was a stack of parenting books ordered online before they left Paris.

‘Appearances can be deceptive.’ Ricardo slipped his hand behind the frame, raising his eyebrows; a silent drum roll.

It seemed like the whole wall shifted open, revealing a hidden galvanized steel door with the bolts of a mortice lock running the length of it.

Robert wet his lips.

‘Seriously? A panic-room? Are you really that paranoid?’

‘Well obviously not, I invited you to stay, didn’t I?’ Rico grinned good naturedly. ‘And I prefer to call it a safe-room, less dramatic.’
‘Yeah, well you’ll probably want to be moving in there permanently before long, you don’t know what you’ve taken on with us.’

‘I’m looking forward to finding out,’ Ricardo replied with a side-long glance trying to catch Robert’s eyes.

The revealed room was surprising cluttered compared to the stylish minimalism of the rest of the villa, maybe he’d run out of storage for stuff he’d accrued that didn’t fit in with his lifestyle as he ascended the business world. There were no windows. Robert could see a screen, presumably some sort of CCTV security; a night vision motion detector, two-way audio, the works, Rico explained proudly.

A blast of humid air from inside hit their faces.

‘What’s a panic-room?’ Josh asked.

‘A place other people don’t know about, where you can feel safe.’

Aaron’s powerful chest; his own cheek damp, flattened against the rise and fall of it, the faint drone of Paris traffic filtering through the shutters. Aaron lowering his chin, his voice a vibration.

‘Rob? Robert? We should get up.’

‘I know, five more minutes, yeah?’

Closing his eyes again, listening to Aaron’s heart.

‘What happens if people do know?’

‘Well, then it wouldn’t be safe anymore, would it?’ Ricardo answered. ‘That’s why we don’t tell anybody, why it’s hidden behind the mirror. The mirror is a distraction, you see. It’s clever. You can go in and take a look if you like?’

‘Maybe another time? I think we should unpack,’ Robert cut in.

‘Okay, when you come down, I’ll open a bottle of wine, we can have a drink by the pool before dinner, you can swim if you’re not feeling too tired. Josh knows how to swim, yes?’

Robert looked confused for a moment; how couldn’t he know that about his son?

‘Duh! Yes! We had lessons at school, and sometimes my au pair would take me and Doli.’

‘She must have been nice.’

‘He, and yes he was the best in the world. Aaron. He and my dad...’

The children’s au pair. You met him once.’

Ricardo narrowed his eyes with effort.

‘I don’t remember, should I?’

‘It’s fine. I think you met a lot of people that week in Paris....’ he said dryly, and then smiled. ‘Wine sounds like a good idea, we’ll be down shortly.’
Robert steered Josh down the hallway, past semi-abstract paintings featuring male nudes, hopefully too obscure for a nearly seven-year old to interpret.

Josh’s room was all white with a bright window overlooking a lawn with a line of luscious tropical flowers at the side of the house. Robert heaved a suitcase onto the bed and opened it.

‘Right, young man, for now we’ll put the essentials in this top drawer so you know where they are; are you looking? PJ’s, right? Underwear, t-shirts, shorts…, and here; if you want to put these on now,’ he held up Josh’s bathing trunks, ‘But if you feel too tired that’s fine.’

‘No, I want to.’

He could see how Josh’s eyes glittered from fighting off fatigue, so he sat on the bed and helped him change his clothes. When he was dressed, Robert plucked at the hem of his t-shirt to straighten it.

Josh let his head rest against his father’s chest, Robert closed his eyes and kissed his hair.

He took his hands in his own as he leaned back.

‘First impressions?’

Josh nodded vigorously, looking round.

‘Great!’

Robert stroked the tips of Josh’s fingers with his thumbs, looking carefully at his son’s face.

‘Listen,’ he caught his eyes. ‘This is a big change for both of us, yeah? And it’ll probably feel strange at the start. And that’s perfectly normal and fine. But I won’t always be able to help unless you talk to me, right? So, I want you to promise me; no secrets, no worrying about things…’

‘No panic rooms,’ Josh cut in, making Robert smile.

‘That’s right, no panic rooms. Just tell me what’s on your mind, anytime, okay? Because I love you, and I’m here for you, you know that, don’t you?’

‘Okay.’

Robert pulled him back into a hug.

‘And you’ll tell me, too?’ Josh added, playing with a button on his father’s shirt before looking up at his face. ‘No secrets?’

‘Course, cross my heart…’

They shared a gentle fist-bump, and then Josh looked down again with a frown.

‘I think I miss Doli.’

‘I know, we’ll Skype with her tomorrow.’

There was a moment when Josh hesitated, as if there was something else that he wanted to say, and then his eyes alighted on the snow-globe of Paris that he’d put down on the bed when they’d first
been shown the room, and he was all energy again. He reached for it and carried it swiftly towards
the window, placing it ceremoniously on the sill, where it reflected the sun in rainbows.

