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Thirteen

Calla watched Adam throw his weight at Corbin's door. The man inside—who Calla saw as Waylon Ellis—was no match for the sheer mass of Adam's compact but muscular frame. Ellis flew backward into the small entryway table, knocking over a lamp and picture frame in the process.

Now, they stared at each other like Old West gunfighters.

The GBI agent had essentially forced his way into a private residence without probable cause or a search warrant, and he didn't seem to see a problem with that. Even now, he stood, hand poised to reach for his firearm, ready to draw if provoked.

Calla was seeing another facet of his personality: a man of action.

Still uncertain of almost everything, Calla stepped into the dim, cool foyer behind Adam. She studied his back. Somehow, he appeared bigger, stronger, and more capable than he had looked earlier.

A chill walked up her spine.

Until this very moment, she had been going along with this soul-seer thing just to see how it would play out. She'd even taken Adam's "eliminate the threat" speech with a grain of salt.

But now, she realized that he'd been serious.

He would kill this man if necessary.

Calla bent to pick up the picture frame that had been knocked off the white wicker table. A snapshot of Matt Corbin with an older couple, likely his parents, was nestled behind the now-broken glass.

She set it back on the table.

They had come to save college kid Matt Corbin, and to do that, they were supposed to talk to Ellis, to figure out how he died. But Adam's show of force made Ellis even more defensive. He didn't look like he was in a talking mood.

Calla had to do something to get this conversation on track.

"You really need to work on your people skills," Calla murmured from behind Adam. "We came to talk."

Calla sidestepped him and extended a hand to Ellis. He ignored the gesture and got up under his own power. Calla let her hand fall to her side. In truth, she was glad he had rejected her aid. He was, after all, the man who had tried to run her down with a car yesterday.

"Look," she said to Ellis. "We got off to bad start yesterday. I'm willing to forget that you tried to mow me down with your car yesterday."

"You chased me for two blocks!" he protested.

"You tried to run me over," Calla repeated with emphasis.

"That wasn't very nice, Ellis," Adam pointed out. "Especially when she came to to help you."

"Help me?" Ellis demanded. "How do you think you're going to do that?"

"Can we sit down?" Calla asked, glancing around the foyer. They needed to take the tension down a notch, and sitting usually helped.

"Prissy little lady needs a seat," he said, rolling his eyes at her.

Feeling a great deal less forgiving after that comment, Calla followed Ellis to a living room that could have come out of a decades old beach-decor magazine. White wicker, bold floral fabrics, and shells on everything. Probably decorated by Matt's mother.

His poor mother would not understand the changes that came over her boy.

As she crossed the room to a wicker chair, Calla removed her phone from her skirt pocket and activated the screen. She would run her test now. Before things went any further.

Ellis took a seat on the matching wicker sofa while Adam remained standing on the opposite side of the room, back to the wall.

“Who are you anyway?” Ellis asked, eyes focused on Calla.

She answered without looking away from her phone. Nobody thought anything of her use of the phone. For all they knew, she was getting ready to take notes or texting or updating her social media.

“Calla Escott,” she said, navigating to the camera. Adam told her that he saw physical bodies, but she saw souls. Contrary to some primitive beliefs, cameras captured images of the physical, not the spiritual.

One picture should tell Calla whether or not Adam and Pursiful told the truth.

While feigning interest in the conversation, Calla snapped one.

“She’s a forensic psychologist consulting on your case,” Adam added, keeping to his place on the periphery.

“My case?”

“The GBI is investigating your death,” Adam said flatly. He glanced pointedly at Calla. “We investigate equivocal deaths—”

“Equivocal?” Ellis repeated, choking in disgust on the ten-cent word. “Does that mean ‘really screwed up’?”

“Yeah,” Adam said. “That’s exactly what it means.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Calla corrected, momentarily forgetting the evidence she held in her hand. She was prepared to quote Webster’s, but glancing between the two men, she didn’t think

it would be appreciated. “It means we don’t understand the exact circumstances surrounding the death. Such a death could have resulted from homicide, suicide, accident, or natural causes.”

