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series.***

Ten

The trip to the morgue had gone about as well as it could have, and the result was that Calla was high-tailing it to her car. Adam tracked her, already tired of being in this position. If they were ever going to be able to work together, they needed to stop this cat-and-mouse garbage and get on equal footing.

Of course, she had no inclination to work with him. But he needed her. So did Pursiful.

And they needed her as soon as possible.

Right now, Calla probably wanted to be left alone, but his job was to guide her in the direction of the truth. He had to cut off access to escape and continue pressing her forward until she could no longer deny this new reality.

And she needed to feel like she was making all the decisions.

He cursed himself for sounding like Pursiful.

No. She needed more than just to feel as if she were making decisions. She actually needed to be the one making them. It was her life, and if she didn't want to acknowledge and use her gift, Adam wasn't going to force her.

No matter what Pursiful said.

As long as she showed interest in their work, however, he would keep doing his job.

"Just what did Pursiful mean back there?" Calla demanded as her heels clacked across the asphalt. Her sharp, sarcastic tone pierced the evening air. "Help humanity? What bull."

Adam felt sure she didn't actually expect a response, so he said nothing. He kept pace with her as she dodged a police car that was rolling through, but he didn't try to close the distance between them.

He wasn't quite sure what was going on in her head. Hell, he barely had a handle on his

own thoughts on this soul-seer thing. They could only guess at what her sight might entail. She was a wildcard, and Adam found that he was actually a little scared of what she might be able to do.

Finally, Calla slowed and stopped, allowing him to come within arm's length of her. "If I have this so-called gift of seeing souls," she began in a much softer tone, "then how is that supposed to help anybody?"

He raised a hand to the back of his neck and studied her back before answering. "There's more to it than you know."

"Oh yeah?" Calla's shoulders stiffened, her tone going sarcastic again. "More to the story? I'm shocked."

"I know you're pissed about the stuff we didn't tell you. But that day in your office," he said, still addressing her back. "If I told you the whole story—that souls can become earthbound and possess the bodies of the living and that you might be able to identify them—you would've sent me straight to the loony bin."

"Please." Calla faced him, her arms crossed over her chest. "We haven't sent people to the loony bin for years. But frankly, I'm still working up a list of potential therapists."

He decided to let that comment slide and move on to the meat of the discussion. "You asked how being a soul-seer might help someone."

She nodded slowly.

"When a soul possess a body, a person's life is being taken from them."

Adam watched her from under lowered brows. For the briefest moment, Calla looked as if she wanted to run again, but her expression turned thoughtful. Her impractical little heels remained planted where they were.

“So my seeing Waylon Ellis’s soul means he’s walking around wearing someone else’s body? Doesn’t he have to be invited in or something?”

“We aren’t talking about vampires here,” he said, shaking his head. “But a human life has been taken. Invasive souls commit murder without leaving a dead body behind. They get inside and destroy the victim’s spirit, until they are no longer interested in fighting back. You’re the only person who can identify an invasive soul.”

She tilted her head as she listened and then began to chew her lip. “So Matt Corbin is dead inside his own body?”

“Kind of,” Adam said. There might be a lot to learn about invasive souls, but he had a pretty good idea what it was like for the victim. “Matt Corbin’s spirit still exists—souls are eternal—but he is no longer in control of his mind or body. Ellis is the one behind the wheel.”

Calla appeared to mull that over before asking, “Corbin lost his free will?”

“More like, he *gave up* his free will,” Adam corrected, pausing to find words to explain the situation. “In theory, Corbin *should* be able to eject Ellis from his body at any time, but people who get overtaken actually forfeited their own wills long ago. They passively float through life, just taking the easiest path. They’re easy prey to a pernicious spirit in search of a body to alight in. It’s very difficult to go from a lifetime of thoughtless living to taking control and responsibility, especially when another entity is happy to do it for you.”

Calla remained silent and chewed on her lip. The nervous habit might have been cute if Adam wasn’t so concerned about her reaction to this new world. Maybe she really could have him involuntarily committed.

Too late to worry about that now.

“Most of the time,” he continued, “an invasive soul isn’t innocent...in life or in death.

Usually, they were troublemakers while alive. That doesn't change much after death. In fact, they can get worse."

"Worse?" she repeated. "Worse how?"

The things he'd seen. Been forced to do.

Hell, if she knew, she might never join them.

"Soul possession ain't exactly an act of goodwill and charity." He paused, got control of himself, and found her studying him, her expression thoughtful. "The invasive soul can come to believe they've conquered death. That they're invincible. And they start behaving that way. That's never good for the vessel."

Calla's brow furrowed. "I thought you were supposed to be convincing me to be part of this. You're not doing a very good job."

