



DEAD INSIDE

A Calla Escott Novel

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One

Calla Escott raised an eyebrow at the feral-looking man who stood on the opposite side of her desk. Adam Shepherd claimed to be an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, but he certainly didn't look like one. With his shaggy hair, he reminded her of a mongrel street dog, just this side of tame.

"Can I see your identification?" Calla asked, holding out a neatly manicured hand.

Adam Shepherd, supposedly a sworn law enforcement officer, regarded her with silent eyes and then gave her a nearly indistinguishable sideways smirk.

She didn't like that little smirk, especially since it was combined with a keen look of understanding. He might present himself as if he lacked a few IQ points, but he was observant and likely far more intelligent than he wanted people to think he was.

Whether or not he turned out to be legit, Calla didn't want him in her office, her personal space. He wore a disguise, and disguises made her nervous.

"Yeah." He reached into the pocket of his khaki Carhart coat to produce a battered brown leather case and dropped it into Calla's waiting fingers.

The scent of warm leather wafted up as she opened the case and studied the picture ID, recording his identification number on a notepad. She snapped the case closed and placed it on the corner of her desk beside her small potted succulent plant.

Adam reached for his badge, and she noticed a hint of grease under his fingernails.

"Satisfied?" he asked as he returned the case to his coat pocket.

"Not even remotely," Calla said, pulling up the GBI website on her laptop with the intention of checking his credentials later if she needed to do so. But that was unlikely because

she wasn't taking any of this seriously.

Without making eye contact, he asked. "Anyone ever tell you you're paranoid?"

As a matter of fact, she had heard that criticism quite often. But she wasn't paranoid. She simply didn't give her trust to those who hadn't earned it.

Still, his candor annoyed her. Calla glared at him from behind her laptop. "Anyone ever tell you you're rude?"

"Every damn day," Adam snorted without a single hint of repentance. He probably heard that criticism often too. "Sometimes, polite doesn't get you what you need. Not in my line of work, anyway."

Still, that was no excuse for poor manners. "I think it's safe to say that, in this case, rudeness won't get you what you want either," she assured him. "What is it that you think I can do for you?"

Adam dropped uninvited into the wooden guest chair, overgrown hair swinging, and said, "Well, I don't know that you can," he said bluntly. "Pursiful sent me, and he seems to think you might be just the person to provide a psychological autopsy on a recent equivocal death case."

Calla uncrossed her arms and then recrossed them. Pursiful was the Jacks County Coroner. She'd had a few brushes with him in the past, but why he would think she consulted for law enforcement was beyond her.

"Coroner Pursiful is wrong," Calla assured Adam. "I don't consult for law enforcement."

Adam studied her through narrowed eyes. "He said you'd say that."

Calla harrumphed. "I'm a researcher."

"Who has consulted for the police in the past?"

"In the past." And she had regretted it every time. Not all courts admitted psychological

autopsies into evidence, and those that did were nothing short of war zones. Calla's experiences in court hadn't been focused on enlightening jurors about the deceased's mental state so much as defending the validity of a psychological autopsy in general and explaining her methods in particular. "At the present time, I have no inclination to involve myself in courtroom shenanigans. I have research..." She gestured at the neat office as if he should notice the research in progress.

Adam shrugged and seemed to settle deeper into the chair with each of her vague excuses.

"I'm not asking you to be an expert witness in court. I'm asking you to consult on this one case for the GBI. That's all." He pulled a small tablet from his jacket pocket, punched at the screen with his blunt fingertips, and placed the device on the desk. "Just take a quick look. Tell me if he killed himself."

A "quick look" would tell her nothing that he hadn't already figured out himself, if he was a decent investigator.

Wanting no part in consulting for Adam Shepherd, Calla deliberately avoided even glancing at the screen. "I should think Pursiful's forensic autopsy would tell you that."

"Yeah, you'd think," he said, edging the tablet closer to her. He was keeping his eyes averted, probably to lessen the pressure, but Calla got the feeling that somehow, he was still watching her, gauging her. "But they don't call it an equivocal death for nothing. It's not that simple. Have a look."

Finally, Calla gave in and glanced at the tablet to find a photograph of a deceased male. His body was propped against a headboard with a shotgun in his lap. The barrel pointed toward the victim's head, and the butt of the gun rested near his knees. Blood spatter covered the wall

behind him.