“And infrequently,” Adam added, eyeing Ellis carefully, “in equivocal cases such as these, a spiritual attachment might occur. That appears to be the situation here.”

Ellis considered that for a moment, giving Calla the opportunity to look at her phone for confirmation of this so-called spiritual attachment. The screen had gone blank during the intervening conversation, so she hit the power button. The last picture she had taken appeared on the screen.

Matt Corbin sat in the center of the frame. Lanky, sandy blond hair. Matt Corbin.

Calla’s head jerked up, and she stared again at the man on the couch. This man, the man she saw right there in front of her, was not the same man she had just photographed.

She made a confused gurgling sound and then began snapping more pictures, periodically checking them against the man she saw on the sofa.

Waylon Ellis sat on the couch, but Matt Corbin appeared in every picture.

This was ridiculous, crazy!

Calla faced Ellis, trying her best to see what Adam saw, what the camera saw, trying to see Matt Corbin’s body underneath the soul of Waylon Ellis.

She closed one eye.

Still Ellis.

She tried the other eye.

Same result.

She turned her head and cut her eyes to the side. In her peripheral vision, she saw Waylon Ellis.

She was looking at the physical body of Matt Corbin, and yet all she saw was the soul of Waylon Ellis.

It was impossible.

But she had proof.

Right in her hand.

She couldn't stay in denial forever.

Calla nearly laugh at her own thought. In all her years as a research psychologist, she'd seen amazing feats of denial. And those were the saddest of all her clients, those who were truly missing out on life because they refused to see the truth before them.

She did not want to be one of those people.

But she also did not want to believe *this*.

"Spiritual attachment?" Ellis was saying. "You mean how I'm me but look like this guy?" He gestured up and down Matt Corbin's body.

"Yes."

Ellis crossed his arms and sneered at Adam. "Well, thank you, officer, for the in-depth explanation. I still have no idea what's going on."

Adam's jaw clenched. "After your death, your consciousness came to be inside another person's body."

"My *consciousness*?" He turned to Calla and jerked a thumb back toward Adam. "Does this guy speak English?"

Calla opened her mouth to say something that was sure to be relevant, but no sound came out.

They were talking to a dead man.

She felt Adam's eyes on her and wondered if he realized what she'd done. He gave her a small smile and then turned back to Ellis.

"You had an abrupt death," Adam said without any clarification regarding the spiritual aspects of this phenomenon. "Explaining what happened to you—and getting justice if necessary—should help you move on to what's next."

Calla glanced at Adam. Now that she believed his claim that she was a soul-seer, a question formed on her lips.

What does come next?

Adam seemed to read her thoughts and shook his head. There seemed to be a lot he wasn't telling Ellis. And her.

"I'm stuck in here for *closure*?" Ellis cocked his head to the side. "Sounds like a pile of steaming bullshit to me. Besides, I don't see how finding out who blew off my head is going to change anything. If it's forgiveness you're after, you can forget it."

"Is that what happened?" Calla asked, latching on to the mystery of his death like a lifeline. "Did someone shoot you?"

He regarded her with the heat of a thousand suns. "Obviously."

Calla raised a brow. "It isn't obvious at—"

"What do you remember from the night you died?" Adam interrupted.

Calla wanted to be angry for his intrusion, but it was probably better not to pick a fight with the dead guy.

"Not much. Open bar. Stocked with imported beer and hard liquor. I was pretty drunk."

"Why did you become intoxicated?" Calla asked. "Were you depressed about something?"

He regarded her as if she were a total moron. “It’s football season,” he said as if that explained everything. “Besides, I don’t drink to massage my lady feelings.”

“So you always get that drunk for a college game?” Adam asked.

“It was a party.” He shrugged. “The Dawgs were winning. The beverages were available. It seemed like the thing to do.

“So you were drinking at the party,” Adam prompted. “What else happened?”

“It’s kind of fuzzy.” Ellis’s face contorted as if he were trying to do a complex math problem in his head. “Rena was there. I remember Rena. She wasn’t happy with me for some reason.”

