

Nineteen

“I believe I have located Ellis,” Pursiful said.

“You’re kidding,” Adam said, slowing his truck and turning into a handy parking area of a now-permanently-closed video store. He’d been out scouring the island and Pursiful just calls with an exact location?

“Someone just attacked a woman at Dr. Escott’s clinic.”

“What?” Adam swore under his breath and put the truck in park. After contacting Sal about accessing the GPS tracking data on Maddix and Guthrie’s cruiser, he’d been about a scant ten minutes behind Calla. He’d driven by the clinic building, but there was only one car—an old Beetle—in the lot other than Calla’s.

“Calla?”

“I believe it was her associate who was injured,” Pursiful said. “I wasn’t able to get the full story. I simply overheard chatter on the police scanner.”

Without another word, Adam disconnected the call and headed his truck in the direction of Calla’s clinic. The place was lit up like the fourth of July. Paramedics, cop cars, a firetruck.

Holy hell. She called everyone but the Coast Guard.

Calla sat perfectly still in the middle of it all right on the front stoop, a rough-looking blanket tucked around her shoulders.

When she saw Adam drive in, she stood as if she’d been waiting for him. He pulled the truck as close as he could, which was pretty far back thanks to the emergency vehicles, and let it idle.

Throwing off the blanket, she waded through the crowds and the cars, ignoring anyone who spoke to her, until she got to him.

“Ellis almost killed Nia,” she said, opening the door. “She’s at the hospital now. She might not make it.”

In the dome light, he saw that her face was smeared in blood. The cardigan she’d worn earlier was missing. Her voice quivered, but her expression was almost stoic.

“Are *you* okay?” he asked.

“I’m okay, but Nia may not be. And no one here—” she glanced over her shoulder at the crowd—“knows what’s really going on. We’ve got to find him.”

“Get in,” Adam said, as if he could stop her.

She pulled herself into the passenger seat, and he drove off, leaving the chaos of the crime scene behind.

He gave her a few minutes to settle.

“What happened?” he asked finally.

She took a deep breath and went over the events. When she was finished, Adam felt a mixture of respect and concern.

“You sure it was Ellis who came at you?” Adam asked. “You saw him?”

“No, not clearly. He wore a hoodie. But who else could it have been? As far as I know, Ellis is the only man who might want to kill me.”

That wasn’t necessarily true.

“We did drop a bomb at Palmetto Grove tonight,” Adam reminded her. “Maybe that stirred up Ellis’s killer.”

She paused. “He didn’t want me asking any more questions,” Calla said. “I figured Ellis wanted us to stop looking for his killer, you know, so he could avoid getting closure. That way, he could live rent-free in Matt Corbin. But I guess he could have been the killer warning me off

the investigation.”

“It was definitely a man?”

She nodded.

“So Rena’s not a suspect.”

“At least not in attacking me.” She paused. “Though I suppose she might have influenced someone to do it.”

Likely, she was thinking of Brody Maddix. It was plausible that he could be protecting her somehow. Or protecting himself.

They’d know more once they got the info from the GPS on the cruiser.

Adam asked the next question that had been niggling at his brain. “You couldn’t see *in* him, could you?”

Calla glanced at him sidelong. “No.” She shook her head and then cocked it to the side. “Was I supposed to be able to do that?”

“I dunno,” Adam said. There was a lot he and Pursiful didn’t know about her skills.

“I don’t think it works like that.” Calla considered but then shook her head again.

“Maybe I have to see his eyes or something. Eyes are the windows to the soul, right?”

“Did you notice anything else? Height, weight, smell?”

“He was bigger than me, but I didn’t think to take his measurements.” She paused.

“Looking back, I don’t think it could have been Brody Maddix. He’s an experienced police officer. The man I fought didn’t have well-developed self-defense skills. I did a fair amount of damage. Even if he underestimated my training, his would have kicked in.”

Adam considered that for a moment. Proving it wasn’t Maddix didn’t mean it was Ellis. There were still other suspects out there.

Calla seemed sure. But she was still reacting to her adrenaline high and that wasn't the best state of mind for long-range planning.

