

**Dead Inside**  
**A Calla Escott Novel**

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## Four

Calla spent the afternoon ignoring the dead man.

Instead of getting acquainted with the victim and his case, she passed the remainder of the day the way she always did: pouring over PTSD studies, looking for patterns, entering data into already overwhelmingly long spreadsheets.

When the clock struck five, Calla followed her usual routine. She straightened her office, turned off her laptop, and tucked it in her leather satchel.

Only today, she added the flash drive Special Agent Shepherd had given her.

She locked up her personal office and then the outer door to the clinic. She took the nicely decorated, but still sterile, hallway through the main building where she and Nia rented practice space. Pushing open the heavy metal door, a cold blast of moist air hit Calla headlong. Nia was right. It shouldn't ever get this cold on the Georgia coast.

She pulled her coat tighter and hurried across the parking lot toward her car as fast as her kitten heels would allow.

Once settled in the buttery leather seats of her silver sedan, Calla cranked the engine, turned on the seat warmers, and blasted the heat. It didn't have much effect on the chilly, moist air. And only by the time she pulled into her driveway and under the carport was the air coming through the vents was finally warm.

*Typical*, Calla thought, forcing herself to leave the now-warm vehicle and dash to her door.

The redbrick building welcomed her with the immediate gift of peace.

She often wondered if that feeling of tranquility came because of her own attachments to the place or if it was somehow leftover from its original purpose.

Either way, she loved her home, a former Spanish mission chapel that had long since been converted into a house.

Dark, heavy, exposed beams lined the ceiling, and terracotta tiles cover the floor. Updated recessed lighting mingled with heavy Moorish-looking chandeliers.

Calla hung her keys on the hook by the back door and kicked off her heels, leaving them where they lay.

She deposited her satchel on the kitchen island en route to the master suite, the only separate section in the open-floor-plan house. She changed into yoga pants and a loose sweatshirt and padded back to the kitchen to search the refrigerator for sustenance.

Choosing to finish off some pasta left over from the previous night, she grabbed her satchel and settled on her couch.

She had avoided him long enough. It was time to meet the dead man.

She ate while her laptop booted up, and when it was finally ready, she inserted Adam's flash drive.

The dead man was Waylon Ellis.

Middle aged at the time of his death, Ellis had been handsome, with dark hair and eyes and a neatly trimmed Van Dyke. His eyes glittered, even in the usually dreadful driver's license photo.

He certainly had the advantage of being physically appealing. But what was he underneath the good looks? That was what mattered to Calla. Neat appearances often concealed more than they revealed.

Her thoughts returned to Special Agent Adam Shepherd, a man who gave all the appearance of an unwashed auto mechanic. But underneath lurked an intelligent, insightful

human. He had successfully conned her into agreeing to consult on this case, after all.

She would not make the mistake of underestimating him again.

Calla took out a fresh notepad and pen.

A psychological autopsy was basically an information-gathering process, research.

Calla's forte. She would not only study archival information related to the victim, but she would also conduct interviews with people with whom the victim had significant relationships. In short, her job was to study Ellis's school records, medical records, personal letters, calendars, diaries, and police reports. After that, she would talk to his family and close friends to find out more about him and his mental state. Once all her data was gathered, Calla would look for themes and issues that may be valuable in the explanation of his death.

She'd start with the information Adam had provided, move to online research, and then go into the field.

His bio was pretty average. Born to lower middle class parents in a rural South Georgia town, Waylon Ellis had a slightly adventurous youth. He was busted for underage drinking and pot smoking and got community service for defacing an overpass with a can of Krylon. Still, he managed to graduate high school with a middling GPA and became a commercial builder.

Ten years ago, Ellis started his own company, managing teams of workers whom he sent around the country to construct new fast-food joints, factories, or whatever needed to be built. That's when the money started rolling in and he'd leased his townhouse in Palmetto Grove.

Thanks to the slowing economy, Ellis's company had been downsized recently, but his financial records indicated that it was still managing to operate in the black.

Calla scrawled notes as she read the remainder of his work history. Perhaps, Ellis could have been depressed about downsizing and layoffs, or maybe he looked out on the horizon and

saw no hope for economic recovery.

Of course, a person's decision to commit suicide was usually a complex equation, not a simple cipher. People don't become suicidal overnight because their business has taken a dip.