The Eiffel Tower, an almost kiss, coffee grounds, fingers on his waist ...the wedding bells of Sainte
Antione lost in traffic...thinking No! This is a mistake...except Josh was already waiting at the
airport with Emile on the phone saying he needed to get back, and they were going to miss the
plane... ‘You said goodbye? You told him, non?’ ‘Not exactly.’ ‘What? I didn’t sign up for this.
You should have told him, Robert!’ ‘Which just proves I made the right decision. He’s better off
without me...’

From the garden, a mouth-watering smell of herbs and baking bread reached them, outside a wisp
of smoke rounded the house.

Robert rallied himself, shaking himself out as he stood, forcing himself back to the present.

‘Ricardo’s making us something to eat,’ he took a breath then stretched his eyes, ‘...pizza Forno a
lenha! -means pizza in a wood oven to you and me - sounds good, yeah?’

Josh waggled his tongue enthusiastically.

‘Give me a second and I’ll get changed, we’ll go down together.’ He was already at the door.

‘And have a look for your flip-flops in the case...’

This time around he was going to make it work, he told himself. He’d done the right thing for once;
for all of them...

Aaron decided that hating Robert was easier than loving him, and that worked well for a while at
least. He nurtured it, raking over Robert’s faults.

There was plenty enough to go at; self-serving, manipulative, serial cheat, and the list just went
on...how long had you got?

Only he had no one to talk to about it.

‘Gone to be with that Brazilian bloke, I expect,’ he’d said to Emile before he left, feigning
disinterest.

‘Maybe it’s for the best. Ah, look at this one!’ Emile head was bent over the prints from Ed’s
wedding, he picked one up. ‘Beautiful, non? Can I take a copy of this for Lucas?’

Aaron fighting back hot tears. How was Emile so oblivious all at once? - He was supposed to be
with me! He was supposed to choose me! - He wiped his sleeve hastily over his face.

‘Just take that one, yeah? I can always get more done.’

‘Thanks, he’ll love it. Don’t forget to call me before you leave for London.’ He was already by the
door, fastening the zip on his jacket.

‘Erm, Leeds actually, and yeah course I will.’
And then he was gone. No heart to heart, not even a hug. It was only long after that he realized, Emile had been pulling back the lifeline of his friendship, letting him go too; they’d all put him first in the end.

But those early days, he hadn’t seen it; and hating Robert was as easy as breathing.

The fact that he’d left without saying goodbye, and then, on top of that, that he’d taken away Aaron’s choice and agency by buying him the train ticket back to England from Paris.

It hadn’t been his decision to make. How dare he?

But there’d never really been any doubt, and Robert had known it. With him and Josh gone, Emile wrapped up with Lucas in rehab, Ed and Benoit newlywed, there’d been nothing left for him in Paris.

And Robert had known another thing too. The risk of the journey, the thought of getting picked up by the police, sent down - not just for the original arson, but for being on the run, that they’d most likely throw away the key - it was so seductive.

He’d wanted it. He’d wanted to get caught; he’d wanted to be locked up and never have to think or function again. It would be over. All of it.

And he hated Robert for knowing that about him, like he was inside his head. For playing him so well.

And then at immigration he’d placed his passport face down in the electronic gate, and waited and seen the green light. He’d passed through, looking back over his shoulder. No one had stopped him, no one had even raised an eyebrow.

And he had to live his life after all.

So there was that white fury, spilling over into his dreams at night where he’d be back in a bedroom in Paris, snarling and threatening, pushing Robert up against the wall, until he’d wake up in the dark with his dick hard, his fist a blur and he’d lie there, eyes wide open, as hot cum splashed down between his fingers. His Mum in the morning saying, ‘Didn’t you do a wash yesterday?’ as he turned on the machine yet again, or, ‘Is your window open, it’s making a draught right through the place, it is winter you know and it’s not like Paris, it’s bloody chilly here love or were you away so long you’ve forgotten?’ And then, just when he was sitting down to breakfast, she’d throw in, ‘And isn’t it time you thought about a job, love, instead of hanging around like a wet weekend? Even Adam’s got himself sorted...’

He was home.

And for a while, he’d forget about Robert, feeling relief flood through him as the years away shrank, like he’d closed the back page of yesterday’s newspaper and all that was left to read was the final results, and even they’d be forgotten too in a moment, as he chucked it in the recycling, and put his breakfast plate in the sink.

He’d thought coming home would be the answer, that it would make him happy, and it did.

And one of the best things of all was being back with Adam. The first night they went out and got
blathered, Adam’s high spirits and good nature carrying them through the evening, so that he laughed until his chest was full as he drank in the features of his face, listening as he recounted anecdote after anecdote from all the times he’d missed. The morning after they sat half-blind at Butlers, numb fingers around pints of water.

‘So, the scrapyard, man, you are going to work with me, yeah?’

He rubbed at an eyelid.

