

THE
NOT-SO
GREAT
ESCAPE



To my beautiful children, for making me
try to be a better person.

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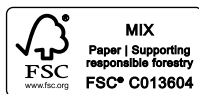
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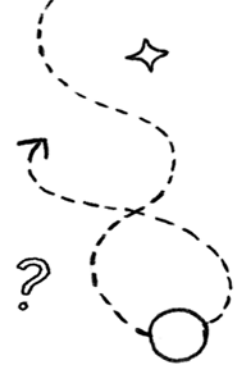
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CHAPTER ONE



When the police officer dropped me, Dad and Lilly back home to our flat after the Crash, he said to me, “Rotten luck there, Hedley.”

Which is a silly thing to say because, of course, people don’t die through bad luck alone.

In fact, the Department for Health and Statistics says that:

The average life expectancy for a human being in the UK is seventy-five years, but when certain risk factors are considered this average drops down to sixty.

Not that Mum was sixty when the car killed her, but you get the point. And after, when we got inside, Dad went straight to the bed he used to sleep in with Mum and he’s been in it ever since. He says his legs don’t work properly since the accident.

But I don’t think it’s his legs that need fixing.

Anyway, before he left us, the police officer gave me some advice.

“Keep your head down and things will get easier.”

So, I turned the words into something spiky and hard

which squished up the scream inside me, covered it tightly and promised never to let it go.

And I'm still keeping my head down even now, one year later. Well, the real truth is I'm being forced to do it by my roommate, Aiden. That is because he's currently holding me upside down, while he tries to simultaneously punch and fart in my face.

He's actually doing quite well.

I suppose the word roommate is wrong on all accounts. Firstly, as you can see, we're not really mates. Secondly, we both only stay at Bridlebank Therapy Activities Centre from Friday night through to Sunday, and that's only because, apparently, we both need help with our emotions and things; and thirdly me and Aiden don't exactly "share" the room. In fact, when I first stayed at the Guff Cave (as I call it), Aiden drew a line (literally with a great big marker pen) in a small corner and piled all my stuff behind it. Since then, I've been under strict threat of a front wedge to not even breathe outside of the pen line on my visits, which actually isn't as difficult as it sounds because there is always a strong smell of eggy fart coming from Aiden's bed.

Another reason Aiden is a terrible roommate is because he never has any stuff of his own, and therefore he is always stealing my things, despite the marker-pen line.

And I'm now suspended in mid-air because Aiden has once again stolen my hat.

Listen, it's not just any old hat. It's my favourite stripy one that Mum gave me on the last Christmas we had together before the Crash. It's got long knitted ears that reach my shoulders, but the really bestest thing about it is that it activates my golden shield of protection. Before, whenever I got scared or I had to do something that made me nervous, which was surprisingly a lot, Mum would pull on the ears and say, "There you go, Hedley, you're invincible now."

Normally, when Aiden takes my stuff, I don't say anything. But my therapist, Dr Rosenhaus, says avoiding fights is not always a good thing. That sometimes confrontation is necessary.

So, when I saw him wearing my woolly hat and wiping his sticky fingers all over it, I said, "Give me my hat back."

And of course Aiden said, "No. What you going to do about it?"

Which is exactly the moment when I realized that despite telling me that avoiding fights was bad, my therapist hadn't actually told me how to *win* them. So, now I'm just letting Aiden hit me until he gets tired. Or I pass out from the blood pooling in my head – whichever happens to happen first.

As it goes, I'm saved by the telephone.

"Hedley!" someone was shouting up the stairs.
"Telephone call for you. It's Nic."

Usually, Nic, my weekend support worker at the centre, can do one as far as I'm concerned, but this time, I could have kissed him. Aiden smirked back at me with his arms folded across his chest as I squeezed past him and ran down to the ground floor corridor where the telephone was hanging on the wall. Something must be up for Nic to call me on a Friday evening rather than wait until he was working tomorrow.

"Hiya, Hedley, looking forward to our session this weekend? How are you feeling?"

