



BROKEN MOUNTAIN SERIES

the
PARTS
WE
KEEP

BOOK TWO

LIV ROWAN

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Previously in Broken Mountain...

In Book One, *The Shape We Take*, Harlow Tate fled the mountains of Appalachia and the tragedy that stole her childhood, determined to build a new life as an ER nurse in New Orleans. Crew Dawson spent years running from the secrets he buried in the Blue Ridge Mountains until fate reunited them five years after a chance encounter on the side of a mountain road. Together, they discovered that the shape of a life isn't defined by its darkest moments but by everything that comes after.

Along the way, readers met Luke Sawyer through Harlow's eyes. Her childhood best friend. The boy who knew every back road, bonfire, and holler in Laurel Hollow because he never left. While Harlow spent years trying to leave the mountains behind, Luke stayed, carrying burdens of his own that no one—not even Harlow—ever truly saw.

This time, it's Luke's story.

The Parts We Keep is the second novel in the Broken Mountain series. Each book is a standalone romance featuring a different couple, but the books are interconnected and best read in order.

About the Book

Luke Sawyer has spent his life believing everyone eventually leaves. After years of watching the people he loves walk away, he's learned to keep his world small, his heart guarded, and his expectations even smaller. Briar has spent her entire life trapped inside a future someone else chose for her. Raised among Kentucky horse farms and old-money expectations, she knows walking away from the man she's expected to marry means abandoning everything she's ever known in search of one thing she's never had—freedom.

When Briar crashes into Laurel Hollow, neither of them is looking for love. She's determined to discover who she is beyond the life she escaped. He's convinced she's only passing through. But attraction quickly turns into something neither of them can outrun. Luke mistakes protection for love. Briar mistakes protection for another cage. Every collision between them pushes old wounds to the surface until the past they've both tried to bury begins demanding to be faced.

Now Luke must decide whether the pieces of his past were ever meant to define his future...or whether the parts we keep are the ones that teach us how to love—and the ones we're finally strong enough to leave behind.

The Parts We Keep, Book Two in the Broken Mountain series, is a high-spice contemporary romance about fate, redemption, and the choices that define us long after our darkest moments.

Prologue

LUKE

OCTOBER 2015

THE OLD PORCH steps groaned as I climbed toward the front door. The farmhouse was older than time and had the scars to prove it and stories to tell it. Mighta been standin on prayer, spite, and a handful of nails too stubborn to quit, but its bones were good. A cool October breeze stirred the leaves scattered across the porch. The front door stood open, the smells of beans and cornbread driftin out, mixin with burnin leaves.

I rapped my knuckles against the doorframe and hollered through the screen. "Granny?"

"Come on in, Luke," she called from the next room.

The screen door creaked as I pulled it open and stepped inside, then slammed behind me. I'd heard that sound countless times over the years. Somehow, it felt jarrin and comfortin all at once. Every slam, creak, and rattle carried a memory. Some I'd never forget. A couple I'd like to. Didn't matter how many years passed or how many times I walked through that door. Somehow, every one of 'em led back to her. "Come by to take a look at that leaky faucet for you," I said as she walked into the kitchen.

"Appreciate it," she said, pullin open the oven. She tilted her

head toward the sink. "You know where it is. Don't need permission."

I laughed. "Wasn't lookin for permission. I was eyein that cornbread you got there. You make that for me?"

"Luke Sawyer, you know damn well you're welcome at my table any damn time you want."

My lips curled into a soft smile. "Good. Reckon that faucet's gonna be a two-helpin job."

She set the cornbread on the counter and laughed. "What's your excuse for all the other times you required two helpins?"

I grabbed my toolbox and headed for the sink. "Just bein polite. Wouldn't want you thinkin I don't like your cookin."

Truth was, it wasn't Granny's cookin that kept bringin me back. This place had felt like home for as long as I could remember. Granny wasn't mine by blood. She was Harlow's, and they'd lived down the road from me all my life. Harlow had been my best friend since we were kids, and between the two of us, trouble was never hard to find. I'd spent near as much of my childhood in this house as she had, runnin through that screen door with skinned knees and muddy boots. Granny had fed me, fussed at me, and made room for me so many times I couldn't remember when I'd stopped feelin like a guest. In a life where people had a habit of leavin, she and this old farmhouse had always stayed.

She shook her head. "Not sure whether it's that mouth or the smile on it that has saved your ass all these years."

"Probably both," I said, smirkin as I slid beneath the sink. I worked the wrench around the pipe, givin it a couple good turns.

"What you doin with the rest of your day?" Granny asked.

"Helpin Old Man Boone mend some fence," I said, wipin the pipe with a rag.

