



A WHITELEY PRESS, LLC, BOOK
SnapStories Edition

Copyright © 2016 by J. W. Becton
<http://www.jwbecton.com>

*Uncorrected advanced proof for online viewing only.
Material and/or information herein is not in its final form and should not be further
disseminated.
The characters and events in this book are fictitious or used fictitiously. Any similarity to real
people, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.
**This book contains no sound theological doctrine. Do not start a cult based on this
series.***

Fourteen

That had been a disaster of epic proportions.

Maybe that was an exaggeration, but not by much.

Sure, Calla had succeeded in proving to herself that she was indeed what Adam and Pursiful believed. She could see souls, for whatever that was worth.

But her people skills sucked. Calla had no talent for conversation, no subtlety. Nia would never have made such a rookie mistake with a sensitive client. Even barbarian Adam had performed better.

Instead of motivating Ellis to find his killer and move on peacefully to whatever comes next, Calla had managed to put ideas about Rena into his head. He didn't want to move on. He wanted Calla to convince Rena that he was still around.

Inside another human being's body.

That didn't seem to indicate a desire to move on peacefully to eternity. And his sociopathic behavior in life probably meant he would take it up a notch in death. He wouldn't go down without a fight.

Calla glanced down at her phone, intending to check the time. The screen brightened to show one of the pictures she'd taken of Matt Corbin.

Regret flooded her.

Her mistake with Ellis had likely signed Corbin's death warrant.

"I obviously suck at this," Calla said to Adam, who walked beside her toward their waiting vehicles. "I'll send my psychological autopsy to Pursiful, and you won't have me screwing up the rest of this investigation."

Adam remained silent for a few beats, and the sound of their footsteps seemed to grow

loud. Then, he shoved his hands in his coat pockets.

“Scared, huh?” Adam asked, his tone more amicable than accusing. He kept his head down, focused on the earth passing beneath his booted feet, but Calla could sense his attention on her.

He wasn’t baiting her again. This time, he sounded sincerely interested. So instead of returning a snarky comment, Calla let her hand fall to her side and told him the truth.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I’m scared. It’s a reasonable reaction to what I learned today. Souls can steal bodies, and there’s a murderer somewhere on the island. What’s next? Ghosts? Aliens?”

“Well, not aliens,” Adam said deadpan.

Calla gaped at him, but his expression was unreadable when his eyes were hidden behind a veil of overgrown hair.

Was he telling her that ghosts existed too?

Well, she refused to care. There could be ghosts all around her, and she wouldn’t change her mind. Investigating murders was not the job for her.

They reached Calla’s sedan, and she unlocked the door with her remote key.

Adam’s voice stopped her from opening the door and climbing in.

“You finally believe I’m telling you the truth, about invasive souls, about your gift. But you keep wanting to run. Pretend none of it ever happened, that about right?”

Again, his tone was more conversational than convicting.

Without turning away from the car door, Calla nodded. “Why would you want me to help with the murder investigation anyway? Back there—” She jerked her head toward Corbin’s condo. “I only made things worse. I thought I was helping, but I just put ideas into Ellis’s head.

Now you're going to have to...."

She couldn't bring herself to say the words.

Kill Matt Corbin. Assassinate an innocent man in order to free him from a lifetime trapped inside the prison of his own body.

"Yeah, well," Adam said, kicking at Calla's tire with the steel toe of his boot.

Calla pressed her lips together and sighed. "That's not much comfort."

"I'm not trying to comfort you." Adam looked away from the tire he was abusing. "I'm telling you the truth. Sure, it would have been better if you hadn't said what you did about Rena, but it would have been much worse if we'd never found Ellis in the first place. He would have been able to live in Matt Corbin forever, and that would have been worse than death for Corbin. It's a living death."

Something about his tone had Calla creeping closer to try to get a read on him. He sounded almost mournful, serious, sad.

When Adam had explained the concept of soul possession to her, he'd mentioned that Matt Corbin was the victim he cared about saving. But Calla had been so preoccupied with sussing out how she could be seeing a dead man, she hadn't even considered what Matt Corbin must be experiencing.

To be controlled by another and to lack the strength—or even desire—to cast him off....

Calla understood that too well. It sounded as if Adam did too. After Nia had seen Adam in their clinic, she mentioned that he threw off a PTSD vibe. Maybe she was right. Maybe he had suffered a trauma in his past too.

Without noticing her study of his profile, Adam went back to kicking her tire. On any other man, that action would have struck her as just an awkward nervous outlet, a way to avoid

looking at what needed to be done. But on Adam, it came off as more than just that. Rather than an act of avoidance, he seemed to be wrestling with the difficult choices ahead. He faced choices—life and death—that most people knew nothing about.

She wished she were one of those happily ignorant people.

But that was no longer the case.

“Plus, now we know that Rena triggers Ellis’s rage,” Adam added as an afterthought.

