



BROKEN MOUNTAIN SERIES

the
SHAPE
WE
TAKE

BOOK ONE

LIV ROWAN

 PAPER MOON PRESS

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Playlist



*Listen to Harlow & Crew's
playlist on Spotify while you read.*

Flatliner, Cole Swindle/Dierks Bently
On the Run, Jompson Brothers
Tennessee Whiskey, Chris Stapleton
Sun to Me, Zach Bryan
Cold Desert, Kings of Leon
Broken Window Serenade, Whiskey Myers
Nose On The Grindstone, Tyler Childers
Sweet Appalachia, Jackson Dean
Revival, Zach Bryan
Whiskey Glasses, Morgan Wallen
Pills and Poverty, Tim Goodin
Copperhead Road, Steve Earle
Feathered Indians, Tyler Childers
Heading South, Zach Bryan
Girl Like You, Jason Aldean

Draw Me a Map, Dierks Bently
The Night We Met, Lord Huron
Wait for Me, Kings of Leon
Sunrise, Morgan Wallen
Worst Way, Riley Green
Between You and Me, Justin Moore
Ride, Chase Rice
Sin So Sweet, Warren Zeiders
Break My Baby, Kaleo
Must Be the Whiskey, Cody Jinks
Cowgirls, Morgan Wallen
If You Want A Bad Boy, Brantley Gilbert
Simple Man, Lynyrd Skynyrd
Don't Come Lookin', Jackson Dean
Wildflowers and Wild Horses, Lainey Wilson
Me or the Dawn, Tyler Braden
God Needs the Devil, Jonah Kagen
Mind on You, George Birge
Make It Out Alive, Tanner Usrey, Jess England
Bar, Guitar and a Honky Tonk Crowd, Whiskey Myers
Breathe You In, Dierks Bentley
The Wolf, Whiskey Myers
If You Want Me Tonight, Landon Smith
Wake Up With You, Gavin Adcock
Ends of the Earth, Lord Huron
Pretty Little Poison, Warren Zeiders
Devil You Know, Tyler Braden
I Feel A Sin Coming On, Pistol Annies
One by One, Blue Stones
Low, Flo Rider, T-Pain
Black Creek, Brent Cobb
Something in the Orange, Zach Bryan
Good God, Hot Damn, Hayden Blount
Pieces, Andrew Belle
'Til the Day One Does, Colin Stough

Parachute, Chris Stapleton
Somethin' Bad, Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood
Country Boy's Dream Girl, Ella Langley
Burn the Ground, Mason Lively
Devil I Know, Warren Zeiders
Meet Me in the Woods, Lord Huron
Particles, Nothing But Thieves
Indigo, Sam Barber
Barely Alive, Jompson Brothers
Devil's Backbone, The Civil Wars
The Roads, Jonah Kagen
I Found, Amber Run
Movement, Hozier
Joy of My Life, Chris Stapleton
Bed Of My Chevy, Justin Moore

Prologue

HARLOW

JULY 2006

"THE TROUBLE with being alive is you don't know which ordinary day will be your last."

The preacher kept ramblin on, but the words slid past me, all tangled up and useless. They mixed with the sound of whimperin and sniffles until it felt like the saddest country song ever. Everyone else was cryin. I figured I was supposed to be, too. But the tears wouldn't come. They sat stuck somewhere deep, like a boulder stoppin a creek from flowin.

The only feelin that came up was...mad. Mad at God for takin my mama. Mad at the preacher. Mad at everyone sittin there actin like they cared. Even mad at the sun for shinin when it shoulda been rainin. But I suppose it fit. It beat down on me like a cruel punishment, worse than a bad whoopin. The heat stuck to my skin, turnin this black dress into a chokehold. I couldn't breathe right in it.

Maybe this was hell. Least that's what they said in church. Hot enough to make you wish you could die, but you couldn't. You just had to stay there and feel it. Sweat slid down my back while they sang *Amazing Grace*. I didn't understand why they

were singin somethin so pretty at a time like this. God didn't save my mama. They called her a wretch in the song. I figured she probably was. Seemed like the kind of person God would've saved.

But He never did.

My granny cried as they sang. But she looked mad too. I didn't know if she was mad at God or mama. Or me. Or maybe she was just plain mad at everything. I didn't blame her. She seemed tired. Not the kinda tired where you need a nap. But the kind that just sits on you and won't get off. Like when the day gets so heavy the only good part is when the sun finally goes down, and you don't gotta hold it up no more.

