

Twenty-one

The zip tie tightened around Matt Corbin's ankles. It matched the restraint already on his wrists.

Adam stood up and regarded the young man he saw before him. Matt Corbin was bound and laying sideways on a pile of shop towels in one of Adam's empty outbuildings. The kid's sandy blond hair was streaked with soot, and the clothes that hung off his lanky frame smelled of gasoline. His face was already swelling. It would bloom into a bruise soon.

Adam lifted a hand to his own face. Ellis had gotten in a good shot, but he hardly felt anything from it. He had bigger problems.

So did Matt Corbin.

The boy had sure gotten himself into a mess, and he probably couldn't see a way out.

Maybe Corbin didn't want a way out.

That was even sadder.

Adam pressed his lips together. He had to say something. One last ditch effort to let the boy know that he could still get out of this.

As always in these situations, he went back to his hostage negotiation training.

"It don't have to be like this," Adam said. His message was primarily meant for Matt Corbin, and he hoped it would filter through to the young man's brain. But it had a secondary meaning for Waylon Ellis. "You can get out of this anytime you want."

Both of them could take actions that would end this senseless violence. Corbin could eject Ellis. Or Ellis could surrender his hostage.

Either outcome would be fine by him.

Adam stood and walking the perimeter of the small building to make sure he hadn't left

any tools in the shed. He couldn't have Corbin escaping.

When he turned back to his captive, Ellis sneered at him. "Leave me a box cutter and I will get out of this."

Adam walked the circuit again and then knelt in front of Corbin. "I know why you wanted to burn me alive," he said. "But I gotta ask why you attacked Dr. Escott earlier."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Corbin's brow furrowed. "Is the lady doc okay?"

Adam didn't answer.

"I didn't attack anyone," Ellis added.

Adam raised a brow and looked over his shoulder to his still-smoldering front yard.

"Okay," Ellis acknowledged. "I attacked your house, but I didn't go after the doc."

"No? She was in the house you just tried to burn down."

"Well, that isn't my fault," Corbin said, appearing truly perplexed. "I didn't know she was here. Wouldn't have wanted to hurt her. I need her."

"Need her for what?" Adam asked even though he had a pretty good idea why he wanted to keep Calla around.

Ignoring the question, Corbin fought against the zip ties, which held fast. He relaxed his hands again.

"You might as well forget it," Adam said. "Dr. Escott isn't going to convince Rena that you're still 'alive.' And you aren't getting out of here. Your days of freedom are over."

Corbin stopped fidgeting and met Adam's stare with defiance. "This ain't legal you know."

"Yeah?" Adam rolled his eyes and pushed himself to a standing position. "Well, neither is body theft."

He had a lot to do. No sense in wasting time here.

Adam left the shed, padlocking the door behind him.

While Adam secured Ellis in one of his unburned outbuildings, Calla used her trusty hose to put out the rest of the fires Ellis had started. Luckily, he didn't have a great throwing arm, but you didn't really have to when you're launching bottles of flaming gasoline.

They are kind of foolproof. Land anywhere near your target, and flames will take care of the rest.

Adam's lawn was scorched and parts of his siding would need to be replaced. One shed was basically a loss.

But they were alive, and they had captured Ellis.

By the time Calla doused the last smoldering section of grass and turned off her hose, the sun had risen over the marsh and begun its trek to its winter apex. Adam emerged from his outbuilding holding cell, looking like hell. His face and clothes were smeared with soot for wrestling with Ellis, and the rest of him was damp from Calla's water hose. Mud covered his legs to mid-thigh from the trek through the marsh. He hadn't been kidding about how hard it was to traverse the deep muck outside his fence.

"Are you okay?" Calla asked as he approached.

"I'm fine," Adam assured her.

Now that he was closer, she could see that his jaw was starting to swell, and a section of his cheek looked raw.

"No, you're not," Calla said, raising a gentle hand to his face. She cupped an uninjured section of his jaw and turned his face so she could get a better look at his wounds.

He flinched back.

“Your cheek is burned. Let me—” She was going to suggest first aid, but he stepped back out of her reach.

“No bandages or salves. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Calla let her hand fall from his jaw. She got the message. Tough guy. He didn’t want to be coddled.

