



# The Lemon Drop Kid

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**Description:** How The Cookie Crumbled

As sole heir to the Bredahl Cookies and Cakes fortune, Casper led a comfortable, happy-go-lucky life. Some would say, a charmed life. Sure, there were challenges: relentless pressure to join the family business, and his unrequited feelings for former high school crush Raleigh Jackson. But yeah, a charmed existence, compared to life after being arrested for murder and spending nearly a year in Chippewa Falls County Jail, awaiting trial.

Exoneration, freedom, came at too steep a price. To say Casper isn't in the mood for the holidays, is putting it mildly. In fact, the only thing he wants for Christmas is to see Detective Raleigh Jackson, the man responsible for wrongly putting him behind bars, get his just desserts.

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# Page 1

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## Prologue

“Well, well. If it isn’t the Lemon Drop Kid.”

Huddled in a booth at Cutter’s Mill Bar and Grill, Dax and I looked up from our drinks—and kept looking up—as Officer Raleigh Jackson, Little Copenhagen PD’s finest, gazed down at us with resignation.

Dax, being the goofball that he was, giggled.

Me, being whatever I was seventeen months ago, choked mid-swallow on my lemon drop martini.

Technically, it was a choke and a teeny-tiny splutter, made worse by Dax—still giggling maniacally—energetically pounding my back.

So, the teeny-tiny splutter became a full splashdown. I could see Raleigh—Officer Raleigh Jackson—prismed through the glittery drops of martini on my eyelashes. I think he was trying not to laugh.

But he sounded as serious as ever when he said, “Jeez, I hope neither of you juvenile delinquents plan on driving anywhere tonight.”

I found my voice and said, a little hoarsely from all the coughing, “You know we’re thirty, right?”

Raleigh’s lip curled. “You’re twenty-eight, Caz, and that’s a legal technicality.”

“Rude,” Dax observed.

We’ve been best friends since the sixth grade, Dax and I. No origin story. We randomly got seated next to each other in Mrs. Kaynor’s homeroom, and the rest was history

“I’ll say.” It did kind of sting, given it was Friday night and we weren’t doing anything that everyone else in the place—barring Officer Killjoy—wasn’t.

“You could drive us home,” Dax suggested. He flinched when I kicked him beneath the table, then grinned even more broadly.

Raleigh snorted. “Yeah, no. I’m on duty.”

“So?”

“So,” Raleigh shot back. A reminder that, sure, he was older, but not that much older, and snappy repartee had never been his long suit.

“I call bullshit,” Dax retorted. “You just ordered beer and a plate of potato skins to eat at the bar.”

That was news to me, and you’d have thought it was news to Raleigh, given his expression.

“Anyway, I’ve got a ride.” Dax added slyly, “You could drive Caz home, though.”

Dax always had a ride, literally and metaphorically. He was the original chick magnet: slim and blond with dark soulful eyes, which was false advertising because he was the least soulful person on the planet. He was also short, which I used to tell him was where the magnet part came in. He could have easily fit on the front of some

lucky girl's refrigerator.

Raleigh's dark brows pulled into a straight and forbidding line. "Ha."

Frankly, it was a pretty half-hearted effort. Like he was afraid he was going to be roped into driving the kiddy carpool, but knew it was his duty.

"HA!" I said with a lot more vim and vigor. Because thanks, but no thanks.

In fact, we got a few glances from our fellow drinkers.

Raleigh noticed the interested looks and retreated posthaste to the bar.

I glared at Dax. "Seriously?"

"Hey, he noticed you the minute he walked in here. I think he was going to grab his food and take off, but he changed his mind when he saw you. It's mutual, man. You should go for it."

"Go for it? What are we..." I groped for a suitably scathing descriptor because the idea that Raleigh might actually sort-of be even a little bit interested was way too... Much.

Dax supplied, "Horny? Yes, we are. And so's he. Come on, you guys have been dancing around this since you were kids.

## Page 2

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“He still thinks I am a kid,” I said a little bitterly.

“He’s only three years older than us.” Dax added slyly, “You know he’s not seeing that coach anymore.”

I grunted, but Dax grinned. “You don’t fool me. Your face is the color of your hair.”

My hair is brown with some reddish glints, so nope. I offered my middle finger in the hope he could still make out shapes.

But I can’t deny that the news Raleigh was no longer seeing Muskies football coach Harbin Folke cheered me up no end. So, when Dax eventually left with his girl du jour, I didn’t phone for an Uber.

I didn’t phone anybody. I sat there nursing my third lemon drop, watching out of the corner of my eye as Raleigh ate his loaded potato skins and chatted with the bartender.

When he finally pushed his plate away, my pulse picked up, because it was liable to look like I was waiting—hoping—

Because I was.

Raleigh half-turned on his stool, scanned the room casually, caught my gaze. We stared at each other. He glanced away, ordered a second beer, and when it came, he picked it up and wandered over to my booth.

So. Raleigh. Think of the boy next door in a 1950s rom com. His dad was chief of police and becoming a cop was all Raleigh wanted to be growing up. He was popular, he played quarterback three out of his four years in high school, and yep, right after college he became a cop. Also, he was tall, broad-shouldered, and long-legged. He had straight dark hair, light gray eyes, and a handsome, serious face. He did not look like someone who smiled much, and that was true, but he had a great laugh. His nose wrinkled just a bit, the corners of his eyes crinkled, and his chuckle came out all husky and boyish. It was one of my favorite sounds way back when making Raleigh laugh had been one of my goals in life.

I gazed up at him, and my heart was in my throat.

“Waiting for someone?” He looked very serious, so maybe he was just concerned with me driving while over the legal limit.

But Dax was right. It was now or never. So, I smiled. “I hope so.”

Raleigh tipped his head, like he was trying to see me better, then he gave a half-smile and slid into the booth across from me.

“It’s been a long time, Caz,” he said. “How’ve you been?”

“Great.” I shrugged. “Busy.”

“They make you vice president over at Bredahl Cookies and Cakes yet?”

“Nope. But there’s no escape.”

“You can run but you can’t hide?”

“Exactly. I can’t even run very far since I live in my sister’s backyard.”

Raleigh laughed that soft, husky laugh, and I got that warm, funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. There was a little twinkle in his pale eyes as he said in seeming commiseration, “Family business.”

“Yeah. Speaking of which. Have you made detective yet?” I mean, I knew he hadn’t. For one thing he still wore that snazzy navy-blue uniform that hugged his shoulders, thighs, and ass. For another, I’d have heard about that. The whole town would have heard about that.

Raleigh grimaced. “Still working on it. Pop says, the problem is nothing happens in Little Copenhagen that requires detecting.”

I grinned. Not only was Raleigh’s pop chief of police, his father before him, and his father before him had also been Little Copenhagen’s chief of police. There had never been any question of what Raleigh was going to be when he grew up. Just like there had never been any question of me eventually running Bredahl Cookies and Cakes.

The difference was, Raleigh loved being a cop. I couldn’t think of anything I wanted to do less than become a corporate executive for a cookie company. Even some of the most delicious cookies in the world cookie company.

Raleigh glanced at my empty martini glass, said lightly, “If you want another drink, I’ll drive you home.”

I gazed into his eyes, smiled. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Raleigh held my gaze, slowly smiled.

## Chapter One

You get used to it.

## Page 3

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The whispers. The looks.

That's when they don't pretend not to see you.

I didn't care.

Not anymore. What could any of them say that hadn't been said? Behind my back, then to my face, and finally in the Copenhagen Herald. I didn't care what they thought before. I sure as hell didn't care what they thought after I'd been exonerated.

I cared about the dog, though.

Freyja. My four-year-old golden retriever.

She'd run away two days earlier. Just too lonely after Astrid, I guess. Malcolm was apologetic, but it wasn't really his fault. He had his hands full with the funeral arrangements and a company in freefall. Even so, he offered to help me look for her.

Our annual average snowfall is about forty-four inches here in Little Copenhagen. Hard to imagine Malcom in his fifteen-hundred dollar suit out there in the snow, tacking up Lost Dog posters, but it's the thought that counts.

I stuck my last Reward Offered for Lost Dog poster on the bulletin board at Jensen's Feed Store, adding Freyja to the photo line-up of free kittens, free ducklings, puppies for sale, and farrier for hire.

"That's your priority? A dog?" Carl Jensen muttered behind the counter.



There was a time in my life when I'd been able to laugh almost anything off. But that was a long time ago. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that not everyone believed that "charges dropped" equaled "exonerated." There are conspiracy theorists everywhere, even in a cute little town that looked like a Thomas Kinkade collectible.

I turned from the giant scrapbook page that served as a bulletin board. "With nights dropping down to nine degrees? Yeah, finding my dog is a priority." I walked toward the counter, stepping around the giant fiberglass Christmas tree with animal ornaments, the heavy bags of dog food and cat food and horse pellets adorned with red bows. "Why? What do you think should be my priority, Mr. Jensen?"

Jensen had one of those old-baby faces. Bulging blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and a peevish little mouth. He stared at me, then popped the drawer on his cash register and started counting money. His back to me, he said, "None of my business."

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear that."

He turned and glared. "I said, it's none of my business what you do."

"Thanks for saying so. And thanks for letting me put my poster up."

He continued to glare at me. Warily.

Yeah, Jensen was one of those people who believed I was getting away with murder. Maybe because he really did believe I'd killed Tom Peyton, or maybe because somewhere along the line, I'd done something to offend him. I admit it, before I was charged with killing my boss at Bredahl Cookies and Cakes, I'd been pretty oblivious to other people. Not mean. Not rude. Not intentionally. Just...oblivious.

But there were still advantages to belonging to one of the wealthiest families in northwest Wisconsin—and by far the town's largest employer. Jensen might take my

poster down after I left, but he wasn't going to confront me. And he probably wouldn't take the poster down, either, because he wouldn't want to risk losing the Bredahl account. Minus Freyja, there were still four hunting dogs and five horses back home that had to eat.

"Merry Christmas," I said and walked out of the feedstore.

But I was shaking as I climbed inside my car.

I don't like conflict. I'm not good at it. You'd have thought eleven months in County would have toughened me up. Not so much. It taught me how to fake it, though.

According to the Chamber of Commerce, Little Copenhagen is a hidden gem nestled in the heart of northwestern Wisconsin. A charming village that embodies the essence of Scandinavian heritage and traditions and an inviting atmosphere that captivates visitors from near and far.

Mostly from far, because, if you live here, you know appearances are deceiving.

Although, full disclosure, I didn't realize that until I started dating Officer Raleigh Jackson.

Anyway, the generic Chamber of Commerce script isn't wrong. The village was founded in 1845 by Danish immigrants, and it's pretty and picturesque, especially around the holidays, when it could pass for an Alpine village competing for a slot in an Advent calendar.

