

## Chapter Three

As his mother gazed lovingly down at her granddaughter's small face, Kieran noted that Lindsay Love's slight form seemed more filled out, less gaunt from the cancer treatments and hip injury. Her recovery provided gut-deep relief to his father and Kieran's slew of siblings. The last year and a half had been hell on a lot of levels.

He kept a death grip on his beer as the sound of a Reds baseball game filled the air, like so many summer afternoons of his youth. His brothers splashed around and yelled in the pool. His sister Angelique sat holding baby-boy Josh, jiggling him out of a fussy spell.

Even as he finished his second beer, Kieran craved a third and headed for the kitchen, leaving the makeshift daycare to the ladies. He'd wanted to talk to his mother alone, but she'd locked into full-blown granny mode insisting that both her daughters-in-law take the afternoon off and get a manicure or read a book or something equally kid-free for a few hours. Then she'd banished her sons Antony and Aiden, the fathers of said progeny, to the swimming pool, declaring that she wanted quality time with Mandy, Josh and Jeff.

As he reflected on all the years spent heaving basketballs at the goal outside the pole barn, all the practices, the hours going to and from games, and the constant, low-lying disapproval from his mother when he'd declared that basketball would be his career, Kieran pondered his life's radical reversal. All that time, effort and sweat had only served to bring him home, leg busted all to hell, engaged to a bitchy woman nobody liked, and freshly pink-slipped from the one job he'd managed to find and had thoroughly enjoyed.

The rich hoppy beer soothed his jittery nerves, so he kept drinking and listening to the familiar sounds of babies, baseball, and splashing pool water for a few more minutes before grabbing another bottle and heading outside. He needed to talk to someone about his predicament. But he didn't want to ruin anyone else's summer afternoon.

He spotted his father, brothers, and some punk who'd been hanging around lately as Angelique's boyfriend engaged in a sort of water-polo dodge ball game that had nearly as much water out of the pool as in it. Mood darkening under the bright sun baking the

scene in front of him, he popped open his next beer using the opener they'd attached to the outdoor fridge and drank half without tasting it.

Melinda was going to have kittens when he told her about his newly unemployed state. She already claimed that being a high school history teacher made him *underemployed*, that he should apply for some kind of financial-planning job or something that could use his *celebrity* to get clients.

"Financial planning?" he'd asked, incredulous by the suggestion. "Since when do I know anything about that?"

"They'll teach you all you need to know. Besides you'd be the front man, getting people in the door? Folks around here love you and your success story. You'd turn the clients over to the real advisors after that."

Already wanting another beer, he got slowly to his feet and winced at the ever-present pain in his left leg. The second he stepped onto the grass from the pool surround he got drenched from head to toe. Whirling around, he spotted his youngest brother Aiden gripping an empty bucket and grinning ear to ear. Kieran tossed the empty on the ground and rammed into Aiden's midsection, driving him backward and into the pool. Kieran let his body sink, loving the cool quiet beneath the water.

Later, he sat with a towel around his waist, playing poker on the patio table. Angelique was kicking all their asses and had a pile of quarters in front of her. Her punk boyfriend had gone inside, sucking up by *helping* with dinner. His brother Dominic had tapped a fresh keg in the outdoors fridge, and they all had plenty of fresh, crisp Love Brewing pilsner. Kieran's head had gone a little fuzzy, but at least it meant he'd stopped anticipating Melinda's no-doubt vocal disappointment. He held out his empty glass. Dominic filled it from the pitcher but not before Kieran intercepted a look between Dom and their oldest brother Antony.

"Fuck you both," he muttered into his fresh brew. The gloom descended again, clouding his vision.

Angelique gave him a snooty look. "Swear jar."

He glowered at her. "Bite me."

"What's up your ass, boy?" His father tossed his cards down.

The shitty poker hand mocked him as he glared at it. "Nothing."

“Not what I heard,” Dom said, lightly, looking down at his cards.