She set two bowls of beans on the table and carried over the cornbread as I slid back out. "You ever do anything that don't involve fixin somebody else's mess?"

"I'm workin off a favor," I said, pushin myself up from the floor.

"What favor?"

"He's got some grain left from harvest. Said it's mine if I haul it off."

"What you need with a mess of grain?" she asked as she lowered herself into the chair.

I took the chair across from her. "You still got Granddaddy's old still and them whiskey barrels out in the barn?"

She arched a brow. "I might."

My lips tipped up into a smirk. "Care if I use 'em? Barn too?"

"Only if you're sharin," she said, scoopin up a spoonful of beans.

I flashed her a grin. "You know me. I'm a giver."

"Yeah, you've been givin me grief since you were knee-high. Reckon I'm owed somethin worth drinkin by now."

I let out a huff of laughter. "That's a price worth payin. Soon as I have somethin that don't taste like gasoline, you'll get the first bottle."

She took another bite. "How's your daddy?"

"Same as always. Works too much. Talks too little."

Her eyes lifted to meet mine. "Apple didn't fall far, then."

I scoffed, reachin for the cornbread. "I talk plenty."

"Mostly shit."

I pressed my lips together to suppress a grin. She wasn't wrong.

The silence settled between us, the question sittin there as I broke off a piece of cornbread and dragged it through my beans. Finally, I asked it. "You heard from her?"

She nodded into her bowl. "I talk to her regular. She called Tuesday."

Harlow had only been gone two months, but it felt like a lifetime. Two months shouldn't have been enough to turn more than ten years into silence, but somehow it had. She'd been beside me through every bad idea we'd survived and every

secret we'd sworn to take to the grave. Now I had to ask someone else how she was. "How's she doin'?"

Her mouth tightened. "Good. Glad to be gone from here, I reckon."

"Yeah," I murmured, rubbin my thumb along the chipped rim of my bowl. Knew that was the truth of it, much as it pained me to think it. To Harlow, I was just a friend she occasionally fucked, so I let her believe I felt the same way. Lived up to my reputation as a playboy, sleepin with anyone worth lookin at. She had plans bigger than Laurel Hollow, the kind that didn't include me or the dirt that came with this place.

To her, Laurel Hollow wasn't home. It was calloused hands and empty pockets, addiction and grief, and the place that had taken her mama from her. The roots here didn't hold her steady. They wrapped around her ankles, and she'd spent her whole life tryin to pull free. She'd always been meant for more than any of it. More than me. Knew she was never mine to keep, so when she left, I let her go. Least that was what I kept tellin myself.

Granny pushed her bowl away and leaned back in her chair. She lit a cigarette, smoke driftin between us as she took a deep drag. "You need to quit pinin for her. She ain't comin back. Not for me. Not for you."

My gaze dropped to the beans as I pushed them around with my spoon. Knew she was right. Harlow was gone, and she wasn't comin back. Should've been used to it by then. People left. They always did. I just wasn't enough to make anybody stay.

CHAPTER 1

Luke

SEPTEMBER 2024

GRANNY'S HOUSE WAS QUIET. Didn't feel right bein here without her. Also felt righter than anything I'd ever known. Couldn't imagine bein anywhere else. The clock ticked on the wall, cuttin through the silence like a reminder that time never stood still, even if you couldn't keep up with it. Part of me wanted to reverse it. The other part wanted to speed it up. Folks said time healed most things. Reckoned I was still waitin to see about that.

Still couldn't believe she was gone. Makin the call to Harlow two nights ago to tell her that her granny had passed was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. Must've sat there starin at her name on my phone for five minutes before I finally hit the button. Hearin her voice cut deeper than I was prepared for, all them years between us disappearin the second she said my name. Always did when I talked to her. This time it hit different though. She knew exactly why I was callin. Still, the words somehow made it all final. Granny. Us. Whatever we had been. *I'm so sorry. Your granny passed tonight.* Like sayin it to Harlow made it real in a way nothin else had.

I pulled open the oven and slid the cornbread in. Then grabbed my guitar and headed out to the front porch to wait for her. Seemed like I'd been doin that my whole life—waitin for her. Waited for her to see me as somethin more than a friend. Waited for her to come home after she left. Took me longer than I cared to admit to finally understand she wasn't goin to. Somewhere along the way, I'd stopped waitin. And now here I was, doin it again.

I sat on the porch steps, watchin the sun sink toward the horizon as it cast an orange glow across the sky. I fired up my playlist and strummed along as one song bled into the next until the oven alarm cut through the noise. I pushed myself up, set my guitar against the rail, then went inside to pull out the cornbread. *Sweet Appalachia* was playin on my phone when I came back out. I settled back onto the steps, grabbed my guitar, and started singin and strummin along, eyes closed as I took in every note. This song had worked its way into my blood just like these hills had. Every word felt like home.

