

The Shut Out

‘Are you sure you’re ready?’ Bonnie looked surprised. ‘It’s only been a few weeks.’

Harper’s reply came without hesitation. ‘I’m ready,’ she said. ‘And it’s been seven weeks, actually. Forty-nine long, boring days. It’s time for me to go back to work.’

Around them, the other tables at Pangaea Coffee House were populated by the usual afternoon crew of art students with technicolor hair and enormous sketchpads. The Savannah College of Art and Design was just a few blocks away.

None of them paid any attention to Harper and Bonnie, sitting in a nook near the window, with large cups of coffee cooling on the table in front of them.

‘I don’t know...’ Bonnie said, clearly unconvinced. ‘It doesn’t seem long enough after everything you went through.’

‘I have to go back to work sometime,’ Harper reminded her. ‘It’s still my job. Besides, I’m flat broke. My sick pay ran out three weeks ago. I’m living on crackers and boredom.’

She flexed and extended her left arm. ‘Baxter said I could come back when the cast was off and I could type. Now it’s off.’

‘You got it off yesterday.’ Bonnie’s eyebrows drew together. ‘You need time.’

‘Come on. It’s not like I’m going to fight anyone,’ Harper said. ‘I’m going to sit at my computer and write a few words. How could that hurt me?’

Bonnie gave her an exasperated look.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Who are you kidding? I know you, remember?’

‘Okay.’ Harper held up her hands. ‘I don’t intend to fight anyone. I promise I’ll try to avoid it.’

‘Yeah, fine. But there’s more to this than just getting shot, and you know it. There’s also Smith. And Luke.’ Bonnie ticked each item off on her fingers. ‘You’ve got a lot to process.’

Harper grimaced. ‘Look, it’s not like I haven’t “processed”. I’ve been stuck at home for weeks processing,’ she said. ‘I’ve gone over and over it in my head and I’ve come to the conclusion that I need to get my ass to work and stop processing.’

She tried to keep her tone light but the emotion behind it was raw. There was no way Bonnie was going to miss that.

But she said nothing. Instead, she reached across the table and rested her cool hand on the back of Harper's.

The gentle, wordless gesture took some of the heat from the moment.

'I just miss it,' Harper told her, quietly. 'I miss having something to do. I can't sit around anymore, thinking. I'd do anything to stop thinking.'

'I get it,' Bonnie said. 'I really do.'

Her worried eyes swept across Harper's face.

'Just, promise me you'll take it easy, OK? I have a feeling this is going to be harder than you expect.'

At this, Harper smiled darkly.

'Everything is.'

* * *

When Harper walked into the newsroom that afternoon, DJ Gonzales, the education reporter who sat in the desk directly in front of hers in the row by the windows, was on the phone.

Spotting her, he waved frantically, while making polite sounds into the receiver.

'Mm-hmm. Well that's very helpful, Mrs Landry. Thank you for... Oh yes. I do... Uh-huh. Well I better go get this written... Okay. Sure.'

Dropping her bag on the floor beside her desk, Harper gathered a pile of newspapers that had been left in her absence and chucked them in the trash.

Finally slamming the phone down, DJ spun around and beamed at her.

'You're back!' His eyes darted to her shoulder. 'The cast's gone. How are you feeling?'

'Like I got shot in the shoulder,' she said. 'Did you miss me?'

He furrowed his brow in an expression of elaborate earnestness. 'So much. Every time I put another piece of trash on your desk, it was like an offering to the gods. Bring her back, I told them. Bring Harper back.'

She barked a laugh. 'Well, it's nice to know you thought about me. I didn't miss you at all.'

'You did,' he argued, gleeful. 'You thought of me every night just before you...'

‘McClain.’

Baxter’s chainsaw voice cut through the newsroom chatter.

The editor strode across the newsroom towards them, her blazer a dark cloud billowing around her thin frame.

‘Have you had your HR assessment?’ she demanded. ‘I told you to have one before coming in today.’

Harper slapped her forehead.

‘Do you know what? I completely forgot.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘Oh darn. They close at three, don’t they? And it’s nearly four now...’

Baxter’s eyes narrowed. ‘Very funny. Do it tomorrow or you’re fired.’