Adam shoved his hands in his pockets. "I ain't trying to *convince* you to do anything."

Pursiful, of course, would disagree. He wanted Adam to get Calla on their team, but Adam hated manipulating innocent people. A certain amount of bullshitting was part of being a cop, but he only directed it to suspects or reluctant witnesses. If Calla joined them, then it would be because she made the free choice to do so.

He clenched the fists that were hidden in his pocket and shrugged. His grammar was all over the place, and he couldn't quite get control of himself. When he spoke again, his accent was thicker, but at least the words were right.

"I'm telling you the truth," he drawled. "As much as I know of it anyway. An invasive soul has the potential for evil. And Matt Corbin needs help, even though he might not yet realize it. You can help us set these people free."

"I've already done my part, haven't I?" Calla protested in her prim voice. "I identified the

invasive soul. I have no idea how I'm supposed to help free Matt Corbin."

Here's where it got tricky.

Adam didn't know what else she could see or possibly do. To this point, Pursiful had only theorized of their existence and potential abilities based on some anecdotal evidence.

He began with what he knew to be true. "You saw Waylon Ellis, but when I look at the same man, I see Matt Corbin."

She nodded. "It's completely surreal."

"You're still wracking your brain for some reasonable explanation," he said flatly. "But you refuse to look at the growing evidence that something supernatural is occurring before your eyes. But the reality is that your gift has made justice possible for two people. But only if we take action together and in time."

"I helped you find the two victims. What happens next?"

"We find out what really happened to Ellis, and we help him move on."

Calla looked at him as if he were the biggest con artist ever. "So Ellis just—poof!—vanishes after we figure out how he died? That seems awfully convenient."

"That's an oversimplification," Adam said. "We believe that invasive souls are borne from traumatic deaths. In theory, once Ellis discovers what happened and ensures that justice is done, his spirit should be ready to move on to whatever comes next."

"So this possession isn't permanent?"

"I didn't say that. It *can* be permanent. The longer Ellis remains in possession of Matt Corbin, the less likely he is to move on peacefully."

"So what then? What do you do if you can't solve his murder or whatever? Do you call a priest, perform an exorcism? Scripture? A spell of some kind? Or ritual?"

Now Calla had swung too far in the other direction. She'd gone from looking for a logical explanation to spouting every magical story remotely connected to souls and death.

“Human consciousness is not magic that can be reversed with the right spell or charm. A soul is information, energy. It's what makes a person a unique spiritual individual. It's real. It exists, but without a physical form.”

He paused and studied her. She said nothing and waited for him to continue.

“The truth is that we don't really know *how* to expel an invasive soul. After all, we're dealing with something that exists beyond scientific theory. Physicists are only just starting the work necessary to reveal the existence of the soul. We're a long way from understanding how it functions.”

“I'm not seeing a lot of concrete suggestions for how to help here,” Calla pointed out.

“In previous cases, the soul can leave of its own accord. Usually, that happens when it feels a sense of completion. In a murder case, we start by bringing the killer to justice. So far, that's enough to help most souls move on.”

“Like tying up loose ends. Unfinished business.”

He nodded. “It gets a little more complicated with suicides or accidental deaths. And the longer a soul remains earthbound, the more difficult it is to remove. That's why we wanted to find a soul-seer. You can identify them faster than Pursiful or me, and we can help them along their way.”

“Okay,” Calla said, drawing out the word. “So first we have to find out exactly how Waylon Ellis died.”

“If he was murdered, we find his real killer and bring him to justice.”

She paused and looked at Adam. “And then the soul leaves?”

“Basically.” When everything went according to plan, that’s what happened. But sometimes souls didn’t follow the plan.

Eleven

Calla was sure she had finally lost her gossamer hold on sanity because the next morning, she found herself sitting beside Adam outside Matt Corbin's house. He'd left his car down the street and rapped on her window as if he were making a traffic stop.

And for some reason, she'd let him in.

Calla was already second-guessing her decision to meet him. In truth, she was second-guessing a lot more than that.

"I agreed to this charade out of morbid curiosity," she told Adam. "That's all."

Instead of chiding her as she expected him to, Adam turned and regarded her silently. He had a different air about him this morning, and Calla couldn't quite put her finger on why. Yesterday, he'd been teasing, almost intentionally provoking, but this morning, he was quiet. Serious.

"Nervous?" he asked, his tone empathetic. His green eyes were soft and their expression almost made her want to tell the truth.

"No," she lied.

He gave her a brief half-smile, and she knew he didn't believe her.

"Okay," he agreed. "But for the record, it would be okay to be nervous. You've had to deal with a lot in a short time."

Calla looked out the window, avoiding his eyes. It wasn't just that. As if that weren't enough.

