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Seven

Calla remained frozen in the car's wake, but her mind raced, trying to make any sort of sense of what she'd seen.

Or whom she *thought* she'd seen.

Waylon Ellis was supposed to be dead. A shotgun blast had ejected his brain from his skull with such force as to land the organ in another room.

People didn't get much deader than that.

But the blast had all but obliterated the victim's facial features and most of his teeth. According to the forensic autopsy, the body had been positively identified, but what if the identification was wrong? Had the ID been made based on fingerprints? DNA? What if the body in Ellis's bedroom wasn't Waylon Ellis?

Waylon Ellis could have faked his own death, perhaps for a life insurance payout. If that were the case, what was he doing in Matt Corbin's townhouse?

Whatever Ellis was up to must have been important if he was stupid enough to show up where he might be noticed. He was supposed to be dead.

Calla looked around, deciding to text Adam. He should be here. He should know about this. She sent him a hasty message and was sliding her phone back into its place when she heard someone behind her speak.

"Everything okay, miss?"

Startled, Calla jumped and landed facing an older man she'd never seen before. Her hand flew to her chest, and embarrassed at her overreaction, she dropped it to her side.

"Didn't mean to give you a spook," the man said, giving her an open smile and tipping his plaid golf hat to her. "But when I see a respectable looking lady running down the middle of

my road in that get up on a Sunday morning, well, I have to find out what's going on."

"Oh," Calla managed, still off balance and winded from the chase. "Your road?"

"I'm Leo Baranova." The man smiled again and extended his hand.

"Oh, right. Mr. Baranova." Calla smiled and shook Leo's hand, feeling as though the action grounded her.

"I own this little slice of heaven. Well, I used to. I developed this community. Now I keep a few condos as rental properties. To keep my hand in, you know. Otherwise, retirement gets dull."

"I was supposed to interview you too."

"Were you?" He tilted up his cap to get a better look at her. "Then it's fortunate that I'm such a nosy old man and approached you first. Who are you, dear?"

"Dr. Calla Escott. I'm here on behalf of the GBI. They asked me to come out and ask a few questions about Waylon Ellis."

"Why are the cops so interested in a suicide?" He cocked a furry brow at her and led her graciously to the sidewalk and out of the middle of the road. "I could maybe understand why they are sending cruisers through Palmetto Grove more often these days, but doctors now?"

"I'm a psychologist," Calla explained, glad she didn't have to go into detail about why the police might be investigating a suicide so closely.

"Ah, that explains a lot." He winked at her. "You know what they say about people who go into psychology, right?"

She did, and after her surreal encounter with a supposedly dead man, it touched a little too close to home.

Leo laughed and added, "Makes perfect sense that a shrink would be chasing one of my

neighbors down the road.”

“Does it?” Calla pointed in the direction where the Camry had disappeared. “Do you know that man?”

“Of course, I do,” he said, turning back to regard her with assessing gray eyes. “I keep my hand in, remember. I know all the owners and lessees.”

“Right.”

“That was Matt Corbin.”

Calla blinked at Leo. “The man I talked to was Matt Corbin?”

Leo gave her a confused look.

“Yeah.” He pointed to Corbin’s condo. “He lives there. That was his car you chased.”

“You’re sure that was Matt Corbin? You *saw* him?”

Leo nodded slowly, a gesture she felt sure he might make to someone who was intellectually deficient.

Calla couldn’t blame him. She felt deficient at the moment. Surely, she misunderstood what Leo was saying. “You mean, Matt Corbin lives there, but that wasn’t him in the car, was it?”

Leo’s brow creased. “I thought you said you were here about Ellis.”

“I am.” Calla started to feel her world slipping a bit. Had he seen Corbin or not? “I wanted to speak with Mr. Corbin about Mr. Ellis. But I’m not quite sure what he looks like.”

“You just saw him.”

“The guy in the Camry?” Calla squeaked. “That was Corbin?”

“Yeah,” he said, shaking his head and laughing lightly to dispel the tension. “I feel like I’m trapped inside an Abbott and Costello skit.”

Calla could barely muster a laugh before he continued.

“I watched the whole thing. Saw him tell you to get lost. Watched you try to stop his car with your bare hands.”