Suicidal ideation is a process, beginning with general demotivation and dissatisfaction with life. Usually, it spirals down from there.

Work alone didn't make a person who he was.

What else was going on with Waylon Ellis prior to his death?

Calla scanned the documents, choosing the victim's calendar. The file opened, revealing a scanned monthly calendar featuring scantily clad women wielding tools.

Classic male porn fantasy. Other than the utter impracticality of doing electrical or plumbing work with no protective clothing, there was nothing unusual in the choice of subject matter. Well, other than the obviously fake breasts and six-inch nails sported by the models.

Calla turned her focus to the calendar itself, going over the last few months. The grids showed a smattering of business appointments, numerous weekly jobs, and several dates with a woman named Rena.

A quick web search told her that Rena Bethel lived in Palmetto Grove, right next door to Waylon Ellis. Her social media accounts showed that she portrayed herself as a classy Southern belle, all bleached blond hair and monogrammed accessories. Rena had also attended the neighborhood party on the day of Ellis's death.

So Ellis had a regular lady friend, and he attended parties, so he obviously socialized. But how well did he fit into that society? Did he cultivate healthy relationships? She would have to dig deeper to find out.

Unfortunately, the rest of Adam's information revealed little more.

Ellis had no history of psychological treatment, and his medical records were scant. He'd visited a doctor in the last year for stomach pain, which signified little. Additional charts indicated that Ellis was in average health for a man of his age. Slightly overweight with elevated blood pressure, he certainly wasn't facing any immanently life-threatening conditions, like cancer. His blood pressure wasn't even high enough to warrant mild medication. He was supposed to be following a low-salt diet.

His health gave him no reason to want to end his own life.

Calla scanned the autopsy report until she got to the summary at the end. Pursiful's examination indicated that Ellis was well over the legal blood alcohol limit at the time of his death. His liver showed signs of chronic alcohol abuse, and there was evidence of previously healed injuries to Ellis's hands and face, perhaps indicating that he was prone to fighting.

The cause of death was a gunshot wound—formed by a 12 gauge slug fired from a shotgun—to the submandibular region of the skull. Whether or not the wound was self-inflicted was unable to be determined. Based on the trajectory of the slug, Ellis could have pulled the trigger himself or someone else could have done the job for him. But the powder burns and stippling indicated that that shot was fired while in contact with the victim's skin.

Calla flipped to the next document in the forensics folder: fingerprints. Ellis's condo was littered with his own prints, his girlfriend Rena's prints, those of the patrol officers, and many other full and partial unidentified prints. The shotgun itself contained only the victim's prints, and the trigger held a partial right thumbprint belonging to the victim.

That was a point in favor of the self-inflicted gunshot wound theory. If Ellis had killed himself either on purpose or by accident, it was likely that he would have used his thumb to push the trigger. It was at least physically possible that he could have taken his own life.

Leaving the autopsy photos on screen, Calla set the laptop on the coffee table and snuggled back on the sofa, tucking her feet beneath her.

The night had grown chillier, and she had forgotten to turn up the heat pump. Feeling tired, she simply pulled the terracotta colored chenille throw from the back of the couch and draped it over herself.

Even without taking the location of the victim's brain into consideration, this was already an interesting case.

The death scene appeared to indicate suicide, but few of the classic suicide markers were present. Ellis left no note indicating his intention to die or the reasons behind his decision, as was common in many suicides. None of his personal documents indicated depression, family crisis, trauma, or other psychological issues. He was not terminally ill, and nothing indicated illness in his family or circle of friends.

On the other hand, Ellis had a history of drinking and drug use as an adolescent, and as an adult, he used alcohol on a regular basis. There were also indications of a history of fighting. He recently downsized his construction business, which may have caused him to feel stress about his future or caused him guilt over firing employees.

There was not enough information to make a determination. Not yet anyway.

Calla still needed to read the recent police reports and witness statements. She'd purposefully withheld that task for the end. She wanted to form her own opinion of the victim based on what he could tell her himself. She didn't want to hear about him from others until she'd gotten acquainted with him first.

Besides, Special Agent Shepherd said that the police report and witness statements lacked much useful information. And what information they did contain would just have to wait.

Now cozy and warm under her blanket, Calla yawned, and her eyelids began to feel heavy. Letting them slide closed, she indulged in as many precious hours sleep as she could get.

