

Dead Inside
A Calla Escott Novel

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Two

Not ten seconds after Special Agent Adam Shepherd departed Calla's office, her practice partner Nia materialized at the door. She was tall, blond, and dressed with a boho vibe, the exact opposite of Calla's conservative 1950s look.

"Hey, Cal," Nia said, picking at some pills on the sleeves of her peacock blue sweater. "Nice weather we're having, huh?"

Calla concealed a grin, but didn't respond. Nia didn't want to talk about the temperature or the condition of the roads. She wanted the scoop on the man who had just left the office, but she didn't want to appear nosy.

"I mean," Nia said, soldiering on with her weather ruse. "It just isn't right to have such cold weather on what's basically a subtropical island, right?"

Winter on Bell Island, Georgia, an insignificant little landmass situated in an Atlantic

Ocean island chain, always felt wrong. Nestled between Cumberland Island, Georgia, and Amelia Island, Florida, vacationers usually headed farther south to the white sandy beaches of Florida. But Bell Island was growing in popularity. It had good beaches, decent waves when the wind was right, and lots of historical places to visit. Originally settled by Spanish explorers, it boasted their typical architecture and grid-style city plan. Plus it was so affordable that Bell Island was becoming more crowded every summer.

“We should be basking in the sun wearing bikinis,” Nia lamented. “Not trudging around in the cold and wearing sweaters.”

“It *is* winter,” Calla reminded her. “Traditionally, that means colder weather.”

“That guy who just left here was dressed for it though. Work boots and a canvas coat....”

Nia ended her sentence as if Calla were supposed to pick up the story there.

Calla shook her head at Nia’s attempts to wheedle info. Her partner could wheedle with the best of them. It’s part of what made her such a good therapist.

“Good looking, nice ass....” Nia added, waggling an eyebrow at her.

Calla’s amusement faded as the image of Adam returned to her mind. There was something unsettling about him.

“If you want to know about the man who just left my office, you could ask.”

Understanding that to be as much of an invitation to socialize as Calla ever offered, Nia bounced farther into the office and flopped in the seat Adam had vacated.

“So is he a new patient?”

“If he were a patient,” Calla said, leaning back in her seat to smirk at her friend. “You’d know it. You’d be his therapist. And then, I’d have to reprimand you severely for commenting on his posterior regions. Very unprofessional.”

“Hey,” Nia said, shrugging a shoulder. “A nice butt is a nice butt. Besides, I wasn’t aware he was a patient at the time of my alleged comment. Besides, he’s not one, is he? So it’s a moot point.”

“You know I don’t take on therapy clients.” That was the beauty of the practice she and Nia had set up at Bell Island Behavioral Health Services. Nia did the post-trauma therapy, while Calla concentrated on PTSD research. It was the ideal arrangement.

“Yeah,” Nia agreed. “But he sure had that PTSD vibe. You know, that damaged intensity that he was throwing off... It’s kind of sexy.”

Calla raised an eyebrow. “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder doesn’t have a *vibe*, and that sort of trauma certainly isn’t sexy.”

“Whatever you say, Cal. So who was Mr. Not-Sexy-at-All, and is he single?”

Calla ignored her second question, but answered the first. “He’s a GBI agent who asked me to consult on an equivocal death case.”

“Did you agree?” Nia asked, leaning forward and then back again, obviously trying not to appear eager. And failing.

Calla nodded.

Nia settled back in the chair, a broad smile stretching her lips. “That’s great!”

“Is it?” Calla asked, truly uncertain whether or not she’d made the right decision. “I’m not so sure. I was just thinking of contacting him and calling off the whole business.”

“He just left. You can’t be having second thoughts already.”

When Calla didn’t respond, Nia’s face turned serious.

“You’ve stay in this office too much. Some people were starting to speculate that you were actually a vampire.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Calla scoffed. But she had to admit that she did prefer to keep to herself. “There’s no such thing as vampires.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Nia mocked. “Look at yourself. You’re pastier than usual. You need to get outside, get some sun.”