Tires crunchin on the gravel broke into the song. I looked up as a white Jeep came into view. Somethin shifted in my chest at the sight of it—knowin she was behind the wheel. Old habit, I reckoned. Some things your body remembered long after your heart learned better. I kept my eyes locked on her as I continued playin until the Jeep came to a stop.

I turned off the music and stood up, settin my guitar against the porch rail as she opened the door and climbed out. The girl was gone, and a woman stood in her place. Still gorgeous as ever. All curves and long brown hair, with the same amber eyes that used to knock the damn wind outta me.

Only they didn't. Not the way they used to anyway. Couldn't say exactly when that had changed. Somewhere in the years she'd been gone, I'd finally stopped lookin at Harlow and seein everything I wanted but couldn't have. Whiskey and women helped.

My lips curled into a smirk. “‘Bout time you showed up,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Didn’t know I was on your schedule,” she shot back with a grin.

Damn long trip—took her five fuckin years. Would’ve taken longer if Granny hadn’t died. That was the only thing that would ever bring her back here. I knew she wanted to be here as much as a hog wanted an invite to a barbecue. I laughed under my breath. “You musta been on another planet to take five years to get here.”

She didn’t say nothin; just arched a brow in typical Harlow fashion as she headed toward the front door. “You been here long?” she asked.

“Long enough.”

She nodded. “Appreciate you checkin on her.”

I shrugged. “Someone had to.” That was the plain truth of it. Don’t know what Granny woulda done if I wasn’t here lookin in on her all these years.

“She talk about me?”

“Sometimes.” I knew it hurt Granny that Harlow left—more than it hurt me. Didn’t think that was possible in the beginning, but I’d come to see it. Granny never woulda admitted it though. She didn’t want to be the one to hold Harlow back, same as me. We loved her too much. Knew she was meant for more than this place had to offer.

She placed her hand on the door handle. “What’d she say?”

I didn’t quite know what to say to that. Truth had a way of hurtin. Didn’t ever want to be the one to hurt her, even though she’d left us bleedin while she walked away clean. So I gave her the easy answer. “Said you were doin good.”

She let out a breath. “Hope she believed it.”

She pulled the screen door open, the creak breakin through the still evenin. She dropped her bag on the floor as I pulled open the fridge and took out a pitcher of iced tea. I poured us each a glass, then headed back outside, the screen door slammin

behind me. Too much of Granny in there. Too many memories I wasn't ready to face. Judgin by how quick Harlow followed me out, reckoned I wasn't the only one. We settled on the porch rockin chairs as the silence took over.

After a few minutes, I walked back into the house and made us each a bowl of beans and cornbread. I walked back out and handed her one. "Beans. Cornbread."

She nodded, reachin up and takin it from me. We sat in silence as we ate. When we were done, I took the bowl from her and headed back inside to wash the dishes. My head swam with memories I couldn't sort fast enough. Harlow. Granny. My daddy. One piled on top of another until I couldn't tell which hurt more. My eyes glazed over, and I blinked to push it back. I took a deep breath and turned off the water. I dried the bowls and put them back in the cabinet.

I walked back outside, dryin my hands on a dishtowel. I stood in front of her for a second. Felt like I needed to say somethin. It sat right there, stuck between my head and my mouth, completely unformed. My thoughts all jumbled up like a tackle box somebody'd kicked down the stairs. I finally gave up. Better off that way.

"I'll see you in the mornin," I said, then turned to leave. I stopped on the bottom step, turned back, and tossed the dish-towel at her.

Her hand shot up on reflex, just as quick as her brow, and she caught it midair. Of course she did. Five years gone, and I still couldn't get a damn thing past her. My mouth broke into a grin as I shook my head and headed down the drive toward home.

We pulled up to the church the next mornin, and I cut the engine on my old truck. We sat there in silence for a minute, neither of us eager to face what came next. Finally, Harlow grabbed the handle and pushed the door open, the squeak cuttin through the

low murmur of the crowd gathered outside. Humidity hung thick in the air, mixed with that strange heaviness that always seemed to settle over a place durin times like this.

Harlow didn't stop to talk to anyone. She nodded and smiled as people reached out to touch her arm in sympathy, and I followed close behind, offerin a nod here and there. I kept my hand on the small of her back as the crowd parted for her. Told myself it was to hold her steady. Truth was, she was doin the same for me.

She just didn't know it.