‘I’d thought, well…maybe I could do something working with kids again.’

Josh’s hand in his, the walk to school, Doli in the pushchair pointing at birds as they trundled down an avenue of beech trees…

Except it hadn’t all been like that, had it?

Robert driving alongside in the red Porsche, lowering the window, calling out…’Be good for Aaron, won’t you children?’ then looking him up and down, and adding quietly with that self-satisfied smile of his, ‘…and I’ll be good for you later, too? Or bad… if you prefer…’

And he had been; very, very bad…

He’d stood, feeling nauseous all at once.

‘We’ll talk about this later, yeah? I need to go home and you need to call Vic after you drunk dialed her last night…I think you proposed, mate…’

Initially he’d been made up for him about the scrapyard.

He had premises and a portacabin, a pick-up for collecting, he even had a crusher.

‘I’m chuffed for ya, Adam, really! Where’d you get the capital from? Must have cost quite a bit getting this set up?’

‘Yeah well, mum released some equity from the farm, didn’t she?’ Adam had answered looking away across the valley.

And in the end, he’d fallen into it, helping Adam out at first, until he was there every day - after working with Emile in Paris it was only natural.

Then one day he was looking for a receipt and opened some drawers and happened upon some official looking documents, legal stuff, and then he’d seen it, Robert’s name, jumping out at him in black and white print, and his signature next to Adam’s on the bottom of every page of a thirty-million-page document.

He’d picked it up and frowned, his head bowed over it trying to make sense of what it could mean.

Then Adam walked up the metal steps and he’d held it out towards him.

‘What’s this?’

‘Oh, man! He asked me not to say anything.’

‘I don’t get it.’
'Robert; he gave me the capital to start the business, he’s a sleeping partner.’

He could feel his heart going uncomfortably fast.

‘Just tell me, Adam! What’s going on?’

‘He knew, that it was me; the arson. To be honest, I wondered for a while if you’d told him.’

Aaron stretched his eyes and pointed a hand towards himself.

‘Me?’

‘No, I mean, I know you wouldn’t have, but how else…anyway, he just told me, and then he gave me a choice, fess up to the police, or start a business. He said he was doing it for Vic, he wasn’t nice about it. Something about if she was dating a loser she may as well date a loser with a business. You were right, man, the bloke’s a prick!’

Aaron raised a hand quickly brushing over his eyes, hating that he could still feel this rush of anger and grief.

‘So how come you didn’t tell me?’

‘He told me not to. And he told me you’d come back, as well, that he was sorting it so you wouldn’t be arrested, told me to persuade you to work here with me. In fact, …oh man… well you may as well know now, you own part of the business, too.’ He sorted through the document and showed Aaron a page, ‘he gifted a load of shares to you.’

He felt sick, and now he was crying again, it was the rage, he told himself.

‘I’m sorry, Aaron. I’m sorry I lied to you, man. He can be very persuasive.’

He couldn’t trust himself to speak, not yet, but he nodded as Adam started to speak again.

‘What I didn’t get was why he gave you the shares, you know? I thought maybe he felt bad because you lost your job with him or something, and it must have been his fault, you never said,’ Adam gave a hollow laugh, ‘You know I honestly even thought maybe he and you…maybe he fancied you or something, which is just ridiculous, I’m sorry…’

And then Adam caught his eyes.

‘Aaron? No, no… you’re not telling me… is it true then?... I can’t believe… I mean he was… he’s not…’

‘You mustn’t say anything, no one here knows! Not his family, not anyone. Just Vic.’

‘I had no idea.’

‘Well it doesn’t matter now, does it. He’s gone to Brazil, and I’m better off without him.’

‘He must have cared about you, though.’

Adam gestured at the yard.

‘He didn’t. This is just because he can’t stand not being the one in control. Even now, even if he’s a million miles away. The only person he cares about is himself, that’s all he’s capable of. He’s broken, Adam, and nothing’s gonna fix him.’
The first few weeks it seemed like there was so much to do, organizing everything for Josh.

There was hardly time to pay attention to the running commentary on his life, playing in the background of his thoughts. He’d been exiled before, by his dad, but this time he’d exiled himself and it was for the best. Maybe he’d even become his dad; judge and jury on himself.

He applied for a place for Josh in a private school that taught lessons in French and Portuguese, and then they had to wait for references from Paris. Meanwhile he’d found him a new play therapist, and a Portuguese teacher who came to the house a couple of hours a day.

Ricardo bought Josh a bicycle to ride around the pool, and other gifts, maybe trying just a bit too hard, while Robert found himself inadvertently playing hard to get.

On paper everything should work, absolutely. Never mind they were from different continents. Ricardo was good-looking, self-made, ambitious; he owned a sports Chevrolet Camaro, wanted a Corvette; soon, he said. He had a killer instinct for business which was why Robert had taken him on in the first place. And he had the hots for Robert.

