



“Mrs. Beecham, I’ll be glad to make a trip out to check.” Detective Dev Hollister rolled his eyes as he stood, searching through the paperwork on his desk for his keys.

“I’d rather Walter go and check for her. He knows her.” The older woman’s voice went stern.

“Like I said, ma’am, Walter went home sick. It’s just me here tonight. I’ll take a trip around town and then head your way.”

“Fine, that’s fine.” Her sigh echoed.

He smirked. “I’ll call if I find her.”

Pulling on his rain slicker, he shoved his baseball hat on and headed out to the cruiser. The rain came down in waves, and the radio said the weather would just get worse as the night went on.

He sighed. “God, I know you had a plan bringing me out here, but I’m not so sure.”

After two years as a beat cop and then seven years a detective in Little Rock, Dev had grown weary of crime. The constant death, destruction, and lawlessness that affected the innocent ate at him for years. After his injury last year, he was done.

With months of leave time stacking up, he took it all, then handed in his resignation. He figured he’d be able to find another job somewhere. His buddy pushed him into this one, a county

detective in rural Arkansas. After lots of prayer and distinct thoughts of running away, he got a call with the job offer and decided to follow God's lead. For about a month now, he'd been here, enjoying the slow pace, the area, and the people. Most of them anyway. He heaved out a sigh.

Mrs. Kendra Beecham. He'd been warned to keep on her good side. Not that she wasn't nice—she just expected things to happen her way and in her timing. And she had connections in town.

Like tonight. Mrs. Beecham wanted someone to check on her girl. She kept repeating that phrase as if her girl didn't have a name. It was Laurel. Laurel apparently got off work at six and hadn't come home yet. Mrs. Beecham said her girl would've made it home by no later than seven, even if she stopped for dinner. So here he was, eight o'clock at night, driving in the rain through town, expecting to discover Laurel out on a date or with friends.

Seeing nothing similar to her car in town, Dev started toward Mrs. Beecham's. On State Road 19, the rough gravel reminded him just how different roads were here than in the city.

His eyes focused on red taillights. A car up ahead fishtailed as the tires spun and sped away. He flipped on his blue lights and pulled up behind another car still parked on the side of the road. The make and model matched Laurel's.

Grabbing his flashlight, he slid down from his truck, unsnapping his sidearm.

"Hello?" He shone the beam around the car and road. The light caught a glint. Striding up to the shimmering object, the long blade of a knife stood out against the dark pavement. Unholstering his sidearm, he called again.

"Hello? Detective Hollister here. Everyone okay?" He eased around the car to the front when something pointed pushed into his side.

"Who are you?" a whispered voice muttered as he raised his hands.

“Mrs. Beecham called. Are you Laurel?”

“Mrs. Beecham?” The voice sighed, and the object moved away from his side.

He turned. A woman with blood covering her shirt stood in the rain, keys threaded between her fingers.

“Are you okay?” He reached out, and she stepped back, holding up her hands.

“Yes. But you let him get away.” She motioned down the road.

“We need to get you to the hospital. Come on.”

“I—I don’t need a hospital.” She stepped back farther. “I don’t think I need stitches.”

“Either you get in the cruiser in the front, or I’ll put you in the back for attacking an officer.”

She crossed her arms as the rain continued to soak her body. “Fine,” she gritted through her teeth.

“Wait in the car. I’ve got to bag the evidence before we leave.”

Dev jogged back to his cruiser and grabbed a bag. After taking pictures of the car and knife with his phone, he pulled on latex gloves and slid the weapon into the bag. He secured it in the cruiser and noticed Laurel staring down the road, blood saturating the back of her shirt, her body completely soaked from the rain.

Grabbing his jacket from the backseat, he made his way behind her. “We need to go.” After her backing away twice, he carefully stepped forward and slid the jacket over her shoulders. “Come on.”

With a nod, she turned and pulled the jacket tight. He paused at her car and saw a handbag sitting in the seat. Opening the door, he grabbed the bag and phone, then locked the door before he shut it.

“You’ve got your keys, right?” He slid into the cruiser and looked her over.

She nodded and held up her hand. Taking out another bag,

he had her drop them in, then made a U-turn, he took off toward town.

“You don’t have to drive so fast. I told you. I’m fine.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“You’re in shock.”

“No. I’m not,” she punctuated her words.

“Okay.”

As he drove, he caught a glimpse of her face. When Mrs. Beecham said girl, he’d expected a teenager –not a woman closer to his age. Her jaw clenched, but with the ballcap on, he couldn’t see her eyes.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Don’t you need to record it or something?”

He chuckled. “I’ve got a pretty good memory.”

