

Twenty-four

Calla sat on Corbin's sofa, leg bouncing. It was late afternoon, and they had managed to arrive early. Adam's GBI sedan was parked around back, supposedly for easy pickup of killer later.

If everything went as it should.

"You don't have to be here," Adam said, nodding at Calla's nervous leg.

She stilled.

"Well, I am here," she said flatly. "My life is in danger just as much as your is."

Apparently, her false bravado persuaded him because he gave her a brief nod and then began to walk the first floor. He'd traversed the condo many times since they'd arrived. That was the only sign that he was on edge. Well, that and the 1911 visible in the holster on his belt. Everything else about him seemed ready but relaxed. Just like usual.

In the living room where Calla sat, the blinds had been drawn, making everything gloomy. Her leg began to bounce again.

Calla stopped it when she heard him pacing back to the front door. When he passed in front of the sofa, she could smell the sunshine and salt air scents that she had come to associate with him.

"My mother was clinically dead when I was born," Calla said into the silence. There was more to the story, of course. But even then, it wasn't the source of her current struggle with PTSD. That was something else entirely.

She didn't know why she wanted to confide in Adam, but for some reason, she did.

But Adam's only response was a brief break in stride. Then, he continued to the next

window and peered out between two slats.

“Pursiful said that’s how I got my gift,” Calla said. “I am ‘born of death.’”

She did air quotes, but Adam didn’t turn to see them.

“You don’t gotta tell me this,” he said, still facing the window.

Calla wished she could see his reflection, read his expression, but the blinds were drawn tight, except where he peeked out.

“I-I just thought you should know.” She paused and studied his back. “I asked Pursiful about you.”

His shoulders tensed, but that was his only response.

“He said to ask you....”

She let the question linger.

After a pause, Adam said, “It’s getting dark. Someone should show up soon.”

Right. Message received. Now was not the time for a history lesson. Now was the time for action.

Calla wished once more that she and Adam could have called in some backup. But that was not possible. At least according to him.

“So what should we expect?” Calla asked, watching as he paced from window to window.

“If all goes right, whoever shows up here will be the killer.” Calla gave him a look that pretty much conveyed “well, duh.”

“We arrest him,” Adam continued. “Show Ellis that he is going to be brought to justice, and hope that’s enough to cause his spirit to move on.”

“When Ellis’s spirit leaves, what happens?”

Adam considered for a moment. “Sometimes, you might feel the wind kick up when a

soul moves on.”

“That’s all?” Calla asked, incredulous. “Something as dramatic as a soul departing a stolen human body happens, and that’s it? You might feel some wind?”

“Hey, don’t knock it. It could be a whole new beginning for Matt Corbin.”

“For Corbin?” she repeated. Adam was always thinking of him first, and Calla barely even remember his existence. It was easy to forget there was someone else—a silent victim. Someone Calla couldn’t see easily.

But Adam could.

“Yeah,” he said. “Waking up to the realization that you’ve been controlled by someone else.... It can be a major turning point.”

She was on the verge of asking why he sounded so certain of that. Asking him for the story behind the certainty, perhaps the one Pursiful wouldn’t tell her.

The one Adam wouldn’t tell her.

But he turned back to the window.

“They should be here soon,” he repeated.

“What should I be doing?” Calla asked, standing abruptly. “I need to be doing something. I can help.”

“Watch the front.” He nodded toward the front door. “I’ll watch the back. Call out if you see anyone coming.”

Calla went to her post, perching on the edge of a side table and peeking out a section of blind and wondering if the killer would be so stupid as to just drive up to the house and come in the front door.

Calla hadn't been watching the front long when a BIPD cruiser pulled into Corbin's driveway.

"Adam," Calla whispered, breaking a long tense silence in Corbin's condo. "There's a police car out front."

"Who? Guthrie or Maddix?" he asked as he trotted across the condo to where Calla stood at the front window.

The driver's door opened. Then the passenger door.

"Both," Calla said, squinting at the approaching officers in the bright wash of light from the nearby lamp post.

She stepped closer to the windowpane and studied Guthrie. Seeing him in this distance, without being able to see the details of his baby face, caused something to niggle at her, but she couldn't quite name it.

What was it about him?

She was staring so intently at his body language and gait that she flinched when Adam pressed his face close beside hers.

Though he stood perfectly still, a new energy radiated from Adam, and it made Calla start to vibrate on the inside.

