

# AFTER THE STORM BREAKS

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*For Derrick. Without you, I would never have experienced the  
Mississippi Gulf Coast or grown to regard it as home.*

## 1

The Dodge Ram came out of the side street like it had been fired from a gun. Its lifted suspension groaned under the weight of oversized tires as they chewed into the cracked asphalt of Waveland, Mississippi. It was 2008, almost three years since Hurricane Katrina had ripped through this Gulf Coast community like the hand of God dragging its fingers through wet sand. In its wake was a patchwork of rebuilt homes standing alongside empty lots overgrown with weeds, their concrete slabs the only evidence that families had ever lived there. A lingering sense of fragility hung in the humid air—the knowledge that nature could erase everything again if it chose to.

Isaiah Cole was behind the wheel of his silver Toyota Prius with New York plates. He barely had time to register the rebel flags whipping from both sides of the truck bed before steel slammed into steel. The impact jolted his car sideways, its tires shrieking as the rear quarter panel crumpled with a sickening crunch. His camera bag flew off the passenger seat and hit the floor with a thud that made his heart stop—three thousand dollars of equipment he couldn't afford to replace.

Isaiah swore under his breath, hands gripping the steering wheel as he brought the Prius to a shuddering stop. His heart hammered against his ribs. At twenty-eight, Isaiah was a Black man who carried himself with a quiet confidence born from years of navigating spaces

where he wasn't always welcome. He'd grown up in a working-class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. His father worked for the post office and his mother was a teacher. They worked hard and saved for years to send Isaiah off to undergraduate at Northwestern, where he finished top of his class. He was accepted into Columbia University's graduate program, where he was pursuing a Master's in documentary photography. This project—documenting the long-term aftermath of Katrina—was supposed to be his thesis and his ticket to a career that meant something. Getting into an accident on his second day in Mississippi hadn't been part of the plan.

He wore his usual preppy attire: a crisp navy polo tucked into khaki shorts and paired with Sperry boat shoes and no socks. His skin was deep brown, his face clean-shaven with sharp cheekbones and dark eyes trained to observe, to document, and to see what others had missed. He ran a hand over his close-cropped hair and unbuckled his seatbelt. Numbers were already running through his head as he calculated the costs of repairs, the deductible and the time he will lose in the field.

The Dodge Ram lurched forward aggressively, then stopped dead in the middle of the road, its engine growling. Exhaust fumes mingled with the salty Gulf breeze. The driver's door swung open with a metallic creak, and Boone Whitaker jumped down, his muddy boots hitting the pavement with a solid thump.

Boone was twenty-two, white, around five-eleven with an athletic body. His 175 pounds of muscle was forged from four years of high school football and two summers working the shrimp boats before the accident. His sandy blond hair was damp with sweat and his green eyes narrowed with immediate irritation. A rebel flag tattoo showed beneath his sleeveless shirt, inked the summer after he graduated. That was when he'd still thought he had a future. A jagged scar ran down his left leg, visible below his cargo shorts. It was a souvenir from the shrimping accident two years ago that had ended the football scholarship offers, his college plans, and the escape route from Waveland he'd been counting on since he was fifteen. He'd lost the full ride to Southern Miss, the chance to play Division I ball, and the possibility of becoming someone other than Wade Whitaker's son stuck working the family farm for the rest of his life. The scar still

ached when storms rolled in, a phantom pain that physically complimented the anger and rage he struggled with daily.

Boone inspected his truck first. His bumper was slightly scuffed, nothing serious. He then turned slowly toward the Prius. The street was quiet, lined with hastily rebuilt bungalows painted in cheerful pastels that couldn't quite disguise their FEMA-trailer origins. Satellite dishes sprouted from roofs like mechanical flowers. A few houses down, an American flag hung limp in the still air beside a faded yellow ribbon that had been there since someone's son deployed to Iraq years ago.

"What the hell were you doing?" Boone snapped, his thick drawl sharp with the particular anger of someone looking for a fight. "You blind or somethin'?"

Isaiah stepped out of his car. His pulse was still racing as he glanced at the damage—the rear panel crushed inward, the paint spiderwebbed with cracks. At least a thousand dollars, maybe more. "You ran the stop sign," he said evenly, his voice calm with just a hint of the Midwestern accent he'd learned to soften but never quite eliminate.

