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Nine

Low-slung and flat-roofed, the white concrete building that housed the Jacks County Morgue looked like something Mike Brady might have designed. Originally, the architecture was intended to be modern and edgy, and yet only thirty years later, it managed to read as dated and dingy. The interior had been remodeled sometime in the last decade, and the labs had been fitted with the best equipment the county could afford. But the autopsy suites were hardly what Pursiful might call scientific marvels.

They were barely adequate.

Standing as still as though he'd been cast in bronze, county coroner Pursiful awaited Adam and Calla in the lobby. Bask, wearing his service dog coat, lay on the black rubber floor mat beside the automatic doors.

Despite his unmoving body, Pursiful's mind worked briskly. Adam's text hadn't provided many details. Why couldn't people just call each other on the phone anymore? He needed more info than a text could provide.

But Adam was bringing Calla Escott onto the mainland to view Waylon Ellis's remains. Pursiful would soon see for himself if she possessed the gift.

A blast of cold, damp wind escorted Adam and Calla through the mirrored glass doors. The woman looked much like the pictures he'd seen, but no image, no matter how skilled the photographer, could truly capture a person's spirit. And Dr. Escott radiated intelligence, observance, and edginess.

She was nervous.

As well she should be. She was on the precipice of a whole new understanding of life and death. She just didn't know it yet.

Pursiful finally broke his stillness. Quickly checking to make sure his lab ID was tucked neatly under the edge of his lapel, he stepped forward and offered the young woman his hand, which she gave willingly.

“Dr. Escott,” he said, nodding a greeting to Adam without looking away from the doctor.

For years, Pursiful had been looking for a soul-seer, and what he’d unearthed was a selection of people whose only skill was a marked obsession with death. This woman looked like life. She was vibrant, feminine, and yet still professional.

“Dr. Pursiful,” she replied, her tone composed and almost cool as her hand slipped from his grasp. “Thank you for being here on such short notice.”

From his place on the rubber floor mat, Bask sat up and eyed the newcomers. He bared his teeth at Adam, but to Calla, he offered his coveted doggy grin.

Noticing the hulk of a dog for the first time, Calla stepped slowly toward him. “Wow,” she said, eyeing Bask as if he had three heads. “Big dog. What breed is he?”

“I can’t say. Common street dog, I’d wager,” Pursiful said, watching her reaction carefully. She tilted her head to the side and considered the beast. Bask was no rangy orange mutt. His coat was shaggy and black as pitch, and the thick ruff that encircled his muscled neck gave him a fierce, almost lion-like look.

“Probably half dingo,” Adam added, glaring at the canine. “The baby eating kind.”

Ignoring Adam’s insult, Calla extended a hand for Bask to sniff. Immediately, he nudged her palm for a scratch.

Calla ruffled the dog’s ears. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Bask,” Pursiful replied for him.

“Bask,” Calla repeated in a thoughtful tone. She stood but continued to study the dog

with a skeptical headset. “What’s with the vest?”

“He’s my service dog,” Pursiful explained. “Epilepsy.”

“Interesting,” Calla said, turning back to face Pursiful and Adam.

She didn’t seem to believe him, and Pursiful tried not to take it personally.

After all, she had a hard morning, and he *was* lying. Indeed, he had epilepsy, but Bask was no ordinary service animal.

Still, Pursiful needed to gain her trust, not push her away with half-truths about Bask. So, smiling, he opened his hands wide and stepped forward slowly. “Adam says you encountered another anomaly in the Ellis case.”

He gestured Calla toward the double doors that led to the morgue and was relieved when she returned his smile and fell into step beside him.

“If you consider seeing the murder victim an anomaly,” Calla said as he swiped his key card that granted him access to a long hallway. “Then yes, I discovered another anomaly.”

Pursiful gave a measured laugh. “There have been several accounts of the deceased’s body being resuscitated after death, but it’s unlikely to have occurred with Waylon Ellis, given the nature of his injuries.”

“I’m not questioning your identification of the body. But...,” she tapered off. For a moment, the only sound was four sets of footsteps clicking down the long linoleum hallway.

“Well,” Calla continued, too polite to accuse him of misidentification of the body. “When Special Agent Shepherd offered to let me view Waylon Ellis’s body, I figured it might help me understand what I saw.”

“Of course, of course.” Pursiful swiped his key card in the reader beside the autopsy suite door and held it open for dog and visitors to pass through.

Adam entered the room last and shot Pursiful a flat look.