“But...you’re sure that was Corbin. You *saw* him.”

“Yeah,” Baranova said. “I know him pretty well by sight. He’s lived in his daddy’s condo since he graduated from college on the eight-year plan.”

The man Baranova was talking about couldn’t have been more than twenty-six or twenty-seven. Waylon Ellis was middle aged.

“Can you describe Corbin to me?” Calla asked.

Leo must have decided it would just be faster to play along with harmless kook because he described Corbin without reminding her that she’d just seen him with her own eyes.

“Mid-twenties. Six feet tall. On the skinny side with dark blond hair.”

That was the man Leo had seen her speaking with?

His description didn’t sound anything like the man Calla had seen. He was roughly the same height, but that’s where the similarities ended. He had dark, wavy hair, dark eyes, and a goatee. Clearly, they hadn’t seen the same guy.

But Leo seemed totally convinced that Matt Corbin had been the man in the car. And that Calla was the crazy one.

There had to be some other explanation.

“Does, uh, Mr. Corbin have a house guest?”

Leo shook his head. “Not that I know of, but honestly, I don’t keep up with everyone’s comings and goings.” He shrugged. “I know the regulars, but this is a vacation spot. Lots of people in and out.”

“Even in the winter?”

“Not so much at this time of year. You’re right. But I haven’t noticed anyone strange. Except you.”

“Yes, well,” Calla hedged. Something was very wrong.

Maybe Leo was lying for some reason.

Or maybe he thought he’d seen Matt Corbin because he simply expected to see him come out of that condo and get into that car.

“Well,” Calla said, forcing her mind back to the present. “Back to my reason for being here. Waylon Ellis. Did you notice anything strange about him before his death?”

“Nah, he was just the same as usual,” Leo said. When Calla remained silent, he explained further. “Ellis was one of the few full-time residents who decided to lease a condo from me instead of outright purchasing it. He had the money to buy. I ran a credit check, you see, but I think he just liked to have me by the short and curlies, if you’ll pardon the expression.”

Calla barely registered the crude expression. She barely registered anything at the moment. But still, she managed to keep the interview going. “He was a difficult tenant?”

“He was a nice enough guy, but he was always trying to get something for nothing. Very high maintenance. Every month, he’d find some reason to complain about something. The sink dripped. The paint peeled. The carpet needed vacuuming. Then he’d threaten to withhold payment if I didn’t repair, replace, or otherwise clean up whatever damage he’d done.” He sighed as if even the explanation tired him. “Then, I would threaten to take legal action before caving and doing whatever he wanted. Honestly, I think Ellis got his rocks off on that kind of drama.”

“Some people thrive on conflict,” Calla murmured.

“That was Ellis.” He paused. “I mean, most of the time he wasn’t so bad. But I wouldn’t have leased to him if I’d known how he was.”

“According to the police report, you two argued the night he died.”

“Yeah, now that was unusual.” Leo appeared totally neutral, his tone matter of fact. “I mean, we haggled a lot over maintenance and payments, but it was always civil. That night, he was drunk and not nearly as polite.”

Based on what Calla had heard from Rena, she could well believe this account of Ellis.

“Did it come to blows?”

“No. I’m in no physical condition to engage in fisticuffs,” he said, gesturing to his narrow frame, “But I know how to dial 911 and get the police involved.”

“You called the police to the party?”

“Yes, when it was clear things were out of hand, I did. Ellis was already pretty drunk, but he just kept knocking them back and getting more obnoxious. I knew Rena would go home with him, and well, I didn’t think he was in any condition to be alone with a lady.”

“Did you ever see him get violent with Rena?”

“No, but I didn’t really need to. Everyone knew how it was.” He shook his head. “Far as I’m concerned, his suicide was a blessing in disguise for that poor girl.”

Calla blinked at his frank assertion and then recovered enough to ask her next question.

“Did Ellis give any indication that he wanted to take his life?”

“Well, now, we weren’t exactly close. He didn’t confide in me.”

“Did he do anything unusual?” Calla prompted. “Like pay his unpaid rent? Or give you an month in advance?” Settling accounts could indicate suicidal thoughts.

“No, I would have noticed something weird like that.”

“What about since his death? Have you seen anyone acting oddly since Mr. Ellis died?”

