

Chapter One

July

“I hope you don’t think I’m gonna hire you because you’re my baby brother. No, wait. My lazy, bookworm, useless baby brother, who’s gone and dropped out of that expensive, fancy writing school he just had to get into, and now shows up here at *my* business, in this ole backwater, hillbilly town...broke and looking like he’s been dragged through a knothole.”

Aiden flinched in the face of Antony’s fury. His hands curled into fists deep inside his trouser pockets, as a too-familiar rush of anger threatened to consume him. He waited and watched, seeking visual cues from their growing up years. Antony merely leaned against the tallest worktable, slowly wiping off some kind of a wrench with a blue cloth, his dark eyes inscrutable.

The sounds of a busy garage swirled around them, filling the real and virtual space between Aiden and the man who’d been his protector and friend his entire life. That gaping hole he’d placed there, with his casual disregard for his family and seeking escape from this very hillbilly backwater. Those were the words he’d used not that long ago. Flung back at him in Antony’s overblown, exaggerated redneck accent, they stung like ice pellets.

Not for the first time, Aiden deeply regretted the effort he’d made to keep distance between them—from all his brothers—for the last seven-and-a-half years. It had seemed the right thing then, with him in the full flush of his heady personal expectations as the next Great American Novel Author.

He gulped, and forced his voice to remain steady. Heaven knows he’d had plenty of years to practice not rising to Antony’s bait.

“Yes...um, well, kind of. Yeah. That is what I’m thinking.” He ran a hand around the back of his neck while Antony observed him without moving or speaking—barely even blinking.

The bastard isn’t going to make this easy, is he?

Aiden cleared his throat and tried to find the right words. They failed him.

“Never mind.” He turned to shoulder his way through the grease monkeys peopling Antony’s successful auto-repair joint. His head buzzed with exhaustion from his trip “riding the dog,” as he’d learned to deem travelling by Greyhound bus, and anxiety over the reason he’d made it.

As he reached for the office door, after making it all the way across the garage, a distinct noise like resignation hit his ears.

Ridiculous, of course. He could barely think amidst all the garage noise, let alone hear his oldest brother heaving his patented sigh from all the way across it. But Aiden turned anyway, knowing, somehow, that he had.

Antony remained propped against the workbench, still clutching the blue rag. Still staring holes into Aiden. “You don’t even know how to change the oil on a late model pickup. You’re about useful as tits on a bull.”

Aiden squared his shoulders and tried to look somewhat more useful than that.

“Maybe, but I can clean up after the guys who do know how, or I can keep your books, update your website, get you active on Facebook and Twitter and—” That sounded desperate. But he might as well own that, too.

“I don’t use any of that shit.” Antony dropped the rag on the bench and scowled as an employee rolled a couple of tires by him. “I don’t need it. I have more work than I can handle now.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe you should think about it. What happens when the work dries up?”

Antony let out a distinctly unpleasant-sounding laugh. “Little bro, you obviously missed class the day they talked about the recession-proof businesses.” He held up three fingers. “Cars always need fixing. People always need to drink beer. Kids always need teaching. By my calculations, the Love family is pretty fuckin’ smart. But for one of us, I guess.”

Aiden bit the inside of his cheek to keep from lashing back in defense then tried a different tactic.

“Mama is sick. You forget that? Ever think maybe I came home to be here for her?” He had to shut his eyes for a split second to dispel the concept of a world without the formidable Lindsay Halloran Love in it.

Antony grunted and headed toward one of the four lifts. Each had a car hoisted on it and a guy underneath, messing around with whatever they did under there. He reached up and fiddled with something beneath what looked like a big black Mercedes sedan, ignoring Aiden. Given that he had no other viable option, Aiden let him.

His sister had broken the news about their mother to him four days earlier, around 5:00 p.m. He'd never forget the moment—since it happened to be the same day he'd discovered he'd failed a poetry-writing seminar, plus made a serious miscalculation by drinking too much and then coming on to a hot professor at a department social event. He'd seen her next day at the panel “discussion” of his final novel.

Lack of clear plot progression, shallow characters and poor dialogue choices, had been the gist of their “advice.”