This presented me with a bit of a dilemma. I didn't want to hurt his feelings and say I preferred double maths to my weekend sessions at the centre – not because Nic's activities were boring, you understand, don't get me wrong. The centre goes all out to make everything as exciting as possible. That's exactly the problem. I've been coming here for a while now at the weekends, because of Dad not getting out of bed and stuff, and so far, in my opinion, every single activity is designed to kill me. Surely sitting in a corner, reading my book would be a far less risky way of spending the weekend? When it comes down to it, I am just not built for zip lines that dangle me high

above the ground, suspended by a wire cradle chafing my unmentionables.

Nor apparently am I any good at talking about my feelings.

They showed us a documentary in science once, when a caterpillar creates a chrysalis to turn into a butterfly. There's a stage when its body releases enzymes that dissolve its own cells leaving only the life-supporting ones. So really it's just a blob of nothingness. Sometimes that's how I feel. But telling that sort of thing to Nic always makes him talk even more.

"Fine."

Nic has an earring and thinks that he is "uber-cool" – which is what he calls things a lot. I think the fact that he says things like "uber-cool" means that he isn't.

He gave a little sigh but, for once, let it go. "Hedley, do you want the good news or the bad news?"

Seriously, what kind of question is that to ask someone who had to be told his mum died in a car crash? Sometimes, I'm not even sure Nic went to therapy school.

Eventually, he realized that he wasn't getting an answer. "Okay! So..."

He always starts his sentences with "So," like we've been in the middle of talking about something. It's both confusing and factually incorrect.

“So, actually both of them are good news. It was a trick question.”

It was a dumb question.

I wiped the handpiece of the phone, trying to focus on something other than the crusted bogie trail that Shona Calcutt, another regular at the centre, always leaves smeared across the wall whenever she phones home. Someone had drawn dog ears in a black biro around one of them.

“Anyhooo...” There was a weird banging noise on the phone which was probably Nic drumming his hands on something. “So, guess who’s got a new weekend job working at Farmer Bert’s Petting Farm?”

It wasn’t that big a shock – I was surprised he’d managed to last this long as a support worker before being sacked. He was pretty rubbish at it, if I’m honest. “Aren’t you a bit old, though?” I asked.

“What? No. Not me, Hedley. Why would you think that I— Never mind. Look, the job is for you. Weekend mornings. Starting tomorrow!”

Oh god. No. The whooshing noise in my ears was back again. Now I really did want to zip myself up into a chrysalis. Mush and all.

“But I hate animals!” I could feel the panic rising up from my tummy to my throat, and I wanted to spew my guts everywhere. Animals, by definition,

were a Big Risk. They were unpredictable at BOTH ENDS!

“Hedley, think of this as a Good Thing. Kids your age, they need hobbies.”

There was something in his voice.

“Hang on, is this actually a job with proper money or...?” I asked.

There was a pause before he cleared his throat. “Well, it’s part of your therapy, really. Dr Rosenhaus has recommended it. You know, studies have shown that spending time with animals can be therapeutic.”

“But a farm?” I stood on tiptoes and rested my forehead against the wall, taking care to avoid the bogies. The SAS call it the stress position.

“It’s just the focus that you need to take you out of yourself,” replied Nic. What did that even mean? Being taken out of myself sounded bad. Very BAD.

“Have you ever given any thought to what you want to do or be when you leave school, Hedley?” Nic’s voice was quieter, and I pushed hard against the wall.

“A librarian.” I’ve researched the Department of Health and Safety statistics for accidents and deaths in the workplace. And other than a bed tester, librarian has the lowest number of fatalities.

“Oh.”

There was a silence apart from me cracking my

knuckles. “I think it will be good for you, Hedley. Face a bit of unpredictability. Sometimes when we’ve experienced a big trauma, then...”

Oh, nuggets! To Nic, everything was connected to grief. Could this get any worse?

“You know, Hedley, if you ever want to talk...”

Obviously, it could.

“No. I am FINE, Nic. F.I.N.E.” Hopefully Nic would think that someone who could spell out the word “fine” needed no help whatsoever.

“I don’t think you are fine, Hedley. I spoke to Dr Rosenhaus yesterday. She had a lot of interesting things to say about your last session. She thinks you are trying too hard to convince everyone that you are okay.”

“Oh.”

“So, anyway, while you’re still on the phone, here’s the next good news. We’re having a really great dinner and disco over Christmastime here at the centre. I have it on good authority that Father Christmas is DJing.” There was a pause, and I could tell Nic was leading up to something. “Actually, I wondered if you’d given any thought to staying here during the holidays? Everyone really enjoys your visits.”