‘Learn your own language,’ Emile had said, and wasn’t that partly why he was there? Away from everyone who knew him, staying as a guest with an out and proud gay man; he hadn’t said it aloud, not even to himself, but deep down he knew where this was leading.

He loved Aaron, but Aaron deserved better, and now he needed to be a better person, and being a better person meant finding out who he really was.

‘Pizzato Merlot, from the Serra Gaucha moutains in the south, the best region in Brazil for wine. What do you think?’

He’d come down after putting Josh to bed and joined Rico at a table outside. The pool glowed green in the dark from strategically placed underwater lights. The air was humid. He plucked at his t-shirt, pulling it away from his skin, and took the offered glass.

‘Maybe we can take a trip and visit some of the vineyards, do some tasting.’

‘Doesn’t sound suitable for Josh, though does it?’

‘Maybe not, you’re such a devoted father, but don’t you deserve a little adult time now and then, Roberto? What do you think?’

‘He’s my priority. I told you that before we came out.’

‘I understand.’

He grimaced, he’d shut him down; he wasn’t supposed to do that.

‘I had a chat with a couple more clients who want me to do some consultancy today.’
'That’s great.'

‘I know, but I still need to work on my Portuguese, maybe I should ask Josh’s teacher to help me, she seems good, at least, he likes her.’

He drank some more wine, wetting his lips.

‘She’s pretty,’ Ricardo said.

‘Is she? I hadn’t noticed.’

He tapped at his glass with his fingers.

‘I thought I was your Portuguese teacher?’

‘Well, you are, if you’re still offering?’

‘I’m still offering; you know that.’

They held each others’ eyes for a moment, then Robert put down his glass and leaned forwards into a kiss, brief, but lingering; a promise that there was more to come.

‘Let’s take it slow, though, see what happens, yeah? Like I said, Josh is my priority.’

‘Whatever you want,’ Ricardo answered quietly.

‘What was it with you and sleeping with people you shouldn’t? Because it’s not about love, is it? I know you’re a dirt bag, but it isn’t even that, is it? So come on, Rob, what is it, really?’

Andy’s voice in his head; after Katie found out about Sadie...

He turned with a frown, tugging at the sheet, listening to the whir of the ceiling fan. England would be cold, it would be nearly morning now, Aaron asleep in his bedroom, eyes closed, he remembered the fossil on his dresser.

‘So come on, Rob?’

Andy still there, insisting on his answer.

‘What do you want me to say? I don’t know, alright? I’m human, and I make mistakes. But, sometimes, sometimes it is about love, alright?’

He needed to go further back, though, even further...

‘What’s the sudden interest in the farm?’

‘Nothin’. Just wanna help me dad out.’

‘Our dad, and come on Rob, like you ever gave a damn before?’

‘You’re not inside my head, what would you know about it?’
'Whatever’s inside there, it’s pretty worthless, I know that much.'

Outside the kitchen window, the pop of an engine as the hired hand arrived, taking off his helmet, shaking out chestnut brown curls.

Robert watched him through the glass as he rocked on the saddle of the thrumming motorbike.

Andy and his petty opinions paled away into insignificance, and yeah, he was fanciful maybe; but right then, right there, to him, the fields and farm transformed into some sort of wonderland, waiting to be explored.

He grabbed his coat, checked his face in the mirror, smoothing a stray lock of hair.

‘Tell Dad I’ll be back in time for school.’

‘Rob, wait, where are ya going?’

‘Muck-spreading! Where do you think?’

And he was out, under the morning sky – king of the world...

‘Ungh!’

He opened his eyes.

Josh must have taken a flying leap from the side of the bed and then landed in a belly flop heavily on his stomach. Good job he was light. He raised a hand instinctively to the scar of his gunshot wound.

Josh turned his sharp chin, grinned up impishly, showing the gap where he’d lost his front teeth.

‘Ouch!’

Robert raised a hand and ran it over Josh’s halo of morning hair.

‘Seriously? How many times have I told you to knock first?’ He found his voice, still laced with sleep.

‘But it’s morning!’

‘It doesn’t matter what time of day it is. Grown up rooms, you knock, right? You know it.’

He yawned. ‘What have you got there?’

He could see he was holding something in his outstretched arm.

‘Postcards. My Portuguese teacher got them for me. I’m going to write to everyone in Paris.’

‘Alright, but first wash and then breakfast, okay?’

He was already half out the door.

‘Okay, and then can we go to the beach?’
Downstairs, Ricardo was cooking eggs on the stove. He stepped up behind him and put both hands on his shoulders in a light caress. When Ricardo turned his head, he dropped his eyes to his mouth and kissed him, lightly.

‘Good morning.’

‘Mmm, seems like it!’ Ricardo said, eyes smiling back. He dropped his spatula, reached for Robert’s t-shirt.

‘Hey, you gave me an appetite...’