What she had originally believed to be a doable challenge for her had turned into something much bigger. Writing a psychological autopsy for a violent death was all she believed she could handle. But so much more was being asked of her. Supposedly, the foundations of the

universe were being rewritten before her eyes, and now, she had to help solve a murder in order to free an innocent person.

And she wasn't sure she believed any of this yet.

She glanced sidelong at Adam again. He appeared to be waiting for her to speak. Maybe he expected her to open up.

She turned to face him fully, and he watched her from under his shaggy hair. He really seemed sincere, and she longed to trust someone.

But she couldn't trust *him*. Not yet. She had to see proof of his claims about invasive souls and her "gift" for herself. She planned to run her own test this morning, one that would end all her questions once and for all.

She shivered.

If Adam Shepherd were telling the truth, then Calla's whole understanding of the universe would, in fact, be turned upside down. But she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

Apparently realizing that Calla didn't plan to respond, Adam opened the car door. "Let's go interview the victim."

The coastal wind whistled through the open car door as Adam slung a booted foot to the pavement.

"Wait," Calla said, cutting off his exit. "What do we call him?"

"Huh?" Adam narrowed the gap in the car door enough to block most of the wind and not sever his leg.

"What do we call him?" She nodded to the house in front of them. "Do we refer to him as Ellis or Corbin?"

“I tend to think of the person’s identity as the living body,” Adam said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Calla got the impression that he hadn’t really pondered this question before.

“That’s the person I want to save. But Ellis is in control....”

“Then I guess I’ll call him Ellis. He’s the one I’ll be addressing,” Calla said. “So what’s the deal with Corbin? Can he hear what’s going on? Or is he...walled off or something?”

“Corbin is aware of what’s happening,” Adam said, all uncertainty gone from his tone. “But he doesn’t take part in the decision-making process. Ellis is calling all the shots, and Corbin is just along for the ride.”

Calla paused and cocked her head to the side, wisps of hair floating into her eyes. “This is so screwed up.”

“No. It’s simple. We’re here to figure out how Waylon Ellis died. Let’s go see what he remembers from that night.”

Calla blinked at him. “What he *remembers*? Do the recently deceased develop amnesia upon death?”

“Some do,” he acknowledged. “But not because of shock or amnesia. Some memories are stored in the physical body, like muscle memory. But some are stored in the consciousness. Not everything always translates after death.”

Calla gave him a dubious look. It sounded awfully cliché to her.

“In this case, it’s science. Waylon Ellis was drunk when he died. Drunk people don’t have the most reliable memories—alive or dead. And Matt Corbin was also drunk when Ellis took over. Whatever he remembers is bound to be unreliable. We’ll need to verify everything independently.”

Finally, Adam stepped out of the car and went around to open the driver’s door.

Calla was already out by the time he got there. But for just a moment, he blocked her exit, trapping her in the vee of the open car door.

“Listen.” He made eye contact to make sure she understood the importance of what he was about to say. His green eyes were serious, perhaps a little worried. “Don’t tell anyone you’re a soul-seer.”

Calla crossed her arms and glared at him. “As if you have to tell me that! Who would believe me? *I* don’t even believe me.”

She took a step forward and into his personal space.

“No,” he said, remaining right where he was. “I meant don’t tell *Ellis* you’re a soul-seer. Don’t let him know that you can see beyond the physical body, that you can see *him*. I told you yesterday that invasive souls can get power trippy. A hostile might not like knowing that they can’t hide from you.”

Not that she really believed any of this, but still, she heard the warning in his tone. She took a tiny step back.

“Are you saying I’m in danger?”

That she could believe. After all, Ellis had tried to run her down the previous day.

“Not necessarily. It’s just a precaution.”

She cocked her head to the side, eyes questioning. They stood nearly toe to toe, and she resisted the urge to step back from the kindness she read in his expression. He was too close.

“If we do this right,” he began in a gruff voice. He glanced aside and cleared his throat. When he spoke again, his voice was softer. “If we do this right, Ellis will never even know that turning hostile is an option. It’s time, Doc, that makes the difference.”

“Okay, warning received,” she said, her cheeks heating slightly. “Let’s get this over

with.”

She took a quick step forward, bringing her nearly flush against Adam’s sturdy, muscle-dense body. After an awkward pause, he shifted from her path. Calla might have thought the move was intentional—a male trick to get a cheap feel—if his ears hadn’t turned red.

She watched him stride a few steps away, where he waited for her to close and lock her car door. Then, they walked in silence toward Corbin’s townhouse.

That’s when the question occurred to her. She stopped dead and turned to Adam, who walked an extra pace before turning back to her.

“What if we don’t do it right?” Calla asked. “What if Ellis’s soul won’t leave? What then?”

Adam met her eyes steadily. “That’s where I come in.”