“Let me check my diary and get back to you,” I said. I mean, I was sure it would be fun and everything, but I had Dad and Lilly.

“Ha ha, Hedley. I’ll have a chat with your dad about it.” Why bother asking me, then?

“I can’t really leave Dad for that long,” I muttered.

“You know he’ll have someone in helping him, just like at the weekends.”

My calves had started to burn.

“Why are you practising ballet, Hedley? Do you want me to show you first position?”

My heart sank.

Lilly, my annoying six-year-old sister, was hovering in the hallway. Her plaits all tangled and smelling of poster paint.

I blinked and lowered myself back to the ground.

“So, can I at least tell them you’ll go to the farm tomorrow?” Nic sucked in some air.

Hmm. According to the publishing of the Department of Works and Pensions, farmers have the youngest average age of mortality of any other occupation. Mainly from machine operations.

“I’ve got a really good joke, Hedley! Want to hear it?” Lilly was tugging on my jumper. I pushed her hand away and glared at her to shut her up.

“Will I be operating heavy machinery?”

“Now, Hedley, don’t overthink this,” Nic said. “The petting farm has good reviews; I think you will really like it there.”

“Statistically eighty per cent of pet owners end up with respiratory issues,” I replied.

Lilly interrupted, “Sam Ardent told me it, and he doesn’t always tell me his jokes because he says girls aren’t funny and it would be a waste of his time, but I followed him all the way to the toilets and said I wouldn’t leave unless he did tell me it, and that actually if he was really worried about saving time then he should change his diet, because it’s not normal for a person to spend that long on the loo anyway, and my older brother Hedley – that’s you – only goes to the toilet once every two days... That’s right, isn’t it, Hedley?”

“Shut up, Lilly,” I hissed.

I could hear Nic sighing.

“You know it’s really important to accept some help, Hedley. You’re not on your own.”

I watched as Lilly wandered back to the TV room.

I looped my finger into the hole in my jumper and squeezed it until one end went white and the other red.

“Can Lilly come too?”

Nic’s breath came out all in one big blast down the phone and I could imagine the vein that ran down his forehead sticking out. “Listen, mate, we’ve been through this before and I really think it would be better if you try this by yourself first.”

There was a buzzing in my ears.

“I’ve got to go,” I shouted. I was hardly able to hear him now above the noise in my head.

“Hedley!” His voice sounded far away, as if down a tunnel. “Hedley? Just try, Hedley...”

I slammed the telephone down and slumped against the wall.

The wool had left a mark around my finger.



CHAPTER TWO

It turned out that as well as lying about the petting farm being an actual job, which would have meant actual real money for once, Nic had also failed to mention the worst part of the rubbishy therapy activity.

Aiden was taking part in it too.

I was late anyway, because Aiden had nicked both my coat and my only pair of trainers, which meant I'd had to go through the lost property box, and the last time I borrowed anything from there I'd ended up with athlete's foot on my face. For some reason, Aiden had dumped my woolly hat in there as well, so I grabbed that while I was trying to find some shoes. As it was, the only ones I could find were an old pair of pink unicorn wellies which were about two sizes too small, so it took me ages to walk up the track to the farm which was just on the outside edge of the town. You could even see the top windows of the activities centre from it and the tower block of Blackbird Estate, where I lived, behind it.

Farmer Bert's wasn't really a proper farm. It was two

big fields up the road from us next to the cricket pitch. In the corner of one of the fields next to the road was a massive billboard poster on wooden legs with the words: *Farmer Bert welcomes you to his petting farm.* It had a picture of a young man with a yellow necktie holding a pig. There was a cigarette hanging from his mouth. The farmer, I mean, not the pig. I'm not even sure they can smoke.

Anyway, Aiden was already standing at the gate, splashing up and down in the muddy puddles and getting my trainers dirty.

"What are you doing here?" He pulled an angry face at me when I walked up. "And what the fudge are you wearing on your feet?"

"Nic told me I had to come." I shrugged, blowing on my hands to warm them up and ignoring the comment about the wellies. Aiden looked toasty warm in my coat.

"Yeah, well, I get first dibs on all the girl action," frowned Aiden, kicking at the metal gate with his foot.