Six days before Christmas, you couldn't take three steps without bumping into a giant inflatable reindeer or falling over a mini forest of resin candy canes. Everywhere you looked there was evergreen garland and tiny twinkling lights. Thousands of twinkling lights woven around trees, lamp posts, and storefronts, casting a soft and inviting

glow over the entire town. The crisp, cold air was sweet with the smell of cinnamon and pine and cocoa.

Anyway, was it weird that eleven months after being sequestered from the world, I didn't have any trouble driving, but I couldn't figure out what to do in a grocery store?

For one thing, the previously mentioned looks and whispers. To think I used to like people.

But more than that, the overwhelming possibilities, the staggering number of choices. For crying out loud, twenty-five brands of vodka? I could feel my heart speeding up, my forehead and underarms getting damp. The rational part of my brain tried to remind me that I was just feeling flustered by the idea of being able to eat whatever I wanted—drink whatever I wanted—whenever I wanted to the extent I wanted. Or not eat at all. Which was more likely by the second.

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“Casper!”

I jumped, turned to stare down at the smiling face of Mrs. Christensen, my ninth grade geometry teacher. I blinked, opened my mouth...couldn't think of what to say.

How strange. I found it easier to be confrontational than make pleasant chitchat. Casual conversation was almost beyond me. Partly because I had no idea how to respond to simple ordinary questions like how are you?

How was I?

I'd spent eleven months in jail waiting to be tried for a crime I hadn't committed. And the only reason I wasn't still in jail was because my sister—my only living relative—had confessed to the murder and then overdosed on sleeping pills.

I was not good.

And people are not comfortable hearing that.

Mrs. Christensen didn't seem to notice anything amiss however. “I'm glad I ran into you.” Her smile faded a little. “I was so sorry to hear about Astrid.”

I swallowed. “Thanks.”

“It's a relief to know the record has been set straight.”

“Yes.”

Would the record ever really be set straight? I had to wonder.

“No one who knows you ever believed you could do something like that.”

She meant it. She was so sincere and so sweet; it closed my throat.

“You’d be surprised,” I managed.

Mrs. Christensen shook her head, patted my arm. “People can be very foolish. But time heals all wounds. You’ll see.”

Yeah, no.

But I appreciated the thought and the kindness behind the thought.

“Will we see you at the bonfire tomorrow night?”

“No.” That came out more gruffly than I’d intended. Buthellno.

Mrs. Christensen studied my face, gave my arm another little squeeze. “God bless you, dear. Merry Christmas.”

I bought three bottles of citrus vodka, two bottles of limoncello, a six pack of Lori’s Lavender Lemonade, and twelve cans of Campbell’s soup.

On the drive home I stopped at Hiraeth Hollow.

I used to bring Freyja down here on weekends to give her a good run and give the squirrels and rabbits a good laugh. Maybe in the back of my mind there was a little bit of hope that she was hanging out in the woods, hoping I was going to show up.

I pulled the Range Rover to the side of the road, got out, boots sinking into snow. I walked into the trees. The air was sweet with pine and smoky-snow smell. As I walked deeper into the green-blue shadows, the crunch of my boots on snow, my exhales and inhales were swallowed by the hushed stillness.

Silence.

I had not experienced silence in nearly a year.

And again, I felt overwhelmed. Tears stung my eyes, and I stopped, breathing it in, the cold-clean air and the ringing silence. Not a plane in the sky, not a car on the road. Even the river behind the towering pines, was silent, frozen over. I wiped at my cheeks before the tears froze, and walked on.

The profound hush was interrupted only by the occasional soft creaking of branches, as if the trees whispered to one another. Released on a technicality.

“Fuck you all,” I muttered.

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Technicality? The technicality that I was innocent? The charges had been dropped. With prejudice. Meaning the court's decision was final. Case closed.

It didn't feel closed.

I stopped again, closing my eyes and taking a long, shaky breath, feeling the white hush surrounded me. Letting it slowly, slowly sink in. Letting go of all that roiling emotion.

After a few seconds I realized I had not called for Freyja. I pulled my gloves off, put my fingers to my lips and whistled.

The sharp sound shot through the trees, echoing...echoing and then fading away.

No answer.

Okay, she wasn't Lassie. She wasn't good at tricks. She had a bad habit of chasing ducks. She had a tendency to get lost. She barked too much and for a long time she'd, no exaggeration, been afraid of her own shadow. But she was loyal and affectionate. She had a joyful spirit. She was funny too. She knew when she was being teased, and she'd give that big goofy goldie grin and try to lick my face. If she'd run away—if she hadn't gotten lost—she had been looking for me, and that was hard to take.

I whistled again, but the silence that followed hurt more that time.

I waited a few minutes more, listening, and then started back to my car.

I mean, I hadn't really expected to find her. I knew she was gone. Gone like everything else. Every good thing else. I knew she wasn't here, but somewhere deep down I guess I'd been hoping for a little miracle. A harmless one. Something nobody had to die for.

Just let me have my dog back.

As I stepped out of the wood line, I saw a black SUV parked behind the Range Rover. The SUV bore the familiar—and now dreaded—red and white insignia of Little Copenhagen Police Department.

My heart stopped.

I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm allowed to be here.

Before panic—and rage—could take over, I recognized the tall, dark-haired figure peering through the driver's window of my vehicle. No uniform. A plainclothes officer. My heart kickstarted back into life, began to pound in a painful mix of anger and hatred—made even more painful by my recognition that even now, my instinctive reaction to seeing Raleigh was...delight.

Because I had loved him all my life. And as much as I hated him now, the conditioned reflex of my blood and bones to the surprise of seeing him was...

Stupid.

Raleigh must have caught my approach out of the corner of his eye because he straightened up, turned. He didn't look surprised, but then he'd have recognized the car.

The snow made a squeaky-creak sound as the ice crystals shifted beneath my boots. It



seemed to take a very long time to cross that clearing. Raleigh didn't move. He was too far away for me to read his face, but then it was always hard to read his face.

I kept walking toward him, not saying anything, just looking at him without any expression. You learn fast to hide your feelings in County. You learn fast not to have feelings.

Raleigh stared gravely back—his eyes were the color of the shadows on the snow. Maybe he was waiting for me to get closer than shouting distance or maybe he was waiting for me to speak first. If so, he was going to wait a long time.

I was never willingly going to speak to him again.

Even as that thought formed, it was washed aside by the fury now always bubbling beneath the surface.

“Problem, Officer?” I sounded clipped because I was out of breath. It's funny how anger winds you.

Raleigh gave a short shake of his head. “Hi, Casper. Just making sure everything's okay.” He dipped his head, drew a sharp breath. “Actually, I'm glad I—”

“Oh yeah,” I cut in. “Everything'sfantastic.”

His light gaze flickered.

“But you're a detective now. You probably could tell that just from the way I parked.” I made a commiserating face. “Then again, you're a pretty shitty detective, so maybe not.”

Raleigh's expression changed, grew stony.

Funny—crazy—that I had kissed that straight line of a mouth. That he had kissed me too. Not once, not twice, not by accident, not because we'd been drinking. Many times. Many kisses. I regretted every single one.

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Raleigh didn't sound stony, though, as he stumbled through his disjointed whatever-it-was-supposed-to-be. Explanation? It sure as hell wasn't an apology. "Look, Casper. I was doing my job. You know I didn't—you think it was easy for me?"

"Oh, my God," My parka crinkled in the chilly air as I put a hand to my chest. "It must have been terrible for you. What am I thinking? All those months you had to go on with your life and suffer through getting a big fat promotion you knew fucking well you didn't deserve. How can I be so selfish?"

"I thought you were guilty!"

It seemed to bounce off the distant snowy hills.

And just like that I was calm again. Ice cold. "So you said at the time."

Both times. The night he arrested me. And the day he came to see me in jail to explain why, friends or no friends, he couldn't overlook my committing murder.

Raleigh was calmer, too. Quieter. "Casper."

"But like you said, nothing personal."

"I never said it wasn't personal. Of course, it was personal. I—" He gave a disarming swallow in the middle of it. "I cared for you. You know that."

"No doubt there."

“But if you were capable of murder—”

“Except I wasn’t.”

He sounded sincere and kind, like the old once-upon-a-time-there-was-a-prince Raleigh. “I know that now. We all know that now. And I’m glad you’ve been exonerated. I can’t tell you how sorry I am for everything that happened.”

I smiled. “Worried about the lawsuit?”

He stared.

There wasn’t any lawsuit. Not yet, anyway. My lawyer had broached the idea; I figured he was disappointed he hadn’t been able to make mincemeat of LCPD in court.

I laughed.

It wasn’t much of a laugh. It sounded like icicles falling.

I think one of those icicles must have found its target, because Raleigh seemed frozen. He continued to stare at me and then he snapped out of it.

His face was cold, his voice hard as he said, “Do your worst, Caz. In the meantime, what are you doing parked out here in the middle of nowhere?”

I opened my mouth—the old Casper would have snapped back with a smartass answer. But I was eleven months older and, if not wiser, much more careful. It took a lot to make Raleigh angry, but he was angry now. I didn’t want to push my luck. The idea of being arrested, jailed—for even five minutes—was enough to fill me with panic.

I understood how very fragile freedom was.

“Looking for Freyja. She ran away two days ago.”

He didn't say anything for a moment. Raleigh was as crazy about dogs as me. That was one thing we'd always had in common. For another, I'd got Freyja from Linda, Raleigh's mom. Linda raised golden retrievers. Raleigh's dog Loki was from the same litter.

He said neutrally, “She's chipped. Did you try the animal shelter and the vet clinics?”

“I tried.”

“I'm sorry. I'll keep an eye out for her.”

I nodded, shrugged. “Thanks. I know she's gone. She wouldn't stay away this long.”

Just one more thing I blamed him for, and he probably saw it in my face.

He nodded curtly. “Drive safely. It's getting dark.” He turned his back on me, not waiting for the response that he correctly assumed wasn't coming.

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I didn't watch him walk away. I unlocked the Range Rover, got inside, and started the engine—and nearly jumped out of my skin as someone thumped on the driver's side window. Hard.

Raleigh glared down at me.

I fumbled to find the button to lower the window.

As the window slid down, he said hotly, "You know, I wasn't the only one. Everybody thought you were guilty—"

I said, matching his anger decibel for decibel, "You aren't everybody, Raleigh. You knew me. You were my—" My voice gave a humiliating crack, but I got control. "You were supposed to be my friend."

He was supposed to be a hell of a lot more than my friend.

"Jesus Christ. You were found in Peyton's office minutes after he'd been killed—the same day the two of you had a huge blow-up."