‘I swear I will.’ Harper grinned at her. ‘Come on. You’re really glad I’m back, aren’t you?’

‘Don’t count on it,’ Baxter said. ‘What I need right now is a crime reporter who can manage not to get herself shot.’

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled Harper’s police scanner from her pocket.

‘Well. Since you’re here. I suppose you’re going to need this.’

Harper snatched it from her. She had her own scanner at home, but this one had sentimental value.

‘Thanks,’ she said, meaning it.

It felt good in her hand. Like a missing part of her had been restored. Unconsciously, she ran her thumb across

the buttons on the front of it where the chrome had long ago been rubbed off, revealing the plastic bones below.

Baxter had no time for sentimentality.

‘Now, get yourself to the cop shop – I need your roundup in an hour.’ Turning on her heel, she stormed back to the row of editors’ desks, her last words floating over her shoulder, unconvincingly, ‘Oh, and welcome back.’

Harper glanced at DJ, who had watched the entire conversation with open amusement.

‘She loves me.’

His crooked grin widened.

‘She does, you know.’ He stretched back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head. ‘Just the other day she said to me, “Do you think Harper would sleep with me if I asked?” And I said...’

He ducked as Harper hurled a crumpled newspaper at his head.

‘Too far?’ he asked.

‘Too far.’

As he turned back to his computer, Harper settled in her chair. It hadn’t changed. There was the same creaky left wheel. The same loose screw on the right arm that made it wobble if she leaned on it.

With her right hand, she lightly rubbed her left shoulder. What she hadn’t told Bonnie earlier was that her arm felt weak and heavy. Without the cast, it was cold all the time. And it got tired fast.

Still, all she had to do today was type. She’d be fine.

Setting the scanner on her desk, she switched it on. A crackle of official information filled the air. A fender bender on Veterans. Shoplifting on River Street. Ambulances rolling to a possible cardiac arrest on 26th Street.

The bad news washed over her in a pleasant wave. The tension that had weighed her down for weeks – waking her up in the middle of the night to feel the unexpected heat of that bullet over and over again – began to ease.

Bonnie was wrong.

She was ready for this.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, she pushed open the heavy glass door of the police station for the first time in weeks.

The lobby was empty except for Darlene Wilson, the desk officer, who sat staring at her with an expression of almost comic surprise.

‘I’m back,’ Harper told her, unnecessarily.

Darlene glanced over her shoulder, as if to see if anyone was watching. When she looked back at Harper again, her expression was cool.

‘McClain.’ Her voice didn’t exactly ooze friendliness. ‘I didn’t know you were coming back today.’

Harper’s stomach tightened. She and Darlene had always got along. More than that, they liked each other.

Or they used to. Before everything happened.

She forced her mouth into a breezy smile.

‘You just can’t get rid of me,’ she said, pulling a notebook and pen from the pocket of her jacket. ‘What’ve I missed?’

‘Well.’ Darlene pushed the stack of crime reports towards her and looked out to the parking lot behind her.

‘There’s not much to tell.’

Pretending not to notice the chill in the air, Harper began flipping through the pages, but she was only half-looking at them. Most of the time she was watching the desk officer.

Darlene was stacking papers - straightening things that didn’t need arranging. Her forehead was set in worried lines. Everything about this set off warning signals.

‘So, what’s been going on?’ Harper asked. ‘Any gossip?’

‘No.’ Darlene could pile a lot of ice into one syllable.

Harper’s hands stilled.

‘No gossip.’ The desk officer’s voice was flat. ‘Anyway. I’ve got things to do.’

She walked to a row of file cabinets, her back stiff.

‘Hey, come on, Darlene. What’s the matter?’ Harper closed the folder. ‘Why are you mad at me?’

‘I’m not...’ Darlene began to reply, but then the security door leading into the back offices swung open, and a trio of detectives walked out deep in conversation. Her voice trailed off, and she busied herself with her files.

Detective Julie Daltrey was the first to spot Harper. She swung out an arm, hitting Detective Shumaker in his bulging beer belly.

‘What the...’ he protested.

Catching his eye, Daltrey pointed to where Harper stood at the front desk.

Shumaker and Detective Lancaster, who was following the two of them, both saw her at the same time.

