



CON RILEY



AIDEN'S

Luck

A
Seattle Stories
novel

After Ben

“This story is a slow burn, totally realistic...”

—Rainbow Book Review

“Beautiful writing! I laughed and I cried. Riley created a wonderful book full of emotion high and lows.”

—Pants Off Review

“I thought the whole story was very well-written and it lived in my thoughts long after finished the book.”

—Top2Bottom Review

“I am truly in love with this book.”

—Joyfully Ja

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By CON RILEY

NOVELS

SEATTLE STORIES

After Ben

Saving Sean

Aiden's Luck

Published by DREAMSPINNER PRESS
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Aiden's Luck
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This book is about luck. I've been very lucky to make some wonderfully generous friends while

writing this series.

Monica and JJ know these men as well as I do.

Claire and Jess added fresh perspectives.

Alby loaned me her dagger, and Anna brought Milan to life.

Author's Note

Aiden's Luck is the third novel in the Seattle Stories series. Each book can be read as a standalone story. However, if you wish to read about this group of friends in chronological order, please start with *After Ben*, followed by *Saving Sean*—both also available from Dreamspinner Press.

—Con Ril

CHAPTER
One

AIDEN DALY slumped behind his too-small desk in the far corner of his carton-strewn clothing stockroom, and rested his head in his hands. A hesitant knock, followed by the creak of the slowly opening door that led into the store, made him lurch upright. He shoved the envelope he'd been staring at for the last twenty minutes under some papers as his store clerk, Levi, peered through the narrow gap in the doorway.

"B-Boss? Mr. Daly, sir? I know you said not to disturb you, but..." The door creaked again as Levi shouldered his way into the stockroom, sliding sideways through a gap almost too narrow for his slight frame. He passed between cartons draped with the latest consignment of clothing to arrive from Europe, his fingers automatically straightening crumpled fabric and smoothing wrinkles as he sidled closer. His tongue—a small pierced pink dart of movement—wet his lips nervously.

Aiden scrubbed his face, the rasp of his fingers against dark stubble sounding loud in the long stretch of silence as he waited for Levi to continue.

"But what?" Aiden finally prompted.

"I-I'm sorry?" Levi stuttered.

Aiden lowered his hands and tilted his head to one side as he watched his employee try to order his thoughts. Inwardly, he counted to ten before reminding Levi of what he'd started to say.

"Did you come in to tell me something important, Levi?" On any other day Aiden would have shown much more tolerance. But today, after taking delivery of yet another expensive and incorrect consignment of clothing from Europe, he'd already exhausted all his patience.

Maybe his housemate, Marco, had been right.

Perhaps some people weren't cut out for business.

Aiden's late father, David Daly, had known everything about business—every single thing. Aiden had spent the morning wishing he could ask his dad for help, even though that made him feel uncomfortably like a kid of seventeen rather than a grown man of nearly twenty-seven. He caught a glimpse of his own drawn face reflected in his darkened PC screen, and how unprofessional looking dragging his hands through his curly dark-brown hair had left him. Perhaps it was a blessing that his dad would never see the way Aiden ran his own business.

It was a sign of his stress level that he took his bad mood out on the closest person to him at the moment. "Should I be sitting here waiting for you to explain, Levi? Or should I be out front guarding the cash register that you've left unattended?"

The darkening stain of a hot-looking flush crept up Levi's throat as he backed toward the door, his haste causing him to hip-check cartons that began to tilt and teeter. Levi's gasp, and muffled "shit" as he tried to stop boxes from falling, made Aiden feel like a real asshole. He hadn't meant to scare the kid. He was tired, that was all. Tired of consignments arriving containing stock he couldn't sell.

and so tired of adding up cash-register receipts that lately refused to tally. He hadn't slept well the night before—hell, he hadn't slept well for months—and he'd gotten out of his borrowed bed this morning, in the place he was house-sitting as a favor for his friend Peter, already worn out and cranky.

None of that was his clerk's fault. He watched Levi sweep straight black bangs from his eyes and draw himself up to his full five foot six before speaking again.

"I would *never* leave the register unattended, Mr. Daly. Your brother's here. He asked me to come tell you—" He shook his head quickly. "No, that's not it exactly. He said that you should take a look at the store security cameras."

Aiden grudgingly powered up his PC. The screen filled with eight closed-circuit television frames revealing different aspects of the store and the customers who picked through neat stacks of clothing. Today, instead of feeling grateful every time a new patron crossed the threshold, he glowered as they unfurled all his neatly displayed fall merchandise. He'd felt his temper rising, so he'd turned off the PC. Last night he'd wished for a way to turn off his housemate, Marco, too who he'd told Aiden how lousy his security camera setup was. Now his brother Evan was here to talk about the same thing? Marco—*fucking* Marco—really couldn't keep his mouth shut.

He studied the camera feeds, only vaguely aware of Levi shuffling closer as he leaned across the paper-covered desk. Levi's "There, see?" was a breathy whisper Aiden felt against his cheek. Aiden peered at the screen, squinting, trying to locate his brother among the shadowy flickers on the screen.

"Do you see him?"

Aiden shook his head and then caught Levi as the palm his clerk had braced himself with suddenly slipped out from under him.

Levi looked down at what had broken his fall. Aiden's huge hand was spread wide, supporting his ribcage, easily bearing his weight. Levi's "Wow" was another breathless whisper followed by a louder "Oh God, I'm so sorry" as neatly piled register receipts toppled.

This time, Aiden counted to twenty.

By the time Aiden had scooped up the fallen papers, Levi was around his side of the desk. There was barely enough room there for all six foot six inches of Aiden, let alone another person, but Levi's sudden yelp of "There, see? See!" made Aiden push his chair back so Levi could get a little closer. They both watched the black and white display as Aiden toggled the controller, zooming in until the image of one man filled the screen.