She would need it. Because tomorrow, she was going to have to interview Waylon Ellis's friends and neighbors.



## Five

The next morning, a Saturday, Calla drove to Palmetto Grove, a condominium complex on the marsh side of Bell Island where Waylon Ellis lived. Neither touristy nor low-rent, the neighborhood couldn't quite be classified as luxury either. It was upper middle class, with an abundance of sidewalks for bicyclists and dog-walkers.

The condos all looked identical—like they had been created from a giant press from the sky. Narrow, two-story units boasted of a coquina facade. The crushed seashell and stucco exteriors were popular on Bell Island because they stood up well to the constant assault of salt air and wind.

Calla scanned the row of homes. Every one had freshly painted window and door trim. Whoever was responsible for the care of this development was still fighting the good fight against nature. And apparently, he was winning.

But looks could be deceiving.

What was visible on the surface didn't always reflect what existed on the inside.

What would Calla's find inside Rena Bethel's condo? She rang the bell and waited to find out.

Mug of coffee in hand, Waylon's girlfriend appeared at the glass door wearing a monogrammed terrycloth bathrobe and a frown. She ran a hand through her tangled blond hair, and in a small voice asked, "Can I help you?"

"Rena Bethel?" Calla queried through the glass door, offering the woman her warmest smile.

Rena hesitated and looked as if she wanted to step back and close the heavy wooden door.

Disheartened, Calla wished she'd brought Nia along for this. Her partner was so much better at reassuring uncertain people than Calla was.

But she smiled again, hoping the woman wouldn't hide herself away.

"I'm Dr. Calla Escott," she said. "I'm sorry to bother you this morning, but the GBI asked me to help them understand what happened to Waylon Ellis."

At the mention of her boyfriend's name, a series of conflicting emotions crossed Rena's face. Then, her tired hazel eyes grew distant, remembering.

The wind picked up, pulling strands of Calla's hair free from her neat bun. Remaining silent to give the woman time to process, Calla shivered.

Moments passed. Calla hoped that Rena might say something, but she seemed to have slipped too deeply into another world.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Calla said finally, breaking the silence. "As I said, I'm looking into his suicide. I want to help."

Rena's eyes refocused, and her fingers tightened on the mug's handle. "What do you mean 'help'?"

"Well," Calla hedged. She didn't want to alert anyone that his death might be anything other than a suicide. "Local authorities ruled his death a suicide, and the GBI has contracted with me to gather information on recent deaths of that nature in order to create a suicide prevention program for the area."

That was a total lie, but it loosened the worry lines around Rena's mouth.

"Oh," Rena said, releasing a pent up breath. "I don't know what help I can be. I mean, he didn't leave a note or anything. He didn't explain..."

"Not everyone leaves a note," Calla assured her. "But most people signal their decision

somehow. Knowing what was in his mind might help to give you closure.”

Rena pushed open the door. “Come in,” she said, giving her a small smile. “It’s freezing out there.”

Calla stepped into the warmth of Rena’s condo, tempted deeper inside by the smell of cinnamon.

“Come on back to the kitchen. It’s a bit of a mess. I haven’t felt like doing much since—” Rena broke off, but her steps never faltered. She led Calla to a tidy room done up in copper and cream. The room was hospitable, but it gave off a decorated vibe, more than a homey one.

“Sit down there.” Rena pointed to a perfectly distressed cream bar stool. “I have some cinnamon buns in the oven. You’ll want coffee?”

Rena was already reaching for a carafe when Calla agreed politely. Accepting a small token from Rena might help the woman open herself more.

Calla wasn’t much of a coffee aficionado, but a warm mug would feel good on her numb fingers.

“How did the GBI get involved in this anyway?” Rena asked over her shoulder. “Last I heard, even the local police were done looking into his—the matter.”

“Well, it’s not your typical involvement,” Calla said. “It’s more for research purposes. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to ask a few questions about Mr. Ellis.”

“Mr. Ellis?” Rena laughed lightly for the first time since Calla had made her acquaintance. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone call him Mr. Ellis. I call...called...him Waylon. Everyone did, even his employees.”

“Waylon, then,” Calla said, wrapping her hands around the mug and nearly sighing in relief as the warmth seeped through her frozen flesh. “How did you two meet?”