Needed to be strong for her. Just hoped I could, even when I wasn't sure I could hold myself together.

We slipped into the front pew, and Harlow kept her head down beside me. I stared at Granny's casket, tryin not to think too hard about what was inside it. Harlow's flowers lay across the top, wild and colorful. Looked more like Granny than all the fancy shit surroundin them. Could almost hear her bitchin about all the fuss. Tellin everybody they'd wasted perfectly good money on flowers that'd be dead by Tuesday. The thought damn near made me smile. Harlow shifted beside me, her arm brushin mine. I let mine stay there. Didn't know which one of us needed it more.

Then the pastor stepped up and cleared his throat. The hushed voices fell silent as he began. "She was the kind of woman who didn't need much," the pastor said. "But what she had, she gave. Every day. Whether she felt like it or not."

Didn't hear much after that. Spent most of it starin straight ahead, remindin myself to breathe and keep my shit together. Could tell Harlow was doin the same beside me, hangin on by about as much as I was.

The first notes of *Amazing Grace* filled the church, and everyone began to sing. We didn't. By the second verse, Harlow was on her feet, headed for the door.

Fuck.

Didn't know whether to go after her or give her space.

The first option won out, and I went after her. She stood in front of the hickory trees, eyes fixed on the mountains ahead. Knew she'd rather be up in one of them right now than standin on the ground. It was always her favorite place to be. Used to sit with her up in those branches till our asses went numb.

I came up behind her and hesitated before reachin for her hand. She stiffened at my touch, then softened as my fingers curled around hers. I kept my eyes ahead but saw her jaw clench out of the corner of my eye. She was tryin to hold it together. Couldn't. A lifetime of love and memories caught up, and a tear slipped out.

I squeezed her hand tighter—both to comfort her and to keep me from losin my shit. My daddy dyin was hard. But somehow this hit harder. Probably because she was standin right next to me and I was carryin her grief too.

She took a shaky breath and wiped away her tears, shovin it back down just as quick as it came up. That was always her way. Walls higher than these mountains. Wasn't nobody gettin through 'em. I'd tried and failed more times than I cared to admit. Didn't like failin at anything. But when it came to Harlow, I never could figure out how to win.

Then she let go of my hand and turned to walk back toward the church.

We stood outside as Harlow said *thank-yous* and *goodbyes* to everyone. She went through the motions, but I could tell she was enjoyin it about as much as a sinner enjoyed the confessional booth. Slowly, people made their way to their cars, the line pullin out one by one and leavin a trail of dust behind. More than half of 'em were headin straight to The Holler. No one needed an excuse for whiskey in these parts, but it'd be a transgression against tradition if folks didn't drink after a funeral.

Drownin your sorrows or celebratin a life. Whiskey didn't much care which. Neither did the person drinkin it.

"You wanna go home," I asked her, "or head down to The Holler?"

She kept her eyes locked on the line of trucks disappearin in the distance. "Don't matter."

Knew exactly what that meant. My lips curled into a smile. "Alright then."

I opened the truck door for her, and she climbed in. I closed it behind her and rounded the hood to my side. I climbed in, started the engine, then pulled up my playlist and cued Granny's favorite song. I cranked the volume as the first notes of *Tuesday's Gone* filled the cab. I hooked my arm over the back of Harlow's seat and twisted around to back out. Then I threw it in drive and hauled ass down the old church road, spinnin the tires as we left the lot behind.

I glanced over at Harlow. A slow smirk spread across her face, that familiar spark flashin in her eyes.

Faster.

I grinned and buried my foot in the gas.

She wasn't happy about bein here. Not Laurel Hollow. Definitely not Granny's funeral. But this night was about to get good no matter how hard she tried to resist it. Impossible to stay miserable at The Holler with whiskey flowin and a jukebox loud enough to drown out your problems. Lord knew plenty had tried.

People started hootin and hollerin the second we walked in, like the prodigal daughter herself had finally come home. No one ever thought they'd see her back in these parts again, especially at The Holler. *Revival* echoed through the bar as she moved straight to the bar, not acknowledgin any of it. People who didn't know her would've thought she was an uptight bitch.

Those of us who did know she was guarded on her best day, let alone when she was grievin'.

I moved to the pool tables while she kept her head down at the bar, grippin her whiskey glass like it was the only friend she wanted tonight. Stacy slid up beside me while I was rackin the balls. She was a few years younger than me and had been followin me around with hearts in her eyes since she was fifteen and old enough to figure out boys were good for more than throwin rocks at.