Evan's arms-crossed stance was familiar, as was the way he flicked his pale blond bangs from his eyes in agitation, reminding Aiden strongly of the day he'd first met his adoptive brother. Aiden had been sixteen years old compared to Evan's eleven, but Evan had bossed him around from the get-go. Ten years ago, Aiden hadn't wanted to go to his old group home summer picnic. Revisiting the last place he'd lived before getting adopted had made him feel weird inside. But when his dad explained that Aiden was nearly grown, and his mom had been losing sleep about having no one to mother him, Aiden had grudgingly agreed—shamed into tagging along.

His dad had looked at him in the rearview mirror on the way to the home and said, "We can do another kid into our game, can't we, son? It'll be fun. Just you wait and see."

Aiden hadn't thought so. He'd been only weeks away from his sixteenth birthday. Why the hell would he have wanted a kid brother or sister? His dad had said variations of "two kids are better than one" so many times in the week leading up to the picnic that Aiden had gotten sick of hearing it. He hated the idea of going back there, but he'd hated the idea of upsetting his mom and dad even more so.

He owed them, and he knew it.

Once there, his mom had knelt beside a little girl in the big backyard, threading daisies in chains as they chatted, and his dad had talked with the home's director, ignoring Aiden's sulky teenage sulking.

The group home hadn't been a bad place to live for a while, but moody or not, Aiden still counted his blessings that he'd been adopted when he was young. So he found it weird how the kid who sat opposite him at a picnic table had ignored all the prospective parents who tried to start up conversation. He'd guessed that the irritable-looking kid—small, skinny, and angular, with a fall of straight, light-blond hair covering his eyes—must really like it at the home. He hadn't even tried to make nice with any of the name-badge-wearing visitors looking for children to adopt.

Aiden had watched him glower, and had rolled his eyes.

Evan had noticed Aiden's eye roll. He'd waited until Aiden was stuffing his face with a hot dog, then asked, "What do you think you're looking at?"

He'd sounded so snippy that Aiden had been surly in return. He'd swallowed his food and replied, "At a dumb kid with stupid-looking hair." He'd felt bad right away. The kid had glared across the table at him through his too-long bangs. He'd been half Aiden's size, but had been ready to punch him—Aiden could see it coming. He'd watched Evan pull back his scrawny arm to swing. The punch hadn't landed. Evan had grabbed one of Aiden's curls instead and had pulled it out straight. It had corkscrewed as he released it, and Evan had burst out laughing. His amused "Look in the mirror, dumbass" had been quiet when everyone had turned to look their way, but Aiden had heard the good humor hidden behind a quickly resumed frown.

He'd spent the rest of the picnic watching as Evan scowled and glared, scaring away any of the interested adults. His actions had baffled Aiden—why would anyone want to stay in a group home? Maybe he'd responded thoughtlessly when the smaller kid defensively asked, "Now what are you looking at?" He hadn't intended to make him reel away as if Aiden had actually punched him. Aiden had only answered Evan's question by telling the truth as he saw it: "At someone who doesn't want a family."

His dad had brought over some people who wanted to hear what getting adopted had been like for Aiden, so he'd done his best to answer all their questions, when all he'd really wanted was to fire the kid and say sorry. Standing close by, his dad had rested his hand firmly on Aiden's shoulder, so Aiden had sat tight and had done his best to do his duty.

Later, he'd toured the inside of the home with his parents. The bedrooms were smaller than Aiden had remembered—much cozier, with brighter furnishings and lots more artwork on the walls. He'd snooped a little, while his mom talked with kid after kid after kid.

He'd spent a long time looking at the wall by one bed. It was covered with a collage made up of pictures torn from magazines. When he'd stood back, he saw that each section of the wall was devoted to a room in a house. There had been lots of pictures featuring parents reading to their children, and kids' bedrooms filled with toys. In a lower corner had been multiple images of backyards where swings hung from trees, just like the one his dad had fixed up for Aiden at home years before.

He'd been bent over, taking a closer look, when Evan had shoved him in the side, sending him to the floor. Aiden was over six feet tall at that point, but Evan—who was still small even now—had been tiny and fearless. He'd knelt on Aiden's chest, had shaken his bone-white fist in his face, yelling that if Aiden touched his stuff again, he'd be sorry.

Aiden's family left soon after, and on the way home he'd stared out the car window as his mom

said how impossible it was to choose a child. It hadn't seemed impossible to Aiden at all. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Evan's red-rimmed ones, and the way his fist shook as he tried to protect the home he'd made on the wall next to his bed. Aiden hadn't put too much thought into what he said next. He'd told his parents that he was pretty sure he'd already met his new brother. Then, when he asked if they could go get Evan right away, his mom had cried.

His dad had looked in the rearview mirror and smiled.

Ten years later, that all seemed like something from another lifetime. He looked at the grainy image of his brother on the PC screen and couldn't imagine not having Evan in his life.

"Okay, so Evan's here. Thanks for telling me, although I'm not sure why we needed to look at him on the store cameras."

"Oh!" Levi sounded flustered. "He said you should focus the camera on the man he's watching."

"Why didn't you say so right away?" Aiden tried to adjust the camera angle, cursing under his breath when he couldn't quite see whomever it was that Evan had his eye on. "Do I need to get out there?" He shifted in his seat until Levi's hand tentatively pressed down on his shoulder.

"No. Evan said to ask if you could see what was happening."

Aiden adjusted the cameras again but still couldn't quite see the whole store floor. "No," he finally admitted. "He must be standing in a blind spot." One of the blind spots he'd denied existed last night when Marco had stuck his nose into the way Aiden ran his business. A sudden movement caught his eye as someone stood much closer to his brother.

Even from behind it was clear that this guy was up to no good.

Aiden watched, his whole body tensing, as the man shook out jersey T-shirts and then dropped them on the floor. "What the—"

"I know!" Levi sounded excited. "I didn't get a close look at him before Evan told me to get you to watch. I didn't need to. The guy's not even trying to hide what he's doing." He stumbled a little as he leaned closer to the screen, but caught himself this time by planting one hand on Aiden's broad shoulder again. "See? Now your brother is right next to him, and he's *still* doing it."

Levi was right. Evan was next to the guy. The detail was so hard to make out. Aiden frowned, thinking that the camera system really was a piece of crap.