"No fingerprints on the gun. No gun residue on my hands."

"There were no fingerprints on the gun at all, so that doesn't help you. You weren't tested for GSR until the next day. We both know you're smart enough to wear gloves."

I actually had to fight to get the breath to shout, "You sound like you still think I'm

guilty! After everything that's happened—”

Raleigh's face flushed. “Of course I don't! I'm trying to—the case was presented to the DA and he made the call to bring charges. You know that.”

I said scornfully, “Oh, I see. You were just an innocent bystander.”

“I'm not saying that. I'm saying there was a preponderance of evidence and the consensus was—”

“Consensus. Jesus,” I interrupted him again. “At least have the guts to own your part in it.”

“I do own it,” he snapped. “I own it and I'm sorry for my part in it. I said I was sorry.”

“Right. That's what this is. Your apology.”

He looked taken aback and then shocked. “I am apologizing. I'm sorry. I wish to God none of it had happened.”

For a minute I couldn't answer. The silence between us was so raw, so fraught, you could practically feel the atoms splitting.

I found my voice at last. “Are you going to arrest me if I don't accept your apology? Or can I go?”

It was getting too dark to read his expression, but I could see the darkness of his eyes, his confusion—well, gosh, he so rarely heard the word no. Not from me.

After a moment, he stepped back from my car, said thickly, “Of course, you can go.”

I didn't take the time to roll up the window, I just hit the gas and drove.

## Chapter Two

Malcolm was waiting for me when I got back to the Gingerbread House.

I can't say I was thrilled. I'd been ready to call it a day even before running into Raleigh. Post-Raleigh, I was exhausted, wrung out, depressed. I wanted to go to bed, pull the covers over my head, and not come out until the spring. Assuming spring ever came.

But I liked Malcolm.

Well, okay, more honestly, I guess I didn't think much about him one way or the other. He had never tried to be a father to me, thank God. In fact, he had never really even tried to be a big brother to me. I think I was as much on Malcolm's radar as he was mine. Blank screens all around.

But he was kind and helpful and good natured when we did run into each other. He had been trying hard to do all the things since I'd arrived home the day before, though I'm sure he felt a little like he'd been asked to look after a space alien.

Anyway.

I remember Astrid telling me once that Malcolm was a good man, but that he wasn't a passionate man. He didn't get worked up about things. Good things. Bad things. Any things.



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He loved Astrid, though. She loved him. That was all that had ever mattered to me.

“I was starting to worry.” Malcolm rose from the sofa as I closed the front door behind me.

I managed not to jump—noticeably—I was no longer a fan of surprises. Also, not a fan of having my privacy invaded, but I got it. I’d lived in the Gingerbread House—the family name for the guest cottage behind the mansion my grandfather built back in 1912—since I’d been seventeen. I think both Astrid and Malcolm tended to think I was still seventeen.

“I was putting up posters for Freyja.”

Malcolm winced. “Right. Of course.”

“And then I picked up a few groceries.”

“You didn’t need to worry about that, Caz. I had Mrs. Bolt stock the pantry and fridge this afternoon.”

I said slowly, “Right. Okay.” I put the box of groceries, bottles clinking, on the counter, and noticed a pecan custard coffee cake in the glass cake dome.

A Bredahl Cookies and Cakes bestseller. The recipe was my great-grandmother’s.

“I know it’s your favorite.” Malcolm sounded awkward.

“Yes. Thanks.” I tried to remember how this type of interaction was supposed to go.  
“That was thoughtful.”

Fortunately, Malcolm had not forgotten. “It’s what Astrid would have done.”

Neither of us said anything. In the light of the living room lamps, Malcolm looked harrowed. Old.

Swept up in my anger and bitterness and depression, it was too easy to forget that Malcolm was also suffering. That he’d lost nearly as much as I had. I wanted to say the right thing, but what would that be? Normal civilized conversation seemed beyond me now.

Malcolm said kindly, “Anyway, I wanted to invite you up to the house for dinner tonight.”

I appreciated the gesture, but I didn’t want to have dinner with Malcolm. I didn’t want to go anywhere or talk to anyone.

“I appreciate it. But honestly, I think I’m going to take a couple of aspirin and go to bed. I’m beat.”

Malcolm gave another of those little winces. He wasn’t enjoying his new role any more than I was. “You have to eat, Casper. You look—you’re too thin. You don’t look well.”

“Well, you know, prison food.” I was kind of kidding, kind of not. Because...seriously? I was being judged on appearance?

“Don’t worry,” Malcolm said quickly. “I’m not going to pester you. I know you’ve been through a lot. You need your space. Humor me tonight and I won’t disturb you

again until Christmas.” He grimaced, “It’s just...the house is so quiet without Astrid.”

Yes. The whole world was quiet without Astrid.

I closed my eyes. Opened them. Said, “Yeah, of course, Malcolm. Thank you. I could use a home-cooked dinner.”

Malcolm smiled and headed for the front door. He glanced at the box of booze in passing, but said nothing.

As the door closed behind him, I dropped down on the sofa, let my head fall back.

I— I cared for you.

Past tense.

How insane was it that was the most painful takeaway of my run-in with Raleigh?

Was it a surprise to me that he was already over what he’d felt?

No.

He couldn’t have felt much or he would never have done the things he did. Never have believed the things he did.

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But it still hurt like some awful new injury to my heart.

Which was funny because I was certainly over him.

I wanted to see him suffer, though. There were ways to bring that about—

My sweet revenge reverie was interrupted by a polite knock at the door.

I snatched up the nearest throw pillow and screamed into it. I tossed the pillow aside, crossed to the door in two long steps, jerked it open, “Hey, Mal—”

It wasn’t Malcolm, though. Dax stood on my front step.

I snapped my mouth closed.

Dax looked older, thinner. He wore a leather bomber jacket and jeans. His cheeks were red with the cold and he now sported a golden stubble-beard. The jacket and the beard were new.

“I was waiting for George to leave.” For reasons I never did follow, Dax always called Malcolm “George”.

I said nothing.

Dax’s expression changed, grew uncertain. “Can I come in?”

I stepped back without speaking.

He said, “Why didn’t you call? Why didn’t you let me know you were home?”

My expression probably said it all.

Dax’s eyes widened. “Caz,” he protested. “You don’t think—what?”

“That you wrote me off? That you forgot I even existed.”

He gasped as if I’d punched him. “The hell! If this is about not coming to see you... It’s not like I didn’t want to keep visiting.”

I turned my back to him, closed the door. “Sure.”

“Don’t sureme. Listen. Astrid said it was making it harder for you.”

That turned me around fast. I glared at him. “Bullshit.”

“I swear to God.” He even put his hand up as though taking his oath. “You really think I wouldn’t have come to see you? What the hell!”

“Why would she say that? She wouldn’t. Make it harder on me to know that my friends were still—?” I had to stop. I was like a volcano of emotions now, ready to spew every time I bumped into another painful revelation. I had never been like this before. I didn’t want to be like this now.

“I don’t know!” Dax’s protest sounded sincere. “But I felt like I had to respect her...” His voice tailed off. He said again, sounding pained, “I don’t know, but it wasn’t because I ever thought you killed anybody.”

“Sure about that?” I asked darkly.

Dax goggled at me. “Caz, you passed out in biology because we had to dissect a frog—and you weren’t even the one doing the dissecting! For chrissake. No, I never thought for one second you killed anyone.”

I struggled with it, then said shortly, “I didn’t pass out because of the frog. I was coming down with the flu.”

Dax relaxed. “Maybe. The flu didn’t help.”

We studied each other for a long wary moment, and Dax’s face twisted. “Jeez, Caz. It’s me. Your sidekick. Your amigo. Your long-lost pardner?”

I nodded, sat down on the sofa, and Dax sat down beside me, slung his arm around my shoulders, said gruffly, “Welcome home, man.”

I snorted. He bumped his head against mine, harder than he intended—we “Owwwed” in unison—he jumped up and took a couple of quick turns around the living room. After a minute, he asked, “Where’s Freyja?”

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The tightness in my chest returned. “She ran away on Tuesday.”

“Oh, fuck. Freyja? Oh no.”

I rubbed my forehead. “I looked everywhere I could think of.”

“Did you try the pound?”

“Yep.”

“Local vets?”

“I tried everywhere I could think of.”

“Dog rescues?”

“Yeah.”

“Hell.” He wandered over to the window, looking out at the main house. After a moment, he asked, “How’s George?”

That was quite the segue. I considered Dax, considered that question. “Not great. Grieving.”

“No more than you.”

And that seemed an even odder comment. “It’s not a competition.”

Dax grimaced, turned from the window. “Have you seen Dudley Do-Right?”

“I’ve seen him,” I said shortly.

He grunted. “Anyway, I came by to see if you want to go out tomorrow night? Grab dinner, have some drinks? I’m buying.”

I shook my head. “Not really. I’m not in a party mood.”

Dax rolled his eyes. “I didn’t say a party. I said you and me having dinner and a couple of drinks.” He met my eyes. “You don’t want to look like you think you have something to hide.”

“I don’t give a fuck what anyone thinks.”

“Duly noted.” Dax’s grin was lopsided. “All the same, what better way to make that point than letting the assholes see you out enjoying your well-deserved freedom.”

I scowled, although I did see his point.

“Happiness is the best revenge. Am I right?” Dax wiggled his eyebrows.

“I think revenge is the best revenge.” But I sighed. “Yeah. Okay. Why not?”

“That’s the old Casper.” Dax headed for the front door. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” He stopped. “Do you—you still have your cell?”

No. Presumably my cell phone was still in an evidence locker at LCPD. It had been confiscated early in the investigation—which had to have been excruciating for Raleigh, given how much we’d texted each other. Probably another reason he’d been so hell-bent on proving he could be objective where I was concerned. Maybe some



people thought that was admirable. But when your back is against the wall, you don't want your significant other to be objective; you want them on your side, believing in you, fighting for you.

"My new phone's supposed to arrive tomorrow."

"Okay. You call me."

I nodded, already regretting my agreement to go out.

Dax must have seen it because he said, "Come on, man, it'll be like old times. You'll see."

"Sure." I already knew the old times were over and nothing would ever be the same.

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As if it had been listening to our conversation, the wall phone started to ring as Dax disappeared down the flagstones that led across the frozen garden.

I stopped a few feet away, listening to the voice being recorded.

“Hi, Mr. Bredahl. This is Matilda Seger with theCopenhagen Herald. I was hoping we could chat for a few minutes. I know you must have a lot to say about your recent incarceration and subsequent release after your sister confessed to the crime. It’s a story that a lot of people want to hear. A story that needs to be told...”

I went into the bedroom and closed the door.