Probably because you were sloshed.

This time Calla didn’t offer the obvious answer.

“The cops showed up.” Ellis rubbed at his head. “I think they helped me get back home. I remember Rena being at my place. She took off my shoes. The two pigs helped me onto the bed.” He paused and closed his eyes. “That’s all I remember. Least until I woke up and found myself in this house.”

“You woke up *here*?” Calla asked, surprised. She would have thought there would be some transition time. Not just, poof! In Matt Corbin. “Inside Mr. Corbin?”

“At first, I didn’t know I was dead and *inside* somebody else. I figured must have stumbled in Corbin’s place at some point. I mean, this—” he pointed to the furnishings—“is not my style. So I got up and went home.”

“You returned to your condo?” Calla asked.

“Sure I did. It’s *my* house. I went in—”

“Locked or unlocked?” Adam interrupted. “Was your door locked or unlocked?”

Ellis considered the question for a moment. “Unlocked, I guess. I didn’t have a key on me.” He patted Matt Corbin’s body as if it were a pair of pants and he was checking the pockets. “So I must have just turned the knob and walked in.”

“What did you find when you went in?” Adam asked.

“Everything looked the same as normal.” He scratched the stubble on his chin. “But the shotgun must have been gone from over the TV.”

“Must have been gone?” Calla asked. “You didn’t notice?”

“Drunk, remember?” he said as if Calla were a moron. Adam had reminded her that Matt Corbin was also intoxicated that night. That would have had an effect on what Ellis remembered after his death.

“You normally stored your weapon on a rack over the TV?” Adam asked.

“Yup.”

“Loaded?”

“Of course. An unloaded gun isn’t much help. How else are you gonna shoot an intruder?”

“Were there intruders?” Calla asked. “Did you see anyone when you returned home?”

“No,” he said. “I walked straight to the bedroom, thinking I needed to come down off this crazy trip, and there I was. Dead.”

“You saw yourself dead,” Calla summed up. “That must have been shocking.”

“Yeah, at first, I just stood there. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. But there I was. On the bed. With this goopy-looking thing on the floor beside me. I went over and picked it up. Turns out, it was my damn brain. Freaked me the hell out, but I couldn’t put it down. I held it in one hand and stared at it.”

Ellis demonstrated by holding his left hand palm up at eye level in a pose reminiscent of the “Alas poor Yorick...” scene in Hamlet.

“I carried it all around the house like that, wondering how my brain was in my hand. How my body was on the bed. How could I be dead and alive at the same time.... I ended up in the bathroom, trying to make sense of it all. I checked the mirror to see if I had a big hole in my head or something. That’s when I first saw Matt Corbin. I saw Matt Corbin in *my* bathroom holding *my* brain. I thought I might be going crazy, like I needed to be committed or something. But that brain in my hand seemed so real. That’s when I started thinking maybe I had killed a man and didn’t remember. Maybe I killed Corbin and was having some kind of guilt-induced hallucination. Like I was seeing myself dead in Corbin’s place or something.”

A dozen questions leapt to Calla’s mind, but Ellis was on a roll, and she didn’t want to interrupt.

“All I could think was that if anyone saw me holding a brain with a dead body in the next room, I was going to the chair. So I got the hell out.”

“What about the brain?” Calla asked. “What did you do with it?”

Ellis went still. Then he looked between them. “I guess I dropped it.”

“Where?” Adam asked, though Calla wasn’t sure the question even mattered. Ellis had just explained why the brain was no longer in the same room as the body.

“I don’t know,” he said, turning defensive. “Hello. I was scared. I didn’t know if I’d just killed Matt Corbin. Or if I was dead. Or if I were on a serious bender. But I knew a couple of things for sure. I was in my house with a dead body, and one of my hands was all covered in blood and brain goo. Dropping that sucker and running seemed like good ideas at the time. I ran out, and this I remember. I locked the door behind me.”

“You took time to lock the door?” Adam asked.

“Weren’t your hands covered in blood and brain matter?” Calla asked at the same time.

“From holding the brain?”