So Robert kissed him a second time, this time letting his nose press briefly into his cheek as he closed his eyes, and just catching his upper lip for a moment.

He pulled back and winked, and from the corner of his eye he thought he saw a movement at the kitchen entrance, but then nothing, and then a couple of moments later as he was setting the table, Josh trailed in looking away nonchalantly out of the window onto the patio by the pool.

So he’d seen, then. But that was alright; later they’d talk about it. He had to try and make this work. No more secrets.

After breakfast, Josh’s teacher had come, hair tied up high on her head, in a floral short summer dress and sunglasses that she removed, lifting her heavy satchel from her shoulder as he ran up to greet her with a hug around her waist.

‘Oi, Bom dia, Joshua! Como vai você?

‘Muito bem,’ Josh answered grinning a bit self-consciously.

‘How’s he doing, will he be ready when he starts school in a couple of weeks?’ Robert asked.

‘Oh, he’s doing well.’ She smiled. ‘They’ll help him at school too, you know, he’ll pick it up quickly I’m sure, and I’m happy to continue, help with homework.’

‘Great!’

‘So come on, Joshua, let’s start!’

She turned towards the study where they had their lessons.

‘Querem tomar café?’ Robert asked.

‘Sim obrigado,’ she laughed.

‘So how do you take it?’ Robert said, switching to English.

She raised a hand to the slim gold necklace at her throat.

‘Just a little milk, I like it dark.’

‘..and mysterious, like your eyes,’ Robert grinned.

When they’d gone into the room, he turned and saw Rico looking at him.
‘What?’

Rico shook his head and opened his laptop.

‘I’ll make you a coffee, too, alright?’

Rico waved a hand, opening his laptop.

‘Fine, as you want.’

They were drinking their coffee, when a colleague from Rico’s office dropped round to pick up some documents on the way to a client. Rico introduced Robert, a hand lightly touching his waist from behind.

‘So, are you two an item, then?’

The discomfort trickled through him like ice.

‘No,’ And then he heard Rico answer at the same time; ‘Yes.’

‘Well, until I get a better offer,’ he added jokingly.

But no one laughed, and Rico looked away.

After he’d gone they sat in silence, both with their laptops open. Robert had that feeling where everything was racing – he reached out for the one person who could make him calm, sifting through memories...

‘You know you have more nerve endings on your lips than any other part of the body?’

‘That can’t be right.’

‘What? Are you arguing with science, now?’

‘They always get stuff wrong, don’t they? Scientists.’

‘Alright, where do you think there are more nerve endings, then?’

‘Obvious, innit?’

‘You’ll have to be more specific.’

Aaron’s eye roll, pointing down below his waist, a blush creeping across his cheek.

‘Shall we put it to the test, then? No, seriously, I think we need to, in the interest of science… So, are there more nerves here?’ He’d caught him by the waistband of his jogging pants, pulling him close, looking down with mock concentration and up again, searching his face. ‘…Or here, what do you think? Aaron? Aaron?’
“His mouth so close. He’d watched his eyelids fall anticipating the kiss…”

‘Roberto, you were miles away.’

‘No, I wasn’t, I’m right here.’

‘Well what do you think, then? A party? For Josh’s birthday? Here, a pool party.’

‘Steady on, we’ve only been here a few weeks. He doesn’t know anyone yet.’

‘Well it’s a perfect way to make new friends. I can invite some of the neighbors who have kids, and you can meet some people, too.’

‘Let me think about it.’

‘Okay, you know what? working from home today wasn’t such a good idea. I’m going into the office.’

There was a time half remembered now when everything felt right; when his dad fell in love with Sarah, and maybe from that he’d internalized something about what love looked like.

A girl at school with a french braid who sat next to him in math, the boy who always caught the bus at the third stop, and then that day when he didn’t get on, and everyday after wondering where he’d gone, and why.

And then Andy came along, with his freckles and idiot grin that made his brown eyes shine, and for the first time friendship mattered, even with everything that followed, ...and then those years - the growth spurts and voice breaking...and all at once it all seemed so chaotic...

An hour into Josh’s lesson, and Vic face-timed, interrupting his thoughts.

‘He wants to fly out and see you, stay for a while.’

‘Stay here? You’re joking.’

‘For a holiday. That’s a good thing isn’t it? My brothers rubbing along together again?’

‘As if we’ve ever done that. He didn’t even come to my wedding.’

‘Erm, maybe because he wasn’t invited? And it’s not as if the marriage lasted.’

Good ole Vic, bigging him up, even though he probably deserved it.

‘What does he want? A free holiday? Always knew he was a cheapskate.’

‘Don’t, Robert! He’s willing to make the effort. Will you at least think about it? It would be good for Josh to meet his uncle. Say yes for him, if not for yourself. You’re both so far away, and Josh needs to know he belongs to a family.’
She’d said the magic word. *Family.*

It wasn’t easy face-timing from such a distance and with immaculate timing the screen froze.