Pursiful raised an eyebrow and shrugged. Adam liked to walk the straight and narrow, but in Pursiful's experience, a well-told lie revealed a great deal more than the truth ever could.

Calla waited for them in the center of the bleak autopsy suite. Her strawberry blonde hair was a vivid splash of color in the sterile, stainless steel gray room. Beside her sat Waylon Ellis's body already laid out for viewing.

He offered Calla no warning, no chance to take a bracing breath.

He came beside the table, drew back the paper sheet, and revealed the corpse.

Waylon Ellis used to be alive. He used to walk and talk and fight. He used to *be*.

Now, he wasn't.

His body lay on a stainless steel table, its only clothing a paper sheet. Calla stepped nearer, staring at the mangled, faceless form.

The man on this table was definitely dead.

Whatever had made this body Waylon Ellis was now gone, leaving behind an empty vessel.

Pursiful cleared his throat, and Calla raised her eyes to where he stood on the opposite side of the table. She got that feeling that he'd been studying her reaction to the corpse before her.

In fact, she felt as if the shrewd little coroner had been taking the measure of her character from the moment she'd walked in the front door.

"As you can see," Pursiful said, pointing to the victim's exposed jawbone. "The slug entered through the submandibular triangle with resultant exenteration of the brain." He lifted a

clear plastic bag that housed the organ in question and then continued. “This indicates a low-range, self-inflicted—”

“In point of fact,” Calla corrected. “That conclusion cannot be drawn until we have evidence that Waylon Ellis had experienced suicidal ideation.”

She glanced at Pursiful. His expression remained unaltered, as if she hadn’t spoken, but she got the feeling he was annoyed at her interruption.

“*Usually* self-inflicted,” Pursiful amended, clearing his throat. “Such damage indicates a high velocity weapon consistent with the shotgun found at the scene. The victim’s facial features have been split and peeled away from the bone by the concussive force of the blast.”

Snapping on a blue nitrile glove, Pursiful gestured to Calla to come around the table. “Dental records are essentially useless, but authorities had Ellis’s fingerprints on file. They match, but we’re still waiting on the DNA results.”

Gently, he lifted the flap of skin that used to be the victim’s face and laid it back in place across the skull. The result was a flat caricature, but it was definitely Waylon Ellis.

“But this body has been positively identified as Waylon Ellis.”

Calla leaned closer as if distance alone could settle her disquiet. *How could this be? This was the man she’d seen earlier. The man she’s spoken with. But that was literally impossible because Waylon Ellis was laying here with his face peeled back.*

She felt herself turning green.

“Waylon Ellis *is* dead,” she murmured.

“Indeed, he is,” Pursiful assured her.

Calla closed her eyes and lifted a hand to her forehead, noticing with embarrassment that it shook. Again, she considered the possibility that she had hallucinated the encounter with Ellis.

If Ellis was dead, what other plausible option remained?

“Are you alright, my dear?” Pursiful asked, his tone concerned. “If you’re feeling ill....”

Wondering if Pursiful were truly concerned for her health or just worried that she would vomit on his corpse, Calla swallowed hard and shook her head. “No, it’s not that. I feel fine.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of if you are unwell. Many people react this way to viewing a dead body, especially one in this state.”

Calla opened her eyes to find Pursiful wearing a mask of concern.

“It’s cognitive dissonance,” she explained, wishing that she might have been reacting something normal like the gory condition of the body. Most people would have bolted from the room when Pursiful revealed the corpse. But no, she was fine with that. She was freaking out because of one of the most realistic hallucinations she had ever experienced. “I could have sworn I saw this man earlier today. I spoke with him. Yet here he is. He’s been here all along. I don’t understand.”

Pursiful sent a quick glance in Adam’s direction, and he returned a minute nod.

That nod set off alarm bells in her already overwhelmed mind.

Sensing the shift in mood, Calla crossed her arms. “What?” she demanded, no longer caring to hide her nervousness “What is it that I don’t know? Does Ellis have a long-lost twin?”

They both shook their heads but remained silent.

Again, Calla looked between the two men, now both obstinately mute. Anger burgeoned in her chest. These two jackasses obviously knew something she didn’t, and they were withholding it from her for some reason.

Her jaw tightened, and her hands dropped to her sides, balling into fists.

She didn’t do games.

“That’s it,” Calla said, unclenching a hand and picking up a corner of the sheet and putting it back over the victim’s face. “This job is over. I don’t work for people who withhold pertinent information. I’ll bill you for my time and send the portion of the psychological autopsy I have been able to complete. Don’t call me again.”