Unconsciously, Calla looked toward Corbin’s house. Calla hoped that Leo would say, “Oh sure, I saw Ellis just the other day. The punk is scamming the insurance company for sure.”

But Leo only smirked at her and said. “Just you, my dear.”

Calla laughed with politeness she didn’t really feel. At the moment, she didn’t feel anything but numbness and confusion.

“Uh, thank you for your time, Mr. Baranova. If you think of anything else, here’s my card.”

After giving him her card, they parted company, and Calla headed back to her car on unsteady feet.

This was getting to be a little much.

According to Leo Baranova, she hadn’t seen Waylon Ellis at all, but Matt Corbin.

She could think of no reason for Leo to lie about the person he’d seen her talking to. But that didn’t mean his perception had been accurate.

He could have imagined Matt Corbin.

Or *she* could have imagined Waylon Ellis.

Calla’s throat began to close.

God, had she hallucinated Waylon Ellis?

Old, familiar feelings flooded her body, leaving Calla somehow numb and sensitized at the same time, as if she could jump out of her own skin.

Suddenly angry at everything, Calla gritted her teeth. *This* was why she didn’t do psychological autopsies. *This* was why she stuck to research.

She should have told Special Agent Shepherd that she was flattered by his invitation, but

she didn't do grisly death cases, no matter how intriguingly placed the victim's brain was.

She should be safe in her office right now, looking at research and creating intricate spreadsheets.

She shouldn't be hallucinating dead men or having a panic attack in the middle of some cookie-cutter neighborhood.

But that was what was happening.

Calla's stomach clenched into knots. Her breath came in fast pants, and she felt even more lightheaded than when she'd been chasing the Camry. Her heart thrummed in her chest, the pattern irregular.

Doubling over to relieve the pain in her gut and prevent herself from passing out, Calla raised a shaking hand to her temple and took measured breaths of cold air. She couldn't trust her own perceptions, something as basic as sight.

So she closed her eyes. They might be lying to her, betraying her. She clenched her lids them tight against the tears that gathered behind her eyes.

Calla would get herself together. She had practiced the technique for years, sometimes every hour of every day. She forced herself to take another measured breath, feeling her abdomen rise and fall. Her hands still shook, and her breath came too fast. But slowly, other sensations overcame the rest. She became conscious of the wind rolling off the tops of the short, scrubby trees. She began to smell the briny air.

Calla felt the soft whisper of the briny breeze on her skin, like the physical touch of gentle words.

"Calm down," she whispered to herself. "Calm down. You got this."

At length, she opened her eyes. Calla glanced around, unrooting her feet from the cement

walkway. She turned. The street was empty. Leo was gone. No other people, no dogs, no cars, no one. She exhaled in relief. No one had observed her mini-breakdown, it seemed.

Okay, she seemed to have herself under control for the moment. What next?

She wanted to walk straight to her car and go home. She checked her phone. Adam had texted back. He was on the way.

She would just tell Adam that she couldn't risk looking any deeper into a case that was obviously putting stress on her.

She hated to leave a job unfinished, a mystery unsolved, but she no longer cared what happened to Waylon Ellis the night he died.

If he died.

She didn't care how the victim's brain migrated to another room.

Nope.

She just wanted to go somewhere safe where she would never encounter supposedly dead people.

Or be run over by cars driven by supposedly dead people.

She didn't want to worry that she was losing her grip on reality.

She brushed her fingers along the cool metal of her car and then traced the door handle.

She could get in now and drive away.

But what if Waylon Ellis wasn't really dead? What if she had just spoken with him? He'd tried to run her down.

What if a dead man was now trying to kill her?

Eight

Adam found Calla sitting in her parked car working on her laptop at lightening pace. She looked far less put-together than when he's first seen her in her hidey-hole of an office. Her hair was no longer in its neat bun. Curls hung limply from the knot, and frizz haloed her face.

She was sure concentrating on her work though, just as she had before.

She was working so hard, in fact, that he was pretty sure she hadn't noticed him pull his vehicle behind hers.

And she sure hadn't noticed him approach on foot. Now, he stood at her car window, and for a moment, he watched her scowl at the screen as her pink-painted fingertips flew across the keys.

He looked closer and saw that the nails on her right hand were broken.