"Can you zoom out?" Levi urged him to hurry, resting his much smaller hand on top of Aiden's on the CCTV controller. Aiden slipped his hand out from underneath. "Sorry," Levi mumbled. He let go of the controller, clearly embarrassed. "I got a little carried away," he explained. "This is exciting, like watching a show on TV. Are you gonna call the cops now?"

"For throwing T-shirts on the floor? Nope. I save calling the cops for people who steal from me. I will kick his ass if he doesn't quit it, though." They both watched as Evan backed out of the store. Aiden pulled the camera back too, and as he added distance, the image sharpened—still not perfect, but a little better. For a still-warm, late-summer afternoon, this asshole of a customer sure was wearing a heavy overcoat. Aiden looked a little closer. From the ceiling-level perspective of the camera, Aiden saw light reflecting off glasses when the man glanced quickly over his shoulder.

"Motherfucker." That quick, sneaky glance told Aiden everything he needed to know. If that customer hadn't stolen yet, he was surely thinking about it. Aiden had seen it too many times over the last few years. At first he'd been saddened, and then later maddened by how prevalent store theft was. Add in the patrons who returned clothes on a Monday that they'd clearly worn over the weekend—smudged with makeup, stinking of cigarette smoke, or with the labels carelessly torn out—and he

losses were a serious issue.

Aiden had so many financial commitments—too many—since his dad’s death. The thought of not meeting them and of failing to fulfill his late father’s final wishes because of thoughtless customers and theft, constantly drove him crazy. It meant he had to save cash in other areas, like letting the security camera system’s maintenance contract lapse.

The sudden creak of the stockroom door opening made them both jump, Levi more so than Aiden, who caught his clerk as he lost his footing. Aiden wrapped one big arm around Levi right as his clerk’s panicked grip tightened on Aiden’s shoulder. The chair rocked under their combined weight, hitting the back wall, jolting them both so that Levi ended up perched on Aiden’s lap, both arms around his neck.

Evan’s expression, as he stood in the doorway, didn’t look the slightest bit amused. He frowned as Levi got to his feet and hurried out, then repeated Levi’s earlier actions. He walked over and shoved his way close to the PC monitor, pointing at the guy now visibly arguing with Levi, who’d started refolding the T-shirts that had been thrown on the floor.

“This,” Evan said, pointing at the PC screen, “is what happens when you don’t pick up on signals.”

Aiden shook his head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. If you mean Levi, there are no signals to pick up.”

“I don’t mean Levi, although you really can be so blind, Aiden. It’s obvious the kid has a crush on you.” He switched cameras, and a different view filled the screen. The new angle wasn’t perfect either, but Evan persisted until an open bag to one side of the man was just visible, a still-tagged shirtsleeve hanging from its opening.

Aiden was on his feet immediately, shoving his brother out of the way and heading for the door as Evan spoke again. Aiden heard Evan’s “He’s just trying to get your attention. He’s been trying for weeks, but you don’t pick up on his signals” and ignored him.

This was no time to talk about a kid with a stupid crush. He had a thief to catch.

In less than a minute, he was through the stockroom door. He glanced at Evan’s boyfriend, Joel, who stood near the register, and he frowned momentarily at Joel’s huge grin. Aiden had tried really hard lately to get along with the guy for his brother’s sake, but seeing him smile as Aiden’s stock was being stolen pissed him off. His strides to the rear of the store were fast and furious.

Levi was red-faced again, his arms full of crumpled shirts as Aiden pushed past him, grabbing the overcoat-wearing man’s shoulder. The coat sagged in his hand as its wearer slipped it off and ran, leaving his bag full of stolen shirts behind. That was something at least, Aiden thought as he spun, reaching out to stop the thief’s escape. But without the oversized overcoat, he was much smaller than Aiden, and slipped easily away in a flash of blurred motion.

The thief ran for the exit—fast—and Aiden yelled for Joel to stop him. Aiden added Joel doing nothing, apart from stifling laughter, to his list of reasons to dislike his brother’s boyfriend, and then he ran too.

It didn’t matter that the thief had left his stash of stolen shirts behind.

It didn’t matter that Levi yelled something that sounded like “Wait, it’s only Mar—”

All that mattered was catching him. He’d had a bad week after a difficult month, and his frustration at someone attempting to take what was his ignited Aiden’s temper.

Crowds of shoppers parted before Aiden like biblical waters as he ran, thundering along the main

concourse, past the food court where a group of pretty girls yelled and pointed toward the exit. Aiden put on an extra burst of speed, sliding some as he rounded a corner too fast, glimpsing his quarry as he slipped out the mall exit doors.

Aiden cursed as he ran outside, momentarily blinded by the bright afternoon sunlight of Seattle in August, its glare reflected by multiple windshields. The lot was full, and people were everywhere.

Puffing, hauling in huge breaths, he turned in a slow circle. Light reflecting on a pair of glasses caught his eye as someone looked over his shoulder before dashing into an underground parking lot entrance. He ran again, and soon caught up with the man, who darted between two parked trucks. Aiden lunged forward as the thief stumbled, and they fell in a tangled heap.

It took a moment for Aiden to get a grip on the man who was flat on his face underneath him. He might have been smaller, but he sure was feisty, wriggling and jerking until Aiden grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him up on his knees. The last thing he expected was for the thief to burst out laughing.

Hearing his housemate's familiar, infuriating laugh made Aiden curse again, roughly shoving him away, not caring when he yelped as he fell. Aiden sat back on his heels, stony faced and pissed off as Marco—*fucking* Marco Fortunato de Luca—rolled over, complaining in his husky Italian accent that Aiden had no sense of humor.

"I was only trying to help you, *tesoro*. Didn't I tell you there were blind spots in your store's camera setup?" He propped himself up on his elbows and peeled off his Mariners baseball cap, and then ran his hands through his sleek dark hair. Marco gave Aiden back the reading glasses that he'd used as part of his disguise. "You only caught me because I couldn't see clearly."