Jerks. Wouldn't know a decent, modern plot if it bit them all in the collective ass. So what if I want to actually make money with a book, and not just collect a lot of critical admiration?

Shifting from foot to foot, he calculated how long Antony would make him stand there like a supplicant before he caved. Because cave he would. Aiden understood enough about his eldest sibling to realize that. The strains of the latest Luke Bryan song wafted around, chafing his exposed nerve endings.

As Aiden watched, Antony finished under the Merc and hit the button to lower it back to the garage floor. Then he spent a solid ten minutes consulting beneath the hood of a late model F-150, another five wiping down a set of tools, and ten more fiddling with his phone. But Aiden didn't say anything, lest he break into the man's thought pattern. That would only trigger his temper—the last thing Aiden needed at that moment.

Memories of angry explosions past made him sigh, rub the back of his neck, and touch his still-crooked nose. While the Love siblings were fiercely loyal to each other—they maintained zero tolerance for bullshit between them. He took a step backward, regretting his decision to come here first, as opposed to the brewery on the west side of town to beg his father to hire him to pour beer, shift kegs, or hose out brewing equipment, mainly because that would also mean facing Dominic. Between them all, he'd much rather deal with Antony.

He refocused when Antony frowned at him, as if sensing his sudden mental flinch.

Aiden raised an eyebrow in a “well, I’m very busy, and important, and require an answer” sort of way. His stomach churned, reminding him of the disgusting fast food he’d inhaled earlier. He hated being the screw-up little brother. Honest to God, he hated it, almost as much as he despised the country music pounding on his eardrums right then.

Antony crossed his arms over his ample chest, opened his mouth, and something resembling relief coated Aiden’s brain. A loud beep of a horn made them both turn to face the one closed overhead door. Thanks to his brother’s success with it, Love Garage boasted three new bays in addition to the first, all of which were open onto the soft summer midmorning. Aiden took a step backward to see who couldn’t manage to drive up to an open door. He spotted a circa 1990s Ford Explorer, navy blue, filthy, with a crappy spare donut tire on the right front. Antony materialized next to him, a wide smile spreading across his face, replacing the asshole-ish scowl he’d been wearing since Aiden had shown, hoping for a welcome more in keeping with the Prodigal Son’s.

Walking past him without a word, Antony opened the passenger’s side back door then reappeared holding a little blond boy. As soon as he got released, the kid ran to the patch of pebbles surrounding the giant maple tree shading the front of the garage, plopped down, and started cramming handfuls of them into his mouth.

Aiden frowned then walked over and crouched down in front of him. His eyes were of the clearest, brightest blue, his hair so yellow as to seem Technicolor, or fake. At that moment his cheeks bulged, like a squirrel’s hoarding nuts. But at least he’d stopped eating rocks.

“Hey, um...?” Aiden held out a hand in front of the boy’s mouth. “Spit. Those are pretty gross.”

His face split into a grin and slimy, saliva-covered rocks spilled into Aiden’s palm. He grimaced and dropped them before wiping his hand on his travel-wilted khaki’s.

“I’m Jeffery. I needs a drink!” he declared, leaping into Aiden’s arms as if they were best buddies.

“Me too, Jeffrey,” Aiden said, surprised by how comfortable he seemed in his arms.

“Jeffrey needs a drink *now*.” He patted Aiden’s cheeks. Smelling of dirt, grass, and something a little too much like pee for Aiden’s comfort level, Jeffrey pointed toward the SUV. “Tell Mommy to get Jeffrey a drink.”

Aiden glanced over toward the truck and saw his brother beaming like a total sap at an attractive, petite, dark-haired woman. Aiden blinked when she looked over at him until the realization she only wanted to keep track of her kid gave him a mental smack. Her green eyes widened and seemed to flash.

“Oh, my Lord.” She touched Antony’s arm. “That? That is *Aiden*? Little A? Wow....”

Antony scowled at him, then smiled at the woman again, but in a way Aiden didn’t quite understand. He forced his eyes to remain on hers, although the temptation to take in all her jeans, boots, and T-shirt-clad glory nearly bested him. Her flushed face, framed by wild, curly hair barely contained by a headband, deep-green eyes, and full lips, mesmerized him in a bizarre, uncomfortable way. She had to be the most beautiful woman Aiden had ever laid eyes on.