Boone laughed—short and humorless—and flicked his hand back toward the faded red octagon hanging crooked on a storm-bent pole. "That thing? I've lived here my whole life. Ain't nobody who stops at that sign."

"Well, everybody didn't hit me," Isaiah replied, crossing his arms. His polo stretched slightly over his shoulders. His solid upper body was lean and strong, toned by daily runs, a gym routine and years of hauling camera equipment.

Boone's eyes locked on him fully then, taking in Isaiah's face, clothes, and the New York plates that screamed outsider louder than anything else could. His posture shifted, his shoulders squaring in that way men did when they were sizing each other up. "You ain't from around here," he said, his tone accusatory.

"No," Isaiah replied simply, meeting those green eyes without backing down. "I'm not."

"Figured," Boone muttered. His gaze drifted back to the Prius, then to Isaiah again, taking inventory in a way that made Isaiah's skin prickle with familiar wariness. This wasn't the first time he'd been on the receiving end of that look. He had seen the calculation happening

behind someone's eyes when they decided he didn't belong. He'd experienced it in New York too, just delivered with less drawl and more polish. "Y'all always show up down here thinkin' you own the road," Boone continued. "With your cameras and notepads to study us like we are some experiment or animals in a zoo."

Isaiah felt the weight of the moment—the quiet street, the sense of being very visible and very alone in a place where outsiders were eyed with suspicion, especially Black outsiders from up North. He'd known it would be like this—he'd even prepared for it—but the reality still stung. "I was driving," he said firmly, keeping his voice level. "You hit me. That's on you. And for what it's worth, I'm here documenting Katrina's aftermath for my Master's thesis. I'm not taking pictures like this is a zoo. I am recording what happened. And what's still happening."

Boone scoffed and walked closer, boots scraping pavement deliberately, closing the distance in a way that felt like a challenge. "Shoulda' been payin' attention. Or maybe you just shouldn't be drivin' that rice rocket down here."

"That 'rice rocket' was stopped," Isaiah countered, refusing to be intimidated. "Because I obey traffic signs."

Boone's jaw tightened, a muscle twitching under his sunburned skin. He looked at the dent again, calculating. Then his gaze snapped back to Isaiah's face. The rebel flags on his truck snapped in the breeze. There were no witnesses on this back road. No one but cicadas buzzing in the live oaks and the sun baking everything flat. For a moment, Isaiah wondered if this was going to escalate into something worse than a fender bender.

"Great," Boone said through gritted teeth. "Now I gotta deal with this."

"You damaged my car," Isaiah replied, unyielding. "So yeah. You do." He pulled out his phone, snapping photos of the damage, the license plate, and the street sign Boone had ignored.

Boone stood rigid, his fists clenching and unclenching. Finally, he pulled his phone from his pocket, his irritation etched into every movement. "Whatever. Let's get this over with."

They exchanged information in tense silence. Boone didn't offer his name until Isaiah asked for it point-blank. "Boone Whitaker," he

said, scribbling on a crumpled receipt from his glove box, his handwriting barely legible.

"Isaiah Cole," Isaiah said in return, writing it down with precise strokes in the small notebook he always carried for documenting photo locations.

Boone paused, then snorted derisively. "Figures." The name sounded too Northern, too polished, and too different from the Jasons and Brandons and Tylers who Boone had grown up with.

When they finished, Boone shoved his phone back into his pocket, his green eyes flashing with something between anger and resignation. "I don't like it but I'll call it in," he said, like it was a magnanimous gesture.

Isaiah met his eyes squarely, refusing to show the frustration churning in his gut. "You don't have to like it. You just have to pay for it."

Boone's stare lingered, sharp and assessing, a storm brewing behind those green irises. Then he turned abruptly and climbed back into the Ram. The engine roared to life, and the truck peeled off down the street, rebel flags whipping behind it and leaving a cloud of dust and exhaust in its wake.