### Chapter Three

Dinner at the Big House.

No pun intended.

Back before the asteroid hit, AKA Tom Peyton’s murder, I used to have dinner with Astrid and Malcolm every Sunday afternoon. That kind of thing was really important to Astrid. Did I love having all my Sunday afternoons booked from here to eternity? Of course not. But I loved my sister, and also, Mrs. Bolt, Astrid’s housekeeper, was a fantastic cook.

When I was a kid, Sunday dinners were always followed by game night. Once I started working for the company, Sunday dinners felt a little more like informal staff meetings, but it was only a few hours out of my week, and I’d have happily donated

those hours for the rest of my life if I could have still had my sister.

I won't pretend I didn't make myself a couple of drinks before I walked up to the house. Astrid and Malcolm drank, but their tastes ran to the strictly traditional. Astrid drank old fashioned and Malcolm liked whisky neat. Neither drank to excess, and Astrid found my love of flavored martinis concerning.

At ten to seven, I shrugged into my coat and walked up to the main house. The moon shone brightly in the purple-black sky. It was like walking through an ice garden. Shrubs and low walls were covered in the fresh powdery snow, turning them into whimsical ice sculptures. LED lanterns shone from trees and benches. Up ahead, the house was brightly lit, cheerful light glowing from most windows.

I refused to let myself think about anything beyond the crunchy slide of my footsteps on snow, my sharp breaths as I drew in and out the cold night air. If I started thinking, remembering, I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep walking. I told myself it had been a long, difficult day and I was too tired to be able to think logically, productively. A good meal would help and hopefully a good night's rest.

I kept walking, one foot in front of the other, and at last I reached the white Federalist style front door with its giant evergreen wreath.

I had a key, of course. I'd grown up in this house. But with Astrid gone... I rang the doorbell.

Mrs. Bolt opened the door almost immediately. Samantha Bolt had been our housekeeper my entire life, but she had aged more in eleven months than in all the years I'd known her.

"Hi, Sammie," I said.

Her impassive expression melted. There were tears in her eyes and her voice shook as she said, “Casper. Welcome home.”

We hugged. Her thin arms wrapped around me so tightly I could feel her heart hammering. I did my best not to crush her.

She whispered, “I’m so sorry about Miss Astrid.”

Astrid was only “Miss Astrid” to me. I think that was because Sammie and I were the only ones who remembered the period before Astrid had married Malcolm, when, after our parents died in a plane crash, she had taken on the huge twin responsibilities of raising her kid brother and running the company. She had been twenty and I was six.

“Thanks.”

Sammie drew back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Mr. Melber is in the drawing room.”

“Okey-dokey.”

I squeezed her shoulder and headed for the drawing room. The house looked like a magazine layout for the holidays. That’s how it always looked this time of year. Astrid loved Christmas. The day after Thanksgiving the house always magically transformed into a Christmas castle. This would be the last year.

The double doors to the drawing room were shut. I knocked once, opened the left door, poked my head in. Malcolm sat staring into the fireplace, drinking whisky. He looked up and twitched a smile.

“Caz. You made it.” He rose. “What would you like to drink?”

“Anything’s fine.”

Malcolm went to the drinks cart. Absently, I listened to sound of clinking glasses and pouring bottles as I gazed around the room. Astrid had redecorated the house a few times since she’d become lady of the manor. But a lot of the pieces in the room—the portrait of my great-grandfather over the fireplace, the vintage painted duck decoys sitting on the bookshelf, and even the Regency-style cocktail cart were the original furnishings.

The house appeared unchanged, but without Astrid there, it felt like a foreign country.

It wasn’t just Astrid’s absence.

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I took my drink from Malcolm. “Where’s the Gang of Four?” Astrid and Malcolm had four hunting dogs: Sadie, Samson, Skipper, and Shorty.

“In the kennel.” Malcolm looked apologetic. “They’re out of control without Astrid here.”

No doubt they missed Astrid, but they were older dogs. Compared to Freyja they were sane and sober members of society.

“You’re kidding.”

He shook his head.

I was genuinely shocked. The Gang of Four were hunting dogs, but they were also house dogs. They’d spent their entire lives inside.

Malcolm probably read a lot of that in my face because he said defensively, “The kennels are spacious, insulated, and they have each other for company. Those four dogs live better than a lot of people in this county.”

“I’m just surprised.” But also horrified. It was a lot of dogs for the Gingerbread House, but I was wondering if I could bring them in with me at night. Would Malcolm take offense?

“Drink okay?” Malcolm asked.

“Oh.” I took a sip of the watery whisky. I was not a fan of whisky, watery or not.

Raleigh had liked whisky, though, on the special occasions he'd attended with me. "Sure."

Malcolm returned to the sofa. I sat in a chair across from him. "Did you see Mike Baer this afternoon?"

The law firm of Baer, Baer and Baer had represented the legal interests of the Bredahls for nearly as long as the Bredahls had legal interests. Needless to say, the Baers had not been representing me in the sordid upcoming case of homicide.

"No. Was I supposed to?"

Malcolm seemed surprised. "I assumed that's where you went today."

"I told you I was looking for Freyja."

"Of course. But I assumed you'd want to speak to Baer as soon as possible."

"I was looking forward to a day without talking to a lawyer."

Malcolm gave a short laugh. "I can imagine. Well, there's no mystery. Everything is yours. This house. The company. You know that." His shrug was all-encompassing.

Yes, I suppose I did know. I hadn't thought about it. It's not like taking charge of anything was high on my list of priorities. I'd barely had a chance to figure out what my next move was beyond finding Freyja. For God's sake, yesterday morning I'd woken up in a jail cell. I needed a little time to acclimate.

But I nodded.

Malcolm said with an attempt at lightness, "Let me know, when you want me to

vacate the premises.”

“Is that a serious question?”

His expression was wry. “It has to be asked.”

“No, it doesn’t. Of course I don’t want you out. This is your home.”

He stared into the fire for a moment, and said quietly, “I’m not sure I can go on living here without her.”

That was a different matter entirely, and I had no answer.

Malcolm looked up from the flames, studied me. His handsome face seemed troubled. “I know this is all hitting you hard, Caz, but had you thought about—”

I knew what was coming.

“Malcolm, I haven’t thought about anything as far as the company is concerned. Aren’t we on Christmas break?”

“Monday.”



“Okay. Well.”

“I don’t mean to pressure you.”

“No, I know. But.”

He said slowly, “I’m hesitant to suggest this, but a couple of our managers mentioned that you could appoint me acting director for the short term while you figure out your next steps. I suspect that might soothe some fears.”

I looked at him in surprise, but it made sense in a lot of ways. Malcolm was not only Bredahl’s sales manager, he’d been married to Astrid for fifteen years. If anyone knew her wishes and plans for the company, it was probably Malcolm. It wasn’t like I wanted the job.

At the same time, I didn’t want to be rushed into making any decisions before I’d had time to think them through.

“It sounds reasonable. Let me take a day or two to think about it.”

“Of course,” he said quickly, as though only too happy to drop the subject. “And what about Saturday?”

I frowned. “What about Saturday?”

“It’s the company Christmas party.”

My heart sank.

“I really don’t think I’m going to be in a party mood.”

Malcolm opened his mouth, but I cut him off.

“Not to mention that I’d have thought the party would be canceled after Astrid...”

Malcolm looked pained, which was quickly becoming his usual expression with me.

“I feel the same, of course, but the party is for the employees. Astrid would expect us to put celebrating them ahead of our own feelings.”

Yes. Astrid would have. That’s why she had been a great director. And why I would be a terrible director. Not least because I’d never wanted to be director.

“Fair enough. But I don’t know if I’m up to it.” I mean, I knew that was a feeble answer, but it was also the truth.

“I understand.” Malcolm cleared his throat. “And the last thing I want to do is put more pressure on you, Casper, but you are the company now.

No. With over one hundred employees, one lowly assistant VP—who’d basically inherited the position—was hardly Bredahl Cookies and Cakes. Especially since I’d been gone for the last year. Even when I had been doing the nine-to-five routine, well, I don’t think anyone had ever looked to me for leadership.

As though reading my thoughts, Malcolm insisted, “You represent continuity, “

“So do you. More so than me.”

He nodded. Not in agreement. “Astrid would expect this of you.”

I felt another of those unexpected flashes of anger.

“If Astrid wanted a vote, she shouldn’t have killed herself.”

Malcolm looked shocked. I was a little shocked myself.

I summoned whatever was left of my good manners.

“I’m sorry, Malcolm. All of this is just...a lot right now. Let me think about Saturday, okay?”

Once again, he couldn’t drop the subject fast enough. “Of course. Of course.” When the dinner bell chimed—another historical artifact from the grand old days—he said, “Let’s eat, shall we?”

If it had just been Astrid and me, we’d have eaten in the drawing room. That’s what we did before Malcolm came into our lives, and it’s what we did when Malcolm was out of town on business trips. But Malcolm was a guy for tradition and formalities. So, we sat at opposite ends of the long linen-covered table, and ate our London broil, roasted brussels sprouts, and potato gratin off the aqua-blue and white Royal Albert china.

Malcolm had switched from whisky to wine, and filled my glass despite my demur. I’d barely touched the whisky and I only took a couple of sips of wine. Not that I wouldn’t have loved to get plastered and numb the pain of this encounter, but I could barely contain my emotions as it was: depression, anger, bitterness were my constant companions now.

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Was I grateful not to be sitting in a jail cell awaiting trial?

Yes.

But exoneration had come at too high a price. The only person who'd ever really cared about me, was gone. I was alone. No, worse, I was left with people like Malcolm and Dax and Raleigh, who felt terrible about believing the worst of me, but had believed it nonetheless.

I wasn't sure I was ever going to get over the pain. I didn't believe I would ever be able to trust anyone again.

"Caz, you haven't said ten words since we sat down." Malcolm's voice broke into my dark reflections.

I gazed down the table at his concerned expression. "Sorry. I'm out of the habit of normal social interaction."

I immediately regretted admitting that because Malcolm got an odd expression.

"That's understandable. Had you considered talking to someone?"

I frowned. "You mean a therapist? I don't think I'd be able to take advice from someone who hasn't been through what I have."

"I'm not sure that giving advice is what a therapist does. Just being able to talk to someone about... It might be helpful."

“I have zero desire to talk to anyone. Present company excepted.” The last was added out of courtesy, and we both knew it was a lie.

Malcolm winced. But I had to give it to him, he kept trying in his awkward, clearly-feeling-obligated way. “Experiencing unjust incarceration can have profound and lasting emotional and psychological effects on a young man. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

I was pretty sure he’d read it off a website.

I said curtly, “I don’t think I have anything to be ashamed of.”

