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Sixteen

The grass patches in front of the Palmetto Grove condos here were hardly big enough to be called yards. The BIPD cruiser barely fit in Rena's driveway without hanging out into the street. And Calla's car took up nearly the entire front of the unit.

Adam didn't know how people could enjoy such confined spaces. A dog could barely take a decent crap in the tiny lawn. Bask sure couldn't.

He would feel trapped if he had to live in a place that small. He felt confined just searching it.

But Rena's small yard and football-stadium-style outdoor lighting made his grid search quick work. According to Calla, Rena didn't know how Corbin had entered her home. He was just sitting on the sofa when she returned from her run.

So Adam checked the damp earth for footprints or any object the perpetrator might have dropped on his way in or out of Rena's house. You never knew what might come in handy in searching for a person who'd gone MIA.

After finding nothing, Adam checked the perimeter of the house, searching for signs of forced entry. But Corbin had likely entered Rena's home by walking up the sidewalk and using a key. Or entered through an unlocked door.

Adam looked across the street to Corbin's place, which was a mirror image of Rena's. There were no signs of activity. No lights, no movement beyond the windows.

According to Rena, Corbin wanted to pull a disappearing act, and he'd wanted her to go with him. That second part hadn't gone according to plan, but apparently, he was in the wind.

But where had he gone?

Before Adam could consider the situation further, his phone chirped. That would be

Pursiful. He had a special talent for keeping his finger on the pulse of a case.

Kind of ironic for a coroner.

He was especially on the ball when Adam had erred in judgment, like having allowed Ellis to remain out in the world. He should have put him in custody.

But there was nothing he could do about that now.

“BIPD is on scene already,” Adam said to Pursiful by way of greeting.

“I know.” Pursiful’s voice came through the speaker. “You think Ellis is running?”

“Most likely,” Adam said, glancing at Corbin’s place again. “We need to bring him in, but I don’t expect to find him easily. I think he wanted to take Rena and disappear for good.”

“You’re probably right, my boy,” Pursiful agreed. “When he turns up, bring him to me. Bask and I will watch him.”

Adam ended the call and looked around. There was just the small matter of finding Ellis.

Calla had dug deeper into Ellis’s biography and history. Maybe she’d know where he was likely to go.

He turned when two uniformed BIPD officers emerged from Rena’s condo. Even if he hadn’t been able to see their insignia—or lack thereof in the case of the rookie—it wasn’t difficult to tell who was the ranking officer.

The junior officer was clearly still wet behind the ears. Minus the insignia, he had all the typical cop accoutrements—mustache, mirrored sunglasses, and an equipment belt so heavily laden that it threatened to take his pants to his ankles with every stride. But his outfit wasn’t fooling anyone. He was hardly confident in his own skin much less with his new role behind the badge.

But he was trying to look as tough as his partner.

And not quite succeeding.

The senior partner had a few more years and at least forty pounds of muscle on the younger man. He wasn't bothering to hide behind glasses and facial hair. He was clean shaven and bare faced, but he wore a confident expression. He looked like a real straight arrow, the kind of guy Adam might have chosen as a buddy. He wore a silver badge and a single stripe on his collar that clearly denoted him as among the rank and file, but he also wore a few pins signifying some departmental awards. And he was obviously competent enough to serve as a field training officer.

On spotting Adam—a suspicious male—lurking outside Rena's residence, the senior officer came forward immediately, trying to look casual but clearly on a mission. Once they were closer, Adam could make out their name tags. Maddix and Guthrie, the same officers who had responded to the domestic disturbance call and the shots fired call the night of Ellis's death.

Interesting. And not a coincidence.

"Afternoon, sir," Maddix, the senior officer, said. "Can I ask you what you're doing out here on this lady's lawn?"

Adam tried to look unassuming and perhaps a little dim. It was time to bullshit the bullshitters.

"I'm here with the doc," he said, nodding toward Rena's house.

Maddix appeared skeptical. "You got a name?"

"Adam Shepherd."

"We'll need to see your ID," the junior officer said.

Instead of reaching for his driver's license, Adam produced his GBI badge. He wanted them to underestimate him, but he wasn't going to lie about exactly who he was.

“What’s the GBI doing here?” the younger officer Guthrie asked his partner.

“Good question,” Maddix said, voice thick with suspicion. “What is the GBI’s interest in a criminal trespass call?”

“Nothin’” Adam assured them, laying his accent on thick. People subtracted IQ points for poor grammar, so it was fortunate that his redneck accent came naturally to him. “Like I said, I’m here with the doc.”

He nodded toward Rena’s door where Calla had appeared. Both officers glanced back at her before returning their focus to him.

“Hey, babe,” Adam called, the words feeling awkward on his lips. Calla returned his greeting with a little wave and a look of confusion. Fortunately, neither officer saw her ambivalent greeting.