Adam swore. "Taking down two cops ain't going to be easy."

He didn't have to say much more. They were both armed, both trained.

Adam and Calla were in for a fight.

Was she ready for that?

Brody Maddix would be tough, but rookie Guthrie.... That's when it hit her.

Calla barely cut her eyes to the side to look at the man so close to her.

“I think,” Calla began, stepping back to get a better view of Adam. “Officer Guthrie is the same build as the man who attacked me in the parking lot of my clinic. I think he hurt Nia.”

“Huh,” he said, stepping back from the blinds and nodding. “Didn’t really expect that.”

Calla hadn’t expected it either.

“If Guthrie’s involved in the murder or the cover up,” Adam continued. “He’d want to know what your psychological autopsy said.”

“The guy who tried to knife me did tell me to stop asking so many questions.”

Calla didn’t want to believe that Guthrie had hurt Nia, had attacked her. He was so young and had a long future ahead of him.

But it also explained how Calla had overpowered him so easily. Guthrie was young and didn’t have the field experience to back up his threats.

“Why didn’t they just ask for a copy of my findings?” Calla wondered. “You know, in their official capacity. I probably would have given it to them.”

“Panic doesn’t make for clear thinking,” he said.

Didn’t she know it?

Adam turned to her, looking as if he wanted to say something, but the police officer banged on the front door.

“Bell Island Police,” Brody boomed.

Before either Calla or Adam could move toward the front door, another door opened at the back of the condo.

Adam swore, head spinning toward the sound.

“Who is that?” Calla whispered, temporarily frozen and unsure of what to do. She needed to find out who had arrived through the back, but she shouldn’t leave Adam alone with two

armed killers.

But they had little choice.

“I’ll go find out,” Calla said, straightening. “You handle the cops.”

“Okay,” he agreed. Then, he grabbed her hand, sending warm tingles down her spine. He held her gaze for a moment. “You be careful.”

Calla slipped her hand from his grasp and hurried to the kitchen as if she were ready what was about to happen.

At the front door, Adam paused, checked over his shoulder to make sure Calla was out of sight, and then took a deep breath.

Whatever was going to happen—with Calla, the cops, and whoever was at the back door—it was happening now. He checked the gun and badge at his waist, glanced at the revolver he wore concealed on his ankle.

Adam didn’t have time to think or plan, so he winged it.

He opened the door, wearing his schnook grin.

“Evening officers,” he leaned toward them slightly and whispered to Maddix. “Officer Guthrie must not have remembered to give you the message. The GBI is taking custody of Mr. Corbin. Thanks for coming by—”

“Unrelated matter,” Maddix said. “My partner and I were patrolling the neighborhood and saw a suspicious person in the alley behind this residence. We simply wanted to ensure the GBI’s safety when you took in our suspect for us.”

Adam nearly laughed. Of all the pretenses the police officer might choose, this one was at least amusing.

“We both know that ain’t true. Corbin ain’t your suspect no more,” Adam drawled, leaning casually against the door frame. “I thought I made that clear to Guthrie.

“Maybe you want him for your little *inquiry* into Ellis’s death, but we still want him on actual criminal charges. We take criminal trespass and stalking very seriously.”

“You’re here interfering with a GBI murder investigation over criminal trespass and stalking? Usually, we get a little more cooperation from local PD.” He paused. “Any particular reason for that?”

Maddix understood the implication. “What are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything. I’m asking if there’s more to the story of why you showed up here.”

Guthrie looked at Maddix.

Adam knew he’d hit a nerve.

“It wouldn’t be because you two have something to hide? Like murdering Waylon Ellis and then covering it up?”

Calla found Rena skulking around Matt Corbin’s back door.

“What are you doing here?” Calla whispered, grabbing her hand pulling her through the door and locking it behind them. “And keep your voice down when you answer.”

Rena shuffled her feet and then looked at Calla with big cow eyes. “I heard Matt would be here. I came to talk to him.”

“You *just* filed a request for a protective order against him.” Calla’s brow furrowed, and she had a nearly overwhelming urge to slap some sense into the woman. “What made you think coming to chat was a good idea?”

Tears threatened to spill from Rena's eyes, but Calla couldn't muster any remorse for making her cry. They were trying to uncover her boyfriend's killer, not resolve her silly stalking issue.