“No, of course not. I’m not saying it’s a logical reaction. But it’s genuine. It’s real. Clearly, you’re very upset about what happened.”

That was actually funny, and I laughed. Because, talk about understatement of the year.

What was not so funny was when he said bleakly, “Astrid was afraid if you were trapped in there much longer, you’d take your own life.”

That was like getting punched, and I gasped. “What? There’s no way. That’s ridiculous.”

Malcolm shook his head. He looked worried and sad. “You had to be hospitalized for a breakdown, Casper.”

“The hell. It was an overnight stay. I didn’t have a breakdown. Jesus. I had an anxiety attack. With good reason! I was jumped in the showers. I was attacked in the cafeteria. Of course I was anxious. You’d be anxious too in there. It was fucking apocalyptic.”

Malcolm flinched, whether at my language or the image that conjured. Well, if it was hard for him to hear, it was harder for me to remember. My heart was bounding and banging all over my chest like a breakdancer in a call-out-battle.

It didn't help that Malcolm continued to look concerned and kind and disbelieving. Maybe Astrid had thought I was cracking up. I mean, in fairness, I'd wondered how much longer I could take it.

"It wouldn't hurt to talk to someone, though?" Malcolm persisted. "You've been through a traumatic event. One traumatic event after another, really. Even guilty people find readjustment after prison difficult."

"It wasn't prison. It was county jail." Actually, prison would probably have been easier, from what I gathered after having to sit through about fifty thousand episodes of *Lockup* and *60 Days In*.

I took a deep breath, pulled myself together. After all, people can only take so much raw truth from each other. I served him the sugar-added flavor. "But yeah, you're right. It's...weird. Everything feels unsettled. I don't have a problem talking to someone. But I want—need a little time to myself right now. To process."

"Of course," Malcolm said quickly. "I don't want to intrude. You're a grown man. But I know Astrid would have wanted me to try to look out for you."

"I know." I wanted to say I appreciated it, but I didn't. I said reassuringly, "After the holidays, if I'm..."

"Still struggling," he supplied.

I swallowed my irritation. "Right. If I'm—if I feel like I need to talk to someone, I will. I promise. But honestly, just being by myself right now is the best thing on the

planet. Just to have quiet. And privacy.” I smiled. “Besides, it’s the holidays. Everyone’s on winter break.”

Malcolm did not smile. “If you’re in crisis, we’ll get you help.”

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“Malcolm.” I managed to laugh even though I was not remotely amused. “Come on. I’m not in crisis. I’m glad and grateful to be home. I know I have to...do all the things, but this week I just want to sleep and eat and—” I started to say, play with my dog, but remembered Freyja was gone. I said briskly, talking past the wrench of pain, “And not worry about anything until after the New Year. Okay?”

“Yes, of course.” He looked relieved then and even smiled. “I think that’s an excellent plan.”

Feeling like I had narrowly skirted an unexpected threat, I returned to the business of force-feeding myself. There was nothing wrong with the food. I’m sure it was delicious. It was the ongoing difficulty of finding room in my gut for something besides anger.

Malcolm wasn’t eating much either, though he was drinking, and for a time the only sound in the long elegant dining room was the desultory scrape of forks on porcelain and the tick-tock of the clock on the mantel.

Slowly, though, the unpleasant implications of what Malcolm said sank in. A wave of cold dread washed through me. I put my fork down, said shakily, “Are you saying, you think that’s why Astrid killed herself? Because she thought I was going to...”

My voice gave out.

“No,” Malcolm said quickly. “Yes, Astrid finally came forward because she was afraid for you. She could see the strain you were under. But she killed herself because she couldn’t—I think her pride wouldn’t accept what would happen to her once the



truth came out.”

She was proud, yes. It was hard to imagine Astrid incarcerated. But it was also hard picturing her losing her nerve and taking her own life. She had more courage than anyone I’d ever known.

But why else would she kill herself? Something unbearable had driven her to swallow all those sleeping pills. She’d left a letter. It wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t a misunderstanding. As much as she loved me, no way would my sister have confessed to a crime she knew I committed. She had to have killed Tom Peyton.

But I struggled with that, too. The idea that Astrid would commit murder? I could see her killing in self-defense or to protect someone she loved, but that wasn’t in play here. Supposedly, she’d killed Tom because he had ended their affair.

There had been an affair. I knew that, too. But it had ended a month earlier. Her little romances never lasted long. And Astrid hadn’t seemed particularly upset about it.

It turned out I hadn’t known my sister any better than I’d known anyone else.

“Are you all right, Casper?” Malcolm asked from a million miles away.

I looked up, stared at him, and realized how humiliating all this had to be for him. He wasn’t just grieving the loss of his wife. He was having to deal with having the intimate details of their marriage being made public.

“Yes.”

I was thinking that I needed to be kinder to Malcolm. More patient with him. For a guy who’d always been uncomfortable with any hint of drama, he had to feel like he was mired in an emotional swampland.

I said, “I appreciate everything you’re trying to do for me. I’ll try not to be more difficult than I have to.”

He gave me a strange look and made a sound that wasn’t quite a laugh. “You were always such a good-natured kid, Caz. You’re probably the only innocent bystander in all this.”

It seemed cryptic. I took it to mean Malcolm, understandably, was also bitter.

We were saved further embarrassing revelations by the arrival of Sammie with dessert. Inevitably, it was another Bredahl classic—and a consistent holiday bestseller: White Christmas Cake. A lavish concoction of white cake layered with white chocolate mousse, slivered almonds, and white chocolate ganache frosting. Tiny silver sugar pearls and baker’s sugar sparkled and glittered within the lavish swirls of snowy frosting.

I managed to choke down a few bites, declined coffee, and thanked Malcolm for everything. A few minutes later I was able to escape into the frosty night.

Once out in the bracing cold, I felt a lot better. The cold nipped at my nose, the chill seeped through my jeans and parka. But it felt good. After being stuck inside four walls for almost eleven months, just being outside at all was heaven. The perspiration dried on my skin. I hadn’t even realized how much I’d been sweating. The little lanterns glittered like caged stars along the path. The snow shimmered. After a yard or two of crunching through crusty snow, my stomach stopped churning; I could take a full breath again.

More time outside. That’s what I needed. Fresh air. Physical activity.

The snow dampened the impact of my boots, doused all sound, so the rising howl of the hounds in their kennel was all the louder and eerier. Their wails floated through in

the night.

Malcolm's decision confused me. Wouldn't the dogs be company in that giant empty house?

I came around a pyramid-shaped wall of American pillar and stopped in my snowy tracks.

A tall silhouette stood in the crisp white triangle of the Gingerbread House's outdoor wall light. At the sound of my footsteps, the silhouette turned and my heart began to thunder in my ears.

Raleigh was waiting for me.

#### Chapter Four

I had no choice. I had to keep walking toward him. My body began to run through the all-systems check for fight or flight: spiking heart rate and blood pressure, surging adrenaline, accelerated breathing. I balled my mittened hands into fists, squared my shoulders.

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But as I reached the little wooden gate, Raleigh said, “I didn’t handle that well today.” As though we were holding an ongoing conversation.

I snorted—and there was actually steam from my breath hitting the icy air.

Raleigh stepped away from the front door, met me on the flagstone walk, and that unexpected proximity—the warmth and energy in his nearness—made every muscle in my body lock so tight I started to shake. Such an infuriating biological response—stress overload, not excitement or pleasure to be close enough to share his frosty breath, see the tiny snowflakes in his dark eyelashes. He must have had a cold, long wait.

He was still talking in that hushed, pained voice. “It was just... Seeing you again. I’ve been thinking for days about what I would say to you, and then when the moment came, I wasn’t ready. All I could do was talk about my feelings, how it was for me.”

I curled my lip, but said nothing.

He drew in a long, unsteady breath. “The reason I keep wanting, trying, to explain, is because I don’t want you to think that I was okay with—that I didn’t care.”

What was I supposed to say to that? I didn’t even try.

Raleigh did, though. He kept hoeing that row for all he was worth. “Like if I can explain, you’ll...”

“Understand?” That voice sounded nothing like me. I don’t even know where it came from.

I could feel him trying to read my face in the gloom.

“Maybe. I don’t know. But I came here to apologize. Not explain. Not rationalize. I’m sorry, Caz. We’re all sorry. For all of it. But me most of all. Not only was I not there for you, I believed you were guilty. And you’re right. If anyone should have known better, it was me. I was wrong. And I-I wronged you.”

That little stutter. I used to think that was cute. That one tiny imperfection. It was so endearing. Once.

I waited for him to stop talking. When he finally ran out of words, I said, “I accept your apology.”

His tensed shoulders relaxed a fraction.

“It doesn’t change anything, though. Not for me. You can tell yourself you did the right thing. Then and now. That’s what matters most to you anyway. But I don’t forgive you. I never will. I hate you. I hate you as much as I loved you, and I loved you with all my—”

My voice gave out. If I lost control I’d be sobbing in huge childish gulps; I struggled and managed to hang on.

Raleigh didn’t move, but I heard something change in his breathing. “Caz.”

I got out, “There was a time I thought you could do no wrong. You were fucking Prince Charming as far as I was concerned.” I started out calm and steady, but my voice shook when I finished, “Turns out, Raleigh, you’re just another troll.”

He didn't say a word. Just stood there, a motionless shadow in the harsh light.

I brushed past him—and even that, the closeness, the proximity brought too many memories. I fumbled open the door to my cottage, went inside.

Then I leaned against the door, heart thundering in my ears, feeling sick and dizzy and faint with the pain of it.

Was this really what you wanted?

No. Of course not. None of this was what I'd wanted.

But this was what it was. This was all that was left of the sweetest, best thing that had ever happened to me.

Snow and ashes.

I didn't sleep much that night.

You'd think the relief and comfort of being in my own bed would guarantee I slept like a baby, but it was just the opposite. It was too dark. The whole concept of "lights out" is a joke in jail. There's always light of some kind. You're always under observation. And it was too quiet. There's always noise of some kind going on in a correctional facility, some reminder that you're not alone, not in control. I'd been desperate for quiet. But now the silence, the dark, the isolation felt threatening. It gave me too much time, too much space, to think.

It had been the same the night before.

I probably did have some form PTSD. The loss of personal autonomy and the dehumanizing conditions of life behind bars had eaten away at me, at my self-esteem,

my sense of self-worth—whatever was left of it after realizing the people who knew me best thought I was capable of murder. The constant exposure to negative experiences and cynical attitudes had left me feeling helpless and hopeless. None of that was unique to me. I'd seen firsthand that's how it was for almost everybody.