“I only held the brain in my left hand.” He did the Yorick pose again and let his hand fall to his lap. “My right hand was clean. I grabbed my key off the counter and locked up.” He shook his head and then scrubbed at the back of his neck. “Seems pretty stupid now that I know I’m dead.”

“What next?” Adam asked.

“I came back here. I knew Corbin’s place was unlocked. And I seemed to I look like Corbin, so I figured I could hide here. I washed my left hand, dumped some Windex down the sink, you know, to hide the blood and DNA. Didn’t take long. In fact, I got it all done about the time I saw the lights on the cop car across the street.”

According to the police report, that would have been 3:30 AM.

The 911 call had been placed at 3:10 AM.

All that had happened in twenty minutes.

“The police report says that Matt Corbin gave a statement as a bystander,” Calla confirmed.

“Yeah, I went out to watch what was happening. I figured maybe I’d learn what was going on. I watched two cops knock on the door to my house. When I didn’t answer, they bashed the thing in. They didn’t come out for a while, but I stuck around. Eventually, the coroner truck showed up. A couple more neighbors came outside. Everyone talked to me like I was Corbin, so I figured I should act like him. “When the cops finally came out to talk to us, I pretended to be Corbin. Then, they told everyone that I had killed myself.”

“Did you?” Calla asked Ellis. “Kill yourself?”

Ellis’s face screwed up in puzzlement. “I don’t remember ever wanting to kill myself. But maybe I did. I was drunk. And I’m dead, right?”

“Everyone who gets drunk doesn’t commit suicide,” Calla said.

“It could have been an accident,” Adam suggested. “Could you have been cleaning your shotgun while intoxicated?”

Ellis gave Adam a hard look. “Even drunk as a skunk, I wouldn’t have aimed a loaded shotgun at my own head while cleaning it.”

“Besides, where were the cleaning supplies?” Calla asked. “He’d need a snake and oil.”

“Would you have taken down the weapon for some other purpose?” Adam asked. “Did you want to kill Matt Corbin?”

At that suggestion, Ellis stood up. He looked tense and ready to fight, but Adam remained right where he was, leaning passively against the wall. Calla got the impression that his posture was another disguise. He was ready.

“You mentioned the idea yourself,” Adam drawled. “Don’t get pissy with me for asking.”

Ellis considered this for a moment and then sat so abruptly it was as if his knees deflated. “No, I don’t think so,” he said, his ire now gone as well. “Why would I? He never bothered me before.”

“Did he bother Rena?” Calla asked.

“What do you mean?” Ellis asked in a hot, suspicious tone. He didn’t stand up this time, but his eyes had brightened, and he leaned forward, his hands balling into fists on his thighs.

“She believes Matt Corbin has been stalking her for years,” Calla said, feeling odd talking about the man as if he weren’t in the room with them. “She told me so yesterday when I

interviewed her.”

Ellis considered that for a moment. “I don’t think so.”

Calla was glad for that. Frankly, Corbin was her strongest suspect in Ellis’s death. If he were stalking Rena, he had a decent motive.

But she was having trouble wrapping her mind around the whole soul possession thing, and having to deal with a murder victim inside his killer’s body. Well, that was just absurd.

“She thinks Corbin is stalking her because I’ve been trying to get her to understand what happened. I called her up a thousand times, explaining that I was still here, that it was me in here. I tried to tell her the truth, but I guess she just thought Corbin was a creeper.”

Ellis sounded truly grieved for the first time since Calla and Adam had arrived. “She’s never going to believe that I’m me—”

“No, she won’t. We need to focus on finding out how you died.”

“Who killed me,” he corrected blandly. “I never thought about who killed me,” Ellis admitted. “I guess I just didn’t feel dead, you know.”

“But you are dead,” Adam pointed out.

He looked around the room and then down at Corbin’s body as if these possibilities had never occurred to him. “Who killed me? Leo? Rena?” Ellis shook his head and answered his own question. “Rena wouldn’t kill me. She’s been all broken up about my death. I’ve seen her moping around.”