Her eyes stayed fixed on the casket. It sat all polished and still, piled with flowers like it was way too fancy to put in the ground. I didn't understand why they made it look so pretty if they were just gonna bury it. A bee buzzed around the flowers, landin and liftin off again like it couldn't figure out if they was alive or dead. The wood shined in the sun, bright enough to hurt your eyes if you looked too long. I told myself it was just the sun makin it hard to look.

I shifted my eyes towards the cluster of hickory trees in the distance, wishin I was climbin one instead of standin there fryin like an egg on a griddle. They stretched up into the sky where nobody could touch 'em. Scrapes and bruises covered my legs like gravy on biscuits, scars left behind from all the time I'd spent climbin the trees in these hills. But I didn't care.

They were my favorite place to hide. And dream. They were the only place I felt safe, high above the chaos and the noise where nobody could reach me. Somehow, even ten feet off the ground seemed a whole lot less dangerous than the world below. I always dreamed I was climbin my way up to a castle in the sky. It was prettier up there. People dressed nice. And spoke nice. No one said "ain't" or drank moonshine on the porch. They wore fancy dresses. And spoke proper like. Like folk in the movies.

We rode back to granny's house in silence. The only noise was the truck rattlin as it hobbled over the ruts of the long clay drive. Red dirt left a cloud of dust behind us as Granny's house came into view. The clothes hung lifeless on the line like the heat had sucked the life right out of 'em. Not a breeze to stir 'em.

I stepped up the crooked porch steps. The white paint was chippin off the sidin somethin dreadful, like it wanted to get away as bad as I did. The porch sagged in the middle, bowin under years of people sittin and waitin, watchin the road like it led to somethin better. I held the screen door open for Granny as she fiddled with the lock. The door hung crooked, same as the rest of the house, like it just got tired of standin up straight.

The screen door slammed behind us like it was tryin to make a statement. Granny went straight to the fridge, pulled out a casserole, and shoved it in the oven. The shelves were packed full of dishes folks had dropped off, foil pans and Tupperware stacked on top of each other. They said it was to "pay their respects." I didn't know what that meant. My mama didn't deserve no respect. I didn't feel much like eatin anyway. My stomach was all knotted up, like it couldn't decide whether to stay put or turn itself inside out.

The chair legs scraped across the old wooden floor as I pulled it out and sat down. Granny set a glass of sweet tea in front of me, then lowered herself slowly into the chair across from me, like she might break if she moved too fast. She took a slow sip, starin down into the glass like there was somethin worth lookin at. Then she finally spoke.

"Your mama always did leave things undone."

I nodded like I knew what she meant.

"I'll be lookin after you now." She sighed like it was just one more thing on her list.

"Well, I ain't stayin," I snapped.

Her eyes met mine. "Yeah? Where else you gonna go?" She lit a cigarette and took a long drag.

"College," I said, crossin my arms like it was already decided.

She let the smoke drift out slow, then gave a dry little laugh. "College? Well, you're stuck with me for nine more years then." She took another drag. "But if anybody's e'er gonna make it outta these hills, it'd be you, Harlow Tate."

That night, I lay in bed, tossin and turnin, as if it might somehow help me sleep. The heat still hadn't let up, and the sheets stuck to my skin like a dirty band-aid. Every time I closed my eyes, my mind started runnin again. I stared up at the ceilin while the crickets chirped the same song over and over, like they had a reason to keep singin. The world kept on movin around me, even though it felt like mine had stopped. It all played back in my head, repeatin itself. Same as it happened. I rolled over and squeezed my eyes shut, like that might change it. I tried not to think about it, but I couldn't stop it. It was my fault she was dead.

CHAPTER 1

Harlow

MAY 2019

"FUCK!" I slammed my hand against the steerin wheel. "Bend me over a porch rail and fuck me sideways." I shouted it at the mountains like they might answer back, then hit the wheel three more times.

My mama didn't leave me much—just her looks and her mouth. The same mouth that could charm a man clean outta his senses could cut him down just as quick. Same as her eyes could bring a man to heel.

I held up my phone, twistin it sideways, swingin it left and right. "Well that's just about right. No fuckin signal."

These mountains were pretty enough to charm a snake, but they kept anything that tried to pass through 'em cut off from the rest of the world.