Never paid her much mind back then. Then she turned eighteen and made damn sure I did. I hadn't wasted much time showin her exactly what came with crushin on Luke Sawyer. Five years later, I'd ridden this particular ride enough times to know every turn. Lost its thrill. Still didn't keep me from playin the game.

She leaned against the pool table beside me, close enough that her tits brushed my arm. Subtle was never her strong suit. "Luke Sawyer." She dragged out my name, slow, turnin three innocent syllables into trouble. "Been wonderin when you were gonna come find me."

I chalked the end of my cue. "Didn't know you were lost."

"Could be. Meet me in the parkin lot? Get lost with me?"

"Honey, hard to get lost on a road I know that well."

"Even better," she said, her mouth curlin into a grin.

"No, I've had better," I said, bendin over to line up my first shot.

She narrowed her eyes. "You're an asshole."

"Told you that before you were ever in my bed, yet here we are."

Wasn't my usual practice to turn down a proposition. But Stacy never seemed to get the memo that a fuck was all I was offerin. Not like I hid it. I was always straight with every woman who crawled into my bed. Most were fine with the arrangement. We got ours and moved on.

Stacy was different. Sleep with her once, and it bought me

days of phone calls and texts I had no intention of answerin. She was like a stray cat you fed once. Kept showin back up at the door expectin another meal.

"One day, that mouth's gonna get you in trouble, Luke Sawyer."

"Pretty sure it already did when it had you screamin my name."

She shook her head. "Can't wait for somebody to come along and knock that ego right outta you."

I drove the cue forward and sent the balls scatterin, droppin the five in the corner pocket. "She's welcome to try."

She shot me the middle finger, then walked away. I stood up, glancin at Harlow, who was laughin with Emma May at the bar, before bendin over the table again.

"Three, side pocket," I called to Tommy. Dropped it clean. Sunk two more before movement near the dance floor caught my attention. Emma May had Harlow by the hand, draggin her into the crowd. *Whiskey Glasses* echoed through the bar as Harlow took her place on the dance floor like she hadn't been gone ten years.

I took my next shot and missed.

Tommy laughed. "'Bout damn time."

"Enjoy it while it lasts."

He managed to sink three before missin his next, and that was all I needed. I cleaned up the rest of the table and dropped the eight in the corner.

"Better luck next time."

"Fuck you, Sawyer."

I grinned and turned my attention back to the dance floor. She wasn't there. I scanned the room, lookin for her. She was back at the bar, tippin back shots people had lined up in front of her. Yup. Harlow was back in more ways than one. So it was gonna be one of *those* kinda nights. Knew how they went. Never ended one disappointed, even when they ended with us in trouble. And they usually did.

The corner of my mouth hitched up as I shook my head. "Harlow," I called.

She turned.

"Play a round?" I asked, holdin up a cue.

Knew beatin her was about as likely as wakin up after a fifth of whiskey without regrets. But the challenge was always worth the humiliation that came with it.

She smirked, set the shot glass down, and walked over. I racked the balls as *Pills and Poverty* rolled through the bar. I stood up and nodded toward the table. She stepped up and bent over the table as guys gathered around to watch. All of us watchin more than just the game. Whatever I used to feel for her might've faded, but my eyesight sure as hell hadn't.

She cracked the cue ball, sendin the balls scatterin across the table. A striped ball disappeared into the corner pocket.

"Thirteen, corner pocket," she called.

"Damn," someone muttered.

"Nine, side pocket," she called, bendin over and takin her next shot. It banked the twelve off the far rail and knocked the nine in clean.

She sank three more before missin one—on purpose. Knew that shit-eatin little smirk too well to think otherwise. Laughter broke out around the table.

I stepped up to take what would likely be my only turn. Sank four clean before my next shot rattled the corner and rolled wide. "Fuck." I dropped my head, rubbin the back of my neck as I shook it. Game was hers.

"Shame," she said, circlin the table.

"Just take your shot, Tate."

She cleared the rest of the table just as easy as recitin her ABCs. She tapped the eight-ball clean into the corner. Game.

Someone let out a low whistle. She stood and slid the stick back to me.

"Still got it," I said.

She smirked. "Always did."

I moved back to the bar, nursin my second beer all night while Harlow dropped shots like she was tryin to make up for ten years of lost time. By ten o'clock, she was drunk, loud, and lookin more like the girl I remembered by the minute. Best entertainment I'd seen outside of the strip club. *Copperhead Road* kicked on, and someone grabbed her, pulling her out onto the dance floor. She took her place in line, fallin right back into step with the town like she was one of us again. Knew better.

I turned back to the bar, shiftin my gaze to the TV to watch the football game. About ten minutes later, Harlow came over, chest heavin, face shimmerin with a layer of sweat.