“You just said it’s dull and cold outside,” Calla pointed out.

“Well, you need some adventure then.”

“Psychological autopsies are not what I’d consider an adventure.” Calla paused and looked around her small, neat office. “Besides, I like it here. You know I prefer research.”

“What do you think a psychological autopsy is? It’s research. Just outside and in the wild. The project is right up your alley.”

Calla tilted her head and considered.

In general, she didn’t mind the victimology research. Reading calendars, diaries, phone records...it was like solving her own little mystery. What had life thrown at the victim, and how did he react to it? Humans were complex creatures, and what might make one crumble could make another strong.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Nia asked. “Now that I know that hottie—”

“Special Agent Adam Shepherd.”

“—Adam isn’t a therapy client, I wouldn’t mind being able to admire that eye candy a little.”

“Eye candy?” Calla could appreciate Adam’s rugged, untamed handsomeness, but she couldn’t shake the feeling of unease she’d experienced in his presence.

“Oh, come on! He was totally hot in a redneck kind of way. You know, a little dirty and rough around the edges.”

Calla shook her head. "I keep forgetting how young you are. All you think about is gratifying your sexual urges. It's ever so Freudian," she added, just to tweak Nia a little.

"Oh please," Nia grinned. "I'm not that much younger than you. And you know very well that age doesn't prevent people from experiencing sexual urges. Besides, I saw how you looked at him. You know you're just dying to swoon over him."

"You're projecting. I didn't look at him with anything but suspicion."

"You're in denial. You haven't been attracted to a man in so long you don't remember how it feels." She flung her arm dramatically across her forehead. "Oh, Mr. Nasty Carnival Man...."

"Get out of my office, you nut," Calla said, finally laughing. "Fine. He was good looking, but I'm not ready for *that*."

Calla wasn't sure if she were referring to finding a man attractive or working on a potentially disturbing psychological autopsy.

"Seriously, Cal," Nia said, her laughter fading into a soft smile. "We've been partners for five years. Friends for much longer."

Calla nodded. She didn't have many friends in the traditional sense, but Nia was one.

"You are brilliant and interesting, and you've worked hard on your own recovery. It's time you enlarged your comfort zone a little. You keep yourself shut up in this office too much."

"You know I'm not big on social occasions," Calla said, deliberately misunderstanding her intention and eager to defend herself. "Parties are too overwhelming."

The very idea of being in a loud room full of gyrating strangers, all brushing up against her, blocking her escape routes, made her heart begin to race.

She took a series of steady, metered breaths.

There was a reason Calla had focused on PTSD research. She had a personal interest in understanding the condition and learning how to treat it effectively.

Calla wanted to cure herself.

“You don’t have to *party*,” Nia said. “But for someone who spends all her time trying to help people, you sure don’t interact with them much. A psychological autopsy would be a good first step. Getting to know a dead person can’t cause much trauma.”

Calla pursed her lips, but said nothing. She had worked hard to get to where she was today, but she still wasn’t participating fully in life because there was always that fear that she might shut down. That something would happen, and in the moment, she would overreact. Or worse, she wouldn’t be able to function and would become a victim.

Again.

But Nia was right. Staying in the safety of her office, of her paperwork and surveys, that wasn’t really a full life. It was a step toward a full life, but to get there, she had to take the next step. She had to go out into the world.

“I’m just saying,” Nia insisted. “This is good. Your helping out the police. It keeps you connected and challenges the big ole brain of yours.”

Calla didn’t want to agree with her. She wanted to tell Nia that she got all the human contact she needed just by analyzing studies, but deep down, she knew it wasn’t true.

She pursed her lips and gave her a small smile. “You’re a good therapist, you know.”

“That’s why you keep me around.” Nia returned a broad smile and stood. “Well, I have a client in five. Gotta refill the coffee. Say hi to Adam—”

“Special Agent Shepherd,” Calla corrected.

“Say hi to *Adam* for me when you see him. And don’t forget to check out his butt.”

Calla shook her head. But Nia was right.