“Corbin claims he didn’t attack Nia, and I believe him. He wants you to help him with Rena, just like we thought.”

That knowledge really didn’t make her like Ellis any better.

“So who came to my office?”

Adam shrugged. “Whoever killed Ellis, probably.”

Calla considered that for a beat.

“What are you going to do with him?” She nodded toward the shed where Ellis was. He might not have attacked her and Nia, but he was clearly dangerous. Perhaps now, Adam would end it. “Let BIPD take him in?”

Adam glanced over his shoulder. “Stick to the original plan. I’m taking him to Pursiful’s for safekeeping.”

“You still think it’s worth getting justice for him?” Calla asked. She wasn’t so sure. He’d tried to murder them both in their sleep in an extremely painful way.

“No matter how I feel about the victim—and no matter what he did to my property—” He looked at the smoldering patches of grass and the waste of an outbuilding. “There may be a killer on the loose. I’m not going to let a murderer go free just because I’m not a fan of his victim. Bad guys kill bad guys. It’s the way it works.”

Point taken.

“So who killed Ellis? Brody Maddix?” Calla asked, thinking of the police officer and high school friend of Rena’s. He had risen to the position of the most likely suspect. “He seems awfully protective of Rena for ‘just’ an old high school friend. Maybe he decided to do what she couldn’t: end the relationship with her abuser.”

“Maddix had access.” Adam rubbed gingerly at his jaw. “He was at Ellis’s before his death and was the first to arrive on scene later. But we have no actual evidence that he pulled the trigger or staged the scene.”

“What about the GPS?”

He checked his watch. “Sal’s work shift just started. I should hear something soon.”

“Maybe Guthrie will open up.” That little nervous partner of his didn’t seem to be killer material. “Maybe he’ll come forward. Or talk to me.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Adam equivocated. “He has a lot of potential reasons to want to keep quiet. No matter how this shakes down, Guthrie and Maddix are responsible for doing a slack-ass job of processing the death scene. That doesn’t bode well for the kid’s future with the department or any department. And that’s not even taking into account his possible role a murder and its cover up. Just tampering with a crime scene would end his career before it starts.”

“Rena has the most reason to want him dead.” He had been abusing her after all. But she seemed to be trapped in the cycle. “She never even admitted Ellis abused her. She didn’t seem to have an issue when it was Corbin. She loved Ellis too much.”

“Strong emotions, like love, lead to murder every day. Some of the worst I’ve seen were caused by love.”

“A perversion of love,” Calla noted.

“There’s the landlord,” Adam suggested. “Baranova had access to Ellis’s condo, but no witnesses put him there on the night of Ellis’s death.”

Calla considered the idea that the small, older man with the jaunty golf cap was capable of murder. “Why would he kill Ellis in such a messy way on his own property? Would he really want a grisly murder to take place in his rental. That can’t be good for business.”

“Don’t know if he sees it that way. After all, he had the place sanitized and on the market in minutes. Maybe he had a good reason to make the evidence disappear.”

“True, but the police released it. He would have no reason to preserve evidence, much less let a rental property sit empty.” Calla paused. “There’s still the chance it was an accident. My psychological research can’t completely rule it out. Neither can Pursiful’s autopsy.”

“We need to find out for sure.”

“How?”

“We already have created the perfect pretext. The police are aware that you no longer believe Ellis’s death was a suicide.”

Calla nodded. “If the killer thinks we have reopened the murder investigation, he might panic.”

“He’ll definitely panic if he thinks we discovered a witness to Ellis’s death.”

“Corbin,” Calla said. “Everyone thinks he’s been stalking Rena for months. It’s totally believable that he would have seen Ellis’s death.”

“We’ll spread the word that Corbin plans to share what he knows. We’ll make it public knowledge that we plan to ‘pick him up’ at his place tonight. But he’ll be safely tucked away with Pursiful.”

“And we’ll be there waiting.”

“With any luck, the killer will show up too. Or at least someone who knows what the hell happened that night and who will talk.”

“We’ve got a lot to do,” Calla said. Then, recalling that she wanted nothing to do with this case, she added. “Well, *you* do.”

Adam let that pass.

“But first,” he said, looking over at the shed where Ellis was being held and then down at his ruined attire. “I have got to burn these clothes.”