

Twenty-three

Finally, Pursiful was alone with Ellis.

He sat in his wing back chair and regarded his prisoner, whose bare feet made imprints in the plush carpet by the bay window. True to his word, Adam had not bathed the man, but he had at least given him a clean sweat suit to wear.

And so was Pursiful.

Bask lay on the floor, his head on his paws, eyes following their captive's movements as he paced in front of the large picture window.

The man had been in his custody all day, and he hadn't said a word.

He'd just worn a path in his carpet.

Pursiful hadn't ever had the opportunity to glean information about what happens after death straight from the source before, and he was desperate question Ellis. But he needed Ellis to feel as if he were sharing of his own accord and not like he was being grilled.

Pursiful glanced at the brass mantel clock, finding that the day had slipped by them in silence. He was running out of time. If he wanted info from Waylon Ellis, he'd just have to ask.

"How did it happen?" Pursiful asked, glass poised at his lips as if the answer meant nothing more to him than his next sip of whiskey.

"Huh?" Ellis stopped and turned to regard him.

"How did it happen?" Pursiful sipped. "How did you come to be in your current circumstances?"

"How did I die, you mean?" Ellis repeated, his face screwed up in what might have been anger or confusion.

"Actually," Pursiful said, heaving an internal sigh. The man was practically useless. "I'm

curious about what happened *after* you died. How did you get into your neighbor's body?"

"You tell me." Ellis turned his back to Pursiful. "You seem to know more about this than I do."

That was not true. Pursiful had heard no accounts of the experience of a soul after death. All he'd ever found were testimonies from people who'd had near death experiences.

But nothing from someone who'd actually died.

For obvious reasons.

Still, Pursiful didn't correct Ellis's assumption. It never hurt for people to believe you were more powerful and knowledgeable than you actually were.

Instead, he decided to change tactics.

"What did it feel like? Death?"

Ellis shrugged and fell silent again.

Just when Pursiful thought he'd gone totally, mute, he said, "It didn't feel like anything, and I didn't really remember much about it."

"Oh?" Pursiful noted the peculiar choice of verb tense. "But now you recall more?"

"Yeah, but the memories are all jumbled up. At first, I just remembered being in here."

He gestured at Corbin's body. "But now, I remember floating. I remember seeing my room from above, looking down at myself like I was watching a movie."

Pursiful leaned forward. Now he was getting somewhere. Maybe he wasn't getting anything terribly unlike the near-death experience stories he'd read, but the guy was talking.

"So you felt like you were floating?"

"Yeah, I was weightless, and I couldn't control what was happening. I remember looking at my body on the bed and my brain on the floor beside it. I didn't know what was going on, but

I didn't feel afraid either."

Pursiful hummed in response, hoping the noncommittal sound might encourage him to continue

Ellis turned and squinted at Pursiful, and then his eyes shifted to the side in thought. "I don't think I was there for long. I felt this wind, and I floated outside, right through the ceiling. Freaked me out."

"I can imagine," Pursiful said, leaning forward. "What happened next?"

"That's when I got scared. It felt like I was leaving here forever. I kept floating along on that invisible breeze, higher and higher, until I was looking down on the whole neighborhood. That's when I saw this blank spot—"

"Blank spot?" Pursiful repeated.

"Yeah, like, there was all these colorful threads, all connected, but there was a tear in the fabric. I don't know why, but I got this idea that I could go there. I could fill in that blank spot and not just float away."

"And you were able to control your path, get to the blank spot?"

"It wasn't easy." He shrugged. "But I sort of swam out of the wind and got closer to the blank."

Pursiful leaned forward. "How?"

Ellis shrugged. "I don't know. It all just kind of happened."

Pursiful leaned back again. His previous assessment had been correct. The man was practically useless.

"The closer I got," Ellis continued, "the more I was able to see the blank. Then, I could see *through* it. I could see through Corbin's eyes, and it was like being able to see through the

strange fabric to the world I remembered. I wanted to go back. I didn't want to follow the wind. So I stayed. Later I realized I was *inside* Corbin."

"How did you feel when you realized it?" Pursiful asked. "When you realized you were inside another person's body?"

He shrugged. "Better than being dead."

"You don't feel guilty for taking over another human?" Pursiful asked, trying to keep his voice neutral.