“BIPD—” That’s the Bell Island Police Department, which he pronounced “biped.” “— responded to a report of a gunshot around 3:30 AM on Friday the eighth.”

A recent death. Just ten days ago.

“They arrived at the victim’s townhouse in Palmetto Grove and found it locked. The victim lived alone and, other than the landlord, was the only person in possession of a key. The police entered the domicile and discovered an apparent suicide.”

“The scene does suggest suicide.” Calla shrugged. “I really don’t see why you’d need to consult with me on this c—”

Adam reached across the desk, and Calla flinched back. Her cheeks heated at her instinctive reaction, and she glanced quickly at her guest. He didn’t appear to notice and switched to the next picture.

What she saw on screen had her pulling the tablet closer. She used her fingers to zoom in on an object on the floor.

“Is that the victim’s brain?”

“Yeah,” Adam confirmed. “Pursiful says it’s called a—”

“Kronlein shot.” Calla supplied. “The brain is expelled from the skull due to the force of a high-powered weapon. But that doesn’t rule out suicide.”

“Check the next picture,” Adam said, not attempting to make the switch himself this time.

The next photo was taken from a wider angle, revealing the location of the brain to be a small sitting area, a loft of some sort near the stairs, and not on the bedroom floor as Calla had expected.

She leaned back and then forward again, studying the picture intently.

“The loft shares a common wall with the bedroom,” Adam explained. “The door is between them here.” He pointed to a section of the wall that ran perpendicular to the headboard.

“How did the victim’s brain end up in the next room?” Calla asked, her voice soft, lost in thought. “It’s impossible.”

She hadn’t intended to become interested, much less speak her curiosity aloud, but she couldn’t help herself.

A Kronlein shot was a rarity, but the position of the brain in an adjacent room? That was bizarre. The blood spatter on the wall behind the headboard showed that the fatal shot clearly occurred in the bedroom. So how had the brain traveled into the living room?

Was there any possibility that it rolled that far?

Or had someone moved the brain?

And if so, who? And why?

Calla had a dozen more questions, and she couldn’t stop herself from perusing the pictures again to orient herself within the layout of the house. For the brain to have reached its current position, it would have had to travel out of the skull across the room, bounce off the door, and ricochet to its current position beside the sofa. After experiencing all that trauma, the organ would have disintegrated.

“This couldn’t have occurred without human intervention of some sort,” Calla concluded.

“*That’s* why we want you to consult on this case.”

Across the desk, Adam Shepherd concealed his satisfaction. He had gained Dr. Calla’s interest now.

But would his trip to Bell Island Behavioral Health Services and his little slide show prove worthwhile?

Adam doubted it.

Pursiful warned him that the doc would be jumpy, but he had clearly undersold the reality of the situation. Dr. Calla was as skittish as a fawn, all wide-eyed and nervous. With her potted plants and her neat little stacks of paper, she was not at all the type to rush into chaos of her own free will.

The work he and Pursiful did was intense.

Sometimes dangerous.

And always messy.

Sure, the doc was smart, educated, and cute as hell in her prim little blazer. Her psychological insights might prove valuable, but would she want to become involved in their dark, dirty, dangerous world? Would she be able to keep it together?

And if she did allow herself to be dragged into this case, there was no guarantee that Calla Escott had the particular skill set he and Pursiful hoped she did.

“Was the bedroom door open or closed?” Calla asked, focusing her wide, doe eyes on him. He looked away. Something about those doe eyes made him itchy.

“When the police arrived, was the door open or closed?” she repeated more slowly, as if she doubted his grasp of the English language.

Feeling like a dumb redneck, Adam cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “Open.”

She hummed at his response and then returned her attention to the tablet.

“Was there any evidence of the brain’s rolling or bouncing into the other room?”

Though she asked the question aloud, he got the feeling that she wasn’t really waiting for

him to answer. Even her tone sounded doubtful. He watched for a moment as she flicked through the remaining pictures, studying each shot before going on to the next.

“No,” she answered her own question with a corresponding shake of her strawberry blond head. “The force of the blast would have dissipated once the brain left the skull cavity. The brain would have fallen to the bed or maybe the floor.”

She looked at him again. “The brain should be beside the victim.”

“Brain matter was discovered on the floor beside the bed,” Adam said. “The responding officers speculated that the brain may have bounced from there.”