He could see Victoria in her blue chef’s hat and gleaming white double-breasted jacket, the stainless-steel work surfaces and service area of the kitchen at the Woolpack outlined with black pixels.

He stood up, walking with his phone to the window where he leaned his forehead against the glass, looking out at the villa’s garden mostly laid to lawn, isolated flowers in sculptured pots.

‘Does he know?’

Her face moved, a smudge turning sideways looking away somewhere, he could see her frown.

‘Vic? Does he know?’ He wet his lips. ‘About Paris?’

She’d turned back, the signal picking up again with sudden clarity, her big liquid eyes on the screen looking back at him thoughtfully.

‘No one knows. Just like you asked. I haven’t told anybody. And neither has…’

There was something going on behind her, and she turned her face over her shoulder leaving her sentence incomplete, turned back again.

‘Look he’s going to call you, alright? Be nice when he does.’

There was some more noise. Next thing he was looking at the shaking white ceiling as the phone jostled in her hand, then the buttons on her chefs’ jacket.

Another sleeve came into view; belonging to someone else, a black sweater, a wrist, a hand… a hand he’d once pressed back against a sheet, clasped so tight that the soft spaces between the knuckles had been bruised with the imprint of each other’s fingertips.

The phone danced. There was a fleeting view of stubble, the neat line where it ended on a flushed throat, or maybe it was just the way the camera filtered the colours.

He was so near the speaker of the phone when he spoke it was almost intimate, he could imagine his mouth.

‘Adam got ‘im for the scrapyard. What do you think?’

‘You can’t bring him in here, is what I think; it’s against health and safety! Take him out right now! Go on! Before Marlon catches you. Out!’

And then the line cut.

He went out into the garden.

He could just hear faint voices of Josh and his teacher from the window of the study. He laid his phone down on the table, sliding it away from him, the ink blue surface of the pool motionless in the oppressive heat. He tried to compose his mouth; hated it when this happened; when his feelings got the better of him. He sat, only his jaw flexing, trying to get a grip.
That part of his life was over, for good. He scrunched his eyes up tight.

He picked up his phone again, opened his contacts, left a voice message.

‘Look, I’m sorry about this morning. I know I’ve been blowing hot and cold. Just bad timing...And also you know I’m not used to this, don’t you? Bear with me, yeah? I’ll make it up to you tonight.’

At bedtime, he took turns to read with Josh and then they shared about the day.

_“No secrets: I saw him kiss you, ok listen, I might be dating Rico, but I’m not in love, I’m just trying it out, we’re not sharing a room, or anything serious. I’ll tell you if that changes, right?”_ 

‘And you’ll send the postcards? All of them?’

He should have guessed Josh would write to Aaron, Josh had asked him to take them, and now he held them in his hand, still unsure of what to do.

‘Alright, alright,’ Robert sighed. ‘You don’t talk about him,’ he added softly.

‘You don’t talk about him, either.’ Josh answered.

And it was true. But what could he say that a seven-year-old would understand? That he’d found someone that had unlocked the meaning of life for him, that he’d lost him, that nothing would ever be the same again?

Later, when Josh was eventually asleep, he looked again at the postcard.

_Wish you were here_, written in Josh’s spiky print and then a long line of X’s getting smaller and smaller, and a drawing, the three of them, holding hands.

Then an attempt at an address, Aaron Roberts, Near the Eiffel Tower, Paris.

Robert picked up a pen, and drew a line across it.

Then he wrote in his own hand - Aaron Dingle, The Woolpack, Main Street, Emmerdale, Nr. Hotten, Yorkshire, England.

He would give them to the maid to post tomorrow.

He got up and went to the en suite bathroom and washed his face, then went back to check that Josh was asleep. He was lying on the bed limbs akimbo like a star fish. He stepped quietly into the room and placed the back of his hand against his cheek, then, leaning over he kissed his son.

He walked down the hallway, stopped in front of the panic-room and looked at his reflection in the mirror for a moment.

It was close to midnight. At the bottom of the stairs, Rico held out a frosted bottle of beer.
‘How about we swim? The water will be warm.’

So they did, taking their swimming trunks off under the water and moving close until their bodies touched.

‘Tonight?’ Rico asked, and instead of an answer, Robert kissed him, moving his mouth down, gliding over his wet collar bone.

They climbed out and lay back against the soft wood of the decking, and had sex. Robert came hot and hard, looking up over Rico’s shoulder, at the ink night sky over the city, and beyond to the vapor breath of the Milky Way.

And after he felt empty.

‘Shall we take it to the bedroom?’ Rico asked.

‘Not tonight yeah? Josh sometimes wakes up and comes to my room. Let’s wait for now.’

After they said goodnight, he lay back against his pillow and looked for the memory, the one from that morning…

Chrissie had gone to England and Aaron had stayed. Josh was at school. There was no food in the house, so they’d ordered a take-away for lunch. He’d said he’d go shopping later while Aaron picked up Josh.