Time was not somethin I had today. I flicked the broken gas gauge. The needle jumped up. Still had a quarter tank. The door squeaked in protest as I pushed it open and jumped out, my boots crunchin on the gravel as I made my way along the edge of the windin road to the front of the truck. The cool spring breeze off the Blue Ridge Mountains blew through my hair, carryin that

damp, green smell the hills always held this time of year. I pulled my hoodie up and popped the hood of my old Chevy. It was my granddaddy's. Then my mama's after that. And she'd always been faithful, steady in a way nothin else ever was. More than any man I'd ever known.

I was no mechanic. But when you drive somethin built in 1979, you're forced to learn the basics if you wanted to make it anywhere at all. Heat rolled up off the engine, smellin like metal and grease and somethin just shy of burnin. I leaned in and pulled the dipstick, wipin it on my jeans before checkin it again like I knew what I was doin. Looked fine. Or fine enough. I peered at the coolant, then reached over and gave the battery cable a little shake. It didn't budge. Everything looked like it was exactly where it was supposed to be, which was about as helpful as nothin at all.

I dragged a hand through my hair and let out a breath that didn't do a damn thing.

Okay. Think. I wasn't that far. I could make it if I—

I looked down at my boots. *Who the fuck was I kiddin?* My jaw tightened. Of course this would happen today. Of course it would.

I bent back down and jiggled the cables again when I heard a rumblin in the distance. Low at first. Easy to miss if you weren't listenin for it. I stopped, tiltin my head just enough to catch it again. The sound rolled through the hills, echoin back on itself. I stood and turned as a motorcycle came into view around the bend, huggin the curve like it was holdin it. Like it was his to hold and he was never lettin go. Somethin in me shivered before I could make sense of it.

It slowed as it approached from the opposite direction. Then it swayed right with the ease of a water moccasin, crossin the yellow lines and headin straight toward me. The rumble settled low in my chest, takin on a pulse of its own as it came to a stop in front of me. Thick legs in tight jeans straddled the seat, black boots plantin firmly on the gravel as he cut the engine. The

sudden quiet hit harder than the noise had. Like my heart had suddenly stopped beatin. He swung his leg over and climbed off slow and easy.

He reached up and pulled off his helmet, runnin a hand through his dark hair like it needed fixin. Didn't. I caught a glimpse of him—defined cheekbones, strong jaw with enough rough growth to give him an edge, like he didn't spend much time worryin about how he came across. He set the helmet down and turned toward me. He walked across the earth, smooth and confident like he was one with it. Like he was as sure as the ground beneath him.

His gray eyes locked on mine. The intensity of his stare made me feel suddenly exposed, like he'd stripped away every careful layer and was starin straight at the truth underneath. He didn't look away. He stopped a few feet in front of me, eyes still locked like he was tryin to read what I wasn't sayin.

My granny always said my eyes were dangerous, drawin people in, never lettin 'em see what was underneath. Same eyes that could pull a man in or cut him clean dependin on the day. His gaze held like he was testin which one he was gettin. He might be the first one who could see right through 'em.

Didn't like it.

I held his gaze anyway. Heat crept up my neck. I crossed my arms without thinkin, then dropped 'em just as fast. Wasn't about to stand there lookin like I was tryin to hide.

He finally pulled his eyes off me like it cost him. He glanced past me toward the open hood.

"She givin you trouble?"

"Not any more than I give her."

He smirked, noddin like he knew exactly what I meant. "Want me to take a look?"

"Thought that might be why you stopped."

He laughed under his breath and looked at me like he'd just found somethin he wasn't expectin. He held my gaze again for a

second and then shook his head like he was remindin himself of somethin only he understood.

I became aware of myself all at once. The way my jeans hugged my hips, worn soft in all the places that mattered. My hoodie hung open, revealin my white T-shirt and the shape beneath it. Never had been built small. Tall, curves my mama gave me in all the right places, pulled in at my trim waist, but soft in a way that didn't need fixin.

The breeze passed through again, draggin my dark waves across my face. I pushed it back, tuckin it behind my ear without thinkin, catchin him watchin me when I did.

He took a step closer and leaned under the hood. I took a step back like he might burn me. He had that kind of heat—one wrong move, and I'd go up without much fight. He smelled like worn leather and a blend of mountain air and woodsy cologne. With somethin darker underneath that I couldn't quite name.

He leaned in, hand movin with a kind of steady certainty I didn't have, workin through the mess of hoses and metal. "There it is," he muttered.

I moved in just enough to see him press his thumb against a thin crack in one of the hoses.

"Split," he said.