I rattled the bars, looking for a doorbell or something to let Farmer Bert know that we were here. The lane was full of water and one of my unicorn boots had a gash on the side which was already soaking my sock.

"What are you talking about? What girl action?"

"Duh." Aiden pointed at the sign in the field next to us. "Farm. There's bound to be loads of girls working

there. Real girls,” he added. “They love animals and stuff.”

“Jesus, Aiden.” I shook my head. “It’s just us.”

Aiden swung round, his face all pinched and angry. “No girls?”

“Nope.”

“The stinking liars!” he roared and shoved me out of the way. I thought for a moment he was going to run all the way back to the centre, but instead he vaulted over the wooden fence into the field next to us.

“Aiden,” I hissed over the wooden rail. “What are you doing? Get back.”

Aiden looked like he was about to sprint across the field, when a car drove past playing that really annoying snowman song. He stopped and turned back.

“Did Nic talk to you about Christmas?” He was staring at the ground, avoiding looking at me.

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“You going to stay?”

I shrugged, peeling a bit of wood off the rail. “Dunno. What about you?”

“No way...my dad’s coming back this Christmas. He’s bought me a sports car. Not a crap one like a Porsche but a proper Lamborghini.”

None of it was true. Aiden was absolutely spending Christmas at the centre. I knew that because I’d

overheard Nic talking about it last week. Aiden lives with his gran because his mum “can’t cope”. And, anyway, his dad never, ever shows up – and even if he did, Aiden can’t drive – he’s twelve, like me.

But before I could say anything, he was already marching over to the posts at the foot of the giant poster of Farmer Bert.

“Hey – look, Hedders! Look what someone’s left here...” He was pointing to a ladder propped up against the sign.

“Aiden! What are you doing? Get down!” But it was pointless. He was already halfway up the ladder, scrambling closer to the billboard.

The legs of the ladder started to wobble.

“Get over here, Hedley, and hold the bottom for me!” he shouted.

“I most certainly will not.” I rattled the gate even louder in the hope that someone would hear me.

“Get over here, or when I get down I’m going to kick your head in.”

I considered my options and decided to give Aiden a hand.

It took me quite a bit longer than Aiden to get over the fence, on account of the unicorn wellies, which were now so waterlogged that I couldn’t feel my toes. By the time I’d squelched over to the bottom of the ladder, the

whole thing was shaking, and Aiden was already at the top and busy pulling something from his pocket.

My heart dropped.

It was a can of spray paint that he must have nicked from the art room back at the centre.

The ladder jiggled as he pulled the cap off. “Put your foot on the bottom, Hedley!” he shouted down.

“I don’t think this is a good idea, Aiden,” I called, but he had turned back to the sign and was soon deep in the process of spraying what looked like two giant boobies onto Farmer Bert.

Something moved in the corner of the field.

“Er...Aiden...”

A black cloud on legs had just detached itself from the mist and was slowly making its way towards us.

“Stop wobbling the ladder!” he shouted.

“I think you should get down, Aiden,” I hissed, craning my neck to get a better look at whatever was coming towards us. It had picked up speed a bit.

A giant head of fur like a beanie hat at the end of a long, telescopic neck suddenly raised itself from a fluffy ball of wool. A pair of ears twitched forward. The thick wool was covered in tiny water droplets and four spaghetti legs stuck out from the body like a giant cake pop.

As it got closer to me, a smell reached my nostrils.

“Urghhhh! What is that stink?” shouted Aiden from above my head.

The animal stopped as it reached the ladder and shoved its nose between the rungs directly into my face.

For one second, I was staring into a pair of soft brown eyes, until a pair of cavernous nostrils opened up, sucking me forward as it sniffed.

“Gah.” I whipped my head to the side. “Urgh...go...shooo.”

“What’s going on down there?” shouted Aiden.

“There’s a thing – an alpaca or something – here. Shooo... It’s nibbling me...shoooo...gerrofff...”

But the stupid animal must have got a whiff of the wool on my hat ears and had hold of it between its massive teeth.

“Get off! Leave it alone!” I shouted, waving my arms about, trying to push it off, but it only pulled on the hat more. One of the threads had already come loose.

“Hedley, hold it steady, or else I’m going to come down there and batter you.”