He grumbled all the way back to the store, where Aiden watched, arms crossed, expression thunderous, as Marco refolded all the shirts he'd managed to stuff into his bag before Evan and Leo had noticed what he'd been up to. He carried on grumbling as Aiden made him tidy the stock room, too. Aiden tried to tune him out, but Marco was incessant, interrupting constantly as Aiden tried to concentrate on his columns of figures.

"See, this is why you need me, Aiden. You will not admit it, but you do."

Aiden kept his head down.

He needed Marco like he needed another hole in his head.

Putting up with him and his ridiculous, excitable Italian ways was an unfortunate byproduct of sharing a house and sharing the same circle of friends, that was all. The sooner Marco went back to Milan, the better.

"You should relax more, Aiden. If you let me help you here, then you could let go a little. This work is too much for one person." Marco went on and on and on. "Worry makes your handsome face ugly, which is a shame for everyone. I worry about your stress levels too. No wonder you get heartburn."

Aiden bit his tongue. Marco had brought nothing but stress into his life for the whole month they'd lived together. Coming home every evening to someone who walked around the place half-naked, showing off his trim, tanned torso whatever the weather, and who thought nothing of climbing into his bed—*talk to me, baby. I've been on my own all day*—left Aiden in a constant state of.... He didn't even know how to describe the inner turmoil that living with Marco provoked.

"But what is this?" Marco asked, his head buried in one of the open cartons, sounding suddenly delighted.

Aiden huffed, ignoring him, still angry that he'd wasted so much time chasing the infuriating Italian, who had nothing better to do than get on his nerves, all around the mall. He should start acting his age. Wasn't he over thirty? Someone so compact and lazy shouldn't be able to run so fucking fast. It wasn't right. The only thing Marco ever exercised was his mouth.

"Is this another consignment of things you didn't order, *tesoro*? Why won't you let me help you when you make international deals? Or ask Morgan? Between the two of us, we speak enough languages to help you." His voice lowered, and Aiden felt Marco's hand on his thigh as he knelt to Aiden's side. "Let us help you, yes? These translation mistakes could be avoided." He removed his hand, leaving behind a scrap of pink, silky fabric—panties, ordered in error, expensive, and impossible for Aiden to return without losing money.

Aiden couldn't look away, transfixed by Marco's slim fingers as he smoothed out the fabric across Aiden's wide thigh. Those fingers traced the swirls in the silky pattern slowly, making Aiden shiver.

"These are so beautiful, Aiden. Feel them. Touch them for yourself. Imagine how they would feel against your skin. It is a shame they aren't your size."

Aiden gritted his teeth and tried not to move a muscle. His housemate needed no encouragement. This much he'd learned already.

Marco sighed and stood again. He picked up the panties, fingering the lace that edged them.

"Maybe they weren't a mistake." He held them against his own narrow hips, made a small sound of approval, and then stuffed them into his pocket. "Perhaps I will model them for you after dinner." He bent, pressed a kiss on Aiden's cheek—another example of European behavior Aiden thought best to ignore completely—and walked away. Before he left the stockroom, he turned and asked, "Do you believe me now that you have blind spots in the store?"

Aiden grudgingly nodded.

"And do you agree that moving the cameras will help?"

He nodded again.

"I shall reposition them for you before I leave, yes?" Marco didn't wait for Aiden to agree, but before the stockroom door creaked fully open, he added, "And you have another blind spot, Aiden. I watched your clerk closely this morning. Maybe you should look more closely at him too." Marco paused, taking in the sudden shift in Aiden's previously masklike expression before crossing quickly back to his desk. "I'm sorry. It is so sad when people let you down, I know." He squeezed Aiden's hand and then leaned over the desk, whispering, "I would never do that." Marco lingered for a moment before walking away.

Aiden waited until Marco left and then typed a code into his PC that revealed the feed from the camera above the register. It only took a few minutes to speed through that morning's footage. He watched as the recording approached the time that Marco had arrived at the store. He must have suspected right away what Aiden hadn't even noticed. No wonder none of the receipts he added so carefully at the end of every day corresponded accurately to the register totals lately. The discrepancies had frustrated him for the last few weeks.

His dad had always said that a good manager knew instinctively whom he could trust. He'd be so disappointed in Aiden's lack of judgment.

He viewed the recording, feeling too sick and tired to be angry as he watched Levi fail to close the register fully after a transaction, quickly removing a handful of bills the moment the customer

walked away. Aiden slowed the feed until he could watch, frame by slow-moving frame, as Leo pushed the cash into his pants pocket.

He should have noticed this shit himself. Instead, he'd been distracted by the envelope that still lay unopened on his desk, as it had for the last two weeks.

Aiden slumped behind his too-small desk in the far corner of his carton-strewn stockroom, and rested his head in his hands.

CHAPTER *Two*

AIDEN was only halfway through mowing the lawn that curved in a wide, lush green swath around his mother's home when the mower's motor started to labor. He cursed under his breath, urging it to keep going. His forward momentum helped some as the lawn swept down around the front of the classic white colonial home. Although the slope took some of the strain off the motor, its continued erratic noises sounded ominous.

"Come on, come on, come on already." Aiden's urging made little difference. He babied the mower, taking it slow as he steered carefully. Right when the motor finally sounded steadier, and he began to think that he might get to finish his final chore for the day, a sudden, rapid knocking noise along with a cloud of blue fumes escaping from the engine casing, signaled game over.

His pale gray T-shirt, sweat-darkened after an hour's effort, clung to his back as he bent over the mower, cursing in disgust. When he stood upright, the low evening sunlight made him squint as he thought through his options. Pushing the mower onto the driveway so that he could reverse over it with his beat-up old pickup a few dozen times, leaving it in a heap of twisted pieces, probably wasn't his most mature choice. But right about then, especially after the day he'd had, crushing something sure seemed like it might take the edge off his bad temper.

His mother's faint voice sounded worried. "Aiden? Is everything okay?"

He tensed, straightening his shoulders as he turned so they formed a wide wall blocking her view from an open upstairs window.