“How clever of me to figure that out,” Calla said, her snark returning. Ellis’s police record told them that long ago.

“And now that we know Ellis was likely murdered, we can assume the chances of him turning vengeful were sky high anyway.” He looked at her. “He would have gone dark side at some point.”

“If you think he will turn vengeful—” Calla broke off, trying to figure out how to formulate the question without sounding like a psychopath. “Why didn’t you...uh...release his soul?”

“Calculated risk.” Adam shifted his weight from one foot to the other and studied her, wrestling internally again. “There’s still a chance that Ellis could leave on his own once he gets justice. I like to give the soul a chance to move on peacefully. It’s a better option all the way around.”

A better option than taking an innocent life.

Feeling herself go just the slightest bit lightheaded, Calla took a metered breath. She hadn’t signed up for this. She’d been handling the psychological autopsy just fine, but she obviously wasn’t ready for life or death situations.

She couldn’t count on herself to say or do the right thing. Under pressure, she either

overreacted or froze. Those were not good options.

“I can’t do this,” she said. In a whisper, she added, “I’m not a cop, and I don’t want to be a soul-seer.”

“You *are* a soul-seer.” This time Adam sounded tired. “But you do have a choice about how deep into this world you want to go.”

“I’m not a cop or a fixer or whatever you call yourself,” Calla said, feeling a weight lift from her shoulders. He wasn’t trying to force her. “I’ll finish the psychological autopsy. It might help in the prosecution of the killer once you catch him. But I don’t think I should go any farther than that.”

She opened her car door, the silver paint flashing in the late morning sun, and slid behind the wheel. She was surprised when Adam stepped forward, grasping the top of the door before she could shut it behind her.

Calla glared up at him and tugged at the door. He didn’t give an inch.

“I know you’re scared. And you should be. I ain’t gonna lie.” Calla noted his faltering grammar and wondered if he was playing her somehow. But he looked earnest and met her gaze fully with his serious green eyes. Maybe the Southern drawl was the real Adam.

Maybe the decent grammar was something he did because he learned it later, not because it was who he was.

He seemed to be waiting for her to respond, so she gave a brief nod.

“It’s tough work, but it’s important. And you got to make an informed decision about whether or not you want to do it. You saw some bad, and it’ll get worse. But you ain’t seen the good....”

“I’m as informed as I want to be,” Calla said, pulling at the door again. She didn’t want

to be convinced. "I've made a rational decision."

"No, you ain't." He shook his shaggy head. "You been running this whole time, and right now, you're running again, scampering away like a scared little bunny. Hiding behind a report that may not even be admissible in court."

Calla wanted to refute him, tell him that she had not been running away since the beginning.

But she had.

She'd been running away from a lot of things.

Her past, her PTSD, you name it.

But she wasn't going to admit it to him either.

"I was hired to do a job, and I'm going to finish it," Calla said. Then, her mind flashed to Waylon Ellis. The image of his face, the change in his demeanor haunted her. "I saw enough to believe your crazy story, but I can't be a part of this."

She did not want a role in the death of an innocent man.

Adam's forehead furrowed and pain flitted across his features.

"You're already a part of this case," Adam warned. "Ellis knows who you are, and he knows you know who he is. He's gonna want you to convince Rena."

He was probably right. She *was* involved. Ellis might not know she could *see* him, but he knew that she and Adam had identified him somehow.

"I don't think Ellis wants to hurt me," Calla said. "If anything, he would want to keep me alive to talk to Rena. You just said it yourself."

"He also knows that we're trying to force him to the great beyond," Adam reminded her. "He can't get to Rena if his soul leaves the earth. If you ain't gonna help him with Rena, you

represent a danger to him.”

Calla shook her head. He’d come after Adam first, surely. He was the law enforcement officer. She was just a shrink. What threat did she pose?

Deciding to risk it, Calla yanked on the car door again, and this time, Adam let it slip from his fingers. It slammed shut.

“Running,” he reiterated through the closed door.

“I’m not running,” she said as she started the car and peeled out of Palmetto Grove, leaving Adam behind.

It was late morning and a workday, so Calla headed automatically for the clinic. Somewhere, about half way there, she realized that she was breaking the speed limit by double digits, and she forced herself to slow down. She focused her attention on each step in the process of getting to work.

Drive the speed limit.

Park the car under the best shade tree. Even though it winter and a little sun would only serve to improve the temperature in the car later. Still, habit.

Gather her work bag, lock the car doors, go into the clinic.

Once inside, Calla expected to feel safe and peaceful. When that didn’t happen, she focused on the next part of her usual routine: prepare a cup of Sencha green tea, set up her laptop, and look over her agenda.

But nothing helped to ground her. Sure, her hands were steady as she lifted her teacup to her lips and sipped the green, grassy brew. But inside, she was still shaken. What she wanted, more than anything else, was to wake up, safely tucked in her own bed to discover that the whole

weekend had been a nightmare.