I arched a brow. "Had enough yet?"

She nodded, still tryin to catch her breath.

I pushed myself up from the stool, threw some cash on the bar, and steered her toward the door. She walked outside without lookin back.

That was the last Laurel Hollow would ever see of Harlow Tate.

CHAPTER 2

Luke

WE WALKED out into the cool night air, and Harlow took a breath like it was the first time she'd been able to breathe all night. I pulled open the truck door for her, and she lifted her foot to climb in. Missed. Face-planted right into the car seat, laughin like bustin her ass was part of the plan.

I grabbed her arm, shakin my head as I laughed with her—okay, *at* her. I helped her up as she steadied herself and climbed into the seat. “You always did know how to put on a performance,” I said, shuttin the door behind her.

I climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine, *Feathered Indians* fillin the truck. By the time we pulled out of the parkin lot, her head rested against the seat, eyes closed. Wasn't sure if she was passed out, sleepin, or just lost in her own thoughts. Would give my left nut to get inside that fuckin head for just five minutes. This woman never did give anything away. Good luck to whoever ended up with her. Me? I needed someone a hell of a lot less complicated.

We pulled up to the house. Quiet. Empty. Sad. I hopped out, walked to her side, then pulled open the door for her and helped her out. I followed her inside, the screen door slammin behind

us. I walked to the sink, filled a glass with water, then turned and handed it to her. "Drink."

She took a slow sip, then set it down on the table. She had that look in her eyes. One I'd seen countless times. Knew how it ended.

Fuck.

Before I could decide whether to stop it, she leaned in and kissed me.

Fuckin hell.

Not even a saint could turn this away. My hands settled on her hips, lettin her take what she wanted, my tongue movin slow against hers. Went straight to my cock, and need took over. I moved my hands to her ass and pulled her against me. She moaned into my mouth.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

A deep growl escaped me as I pulled away. "Harlow," I murmured against her mouth in warnin.

Her chest was risin and fallin, her breaths comin short. "Luke, just shut up and fuck me."

Didn't have to tell me twice. My mouth was on hers again as I slid my hands down to the backs of her thighs. I gripped and lifted her, carryin her up the stairs to her old bedroom.

Who the fuck was I to turn down a woman in need?

The old alarm clock on the nightstand cast a red glow across the dark wood. 12:10 a.m. We lay there quietly, her back against my chest, one arm folded beneath her head as I waited for her to drift off. Figured this was the last time I'd ever hold her like this. Even though I wasn't in love with her anymore, I loved her. Always would. Wanted to hold onto the moment for a few more minutes before I bailed.

Thought she might be asleep when her voice cut through the silence. "I'm sorry," she said, voice barely above a whisper.

I stared up at the ceilin. "For what?"

"Your daddy." Her words came soft and heavy. "I should've come home."

"You had clinicals."

"I could've figured somethin out."

"I told you not to come."

"You always tell people you don't need 'em, Luke." She turned her face toward me, eyes glassy in the dark. "Doesn't mean we oughta believe you."

I swallowed and looked back at the ceilin. "You leavin was harder than you not comin back for that," I said, the words comin out harsher than I meant. I took a breath, my voice softer this time. "Don't think I could've handled losin you a second time."

She nodded and pulled my arm tighter around her. Then she brought my hand to her lips and kissed it gently.

Five minutes later, she was asleep.

I looked at my phone again as I sat in the truck outside the lawyer's office. 7:57. She still wasn't here.

"Fuckin hell," I muttered. I raked my hand through my hair. "Shoulda dragged her hungover ass out of bed."

Just as I said it, her white Jeep peeled into the parkin lot like she was runnin from the fuckin law. I laughed under my breath. Some things never fuckin change.

She whipped into the spot beside me and killed the engine. Climbed out wearin sunglasses even though the sun had barely made it over the mountains.

I grinned. "Mornin, sunshine."

"Eight o'clock in the fuckin mornin, Luke."

"Technically, it's seven fifty-nine."

She flipped me off and kept walkin.

There she was.

I laughed and followed her inside.

The whole thing took less than an hour. We'd already worked out the details, so there wasn't much left to do but listen to the lawyer talk and sign our names where he told us. House. Land. Payments I could handle without sellin a kidney or startin a meth operation. Seemed fair enough.

Harlow sat beside me, sunglasses finally off, lookin like every scratch of pen against paper was drillin straight through her skull.

I nudged the bottle of water I'd brought in toward her.

She glared at me.

"Drink."

"Fuck off."

"Twenty years late tellin me that. If you'd said that to me when I told you to sit next to me on that school bus, you wouldn't be in this mess."