"Why should I?" Ellis demanded, starting to pace faster. "When I looked down, I saw a void, not a body. A *void*. I didn't even know I was in Corbin until later. So it wasn't my fault. Obviously, his body was empty. He wasn't using it. I could fill in that blank space. So I did."

"That GBI agent says I can't stay here," Ellis said as an afterthought. "He said that once my killer is caught, I'll be sucked out of here and into Never-never land."

"And you're not sure you want that," Pursiful surmised.

Ellis stopped pacing midstride. "Would you?" he asked.

No, Pursiful wouldn't. He wanted to live.

"It's natural to fight for life," he said. "To cling to what we know."

"For those moments when I was floating around, I didn't feel anything," Ellis said, pausing to figure out how to explain the inexplicable. "Right after I died, I felt no spark of excitement. No danger. No passion. Nothing. I don't know how else to describe it."

"What you felt, my boy, was peace," Pursiful explained, watching his reaction. "Your spirit at rest."

This was an important moment. An important question. Did Waylon Ellis want to be at peace? Because all Adam and Calla's efforts to catch his killer would prove useless if Ellis didn't

desire a serene afterlife. He might just hang on to the body he'd stolen and continue to cause trouble for everyone around him.

Ellis stopped pacing, and his back stiffened.

“Well, I sure as hell didn't like it,” Ellis declared, spinning to stare at Pursiful. “It made me feel itchy. Like something was missing. It didn't take my long to realize what I was missing. When Rena didn't believe I was still here, that's when I knew what Neverland was missing. I can't be at peace without Rena.”

Pursiful raised a brow.

What did that mean? Did he intend to stay and woo Rena in his current form? Or did he plan to murder Rena and take her with him.

Ellis stalked forward, causing Bask to sit up and growl, teeth exposed.

That gave Ellis pause. He stopped but when he spoke, his tone was sharp, “I'm not leaving her.”

Pursiful nodded as if he understood. But this wasn't good. At this point in the journey, many souls wanted vengeance. They wanted to slaughter their killer or go after someone who wronged them in life. Then, after seeing that the living received their just rewards—whatever those might be—the dead were ready to rest.

That was how it was supposed to work.

And it did work that way most of the time.

The dead exerted so much energy on justice or vengeance that they were ready to give up the physical world as soon as they completed their mission. But Ellis didn't seem to care all that much about finding his killer. He seemed far more intent on picking up with his life where he'd left off. After all, he hadn't sought the person who'd ended his physical life. Instead, he'd

pursued his girlfriend, a woman with whom he had a strained, dramatic relationship.

“That’s why you tried to kill Adam and Calla? Because you want to stay here and get Rena back?”

Ellis shook his head. “Didn’t mean to hurt the lady. But the dude, he kept telling me I had no choice but to die.”

“There’s always a choice,” Pursiful said. Then, as an afterthought, he asked, “Why not Calla?”

“I figured she might help me convince Rena.” He paused. “But she won’t. Would you help me?”

Pursiful pressed his lips together.

“So you’re going to try to stay where you are?” Pursiful asked in response. It wasn’t really a question.

“Gonna try.” Ellis eyed him and then shrugged. “Up until a few days ago, I didn’t think I could step into a new body period. Who knows what I can do? The way I see it, I’m already eternal. Being dead makes me free. Lots of things I could do.”

Pursiful knew then what had to be done. Adam wouldn’t like it, but it seemed like the only alternative.

“You sound a little excited, son,” Pursiful said, rising and calling Bask to heel. “You clearly aren’t thinking straight. How about I make you a cup of chamomile tea? It will help settle you, prepare you to move into a peaceful afterlife.”

Pursiful watched Ellis. He had chosen his words to be deliberately provocative, and they appeared to have the desired effect.

“I don’t want any tea,” He paused. “You got any beer? I could use a beer.”

“Sorry, I don’t drink beer,” he said. “Come, Bask.”

The dog trotted behind him to the kitchen and whined at him.

Pursiful picked up the kettle and began to fill it. Bask whined again.

“I know,” he whispered. “Ellis is getting away. You heard him, Bask. He isn’t going to go peacefully. He’s going to have to be helped along. That’s what Adam is here for. He handles that. Might as well get it done sooner rather than later.”

When Pursiful turned back to his dog, Bask was gone.

And so was Waylon Ellis.