



Gritting her teeth, Laurel tried to ease her breathing as the doctor pushed into her personal space.

Lizzy came back into the room, her arms full of equipment. She stacked it to the side, rushed over, and held up Laurel's arm. "She mentioned the cut to her back being pretty deep."

"I haven't gotten to it. I'll look at it in a minute." The doctor's harsh voice echoed in the small room.

Shivering, Laurel tried to relax her muscles as they pulled and ached from the cold.

"Okay, let me see your back."

She frowned and lifted her shirt slightly.

The doctor's mouth dropped for a moment and she glared. "What is that?"

"Previous injury."

"I don't have that in your medical history."

"You don't have my medical history," Laurel murmured, barely holding in her irritation.

"Dr. Carrington, I've known Laurel all my life—"

"When I need your opinion, Liz—" the doctor huffed and pushed at the cut, the rough gauze wiping across her skin. "It's

not deep, just a rip through the skin and fatty tissue. We'll need to stitch it up, if the skin will hold."

"Can you let Lizzy do that?"

Dr. Carrington stepped back with a frown. "Why?"

"I want my arm taken care of first. It'll scar, and I want to make sure you'll take care of it properly." Laurel glanced at Lizzy, who frowned.

"Fine. We don't get much of these kind of injuries around here. She could use the experience."

Lizzy grabbed the syringe.

"No. No shots." Laurel groaned.

"You need the local before we take care of this."

With a sigh, Laurel nodded as the sting of the needle burned into her back, then her arm.

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Laurel worked to hold off the uneasiness of having both women up in her space. The prodding and burning of the staples and glue was nothing compared to dealing with everyone pushing too close.

Numbness set in, and her jaw clenched as memories surfaced. Her scarred skin, the shouts of her shipmates, the smell of fire ... Flexing her injured hand, she winced. Her mind jumped back to reality.

After the doctor left, Lizzy cleaned up the mess.

"You know why I did that, right?"

Lizzy's chuckle echoed. "Of course, Laur. I've known you too long. I'm surprised you held it together with both of us working on you at once. I'm sorry about Dr. Carrington. She can be ... frustrating."

"That's an understatement," Laurel murmured. "Why're you still here? You could get paid better in a big city like Fayetteville. Then you wouldn't have to drive so far for class."

"I know. But I wouldn't have the help I do now," Lizzy mumbled.

She nodded and leaned against the edge of the table, exhaustion weighing her down.

“You have a ride?”

“I’m sure I have to go to the police station,” she muttered.

As the memories piled up, Laurel did her best to push them back. There was no way she could get out of going to the police station. The detective needed to take her statement.

Laurel’s worry amplified as she watched Lizzy clean up. Her attacker’s strange voice echoed in her head. “Lizzy, be more careful. Okay?”

“You’re the injured one.” Lizzy frowned.

“I mean it. No being out by yourself at night. Promise me.” A lump welled in her throat as she wondered if Tara had fallen into the same situation and was unable to escape.

Lizzy nodded. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Laurel straightened from the bed with a groan and paused to get her equilibrium. Still shivering, she followed Lizzy out to the nurses’ station, rubbing her bare arms. The detective stood by the wall, speaking with Dr. Carrington. His eyes cut to hers a moment, and Laurel looked away.

“You working tomorrow?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

“You need some rest.” Lizzy sighed. “Here. Sign this.”

Laurel filled out the form and signed at the bottom.

“We need to get to the station and get your statement.”

She turned to the detective, then slowly to the outer doors. The detective paused, pulled on his rain gear, and handed her the jacket.

“It’s still wet, but better than the alternative.” He flashed a smile.

She pulled it on, shivering underneath the damp cloth. Once in the car, he turned the heat up, aiming the vents at her.

“You said we wouldn’t catch him. Why not?”

*Here we go again.*

“I’m sure you’ve heard—”

“I’ve only been here a few months, and I’m not as interested in listening to gossip as you might think.” He glanced her way.

She focused on the road. Maybe he didn't know, but the last thing she wanted to do was explain.

She sighed. "Never mind. I don't want to talk about it."

"If you know who he is, I need to know."

"I told you I don't." She clenched her jaw, pulling the jacket tighter as she stifled a shiver.

"Why don't I take you home? You can get dried and warm, then we can go over what happened." His soft voice was kind, unassuming.

How long had it been since someone spoke to her that way?

"No, I ... Mrs. Beecham, she'll be around. I don't want her to hear."

Silence lingered as her body trembled. She put her head in her hands and before she realized it, the detective stood outside her door, gently tapping her shoulder.

"Let's get inside."

Laurel unbuckled and slid from the vehicle. She gripped the door a moment, letting her body catch up. As he ushered her up the stairs to the office, the detective's arm gently settled around her shoulders, and she paused.

"I'm—I'm fine." She kept her gaze down and pulled away, uncomfortable with him being so close.