"I'm sorry." Rena's voice caught, and she looked down and away. "I thought maybe I could just ask him to leave me alone. And forget about the protective order."

Before Calla could question her further, a deep voice bellowed from deeper inside the condo. "Shut your damn mouth."

"Brody?" Rena whispered, her eyes going wide. She walked toward the sound of his voice as if pulled forward by it. Sounds of a struggle erupted, causing Calla's heart to leap in her chest.

Adam was outnumbered and outgunned, and based on the sounds of crashing furniture, the Maddix and Guthrie had forced their way inside Corbin's condo.

Now, Rena was wandering into the mix.

Calla's head began to buzz.

She had to get in there and do what she could to help.

When Calla emerged into the front section of the condo, she found Brody and Adam squaring off in the middle of the living room. The entry table had been knocked to the floor, shattering Corbin's family picture. Guthrie, gun drawn and pointed safely at the floor, watched with his back to the front door.

"Brody," Rena breathed. "Don't do this. I don't want you to do this."

And to Calla's surprise, Brody stopped and came to her like a little lost puppy.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, taking her hand.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I should. I couldn't let you—"

“Shh,” Maddix hushed her.

“She said she came to talk to Matt,” Calla said, crossing to where Adam stood. His position kept both police officer’s in his sight. Guthrie remained near the front door, and Brody and Rena stood near the kitchen.

Adam’s expression turned skeptical, and when he addressed Rena, his tone held his disbelief. “You chose this exact time to come talk to your stalker neighbor?”

“I-I heard he was going to be here.” She paused and looked around. “Is he?”

“Heard from whom?” Calla asked in a gentler tone. “Who told you Matt would be here?”

Rena’s lips parted to answer, but Maddix spoke first. “I told her. I felt Rena ought to be able to hear what happened to Ellis from the person who witnessed it and not from the evening news.”

“Is that true, Rena?” Calla asked, because she wasn’t buying it. “Is that why you wanted to be here?”

Rena shifted her gaze from Maddix to Calla and then it faltered. “Nooo....”

“It’s okay,” Adam said. “You can tell us the truth. We can help.”

“No,” Rena said, her voice cracking. “You can’t help. I don’t think anyone can.”

“Rena, be quiet,” Maddix ordered.

“Let her speak,” Calla said. This woman had been stifled enough. She obviously had something to say.

“No, I won’t let her cover for me,” Brody said. “I killed Waylon Ellis.”

The words had barely left Maddix’s lips when the room exploded in a flash of light and sound.

The gunshot made the pressure in the room change, and Calla noted dazedly that its shockwave actually made the fabric of her skirt flutter.

In the next millisecond, Adam's 1911 appeared in his hand. He whirled toward the back of the condo to face the source of the shot.

Waylon Ellis stood in the kitchen door, looking on as Brody Maddix crumbled to the floor and blood bloomed from his chest.

"Brody!" Rena cried, flinging herself toward her friend.

Before Calla could draw another breath, a second shot rang out, this time from the front of the condo.

Adam fell.

The buzz in Calla's head ratcheted up, and suddenly, nothing felt real. She stared at Adam, taking long seconds to figure out what had just happened.

Adam had been shot. But Ellis hadn't fired his gun again.

Calla looked from Adam's prone form, the wound so fresh it hadn't even bled yet, to Officer Guthrie, who stood near the front window and blinked at her as if surprised by the gun smoking in his own hand. "I-I didn't mean to do that..."

Guthrie continued to babble, but Calla barely heard him.

From the back of the condo, Waylon Ellis stepped into her peripheral vision, which had gone fuzzy again.

Calla's only source of protection lay on the floor, maybe dying. Maybe dead.

And now, Ellis's gun was now aimed at Guthrie, who clearly did not have the fortitude to deal with it.

"Shut up, kid," Ellis growled. "And get out of here."

Guthrie obeyed and ran.

Some cop.

“Now you,” Ellis said, turning his weapon on Calla. “You tell Rena who I am. Who I *really* am.”

Keeping his own gun on Calla, Ellis stalked across the room and kicked Adam’s weapon well out of his reach. But Adam hadn’t been reaching for it.

He hadn’t moved.

Calla’s hands began to shake, and her vision grew even fuzzier.

“Uh,” she said, trying to think of something to get her and Rena out of this alive.

But Rena spoke first.