Maybe Adam was right. She did want to forget everything that had had happened, but she was not *running*. She was taking a prudent step out of a situation for which she was unprepared. She wanted no part in the death of an innocent person. Other than the part she'd already played.

Nothing seemed real anymore. It was like falling down the rabbit hole and into a world that looked a lot like her home but was governed by all new rules.

Calla shook her head and then looked around her office. This—her work—had always brought her comfort. It was supposed to be doing that now. The neat little piles of surveys, the data files, the routine.

Why wasn't it?

She plunked down in her desk chair and dropped her head into her hands. She had no idea what to do next.

What if Adam was right and her role in the Ellis investigation had already put her in danger?

A gentle knock sounded at the door, and Calla's head jerked up fast enough to cause self-inflicted whiplash.

It was probably just Nia, she realized belatedly. If Ellis was coming to murder her, he probably wouldn't knock politely.

"Come in," Calla called, hoping her voice sounded even.

Obviously, it didn't. And apparently, she didn't look any calmer either.

"Wow, you look like you've just seen a ghost," Nia quipped as she came forward in a swirl of skirts and a clatter of bangles.

"Don't even start," Calla warned, but there was no bite in her tone. She was too tired for

bite.

“Case getting to ya?” Nia asked, sitting down.

Calla nodded and swallowed hard.

“Grisly?” Nia surmised.

Calla nodded, unsure how much to share.

Nia waited.

“I had a panic attack,” Calla confessed finally. “I used my tools and was able to get it under control, but it scared me. It was the first one I’ve had in a long time.”

Nia sighed deeply, and her expression turned thoughtful. “You know that’s normal right? The first time out, dealing with a violent death, lots of strangers? It’s normal to feel the strain of new pressures.”

“I know, I know,” Calla said. “But it’s been so long....”

“And during that time, you’ve been in here, working on your coping skills in safety. This was your first pop quiz, and you passed it. You felt the panic and turned it back.”

Calla wanted to see it from Nia’s hopeful perspective, but she couldn’t quite manage it. “I hoped I was beyond panic.”

“Even despite all your research, we still don’t have a cure for post-traumatic stress. But you have the tools to handle the panic. What you did—having an attack and overcoming it—that shows that you are ready for more.”

“I don’t know,” Calla muttered. The idea of having to work the anti-panic system every day sounded exhausting. “I’m right back to being hypervigilant. It’s easier when I just stay in here.” She gestured around the office. “I don’t have to spend so much energy dealing with that.”

She waved a hand vaguely at the window.

Nia gave her a therapeutic nod that somehow said both “I understand” and “continue.”

“Plus, I don’t know if I have the people skills for these interviews,” Calla added, thinking back on her mistake with Ellis. “I’m not like you. I say the wrong things all the time.”

“Yeah, so do I.”

Calla shot her a look of pure disbelief.

“It’s true. I’m a therapist, not a mind-reader. Much as I try to understand where a client’s head is at, sometimes I guess wrong. But every mistake is an opportunity.”

Calla harrumphed. She really didn’t see how pointing Ellis at Rena like a nuclear missile created any opportunities for anything but death.

“Besides,” Nia continued. “You have different gifts. Your hypervigilance can be used to your advantage. Once you work through the anxiety of being in public and working on violent cases, you’ll be able to see things others can’t. Sense things that cops won’t. Because you’ll see minute signs they’ll miss.”

Calla restrained a derisive snort.

If Nia only knew....

“I think I’m just going to turn in what I have and be done with this psychological autopsy.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a wise choice,” Nia agreed far too easily. “But that’s not what you’re going to do. You might claim you want to quit, but you’re going to stick with this case until the end. That’s just the way you are.”

Nia didn’t have the whole story. She couldn’t make an informed decision. It wasn’t just the PTSD that made Calla want out. It was the fact that the underpinnings of the universe had shifted beneath her.

And she couldn't very well explain that to Nia. She'd never believe it.

No wonder Adam had withheld so much at the beginning.

He'd been breaking the news as gently as he could. For a soul assassin—what had he called it? Fixer?—he seemed to be a good man. He was trying to give Ellis a chance, and he didn't want to kill Corbin unless he absolutely had to.

Adam was rough around the edges, but he was a good man.

“What were you just thinking?” Nia asked. “Your face went all soft.”

“I was thinking about Adam,” she admitted.

“Oh?” Nia asked in a bright tone.

“There's more to him than I thought.”

“I don't have time to say I told you so,” Nia said, glancing at the watch that was nearly buried under all the bangles on her wrist. “I have a client. Gotta run.”

Calla had to admit that Nia was right.

At least about Adam.

She still wasn't sure it was the best idea to stick with the case. But she may not have a choice.