Glaring at him, Kieran took in the blond ponytail, the earring, the tatt snaking around the side of his neck. “Shut your pie hole.” He didn’t want to admit anything to this crowd. Love family groupthink would not help because that would lead down a road he didn’t want to travel—one of *why are you marrying that raging bitch?* A refrain that had gotten way too stale.

All his siblings stared at him, their dark eyes varying shades of the same Halloran/Love mix, different from his green ones. He shrugged and tossed a few more quarters into the middle of the table. “We playing or havin’ a therapy session?”

Antony frowned, and opened his mouth no doubt to spew some sort of oldest brother wisdom.

“Dinner!” their mother called from the balcony, relieving Kieran of the obligation to listen.

“To be continued, losers,” his sister sang out as she placed her cards carefully facedown on the table. He sighed and ran a hand around the back of his neck. Well on his way to being drunk, he grabbed the mug anyway and drained it, hoping that the alcohol would keep everyone on an even keel, avoiding a classic Love-family drama outbreak.

They passed around the buttermilk-fried chicken, green beans, new potatoes, and biscuits in silence. The usual plate scraping and chewing noises pressed in on his overwrought brain in a way that made him want to scream. When his mother touched his arm, he nearly leapt out of skin.

“Son, you all right?” Unable to form words, he felt transported back to his life as a young boy pressed between a bossy older brother and a difficult younger one, expected to play peacemaker nonstop, the perfect athlete, the perfect son, the non-troublemaker. The one who’d made his dream of playing professional basketball come true after an amazing run to an NCAA Division one final game his senior year.

Granted, it had taken some time laboring along in the minor leagues, and a year and a half playing overseas. But while finishing up a season in Spain, he’d managed to catch the attention of an agent who’d invited him to her office in LA, and into her bed a few times, but that was another story.

She'd hit the streets on his behalf and after almost five years he'd finally gotten the contract, and with Miami no less. It hadn't been a terribly great deal at first, and he'd known he'd have to earn his way into the lineup. But he'd been ecstatic, and had partied his ass off that summer, screwing his way through legions of team groupies when not in the gym or on the floor shooting and begging anyone around to take him on in a game.

He observed his mother for a few minutes, pondering the advisability of dumping his life's mess into her lap. She'd been through so much since he'd come home shattered, depressed, and unemployed until his high school alma mater principal had taken pity on him and hired him as a temp teacher. He had no business worrying her over something only he had the power to repair.

"Yes ma'am," he said, keeping his gaze averted. "Sorry." He impaled a potato with his fork, put it in his mouth, and chewed without tasting it, meeting Dom's gaze across the table, as they sat in their old configuration by habit. His brother's expression remained flat, as if he were studying a science experiment gone wrong shaped like his older, redheaded brother.

*Like that asshole could talk—with a kid in New York that no one knew, thanks to the baby mama getting so mad she'd run off at nine months pregnant. I am all kinds of normal compared to him.*

His mother patted his shoulder then shot her husband a worried look down the long, oak table. On cue, Kieran's knee sang out in agony when he bent it, reminding him of his failure, living here in Lucasville, Kentucky and not in Florida in his not-quite-a-penthouse condo, with a willing chick at his door every night, working like mad for playing time.

Within two games, he'd gotten that time only to sustain one of those grotesque, freakish injuries with no real explanation that had been shown in nauseating repeat. It had been so god-awful, one of his teammates had puked on the bench, some lady in a seat nearby had fainted, and finally the sports channel had been convinced to stop showing it, out of deference to its horrific nature.

White-hot frustration shot down his spine. He clenched his jaw, determined to contain it, not to be more trouble to his parents, since his siblings provided enough of that for three or four families.

Ignoring the pain, he pushed away from the table. “I need another beer. Anyone else?”

The entire Love family plus the punk in his sister’s panties looked at him like a bunch of baby birds in a nest. Infuriated, he whirled away and stomped into the kitchen. One of his brothers’ brats chose that moment to let out a loud wail of dismay, matching his mood perfectly.

He turned to stare out the window, wondering how to spin this to his fiancée, dangling a beer bottle from his fingers. Closing his eyes when he sensed someone behind him, he took a long drink and let the alcohol drown out the clanging sound of failure between his ears.