What the hell kind of morning had she had?

Gently, Adam tapped on the glass with a fingertip, causing Calla to jump and a hand to fly to her chest. She scowled at him and then rolled down her window.

"Sorry about that," he said with a shrug.

She flung a dismissive hand at him.

"Forget it, forget it," she said, her tone as agitated as her body language had been. "We have a bigger problem."

He paused and watched her for a moment. He'd seen meth addicts acting less wired. She needed to get out of the car before she vibrated out of her own skin.

"Why don't you come out of the car and tell me what's got you so worked up?"

"I'm not worked up!" Calla insisted, her tone clearly showing the agitation she denied.

"Just come out of the car," he said, glancing up and down the street again. "I feel like a

rookie patrol cop on a traffic stop.”

“Fine.” Calla closed her laptop and slid it into an elegant leather bag that probably cost more than all the contents of Adam’s house combined.

She unlatched the door and stepped from the car.

He took the opportunity to look her up and down. Her getup looked like it should be on someone who just stepped out of a 1950s New York boardroom, complete with impractical heels, which were now covered in sandy soil and grass stains. Even though she tried to hide them, he could plainly see her her hands shaking, and her eyes continued to dart toward a point somewhere behind him.

He didn’t usually feel much compassion for people who got so worked up, but apparently, she touched the one tender spot in him. Damn it. He didn’t know shit about helping people and being compassionate.

But he was a pro at pissing people off.

And anger sometimes worked better than fear.

So he gave her another overt look.

“That’s what you wear to canvas a neighborhood?” he asked, baiting her. “What if you had to get somewhere fast? Can you run in those shoes?”

Calla tore her gaze from whatever she looked at behind him and eyed him narrowly. “You’d be surprised.” Her jaw clenched, and she made a pretense of looking him up and down too. “Maybe it is impractical, but my attire is professional. You look like you just rolled out of bed.”

“I did,” he lied as he brushed a hand through his hair. “It’s Saturday, you know. My day off.”

He hadn't, in fact, just gotten up. He'd been up for hours, working in the garage, but Calla needed a target to aim at. He'd give it to her.

"How do you expect to earn the trust of people—or the respect of suspects—looking like a hooligan?"

"Hooligan?" he repeated, looking down at his dirty brown work boots, jeans, and canvas Carhart coat. "I don't dress like a hooligan. Who even says 'hooligan' these days?"

Calla clenched her fists and took a step toward him on those silly little heels. "I do."

"Oh, right," he said, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "people who dress like 1950s schoolmarms."

"I don't look like a schoolmarm," she replied and then took a deep breath. "Look, we aren't here to discuss my attire."

"Or mine," he reminded her. She seemed to have gotten herself back under control. At least, now her expression registered something that looked like angry determination and not the timid fear she'd worn before. "You texted me. What do you need?"

"I think something funny is going on," she said in a measured tone. Now that she had unleashed some of her nervous energy on him, she seemed calmer. Her hands were steady and her voice strong.

"Funny how?" he prompted, watching her now from the corner of his eye and wondering if this was the moment he and Pursiful anticipated.

"I spoke with a couple of people about Ellis. His girlfriend Rena, the landlord."

He nodded.

"I've come to no firm conclusions about his mental state, but so far, there is little to indicate that Ellis was experiencing suicidal thoughts."

“You suspect that he didn’t take his own life,” he translated.

“At this time anyway, but I haven’t concluded the psychological autopsy yet.”

He hated double talk. He clenched his jaw in frustration. “So you aren’t saying anything?”

She blew out a breath and then her words rushed from her lips. “I’m saying that I don’t know what’s going on here. Since Ellis’s death, a neighbor, Matt Corbin, has been contacting Rena Bethel, the girlfriend. She thinks he’s been stalking her, maybe for years. He seemed fixated on her relationship with Ellis. I thought that if Corbin was watching them he might have seen something to help us figure out how Ellis died.”

“Or he might have killed Ellis himself,” Adam pointed out.

“So I decided to interview Corbin next. Only I didn’t see Corbin. That’s why I called you.”

He had no idea what she was trying to get at, so he just let her talk it out.

“I was headed to Corbin’s condo, but then someone came out his front door....”

Calla paused and looked at her feet.

