

Eighteen

Calla wanted to go home, but in her rush to get to Rena, she'd left all her stuff at the office.

The detour was necessary.

It was after nine PM and already full dark. The clinic had long been closed, but Nia's car remained parked in her usual spot. That was odd. As Calla's headlights swept past, she studied Nia's classic Volkswagon Beetle as if it might suddenly get up and turn cartwheels.

This case was making her suspicious of everything.

Chiding herself, Calla shrugged off her feelings on unease. Her partner was probably getting in some overtime, or perhaps she'd scheduled an after-hours client. Maybe someone had picked her up for a late dinner. Or movie date.

There was a logical explanation. There had to be.

Calla found the building's front door locked, so she dug out her key chain again and unlocked the double glass door. The alarm wasn't set, so she headed straight the the clinic door.

That door was unlocked.

Odd.

"Nia?" Calla called out as she shut the door quietly behind her.

She got no response.

Tension stiffened her spine, but it didn't overwhelm her. Nia was here, and this place was safe.

She was probably just watching Netflix with her headphones on.

Despite her own reassurances, Calla felt compelled to walk on silent feet across the industrial carpet.

Nia's office door stood open, and the room was empty.

Calla tried to shrug it off. So Nia wasn't there? That didn't mean anything bad. She might have had a date pick her up at the clinic. Or perhaps she was in the bathroom.

She'd just call to make sure before she locked up.

Calla dialed Nia's number and froze when she heard her familiar ringtone coming from the next room.

Her office.

What was she doing in her private office?

Calla crept toward the partially open door. She pushed it open and peered inside.

The office was dark and her eyes took a moment to focus.

Gone were the neat little stacks of paper on her desk. Her desk phone was off the hook and the receiver dangled toward the floor.

She rounded the desk and sucked in a panicked breath.

Nia lay on the floor, papers scattered around her.

"Nia?" Calla whispered, rushing to her side, thinking heart attack, stroke, a strange accident.... She could see Nia's chest rising and falling in labored breaths. Relief flooded her body, making her almost lightheaded.

Nia was alive.

Thank God.

But there was blood.

Lots of blood coming from somewhere on Nia's scalp, buried in her thick, dark hair. It pooled under her.

Calla ripped off her cardigan and pressed it against what she thought was the source of

blood, but in the dim light, she couldn't see the wound.

With her other hand, she dialed 911 on the cell phone. Within seconds, she'd relayed her location and given the dispatcher an idea of Rena's condition.

That's when she heard the clinic's inner door slam.

Someone had been in here all along.

Calla stared at Nia, who was still unconscious. This was no accident.

Then, she glared in the direction of the noise. Was it Ellis?

That dead asshole was doing exactly what Adam warned her he might do. He was coming after Calla and had hurt Nia in her place.

Adrenaline spiked through Calla's body, mingling with a sudden surge of anger, and before she realized what she was doing, she was already running in the direction of the sound.

Calla burst out the clinic door and took off down the hallway toward the outer doors. Soon she was outside and in the shadows of the parking lot.

There was no one in sight.

Just as she turned to go back inside to do what she could for Nia, a low voice spoke.

“Stop asking so many questions.”

A male in a hoodie stepped from the shadows. His face was obscured in darkness, and his voice came out as a growl.

Panic crawled up the back of Calla's skull, and she froze.

“W-why? What? Who—” she asked, her brain slowly starting to work again. “Who are you?”

“I said,” he ground out, keeping his voice obscured. “No questions.”

The man stepped forward, and Calla stepped back automatically, keeping distance

between them.

The man in the hoodie interpreted her backward step as encouragement, and he came forward again. Calla's anger rose, and her fists clenched at her sides, but she stepped backward again, retreating once more.

She couldn't keep this up or she'd be cornered in front of the locked door.

Her eyes darted around, desperately searching for something to use to defend herself.

But Calla's situation couldn't get much worse. She was in front of a locked building in an empty parking lot with the vengeful soul that had hurt Nia.

She was all alone with nothing to protect herself.

Should she run for the car?

Try to get back inside?

Or try to play this cat-and-mouse game until the paramedics arrived.

They should be there soon. Maybe, she could stay alive long enough....

That thought triggered something inside her. She stepped forward, not quite in his reach, but just enough to let him know she would fight.

"You can go to hell."

"If you could just leave things alone," he began, pausing to draw a knife from the pouch of his hoodie. "I wouldn't have to do this."

Calla focused on the knife as it glinted at her, glittering in the parking lot lights.

He raised his hand to strike. Calla froze, unable to move until he was nearly on top of her. The knife glittered as it began to arc downward.

I will not let this happen.

Never again.

Calla threw her left arm forward to ward off his strike. Their arms clashed.

He tried to overpower her.

Never.

She balled her right fist and punched him as hard as she could in the throat.

Again.

The man's head snapped back.

Calla powered forward, changing from a block to a grasp. Her fingers were barely able to encircle his wrist around the long sleeves and leather gloves he wore. She angled his knife arm back and away from her, but her grip was not solid.

Her advantage wouldn't last long.

She needed to get away.

Grasping his arm with all her strength, Calla surged in, landing a knee to the man's gut and one to his balls that took his legs from him.

He hit the ground. The knife clattered into the neat plantings beside the building as he grasped his crotch and howled in pain and rage.

Calla turned and managed to unlock the main door, pulling the fire alarm for good measure. Anything to draw attention to passersby that she needed help.

Calla's hand still rested on the fire alarm, and she turned back to the main doors. Her attacker had disappeared, and an ambulance had surged into the parking lot.

Thank God.

Calla's breath came in ragged puffs, and her heart surged in her chest as she let the paramedics inside and followed them to Nia.

By the time they reached her office, Calla's legs shook and her vision was starting to go

dark around the edges.

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the darkness that threatened. She realized she was hyperventilating.

Everything was going too fast. Her breathing, her thoughts, her heart.

She needed a moment to slow down.

To think.

Too late, she slid into her guest chair, the one Nia had sat in earlier. And tried to keep it together while the paramedics did their best to save Nia's life.