They knew Ellis wanted to remain in Matt Corbin's body and that he wanted to convince Rena that he was still "alive."

Because Ellis couldn't somehow use Adam or Calla to convince Rena, then they represented threats to his stolen time on earth.

And he would try to eliminate them.

That meant a trap would be better than an all-out manhunt.

They needed to sit back and let Ellis come to them.

But Calla wouldn't like that. She wanted him gone. Yesterday.

"We probably aren't going to find him tonight," Adam warned, watching her out of the corner of his eye. "After his screw up with you, he's got to regroup, form a new plan. But he'll go back for Rena. Or he'll come after you. Or me. We need to be ready for him."

"So we're supposed to sit back and wait for him to attack again?"

"Yeah—"

"No way. He hurt Nia. We need to finish this before he hurts someone else."

"Can't do that." Adam shook his head. "There's a murderer too, don't forget."

"After tonight," Calla snorted. "I'm on Ellis's killer's side."

"Yeah, well, the guy's a douche. But that don't mean we can't play it smart."

"What's that mean?"

"We set a trap, bait it, and then wait for Ellis and his killer to come to us. It'll take twenty-four hours at the most."

"Twenty-four hours? What am I supposed to do tonight?" Calla demanded. It wasn't a

whine or a whimper. “Where am I supposed to go? You just said he would come after me. I won’t be safe.”

“No,” he agreed. “I got a spare room.”

“Sounds like a pretty stupid hideout to me.” Calla turned and eyed him. “You’re on his hit list too.”

“I hope I am.” He looked at her. “Let him come. At home, I’m ready for him. Running around out here? Not so much. You’ll be safe there.”

They both fell silent until they got to his place: an old double wide right on the marsh. The narrow ribbon of asphalt dead ended in a copse of trees, and an eight-foot-tall chain link fence surrounded Adam’s property on all sides.

“It’s not a fortress, but the place has only one easy point of access.” He pointed to the gate and then down the road we had traveled. “Corbin ain’t gonna slog through the marsh.”

“What?” Calla stared at him. “Invasive spirits can’t cross water?”

“No.” Adam gave her a long-suffering look. “Crossing a marsh ain’t easy. You ever tried?”

She shook her head. “But—”

“Sometimes just making a task more difficult will deter a criminal. That’s why people put locks on doors. A thief could still get in, but it’s harder. A lot of times they give up and go to a house with an unlocked door. Same here. Corbin could still get in, but it’ll be a harder task.”

“You keep calling him Corbin,” Calla pointed out.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “That’s who I see.”

“Not Ellis?”

“No, he’s a dead man. Corbin still has a chance.”

“Really?” Calla sounded as if she didn’t believe him. “If that’s true, why didn’t he stop Ellis from hurting Nia. You said he could throw him out if he wanted. As far as I’m concerned, he’s now Ellis’s accomplice.”

It wasn’t that simple, but that’s not what Calla wanted to hear.

“Where there’s life, there’s hope,” he said. “That’s what my Grandma always said. Corbin has a history of keeping to himself. No rap sheet anyway. His biggest crime was making himself an empty vessel. And nature abhors a vacuum.”

“You’re quoting Aristotle?”

“It’s the truth,” he said. “If a soul is not at home in its body, then it leaves a void.”

“You make Corbin sound like—” She broke off, knowing he probably wouldn’t approve of her metaphor. “A zombie. Living and dead at the same time.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of what they are. The traditional mind-controlled kind, not the walkers you see on TV these days.” Calla searched his face, but he turned away, letting his hair shield him from scrutiny. “Corbin is under Ellis’s control, and he is slipping away as Ellis becomes stronger. We need Ellis to go on to eternity and leave Corbin to take control of his own life. Corbin deserves one last chance at freedom, and Ellis deserves one last chance to go peaceably.”

“That means finding the murderer,” Calla said with a heavy sigh.

“I know you aren’t keen on the idea of playing cop,” he said. “But we need to work together. It’ll be safer. And we already have the perfect pretext for trapping the killer. We’ll let all the suspects know that Corbin witnessed Ellis’s death. Then, we wait to find out who comes to silence him.”