Before I had a chance to respond, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife, flickin it open like it was second nature. He cut off the damaged end, then worked the hose back into place, pushin it on firm, his hands sure and strong like he'd been fixin broken things his whole life. I found myself wishin all things in life could be fixed that easy.

"Try it now."

I climbed back into my truck and turned the key, givin her a little gas. She purred to life like she'd never been broken, *Flat-liner* springin back to life with her through the speakers. I turned up the volume. The stereo was about the only new thing I had in this truck. He shut the hood with a satisfied kind of ease that somehow left me feelin very unsatisfied. He walked over while I

sat behind the wheel, and I cranked the window down when he got close, the music pourin out after it.

“Thanks. You saved me more than I care to admit.”

He rested his arms on the windowsill and leaned in slightly. His eyes locked on mine for a second, like there was somethin he meant to say but didn’t. Then he shook his head, like he was remindin himself of somethin again, his lips curlin into a smirk this time.

He gave the windowsill a light pat and stepped back. “You take care,” he said, already turnin toward his bike.

I watched him ride away in the rearview a second longer than I should’ve, then hit the gas, my tires kickin up gravel that clattered off the tire well like gunfire. Good thing I was in a hurry. He’d gotten my motor runnin in more ways than one, and I didn’t have time to unpack that. I might’ve stuck around and given him somethin more to think about. As my mama used to say, that man was as fine as an ax blade fresh off the grindstone. I hadn’t meant to think it. But there it was. I had plans for my future, and men just...complicated things.

I had left an hour early today. I learned the hard way in life that things didn’t often go accordin to plan. Now I would make it just on time if I drove like my mama taught me—fast and free and like the law was chasin you. I whipped through the Carolina mountains, takin the windin turns like I trusted the mountain more than I trusted myself.

The mountains were green again, like the trees were urgin the warmth to break through, but the spring air still held a chill. I rolled my windows down anyway. The mountain air had a way of birthin hope in your soul. And I needed hope today. I held onto it like moss clingin to these trees.

The air felt different here than it did back in Appalachia. Clay County had a way of stealin your breath like it was pullin the life right outta you. The mountains there stacked like secrets no one ever said out loud. But here in Ridgefield, the air breathed life into a person. The mountains whisperin secrets into your soul,

givin you answers you didn't even know you were lookin for. And to be honest, that encounter made me all kinds of warm. Like a mouthful of moonshine that hit harder than I expected. The cool breeze helped calm the fire I couldn't put out.

I pulled into the parkin lot at Ridgefield University, threw the truck in park, and pushed the door open before the engine had even settled. *Five minutes. Shit.* Backpack in hand, I ran for the building, cuttin across the lot like I might outrun the clock itself. I slipped into my seat with two minutes to spare, breath still catchin in my chest. I dropped my bag to the floor, unzipped it, and dug around for a pencil as a few more students straggled in behind me.

"Alright, everyone, settle in," the professor said, closin the door behind the last student.

A student coughed in the back as the quiet hit.

"You've got two hours for the final. Take your time, read the questions carefully, and remember, there's only one best answer."

Papers shuffled as she walked down the aisles, settin the exams face down on each desk.

"No talking, no phones, no leaving the room unless it's an emergency. If you finish early, bring your exam up and leave quietly." She paused, lettin her eyes move across the room. "You've all worked hard for this. Pass this, and you'll be sitting for boards next month." She paused again. "You begin when I say."

The room lay silent for another moment.

"Begin." I flipped the exam over.

A 68-year-old male presents with acute shortness of breath and chest pain...

Well, that narrowed it down to about half the damn textbook. I kept reading.

Four years of this. Lectures, labs, clinicals that started before the sun came up and ended long after it went down. And it all came down to this.

CHAPTER 2

Crew

I DIDN'T SLOW DOWN. But couldn't stop thinking about her. I watched her disappear in my mirror, that old truck heading the opposite direction. I thought about turning around. Could've made use of a mouth like that. But Ridgefield was filled with ghosts. The kind that don't care if you're awake or asleep. They find you either way. I pressed play on my stereo, the sound comin through thin against the roar of the engine and the wind tearin past me. *On the Run* cut through in pieces, just enough to catch the beat.

I only came back for one reason—to see my mother. She was reason enough. What we had wasn't something most people would understand. Couldn't. There were things that happened in this life that didn't leave you, things that tied you to a person whether you wanted them to or not. Reason enough to visit. Never enough to stay. The memories seeped from the walls like sewage, filling the air with their stench. I could only hold my breath for so long before I had to run. Somewhere I could exhale.