Not about Adam's butt.

However, perhaps, it was time for that to change. And an equivocal death case investigated under controlled circumstances, well, that sounded like a pretty safe step.

Three

Adam Shepherd wished he were in his garage with his hands coated in oil and grease.

But no, he was standing on the doorstep of Pursiful's brick ranch-style house while the precious evening passed him by.

Finally, Pursiful's heavy door opened, revealing a short, round man of upper middle age and receding hairline. Behind him, lurked a shaggy black dog that could technically be classified as kin to a rhinoceros. Adam looked between man and beast. The workday was over, and Pursiful held his customary snifter of brandy. The dog's green eyes shone like hellfire, and he looked like he was sizing up Adam as his evening meal.

"How'd it go, my boy?" Pursiful asked, beaming at Adam expectantly. He stepped aside to beckon him inside. Bask did not mimic his owner's gesture but stood rooted right in Adam's path. "Did Dr. Escott agree to consult?"

"Yeah," Adam said, nudging past Bask, who glared at him. "But I ain't sure it was a good idea."

"Your grammar's slipping," Pursiful pointed out helpfully as he shut the door. "You're upset."

Adam ran a hand down the back of his neck. He was upset. He felt like he was doing Pursiful's dirty work.

Giving the hulking service dog another glance, Adam reminded himself why Pursiful kept his role mostly behind the scenes. He wasn't physically capable of doing a lot of legwork.

Still, that didn't mean Adam appreciated serving as the coroner's errand boy.

"So I said 'ain't.'" Adam turned to face Pursiful, who wore an utterly benign expression. "That don't mean nothing."

Pursiful smirked, probably at his double negative.

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” he said. Behind him, Bask curled his lip in a silent threat to tear Adam’s face off.

“Sorry if I’m not using the subjunctive,” Adam muttered. He hated being read so easily. “But I’m not real keen on what I did today.”

The more Adam thought about luring Calla into their business, the less he liked it. He’d caught himself considering a return trip to her clinic to rescind the offer.

But of course, he didn’t do that.

Because what if she did have the gift?

Pursiful gave him a pitying smile. “Why are you upset?” he asked, walking forward a few steps. Bask hovered at his heels, teeth still partially exposed. “You didn’t do anything today that you haven’t done a dozen times before. What makes this different?”

Suddenly parched, Adam shook his head and turned toward the kitchen

“I don’t like putting vulnerable people in danger,” Adam said, taking a moment to collect himself. “And the doc seems delicate. I’m not sure she’s going to keep it together when she finds out what this case is actually about.”

“Ignorance is not bliss,” Pursiful reminded him. “It’s just ignorance. And that’s far more dangerous than the alternative, as we well know.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Adam tromped from plush living room carpet to the slate kitchen floor, his boots landing heavily with each step.

He didn’t need Pursiful’s reminder. He knew his job, and he knew why it was important. He understood why they needed a person with the skills the doc might possess. He had a few questions for her himself.

“I wish there were another way.”

Look. Subjunctive. He was getting a handle on himself.

“We both know there isn’t,” Pursiful said.

“Are you sure she’s the right person?” Adam muttered as he opened the cabinet by the sink. The glasses were no longer there. He opened and closed four cabinets, finding meticulously arranged dinnerware, but no glasses. “Did you rearrange this shit again? How do you find anything in here if you move it around all the time?”

Pursiful cleared his throat to gain Adam’s attention and opened the door of a modular bar he hadn’t seen before. Pursiful extracted a glass and handed it Adam.

Bask watched their interchange on the plush carpet where his feet wouldn’t get cold.

Some protection dog, Adam thought. Didn’t want to catch a chill.

Adam plucked the glass from Pursiful’s fingers, finding it heavier than he expected. He turned, filled the vessel with tap water, and guzzled it. After he refilled the glass, he faced Pursiful again.

Eyes gleaming, Pursiful gripped his hands behind his back and rocked up onto his toes.

“So that’s what’s bothering you?” Pursiful asked with unconcealed excitement. “Dr. Escott is different.”