Antony interrupted his internal drooling. “So, what’s up today, Rosie?”

Rosie? Rosalee? His memory clicked in then.

“Drink!” Jeffrey flailed around, startling him. “Drink now!”

“All right. Cool your jets.” Aiden headed toward the office. Setting the boy down did not seem practical. The number of things he’d find in Antony’s garage to stuff in his mouth was myriad, none of them safe.

Jeffrey laughed and patted Aiden’s head. “Cool your jets. Cool your jets. Cool your jets!” His volume ramped up with each repeat.

Aiden plunked him on the butt-sprung couch and filled a cup with water from the cooler, his mind spinning as he tried to catch another glimpse of Rosalee. Jeffrey clutched the cup and gulped the water so fast it leaked out the side of his mouth. Antony laughed and leaned into Rosie’s ear. Their body language spoke of an intimacy that made Aiden’s head pound. Since when did his brother muscle in on another man’s wife—a man who’d been his best friend from, like, birth? Antony flirted with the amazingly hot woman who seemed to be giving it back to him while Aiden tried to come to terms with all the years he’d missed out on his family’s news.

“Hey, um, how’s your dad,” he asked Jeffrey.

If he remembered right, Rosalee Kendrick had married Paul Norris, the shooting guard on the Lucasville Broncos state championship-winning basketball team, with

Antony as forward their senior year. Paul and Rosie had married while she'd been in college, and he'd had been home on leave from the Marines.

"My daddy is a soldier and he is brave," he muttered, methodically dismantling the Styrofoam cup and flicking the tiny bits around the room. "Jeffrey likes his flag. It's a big triangle. It's my pillow."

Aiden blinked, while Jeffrey stomped on the foam dots, his face furrowed in concentration.

"Uh, hey, Jeff, let's not do that anymore, okay?" He snagged what remained of the eviscerated cup and dropped it into the trash, making a mental note to get something more biodegradable for water cooler use.

Just as he'd concocted a scheme to distract Jeffrey with a no-doubt forbidden high-sugar snack from the vending machine, the door opened and Antony strode in. He glared at Aiden then scooped Jeffrey up, flipping him around so he sat on his broad shoulders. The boy squealed, laughed, and tugged on his hair.

"Jeffrey wants to fix a car!"

"Not today, pal." Antony patted his leg. "You and your mommy have places to go. You're gonna take my car while I work on your—"

"Piece of *shit!*" Jeffrey blurted out. "Piece of shit! Piece-of-shit truck!"

"Cut it out. You know your mommy doesn't like that word." Antony walked out with Jeffrey still on his shoulders then stuck him into his car seat, which now resided in the backseat of Antony's prized blue latest model Dodge Charger. That, in and of itself, shocked Aiden to his core. No one, and that included his own mother, got to touch, much less drive Antony's muscle-car-of-the-moment. But sure enough, he straightened after getting Jeffrey settled and tossed his keys across the hood to Rosie, who caught them, blew him a kiss, climbed in then peeled out onto Hunter Street.

Aiden's head reeled from the memory of Rosie's deep-green gaze, the quick glimpse he'd gotten of the rise of her breasts in the V-neck T-shirt, the way the faded jeans hugged her hips and ass. He gulped then had to repress a yelp when Antony barreled back into the office, his face flushed. At that moment, Aiden embraced a core truth—his brother had it bad for Paul Norris' widow.

Problem at that moment of course—so did Aiden.

Antony grabbed his to-go coffee cup and took a slug, “Lucky for you, Rosie talked me into taking you on as a charity case.”

“Oh, uh...great. I guess.” He had to look away to hide the flush rising in his cheeks. Antony obviously had something going on with her, in some kind of bizarre, uncharacteristically low-key way. Antony had run through more girls in high school than any of them, even Dominic. He’d been a tough act to follow on many levels. Aiden couldn’t quite get his brain around what he’d observed transpiring between his brother and the widow Norris just now.