"Everything's fine, Mom. I'm just taking a call." He pulled out his cell and smiled up at her.

She pushed her gray-streaked, wavy hair from her eyes. "You want some pop, honey? It's still warm out. You must be thirsty."

Aiden shook his head, and then turned his back with his cell clamped to his ear as an excuse to cut short their conversation. If she brought him a drink, she'd stop to watch him mow for a while. The broken mower was nothing that he couldn't handle, but his mom would latch onto its breaking as an excuse to worry, and his mom's version of worrying was something he could do without.

From his vantage point on their elevated plot, Aiden could see the uniform neatness of his mom's neighbors' yards. Although the style of homes varied in the gated community that they'd moved to when Aiden was a kid, all the front yards were pretty similar—huge, unfenced, sweeping lawns, divided by driveways and subtle, low-level decorative planting. The only difference the passing of twenty years had made was how sterile the neighborhood looked now. There were no kids' toys littering lawns anymore, or homemade skateboard ramps at the bottom of the steepest driveways. All the kids had grown up and moved on, and now the houses were too expensive to appeal to young families.

In comparison to the uniform front yards, Aiden knew that the backyards were all different.

Some of the neighbors had swimming pools that he'd been allowed to use as a teen in return for lawn boy duties. He'd taught Evan to swim right after he first came to live with them. Jesus, what an epic task that turned out to be—eleven really was late to learn. They'd spent the long, idyllic summer before everything went to shit mowing pretty much every sunny morning, hoping to score an afternoon of cooling off in shimmering pool water.

He hadn't minded hanging with his new brother rather than with his friends back then. He liked it. He still did. His dad had been right—two *had* been way better than one.

So their old neighbors had grown used to the sound of Evan directing his brother, telling him what to do as he mowed, even though Aiden had been more than old enough—and experienced enough—to get shit done on his own. But he'd taken orders from Evan, and he'd liked it, smiling as he mowed, happy to have some company.

Now, ten years after Evan's adoption, Aiden wasn't sure if he knew any of the neighbors by name anymore. If he did, he'd borrow a mower to finish up his almost too late in the evening chores, but the neighbors here were all strangers to him now. His mom was the only original homeowner left on their street, living alone in their spacious five-bedroom home.

For a moment, he considered talking to her. Perhaps she'd gotten to know the new next-door neighbors well enough to ask a favor since they'd moved in. Then he shook his head, scrubbing his wide fingers through his dark sweaty curls, guessing that asking her would be a bad idea. Aiden knew that a simple problem, like the mower dying, could send her into a tailspin. It would start with her worrying about calling someone to come take a look at it, and would most likely end with her weeping over his dad's death all over again.

He used to take care of everything for her. Now that was Aiden's role.

He huffed, and slipped his phone back into his pocket, ignoring the chime of a voice-mail reminder. He might not want to talk with his mom right now, but he absolutely, categorically, didn't want to speak with Marco either. He'd been calling for the last couple of hours, starting not even half hour after leaving Aiden at the store. His messages—*How are you? I'm sorry. Maybe I was mistaken about your boy*—had filled Aiden's text-message inbox relentlessly. But the one telling Aiden not to blame himself had made him angry, and he'd ignored each subsequent call, text, and voice mail.

He'd blame himself for employing a thief if he wanted.

Trusting Levi had been on him alone. It smarted badly that his judgment had been so off. Levi had seemed like a good kid, and his work ethic had matched Aiden's own. He might have been on the small side, but Levi sure put effort into making Aiden's store look better than it ever had. He would arrive early, often before Aiden, and look for things to do. Then he'd be reluctant to leave. Oh, he'd been nervous around Aiden, but he'd been quick to learn and even quicker to ask for more shifts. Shifts where he'd probably helped himself to more cash Aiden couldn't afford to lose.

Grumbling, calling himself a fool, Aiden started to push the mower onto the driveway, heading toward the garage that was set back from the house. He skirted the side of his mom's late-model car parked in front of the double garage doors, intent on following the path to the storage shed behind the building. A long, low wolf whistle stopped him in his tracks.

"No way. No fucking way." Aiden groaned, his shoulders slumping again as another whistle sounded, long and low and, from anyone else, sexy. He closed his eyes.

"*Ciao, baby.*"

Aiden started walking again as he heard Marco jog up the driveway behind him. He didn't stop

until he reached the storage shed set behind the garage, out of sight from the house. Marco's hand was instantly on his shoulder, tugging at him, encouraging him to turn.

Marco sounded breathless. "Why didn't you take my calls?"

Aiden let go of the mower and rammed his hands in his pockets before turning to face his housemate, standing as straight and tall as he could to avoid the ever-present threat of an Italian kiss of greeting. He watched Marco's gaze flicker over his face as he wet his lips. Aiden ignored the fleeting disappointed expression that slid across his features—he'd already snuck in enough unwanted kisses for one day.

Aiden knew he sounded abrupt. "What do you want? How did you know where to find me?"

"I was waiting at home for you. I thought you'd be back by five." He shrugged. "I called your brother. Joel answered, then came by to give me a ride."

Fucking Joel.

Aiden had left Joel and Evan at the store after firing Levi, wanting nothing more than to knock back a few beers and to relax in the apartment he'd shared with his brother for the last two years. But since the middle of July, Aiden had instead been house-sitting for Peter, someone he barely knew, with a demanding, noisy Italian stranger as a housemate. Relaxation was the last thing he'd find with Marco in his borrowed home, and for that he firmly blamed Joel.

Moving out of the apartment had seemed a great idea at the time—a temporary deal while he got his head around the way Joel seemed to have moved in. He'd had trouble adjusting when Evan got serious about his first boyfriend. Spending some time at the start of the summer, in Oregon with both of them, had made it pretty clear to Aiden that Joel wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. That had left Aiden feeling out of place and awkward in his own home.

It wasn't that he didn't want Evan to be happy. Far from it. And it wasn't that he'd been surprised when Evan came out to him after meeting Joel, either. Aiden had been pretty sure that Evan was gay too for a long time—maybe always—even if neither of them were in any hurry to make their orientation public. It was just that he'd felt a sinking sense of *I can't have that*, whenever he came home to find them wrapped up in each other.