I didn't get her name. That was intentional. I didn't give her mine either. Also intentional. Names had a way of leadin places neither of us seemed willing to go. Still, somethin about her. Couldn't stop seein it. That smirk on her lips. Eyes just as

dangerous as the guarded confidence behind them. I could still hear her smartass comments in that smoky voice over the roar of my bike. Still smelled vanilla every time I closed my eyes.

Sweet enough to ruin a man.

It clung to me even after I pulled back onto the highway, the wind whipping against my jacket and doin absolutely nothin to clear her from my head.

Fuck me.

She was obviously a student. The backpack in her seat told me as much. She was going somewhere. Me? I was going as far as the next bar I came across. Maybe someone's bed if the night went that way. Red—her truck was red, and it was the only thing I had to call her—left me with a fire I had no intention of puttin out myself.

About an hour later, I crossed the state line into Tennessee, the wind hitting my face as somethin in my chest finally loosened. Felt like I'd been holdin my breath for two straight days. The fifteen-minute distraction with Red was the most I'd enjoyed Ridgefield in...well, twenty-four years. Knoxville sat about another hour ahead. Close enough to pretend I wasn't running. Far enough to disappear. Knoxville meant a drink in my hand and someone else's name I wouldn't bother rememberin. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was enough. Enough to forget Ridgefield. Her too, if I did it right.

I didn't have a place to call home. The road was the closest thing I had to steady. Miles behind me, miles ahead. Kept things simple. Kept me from thinking too hard. I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Just knew I hadn't found it yet. Tonight, Knoxville would do. Tomorrow, somewhere else. Nashville, maybe. Or Vegas. Vegas had a way of letting a man forget himself for a while. Long enough to think he was havin a good time while he made another bad decision he wouldn't think twice about. Some called it sinning. Any man who'd ever been there called it fun. Truth was, it was both. Mostly, it was just

another distraction. And sometimes sinning was necessary. Part of life that made it possible for you to keep goin.

Knoxville came into view in a slow spread of lights, the road filling up as I got closer. Traffic thickened near campus, clusters of students spilling out onto sidewalks, heads down, eyes glued to their phones like they might miss something if they looked up. Finals week, if I had to guess. And the parties that came with it. Another year gone. Another one waitin to take its place.

Bars near campus were already packed, music streaming out onto the sidewalk, kids hoppin from one bar to the next. One last night of fun that would likely end in regrets they'd carry home for the summer. University of Tennessee kids knew how to party. Like they took it as serious as anything they learned in a classroom. I slowed at a light, watchin a group stumble across the street, like they'd been at it all day.

Not my scene. Never had been. I'd had my fill of it at boarding school. Decided early on it wasn't worth the trouble.

I turned off toward Old City and away from the campus chaos without thinkin twice. The buildings got older as I went, less interested in impressing anyone. The crowds were different here too, quieter...with a few years on 'em.

I grabbed a room just off the strip. Didn't plan on staying long. Just needed a place to drop my things. Clear my head.

Didn't work.

The silence in that room pressed in worse than the noise outside. No engine. No road. No distraction. Just my own thoughts. And her sittin right in the middle of 'em like she had every right to be there.

I lasted ten minutes. Maybe less. Then I grabbed my keys and walked back out.

I walked through the crowds, drifting from one street to the next without much of a plan. Same as every other day. Coffee and fresh food hung in the air, following me everywhere, reminding me I hadn't eaten since breakfast. Breakfast across

from my mother. At a table big enough to seat twenty. In a house bigger than anyone ever needed.

I grew up with money. More of it than my father knew what to do with. It had a way of seeping into everything, quiet and poisonous, like filth beneath all the shiny wood and marble floors. People hear money and think comfort, stability, security. They don't think about the kind that buys silence. The kind that teaches everybody in the house to pretend nothin ugly's happening.

I wanted nothing to do with any of it. Didn't mean I hadn't taken pieces of it with me anyway. It kept gas in the tank. A drink in my hand. A roof over my head when I needed one. That was about all I let it do.

The sun sank low, a subtle reminder that it was time for a drink. Bass shook the windows as I passed Preservation Pub. Someone shoved the door open and music spilled out into the street. I caught it before it shut and walked inside, letting the dark close in behind me.