“It’s not what you think.” Antony kept his pensive expression turned to the window. “We’re just friends. Her SUV is ragged out. The VA moves at glacial speed with her benefits, and she had a day off from her teller job....”

“You don’t need to explain anything to me.”

“I know that, you little shit.”

Ah, now we’re back on familiar ground. He banished mental images of Rosie’s full red lips, slim legs, and anything else about her from his brain. He had to convince Antony to hire him for a while. Not to mention, he needed a place to sleep until he got up the nerve to approach his father. He stuck his hands in his pockets and tried out the supplicant face once more.

“Be here tomorrow morning at five. You’ve got the opening clean-up shift and can play gopher for a while, as long as you stay the hell out of my way. Minimum wage. That’s the best I can do right now.”

“That works. Thanks...seriously, I—”

But Antony held up a hand.

“I don’t want to hear it. I, for one, am sick of your excuses. But hey, you’ll be the famous author soon, right? After nearly eight years of school?”

The blood rushed to Aiden’s face again and his hands curled into fists for the millionth time. He counted to ten then fifteen, then took a deep breath. “Can I crash at your place?”

“Jesus-fucking-Christ. Whatever. Now get the hell out of here before I change my mind.”

Aiden stood, heart pounding, fingertips touching the flash drive in his pocket harboring his novel, the one he thought would have passed muster with his stuck-up advisory committee, but had fallen miserably flat. He wondered if Antony still had a computer at home since his own laptop was on its last legs then decided against pushing his luck.

“I’m sorry. But I just need a few... weeks or something. I need to be here for Mama, you know.”

Antony’s frown deepened. “Yeah, speaking of that. Best get it over with now. She know you’re here?”

“Not exactly.” Aiden grimaced. Grime coated him from the long bus ride, and he smelled his own sour body odor—hardly presentable to his mother. But he had no choice. “I...um...could use....”

Antony sighed, dug something out of his pocket, and tossed it toward him. Aiden caught the keys, his throat closing with a combination of panic and relief, and the alarming urge to burst into tears.

“Take the truck. Go to my place and shower first. You smell like the losers in the drunk seat. Do *not* smoke in either my truck or my house, got it? Rosie made me give it up and won’t tolerate it around me.”

Aiden nodded, knowing better than to say a single word at that moment. Antony shot him one more withering glare then turned on his heel and stomped into the garage, yelling and cursing at whatever hapless worker blocked his way.

As Aiden made his way toward the door, he caught sight of the photo hanging over the huge, old-fashioned oak desk harboring all manner of chaos—Antony, his face young and unlined, smiling, with his arm around a lovely blonde woman. A little girl with hair like her grandmother’s, and her father’s deep-brown eyes sat on the man’s shoulders. Aiden shook his head, wondering why Antony let that image torture him every single day.

He’d married his high school sweetheart, like his friend Paul had done, just a little earlier in the game. He and the feisty cheerleader, Crystal Jenkins, had dated from halfway through their senior year then endured a tumultuous couple of years apart while

she went to college in Knoxville, and Antony struggled and failed to complete his degree at the University of Kentucky.

Once he'd dropped out for good, declared to their family that he and a now-pregnant Crystal were getting married, and that he wanted to buy a small farm on ten acres across town, he'd also broken the news that he'd be taking over their aging uncle's garage.

Their father had merely shrugged and gone back to eating. Their mother had let out a small, polite gasp then rallied in her usual fashion when confronted by her family's ongoing drama.

"Well, then I guess Crystal's mama and I need to have a chat about a wedding...and a baby shower."

Aiden sighed and observed his bossy, know-it-all sibling for a few seconds, recalling the god-awful moment he'd heard Crystal had been in a wreck on I-75, coming back from a sorority reunion in Knoxville. Antony had gone into a deep hole after that, losing touch with everyone, including his young daughter.

"What the fuck are you staring at, punk?" Antony's harsh voice sliced through Aiden's reminiscing. "Get the hell out of my office. Shower. Go see our mother, and Lord help you if she won't hide you from Daddy."

Aiden nodded, and walked out, gripping the loaned truck keys.