‘Anyway, I’ve had better things to do with my time.’

The delivery had arrived while they were mid marathon on the couch.

‘Answer it,’ he’d half groaned, half laughed in his ear when the door buzzer sounded. He’d seen the sex versus food conflict play out on Aaron’s face, slapped his hip in gentle encouragement. ‘Go on. I won’t go anywhere.’

Aaron had slowly extracted himself, leaving Robert’s exquisitely abused body abandoned, legs a bit trembly as he’d slipped them down from where they’d been crossed around Aaron’s waist. He’d turned his face, enjoying the view as Aaron hopped into a pair of jogging pants with the johnny still wrapped around his dick.

‘Don’t be long, eh?’

Through the gap in the door he’d seen him take the paper bag full of kebab and chips from the delivery boy. He’d already paid on line, but he could see Aaron cast about for his wallet, probably thinking he should give a tip, heard him mumble an apologetic. ‘La prochaine fois?’

Then the delivery lad was gone, and Aaron was back, leaning over to press his mouth against Robert’s lips, tasting of salt and chip oil, so that Robert knew he must have sneaked a cheeky chip, and protested laughing, ‘…it’s like being kissed by a deep fryer…’

‘One, I had one! Anyway, looks like you kept yourself entertained!’

‘You know you have more nerve endings on your lips than any other part of the body?’
‘Shall we put it to the test, then? No, seriously, I think we need to, in the interest of science… So, are there more nerves here?’ He’d buried his wrist down under Aaron’s waistband. ‘…Or here, what do you think? Aaron? Aaron?’

His mouth so close. He watched his eyelids fall anticipating the kiss…

Of course, they’d made love. Aaron making each thrust deliberate, intimate. Robert had slipped a hand between them, under his thumb his cock bounced like a spring. He would come from the inside; he could feel it building with every punch forward from Aaron’s hips. Aaron had pulled back and the motion of it dragged a moan from him so loud it had spilled into a laugh. Eyes locked Aaron had broken into a laugh echoing his, he’d pushed back inside, just his tip, but for a moment they’d had to stop, and all they could do was kiss...

And that was how he came in the end, shuddering on the sweetness of Aaron’s mouth.

‘Told you,’ he’d said afterwards.

‘No, it didn’t count, because I was….., ya’ know…my …was in…’ Aaron gestured with his hand, a blush suffusing his throat.

‘No tell me, you were what? You’re what was where?’ He’d teased. ‘You’re not shy, are you? After what we just did?’

‘Shut up.’

Robert fastened the Velcro strap around Josh’s wrist and they walked towards the edge of the sea, bodyboards lifted by the wind skimming the sand behind them.

In the shallow water he showed Josh how to balance on the center of the board with his chest raised while they watched and waited for the surf.

It was tricky at first, the waves catching Josh sideways, spinning the board and rolling him off. Robert helped him to rein the board back with the leash, showed him how to paddle straight into the white water, how to read the waves, deciding which would be good to ride, and which not.

Eyes narrowed, time vanished for an hour or so.

When they got out, they sat side by side on the compact sand that caved under their heels, water seeping up to fill the little pockets they left.

‘Can we have churros?’ Josh asked eventually.

‘I don’t see why not, with chocolate? Come on, we’ll take some home for Rico, too, yeah?’

‘He won’t eat them.’

‘He will.’

‘He won’t, he’s not the same as us and…,’ Josh’s voice trailed off.
They both frowned turning their faces back towards the sea. Further out there were bigger waves, crisp curling barrels, and beyond that kite surfers, and then the Atlantic stretched on. Robert followed it in his mind, circling the earth, all the way until it hit the shores of England where Aaron would soon be waking up.

In Paris during the affair they’d made love in the afternoons, and afterwards, usually, he’d fallen briefly asleep. But sometimes it had been Aaron who’d slept; his head resting against his chest. Those afternoons, for a few minutes he’d close his eyes and listen to Aaron breathing, and watch candy clouds burst behind his eye-lids.

‘Do you think they have those little pink and orange sprinkles?’ he asked, looking towards the car park where he could make out the Chevrolet Camaro shining in the sun.

‘Aaron says they’re not good for your teeth,’ Josh said.

Robert blinked.

‘Killjoy,’ he answered, keeping it light.

‘He says it’s alright, though, if you brush.’

‘You haven’t got any teeth anyway.’

He put both body boards under one arm, and took Josh’s hand in his, and together, father and son, they made their way up the beach.

Appendix: Emile and Lucas - for those interested in their continuing story, this has no connection with Aaron and Robert, though eventually they will meet again.

Emile took Lucas to his house in Brittany. The bleached stone walls were cold, and the garden was awash with brown leaves and fallen pears eaten away by codling moth.