Aiden was pretty sure that he couldn't manage to hide a love life, hold the family finances together, and keep his emotionally brittle mom on an even keel. He'd guessed it was beyond him, especially during the first awful years after his dad's death, so he hadn't even tried. Joel moving in had made Aiden's carefully constructed world—the one where he held everything together, and no one had to know the truth about the mess his dad had left behind—feel like it might shake apart at any moment.

Peter, a relative stranger at the start of the summer, had only taken a few hours to figure out that Aiden badly needed some space. The offer of Peter's empty house had come at just the right time.

Maybe he would have thought twice about moving in if he'd known what sharing with Marco would be like. Keeping Joel and Evan's relationship on the down-low had been difficult. Keeping Marco, who thought nothing of demonstrating physical affection toward Aiden, off his mom's thing-to-worry-about radar would be impossible.

Behind the garage, out of sight of the house, Marco stepped a little closer, reaching out to hold Aiden by the wrist. His expression shifted from concern to disappointment as Aiden shook him off and put some distance between them.

"Go away. I'm busy." Aiden knew he sounded like an asshole. Something about the way Marco

frowned as he wrapped his arms around himself almost made him feel bad for a moment.

“Why didn’t you come home?” Marco’s brow furrowed, making him look so much like his late older brother, Ben, that Aiden couldn’t make himself speak.

It still baffled him how Marco could look so much like Ben, who had been Aiden’s first and longest-lasting crush, and yet be so dissimilar to him. He’d fallen hard for Ben when he was just sixteen, at one of his dad’s company Christmas parties. Ben had been in his forties then—way out of Aiden’s league—but the incredibly hot Italian had shown nothing but kindness to him and Evan, who had been freaked out over meeting so many new people. He’d given them chores—fetching wine and finding empty glasses—keeping Evan so busy that he’d forgotten to be his eleven-year-old version: a moody, defensive little shit.

Marco’s late brother, who had died two years ago, had been gorgeous inside and out. He’d been half of the first openly gay couple Aiden had ever gotten to know, right when he was figuring things out for himself. Theo—who had worked with Aiden’s father—and Ben being so happy together made being gay seem okay, despite what Aiden’s dad had said.

It wasn’t that his dad had been intentionally homophobic. Aiden had had a lot of time to think about things in the five years since he’d passed away, and homophobic was far too strong a term. No, it was more that he’d paid attention to stereotypical negatives. His dad would read headlines about HIV and assume that being gay made getting it more likely by default. Even knowing Theo and Ben so well hadn’t made his dad more open to any potential for long-term happiness. Instead, he’d smiled sadly after watching them at company picnics. Ben loved kids, who were drawn to his warmth and his patient good humor. All Aiden’s dad could see was how sad it was that they’d never have a family of their own, as if that were a guaranteed side effect of homosexuality too.

He said, over and over, that the only thing he wanted for his own boys was a normal, happy life. *Normal.*

Aiden had come to hate that word. His dad had been fond of it, using it whenever Evan acted out or when Aiden had questions about his birth parents. He told them, in his well-intentioned way, that although they’d had unconventional starts, both Aiden and Evan were part of a normal, loving family now. Their part of the deal was to leave the past behind, to enjoy normal lives, and to have happy families of their own.

It was ridiculous that his dad’s words, meant well and spoken without malice, were what Aiden still heard in his sleep. He’d replay his final conversations with his father, who had told him to always put family first, and feel waves of unresolved anger and sadness. Aiden stayed closeted, and maybe that was due to his dad saying so many times that he knew Aiden wouldn’t let him down.

In hindsight, those words had been cruel for so many reasons.

Whenever he felt lonely, Aiden had consoled himself by rationalizing that if he couldn’t have someone like Ben then there was no point in pursuing relationships. He’d built their few meetings in something much bigger in his imagination, recalling their conversations and the few times he’d caught glimpses of how Ben was in private.

Only months before Aiden’s dad had died, his mom had called, sounding worried. It was audit time at his dad’s company, and he’d apparently been working too hard again. Aiden came home from college for the weekend and went to his dad’s office to see if he could help.

Getting off the elevator on the wrong floor had been accidental. But standing outside Theo’s office, once he realized that he and Ben were in there, had bordered on deliberate.

The offices had been deserted that Saturday afternoon. Aiden guessed that audit time meant extra work for all the managers, because Theo sat with his back to the partially open doorway, his head in his hands. Ben stood next to him, rubbing his shoulders with strokes that looked firm and soothing. His voice had been a low rumble that left Aiden paralyzed, standing to one side of the almost-closed door, peering through the gap.

Ben had told Theo off. It sounded as if he was angry that Theo was in the office on the weekend and then he sounded concerned that Theo hadn't eaten. His grumbles punctuated a back rub that soon progressed to foreplay. Aiden's mouth grew dry as he'd watched through the crack in the door as Ben got Theo to stand, then bend over the desk. The whole time, he'd told Theo how much he loved him and how much he missed him when he worked so hard, and how he knew a really good way to make Theo relax.

Theo's laugh had been muffled. Ben had laughed too; then his voice had lowered, sounding husky.

"You want me to fuck you, Theo? You need me inside you to take your mind off this pointless paper shuffling that steals all of our time? Maybe I *should* fuck you for once, to bring back your good temper." He'd rubbed against Theo's ass. Aiden had told himself to leave, but then Ben continued talking. "You look so ugly when you stress so, *tesoro*. I'll have to fuck you from behind. If I see your face, I will lose my erection."

Theo had snorted, pushing back and shoving his hand underneath him. It was hard to tell from where Aiden stood, but he guessed he'd been unfastening his pants. Theo sounded breathless. "You have to think of someone pretty, like I always have to."

Ben's laugh rang out. He humped his partner's ass, and rubbed his back as he listed the names of people prettier than Theo. The list went on and on, provoking laughter or growling from his partner.

