

Twenty-six

Calla popped back into her own body. Into the moment right before Ellis planned to kill her.

Her body and spirit reunited, Calla knelt on the floor beside Adam. She could feel the carpet beneath her knees, smell the gunpowder and blood.

All at once, she took in the sight of the vacant bodies of Rena and Brody where they lay in a heap.

She looked up at the man who held a gun at her. The spirit of Ellis was gone. Looking at Corbin—a living human without an invasive soul—was a different experience. Not only could she see his physical body. The young, lean body of Matt Corbin. But she could also see his withered spirit beneath.

As if following Ellis's final instruction, Matt Corbin held the gun on her. His expression was vacant, eyes hollow, and his fingertip rested against the trigger.

He held the gun in a steady hand, finger still on the trigger. And aimed directly at her head. He looked like a man on autopilot, still carrying out the will of spirit who had possessed him.

Calla hadn't come back just to die. She wasn't going to let anyone—not Ellis or Corbin or anyone—destroy her.

Because when your life—your soul, the very essence of who you are—is under assault, you either fight back or you die.

Or perhaps you're already dead inside.

Like Matt Corbin was.

Maybe time was still slower somehow. Or maybe Calla was out of sync with reality still,

but she moved faster than she knew was humanly possible.

She reached down, drew the back-up revolver from Adam's ankle holster, and aimed at Corbin.

Now, if she needed to, she could remove the threat.

But first she would try to save him. Adam would have tried to save him. To bring Matt Corbin back to life.

"Matt," she said, her voice calm and soothing. "It's okay. It's over now. You need to put the gun down."

Slowly, she rose, keeping her gun aimed at him but stepping out of his line of fire.

"I'm going to come over there now and help you, Matt. Everything's okay. Everything's going to be okay."

Corbin barely blinked, but the gun wavered slightly.

Calla edged closer until she could touch him, take the gun.

"It's okay," she reassured him.

In one swift movement, she grasped the top of the pistol and stripped it from his hand.

She barely registered the sounds of his bones breaking.

Calla backed away, unsure of what Corbin might do.

He stood absolutely still for a moment. Slowly, he looked at his now-empty hand.

Then, he turned his head and looked at something just beside her.

Calla cut her eyes there and realized that Bask sat at her heels. He looked different now too. But she couldn't take time to figure out why.

Calla had to watch Corbin.

"You broke my fingers," he said, holding up his hand for her to see the misshapen bones .

If the situation had been any less serious, Calla might have laughed.

But Adam was dead, leaving Calla in a condo with two dead bodies, an innocent victim, and a dog. A massive spirit dog who had come to show her the way home apparently.

Bask sat obediently at her side, waiting.

“What do I do?” she asked him, half expecting an answer. “Call Pursiful?”

The dog gave her nothing.

She pulled out her phone, but before she could dial the coroner, Adam sucked in a massive breath. His body convulsed once, and his eyes slanted open.

It had happened again.

Adam had been gone only to be returned to life.

He felt someone kneel beside him, touch his face with gentle, soft hands. He turned his head into her touch and looked up at Calla’s face.

She was busy looking over his body for wounds.

She wouldn’t find much of anything.

He already knew that.

Calla searched for Adam’s pulse. “Slow and faint, but you’re alive,” she murmured as she searched his chest for the entry wound. “And you barely bled.”

Her confused eyes returned to meet his. “How is that possible?”

Adam groaned and shifted. “What happened? Corbin?”

She looked up and behind her. Adam looked too, but saw no one.

“You’re safe,” she assured him. “Ellis’s spirit is gone. I...I saw it. Corbin must have run. I guess seeing you come back from the dead was too much for him.”

Flooded with regret and shame, Adam shut his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said, trying to sit up. "I'm sorry you had to do that alone."

Calla pushed him back down. Bask trotted over and sat on his uninjured shoulder. "Don't try to move."

"Ow! Damn dog," Adam said.

Calla patted his head. "Don't you listen to him, Bask. You're a good dog."

Bask preened and sat harder on Adam.

If the hell hound was here, then that explained a lot. But he was missing a lot of details.

"What happened?"

"Ellis must have sneaked away from Pursiful," Calla surmised. "He sneaked in the back door just in time to hear Maddix take the fall for Rena. Ellis shot Maddix, and when you turned to find the source of the bullet, Guthrie shot you from the other side."

"Why the hell...?"

"I think he panicked. He just saw his partner get shot and reacted. I'm not even sure he noticed Ellis behind you."

That hadn't been the question Adam planned to ask, but he was glad for the knowledge anyway. He was more concerned with why Pursiful had allowed Ellis to escape in the first place.

Because he was sure Bask hadn't been overpowered by a mere human. He could only conclude that Pursiful had released him on purpose.

But why the hell hadn't he warned Adam that he was allowing Ellis into the mix?

"Get the hell hound off me," Adam said and tried to dislodge Bask.

Calla glanced at Bask. "Hell hound? Is that what he is? Some kind of spiritual watchdog, guarding the gates to eternity?"

Adam ignored the question, shoving the dog away.

“What are you doing?” Calla demanded, helping Bask keep him down. “You’re injured. You need to lie still.”

“It’s fine,” Adam insisted, forcing his way up. “I’ll be fine. We have a mess to clean up.”

“You are not fine,” Calla protested, watching as he sat up and then rose to his feet. “You were shot. I thought you were dead. I couldn’t see your soul.... How is any of this possible?”

Again, he ignored her and took stock of the room.

Now that Adam was standing, he could see what looked a little like the final scene from Hamlet. Rena and Maddix were dead. Guthrie and Corbin had fled.

Ellis was gone forever.

When Adam finished taking in the carnage and looked at Calla again, his eyes shone with respect.

“Are *you* okay?” he asked, taking her hand in a soft gesture that surprised them both.

“I don’t know,” she answered. Calla began to shake. “I saw things. I still see them, but I didn’t see your spirit. When I was over there, I saw everyone else. But you? Nothing. Even now, nothing.”

Adam lowered his head to disguise his sorrow. He hadn’t wanted her to know that he was empty inside.

Again, he surprised them both by pulling her into his arms. He shivered at the contact.

Forgetting Pursiful’s questionable decisions, the monumental clean up task ahead, and, of course, the concealment of what had actually taken place inside Matt Corbin and his condo that day, Adam buried his face in the crook of Calla’s neck.

No one truly saw the weight he had borne alone for so long. No one understood the

terrible limbo he existed in. Not even Pursiful, who seemed to think his gift for returning to life was a useful tool.

No one truly saw him.

Until now.

Adam Shepherd no longer existed alone.

When he stepped back and looked back into Calla's face, her eyes remained steady, honest, concerned. But there was fear behind them.

"You aren't dead," Calla whispered her hand still lightly grasped in his. "But you aren't alive either. What are you?"

Adam pressed her hand to his cool cheek and whispered the hard truth that he faced every day: "I don't know."