“You shot Brody,” Rena whimpered from her place beside the fallen officer. Her hands were covered in his blood, but she didn’t appear to be stemming the flow of blood from his wound. “Matt? Why would you do that?”

“I’m not Matt Corbin!” Ellis shouted, gesturing at Calla with the gun he held. “Tell her.”

Calla’s lips trembled, and her eyes refused to focus on anything but Adam.

Ellis grabbed Calla’s arm, shoving her forward, presumably toward Rena. “I said ‘tell her!’”

But Calla stumbled and tripped over Adam’s body. She landed in the vee of his outstretched legs and drew herself to her knees to get a better look at him. He wasn’t bleeding much. She had no idea where to apply pressure. It was like he was barely wounded, but he was eerily still.

Was he breathing?

She leaned closer to Adam until Ellis poked her in the back of the head with the barrel of

the gun. She could smell burnt powder and practically feel its latent heat on her scalp. She stared at Adam, willing him to move. He was the only person who could help her out of this, and he was unconscious, maybe dead.

Calla's breathing turned into a wheeze, and her head began to spin.

"Tell her who I am," Ellis demanded once more, this time kicking Adam in the side for emphasis.

Calla's hazy vision darkened, and she flitted between the past and the present. She knew she was going to faint. Damn PTSD. She had to do something to get control over herself, or she was going to die too.

Calla ratcheted her gaze from Adam and looked up at Ellis. He stared back with hatred in his eyes.

What harm could the truth do now?

"Ellis," she said matter-of-factly, hoping Rena heard as she leaned over Adam to try to locate the bullet wound. "He's Waylon Ellis."

"Waylon?" Rena repeated, her voice dazed.

Calla looked up to find Rena in much the same position as she was: leaning over a wounded man and trying to stop the blood. But Rena lessened the pressure on Brody's chest as she stared at Ellis.

"Waylon's dead."

"Baby, no. It's me." Ellis took a step toward Rena, letting the gun slip a little from its target. "How else do you think I knew so much about you? About us? Babe, I know because I'm me."

Rena's brows knit together and she removed the pressure on Brody altogether. "Waylon

is dead. Corbin is a stalker.”

“Make her believe me,” Ellis demanded, turning to point his pistol at Calla again. “Or I’ll kill you right now.”

“It’s true,” Calla managed to say through blue lips. “It seems crazy. But it’s true.”

“No,” Rena said, her voice too calm and quiet, as if it were coming to Calla in a dream. “If that were true, if he were really Waylon, he’d know that it wasn’t Brody who killed him.”

The room dropped into fuzzy silence.

Then, a sob burst from Rena’s lips.

“I killed Waylon,” she admitted between massive, wracking inhales.

Calla almost didn’t believe her.

But Ellis did. She watched the play of emotions across his features as the memory must have taken shape.

Then, he wailed and spun, aiming the gun at the love of his life.

“That night,” Rena continued, focused on Calla, not Ellis. Now that she’d confessed, she couldn’t seem to stop chattering. “I-I just couldn’t take it anymore. The fighting. Having to pretend everything was okay when it wasn’t. I was hurt and humiliated. I knew I had to get out. But I loved Waylon so much that I didn’t think I could ever stay away. He would always suck me back in.... I had to make sure I would stay away.”

Calla listened to Rena’s confession, but her focus was on Adam. If he was breathing, it was shallow. And she couldn’t find a pulse. But she did notice Adam’s backup revolver strapped to his ankle. She covered it with the edge of her skirt, hoping to draw it without Ellis noticing.

“When Brody left,” Rena continued. “Waylon was passed out. I don’t know what I was thinking. I just knew I had to do it. I took down his gun and shot him before I even thought

about. Then, I freaked out and went home and called Brody....”

Rena looked down at Maddix and cupped his cheek. He didn't respond. She looked at Calla again. “He said he understood why I had to do it. He came up with the suicide idea.”

“He made sure it was handled as a suicide,” Calla said. “And got the crime scene released.”

“He knew that Leo would clean it and rerent it.”

“Leo didn't know?”

“No,” Rena said. “I think he suspected. He knew how Waylon was—”

“Who gives a shit about Leo. *I* loved you,” Ellis sobbed. “*I loved you, and you killed me.*”

The gun exploded and Rena slumped forward over Maddix.

Then, Ellis whirled on Calla.

His finger poised on the trigger.

And Calla felt herself floating up and away from her body.