Aiden had leaned against the doorframe, suddenly weak, wishing with everything he had in him that Ben would say his name, would think about him as he got closer, would picture his face right when he came, like he himself so often did, picturing Ben.

Ben was shorter than Theo, but he sure seemed in control right until Theo turned quickly, scooping him up and pressing him against the wall. Aiden had stumbled away once he saw the expression on Theo's face. Aiden knew they'd been together for many years, but Theo looked as if he still couldn't believe his good luck.

Aiden's father's words about the sadness inherent in being gay blew away like wisps of smoke once Aiden glimpsed, only for a moment, exactly what love between men could look like.

He knew that Ben and Theo belonged together. He knew it. And Ben's death had only confirmed that having something like that for himself was unlikely—what were the chances of meeting someone who matched him as well? Aiden had told himself that onetime deals suited him fine. Maybe other guys would have used their college years to try out the whole being out or being in a steady relationship thing, but not him. Once his dad was gone, leaving such a fucking mess behind him, he had neither the time nor the emotional energy to spare. Those excuses worked right up until Evan got himself a steady boyfriend, making him question himself again. Then, just when he thought he'd found a place where he could finally relax by house-sitting for Peter, Marco had opened the front door for him.

It had been like seeing a ghost.

Now, living with Ben's younger brother—who could have been his twin—only made everything harder. So much harder. It was bad enough seeing him every day at Peter's house. Marco coming to

Aiden's mother's home like this was completely inexcusable.

"Tesoro—"

"Don't call me that." Aiden hadn't meant to yell, but Marco stumbled backward all the same, as if Aiden's words had shoved him against the storage-shed door. "Don't... just don't." He could hardly meet Marco's concerned, confused gaze. The sound of a door opening made Aiden flinch.

Mom.

Fuck.

He closed his eyes momentarily as his mother approached. She rounded the corner, saw Marco, and almost dropped the ice-cube-filled glass she held.

"I didn't know you'd brought a friend with you, Aiden. You should have said." She stepped closer, frowning as she stared at Marco. "Don't I know you?"

"Maybe you knew my brother, Ben de Luca. We are very similar, it's true. I thank God every day that I do not resemble my other brothers—idiot giants, all of them. I'm Marco, Aiden's housemate." Marco kissed the back of Aiden's mother's hand, surprising her into a smile. He cast a glance in Aiden's direction, as if trying to read his mood. "I was about to help Aiden repair your mower."

Aiden could hardly stifle his groan. His mom launched into the beginnings of a panic, worrying aloud, her verbal anxiety spiraling quickly, mirroring the way her free hand twisted around his as he tried to placate her.

Marco looked surprised. "I'm sure that we can fix it for you, Mrs. Daly. I did not mean to cause you any worry. A minor repair is probably all that is necessary."

Aiden's voice sounded hollow with exhaustion—unconvincing even to his own ears. "It's fine, Mom."

Marco stood behind her, facing Aiden, his expression shifting between confusion and concern as he looked over again. He swallowed, then interrupted. "Could I trouble you for a drink, Mrs. Daly?"

Aiden's mom almost immediately snapped out of her rising panic, her good manners compelling her to offer the glass she still held to Marco.

"I would prefer water. Shall I come inside with you?" Before Aiden could gather his thoughts, Marco had his arm around his mom, his dark head bent toward her graying one, steering her around the corner again. He chatted the whole way across the backyard, his huskily accented voice carrying until the back door squeaked again before closing behind them.

For a moment, Aiden felt grateful. Then he recalled that his mom would have been none the wiser if Marco hadn't run off his stupid, beautiful-like-his-brother's mouth in the first place. He knelt and wrenched off the mower motor's casing, peering at its workings as if he had the first idea what he was looking at. When the door opened again, he didn't look up. Marco soon knelt beside him, his hand tentative on Aiden's rigid shoulder.

"I'm sorry, *tes*—" This time Marco stopped himself from using his habitual endearment, describing Aiden as precious. "I didn't mean to cause a problem." For once he sounded serious.

Aiden was too angry to speak. He continued to poke around, peering at the motor as Marco sat in rare silence. The next time Marco spoke, Aiden found that he couldn't help but turn to look at him. He sounded completely unlike his usual self.

"I didn't realize how much we have in common."

His subsequent lapse into silence made Aiden speak up, asking, "What? What on earth can v

possibly have in common?" He looked away again, glaring at the broken mower. Maybe he sounded a little indignant. He couldn't help it. He was nothing like his housemate. *Nothing*. Marco was flippant and lighthearted to the point of thoughtlessness, seeing a reason to laugh at things that weren't even funny. He was *always* laughing. And he ran his own business as if it were inconsequential, seeming to pay scant attention to it apart from Skyping with his brothers in Milan.

Marco spent every free moment trying to get under Aiden's skin. They had nothing in common at all.

"I wanted to come to Seattle while Ben was still alive. I would have come sooner, only I worried about Mamma being on her own. When he died, I believed that she needed me at home even more."

Aiden turned to look at him.

"It's true," Marco continued, his expression troubled for once. "How old is your mother, Aiden?" When Aiden shared that she was in her late sixties, Marco nodded. "Mine is a little older. I guess you could call my birth a menopause surprise. I told you that Mamma called me her good luck charm, didn't I? That's why she gave me my papà's name. Fortunato means lucky, and it was at least a small part of him that I could keep forever. He died before I was born." Marco paused, shrugging. "Mamma and I are very close."

Aiden had known Marco was the youngest in his family, but he hadn't known that his mother was significantly older, like Aiden's own—she had waited until her early forties before adopting him—or that she was a widow too.

Marco continued, inspecting the mower engine closely, removing a few parts with movements that were precise and dexterous. "I talk with her every day. My brothers and their wives look after her well, but I can't help worrying about her still." He sighed and wiped engine grease from his fingers onto the grass beside him. "I could have stayed in Milan, but Mamma says life has to go on, no? It has to go on, even if it's different and difficult."