Adam grunted in response. It was clear that Pursiful didn’t give a damn about his moral quandary. He just wanted to know if they had finally found the right person.

Adam wasn’t in the mood to indulge him. He leaned against the edge of the counter and said nothing.

“That’s tremendous news,” Pursiful enthused. “Any anomaly could indicate we’ve finally found the right person.”

Pursiful rocked up on his toes again, almost bouncing.

Once again, Adam refused to be baited.

Finally, Pursiful stepped forward and asked plainly, “What precisely do you mean by ‘not the usual type’?”

Annoyed, Adam set the glass on the counter. He should be thrilled that Pursiful thought he was on the right track, but he was tired, pissed, and uninterested in being used as Pursiful’s flunky.

Besides, Pursiful knew already that Dr. Calla Escott was different from the others. He’d done all his research. He probably knew her history better than she did herself. He certainly didn’t need the facts repeated to him.

Dr. Calla Escott was different.

In their years long search for a soul-seer, their quest usually led them to a certain type of person: most often someone just this side of living. Their normal subjects were preoccupied with death. They dressed in black and dyed their hair the color of pitch, wore too much eyeliner, had too many tattoos, and indulged in too many depressants, painkillers, or both. They were both drawn to death and yet simultaneously unable to cope with it. It was kind of the nature of the beast.

So far, they had not unearthed a soul-seer. Frankly, Adam was beginning to believe they were nothing but urban legends.

Seeing that Adam had no intention of talking, Pursiful gave in and began reciting what he already knew. “There are strong indicators that Dr. Escott will have the skill set we’ve been looking for, and the Ellis case has all the makings of the perfect test. We’ll find out soon enough if she has what we need.”

“Yeah, what we *need*,” Adam repeated, his emotions from the afternoon getting the better of him once more. “What if she doesn’t want to give it? What if she can’t?”

“She will.” His tone was certain.

Adam cut his eyes to the smaller man. “What makes you so sure?”

“She has no choice,” Pursiful said simply. “We need her, both of us. And you will be there to help her cope.”

Adam felt like he’d been dropped inside a Godfather movie and was making offers that couldn’t be refused.

He didn’t like that.

“I ain’t going to force her,” Adam said, brows dropping as anger bubbled to the surface. “If she don’t want to get involved in all this mess, I ain’t going to try to persuade her.”

“Yes, I know what you’re getting at,” Pursiful agreed. “I’m not asking you to manipulate her.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. The coroner’s agreement had come too easily.

“And I’m not gonna hide the truth from her neither,” Adam added. “She’s got the right to decide whether or not she wants to be part of this.”

“Once we find out if she has the gift, you are free to tell Dr. Escott whatever you feel you need to. But if you tell her the truth too soon—before we know for sure what she is—you know how she’ll react.”

She’d think he was delusional.

She’d probably want to run some tests on his brain. Write a paper on him.

But that wasn’t Adam’s greatest concern. He worried more about how she might react to seeing the truth with her own eyes.

“She’s fragile,” Adam said.

“I informed you of her condition from the beginning,” Pursiful said. “What do you think drew her to the field of post-traumatic stress disorder? She’s got a personal interest.”

As a matter of fact, Pursiful hadn’t remembered to tell him the doc had symptoms of PTSD.

Adam pressed his lips together. Now the doc’s reaction to his reaching across her desk made sense.

He scowled at Pursiful. “You told me she was hard to work with. You didn’t mention that she was dealing with PTSD. She nearly jumped a foot and a half when I reached toward the tablet she was holding. And she’s clean and soft and... Maybe she ain’t got the stomach for the shit we deal with.”

“Perhaps not,” Pursiful said, now seemingly understanding the difference Adam saw in her. “Or perhaps she will surprise you. As you said, it will be her choice.”

“Look, I know you got your reasons for doing this—”

“As do you,” Pursiful reminded him. “Don’t worry, son. Everything is going to be just fine.”

Adam wished he hadn’t said that.

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