Once at the landing, he held the door open. She hesitated a moment.

"Something wrong?"

She sighed. "Not anymore I guess," she whispered.

Stepping inside, she swallowed the bile working up her throat. Being here, where her father worked, with the men who refused to protect her and her mother ... the memories overwhelmed her already exhausted body.

But there was no reason to be concerned tonight or any night, for that matter. The police department was no longer a danger to her, even if everyone who worked here thought she was a killer.

"Laurel?" The detective motioned to a desk in the corner.

The room was empty. No one else was around. A shudder ran down her spine as she walked to the desk and sat in the chair he offered.

“Take that jacket off.” The detective pulled off his raingear and disappeared for a moment, returning with a sweatshirt and a blanket.

She pulled the soggy coat off her shoulders and handed it to him, accepting the dry offerings.

“You need help?”

“No,” she muttered and slipped it on, groaning at the pull of her stitches. “I’ll—I’ll pay to get your jacket cleaned.”

“No need.”

He sat across from her as she wrapped up in the blanket. When he took off his ballcap, she finally got a good look at the newcomer. Her small town of Cave Springs had few people who moved in and hung around. Most residents drove to the city to work, thirty minutes away, if they lived here. Several got better jobs and moved out.

But she’d heard that Detective Hollister had moved here from Little Rock, looking for a slower pace. Well, besides tonight, he’d probably get his wish.

The detective let out a breath, slamming drawers and shuffling papers. He stood at least six-feet. He drug his fingers through his sandy brown hair a couple of times, and water drops flung around him. His square jaw sported a shadow, and his big, green eyes drooped when he looked at her, making him look sad.

“Tell me about the man. Can you describe him?”

“Six two, at least. He was skinny and lanky.” She cleared her throat. “He had on a large hat, with a wide brim.”

“Okay.” He nodded as he wrote. “What else?”

She sighed. “His voice was strange, a higher-pitched sound. He’ll have a dislocated elbow and shoulder, left side. He’s a lefty.” Pulling her hat down, a wave of exhaustion fell over her again.

“Left-handed? He attacked you with the knife in his left hand?”

“Yes.” Her irritation burning through, she nodded.

*How was that hard to understand?*

“Ms ...”

She looked up and found him waiting, pen in hand. “Ashburn, Laurel Ashburn.”

“Just out of curiosity,” he continued to write, “how did you defend yourself against a man much bigger than you, who had a knife?”

“Practice,” she muttered. Laurel focused on her lap. Her hands ached, and her body eased.

The silence lingered.

“You ended your story with him lunging for you?”

“Yeah. He wanted me on the ground. After that didn’t work, he pulled that knife. He wasn’t all that strong. I just didn’t ... I saw my keys on the ground, and for some reason, I went for them.”

“You wanted to get away.”

“No.” She shook her head. “That’s not usually my first thought,” she mumbled, her voice growing soft and raspy.

The sound of movement drew her attention. The detective stood and walked around the desk to sit next to her.

“Let me see your hand.”

“No. It’s fine.”

“You didn’t have them check it out.” He held out his, and she sighed.

Pulling the sweatshirt cuff from over her right hand, she lifted it. With a frown, he gently turned her hand palm up, then back around. Why was this strange detective taking such an interest? Fingers moved over her knuckles, down the back of her hand. He reached to the desk, pulled some tissues, and pressed them gently into the bloody cuts from the keys.

“You’ve definitely broken something. You need an X-ray,” he murmured.

“It’s fine. Wouldn’t do any good anyway.” She’d busted that hand so many times ... Shuddering, she pulled back and slid the

sleeve back down. “After he hit me with that knife, I grabbed his arm and disabled him, then moved in front of my car to get out of the light.”

He sat and watched her a moment, his sad eyes searching. *What did he hope to find?*

With a huff, he stood, walking back around to sit in his chair. “What kind of car?”

“Twenty ten or eleven Nissan Altima. I think it was navy, but it was hard to tell in the dark.”

“That’s pretty specific.”

She nodded, rubbing her fingers over her pained hand.

“You don’t miss much, do you, Ms. Ashburn?”

“No, I don’t. Is there anything else?” She gave him a glare. It was getting late, and the question session needed to end.

Besides, as soon as Officer Lester informed the detective of who she was, her report would be disregarded as if she had made it all up. And once the new detective learned from everyone else about her troubled past, he’d also think she’d lied. It’s as if the whole town were against her. Why did she even move back here?

*Where would you go?* The thought pushed through her mind once more.

“I just need you to sign this.” He handed her a statement and a pen.

She stepped to the desk and signed the bottom of the page with a wince.

“I’ll get you home.” He slipped on his rain gear again.

After pushing away from his steadying grip, she slid into the front seat and buckled up, relieved to be out of the office and heading home.

She sighed. Between the attack and the memories of the station flooding her mind, there would be little sleep tonight.