Aiden swallowed, then swallowed again, trying to clear the sudden constriction in his throat. Life had gone on after his dad died. And it was different. Different and difficult, even five years later, in ways that Aiden still found hard to wrap his head around. Aiden swallowed one last time, and when he spoke, Marco's expression changed. He'd never looked more like his brother.

"What are you doing here, Marco?" Aiden sounded exhausted, and Marco's answer only made him even more tired.

"Mamma told me to find what would make me happy."

"I meant, what are you doing *here*, in Seattle, in my mom's backyard, right now?"

Marco's smile was slow, as was the way he pivoted from his kneeling position next to Aiden to straddle him. He settled in Aiden's lap as if that was something he did every day, wrapping his arms around Aiden's neck and shifting until he was comfortable. His fingers left smears of engine grease on Aiden's cheeks as he held his head still and kissed him.

Aiden froze, torn between shoving Marco away and the sudden, surprising urge to hold him much, much tighter. His final question was a hoarse, low rumble. "What are you doing?"

When Marco whispered, "Exactly what my mamma told me," Aiden almost kissed him back.

CHAPTER *Three*

ANOTHER creak of the door leading from the house to the backyard interrupted a moment that surely would have ended in disaster. Aiden counted his blessings that he hadn't gotten around to oiling the noisy hinges as he shoved Marco from his lap.

Aiden wiped his mouth. The back of his hand felt rough compared to the surprising softness of Marco's lips. He rubbed harder, smearing away the sensation of Marco's kiss, and of the slick tongue tip that he'd been about to open up to. Jesus. What had he been thinking?

It was bad enough that his housemate had intruded on his private family space. If his mom had caught Marco kissing him like that—provoking a response from Aiden that left him blinking and breathless—it might have sent her straight into shock again.

His hand slipped from his mouth to his chest, rubbing where heartburn suddenly flickered as his imagination raced ahead, filling his head with horribly vivid detail. He rose to his feet, almost staggering. There was no way in hell that he'd ever want to see his mom break down outside the garage again—or anywhere, for that matter. Once in a lifetime was enough.

Marco sprawled on his back on the grass, looking shocked at Aiden's sudden movement. Then he heard the approaching clink of ice cubes against glass and started to scramble to his feet too. He didn't move fast enough for Aiden, who reached out, wrapping one huge hand around Marco's forearm and lifting him clear off his feet as he yanked him upright.

This time Aiden's mom crossed the yard carrying a tray holding freshly filled glasses, along with a bowl of chips. She sounded pleased when Marco blurted that he thought the mower would be an easy repair as he took the tray from her. Aiden watched relief slip across her features, much as it happened every time her anti-anxiety meds used to kick in. It had taken him years to figure out that their effect was a temporary reprieve from pain, and that the pills had only stalled her recovery after his dad's passing.

Truthfully, they hadn't helped her at all.

In fact, it had been Joel, who had left a list of bereavement counselors on Aiden's desk at the store, who drew his attention to alternative strategies. When Aiden had ignored the list for weeks, leaving it on his desk, it had eventually disappeared. Aiden hadn't even realized the piece of paper had moved until it turned up next on the refrigerator door in his apartment kitchen, held up by alphabet magnets spelling out HELP.

Aiden had added *meddling in private family business* to his own list of reasons to dislike his brother's boyfriend.

At first he hadn't realized that Joel's list had been aimed at his mother. He'd read the list of counselors and thought that Joel had meant it for him, even though that seemed baffling. Why would he need a bereavement counselor? It had been years since he'd woken, scrambling to get out of bed.

hurling himself down his hallway, certain that if he only hustled he could get home in time to stop his dad. In Aiden's estimation, the time for counseling was long gone. He'd gotten over losing Dad finally. He'd had to.

Then he wondered if Joel had meant the list for Evan, and that had made him furious—incandescent in a way that had left him shaking. The last five years had been difficult, but he'd done everything he could to make things easier for Evan. Every fucking thing he could. He'd shielded his brother from.... He couldn't even begin to think about it. Evan and Mom were his life. To suggest that his brother needed help was beyond insulting.

Seething, Aiden had torn down the list and trashed it.

He hadn't been able to trash Joel's third attempt to force him to see what was right in front of his face.

Joel had e-mailed him, and then had sat by Aiden's desk, his usual annoyingly amused expression absent, as he waited for Aiden to read it. His message had been bold and black, its font very distinctive, making quite an impact. It comprised three lines that listed how badly Aiden had fucked up. He read them, and he blamed himself for being so dumb. Then he blamed Joel for having the nerve to point out his shortcomings.

Maybe he would have ignored that message too if Evan hadn't stood behind his seated, grinning faced boyfriend, as if Joel were a shield between them.

That had hurt.

Aiden read those three lines over and over, and each time he did so, guilt pressed between his ribs like the blade of a stiletto dagger, thin and sharp and painful. When Evan silently sided with his boyfriend—worry suddenly making Evan look as old as Aiden felt—that stiletto blade pushed in a little deeper.

*Your mother isn't getting better.
The medication alone isn't cutting it.
Please let other people help her.*

He'd burned with shame that day in his stockroom office, and that familiar heat prickled across his chest again as his housemate stood in his mom's backyard and reassured her that he could solve her current problem.

That Marco—*fucking Marco*—could strip away his mom's anxiety with only a few warm words made Aiden clutch at his own ribs, sure he'd find a dagger handle there, the pain was so sharp and familiar. He dropped to his knees again, clumsily reattaching the engine parts Marco had so easily removed. His fingers rebelled, withdrawing their cooperation as he paid too little attention to what he was doing, focusing instead on Marco's conversation with his mother.

Eventually he replaced the engine casing, leaving it loose, and knelt in silence as his housemate talked. For one completely out-of-control moment, Aiden wanted to leap up and drag his mom away or punch Marco in the mouth to stop him from saying things that might tip her over the edge into anxiety once again. Instead he bowed his head, turning a spare screw over in his palm, listening with his eyes closed.

Marco guided Aiden's mom to the patio table, set where the final rays of evening sun struck, and set down the tray he carried. As Marco spoke, Aiden opened his eyes again and realized that it must be

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