“This is where it gets weird,” she admitted softly. “And I don’t know how to explain what I saw. I—”

“It’s okay. I’ve seen some weird crap in this job,” Adam told her honestly. Whatever she thought now was probably far more believable than the truth. “Just tell me what happened.”

“I saw a man come out of Corbin’s condo and get into his car.... But it wasn’t Matt Corbin.” She paced away and then turned to him again. Her face was a mask of embarrassment and confusion. “I know it’s impossible, but I saw the victim—Waylon Ellis—come out that door.”

She gestured at Corbin's condo, and her eyes lingered there. She didn't see any of the excitement or dread that might have crossed Adam's expression.

When she looked back at him with wide, confused eyes, Adam felt his heart accelerate. He looked away from her gaze. Now that he knew what she was, he couldn't meet her eyes.

She was a soul-seer. Or that's what Pursiful called them anyway. Adam had been starting to believe that Pursiful had fabricated the whole idea, but Calla proved their existence.

They were real.

But what they were, what exactly they could do, Adam didn't know.

Calla didn't realize it yet, but she had seen the soul of Waylon Ellis inside the body of Matt Corbin.

"It's a delusion," Calla continued. "It—it's got to be. I'm delusional."

Adam snapped back to reality. "Hey," he murmured to her back. "Hey, listen, it's going to be okay."

"Don't patronize me." Calla's shoulder stiffened and her voice hardened. "Because it's not okay. I thought I saw a dead man, but a reliable witness said I had been talking to Matt Corbin all along. I might have hallucinated a dead man. That's most definitely *not* okay."

Her shoulders slumped as her hands dropped to her sides. Slowly, she pivoted to face him and shook her head. "This is why I don't consult on these types of cases. I'm not good at this kind of thing. I can't do this anymore."

Calla was apparently waiting for him to speak, but he couldn't quite muster any words. He couldn't even raise his eyes to meet hers.

Now that he knew for sure....

Man up, he thought. Eye contact won't change what she sees when she looks at you, dumbass.

But at least averting his eyes meant he didn't have to see her revulsion when she learned the truth about his past.

Finally, he met her eyes.

Nothing happened.

He wanted to say something that would help her make sense of it all, but those words simply didn't exist. He couldn't just drop this soul-seer thing on her and expect her not to start calling him crazy. The ideal outcome would be for Calla to come to an understanding of her gift on her own.

She was a scientist. She had to rule out all the other options first.

"Ellis could have faked his death," he offered.

She frowned, her brow furrowing too.

"I considered that, but why would he? He wasn't in a dire financial situation, and I can find no evidence of anyone having an insurance policy on his life. Besides, if he were going to fake his death, why would he make it look like a suicide? Insurance companies take forever to pay out on suicides, if they pay out at all. He'd have to remain hidden for years."

On more comfortable footing now, Adam leaned against the side of her car, careful not to let the metal buttons on his coat scratch the paint.

"Stranger things have happened." He scratched his fingers along his jaw. He hadn't bothered shaving, and now it itched as it rubbed on his coat collar.

"Maybe he needed to get out of the lease on his condo."

"So he faked his death? Seems a little far-fetched to me."

“Yeah, but it’s the only other reason for him to fake his death that I’ve been able to come up with.”

“The body in the morgue has been identified as Waylon Ellis,” he reminded her.

“I know, I know,” she rushed on, beginning to pace beside her neat little car. “Could there have been a mistake?”

“We’re waiting on the DNA, but there were prints. And Pursiful was able to reconstruct the face enough to make a visual ID.”

“Okay, if Waylon Ellis is dead,” she said, chewing on her lip. “Maybe I saw a relative with a strong family resemblance. I was just checking out that possibility when you scared the crap out of me.”

“Ellis has a brother. “Adam pulled his tablet from his coat pocket. He worked for a moment and then turned the device around for Calla to view. “Is this who you saw?”

“This is Ellis’s brother?” Calla took the tablet and studied the police report he’d pulled up. She grimaced and pushed the tablet back at him.

“He was arrested from some misdemeanors last year. Police have him on record as being 5’8”, 140 pounds, with black hair.”

“No, this wasn’t who I saw.” Calla looked around, her focus landing on the townhouse across the street. “I saw Waylon Ellis.”