I mean, let's be honest, I had it better than a lot of inmates. My family was paying for every possible perk and privilege. Everything a man could desire, from better blankets and pillows to the occasional special meal. I had all the money I wanted for snacks from the commissary. All the books I could read. I read things I'd never dreamed of reading: Dickens, for God's sake. Nothing like a little Dickens for additional ambiance when you're stuck in a jail cell. I probably got added protection, too, though it didn't feel like it at the time.

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But yeah, it was still incarceration. The total loss of all freedom and autonomy, and for me, there was the added frustration and pain of knowing I was innocent.

As much as I wanted to shake it off, focus on being grateful for my rescue, I couldn't seem to let go of those dark and negative emotions.

Granted, it had only been—well, I hadn't been free even forty-eight hours. It was going to take time, I understood that. Intellectually, I thought I knew what was going on. But it didn't seem to alleviate that crushing weight of despair.

It was just too much. And on top of it, losing Astrid. Freyja, and Raleigh—who was just as dead as the other two, as far as I was concerned.

Or so I tried to tell myself.

How ironic, given the nights I'd prayed for silence, privacy, my own safe and comfortable bed, that I was now too nervous, too restless to rest, ears straining for the jingle of Freyja's tags, the familiar growl of Raleigh's SUV coming up the road, the clock in the living room striking some magic hour when everything would be all right again, go back to normal.

Listening for all the impossible things.

I thought about what Raleigh had said. What I'd said.

Back and forth. Back and forth. Round and round and round. My thoughts were caught in an exhausting loop.



I did hate him. And I did not believe I could ever forgive him, no matter how sorry he was.

And he did not seem nearly sorry enough, in my opinion. He still believed he had been justified, that he had been in the right. He felt he had been forced to make difficult but correct choices, that I should be able to see it from his viewpoint.

I believed he had betrayed me in every possible way.

There was no middle ground there. No path to reconciliation.

The problem, as I was discovering, was that you could hate someone and still, in some irrational, unreasonable corner of your heart, still love him.

It was a relief when the first orange streaks of sunrise appeared beneath the bedroom blinds. I got up, showered—it seemed no amount of soap and water would ever erase the jail smell from my hair and skin—made coffee. I ate a slice of pecan custard coffee cake and tried to savor the buttery, nutty delights of freedom.

I thought over Malcolm's suggestion that he be appointed director in the interim. It wasn't a bad idea. Not only would it give me time to catch my breath, it seemed the most likely way to have Astrid's wishes and intent for the company be carried out.

On the other hand, Malcolm was our sales manager. He wasn't particularly good at seeing the big picture. In fact, a lot of my job as assistant VP had been trying to run interference between Malcolm and the production and customer service teams.

But then Malcolm had said the other managers were in favor of the idea.

A decision had to be made, but hopefully it could wait until after the holidays.

I rose to pour myself another cup of coffee and saw that the answering machine was blinking again. Someone must have left a message while I'd been dining with Malcolm. I hadn't noticed after my run-in with Raleigh. I cautiously pressed play. In the weeks before I'd been arrested, my answering machine had regularly recorded anonymous threats and abuse.

Astrid had told me to erase them and shrug it off. "Caz, some people want to think the worst of you. They prefer it. It's not about you. It's about them, and they'll have a variety of reasons. There are people who think you committed murder and hate you for it. But there are also people who are going to hate you because you're a Bredahl or because you're gay or come from a wealthy family or drive a Range Rover or have red hair."

"I don't have red hair!"

She'd grinned and ruffled my hair. "Shake it off, kiddo. Happiness is the best revenge."

I couldn't help a faint smile, remembering that Dax had said the same thing.

The voice on the answering was the same as on Thursday's message.

"Hi, Mr. Bredahl. It's Matilda Seger from the Copenhagen Herald again. A great injustice was done to you. You deserve the opportunity to tell your story—"

I erased the message.

I was not about to forget the things that had been written about me in the Copenhagen Herald. The speculation and innuendo—and then the open accusations and calls for my arrest.

No thanks.

Deciding I was edgy enough without additional caffeine, I put my coffee cup and plate in the sink.

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Then I gazed out the window at the snowy landscape, at the silent main house.

How did Malcolm stand it? That huge empty house, and reminders of Astrid around every corner. He had to be in hell.

I turned from the window and tried to think of what to do with the luxury of an entire day to myself. Nothing came to me.

Probably, I should think about Christmas shopping, but the very idea of Christmas left me feeling nauseous. The two people I would have most wanted to buy presents for were lost to me forever.

Instead, I started calling around again to the animal clinics, rescues, and shelters.

With the same result.

When I finally gave up, it was nearly lunch time and there was yet another message on the answering machine from Matilda Seger.

“Mr. Bredahl, I wanted to let you know theHeraldis publishing a public apology to you on Sunday along with my in-depth analysis of where the police investigation of Tom Peyton’s homicide went off the rails. I understand and respect your decision not to speak publicly about the humiliating and horrifying treatment you received from LCPD, and I can’t pretend to understand what you’ve been through, but I feel like it might be cathartic for you to share your experience. It would certainly help get the word out to people who might not yet know that you’ve been completely exonerated.”

My blood was boiling by the time I got to the end of her message. Was I supposed to care what the uninformed citizens of Little Copenhagen thought now after getting it so wrong the first time?

But then... A switch seemed to flip in my brain.

If the Herald really was publishing an apology, if there really was going to be a serious critique of the investigation that had led to my arrest, charge and indictment, why not take advantage of the platform Seger was offering? Why not have my say? Why not get a little payback for what I'd suffered?

Yeah, a really bad impulse. A terrible instinct.

But in that moment, it seemed—not like a great idea. I knew it wasn't a great idea. But it seemed like the best chance I would have to set the record straight.

And, yes, perhaps inflict a little pain.

It was not like me. In my entire life I'd never looked for trouble. Never wanted conflict. Never deliberately intended to hurt anyone. And I didn't particularly want to hurt anyone now.

But I also didn't care if I did.

I phoned Matilda Seger back and we agreed to meet for lunch.

Matilda was not at all what I expected.

For one thing, she was young. Younger than me, for sure. And tiny. She showed up wearing a furry white parka which had a hood with little pointy animal ears, like a fox or a cat. Maybe it was the ears or maybe it was her big blue eyes and wide blue

streak in her short, silvery hair that made me think of an anime character. She did not look like a hard-hitting journalist. Or any kind of journalist.

Anyway, we got a lot of strange looks and a few whispers as we shucked our coats, scarves, and hats and settled in the back booth at How Now Cow Café.

Matilda beamed at me. “Thanks so much for agreeing to talk to me—”

The waitress appeared and Matilda ordered cocoa and a grilled cheese. I ordered a bowl of cream of chicken with wild rice soup.

The waitress stepped away and, as though we hadn’t been interrupted, Matilda finished, “I can’t tell you how sorry I am for the role my paper played in your incarceration.”

I nodded politely. Why was it so hard to speak normally to people now?

“Is it okay if I record our conversation?”

“I’d prefer that.”

“I don’t blame you.”

I figured she’d use her cell phone, but she took out a little tape recorder, set it on the table between us, and pressed record. She tested the mic while I listened to the Christmas music playing overhead.

It’s the most wonderful time of the year...

Andy Williams. Astrid had loved that retro Christmas music. Weirdly enough, so had Raleigh. And because they loved it, I loved it. Now it sounded like shrill, stupid

nonsense. Cartoon sentiment.

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Yes, the most wonderful time...

Matilda said, “I grew up eating Bredahl pastries. They’re the absolute best in the entire state. That pecan custard coffee cake? Oh myGod.”

“I know.”

Someone who spoke my language. Dollops of creamy custard filled pastry, topped with rich butter streusel and loads of pecans. Pecan custard coffee cake was the first food I could remember eating as a child. While I was incarcerated, Bredahl donated thousands of cookies and pastries to Chippewa Falls County Jail, and I wanted to make sure we continued to do so.

We smiled at each other, and for the first time in a very long time, I started to relax.

Matilda said, “I realize this is probably painful, and that you’ve been through it many, many times, but can you tell me in your own words what happened that night?”

### Chapter Five

Yes, I had been through the story of how I came to be blamed for Tom Peyton’s murder many, many times. Maybe a thousand times by then. Easily.

I said, “There isn’t a lot to tell. I was working late at the bakery—in the administrative offices, I mean. Not in the actual bakery.”

“Right. You were assistant VP to Tom Peyton, who was the company vice president



and second-in-command to the director, your sister Astrid?”

“That’s right.”

I’d worked in the bakery, though. Astrid thought it was important that I know every facet of the company, understood the contribution every employee made, the role they played in our success. And that there be at least the perception that I was working my way up through the ranks. So, I’d worked in shipping, in customer service, and even in the bakery. Frankly, I’d enjoyed working in the bakery a lot more than my titular role as assistant VP.

“Yes. Anyway, it was late. I was supposed to meet—” I changed what I’d been about to say. “I thought I would stop by Tom’s office on the way out. We’d had a-a run-in earlier because I’d missed a managers’ meeting that morning.”

I’d chosen a few more hours in bed with Raleigh over sitting through another never-ending meeting, listening to Tom recite the same script over and over again while he talked over his department heads.

“You wanted to make peace with Mr. Peyton.”

“Well, I’d already apologized. And I’d spoken to Astrid. It was sorted, but I wanted to...” I gave a short laugh, admitted, “Tom and I didn’t like each other. He thought I was a pampered rich kid who got the job because my family owned the company. I thought he was shortsighted, inflexible, and arrogant. But back then, I used to dread the idea that I had disappointed someone or let them down. Even someone like Tom. So, I thought I’d just stop by and say goodnight.”

Initially, it had been hard to talk about this—finding Tom dead—but I’d been through it so many times, had to relive it, retell it, again and again. I said unemotionally, “I knocked on Tom’s door. He didn’t answer. But I could see the lights on under the

door, so I knew he was still there. I opened the door. He was lying on the floor in front of his desk.”

I didn’t have to close my eyes to see it all again: Tom lying face up, staring blankly into space, the gun a few inches from his outstretched fingers. He had been shot in the chest, but there was blood in his mustache. Blood everywhere. I could still smell the burnt sweet-plastic smell of a recently fired weapon, the coppery bite of blood, and the ghostly whisper of Le Labo Santal 33...

Matilda’s blue eyes were dark with sympathy. “That must have been such a shock.”

I nodded. It had been unbelievable.

“Did you call for security?”

“No, I called—I called the police.”

I had called Raleigh. But he hadn’t picked up. He’d been in the middle of sorting out a domestic disturbance. So, I’d phoned NCPD and they’d dispatched two officers.

Matilda asked delicately, “Did you, er, try to render aid?”

I shook my head. That had been one of the things that made me look bad. “I could see he was dead. The amount of blood. The way his face looked.” I shuddered. “Plus...”

