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Seventeen

If Calla had been unsure about her first impressions of Adam Shepherd before, she was certain now.

He *was* a shapeshifter.

Changing his demeanor to get the responses he needed.

Standing with him outside Rene Bethel's condo, she had watched him drop his low IQ, lovesick puppy facade and return to normal. His grammar shifted back to its normal rhythms, and his posture went from slouched to relaxed but ready.

For a police officer, this was probably a good skill to possess. After all, he had to walk into all kinds of situations and develop a rapport with different types of people, many of whom would be reluctant to trust a cop like Brody Maddix, who wore his authority as plainly as the badge on his chest.

Adam had the ability to adapt to the situation at hand, to change when change was needed.

Though she'd been uncomfortable with the couple act, Calla almost envied his ability to construct the ruse so quickly. She could barely keep herself together on an average day, forget a fast-changing situation. She wasn't one to finesse suspects or even witnesses yet. But Adam got a seasoned cop to divulge information that hadn't been included in the police report, and neither he nor his partner probably realized it yet.

"You heard what they said about Leo Baranova?" Calla asked, watching Adam out of the corner of her eye.

"He called in the gunshot," Adam said.

Calla hummed in response. "I think there's something he didn't tell me about that night."

That irritated her. What harm could there be in Leo's explaining that he heard the gunshot and called the police?

Unless *he* killed Ellis.

"Ellis and Leo Baranova argued often, including at the party," Calla said, thinking aloud. "He would have known how drunk Ellis was."

"And as Ellis's landlord, he'd have access," Adam added. "He would have had a key to his condo for repairs and such. He would have seen the shotgun."

Calla hadn't even considered that.

"He could have used his key to get inside and kill him. Then, he could have called the police, claiming he heard the gunshot."

"Let's go find out what he didn't tell you," Adam suggested, taking his tablet and phone from his coat pocket. He looked up Baranova's address and then contacted somebody about the 911 call from the night of Ellis's death.

He dropped his phone and tablet back into his pocket. "It'll take a bit to get a recording of the 911 call," he said. "But let's go ahead and talk to Baranova now."

They found his condo on the next row. It looked just like every other townhouse. Nothing special. Just one of many.

Leo opened the door and beamed at Calla.

"Ah! My favorite lady shrink." He bowed deeply. This time he wasn't wearing his golf cap, so the gesture exposed a copse of thinning gray hair on his scalp.

He returned to an upright position. Calla smiled at him. She couldn't help it. He was cute, even if he had withheld information from her.

Then, he took in Adam as if just noticing him.

“Not talking to yourself today then?” he asked Calla, watching Adam with a mixture of confusion and interest. “What can I do for you?”

“This is Special Agent Adam Shepherd with the GBI,” Calla said, pausing while Adam gave Leo his badge to examine. “We wanted to ask you some questions.”

“About Ellis’s suicide?” Leo asked. He opened the door wider and waved them into a townhouse like Rena’s and Corbin’s.

She followed them to Leo’s kitchen, which was decorated in exploded golf bag. Clubs rested in every corner, packages of golf balls were stacked in front of the toaster, and tees littered the counter.

“Coffee?” he asked, gesturing to a machine whose contents resembled sludge.

They both refused, and then Calla perched on one of his counter stools.

She wasn’t sure how much information Adam wanted to reveal at this point, so she let him proceed. After all, this wasn’t her investigation. She shouldn’t even be here.

Adam surprised her by picking up a tee and twirling it in his blunt fingers. “You play often?”

“One of the perks of living on a resort island,” Leo said, smiling. “You?”

“Not really,” Adam admitted. “I’ve played once or twice.”

Calla concealed a grin at that. She could not image Adam on the links wearing plaid trousers and a golf shirt. But on the other hand, he was a shapeshifter. Maybe he could fit right in.

The hair would be a dead giveaway that he was not at home on the green.

Adam chuckled. “The closest I ever got to a decent handicap was watching Tiger Woods play Augusta National one year.”

“He was something back in his prime,” Leo agreed.

“Look,” Adam said. “I hate to bother you with questions about your tenant, but we’ve run into some trouble with the time line leading up to Mr. Ellis’s death. Dr. Escott needs some clarification for her report.”

“Okay.” Leo appeared more at ease now, and seemed willing to help. He shifted his gaze to her. “I’ll do the best I can to answer your questions.”

“When we talked earlier,” Calla began. “I didn’t realize you were the person who called 911.”

Some of Leo’s ease dissipated. “Guess I didn’t think to mention it, but yeah, I called 911 after I heard the shot.”

“What time was that?” Adam asked.

“Around three, I guess.”

“Where were you when you heard the shot?”