Rena perched on her barstool with one foot tucked beneath her and took a slurping sip of hot coffee. “He moved into Palmetto Grove, and he just stole my heart. Right from the beginning he just bowled me over.”

Calla nodded. “He was very attentive?”

“He took me out every night, gave me little gifts all the time. And he had this big personality, like he filled up a room with energy just by walking into it. And he loved me. *Me.*”

Rena’s voice turned wistful. “Waylon always said it was love at first sight.”

“What about you? Was it love at first sight for you?”

“I don’t know how it couldn’t be.” Wrinkles appeared behind her blond bangs, and she shrugged again. “When someone loves you that much, it’s hard not to love them back. From the moment we met, we were together all the time. He was my all day, every day. We never went more than a few hours without talking or seeing each other.”

Rena tilted her head to the side, and her expression faltered.

Calla gave her a beat to collect herself.

“But then, things cooled off, like they do, you know.”

“What do you mean?” Calla asked, watching emotions skitter across Rena’s face.

“Oh, Waylon still loved me. I know he did. But real life set in. We went out less. He got busy with work and didn’t bring me little gifts like he used to. He didn’t call as much. Things got more stressful, but he still loved me.”

“What stressed him out?” Calla asked.

“Work mostly. But then he laid off some employees, and things got better after that.”

Calla went through a rapid succession of questions.

“Was he having trouble sleeping or sleeping more than usual?”

“No.”

“Eating more or less than usual?”

“Nope.”

“Did he seem anxious?”

She shook her head.

“You mentioned laying off workers. He wasn’t conflicted about letting people go?”

“Yeah, a little,” Rena said. “But Waylon didn’t get emotional about work.”

Calla hummed and changed tactics. She gotten a chance to read the recent police reports and knew BIPD had responded to three disorderly conduct complaints involving Rena and Waylon. According to the reports, Ellis had been intoxicated, and Rena had been injured in “unrelated accidents” each time. Patrol officers suspected that he abused Rena, but they were never able to find any corroborating evidence or witnesses to lead to an arrest or charges.

“The autopsy showed Waylon was above the legal limit the night he died.” Calla said, her tone careful. She hoped Rena would bring up the violent aspects of their relationship of her own accord. This was Calla’s gentle nudge in that direction.

Bitterness briefly turned Rena’s lips downward, but then she forced a smile. “Waylon drank, but he wasn’t an alcoholic or anything. He drank at parties, had a beer or two after work. Maybe on the weekends,” Rena said with a heavy sigh. “Look, if you work with the GBI, then you obviously know about the fake domestic violence stuff.”

“Yes,” Calla said. “I read the police reports, but I’d like to hear about it in your words.”

Looking away, Rena shook her head. “It’s not right. You’re asking me to lie, to say he beat me. I don’t want to speak ill of the dead.”

“I’m not asking you to lie,” Calla said. “I need to know the truth about him so I can

understand what happened.”

Rena studied her kitchen floor for a time.

The oven timer went off, and Rena went obediently to take the baking sheet out and set it on a cooling rack.

The smell of cinnamon grew stronger, and Calla’s stomach growled.

When Rena turned back to the island, it was without a cinnamon roll for Calla, but she did open up more about Waylon.

“He was different when he drank. Not very nice. But I could handle him. It was nobody else’s business. That night, Leo—that’s his landlord—called the police.”

“Why do you think he felt the need to do that?”

“Waylon needed help getting home,” she offered.

That wasn’t the reason, and they both knew it.

“The police report says there was an altercation,” Calla corrected.

“No, that’s not true,” Rena corrected. “It wasn’t an *altercation*. Waylon and Leo just argued. Leo was always trying not to repair things in Waylon’s condo. It wasn’t right. I tried to help calm things down.”

Calla didn’t press her. She knew from the report that the police had come upon another domestic dispute featuring the couple. Leo was apparently long forgotten by then.

“So the police came....”

“And Brody—”

“Brody?” Calla repeated.

“Brody Maddix. He’s a police officer.”

“You knew one of the responding officers?”

“Yeah, we went to high school together. I’ve known Brody forever. He helped me get Waylon home and into bed.”

Her face contorted, and tears began to fall.

This reaction seemed natural. Rena was describing the last time she saw her boyfriend alive. Face averted to give her some privacy, Calla waited until Rena got control of her emotions.