Shumaker’s face hardened.

‘I’ll be damned,’ he said. ‘Did they finally arrest her?’

‘That’d be justice,’ Lancaster said.

‘I can’t think what else she’d be doing here.’ Daltrey turned her attention to the desk officer. ‘Darlene. Which officer is accompanying the prisoner?’

She juttet a thumb at Harper.

Lips tight, Darlene shook her head.

‘I’ve got nothing to do with any of this,’ she grumbled, turning back to the cabinets.

As the three detectives approached, Harper’s muscles tensed. There was a contained anger in the way they held themselves. They weren’t joking around.

Daltrey was a full head shorter than the other two, and one of very few female detectives on the squad. She and Harper had always got along fine.

Right now, though, she looked at Harper like she was a criminal.

‘What’s going on?’ Harper asked, taking a step back.

‘There’s something you need to know, McClain.’ Shumaker stepped close enough for her to see the individual strands of hair combed thinly across his balding pate. She could smell the coffee on his breath. ‘What you did? Crossed a line. You turn on one of us, you turn on all of us.’

Beside him, the other two nodded.

This was ridiculous. Harper wanted to argue, to explain, but the words wouldn’t come. All of these people – all of them – were her friends.

As she stared back at their hard faces, she thought of that moment in the darkness out at The Watch. And all the nights since when she’d sat up in bed, drenched in sweat. Awoken by the shrill panic in her own scream.

‘He shot me.’ It came out as a whisper but it seemed to echo off the linoleum floors and blank walls of the police station.

In the distance, she saw Darlene shake her head.

Shumaker’s small, blue eyes grew colder.

‘Maybe he had a good reason.’

Harper’s breath left her.

She wanted to remind them that it was their job to believe that there was no good reason for one person to shoot another. But she was too stunned.

Anyway, it didn’t matter. She understood what was happening here. They weren’t interested in facts. There was an unspoken police code, and she’d broken it. Now she had to pay.

Blue looked after blue.

‘You can’t blame me,’ she pleaded, desperately. ‘You can’t.’

‘We can,’ Daltrey told her, simply. ‘And we do.’

Then, with deliberation, she turned her wrist over and looked at her watch. ‘We’ve got forty minutes for dinner. Let’s not waste any more time on this trash.’

Lancaster gave a mean laugh.

The three of them turned their backs on her and continued across the room to the glass door, whispering and laughing.

Harper watched them go, the future becoming clearer with each step they took.

They were going to shut her out. From now on. No one would talk to her. She was blackballed.

When the door closed behind them, the clunk of metal against metal had a finality to it.

The end. Thank you for playing.

She stared at the space where they'd been for a long time.

'That's what I tried to tell you.'

Darlene's voice broke the silence.

Harper turned towards her, but she moved too fast and the wound in her shoulder sent a warning burst of pain down her side so hot and fierce her breath caught.

She pressed a hand on the reception desk, fingers spread, bracing herself.

Watching her, Darlene frowned. 'You OK? You look... green.'

'I'm fine.' Harper said it through her teeth.

She straightened slowly, taking a deep, shaky breath.

Darlene wasn't convinced. 'You sure you're supposed to be back? You don't look so great.'

'I'm good.' Harper's voice sharpened, putting an end to that line of discussion. 'What did you try to tell me?'

Giving up the pretense of filing, Darlene returned to her desk.

'The new lieutenant.' She leaned towards Harper. 'He told everyone not to work with you anymore. Said you can't be trusted. Anyone talks to you?' She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'They get written up. Insubordination. Violation of a direct order.'

This was worse than Harper had thought. It came from the top.

'Who's the new lieutenant?' she asked, although she had a feeling she already knew.

Darlene gave her a significant look.

'Blazer.'

Shit.

For a thousand reasons, Larry Blazer hated her. Mostly, though, because he was a by-the-books cop, and Harper did nothing by the books.

She'd hoped on some level that the police might see her as a compatriot after everything that happened. That they might be grateful she'd helped identify a rogue member of the force.

That had been naïve of her.

Blazer was too smart for that. He would have gathered instantly that she'd make a convenient foil for the department's problems. He could blame her for it all, and reunite the cops against her, behind their new leader.