Maddix shifted so he could watch Calla’s approach and keep an eye on Adam at the same time.

The doc cut quite a sweet little figure as she came toward their group. Her skirt swung with each step, and the wind gave her hair in a sexy, natural look. He let his appreciation show in his face, just in case the others were watching him.

Frankly, he couldn’t take his eyes off Calla if he tried.

That probably wasn’t good.

But it worked well for his little cover story.

When Adam met Maddix’s eyes again, he nodded with approval. “Gotcha.”

“Y’all know already,” Adam said. “But she’s been working on a psychological autopsy on Waylon Ellis, this lady’s former boyfriend. I guess Ms. Bethel felt comfortable enough to call Cal for support after the break-in.”

“That’s what Rena said,” Maddix verified.

“So did y’all find signs of forced entry?” Adam asked, looking pointedly around the exterior of the house. He doubted they’d executed a proper search since his were the only footprints left in Rena’s flowerbeds.

“No, but we have a suspect.” Maddix nodded across the street. “Matt Corbin has been stalking Rena for some time apparently. She has a hidden key. If he were watching, he probably knew where it was.”

Well, that explained Ellis’s easy entry.

“You gonna bring him in?” Adam asked, noting Maddix’s familiar use of the victim’s name. Calling her Rena meant their connection was more intimate than he’d like to let on.

Guthrie nodded. “We got him on criminal trespass and stalking.”

Having BIPD take Corbin off the streets would be a decent outcome. Ellis obviously had a plan cooking and didn’t care much to get closure and move on. That made him a wild card. He needed to be in custody, even if it were the BIPD’s lockup and not Pursiful’s place.

All that mattered was securing Corbin so Adam could find Ellis’s murderer.

Rena appeared in the doorway and walked toward the group gathered on her tiny lawn.

“Y’all know each other then?” Adam drawled. “You and Ms. Bethel.”

Maddix nodded, his expression closing off. “Rena and I went to the same high school.”

“You knew Waylon Ellis too?”

“Yeah, I also knew the victim.” He spoke the word victim with such disdain that he might as well have called him a bastard instead.

“Funny how people meet, ain’t it?” Adam said, nodding toward Calla who stood at his side. “Ellis’s death introduced us.”

“Meeting over a suicide,” Maddix said. “Charming.”

“Well, now, we ain’t sure it was suicide. Are we, honeybuns?” He gave Calla a very friendly smile and hoped she wouldn’t snap his neck when he put a gentle arm around her.

And for calling her “honeybuns.”

He also hoped she would take his cue and bait these people a little. It was time to stir the pot and see what rose to the top.

Calla gave him a questioning look and came stiffly into his embrace. He gave her a quick look that he hoped was reassuring.

“That’s right,” Calla said slowly, watching Adam for any sign that she might be about to overshare. “I was unable to find any signs of suicidal ideation in the victim.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Maddix ejaculated. He cleared his throat. “Seemed like a pretty textbook suicide to me.”

“According to the police report, you—” Adam looked between Maddix and Guthrie—
“handled the disorderly conduct call that night.”

“They helped me get Waylon to bed,” Rena corrected. “There was no disorderly conduct. No domestic violence.”

Everyone there—including Rena—knew that was a lie. But they all let it pass. Victims of abuse were conditioned to protect their abusers, and Rena was no different.

Instead, Adam addressed the police officers. “Did you notice anything unusual about the house when you helped Ellis back inside?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Maddix said. “We assisted him to bed and propped him against the headboard, where he passed out. It’s all in the report.”

That was perfectly reasonable. According to Pursiful’s autopsy, Ellis’s blood alcohol

level was a .3. He would have been incoherent and likely unstable on his feet. Passing out was pretty much inevitable.

“Then, Guthrie and I left.”

“But you came back,” Adam said. “The report of shots fired. You took that call too.”

“That was after shift change,” Brody said. “Technically, we were off duty, but we were the closest. So we turned around.”

“Police are never truly off duty,” Adam acknowledged.

“According to the official report you mentioned,” Calla began, shifting in Adam’s light grip. The movement caused her tight little backside to rub against him, and realizing the intimate contact she initiated, she stilled immediately. “Your response time was nearly twenty minutes. What took so long?”

Maddix glared at Calla. His fists bunched, and Calla stiffened almost imperceptibly. The officer quickly crossed his arms to mask his instinctive aggressive response. Adam smiled at the whole silent exchange. The doc was getting to poor Maddix.

“What is she trying to say?” Maddix asked Adam. He seemed to be trying not to let his aggression leach into his voice, but he wasn’t doing a good job of it.

“*She’s* saying,” Calla said with what was sure to be an infuriating level of calm. “That twenty minutes is a long time on a shots fired call. The average BIPD response time is seven minutes.”