“Did Waylon say or do anything unusual once you got him home?”

“No.” Rena dabbed at her eyes. “He could barely stand, so Brody and I got him in bed, and then he passed out. That’s all.”

Waylon was conscious when he first arrived home, but falling down drunk. That matched the finding in Pursiful’s autopsy.

“What did you do after you got Waylon in bed?”

“I—I went back to the party. It broke up around midnight. Then, I went home.”

“To your place?” Calla clarified.

Rena nodded.

“You didn’t go back to check on him?”

“No, no.” Rena set her coffee on the counter and pushed it away. “I did not go back. After what happened, I was upset.”

“After what happened with Leo, you mean?” Calla asked.

Rena swallowed hard and shook her head. “Just the whole thing. It was so embarrassing. Having the police come for no reason. You know what I mean?”

Calla understood, but probably not what Rena wanted her to. Abuse victims were caught in a cycle that often involved a public denial of what was happening to them. Admitting that they were being physically or emotionally abused made it real. They didn’t want it to be real. In order

to survive, they had to pretend everything was okay, and eventually, they came to believe it on some level.

“A while later,” Rena continued, staring down at her shaking hands. Her voice shook nearly as much. “Someone banged on my door. They told me Waylon killed himself. I didn’t even hear the shot. Somebody called the police. Everybody was outside, watching them go through Waylon’s house. I—I didn’t even hear it....”

Calla watched Rena carefully. That was a pretty vague, disordered description of the night’s events. “Who knocked on your door?”

She gave a quivery shrug. “It was...uh...Leo. It must have been him.”

That was a pretty shaky response.

“Was that before or after the police arrived?”

Rena burst into tears. “I don’t know! I’m so confused. It all just happened so fast.”

“It’s okay,” Calla soothed, aware that she had pressed Rena a little too far. She wanted an accurate picture of what happened that night, and extremely emotional people are usually unable to relate events until they’ve calmed down. “It was an emotional night. It’s normal to have things jumbled in your mind. I just have a few business questions left.”

Still a bit watery, Rena nodded.

“Did Waylon have a will?” If he did, the GBI didn’t have a record of it.

Rena shook her head.

“Did he leave instructions for his possessions? Maybe not in a formal document, but maybe he mentioned something in passing....”

Again, she shook her head.

“Can you think of anything unusual that has happened since then?” She was grasping at



straws. “Anything you can tell me will help. Anything that stands out as strange or out of the ordinary.”

“Even if it’s not directly related to Waylon?”

“Maybe,” Calla hedged. “Like what?”

“Well, I don’t know what it means, but after Waylon...you know..., I started getting these phone calls from the guy across the street.”

Calla began with the first obvious question. “Who’s the guy across the street?”

“Matt Corbin in unit 302. He started calling the day after...like within twenty-four hours. I answered the first few times, but then I let them go to voicemail.”

“What did he want to talk about?”

“He was—” Rena rubbed her exposed forearms. “He was asking me out.”

“On a date?” Calla raised a brow and made another note.

“He knows I’m still Waylon’s girl,” she insisted. “I told him to stop calling, but he kept right on. I decided to ignore him. He’s just a kid, you know. Just out of college. I figured he was too young to know any better than to ask out a woman who just lost the man she loved.”

“But he kept calling?”

“Yeah,” Rena looked away. “And the messages got weirder. He knew stuff about me. Me and Waylon. And he would describe this stuff in detail.”

“He knew stuff about you and Waylon? What sort of stuff?”

“Private moments, conversations.” She paused and shivered. “It’s like he’s been stalking us or something. I guess he can see a lot from across the street.”

Calla nodded toward the front of the townhouse. “He’s right across?”

“Yeah,” Rena said, getting up to lead her through the kitchen to the living room window.

Calla used two fingers to open the blinds.

“I’ve been keeping everything closed, since....”

“Probably a good idea,” Calla agreed.

“The master bedroom is right above us,” she said with disgust. “He could see right in there too, probably watched everything.”

“And Waylon’s place is right next door. Same floor plan?”

A look of realization came over Rena’s face. “So he could have been watching us there too.”

That meant Matt Corbin might have seen what happened the night Waylon Ellis died. That made him worth talking to while Calla was at Palmetto Grove.

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