Inside he folded back the peeling blue shutters, a paint job for the spring. He lifted the dust covers from the furniture, watched as Lucas picked up a photograph, himself and Khalid on the beach, his head resting on his dark shoulder. Khalid already ill, but they hadn’t known it, and then an ambulance ride to Paris. He hadn’t stayed here since, choosing his parent’s home instead, until now, until Lucas.

They wore boots in the kitchen on the flagstone floor. Emile searched the drawers and found them roll neck sweaters. Lucas looked in the mirror, pulling his on over his head, remarked that they looked like fishermen.
Neither of them shaved and over the passing days, Emile watched as Lucas grew a boyish dark scruff. In Rehab Lucas had cut his hair razor short, now it was his green eyes that stood out; Emile would catch sight of them in the gilded mirrors, saw a sadness that hadn’t been there in the days when they’d first met.

When they woke, they’d go out early, following the foot path down to the ragged Atlantic coast. They jogged intermittently now that Emile’s leg was stronger. Soon, he said, he’d be able to run the whole way. They stood shoulder to shoulder, watching seabirds dive under the waves waiting for them fly up into the grey morning.

‘As-tu froid?’ Emile asked. He cupped Lucas’s hands in his own and blew on them to warm him up. He longed to kiss him, properly, not just the chaste kisses they shared, but Lucas wasn’t ready yet, and he understood. Matheo had stolen something from him; the boy who he’d met with such a playful confidence in his own body was gone, so he’d be patient, and when the time was right, going at Lucas’s pace, he’d help him learn the joy of physical intimacy again, based on trust.

In the evening, Emile cooked with the radio on.

He opened the lid of a pan of braising beef, saw Lucas wet his lips.

‘Not long now,’ he murmured.

After, they sat in the kitchen, Lucas gripping a fork with red knuckled fingers as he ate, while Emile talked, until he saw Lucas’s cheeks flushed from the food. When they’d finished, he’d tell Lucas to leave the dishes in the sink as he sorted decks of cards and dealt them their hands. In the background the radio played old fashioned French love songs.

Emile put a heater in the bathroom to warm it up, and they took turns to bathe, Emile slipping into the water that Lucas had vacated, laying back against the porcelain with the condensation running down his throat.

He could hear Lucas in his room, called out;

‘Hey? You didn’t pee in the bath, did you?’

He waited, listening.

‘Course I fucking didn’t!’

He laughed and closed his eyes; a memory, joining Lucas in the shower.

‘Don’t stop. You don’t have to be shy with me.’

His flushed tip opening, a crescent of silver liquid reflecting the bathroom light, pale amber spilling over his soft length, running down the gap of his closed thighs... moving his hand between them as they pressed up against the tiles.

They had separate rooms, but Emile kept the door ajar. More than once he heard Lucas cry; a low monologue of sobs. He turned on his side towards the corridor; he couldn’t go to him - it wouldn’t be fair, so for now he just listened until quiet fell, straining to hear the light breathing that signaled Lucas had succumbed to sleep at last.
The day after they arrived in Brittany, Emile had taken Lucas to his family farm.

Emile’s mother hugged him as if he was another son and complained at length about how thin he was. Emile’s father stood at the door, waiting impatiently for Emile to go with him to help with some broken fencing.

‘Bring your boyfriend - he can help, too,’ he gestured, and then turned, and they followed him obediently outdoors.

When they came in for lunch, the kitchen was a cacophony of voices as Emile’s two brothers had arrived in a jeep, his sister already there with three boys of her own, one on her hip who hid his face against her blouse when Emile pinched him.

Emile’s mother instructed Lucas to sit beside her and watched every mouthful as he ate, refilling his plate, tutting sternly when he objected. She poured him home pressed cider to drink, saying it would put color in his cheeks.

While the conversation rolled noisily around the table, Emile’s sister leaned close.

‘Il est très jeune et très beau. Trop beau pour tu!’

Emile laughed, his eyes on Lucas, who looked up with a frown and smiled back.

He took Lucas riding on his father’s horses.

‘Are you nervous?’

‘No!’

Emile nodded, but when Lucas fell tumbling onto the path, he pulled up swiftly and jumped down from his horse, reaching to help Lucas stand, running a hand over his back, down over his hip and thigh, checking for any injury.

And all at once Lucas’s mouth was open and he was trembling, not just from the shock of the fall. Their bodies were so close, Emile could smell the sweat on Lucas’s skin from the exertion of the ride. He thought they were going to kiss and so he waited, standing still, listening to the shuffling hooves of the horses on the hard mud of the path. Then Lucas stepped back.

Emile nodded.

‘We can walk,’ he murmured, bending to pick up the reins that were drifting across the path.

‘They don’t run away,’ Lucas observed.

‘Because they know where they belong.’

TBC
Chapter End Notes

So you know I struggled with this, so if it’s a bit patchy you know why, but the next chapter is better, although also worse from Robert’s pov ahaha. Anyway <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!