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Twelve

Adam swore under his breath.

To this point, Calla probably believed his role was limited to manipulating hapless psychologists into coming over to the dark side. But the truth was even worse.

He was the fixer. His job was to do whatever was necessary to protect the innocent from invasive spirits and to get justice for those whose lives were stolen from them.

And that was rarely a pretty task.

What would Calla think of him once she realized his true role? He wasn't sure how he felt about the things he'd done in the name of justice. But he knew he had to do them.

No one else would.

Adam felt heat creep up his neck, and he turned away.

"I'm tired of you ignoring my questions," Calla said. But her voice wasn't so much irritated as it was curious.

A few beats later, Calla's small hand tugged at the sleeve of his coat. Adam had felt the full force of those fists just the day before, and he was grateful she had used a gentle touch. But that gentleness was almost worse.

He jerked his sleeve from her fingertips.

Instead of glaring as he'd expected her to, Calla gave him a look of pity. "What do you mean, 'That's where you come in'?"

Adam scowled back.

He hadn't wanted to get into the details of his role on the team. He wanted to take this one step at a time, break things to her in stages.

Hell, he didn't want her to know the truth.

After all, it was difficult enough to learn that a human soul would return from death and direct the behavior of another person.

But manipulation like that happened all the time, both in life and in death.

He was far too well aware.

And it was even worse to think that sometimes the innocent had to die in order to protect them from being used for greater evil.

To protect others from that greater evil.

“I remove the threat.” Even as he spoke that weighty truth, Adam felt the burden of the 1911 pistol at his waist and the backup revolver strapped to his ankle.

To this point, Ellis seemed benign, but with invasive souls, you never knew what to expect.

“Remember, I told you that the longer a soul remains earthbound, the more difficult it is to remove.” He looked away and then met her eyes fully. “If you can’t remove the soul from the vessel, you have no choice but to destroy the vessel.”

“You—” Calla’s throat sounded as if it had slammed shut. “You...you kill them? The innocent person you’re out to protect? You kill him?”

He looked at her feet. “Only as a last resort, and only in cases where the invasive spirit becomes hostile and—”

“How?” she cut off the rest of his explanation.

He glanced sidelong at her. He had to look through the ends of his hair, making him realize he probably did appear more unkempt than usual. Her wide eyes focused on him with intent, and he wondered if she hoped he’d reveal some magical spirit-fighting weapon. He was going to disappoint her again.

There was no magic.

“I prefer to use my service weapon,” he said, patting the 1911 handgun holstered at his waist. She looked like she wanted more. “I aim for center mass.”

“Good Lord,” Calla said, eyes wide. “You just shoot them? Execution style?”

“Not execution style. When a spirit becomes hostile, it usually comes down to a fair fight. Their life or mine. And death of the vessel is the only way sure we’ve found of getting rid of a soul who refuses to leave on its own.”

Calla shook her head as if to say there had to be another way.

“Living inside the prison of your own body is no life,” he said. “Pursiful is still looking for less...uh...final methods. That’s part of why we need you.”

She seemed to ignore that last bit and shot off more questions. “How does killing the ‘vessel’ accomplish anything? Can’t the spirit just fly to another body? Start again?”

“It doesn’t seem to be that simple.”

Adam paused. They could spend hours discussing what they knew about invasive souls, but they just didn’t have time for that. Plus, there were more questions than there were answers.

“Look. You found Ellis fast. This should proceed using the preferred method. We solve his murder, and he moves on.”

Calla thought for a moment, her teeth lightly working her delicate bottom lip. He realized once again how attractive she was in her prim Doris Day outfit.

Not the thing to think about right before walking into danger.

He turned.

Together they walked up the path and she rapped on Corbin’s door. After a short wait, it opened.

Of course, Calla saw Waylon Ellis standing in the dimness of the entry. He saw lanky college kid Matt Corbin.

From the corner of his eye, Adam watched Calla study the man before them and wondered what *exactly* she was seeing. Or how she was seeing him.

And what did Calla see when she looked at a normal, unpossessed person? Did she see their soul or their body?

When she looked at regular, non-deceased people, did she see their souls? Was she actually looking beyond the body and in the consciousness inside? Like x-ray vision?

More questions than answers.

Adam looked at the steel toes of his boots for a moment. The very idea that Calla could see Adam's true self made him want to wear lead-lined clothing.

"You again," Ellis sneered, breaking Adam's contemplation. Apparently, he remembered Calla from the previous day. "I thought I told you I wasn't interested in your survey."

Ellis was already moving to shut the door in their faces, but before he could slam it, Adam shoved his boot into the door jamb.

Ellis shoved the door against Adam's boot and sneered when it didn't produce the desired result. "I'm not answering any questions."

Calla made an aborted effort to reason with him. "But, sir—"

Swearing, Ellis leaned harder against the door.

"I don't have anything to say to you." He followed up with a long list of invectives.

Calla had certainly made an impression.

But Adam wasn't impressed. Ellis was surly, rude, and generally a dick. That didn't bode well for the peaceful conclusion he'd all but promised Calla.

Adam decided he didn't have time for swearing contests.

It was time for the blunt route. "Yeah? We got something to say to you, *Ellis*."

That had the desired effect.

"Ellis?" the man paused in his effort to shut the door and stared through the gap. His disbelieving eyes flicked between him and Calla. Then, he added weakly, "But I'm Matt Corbin."

"We, uh, know who you really are," Calla said, stepping to her right to make eye contact with Ellis through the crack in the door.

For a moment, Adam thought Ellis might open the door. Calla smiled at him, and Ellis's expression darkened.

"Why should I care what you know?" he demanded, administering a good kick to the steel toe of Adam's boot.

Feeling no pain, Adam reached into his pocket for his badge. "Because we're with the GBI."

Ellis glared at Adam's badge and tried once more to force the door shut.

"And we need to talk." Foot still wedged in the door, Adam snapped the scuffed leather badge case shut and returned it to his pocket. "About how you died."

"Maybe I don't feel like chatting," Ellis said, throwing his body weight into the door one last time. "Especially about that."

Adam's only reply was to return the favor. Planting his back foot, he threw his full weight against the door, knocking Ellis back. He was dimly cognizant of the sound of breaking glass, but he kept his focus on the fallen man.

"Too bad." Poised to unholster his 1911 if necessary, Adam tromped inside. "Because

you ain't got much of a choice. We're gonna talk."