

Twenty-five

Calla floated above the room. No longer was there floor beneath her feet.

Only air.

Beautiful, shimmering curls of light and wind that lifted her from the earth.

From her vantage point looking down at Corbin's condo, it appeared that someone had hit a cosmic pause button. No one moved. No even breathed.

Calla saw everything just as it had been—the room, the people—but now it all looked much more detailed.

It felt as if she were no longer looking at reality but at a depiction of something real. Dots and dashes of color, like a pointillist painting. The scene was perfectly still, and yet each detail leaped out. Every tiny aspect, even the seemingly insignificant elements, became distinct dots of color and light that merged to form a larger pattern.

Nothing was only one thing.

Overlapping rays of light and color sparkled and danced as Calla looked upon the scene below. Death lingered there in shimmering pools of blood, but the world appeared beautiful in a way she'd never noticed before.

Calla looked down at her own physical body. She still knelt over Adam while Ellis loomed above her.

Calla knew she wasn't dead.

Ellis's finger rested on the trigger, a hair's breadth from activating the firing pin that would send the bullet to end her life.

Calla felt sure that time had *literally* stopped.

She'd felt something like this before, but even at its worst, she'd know it was her

perception of time passing that had been altered. Not time itself.

But this, hovering over herself and the horror below, was something entirely different.

She was looking at the man who would likely end her life when time started again. If it did.

Calla stared at Ellis. But for the first time, she also saw Matt Corbin.

The two souls shared one body, but it didn't look like anything she'd imagined. She'd envisioned them both inside the physical body, but that wasn't the case.

Matt Corbin occupied his body, while Ellis rode him like a backpack, weighing him down until he seemed to buckle under the weight. Corbin's spirit was slumped, listless, and dim.

But Ellis glowed bright and fat, like a parasite who had drained the lifeblood from its victim.

Calla shook her head.

Why could she seem Corbin now? And why was she floating above them?

She couldn't be dead yet. Ellis hadn't finished his trigger pull.

Maybe this was part of the soul-seer gift. Maybe she was seeing the world through her soul-seer eyes fully for the first time. She had no idea. But maybe if she could see Corbin, she could talk to him.

Perhaps she could still save her life. Save his too.

"Matt?" Calla asked, and to her shock, the man's spirit looked at her with dull eyes. "Can you hear me?"

Under the burden of Ellis's weight, Corbin managed to nod.

He could hear her at least, but Calla had no idea what to say. She was dimly aware that she needed to convince him to eject Ellis. That was the only way Ellis was going to spare her

life.

She glanced at the shiny revolver in his hand, and then she looked at Ellis's spirit. He leered at her, his brightly lit face contorted with rage.

Ellis wanted to kill her, but something prevented him. Time prevented him.

Calla glanced at Adam, hoping his spirit would be able to tell her something. But she saw only his still, lifeless body on the ground.

No one could help her.

Convincing Corbin to cast off the parasitic soul that was attached to him was the only chance she saw for surviving this.

"This isn't good," Calla said to Corbin, gesturing at the spirit attached to his back.

This time, Corbin hardly acknowledged she'd spoken at all.

"Matt, listen to me," she said, thinking back on all Adam had told her. "It doesn't have to be like this. You can get rid of Ellis."

He shook his head again, this time slowly.

"You *can*. You don't have to do these things. You don't want to kill people." She gestured around again at the bodies scattered on the floor. "All you have to do is tell Ellis to leave. And mean it."

She hoped that was all it took. She honestly didn't know.

It didn't seem to matter. Corbin no longer seemed to hear what she said.

But then, wind picked up, blustering around the condo and yet somehow not dislodging anything inside it. The newspaper stacked on the end table didn't move. Adam's hair didn't move in the wild wind, and Calla's own physical body remained perfectly still.

But floating Calla's hair danced around her face, and her skirt billowed around her.

Is this what Adam had described when a soul moved on? If so, he had undersold the situation. This wasn't just wind. It was wind and tiny sparks of fire and glittering droplets of water and vivid reflections of color. It was all of that. And yet somehow none of it.

It was pure spirit.

She watched as it eddied around Corbin's ankles before passing him by. Corbin barely blinked as it churned past him. He was too far gone. Eroded away by the will of someone else.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the wind whip around Brody and Rena. Brody's spirit begin to float from his body.

He was swept upward, hovering the same way Calla was, but a delicate silver cord connected his body and spirit.

The cord was finer than any chain Calla had ever seen. Part metal and part light, it danced and swayed in the wind.

Then, the wind gusted, and the silver cord snapped, shattering in a silent burst of shimmering stars.

Brody's spirit began to float freely, carried by the breeze, up and away from his body.

Where? Where was the wind taking him? What came after death? What was eternity?