“Here,” he said spreading his arms wide. “After the police came, it kind of killed the party vibe. Poor choice of words, sorry. But I came home, got in bed, and fell asleep.”

“That’s when you heard the gunshot.”

“It was so loud, it woke me. Then I called 911.”

“How did you know it was a gunshot?” Adam asked.

Leo gave Adam an odd look. “The loud boom seemed to give it away.”

“A lot of people would have thought fireworks,” Adam suggested. “Or that an electrical transformer blew. But you knew it was a gunshot.”

“That’s right, young man,” Leo said. “I wasn’t born yesterday. I probably heard more M16 fire in one year than you’ve heard in your whole life.”

“Vietnam?” Adam asked.

“Army infantry. Did my year in country and got out,” Leo said. “So I know a gunshot when I hear it.”

“So you heard the shot and called 911. From your own phone?”

“That’s right.”

“According to the police report,” Calla said. “You directed the officers to Waylon Ellis’s condo.”

“Well, now, that’s not exactly what I said. I told them the shot sounded like it came from close by, somewhere just south of my place.”

That was another story conflict. Maddix told them that the 911 caller identified the source of the sound as Waylon Ellis’s house. That’s why they went directly there.

“What next?” Adam prompted.

“Nothing,” Leo said, shrugging. “I stayed inside. I’m too old to run around in the middle of the night playing hero. I wanted for the police.”

“Did you notice when they arrived?” Calla asked.

“Not sure.” He pointed to the front of his condo. “I took a peek out my front windows and didn’t see any lights or hear sirens. I figured I had time to make myself a cup of coffee. Sometime around 3:30, I heard the sirens, and when I looked again, the place was all lit up. I took my coffee outside and that’s when I found out Ellis killed himself.”

“How long did you wait to clean up the condo?” Adam asked.

Leo blinked at the question.

“Soon as the police told me I could, I had a crew out there. An empty condo isn’t doing me any good.” He cast a glance at Calla. “Do you know how much a professional clean up crew

charges to handle ‘forensic cleaning’? It’s not cheap.”

“No, it’s not,” Adam said, standing and placing his tablet back in his pocket. “It’s not easy to clean up a tragic life. Thanks for your time.”

The two men shook hands and then Leo took Calla’s hand in his gnarled fist. He pulled her gently aside.

“Everything okay?” he asked her. “Why all the questions?”

Calla gently removed her hand from his grasp. “It’s my job to ask questions.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t ask about Ellis. You asked about timing.”

“We’re looking into all the possibilities,” Calla hedged.

She and Adam weren’t going public with their theory that Waylon Ellis had been murdered. After all, it was clear that no one in Palmetto Grove was particularly fond of Waylon Ellis, and everyone except Rena seemed largely unaffected by his death.

No one would feel motivated to help find his killer, unless it were to thank him.

And revealing too much detail about their investigation could add more layers to what already appeared to be some sort of cover up.

Adam, who had been listening at the kitchen door, added, “It’s just a matter of procedure to interview the person who called 911.”

“Oh, okay,” Leo said, sounding as if he didn’t really believe that. “Well, if you have anymore questions....”

He let the sentence drift off as he escorted them to the front door and watched them leave his property.

“I don’t think he knows much more than he already told us,” Calla said. “But someone does.”

“A lot of people are hiding information,” Adam agreed once they were out of Leo’s earshot. “At first, I believed that BIPD was just incompetent. Now, I’m wondering how much information those clowns purposely withheld details from the report.”

“They knew to go to Ellis’s. We still don’t know how.”

“I’ll need to tread lightly here. Maddix and Guthrie—and a lot of the boys at BIPD—will clam up once they realize we suspect something. But I’m going to request the GPS tracking data on Maddix and Guthrie’s cruiser. Something isn’t right.”

So he thought the time line was off too.

“I knew twenty minutes was unlikely,” Calla said.

“Cops don’t screw around when someone reports gunshots.” He checked his watch. “It’s later than I thought. Maybe I can still catch Sal at BIPD. She’ll be able to provide the tracking data without spreading it around the department.”

Calla shot him a look of overt disbelief. People who shared a common bond—like police officers—tended to get defensive when one of their pack is attacked. “You think Sal—” whoever that was—“won’t alert Guthrie or Maddix?”

“She’s IA—Internal Affairs. She’s paid to be impartial, and it would be her ass if she didn’t look into the possibility that two BIPD officers might have done something to obscure the facts of a death investigation.”

Calla certainly hoped the internal affairs officer would keep their inquiries quiet. This case was complicated enough—what with the dead people involved—without tipping off two potentially rogue cops to of their suspicions.

He looked at his watch again, and this time, he scowled back at it. “I just hope she can gather the data fast enough...before Ellis causes more trouble.”