The bass hit harder inside, settling low in my chest. I dragged a hand through trails of smoke hanging in the air as I headed straight for the bar. I shrugged, sliding out of my leather jacket and hanging it on the back of the stool. My boots stuck to the floor where something had already spilled as I pulled out the stool and sat down. The band on stage hit somewhere deeper than it should've, gritty, loud, and a little too close to the bone. Guitar strings rolled over a steady drumbeat, the singer's voice rough like it had been soaked in aged whiskey.

The place was already full; bodies packed in so close the room felt ten degrees hotter. The kind of atmosphere that led to things you might regret in the morning. Didn't matter much in the end. Everyone was there for the same reason—drink enough to forget or find someone to help you try. Sometimes both.

A woman at the end of the bar laughed as the guy behind her dragged his thumb along the bare strip of skin above her jeans. There was a lot of that. Flirting and touching. No one seemed to

mind. I took it all in without really seeing any of it, the way you do when you've been in enough places like this that they all start to feel the same.

Different bar. Same intention.

"Bourbon. Neat," I said to the bartender over the music. Didn't matter what kind. It all burned the same goin down. And accomplished the same mission.

The band launched into *Tennessee Whiskey*. I almost laughed. Still, it had a way of gettin in, whether you wanted it to or not. Red came back just as quick, invading my senses again. Fifteen minutes. That was all it took. I tipped the glass back. She'd either fade out...or I'd drink enough to make sure she did.

I downed three rounds like it was water. Took the last sip and stared into the empty glass a second before setting it on the bar. The food hadn't done a damn thing to buffer the alcohol. Not wasted. But loose enough. I stood, shoved the stool back, grabbed my leather, and cut through the crowd toward the stairs to the rooftop.

I saw her the second I stepped up. Sitting at the bar, sipping something bright red. I don't know how anyone drank that shit. Nothin but Kool-Aid. A handful of guys hovered around her, all thinkin the same thing I was. They cleared out easy enough when I pulled out the stool beside her. No one said anything. They didn't need to. I'd gotten used to that. Worked in my favor more often than not. Less so when it came to cops. Or bouncers. Both had made that clear more than once.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I asked as I sat down.

"I'd rather you didn't," she said, twirling the straw between her fingers. "I'd rather finish this one and get out of here."

I smirked. "That works too."

She laughed, taking another sip.

"You got a name?" she asked.

"Got a few."

Not many people called me Crew. I didn't share it. Not close enough to. Even in school, instructors used surnames. I'd been

Mr. Dawson since I was fifteen. To most, just Dawson. Except Ryan and Levi—two people I'd lay my life down for. Friends since grade school.

"Which one you usin tonight?" she asked, looking at me with hooded eyes.

I held her stare. "Pick one."

She tilted her head, studying me like I was a mystery she wanted to solve. "I'll need something to scream tonight."

"God'll do."

She threw her head back and laughed.

I didn't really have a type. Lately, the only requirement was willing. And she checked that box. She was pretty enough. Blonde. Fake tits. Short leather skirt. Still a poor substitute for Red. But she'd do. Though after today, my type was startin to look a whole lot like a flatliner in a red truck.

Damn, it was going to be a long life if I kept stackin every woman I fucked up against her. Against the idea of her. Because that's all she was. A fantasy. A damn good one. Legs for miles. Tits I could get lost in. And that mouth...Christ. No doubt she could play dirty with that mouth with the attitude she dished out of it. I had half a mind to ride back to that campus, hunt down that red truck like I was on a goddamn mission. Wouldn't be hard to find. Instead, I tossed some cash on the bar, grabbed what's-her-face by the hand, and pulled her out into the night.

CHAPTER 3

Harlow

SEPTEMBER 2024

I PULLED my phone from the pocket of my scrubs and clicked the button. Six forty-five p.m. Fifteen minutes to go. It had been a long shift. A code I couldn't save, a drunk who swung at everyone in reach, and a waitin room that wouldn't quit. Drained me dry like a creek in August. I rubbed my hand across the back of my neck and headed back toward the nurses' station.

She was already there when I got back, slippin in like she hadn't just walked into the storm. She slid in beside me, already loggin into the computer.

"Hey, Charlotte," I said, eyes fixed on the monitor.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

I huffed a quiet laugh. "Manageable. Enjoy it while you can."

"You've got nine, twelve, fifteen, and seven," I said, pullin up the chart.

"Okay."

"Nine's abdominal pain. CT's clean, labs are fine, but she's still a ten out of ten and not letting it go. Might be a pain admit if they don't send her home first."

She nodded, eyes on the screen.