“Impossible,” Calla said, again flicking through the pictures as if she might have missed something. “The force of the shotgun blast would have dissipated immediately after the brain was ejected from the victim’s skull. The human brain is capable of many amazing things, but it isn’t a rubber ball. It can’t bounce from room to room and remain intact.”

“Plus, there’s no evidence that’s what happened,” he agreed. “No brain matter was discovered that might indicate that it somehow ricocheted out the door.”

“So someone must have moved it there.”

Adam nodded.

“But why would the police rule this suicide without further investigation?”

“It’s more common than you think,” Adam admitted. “To a lot of cops, a shotgun in the lap equals suicide, details aside. The patrol cops saw suicide. Never even bothered to call a detective to the scene to verify. The book says all death scenes are supposed to be treated like murders, but this one sure as hell wasn’t.”

“No, it certainly wasn’t,” Calla agreed, still lost in her own thoughts.

“The scene—the locked house, the position of the body relative to the gun, the blood

spatter—it all says suicide. But the brain? Well, that’s why Pursiful flagged the case and had it sent to me at the GBI. Someone had to be inside the house at the time of the death or shortly thereafter. We still don’t know if someone entered the house, found the body, and moved the brain for some reason. Or if—”

“Someone shot and killed him,” Calla supplied, her voice belying her interest.

“And then moved the brain,” he finished.

“But why? Why move it? Why even touch it?” Calla raised conflicted eyes to Adam and then flushed. The case had piqued her interest, and, clearly, she wished it hadn’t. Clearing her throat, she pushed the tablet across her desk, her expression going blank. When she spoke again, her voice was prim and composed. “Still, I don’t see why you need me. The physical evidence should lead you to the truth.”

“That’s where the problem comes in,” Adam admitted. “Like I said, the first responders saw this as a suicide. They snapped these photos of the death scene, took a few witness statements, and then had the body removed. The death scene was released, and the landlord had a cleanup crew in there right away. In fact, the property is already on the market. So other than the body and the weapon, we have no other physical evidence.”

“All because they saw suicide and no other option.” Calla shook her head. “We see what we expect to see, don’t we?”

Adam studied her for a moment. “Sometimes,” he said, wondering again if the doc was up for what might be coming. “And sometimes we see things we don’t want to see.”

Calla narrowed her eyes at him, perhaps hearing the warning in his tone.

Adam picked up the tablet Calla had abandoned. “Anyway, that’s why we need you. Due to the lack of physical evidence, we can’t investigate the death using normal methods. We need

your help with the victimology. Was this guy suicidal? Or has the local PD let a murderer go free?"

Calla studied him for a moment. She must have found something reassuring in his expression because she gave him a quick nod.

"But no trials," she added.

"No courtroom," he agreed. Trials of a different sort might come. He couldn't make any promises like that. But he could at least assure her that she wouldn't end up as a pawn in the legal system. He and Pursiful tried not to make the more unusual aspects of their investigations out of the public eye.

"Fine," Calla relented. "You can tell Pursiful you talked me into it. I'll consult just this once, and it's against my better judgment." She paused and then added, "You can go now."

Adam might have been offended at her queenly dismissal, but he appreciated her bluntness. It was nice to have someone just say what they wanted, no games, no equivocation. He didn't want to have to decode everything all the time.

"Can't go quite yet," he said. "You'll need this." He reached into the abyss of his coat pocket and produced a flash drive.

"Case files," he explained, opening his palm for her.

She took the flash drive, her fingers maintaining a discreet distance from his palm. "If you need anything else..." he trailed off, trying not to wish she had brushed against him with that smooth-looking skin.

Damn, she looked fragile.

He mentally cursed Pursiful for sending him to drag her into their world. It could eat her alive.

Adam stood, still eying her. He shuffled his feet in the direction of the door, but then, he turned back. “Or if you’d like someone to come with you when you talk to his friends...”

Eyes narrowed again, she shrugged. “This should follow the usual course for a psychological autopsy. I’ll dig into the victim’s life. Before too long, I’ll probably know more about him than he did himself. Unless the contents of the drive are incomplete,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest and adding a stern expression. “I won’t need anything more from you.”

He got it. Calla Escott wanted to make sure he respected her boundaries. One case. No courtroom. And no complications.

Too bad for her that this was just the beginning of something that might complicate her life in ways she never even imagined possible.

“Well, if you do need anything from me—” Adam took a step back toward her desk and tapped the edge of laptop screen where he knew his GBI contact page was still visible—“you know how to reach me.”

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