“Plus?”

I admitted, “I didn’t know how. I never had any lifesaving training beyond watching a fifteen-minute demonstration in my high school gym. I don’t know how to do CPR. I mean, that’s terrible, I know. But it’s the truth. It just didn’t occur to me. I could see he was dead and so I was thinking in terms of not disturbing the crime scene.”

She looked thoughtful. “At the time you said you believed Peyton had committed suicide.”

“Yes. It’s not like I was applying my little gray cells. The gun was right next to his hand and we were the only two left in the building. I assumed it was suicide because anything else seemed unbelievable. I mean, suicide was unbelievable enough.”

Matilda seemed to turn it over in her mind. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

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She was literally one of the only people who'd ever thought so.

I said, "You know, a lot was made of the fact that I didn't try to render aid, but no one instructed me to. And the coroner herself said that it wouldn't have been of any use."

"That stuck out as pretty unfair to me, too," Matilda said. "It demonstrates some really rigid thinking. It really was too late by the time you got to Peyton's office."

"It demonstrates something," I muttered.

"So, the police arrived and then what? You were actually dating Detective Raleigh Jackson, correct?"

"He wasn't a detective back then. But yes. Raleigh wasn't one of the first officers on the scene though. The first officers arrived, I told them exactly what happened, they asked me a few questions, and then told me I was free to go."

"Did they ask you about your relationship with Tom Peyton?"

"No." I grimaced. "And I didn't volunteer the fact that we'd had an argument earlier that day. It wasn't—I was still in shock. And I truly thought Tom had committed suicide. I wasn't sure..."

I wasn't sure what Astrid had said to him. I knew that Tom's position in the company meant everything to him. And I had basically told Astrid it was me or Tom. Hoping, assuming, she'd of course keep the more valuable employee: Tom.

I said, “It wasn’t a deliberate omission. I knew he wouldn’t have killed himself over an argument with me. It just...didn’t occur to me. Which, I know, sounds lame.”

“Yeah, it does,” she agreed. “But you didn’t know you were auditioning for *Dateline* back then.”

There was the truth.

“Obviously, they should have searched me. They should have questioned me thoroughly. They should have tested me for gunshot residue. But they didn’t have any more experience with murder than I did. There hadn’t been an actual homicide in Little Copenhagen for more than thirty years. And also, I’m sure that first night I got a pass just by virtue of being a Bredahl.”

“Oh, hell yeah.”

I was starting to like Matilda a lot.

The waitress arrived with our lunches.

She set my soup in front of me. “How are you, Casper?”

I looked up in surprise. “Okay, thanks.”

“I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Older and wiser,” I said.

“Crackers?”

“By now? Yes.”

She laughed, asked us if we needed anything else, and moved to the next booth.

I said to Matilda, “I’m sure if we all had it to do over, they’d have dragged me down to the station and I’d have begged them to test my hands and clothes and anything else they could think of.”

She tilted her head, studied me, said, “You failed the polygraph.”

I sucked in a breath, nodded. “Yes.” I briefly met her gaze, turned my attention to the beautiful intricate paper stars hanging from the ceiling. This time of year, those wood and paper Scandinavian stars were all over town, hanging from the eaves of buildings and street lamps, often illuminated from within, so as to cast complex patterns of light on the snow-covered streets.

Matilda asked gently, “Was that because you suspected your sister was involved?”

I moved my head, not really denying it, more denying wanting any part in it. I said, “The whole time I was being investigated, I truly believed everything would be okay because I was innocent. I kept talking to the cops when I should have listened to my lawyer.”

“And of course, you trusted Officer Jackson because of your personal connection.”

“Yeah. I’d have trusted him with my life.” I smiled without humor. “I did trust him with my life.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

We ate in silence for a minute or two, and then Matilda began, “The day after the murder—”

I interrupted, “The day after the murder, everything changed. By then it was obvious, the forensics made it obvious, it wasn’t a suicide. Since I had been the only other person still working in the office at that hour, it’s understandable why I’d have to be investigated. But...”

Matilda said, “But plenty of people had access to the building, including your sister, who had also been working late.”

“Astrid, Rhoda. Our shipping manager, Vinnie. Malcolm, Brigid in accounting, Bente—all the managers. We all put in plenty of overtime and we all had twenty-four-hour access to the building.”

Matilda put down her grilled cheese. “You know, honestly, even if your case had gone to trial, it’s hard to believe you’d have been found guilty. The case was entirely circumstantial.”

My lawyer had shared the same opinion. In fact, I suspected he was a little disappointed we hadn’t gone to trial.

I said, “The thing is, when Raleigh finally heard my phone message, he took it as me

in a panic because I'd shot Tom. He knew Tom and I didn't have the best working relationship, knew we'd argued, and somehow, he was convinced I'd committed murder."

I still couldn't understand how he'd made that leap. I didn't even hunt anymore. Hadn't hunted since my teens because as much as I liked the chase and the challenge, I couldn't stand the idea of scaring and then killing some inoffensive creature.

"You were brought in for questioning, they confiscated your phone, the clothes you'd been wearing, you were fingerprinted, tested for GSR, they took your DNA—they did everything they should have done the night before."

"Yes."

"Freaking unbelievable."

"I thought so."

"And then to compound it all, when you were finally arrested, you weren't able to get bail because you were deemed a flight risk."

That was still a point of grievance, but I tried to be objective. "Partly. But also, the charge was first degree homicide. I think there was a real effort to avoid the appearance of privilege or favoritism."

Which, ordinarily, I would have approved of.

"Right." She sipped her cocoa. "Are you planning to sue the police department?"

"My attorney brought up the possibility. But after my recent experience, I don't have a lot of faith in our so-called justice system. Not NCPD nor our local courts."



“Ouch,” she murmured, and made a note on her yellow legal pad.

“In fact, I’m pretty much done with Little Copenhagen. I plan on moving out of state as soon as I wind up things here.”

Matilda gasped. She looked genuinely horrified. “You’re closing Bredahl Cookies and Cakes?”

Of course I wasn’t. I hadn’t even considered moving away until a minute ago. It was just, I don’t know, a childish impulse fueled by hurt and anger. I had been wronged and I wanted someone to be punished for it. And for me, in that moment, punishment amounted to saying some stupid things that would shock and worry people. Probably not the people I most wanted to shock and worry, but I’d take what I could get.

I said quickly, “No. Absolutely not. We’re going to find the right buyer who’ll care about our people and our products as much as we do.”

I mean, it was mostly wishful thinking. I couldn’t really picture it.

Neither could Matilda. “But Bredahl is a family-owned business. You’re still using your best recipes. You make everything from scratch. You take three days to make the kringles. What corporation would carry on those traditions?”

She was right, which was irritating.

“I didn’t say we’d sell to the highest bidder. I said, we’d find the right company that holds the same values we do.”

Sugar and spice without the murder and mayhem.

“You’re breaking my heart,” she said, and she did not appear to be exaggerating.

“And a lot of other people’s hearts, when they read this.”

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“Don’t print it then,” I said wearily. “Maybe I’ll change my mind.”

She shook her head, said sadly, “You just ruined my day.”

I was a little exasperated, but also, I felt bad for ruining her day. “Matilda, come on. What kind of hardened journalist gets tearful over a bakery being sold?”

She wasn’t having any of it. “You know, Bredahl’s is the lifeblood of this town. My aunties work in the bakery. My brother drives one of the delivery trucks. My ex used to bring me pecan custard coffee every Saturday morning.”

“Jeez. I wish I’d kept my mouth shut.”

“We have to know sooner or later,” she said sadly.

I’d have preferred later, when I didn’t have to see her cry.

Not that she was crying. She was misty, yes, but not in actual downpour mode.

I said, “Nothing stays the same. That’s the bad news. Also, the good news.”

“Yeah.” She sniffed, pulled herself together. “I understand why you’re bitter. It’s just...”

That this seemed unfairly brutal? Join the club, lovey.

She sat up straight, looked me in the eyes. “I think that’s all the questions I had. Is

there anything else people should know about everything you've been through? Do you have any questions for me?"

I stared at her and said, "I want to know what happened to my dog."

I was on my way to meet Dax for dinner and drinks when Malcolm showed up on my doorstep. His hair was tufted up like he'd run across the garden. His handsome face was flushed an alarming shade of red velvet cake. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen him look quite so angry or shocked.

"I just got a call from Dave Nazaretyan." He sounded out of breath, so maybe he had sprinted down from the Big House.

"I don't know who that is."

"He's the managing editor of the Copenhagen Herald."

"Ah." Here we go. I braced for impact.

"He wanted to verify a couple of facts ahead of Sunday's publication. Apparently, you gave an interview to a cub reporter named Matilda Seger and told her you planned on selling the company?"

Cub reporter. Maybe that explained the ears.

"I was thinking out loud."

Malcolm demanded, "Then it's true? You're thinking of selling?"

I hesitated. "It's one of a number of possibilities." I shrugged. "Along with suing the police department."

My intention was to convey that it was just one of a number of vague and probably unlikely scenarios. Malcolm didn't take it that way. Or maybe he did. But either way, he went as white as he had been red.

"Are you out of your mind?" he shouted. He'd never shouted at me in my entire life.

Honestly, I was a little taken aback by his reaction. Unlike Astrid, for Malcolm, Bredahl was just a job. He was a good sales manager, maybe a great one, but he didn't live for his work, he didn't live to deliver the best cakes and cookies Wisconsin had to offer to the world. If I sold the company, Malcolm would almost certainly keep his position. Even if he was let go, I knew for a fact he'd be looking at a terrific severance package and a very comfortable retirement. Malcolm didn't have anything to worry about.

"I'm considering all the options. I don't think I'm cut out to run the company—"

"I told you, I will—"

I said, "Malcolm, I don't think you're cut out to run the company either."

His jaw dropped.

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“You’re a great sales manager. No question. But the position of director requires a separate set of skills.”

I didn’t think he could get angrier, but that did it. “You’re going to tell me I’m unqualified to run the company?”

Astrid had not thought Malcolm was cut out to be director. In fact, such a possibility had never crossed her mind. I was surprised it had crossed Malcolm’s. If he was honest with himself, I was pretty sure he wouldn’t even want the job.

I said, “It’s not an either-or situation. We could bring on someone else as director. That’s one possibility. That’s all that’s going on here. I’m looking at possibilities.”

In fairness, that’s not how I’d made it sound to Matilda. At lunch I’d made it sound like I planned on selling. But confronted with the reality of Malcolm and what he represented, the understanding that I was toying with other people’s lives and livelihoods, had a sobering effect.

He burst out, “You have no right!”

That was pure emotion talking because he knew perfectly well that I had every right.