A look of determination and certainty solidified on her face. Her jaw tightened, and she rounded on Adam, eyes narrowed. “There has to be another explanation for what I saw.”

She spun and stalked down the sidewalk, heels clicking as she went.

Adam didn’t chase people if he could possibly help it. If she wanted to storm off, then he wouldn’t try to stop her.

But Calla was storming straight toward Matt Corbin's condo. And that probably wasn't a good idea.

Swearing, he trotted after her. She was likely safe. After all, she'd told him that Matt Corbin had left the house. Still, she had a semi-feral look about her at the moment.

Calla got down the sidewalk and to Corbin's door a few steps ahead of him. She raised a fist and started pounding on the door.

"Matt Corbin," she called loudly enough to wake the dead. "Open the door. GBI."

"GBI?" Adam huffed.

She scowled at him over her shoulder. "You're GBI. I'm not breaking any laws of etiquette."

"Generally, I like to identify myself," he said, scowling back. "Why are you pounding on his door anyway? I thought you said he left."

"I need to talk to Mr. Corbin. Obviously, he knows something about Waylon Ellis. Or—" She turned wide eyes on him. "He might be dead or injured. No matter what the landlord said, I *know* I saw Waylon Ellis leave this house. Corbin was stalking Rena. What if he saw Ellis fake his death and Ellis returned to take care of the witness?"

She didn't give Adam a chance to speak before she started pounding on the door again. He could only watch her out of the corner of his eye and wonder at the change in her demeanor from church mouse to avenging angel.

It was pretty hot.

A full minute must have passed, but no one answered.

Finally, her hand dropped from her side, and she turned on him.

"Can you break this open or what?" she demanded.

Now he gave her an overt look of disbelief. “I understood you worked with police before. If you had, you’d know that we don’t just kick in doors. We need probable cause, and we don’t have it.”

“A man walked out of the house and took the car that was parked there.” She pointed to the carport. “That’s theft.”

“Unless he owned the car. According to the landlord, Matt Corbin took his own car and—”

“It was Waylon Ellis—”

“Who’s dead.”

Appearing as if she wanted to cuss him a blue streak, Calla glared at him.

He glared back. This kind of half-cocked behavior was looking less and less cute. If she didn’t rein it in, it was going to get her killed one day.

“Look, this isn’t part of your job. All you have to do is determine the victim’s mental state prior to his death.”

“I figured seeing the actual murder victim up and walking around took precedence over the psychological autopsy. If Ellis is alive, we could just interview him about his mental state if that’s the part that’s really important to you.”

Calla turned and pounded on the door again. She was going to split her knuckles at this rate.

Without thinking, Adam grasped her drawn-back fist, meaning only to stop her assault on the door. He realized his mistake right away, but it was too late to pull back.

Calla spun, and using the leverage of his own grasp on her wrist, she yanked him forward and used the momentum to land a smart shot to his side.

“Ow!” he said, swearing hard and automatically shifting her into a wrist lock so that he was in the dominant position. “Don’t hit me.”

“Then, don’t touch me,” Calla said, defiant even in her submissive posture. She tried to jerk her hand out of his grasp. He didn’t let her. “Don’t *ever* touch me.”

They remained at an impasse for long moments. Adam recalled her flinchy behavior earlier. He’d thought she was a delicate little flower, with her exaggeratedly feminine attire and reserved demeanor, but this cat had claws.

He dropped her hand and watched as she stepped out of his reach.

“Look,” he said, rubbing the spot on his side where she’d sucker-punched him. “You think you saw the dead guy. And no one is answering this door anytime soon. So let’s go at this another way. Let’s go see the dead guy.”

“You mean go to the morgue,” Calla surmised.

He nodded. “Pursiful will show you Ellis’s body.”

A trip to the morgue on his day off wasn’t exactly Adam’s first choice of weekend activity, but it would accomplish two things. First, Calla would be able to observe the victim’s dead body for herself, ruling out the possibility that Ellis had faked his own death. Second, Pursiful would want to see his newfound soul-seer for himself.

“Now?” Calla glanced at her watch as if the time were important. “Is Pursiful even working today? It’s Saturday.”

“He’ll be there,” Adam promised.