“I can’t! It’s got me!” The alpaca pulled away, the wool still in its teeth, tugging at me. At which point, a small quad bike appeared over the ridge and raced along the track, a cloud of exhaust vapour blowing up behind it. The noise startled the alpaca, who leaped backwards, pulling my hat and me with it. My foot came

away from the bottom rung at the same time that Aiden twisted to see what was going on.

There was a judder and then a creak, and the whole ladder started to slide to the side.

“Arggggghhh!!!” screamed Aiden, jumping back off it into the air, the spray can still in his hand.

Fortunately, his fall to the ground was broken.

Unfortunately, it was me that broke it.

The alpaca had legged it.

“You two got nothing better to do than roll around together in the field?” A man, who I assumed was Farmer Bert, had hopped off the bike and was watching us over the fence.

Me and Aiden scrambled up and Aiden quickly shoved the spray can into my pocket. The farmer didn’t seem to have noticed the new artwork on the sign but was instead angrily pointing to big “No Entry” sign hanging off the fence. “Get out of that field. Livestock worrying is an offence, you know.”

“Wasn’t me,” said Aiden. “That’ll be Hedley probably boring on about climate change again.”

I made a mental note to avoid any other heavy topics during the day. The alpaca eating my hat hadn’t looked very anxious, but then Nic said it was always hard to tell when things were being bottled up.

“Jesus wept,” snorted the farmer. “You’re both late,”

he added, opening the gate and waving at us to come through. I climbed over the fence and through the gate, while Aiden followed.

“Are you Farmer Bert?” I asked, trying to wipe the mud off my hand in order to shake his, but he had already jumped back onto the quad. He didn’t look much like the picture on the board. Even with the new boobies.

“Can I have a go?” asked Aiden, whose eyes had got all shiny at the sight of the quad bike.

“Absolutely not,” snapped Bert. “You got legs, haven’t you? Good grief, what is that on your feet?” His eyes had widened as soon as he clocked my unicorn wellies. “Do you two think you’re on the catwalk?”

“What? No.” As if I’d wear pink unicorns on a catwalk. “I had to borrow these.”

“Right, well, hurry up. One of you is on gift-shop duty and the other is feeding the alpacas.”

“Wait, we haven’t had our health and safety training yet...” I began.

But Farmer Bert wasn’t interested. He had already sped off on the bike.

It turned out that the sign wasn’t the only misleading thing at Farmer Bert’s Petting Farm. Nothing was quite as it seemed. Firstly, it wasn’t a farm. There was one field of alpacas and a hut. The hut smelled just as bad as the alpaca field, which reeked because of the

mountain of dung in the corner. However, the smell inside was from Farmer Bert, who clearly rated personal hygiene as high as he did trading standards. Next to the alpaca field was another small patch of grass that contained a few chickens and some black scruffy-looking sheep.

The “gift shop” was inside the hut. It sold a few packets of out-of-date biscuits and some random photos of the alpacas, all of which had been taken with Farmer Bert’s finger over the lens. Above a stool was a sign that said: *Shoplifters will be fed to the animals.*

Aiden had, of course, bagsied the gift-shop job.

“Come on,” said Farmer Bert, impatiently rattling a feed bucket, which, for some reason, he stored in the toilet cubicle next to the hut. “They’re getting hungry.”

I followed him outside and up to the paddock gate, where a group of alpacas, their heads topped with thick tufts of fur, were already standing at the first rattle of the bucket. Their coats ranged from light browns and snowy whites to dark chocolate. They barged against the gate, churning the mud under their hoofs and snickering softly. As they pushed, they kicked up a thick, earthy scent that rolled over me in heavy waves.

There were a lot of them, and they were very, very big.

“That’s a lot all together,” I said.

“They’re herd animals,” replied Farmer Bert, shooing at them with his thick hands. “You should never have less than three together.”

“Why? What happens?” Aiden had followed us out. “Do they explode?”

Farmer Bert shrugged. “I dunno. They don’t like it, I suppose.”

“What’s the matter, Hedders?” Aiden asked, head on one side as I edged further away. “Scared of the little fluffy wuffy donkeys?”

“No,” I said, squeezing my hands tightly together. “It’s just...”