Again, ignoring Calla, Maddix addressed Adam. “What right does a shrink have to question the department’s response time?”

“Easy bro,” Adam said, turning on as much charm as he could muster without inducing vomiting. Maddix’s response didn’t surprise him. Cops find themselves questioned by everyone:

superiors, the press, the public. And many of those questions are unfair. But Calla was asking a good question, one that should be answered. He'd give the guy a temporary out. Take a little pressure off. "Didn't you say it was shift change?"

"Yeah," he agreed, sounding relieved. "Yeah, it was."

"Then, no need to get all lathered up then. It was shift change. You went above and beyond, even if the response was a bit slow."

"Plus," Guthrie added. "We get shots fired calls all the time that turn out to be fireworks. We had no reason to believe that this call would be any different."

Except the domestic violence call they'd responded to earlier that night.

They had every reason to believe that gunshots could have been fired.

Before chatting with Maddix and Guthrie, Adam believed that they had preconceived notions about Ellis's death. But now, he wondered if they were more than just incompetent cops. Could one of them have killed Ellis?

They had plenty of time to do it.

"Frankly," Adam said, adding a laugh for good measure. "We're looking into the possibility that Ellis's death resulted from an accident."

"No, we—" He gave Calla a little squeeze, and she seemed to understand and correct herself. "Are no longer considering suicide as the means of death."

"We believe he may have managed to get the shotgun and return to bed after you left. He was drunk enough not to be thinking clearly."

He was also drunk enough not to be stable enough to walk alone. There was no way he made it downstairs, took the shotgun from its mount over the TV, and returned to bed.

"We need to put together a time line is all," Adam assured them. "The call of shots fired

came into dispatch at 0310.”

Guthrie and Maddix nodded.

“The police report states that you arrived first at Ellis’s house. How did you know to go there and not the clubhouse, where the party was taking place?”

“Dispatch gave us the location,” Guthrie said.

If that were true, then that meant the caller gave the location to dispatch.

“Who was the caller again?” Adam asked. The caller’s identity had not been part of the information he’d received.

“Leo Baranova,” Guthrie supplied.

“It wasn’t exactly a mystery where the shot originated,” Maddix said, stepping forward, arms crossed once more. “When we rolled up on scene, Corbin stumbled out of his house along with everyone else. Everyone pointed us to Ellis’s place, so that’s where we went.”

“Your report says you treated the scene as a suicide,” Adam said.

“Yeah, but I guess it could have been an accident,” Maddix admitted. “Doesn’t make much of a difference either way, does it? The victim was alone in his locked condo, and he had a shotgun aimed at his own face. Seemed pretty clear that the wound had been inflicted by the victim—either on purpose or by accident.”

Beside Maddix, Guthrie nodded.

“What about the brain?” Calla asked. “The brain was found in the sitting room. Didn’t that strike you as unusual?”

“Didn’t seem that odd to me,” Guthrie said. “The head shot was fired at such close range that his brain bounced into the next room.”

Neither he nor Calla argued the scientific impossibilities.

“Look,” Maddix interrupted. “This is all in our report, and we’re happy to schedule a time to go over the details for you. But right now we got a suspect to bring in.”

“Sure, sure,” Adam agreed, looking across the street at Corbin’s empty condo.

“You go on back inside,” Maddix told Rena in a quiet voice.

“Brody,” Rena said softly, calling Maddix by his first name.

The officer paused and turned to her. “You go on,” he repeated gently. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Rena’s expression turned reluctant, and she looked like she wanted to grab his hand and say something else. But once glance at Adam and Calla apparently changed her mind. Instead, she did as he asked, leaving Calla and Adam alone, still in their couple pose, to watch the officers knock on Corbin’s door.

“You get the feeling something isn’t right with Brody Maddix?” Calla asked in a hushed tone.

“Yup.” He let his hand fall from her side, brushing at the edge of her skirt as he did. He tried not to think about why this made him tingle a bit.

He cleared his throat. “He’s got a rep for being a competent patrol cop, but he was skimpy with the details in the reports from that night.”

She nodded. “I think he’s got a thing for Rena. You should have seen them in the kitchen. There was more than just a professional exchange going on in there.”

“Hmm,” he said.

Then, she spoke his thought aloud. “He responded to the domestic dispute. He knew their history and was protective of Rena.”

“He was also in Ellis’s bedroom before he died,” Adam added. “Plus, it’s becoming

pretty clear that we can't trust the police report."

"Are you going to let BIPD take Ellis in?"

Adam sighed as he watched the officers bang on Corbin's door again.

"Moot point. They won't find Corbin in there, so they'll issue a BOLO. Then, all the cops on the island will be looking for him."

Including himself.