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SnapStories Edition

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Six

Calla stepped down from Rena Bethel's front stoop, having found little else that might hint at suicidal ideation in Waylon Ellis.

But she had found a potential witness to his death.

Calla tightened the belt on her trench. The wind had died down, and the sun peeked bravely through the misty morning clouds, not doing much to dispel the chill in the air. She glanced at Waylon's vacant condo.

A "for lease" sign stood in the middle of the tiny front yard.

The owner—Leo Baranova—hadn't wasted any time getting the place back on the market.

Calla looked toward Matt Corbin's townhouse and then at Rena's again. Given the relative positions of their condos, her claim that he was watching her was plausible. Their windows were aligned perfectly to allow him good views into both Rena's bedroom and the one at Waylon's condo next door. He could also see into their living rooms. Heck, he could have been watching her every move.

Calla shuddered at the thought of being observed in her private space and made a mental note to keep her blinds closed at night. It was unlikely that anyone would be interested in watching her work on the sofa or watch TV, but she didn't want to live in a fishbowl no matter how dull her life was.

Rena and Ellis's private life was probably never dull. Their physical altercations were apparently an open secret around the neighborhood, but Corbin might have witnessed much more of their private encounters than anyone else.

Maybe what he saw made him jealous.

Or angry.

Or perhaps Rena was exaggerating, and Corbin was not stalking her at all.

Calla glanced up and down the street again. The next logical step was to interview Matt Corbin for the psychological autopsy of Waylon Ellis. The prospect seemed harmless enough. After all, she would make it clear that she was operating on the assumption that Ellis had committed suicide and use her suicide prevention ruse.

By talking to Corbin, Calla might not only get another account of the night Ellis died, but she could also get a feel for his personality and level of obsession with Rena.

If he were a stalker.

Calla walked across the street toward Matt Corbin's house. Her kitten heels clicked along the sidewalk, and she slowed her steps when the front door opened.

A male stepped out, face partially hidden in the shadows cast by a UGA baseball cap.

He looked at her, and she paused.

Her body tensed as something intangible in the atmosphere shifted. The air around Calla tingled, making her feel almost lightheaded. She chalked up the odd sensation to an adrenaline dump at possibly coming face to face with Matt Corbin, a potential stalker.

Or maybe a trick of the cold ocean breeze, which had picked up again.

"No soliciting," the man growled to her as he turned to close the door behind him.

"What?" Calla asked, momentarily uncertain of what to do or say to him. Standing on the sidewalk by the road, she had a modest physical buffer. It was broad daylight and plenty of residents were probably inside. She was likely safe.

But should she play it safe and walk away?

Or should she follow the pretext he'd inadvertently suggested?

“No soliciting in Palmetto Grove,” he repeated as he turned from the door and clomped down the step to the sidewalk. “Didn’t you read the sign at the entrance?”

“Oh, no, I must have missed it,” Calla said, mustering a smile. She stepped a little closer. “I mean no harm.”

“Whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying.”

The man continued down his front walk, and Calla tracked his movements. Something seemed odd about him. His manner? His gait? Or fact that his car was parked in front of a perfectly functional garage.

Curious, Calla took another step forward, hoping to get a clear look at his face, try to read his expression. “But I’m not selling anything, sir,” she said. “I just, uh, wanted to ask you some questions.”

“I’m not interested in a damn survey,” he said, misunderstanding her again.

Calla walked down the sidewalk, drawing closer to Corbin, still trying figure out what it was about his appearance that bothered her.

“I have places to be,” he said when he reached the driver’s door and stared down at the keyring. Then, he leaned down to unlock the older model Camry. He fiddled with a keys for a moment before switching from one to the next.

Why was he struggling with his keys?

Was he drunk on a Sunday morning? Or on some sort of medication?

After a few moments of finagling, he managed to pop open the lock. He wrenched open the door, the hinges squealing in protest, and slid into the seat. The lowered sun visor dislodged his cap, knocking it onto the passenger seat.

Even from her skewed angle, Calla got a good look at the man’s face and took two full

steps back. Her heels sank into the lush St. Augustine grass, and she bobbed for a moment before regaining her balance.

She stared at the man's dark hair and square jaw. His goatee looked familiar.

She had seen that face before.

On the dead man.

On Waylon Ellis.

The Camry's engine coughed to life, the exhaust pipe chugging gray smoke into air. The driver glanced in Calla's direction. She stared back, hoping she was wrong.

Because seeing Waylon Ellis, talking to him, was impossible.

In that bare second, she took him in fully. She followed the contours of his face, estimated his height and weight. Everything matched.

This man was Waylon Ellis. He was alive.

Energized, Calla leapt off the thick carpet of grass and onto the cement drive.

"Hey!" she shouted over the hum of the motor, still advancing. "Hey! Stop the car!"

Scowling, the driver lifted his middle finger in a salute, and then, Calla heard the car's gears change. The rough idle switched to that hollow sound of reverse gear. He was going to run.

She had to stop him.

Regretting her choice of shoes, Calla picked up her pace, clicking down the short driveway toward the car that was now starting to back directly toward her. She dodged to the side, stepping again into the deep cushion of grass.

The Camry thumped off the pavement too, cutting a swath through the corner of the lawn at her feet.

The bastard was trying to run her over! Deliberately!

She flung herself to the side, narrowly dodging the car's girth, and grabbed at the passenger door handle as it went by. The asshole wasn't going to get away with trying to kill her.

Her fingertips scrabbled at the handle and managed to gain purchase, but her hold wouldn't last long. She'd never be able to keep up if the car didn't stop.

And it didn't.

The Camry bumped back onto the pavement and whizzed back even faster, jerking Calla in a circle.

"I just want to talk to you!" she yelled. Still managing to hold on in a half-jog half-dragged gait. "Stop!"

Giving it one last effort, she yanked on the handle, finding the door locked tight.

The man swore at her, and not even realizing she'd spoken, Calla swore back at him.

Then the out-of-tune Camry hurtled forward, finally pulling the handle from Calla's fingers.

Knowing it was pointless, Calla pursued the car down the street on foot. If the driver wouldn't stop and talk to her, then she had to at least try to get one more look at him.

She had to be sure of who she saw.

Calla's skirt flew behind her, and her heels clicked onto the asphalt road. The Camry was already nearing the first intersection. It would disappear around the corner any second. She was never going to catch up.

At the last second, just before the car reached the busy entrance intersection, Calla tapered to a halt and grabbed her phone.

Standing in the middle of the road, her breath burning her lungs, Calla balanced on rubbery legs and snapped as many pictures as she could, until the Camry found a gap in traffic

and then careened out of sight.

What had just happened?

She looked from the now empty intersection to the phone she gripped in her hand. She noticed idly that all the fingernails on her right hand had broken. Probably when she'd tried to grab the car door.

Bastard had ruined her manicure. Not to mention he'd tried to run her over.

Quickly forgetting such a petty complaint in favor of the latter, Calla flicked through the pictures she'd managed to get.

She didn't have much to show for her efforts.

Some blurry shots of the Camry's license plate and the back of the driver's head were the only proof that she had just encountered a dead man.