"Twelve's chest pain. Trop negative so far, waiting on cardio. Seven has a radius fracture, waiting on X-ray. Fifteen is ready for discharge when—"

The alarm cut sharp through the noise.

Room twelve.

I was already movin.

He was upright when I hit the doorway, but barely. One hand clutched tight against his chest, breaths comin short and uneven like his body had forgotten how to breathe naturally. Sweat soaked through the collar of his gown. The monitor screamed above him, fast and irregular. That wasn't what he'd been ten minutes ago.

"Hey. Look at me." I moved in fast, snappin gloves on. "Stay with me."

"It's worse," he choked out. "Something's wrong."

"I know." My fingers wrapped around his wrist. His pulse jumped beneath them, fast and irregular. Too fast. Wrong. "You're okay. I've got you."

He tried to lean forward, draggin in short breaths that barely seemed to make it past his throat.

"Don't move." I steadied him with a hand on his shoulder. "Just breathe for me."

The room filled around us almost at once. Another nurse moved to the monitor while a tech pulled the EKG machine closer, someone else already reachin for the blood pressure cuff.

"Rhythm changed," I called out. "Chest pain's worse."

The ER lived somewhere between life and death every second of every day. The smell of antiseptic mixed with blood and sweat. Phones ringin. Families cryin. Monitors screamin. Somebody codin three rooms over while another patient asked for warm blankets and ginger ale, like the world wasn't endin ten feet away.

You learned fast in trauma that sufferin didn't wait its turn.

"What've we got?" the doctor asked, movin toward the bedside as leads were pressed against the man's chest.

"Worsening chest pain. Short of breath, diaphoretic. New irregular rhythm. Pulse is fast."

The machine started spittin paper.

"Pressure's holding," someone said.

The doctor looked from the monitor to the strip in his hand. "A-fib with RVR. Let's get labs. Go ahead with the nitro for the chest pain."

I nodded once, already reachin for it.

"Alright," I said, forcin calm into my voice whether I felt it or not. "This might give you a headache, but it's gonna help your chest, okay?"

He nodded tight, fear shinin through sweat-slick eyes.

Fear always looked the same in here. Didn't matter if they were rich or poor, twenty or eighty, addict or priest. Death stripped people down to somethin raw. Honest.

The room kept movin around him. Blood drawn. Numbers called out. The doctor's attention fixed on the rhythm while I stayed beside him, watchin his face as closely as I watched the monitor.

After another minute, some of the panic started to leave his eyes. "Pain?" I asked.

"Less," he breathed, still strugglin for air.

I exhaled slowly, tension easin from my shoulders just enough to breathe myself. "Good. Stay right there." The rhythm was still fast. Still irregular. But he was stable, and for the moment, that was enough.

"Thank you," he whispered, face pale as the light he almost saw. Moisture clung to his forehead under the fluorescent lights, hair stickin to his skin like it was clingin to life the same way he was.

I gave him a small nod. "Want a blanket?" I asked quietly, already pullin one from the cabinet.

He blinked at me, gray eyes dazed and glassy, starin right through me like he was still tryin to process bein alive. He nodded once.

Starin death in the face rattles people senseless. Leaves them reachin for words they can't find and answers none of us actually have.

I laid the blanket over him, knowin damn well it offered more comfort than warmth.

"Harlow, I can take it from here," Charlotte said softly from behind me.

I stepped back automatically.

She followed me into the hallway, her hand settlin briefly against my arm.

"You can't save them all," she said quietly.

Somethin in my chest tightened at that. Because that was the problem. I still wanted to. I didn't answer her. Just kept walkin.

The double doors slid open as I stepped outside into the humid Louisiana evenin, the first real daylight I'd seen in—

I checked my phone. 7:34 p.m. More than twelve hours.

The guilt followed me anyway. Sticky as the humidity clingin to my skin.

I should've left it back in room twelve with the blood pressure cuffs, tangled monitor wires, and fluorescent lights. Couldn't. Walkin away when somebody needed help was never somethin I'd been good at. I rolled my shoulders, tryin to shake it loose. Didn't work. It never really did.

I took a deep breath, but it was like tryin to suck mud through a straw. Didn't do no good. The air in New Orleans didn't hold you the way the mountains did. It pressed against you instead, humid and relentless, like it wanted to see what you were made of. Fall was knockin, but summer wasn't answerin. But I still preferred walkin on nights like this.