Isaiah stood watching the dust settle, the sound fading into the distance. He looked back at his dented Prius, at the camera bag he'd retrieved from the floor—mercifully undamaged—and took a slow breath of the salty air. Three years at Columbia, two years saving for this project, countless grant applications and thesis proposals, and this was day two. He wasn't hurt, but the message had landed clear as the June sun overhead: outsider, unwelcome.

He'd seen it in Boone's eyes—not just the hostility of someone angry about an accident, but something deeper. The way Boone had looked at him, calculated him, and dismissed him. Isaiah had encountered prejudice before. He had learned to navigate it with his mother's advice ringing in his ears: "Keep your head up, your voice steady, and document everything." The last part had been his father's addition, the postal worker's son who'd learned early that paper trails mattered.

He picked up his camera bag, slung it carefully over his shoulder, and got back in the car. The Prius started despite the damage, the familiar hybrid hum a small comfort. He drove back to the Waveland

Motel, a modest post-Katrina rebuild elevated on pilings against future storm surge, its parking lot half-empty on a Wednesday afternoon. The thought of filing insurance reports, dealing with adjusters, losing precious hours of his photography—it all settled over him as weighted as the humidity. But he'd come this far and he wasn't turning back now.

The sheriff called Boone an hour later.

Boone was sitting on the tailgate of his Ram behind his best friend Eli's place off Nicholson Avenue. He had a cold beer in hand and was replaying the accident in his mind, trying to convince himself he hadn't been at fault. His phone buzzed. He saw the Hancock County Sheriff's Office number and frowned before answering.

"Yeah?"

"Boone Whitaker," Sheriff LeBlanc said, his voice calm in that paternal way Boone had learned to hate since he was a teenager getting pulled over for speeding, for underage drinking, and for all the small rebellions Wade Whitaker's son got away with. The Whitakers had been in Hancock County for five generations and that still meant something even after Katrina.

"I already gave my statement," Boone replied, setting the beer down.

"I know," the sheriff said. "That's why I'm callin'. We reviewed it. You ran the stop sign. You clipped Mr. Cole's vehicle. Clear as day from the skid marks and impact point."

Boone kicked at the gravel, sending pebbles skittering. "That Yankee shouldn't have been—"

"Stop," the sheriff cut in, not raising his voice but firm as oak. "Doesn't matter where he's from. He was obeying the law. You weren't. End of story."

Silence stretched as heavy as the humidity. Boone could hear seagulls screeching somewhere beyond the trees.

"You'll be payin' for the damage," the sheriff continued. "And you're goin' to apologize to Mr. Cole. In person. Today."

Boone laughed, sharp and ugly, the sound echoing off the chain-link fence. "I ain't apologizin' to him. No way."

The pause on the other end was deliberate, loaded.

"Boone," the sheriff said evenly, "My deputy said he smelled beer on you when he came out there earlier. You were lucky he didn't breathalyze you then and there. One beer after work, you said. Maybe that's true. Maybe it ain't. But alcohol was involved, and you know how that looks."

Boone straightened, his athletic frame tensing, green eyes widening. "I wasn't drunk. I had one beer after work—"

"Didn't say you were," the sheriff replied coolly. "I just said alcohol was involved. Enough that a judge might take an interest. Reckless drivin' with alcohol in your system. Could be a couple nights in the Hancock County Jail. Could affect a lot of things."

Boone felt his stomach drop, hot and sour. Jail. Not the holding room for a night like when he and Jaxon had gotten into a bar fight at eighteen. Real jail. A record. The kind of thing that followed you in a county this small, where everyone knew everyone and nothing was ever forgotten. His father would lose his mind. What if he couldn't get a job? Then what? He'd already lost football. He couldn't afford to lose this too.

"You offerin' me a deal?" Boone asked, trying to sound steady, but his voice cracked slightly.

"I'm offerin' you a choice," the sheriff said. "You apologize to Mr. Cole. Today. Face to face. Or I come pick you up myself and we sort this out official-like. Your call."

Boone stared at the beer in his hand like it had betrayed him, his fingers curling around it until foam leaked out. He tossed it into the grass. The sheriff had him cornered and they both knew it. "Where's he at?"

The sheriff gave him the address to the Waveland Motel and said he'd meet him there in an hour.