"Epic failure on my part," she said, liftin the bottle to her mouth.

By the time we stepped outside, the sun was high enough to make her squint. She dug out the keys and held them out to me.

I looked down at 'em for a second before takin 'em.

"Thanks."

"Nothin to thank me for."

I nodded and slipped them into my pocket. Nothin else needed sayin. We'd already said it all.

She leaned in and kissed my cheek before turnin toward her Jeep. And that was it. No niceties. No promises. No *I'll call*. No pretendin I'd ever see her again. I watched her open the door, then she stopped and turned around.

"Luke—"

I looked over.

"Don't do nothin with my truck. I'll be back for it...one day."

The corner of my mouth lifted. "See you in five years."

She smiled. Then she climbed into the Jeep and started the

engine. She tapped a button on her phone, and *Leavin' This Holler* spilled into the air.

That tracked.

I shook my head as she looked at me and smirked before pullin out of the parkin lot. I stood there watchin until the white Jeep disappeared down the road. Last time she'd left, I'd spent too damn long wonderin what I could've done different. What I could've said. Who I could've been that would've made Laurel Hollow enough for her.

This time, I didn't. She needed somethin out there she was never gonna find here. Maybe she already had. And somewhere along the way, I'd finally figured out her leavin didn't mean I had to stay stuck where she left me.

Goodbye, Harlow Tate.

I turned the keys over in my hand. Had a shit ton of work ahead of me. The place needed updatin, and I already had a list a mile long of shit I wanted to change.

By the time I was done, it'd be mine.

CHAPTER 3

Briar

I SWIPED the soft brush across my face, a layer of pink shimmer glidin over my cheekbone. I sat starin at myself in the vanity mirror, barely recognizin the face lookin back at me. I looked small in the large bedroom, my reflection swallowed by all the pink and lace and ornately carved solid-white furniture heavy enough to withstand hurricane-level winds. Somehow, I felt even smaller, despite the walls closin in around me.

Bein back in my childhood room after five years away at college should've felt comfortin. Instead, it felt stiflin.

Did I even like pink and lace? I'd never given it much thought. I'd never been given the opportunity to have many thoughts of my own. If I was honest, I didn't know who I was. Didn't know what I wanted. Every time my mind wandered there, panic rose in my chest, warnin me that I was veerin into dangerous territory.

Wantin somethin different wouldn't change the life that had been chosen for me. It would only make livin it harder.

I pressed a hand to my chest as the anxiety clawed its way up my throat, then reached for the bottle of pills on my vanity. A quiet reminder that I wasn't nearly as put together as my family believed. I popped off the lid, shook one into my cupped palm,

then tipped it into my mouth and washed it down with a swig of water.

School had been the one thing no one could fault me for wantin. The one place I could breathe—make small choices no one else knew enough to take from me. Be myself, as much as I knew how to be.

Did I want a business degree or a future in it? Not particularly. But a daughter with a degree from Vanderbilt reflected well on the family, whether she ever used it or not. Business seemed as good a choice as any. I'd spent my whole life preparin for the future they wanted for me. It hadn't occurred to me that I could want one of my own, much less what it might look like.

The four years away had been the benefit nobody mentioned. And the thought of comin home when those four years were nearly up made me want to run for the hills. So I convinced my parents that a master's degree would look good on my résumé. A résumé for what, I didn't know. I'd never need one. But Mama did love an accomplishment she could mention over lunch. It would've been inconsiderate of me to deprive her.

That bought me one more year of freedom.

Now my master's was finished. My last excuse gone. And downstairs, a house full of people would be waitin for me to come down and play my part.

A soft knock sounded at my bedroom door.

I pulled open the vanity drawer and dropped the pill bottle inside, shovin it shut as the door opened. I didn't even turn to look. I knew I wouldn't be able to hide my displeasure, and lettin her see it would only earn me one more lecture I wasn't in the mood for.

"Briar." My mom's voice came through the cracked door before her face appeared around it. "Are you almost ready? Guests will be arrivin soon."

"Almost," I said, swipin blush across my other cheek.

Her eyes fell on me, and she opened the door the rest of the way. "Oh, for heaven's sake. Your hair isn't even up yet."

Hadn't planned on puttin it up. That never mattered. She apparently expected it up, so up it would go. Heaven forbid my hair enjoy an evenin without supervision. I sighed, my shoulders slumpin as I picked up the brush and held it out behind me.

She took it, then patted my shoulder twice. "Posture, Briar." Her voice was soft but stern. "A woman's grace begins with how she carries herself."

My spine straightened before I could stop it.