“I understand your frustration.” Pursiful gave her an understanding smile, but it had the opposite effect from the one he’d likely intended. He and Adam were the ones making this difficult on her, and here he was playing the understanding father. It galled her, and suddenly, she wanted to rip *his* face off.

Adam cleared his throat. “She thinks we’re screwing with her.”

“Well, aren’t you?” Calla accused.

“No,” Pursiful said, still wearing that expression of pity. “We have withheld nothing from you that was pertinent to the psychological autopsy.”

“Haven’t you?” Calla glared at the coroner. “From the very beginning, I was aware that I was being coerced to take this case. And I admit that I was curious about the location of the victim’s brain. But your reaction to the events of this morning tell me that you are concealing *something else*. Something I should have known from the beginning.”

“We simply didn’t want to overwhelm you, my dear,” Pursiful said as he slid the table toward the refrigeration unit. “Let’s talk somewhere more comfortable for you. Why don’t you go wait in my office while I—”

“No,” Calla said, planting her feet on the tiles beneath her. Her anger transformed to rage at the suggestion that she couldn’t handle a difficult conversation in this environment. If he knew what she’d faced already, he wouldn’t be so smug. “You’ll tell me here. Now. Or I walk.”

Calla pressed her lips together and waited as Pursiful slid the body into the refrigeration

unit and closed the door.

He was taking his time, and the obvious procrastination tempted her to go straight back to her own office. She could be doing something useful now, like having a cup of tea. Repairing her broken fingernails. Looking into a class on underwater basket weaving.

“It probably looks like we’re not playing straight with you,” Adam said. “I wouldn’t blame you for walking away.”

“But we hope you won’t,” Pursiful hurried to add. “We had legitimate reasons for waiting to disclose portions of the case that did not apply directly to the completion of a psychological autopsy.”

“There’s *always* a good reason,” she said, her voice sharp with sarcasm. “Withholding information is not only presumptuous, it’s dangerous.”

“I agree,” Adam said.

“Yeah, whatever. You aren’t exactly spilling the details either.” Calla shot him a glance filled with mild disgust. “I would have never guessed that a man wearing muddy work boots would be such an intellectual elitist.”

“I never thought a Ph.D. in psychology would continue to make judgments based on clothing,” he shot back. “And I never said you weren’t capable of understanding. I thought it would be best for you to come to the conclusion in your own time.”

“Waylon Ellis was killed,” Pursiful said, sounding weary. “His body rests in the drawer.”

He stopped talking and walked slowly to a small metal table and chair against the opposite wall of the morgue. He sat heavily and Bask trotted up and sat beside him.

“Okay, we’ve established that Ellis dead,” Calla said. “So who did I see this morning coming out of Matt Corbin’s house? His brother?”

“You did not see his brother,” he continued.

“Or a doppelganger,” Adam added.

Frustrated at still having to tear answers from the two men, she glared at them. “A hallucination?”

“No,” Adam said, an unexpected look of challenge in his eyes. “You saw Waylon Ellis.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Calla said, turning for the door. “If you’re not going to tell me the truth—”

“It is the truth,” Pursiful said, arresting her mid-retreat. “What you saw was the *soul* of Waylon Ellis.”

Calla’s lips parted, and she spun to stare at Pursiful for confirmation.

Or to find the hidden camera in the room because this had to be a joke.

He continued, “While everyone else—Adam, me, everyone—sees the victim’s physical body, you see the soul that has overtaken it.”

Waylon Ellis was dead, and his soul now possessed Matt Corbin. And Calla had seen his soul. Not his ghost or his spirit, but a *soul*. Who were these people? And what nonsense had they gotten her involved in?

“You expect me to believe *this* is the truth?” Calla demanded. Her loud voice bounced off the walls and floor of the room. “There has to be some sensible explanation for what I saw.” She paused and then murmured. “Or maybe I am worse off than I thought....”

“It seems unbelievable,” Pursiful said. “At least at first blush. But if you’ll hear us out....”

Pursiful continued what sounded like equivocation to Calla. She took a moment to look between the two men.

Arms crossed, Adam leaned against the morgue drawers, his expression closed. When Calla met his eyes, he flushed and looked at the floor.

Suspicious of everything, Calla narrowed her eyes at him. “Who are you? Are you really GBI? I checked your credentials...”

“Hard to believe,” Adam said. “But I really am employed by the GBI.”

She turned to glare at Pursiful. “And you?”