It was only about a thirty-minute walk from my apartment to St. Claire Regional. I turned the corner and headed west toward home, the sun sittin low in the distance. Friday night. The street was already alive—music blendin from every bar, brass and strings and voices low and easy. People moved in clusters, drinks in hand, laughter cuttin through the thick air, creatin its

own melody like it belonged to the song. I passed a couple kissin on a corner, like the rest of the world had fallen away. A man stood playin a trumpet beside them, like he was serenading 'em.

I thought about him then. What he was doin right now, what he'd been doin the past five years. He crossed my mind every now and again. He never did go away. I hadn't had a boyfriend since I met him that day. Had my share of casual hookups, sure, but no one else ever got my motor runnin like he did.

I never did relationships well anyway. Had one serious boyfriend my whole life. In college. He wanted more. Somethin I wasn't able to give. So he found it in the beds of every other short skirt on campus. That piece of me that died when my mama did—that secret part of you that sets flame to your soul. The part you give to someone when you love 'em. That was the problem. I didn't know if I was capable of lovin anyone. My heart ran about as deep as a puddle. Love? That road'll get you in trouble.

I turned the corner toward my apartment. It was quieter here. The way I liked it. Fewer tourists. More people drinkin alone, gettin lost in their thoughts.

I pulled open the door of a local bar, my usual waterin hole after a long shift. The smell of Cajun food hit me in a wave as I walked in. Reminded me of home. Granny always had the house smellin like somethin warm—fresh biscuits, cornbread in a cast-iron skillet, pinto beans simmerin low all afternoon.

I pulled out a stool and sat down.

"Whiskey. Neat," I said to the bartender.

He nodded and turned, grabbin a bottle and pourin me a glass. I watched it flow, the amber catchin the light as it settled. He set it in front of me, and I wrapped my fingers around it. I took a slow sip, lettin it sit a second before swallowin. The warmth spread through my chest, not fixin a damn thing. Never did. But it quieted it long enough to feel like it.

Pool balls rattled in the background as *Sun to Me* hummed low through the bar. My fingers tightened around the glass. He

was back again, playin on repeat in my mind. I hadn't thought about him in months until tonight. Or maybe I had. Just not on purpose. Mama came with him. She always did. The things I'd lost and the things I'd never gotten the chance to have.

I stilled, glass halfway to my lips. Didn't know why that damn song did it.

I reached for a menu on the bar and started readin through it like I was lookin for answers hidden somewhere in there. I always ordered the same thing when I came here. Didn't need to look. Just needed my mind somewhere else than where it was headin. I set the menu down and took another sip, slower this time. Let it settle. The noise in my head didn't go away, but it helped me shove Mama and him back into whatever corner of my head they'd crawled out of.

I stepped back out into the night. The sun had been replaced by moonlight, flickerin off windows as I passed. The heat hadn't let up any. It clung to my skin and clothes, settlin in like it had nowhere else to go. Somewhere down the street, music drifted low through the air, mixin with laughter and the hum of voices that never really stopped in this city.

I walked into my apartment, and the quiet wrapped around me like the calm just after a summer rain. I headed to the bathroom and stripped out of my scrubs, droppin them on the floor where I stood. I turned the shower handle just shy of scaldin and stepped in. The water washed over me, carryin every ounce of stress right along with it down the drain.

I shut the water off and stepped out, steam still clingin to the room as I wrapped a towel around me. The cool air hit my hot, damp skin, raisin goosebumps along my arms as I walked to my bedroom, leavin a trail of water behind me. It felt like whiskey on the rocks—heat meetin cold, just enough to take the edge off without dullin it completely. I crossed the room and pulled open

the drawer, the wood creakin softly in the quiet. I took out a nightdress and slipped it over my head. The silky fabric slid down my back, cool and smooth, sendin a chill straight up my spine. I let out a slow breath and rolled my shoulders, tryin to settle into it.

It was quieter now. The noise of the day, the bar, the music—it had all faded to somethin distant. But it wasn't gone.

I slid into the cool sheets and sighed, like it was the closest thing to heaven I'd felt in a long time. My lids went heavy. My head hit the pillow, and I closed my eyes, sayin a silent prayer as sleep started to take me. No sooner had I drifted off than my phone cut through the quiet, joltin me awake. I grabbed it off the nightstand, heart already pickin up.

Luke Sawyer's name lit up the screen.

Shit.

My finger hit the screen, answerin quick.

"Luke?"

"Harlow—" he whispered.

I already knew. He didn't even have to say it.

"I'm so sorry. Your granny passed tonight."