She ran the brush through my golden hair, then twisted it into a chignon. She tapped my shoulder, and I passed her a pin. She placed it between her lips while she tucked away a loose piece of hair, then secured it in place.

Another tap. Another pin.

She dug this one into my scalp, the metal scrapin against my skin before slidin into place. I winced as the chignon pulled tighter at my temples but held still.

She reached across me, grabbed the hairspray off the vanity, and stepped back. I shielded my face with both hands before she unleashed nothin short of a respiratory arsenal over my head.

When the cloud finally settled, she patted my shoulder. "Stand."

I pushed myself out of the chair, my shoulders automatically pullin back. Goosebumps prickled over my bare skin as I stood there in my nude lace bra and panties, matchin garters holdin sheer stockings high on my thighs.

She took the cream dress from its hanger, lowered the zipper, and held it open while I stepped into it. The silky fabric slid over my hips before she pulled the zipper up my back, settlin the high bateau neckline across my collarbones. The dress hugged my waist before fallin to just below my knees. Expensive. Restrained. Impeccably appropriate.

She held the pale-pink cardigan behind me, and I slipped my arms into the sleeves. She adjusted it over my shoulders, smoothed the fabric down my sides, then turned me toward the mirror and stepped back to inspect me.

"You look lovely." She smiled softly.

No, I looked presentable. Polished. Proper. Worthy of bein a James. The kind of daughter people congratulated my mother for raisin. Exactly like the Briar she'd spent twenty-four years teachin me to be.

Except it wasn't me. I might not have known who I was, but I knew that much.

God, more than twenty years of this torture. Pageant stages. Dance recitals. Cotillion lessons. Debutante balls. Hours spent bein pinned, sprayed, painted, and polished into whatever version of me the occasion required. My whole life measured in bobby pins, hairspray, and how long I could hold a smile without lettin it crack.

"Sit up straighter, Briar."

"Shoulders back."

"Chin down."

"Point your toes."

"Cross your ankles."

"Smile. No, less teeth. Could you not look like one of our prize mares for once?"

There was always somethin to correct. Some part of me that needed smoothin, tightenin, or tuckin back into place. By now, she didn't have to say half of it aloud. I heard her voice, whether she was in the room or not.

My gaze drifted to the shelves of trophies and tiaras along the wall. A lifetime's worth of proof that I knew how to smile, stand straight, and do exactly as I was told. I wondered if she'd still call me graceful if I shoved one of those tiaras up her—

"Turn your head, Briar."

I did.

She fussed with my cardigan again, tuggin at fabric that was already perfectly in place. Her gaze landed on my bare throat, and her eyes widened.

"Wait. Pearls, Briar. Where are your pearls?"

I pointed to the dresser, where I'd left them the week before.

God, I hated pearls. Nothin said old money quite like wearin a small fortune around your throat and callin it understated.

She crossed the room to retrieve them. While her back was to me, I deliberately tugged one shoulder of the cardigan crooked. She walked back and stood behind me, placin the pearl choker around my neck and claspin it. She straightened my cardigan again, then stepped back, her hands on my upper arms behind me.

"There," she said. "Perfect."

I gave her my polished smile. The one I'd been taught to give, whether it contained any genuineness at all. It didn't. It very rarely did. "Of course, Mama. After all, you raised me to be nothin less."

She gently squeezed my arms. "Let's go. Henry is waitin for you downstairs."

Henry.

Who the hell names their child Henry, anyway? Only people whose fathers are named Henry. And their fathers before them. I twisted the two-carat rock on my finger as my stomach churned at the thought.

Henry Whitaker Beaumont Prescott the Fifth. I was goin to be his wife next spring. With the Roman numeral, the entitlement, and the expectation that I'd smile, stay quiet, and produce an heir. I felt like I was marryin into some sixteenth-century monarchy. I had no use for a crown. The beheadin that occasionally came with the title, though? That was startin to sound like mercy.

But I nodded and followed her out of the room.

My heels clicked down the sweepin marble staircase into the two-story foyer. A crystal chandelier cast light across gilded family portraits, carved mahogany tables, ornate crown moldin, and floors of polished black-and-white marble. Beyond a pair of fluted columns, a string quartet was already playin beside the sittin room's grand fireplace, their music carryin through the open rooms.

Henry stood up when I entered. He leaned in to kiss my cheek, placin a hand on my lower back.

"Briar, you look lovely."

There was that word again. Lovely manners. Lovely dress. Lovely young man from a lovely family. I refrained from rollin my eyes and pasted on my smile.

"Thank you," I said instead.

Fuck, it was goin to be a long night. And somehow, I was supposed to make it through the next fifty years.

Lord, grant me patience. Or somebody pour me a bourbon.