It might work. After all, he was one of them. She never had been.

'Thank you,' she told Darlene quietly.

'Someone had to tell you.' The desk officer sniffed. She didn't look happy about the situation. 'I thought this might blow over by the time you got back. But it ain't blowin'.'

Harper had read about this sort of thing – the police shutting a reporter down after a perceived betrayal. In most cases, the journalists involved had to change their beat, or move to another city and start over.

Cops have a deep, almost spiritual, belief in loyalty. They value it above all else. Once they perceive you as disloyal, you're their enemy. Forever.

'It will never blow over,' she whispered, so quietly Darlene couldn't hear it above the hiss of the heater, and the rumble of traffic outside the door.

Then, with a sigh, she picked up the stack of reports and began going through them. She had a job to do.

* * *

That first shift took everything out of Harper. By eleven o'clock, she was half asleep at her desk, her head resting on her good arm.

She was glad the newsroom was empty. She didn't want anyone to see her so weak and exhausted.

Luckily, Baxter had spent much of the evening in the back, working on a two-page spread with the copy editors.

Every time she came in, Harper tried to sit up straight, but it was getting harder. Her wounded arm ached all the way down to the fingertips.

Bonnie had been right, of course. She should have given it a few more days. Maybe a couple of weeks. She needed to get her strength back.

She'd lost almost twenty pounds since the shooting. Walking around the block still took the wind out of her.

Everyone had told her she needed time. But she'd stubbornly insisted she was fine. She wasn't fine.

This had all been a mistake.

She was considering whether it was worth the hassle of asking if she could leave early when her scanner came alive with the excited voice of a patrol officer.

‘Dispatch, we got a signal nine with multiple signal sixes over here on Liberty and Broad.’ He was almost shouting. ‘Shooters are on foot. We need paramedics on the scene. And get me some back-up.’

‘Copy that,’ the dispatcher said crisply. A warning code sounded – a shrill two note alarm that Harper felt in her gut – before she spoke again. ‘All available units, proceed to Liberty and Broad to assist...’

Harper didn’t hear anything else. She was already dialing a familiar number.

Miles answered the phone on the first ring. She could hear the roar of the Mustang’s engine in the background, and the voices coming from his scanners.

‘Harper McClain. Don’t tell me you’re back.’ He sounded pleased.

‘Hell yes, I’m back. Can you give me a lift to that shooting?’

‘Are you kidding?’ She could hear his smile in his voice. ‘I’m on my way. Meet you out front in three minutes.’

Standing, Harper downed two painkillers dry and pulled her jacket on, getting her bad arm in first.

She shoved a notebook and pen in one pocket, and her scanner and press pass in another.

When she was ready, she paused, looking around at the rows of empty desks, their computers lined up like soldiers on a battlefield. At one end, three TVs mounted above the editors’ seats flashed silent images back at her.

A line of tall, drafty windows looked out over the dark city. Through the glass, she could see the gold dome of the town hall, and the glowing lights of a giant container ship lumbering slowly down the river, and out to sea.

She’d looked at that view a thousand times, but this time she felt it in her soul.

Savannah was her home. The newspaper was in her blood.

They wouldn’t get rid of her. Not like this.

She wouldn’t let them.

If they shut her out she’d find a way back in.

Her arm hurt today but it would get better.

Every wound heals.

This job was her whole life. And damn. She’d missed it.

On Bay Street below, a police car roared by, blue lights flashing, the siren issuing a shrill lament.

She had to get moving.

‘Baxter!’ She raised her voice.

The editor appeared in the narrow hallway, a silver pen in her hand.

‘Shooting on Liberty,’ Harper announced, threading through the desks towards the door. ‘Multiple victims. Miles and I are heading out there now.’

Baxter gave her a strange look, as if she wanted to tell her something. But maybe Harper had imagined that because, a second later, she just seemed irritated.

‘Get moving, then,’ the editor told snapped. ‘I’ll tell copy desk.’

Harper was already halfway across the room. She felt lighter now, and wide awake.

The pain was easing.

‘If I need to hold the front page, I have to know by eleven-thirty,’ Baxter called after her.

As she headed out of the newsroom, Harper smiled.

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’