Calla stretched upward, reaching toward him, and to her shock, she began to float after him.

Looking back, she noticed the same delicate silver cord between herself and her body. Only her cord held fast, stretching like an elastic band as she floated higher and connecting her spirit to her body.

"Corbin's weak." Ellis's voice floated to her. "He doesn't want me to go."

Calla look down at Ellis, surprised at how far she had floated from him. She was so far

above the room that she was no longer inside it. And yet she could see inside it.

As Ellis's voice trailed off, Calla saw the wind whip and whirl again, this time around Rena. The woman's spirit became unattached from her battered body. Her silver chain shattered, and soon, she was trailing behind Brody.

"You'll never hurt Rena again," Calla said, watching with a strange calm as Rena floated past her to whatever lay beyond. "She'll never be yours again."

Ellis's spirit seemed to expand with rage, filling the space around him with palpable anger.

A faint silvery flash caught Calla's eye. The cord leaving his spirit was so fine that she almost hadn't noticed it. It stretched into the distance. Perhaps to his body, which was stored in Pursiful's morgue.

She floated higher, hoping to get a look at the other end.

But before she could see where it led, something grabbed at her ankle.

She looked down to see Waylon Ellis pulling at her. He'd let go of Matt Corbin and was coming after her.

Calla's calm eroded, and in its place was her fighting instinct. She didn't understand how, but she knew, even here in this place of peace—Ellis was a danger to her.

Ellis clutched at the delicate silver cord that connected Calla to her body. She knew the moment he touched it that the silver cord was her lifeline, her literal attachment to life.

Unless she truly wanted to find out what was awaiting her in eternity, she needed to fight back now.

She kicked at Ellis.

But the physical attack did little.

He only swore and jerked her down toward him until he loomed over her, eyes wide and wild.

His cold fingers slipped her around the throat, holding her still, and she felt his other hand yank again at the silver cord.

The string vibrated, sending little shoots of light into the wind around her.

It held, but she could tell it wouldn't last forever.

Calla had to do something.

So she lashed out, punching Ellis in the face.

Again, it did nothing. He just went for her cord again.

This fight was spiritual not just physical.

Calla twisted in his grasp and reached for the tightly stretched cord the connected Ellis to his body.

She grabbed the slight string, pulling back as hard as she could. Ellis's silver cord shattered in her hand, sending sparks of white, hot light all around her.

Suddenly, Ellis was swept upward on a violent gust of wind.

Still holding on to Calla by the throat, Ellis dragged her with him. She struggled, but he refused to let her go.

Looking ahead, she saw a wide expanse of what looked like water traversed by a long white bridge. She couldn't see the other side.

Somehow Calla knew the long white bridge led to eternity.

Ellis's tether to life had been severed. He was already dead, but he wanted to take her with him.

Calla would lose her connection to life—to everything that was her—if she didn't break

his hold. The panic she expected to feel never came. But neither did a sense of calm. She had only one objective: break his grasp.

Fighting physically wouldn't work, and the bridge loomed large in the foreground.

Not much time left.

So Calla reached toward the hand on her throat and tried to peel his fingers away.

"You don't want me," Calla said, staring directly into Ellis's deranged eyes. "You want Rena. She's already over there."

He looked toward the bridge, and she felt his grip loosen ever so slightly.

"You can be with her for eternity," Calla said.

She had absolutely no idea if that were true or not. No one knew what came after.

But she really hoped that Ellis never saw Rena again.

"Rena?" he whispered, letting his fingers go lax on Calla's throat.

Calla took the opportunity to shove Ellis as hard as she could, sending him hurtling toward the bridge and away from her. The opposing force sent her flying backward toward the earth.

Still traveling backward, Calla felt her speed decreasing, allowing her to watch as Ellis reached the bridge and disappeared.

Where had he gone? What was eternity?

Was he with Rena?

Without realizing it, Calla began to drift back toward the bridge.

But there was the long white bridge...growing larger in her field of vision. Taking over her world. What was beyond it?

Then, something nudged her. Fearing that Ellis might have circled around her somehow,

Calla stretched her fingers toward the source of the sensation.

Thinking to send Ellis back where he'd come from, she jerked him upward. But it wasn't Ellis.

Calla blinked into Bask's glowing gold eyes.

It hardly even occurred to her to wonder how Pursiful's service dog gotten there. He was there.

And he was probably not a real service dog.

The huge dog's eyes glowed a brighter gold, and then he whined and licked her face. She giggled and pushed back his heavy fur to gaze at him. His eyes pleaded with her, and for some reason, she knew she should follow him.

Bask took Calla's hand gently in his mouth. He tugged at her, pulling her out of the wind. Back down to the earth below.

It wasn't her time.