He looked around the room as if the answer should be obvious.

Calla raised a brow and waited.

“I’m a board certified forensic pathologist.” His tone held a trace of frustration.

“However, I have come to focus my efforts on a rather specialized field within forensics. As has Adam, within the law enforcement world.”

“Would that field be ghost hunting?” Calla returned, letting her frustration leach into her tone as well.

“No, my dear, not ghosts.” He cut his eyes toward Adam and then continued. “*Souls*. Over the course my years in this field, I was often called upon to perform autopsies on ambiguous death cases. Those not unlike the case with Waylon Ellis. Cases that the police are unable to reconstruct and solve due to some quirk in evidence.”

“Like the location of the victim’s brain,” Adam nodded toward the drawer where Ellis’s body had been stored.

“Precisely,” Pursiful agreed. “In such bizarre circumstances, when logic and science could not fill in the blanks, I admit that I looked to other possibilities that science has yet to explain. What I found was that many highly regarded physicists were studying the human consciousness.”

“The study of the human soul,” Calla supplied. It was certainly not her field of study, but she was dimly aware of such research. Few respected scientists regarded it as a legit pursuit.

Pursiful nodded. “Certain physicists believe that the human consciousness or soul resides in the electrical impulses of the brain. After death, the energetic impulses are released into the universe. The soul is released to join with the universal consciousness or God.”

“Okay,” Calla said, drawing out the word.

“I have discovered some souls that do not behave like the majority. Their energy doesn’t just rejoin the universe. Their soul don’t just move on to eternity, so to speak. They remain earthbound.”

“Like a ghost.”

Pursiful shook his head. “If you must use that term, you must realize its limits.”

“We aren’t dealing with chain-rattling, disembodied entities,” Adam said.

“What are we dealing with?” Calla asked, unable to keep the mockery from her voice.

“We are dealing with pernicious souls, those whose physical lives were taken unexpectedly, who committed suicide, or who were troubled in life. For some reason, after the death of their physical bodies, these souls sometimes take control of the bodies of living people.”

“Innocent people,” Adam added. “Like Matt Corbin.”

“You’re talking about possession?” Calla asked, voice pitched high in disbelief. “Souls floating out of bodies and taking over new ones?”

“You’ve already seen proof with your own eyes.”

This was utterly ridiculous, unbelievable, crazy. Calla looked around again for a hidden camera

“You expect me to believe that Waylon Ellis’s soul left his body and is currently

possessing Matt Corbin?”

“Indeed,” Pursiful said. “Which explain why you believed you spoke to him this morning. You *did* speak to him. My dear, you don’t realize it yet, but you have a rare gift.”

“Gift?” Calla directed her stare at Pursiful now.

“You have the ability to see earthbound souls,” he explained.

Calla’s head spun, but this time, she didn’t need to take a moment. She simple said, “I’m supposed to believe that souls can possess living people, and I can see them.”

Both men nodded.

Calla paced a few steps. “Let’s forget the practical scientific questions, and let me ask why? Why would such a thing happen? Why would a soul take over a another person’s body? To what purpose?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have a full understanding of how it all works or why things happen as they do,” Pursiful admitted, watching her carefully from his seated position. “My research indicated that your previous life experience, personality, and history might result in that ability. We devised an experiment to test your ability. Turns out I was right in my diagnosis. You are the first confirmed soul-seer we’ve found.”

Calla scowled at the realization that Pursiful had not only been researching her, but setting up some sort of way to test her without her knowledge or consent.

And he seemed awfully pleased with himself for violating her privacy.

“That’s why you had Agent Shepherd request my help on this case. Not because you needed a psychological autopsy on Waylon Ellis, but because you thought I might be some sort of soul bloodhound.”

“No, my dear, that’s not entirely true,” Pursiful said, apparently realizing his mistake in

boasting. “We needed a psychological autopsy.”

“But,” Adam added, finally breaking his silence. “We did want to know if you were the person we’d been searching for.”

“Okay,” Calla said, waving a hand. “Now I’m going to say it. You people are delusional. You’ve constructed an elaborate, complicated, joint delusion here. Now you’re trying to make me a part of it. That’s not going to happen.”

“I understand your fears, my dear.” Pursiful rose from his chair and took a few steps closer, paused, and then closed the distance. He gripped her hand in his. “We are asking you to digest and process quite a lot of information. You take your time and let us know when you’re ready to use your gift for the good of humanity.”

She pulled her hand away and left the autopsy suite.