Her huff sounded over the pelting rain.

“I got a flat. There’s no cell service on the road, so I changed the tire. A car pulled up as soon as I got done. When I put the jack in the trunk and turned, he was right behind me.” She paused.

“And?”

“I told him I was fine.” She blew out a haggard breath. “He grabbed my elbow and told me I should go with him.”

Dev’s jaw tensed. “So, he was trying to kidnap you?”

She gave a slight nod.

Heartbeat pounding, Dev shook his head. He’d been hoping for less crime when he moved out here. Evil seemed to be everywhere these days.

At the hospital, Dev pulled up to the ER and parked. He ran around the front, but Laurel got out without his help, trembling as he escorted her inside.

“We need to see a doctor, now.”

The ER liaison stood with wide eyes, then ushered them back to a room.

“Someone will be here soon.”

“Thanks.”

The woman gave Laurel another glance before she closed the door.

Laurel let out a deep sigh and heaved herself onto the examination table. Hat still pulled low over her face, her dark hair stuck out from the back in a matted mess. Soaking wet and shivering, she was less than fazed. Her hands rubbed together from beneath the sheath of the coat.

A quick rap on the door, and a woman in scrubs stepped inside.

“Laurel? Oh my gosh! Are you okay? What happened?” The woman quickly descended upon Laurel, grabbing paper towels and handing them to her.

“It’s fine, Liz. Don’t worry,” Laurel huffed as Liz pulled armloads of gauze from the cabinet.

“We need to get you cleaned up.”

“If you could get her a set of scrubs, I need to get pictures of her injuries and gather her clothes for evidence.”

The nurse turned to him with a nod. “Oh, yeah. Okay. I’ll be right back.”

As the door slammed, Laurel slid from the edge of the table. She took off the coat and her long sleeve flannel to reveal a snug, black tank top underneath. Her arms were toned, her shoulders broad. Dev pulled out his phone as she lifted her left arm. Frowning, he took a picture of the jagged cut.

“Turn around.” Refraining from leading her, he snapped a shot of the same cut from the back. “I need to see your back where you were cut.”

“No.” She turned, crossing her arms as if daring him to try.

“Laurel, we’ll need it for the report. To prosecute, we’ll need all—”

“You won’t catch him.”

His jaw clenched. “Do you know who it is?”

She shook her head. “No.”

As he started to debate her stance, the nurse returned with a set of scrubs.

“I’ll be right outside.” Dev left, closing the door behind him.

He pulled off his rain gear, piled it in the chair in the hallway, and leaned against the wall. Laurel acted odd for a woman who was just attacked. Shock would be the norm for any assault victim. But after talking with her in the truck and her calm demeanor in the exam room, she appeared more than centered. Maybe he needed to dig into her past.

The door opened, and he straightened.

“She needed some privacy.” The nurse nodded and rushed away.

He needed a picture of her back, but based on her reaction, that wasn’t going to happen.

Dev blew out a deep breath, grabbed his phone, and called Mrs. Beecham.

“Mrs. Beecham?”

“I’m on my way.”

“What? I mean, how did you—”

“Word travels fast.”

He sighed. “She’s fine, ma’am. After she gets cleaned up, I’ll take her to the station for her report, then I’ll bring her right home. No need getting out in this weather.”

“Well, I think I should be there.”

“Um, ma’am? She seems to be just fine.”

“Yes. Yes she would,” the woman muttered. “Fine then. I guess I’ll stay here.”

“I’ll get her home safe.”

“Thank you, Detective. I appreciate all you’ve done.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am. That’s what I’m here for.” He slipped his phone into his pocket.

“You must be Detective Hollister.” A sweet, southern accent made him turn.

Dev straightened as a woman made her way in front of him.

“Yes, and you are?” He smiled at the pretty redhead.

“Doctor Carrington, Lacy Carrington.” She grinned big and offered her hand.

He shook it with a nod. "Nice to meet you."

"I'm so sorry to have to meet you over something like this." She tilted her head to the side, her lips parting with a smile.

"Yes, well, I'll need to get the information about her injuries for the report."

"Oh, of course. I hate that something like this happened to a woman like her." She frowned.

"What does that mean?" Dev crossed his arms.

She shrugged. "I mean, it's terrible for anyone, but for her." The doctor sighed. "She's been through so much, and she's, well ..." the woman leaned forward. "She's just a little different is all." The doctor winked and straightened.

Clenching his jaw, he tried to offer a smile, irritated that the doctor seemed so judgmental about an assault victim.

"Well, I need to get to work. Hope I'll see you around." She smiled and headed into the room without knocking.

*Hub?* Now he really needed to get some background on Laurel.