Isaiah Cole answered the door with caution written across his face.

Boone stood outside with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. The sheriff's cruiser idled at the curb, its engine humming. Sheriff LeBlanc stood a step behind Boone, his weathered face impassive.

"Mr. Cole," the sheriff said, nodding politely, his drawl soothing. "This is Boone Whitaker."

Isaiah's eyes flicked to Boone, taking in the muscular build. He then noticed the rebel flag tattoo visible on his left shoulder and the

scar on his leg that looked old and painful. Isaiah glanced briefly to the patrol car. "I know who he is," Isaiah said evenly.

The sheriff folded his hands over his belt. "Boone has somethin' he needs to say."

Every instinct in Boone screamed against it. His neck burned with humiliation, chest tight with the kind of rage that had nowhere to go but inward. Apologizing to this black Yankee in front of the sheriff—it felt like surrendering a piece of himself he couldn't afford to lose. Like admitting he was everything his father said he was: reckless, stupid, and going nowhere fast.

But he thought about jail and about losing the farm job. He thought about his father's face when he heard and about being twenty-two with a bum leg and no prospects and now a criminal record on top of it all.

He looked at Isaiah—not just looked, but really looked for the first time. The man stood straight, calm, unreadable, his lean muscles evident under the polo. He was neither scared nor impressed. He was just waiting with the kind of patience Boone couldn't fathom.

Boone swallowed hard, the words sticking in his throat like fishhooks.

"I'm... sorry," he said finally. The word scraped out of him, thin and bitter. "For hittin' your car."

It felt like tearing out a tooth with his bare hands.

Isaiah didn't say anything right away. He watched Boone, dark eyes steady and assessing, as if weighing whether the apology meant anything at all or if it was just words forced out under duress. The breeze rustled the palms overhead, carrying the scent of salt and impending rain.

"Thank you," Isaiah said finally, his tone neutral but firm. "I just need my car to be fixed. Soon."

"It will be," the sheriff interjected smoothly. "Insurance'll handle it. And I'm sure you can get a rental car in Bay St. Louis in the meantime. Right, Boone?"

Boone nodded stiffly, staring at the porch railing, his face hot with shame and anger tangled so tight he couldn't tell them apart anymore.

"Good," Isaiah said. "That's all, then." He glanced at the sheriff, a subtle nod of acknowledgment, before stepping back into the cool darkness of the rental.

The sheriff tipped his hat. "Y'all take care now. And Boone—stay out of trouble."

As Boone walked back toward his truck, the Gulf breeze tugged at his shirt, at the rebel flags still hanging from his truck parked down the block. He didn't look back. He couldn't.

Inside the car, the sheriff started the engine, the AC blasting cold air that was a sharp contrast to the air outside. "Damned kid," the sheriff mumbled as he pulled out of the parking space and headed down the road.

Isaiah closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, exhaling slowly. The encounter replayed in his mind—the crash, the confrontation, and the forced remorse. He wasn't naive. He'd done his research before coming down here. He knew the history: Hancock County's demographics, its voting patterns, the way Katrina had amplified existing inequalities rather than erasing them. He knew what those rebel flags meant, and he knew the weight they carried.

But this was the story. Not just the storm-battered buildings and the slow rebuild, but this—the tensions, the clashes between old and new, the way disaster exposed fault lines that had always been there. People like Boone Whitaker, angry and trapped and lashing out at anything that reminded them the world was changing whether they liked it or not.

He picked up his camera bag and headed to the kitchen table where his laptop sat open, images from his first day's shoot waiting to be cataloged. Three years post-Katrina, and Waveland was slowly coming back. Stories like this—these small collisions between past and present—were part of the larger narrative he'd come here to document.

He sat down and began sorting through the photographs, the hum of the window AC unit drowning out the distant rumble of thunder rolling in from the Gulf. Outside, the light was already changing, the clouds gathering on the horizon the way they did most summer afternoons.

Isaiah pulled up a new file and started typing notes about the accident, about Boone, and about the dynamics he'd observed in those few tense minutes. The thesis was supposed to be about architecture and infrastructure, but it was also about the physical scars Katrina left behind. Isaiah suspected it was going to be about something else entirely.