The corners of Aiden’s mouth were already turning up, and I knew he couldn’t wait to tell everyone at the centre what a total loser I’d been...and honestly, what with the alpacas and everyone staring at me and the smell of that disgusting poo mountain, everything started spinning a little. I was beginning to feel a bit sick from the margie bread I’d shoved down that morning, so I grabbed the fence and lifted my head up until I was chin to chin with the nearest alpaca, which turned out to be the one that had nibbled my hat. It was bigger than the rest, with a black coat and a tuft of white hair that stuck up on the top like a skunk.

“That’s Duke,” said the farmer. “He’s my prize winner.”

It was already staring at me, like some ancient king, looking down its long nose. As our eyes locked, something spiky and familiarly scary stirred in the pit of my tummy, making me shiver. I blinked, pushing the feeling away. I couldn't back out now; everyone was watching. I'd read that when faced with a wild animal, you should show no fear. Don't look away, let it see the beast within you. Well, here I was, Hedley the roaring tiger. I mean, hadn't I shooed the rabid, hat-chewing alpaca away earlier? Practically tamed it, really. How hard could this be? They were just walking teddy bears, when you thought about it. Yeah, any moment now and that animal would be—

The snot ball came shooting from the alpaca's mouth so fast that it bounced off my nose and covered my eyeballs. For two whole seconds, I thought I was blind.

"Oh my god!!!" It wouldn't come off. "Help me... Arghhhhh!!!" The stuff was like napalm. It was sticking to my hands like stringy pizza cheese and it stank worse than the activities centre's toilets after Fajita Night.

"HA HA HA!" Aiden was laughing so hard his heehaaaaawing set off the alpacas in the next field. "It threw up on you!"

"It didn't throw up; it spat." Bert was glaring at me like I was the one who'd been gobbing on people. "It's very unusual. Alpacas usually only spit when they are

competing for food or to discourage the unwanted advances of a persistent male."

I thought Aiden was literally about to pee his pants.

"Ha hahhh ha, Hedley." He was hopping around, grabbing at his tummy. "Have you been making unwanted advances to that little goat?"

"Alpaca." I only had the back of my sleeve to wipe away the yuck trickling down my chin. "It's an alpaca, not a goat."

"Ooohhhh!" sniggered Aiden. "Tell your girlfriend I'm sorry."

"It's clearly a male," snapped Farmer Bert. "Honestly, what are they teaching you at school nowadays?"

Seriously, this is what I mean about Nic's Great Ideas. I knew this whole thing was going to be a disaster. The only plus side was that Aiden had stepped in a pile of stray poop while hopping around and had it all over his trainers. Until I remembered he was wearing mine.

"Come on, then." Bert was waving the bucket at us. "In you go. They won't bite!"

"But how do you *know*?" I asked. The woolly mound had finally stopped giving me the eye and was now scratching its smelly rear end on the wood post just like a dog. The itching sent up another cloud of disgusting smells, released from its thick duvet of fur.

“Can you eat them?” asked Aiden, wrinkling up his nose as he stepped closer.

“No, you cannot eat them,” sighed Bert.

“My dad ate a crocodile once,” continued Aiden, suddenly shoving me into a headlock and knuckling my scalp. “Killed it with his bare hands.” That’s the thing about Aiden, he’s a massive liar. Not just little ones either. Huge whoppers and mostly about his dad. “He was on safari.”

Aiden’s armpits were stinkier than the alpaca poo pile.

Farmer Bert squinted at him. “I think someone’s dad is a bit of a fibber.”

I pulled myself free, burning my ears in the process, and watched as Aiden’s face got ugly. Trash-talking Aiden’s dad is never a good move. In fact, given a choice between Aiden on the warpath and a confused alpaca, I’d prefer to be stuck in the field with an alpaca.

“I’ll feed them, if you’re too scared, Hedley.” Aiden grabbed the feed bucket and emptied it over the side, watching as the alpacas shoved against each other to gobble up the nuts from the ground. The big one with the tuft of white hair stood to the side, eyeballing me while it chewed.

“What next?” Aiden asked Farmer Bert, holding the bucket up. But I could tell by his face that he wasn’t

really done with Farmer Bert’s calling his dad a liar, and my tummy started to feel a bit squirmy. That was just what I needed, Aiden in a bad mood. I’d seen that look before and it usually meant someone was going to get it, big time.