“You and Mr. Baranova fought at the party,” Calla offered.

Ellis stood and began to pace in front of the couch. Adam tracked his movements.

“Yeah, he was trying to weasel out of fixing my sink, but I sure as hell didn’t kill myself over it. And I doubt he had the stones to kill me.” He paused. “But he does have a key to my

place. Not that any of this matters. Finding my killer isn't going to unkill me, is it?"

Calla watched his reaction with a furrowed brow. Ellis ought to be angry that someone ended his life. But he sounded despondent. He should be motivated to find his killer or at least point Adam in the right direction. He should feel something, display an emotion other than this detached coolness.

Calla considered him.

Did death dampen some of his feelings?

"You don't care that someone took your life?" Calla asked, leaning forward with true curiosity.

Ellis's response was a blank stare. He'd already told her he didn't feel dead. Maybe that explained his apathy. Perhaps he would be motivated by something else. Something he'd already showed he cared about.

Or someone.

"You don't care that someone's actions made it impossible for you to be with Rena ever again?"

Ellis sat up straighter and glared at Calla with bright, hard eyes. He didn't say a word, but he didn't need to. His entire demeanor seemed to solidify. His neck tendons strained beneath the tattered neck of his sweatshirt, and his hands clenched into fists. Gone was the slumped posture of a man who'd given up, and in its place was something else.

Clearly, that had been the wrong thing to say.

Calla meant her comment to persuade Ellis to seek justice for himself, but the spark in his eye told her he had heard another message entirely.

But what message was it?

Calla shot an apologetic glance at Adam, but he was focused on Ellis. Adam seemed to sense the man's change too because he had left his place beside the wall and now stood closer to Calla.

Calla didn't know what to do or say next. She should be backpedaling ninety miles an hour. But what would erase his thoughts?

What were his thoughts?

She squinted at him. As a soul-seer, was she supposed to be able to tell? To see the thoughts of their hearts?

Well, she sure couldn't. She couldn't begin to guess what was going on inside Ellis.

This was why she didn't do therapy.

"I want Rena back," Ellis said. "She's all I ever wanted."

"Getting Rena back isn't an option for you anymore," Adam insisted.

"Because I'm dead," Ellis surmised. Then, he stood again and came toward Calla. "But I'm not really dead."

His expression had turned terrible, and he stood and stalked toward Calla.

"You're a nice lady. Rena has talked to you. That means she trusts you. Maybe *you* could tell her I'm in here. If *you* talk to her—"

He loomed over her as if he wanted to grab her by the neck and take her across the street right that minute. Or choke her until she agreed to walk under her own power.

Calla felt herself go numb. That was one of the strange features of PTSD. Some emotions are dampened, while others are heightened. The lack of fear in the face of potential violence was almost as terrifying as terror itself.

"I said it's not an option," Adam interrupted, stepping between them. His voice remained

soothing, but his body had gone rigid. “You are dead. You can’t stay inside Matt Corbin’s body forever.”

“Why not?” Ellis asked with a mocking laugh. “He wasn’t using it for much. Living of his daddy’s dime, no job, no life.... If I stay, there’s a chance I could win Rena back—”

“Forget it,” Adam said. “Ain’t happening. Besides, you got bigger problems than your love life.”

Adam didn’t elaborate, but Calla got his message loud and clear. Adam Shepherd was Ellis’s biggest problem.

“Like what?” Ellis grumbled like a petulant child.

Adam stepped forward, pressing Ellis back a step. Calla sunk deeper into her chair and looked up at the two men. She knew she should do something active to protect herself, but this was a totally unknown world. What was about to happen?

Was Adam going to kill Ellis here and now?

“Sit back down,” Adam ordered, pointing to the place he’d vacated on the sofa.

Neither man moved.

“Sit. Down,” Adam repeated.

“We—” Adam nodded at Calla—“are going to figure out who is responsible for your death. And make sure you get justice. Your job is to keep yourself out of sight and tell us if you remember anything else.”

Ellis growled deep in his chest. “Yeah, sure, whatever you say, hoss.”