But I could see that behind the anger was fear—and maybe that wasn’t unreasonable because he knew that I was emotionally shaky and liable to do something we all regretted. It was just surprising to me that he was so concerned about, well, other people. Our employees. I guess I’d always underestimated him.

I said, trying to reassure, “When the holidays are over, we’ll hold an upper management meeting and everyone can have their say. I’m not trying to ruin anyone’s life. I’m just trying to figure out what I want the rest of mine to look like.”

He wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his coat, drew a long, long breath and let it out slowly. “All right. I understand. But most people will not. You did something incredibly foolish by talking to that reporter. It’s not going to be long before word is out that you’re considering selling Bredahl’s. No one’s going to think that’s anything but terrible news.”

“It’s not—”

He spoke over me. “Not everyone believes you’re innocent, Casper. A lot of people think you got away with murder. And now you’re talking openly about taking away their jobs.” He shook his head. “If something happens, you’ve only yourself to blame.”

## Chapter Six

I slid into what had once been our regular booth at Cutter’s Mill Bar and Grill, and Dax said, “If I was a betting man, I’d have said you weren’t going to show tonight.”

“You are a betting man.”

He grinned. “True. To think I could have made a killing!” He studied me for a moment. “You look a lot better than you did yesterday.”

“I got a haircut.”

“I heard.” Dax’s mother owned The Mane Attraction, Little Copenhagen’s only hair salon and barber shop, which meant, among other things, that Dax had always been

an inexhaustible source of gossip, rumor, and innuendo. He waved the waitress over. “Lemon drop martini?” He asked me.

I assented.

Had it always been this crowded in here on a Friday night? This noisy? This bright? It was seven o’clock and everyone was already half-lit.

The waitress stepped away, and Dax folded his arms on the table, regarding me. “What have you been up to today?”

“That question feels pointed.”

He grimaced in acknowledgement. “Word on the street is you’re planning to sell Bredahl’s.”

I was a little surprised—dismayed, in fact.

“That’s...”

“Not true, I hope.”

“Spreading a lot faster than expected.”

Dax shook his head. “Jesus, Caz. You’re not seriously planning to sell?”

“It’s one of many options. That’s all. I don’t have any plans as of yet.”

“You know that’s not what Astrid would have wanted.”



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What the hell did he care? He didn't work at Bredahl. And he was a fanatic about avoiding refined sugar and carbs—unless served in the form of alcohol.

I said shortly, "Astrid made sure she didn't get a vote, didn't she?"

He glared. "That's a shitty thing to say."

The waitress, apparently set to turbo speed, arrived with our drinks. We waited in simmering silence for them to be set before us.

The minute she was out of earshot, Dax said, "You know why she did it."

"I don't know why she did any of it. And neither do you."

"That, she did for you. That was for you. Because she loved you more than anything on the fucking planet."

Then why did she let me rot in jail for eleven months?

I didn't say it. I was never going to say it. I hated that I even thought it.

A tangy-sweet swallow of lemon drop eased the tightness in my throat. I knew Astrid had been like a big sister to Dax. He had to be shocked and confused, too. Even so, he seemed uncharacteristically worked up about this, especially given that Dax rarely got worked up about anything or anyone.

We sipped our drinks, listened to the music. The Kinks "You Really Got Me" gave

way to a holiday favorite.

“How’s George?” Dax asked suddenly.

It’s the hap-happiest season of all...

“You’ll be pleased to know he agrees with you about selling the business.”

He muttered something under his breath.

“What?”

He shook his head, then, to my surprise, companionably bumped his knee against mine. “Sorry. I’m glad you came tonight. I’ve missed you.”

“Same.”

His dark gaze held mine. “I really would have come to see you if...”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay if you think I ever believed you could have topped that micromanaging bully.”

I tossed back the rest of my cocktail. Dax blinked. “Whoa, cowboy. Slow down there.”

I drawled, “I’m the Lemon Drop Kid, remember? The slingiest gunslinger this side of the Lake Montesian.”

Dax’s brows shot up. He glanced around for the waitress. “We should probably order

food before you're completely wasted."

"I'm fine." Actually, completely wasted sounded pretty good to me in that moment. Not thinking, not feeling, not worrying about anything sounded exactly like what the doctor ordered.

The nurse—er, waitress—arrived and Dax ordered another round.

When we were alone again, he said, "Did you know Raleigh's started looking into Astrid's death?"

The words seemed to echo down a long tunnel.

I raised my head, stared at him. "The case is closed."

Dax shrugged.

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“Why would he?”

“Maybe he thinks there’s something not right.”

My heart started that familiar panicky pound. “Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do,” I said hotly. “He’s still trying to prove that I’m guilty and Astrid only took the blame to sa—”

To my astonishment, Dax half-rose, leaning across the table and speaking loudly into my face. “Shut up, Casper.”

I shut up, blinking up at him. Dax sat back down. He met my eyes, shook his head. “Like people aren’t stupid enough? You have to plant ideas in their brains? Get a fucking grip on yourself.”

I clenched my jaw. Stared at the booths and tables full of laughing talking people who looked away the minute they met my eyes. Not that I was trying to catch anyone’s gaze. One of the things I’d learned during my incarceration was to keep my head down. Both literally and figuratively.

Anyway, what did I care what any of these assholes thought or said?

These were the same people who had been here eleven months ago and would probably be here eleven months from now—elevenyearsfrom now. Not me. I needed

to get out of this place. I needed to break free. Start over. I deserved to be happy and I could never be happy here again. Not now. Not with these people. Not with these memories.

Dax was still staring at me. He said abruptly, “Do you honestly think he wanted you to be guilty?”

I knew which he was still talking about.

I said, “I think he didn’t care so long as he got his promotion.”

Dax’s dark eyes went wide. “Dudley Do-Right? You think he threw you to the wolves because he was bucking for promotion?”

I said nothing. Bitterness superglued my throat shut.

“I’m genuinely shocked.” Dax sounded more thoughtful than shocked.

I curled my lip.

“Seriously.”

I stared down at my drink. If I did stay at Bredahl, I was going to talk to Carl, our master baker, about creating a lemon drop cupcake. Maybe we could use real limoncello in the recipe for an extra zing.

“I mean, you guys were good together,” Dax was saying. “Really good. With your dogs and your camping trips and that whole National Geographic LL Bean thing you had going on.”

I took another swallow of my drink.

“Honestly, I was a little jealous.”

I said scornfully, “The hell you were.”

“I’m serious. You guys were cute.”

Yeah, the well-known ingredient to lasting relationships: cuteness.

“And you, you practically had stars in your eyes when you looked at him.”

I really didn’t want to hear this.

But Dax kept yakking away. “And the way he looked at you. Like that block of ice in his chest melted every time you walked into the room. He could barely keep his suspenders up.”

I almost laughed. Needless to say, Raleigh did not wear suspenders.

“The way he teased you. Like you were adorable. I kid you not. I was so fucking jealous. He adored you. In his buttoned-down-knotted-up-a-boy-scout-has-but-one-life-to-give way.”

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I laughed shakily. Not because I believed him. But Dax could always make me laugh.

Dax wasn't laughing though. He looked troubled. "He really did care for you, Caz."

"Not enough. Clearly."

Dax seemed to think it over. "What do you think he should have done? Just out of curiosity. Made a run for the border with you? The Jacksons have been chasing bad guys as long as the Bredahls have been baking cookies. You know that. Cop is in his DNA."

"He's not a very good one if he thinks I could commit murder."

"I didn't say he was a good one. Clearly, he's a fucking terrible one."

I gave another of those wobbly laughs.

Dax said earnestly, "I know you hate him. Or think you do. I know you don't want to hear it. I guess I'd feel the same. But from what I saw, he's been in hell every day since you were arrested—and probably worse hell since he found out you were innocent."

"Sure. I hope so."

The waitress returned with the second round of cocktails and Dax requested menus. As I watched him, I realized Dax had done a lot of growing up while I'd been away. He seemed older, tougher, possibly wiser. At least about drinking on an empty

stomach.

“We don’t need to talk about me anymore,” I said after the menus were delivered.

“What’s new with you?”

“Same old, same old,” he said vaguely.

That described the menu, for sure, but it was hard to believe Dax had nothing to report after eleven months.

“Are you still working at MPH Motors?”

“Yeah.”

I put my menu down. “Are you now in the Secret Intelligence Division or can you share a few details?”

He laughed, made a face. “I got promoted to sales manager two months ago.”

“That’s great!” Which it was, and I was glad for Dax, but I felt a tiny pang at yet another reminder that life had gone on for him, for everyone but me. I had basically spent eleven months in suspended animation. “Congratulations.”

He nodded.

“Are you seeing anyone?”

His gaze dropped. “No.”

“No?”



Dax was always,alwaysseeing several someones. “No one? Nobody?”

He gave a brief shake of his head.

“There must be one or two girls in this town you haven’t dated yet.”

“I’m taking a break,” he said grimly.

“That reporter I talked to today was a cutie. Probably too smart for you, but...” I realized he wasn’t smiling, wasn’t amused, and I let it go. “What else is new? New car?”

He let out a breath, grinned. “Yes.”

“I figured.”

He said seriously, “Speaking of which, you should think about trading in that Range Rover of yours. Those babies depreciate fast. Like fifty-six-percent within five years. You’ve had it for six.”

I shrugged.

“Maybe something electric?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I think a Tesla would match your eyes perfectly.”

I made a sound of derision. “I’m not a Tesla kind of guy.”

I glanced at him, glanced again. “Something wrong?”

He was staring straight past me. “Speak of the devil.”

“Which devil?” My stomach was already tying itself into knots.

Dax said, ventriloquist-style, “Raleigh.”

The room started to shrink, my breathing turned fast and shallow, my hands got trembly. What the hell? Was I going to have a goddamned anxiety attack because Raleigh walked into the room? What was wrong with me?

“Who’s he with?” I jerked out.

“Raleigh? Nobody. He’s not—” Dax looked at me. His expression changed. “Are you okay?”

“Of course!”

“Uh... Yeah. You look like someone asked you to dissect a frog.”

I tried to laugh, but the sound was strange.

Dax considered, asked, “Are you freaked out because Raleigh’s here or because you’re afraid he’s seeing someone?”

“Neither,” I said fiercely. “I could care less.”

“If you could careless, that means you do care—” Dax’s expression rearranged itself once more. “Okay, buck up, buckaroo. He saw you. He’s coming over.”

Just like that—like someone had dumped cold water over my head—I was okay again. Well, no. Sick with stress, shaky with adrenaline, but all stations ready.

Dax was gazing past my shoulder, smiling with broad fake sincerity. “Hey. Detective Jackson.”

I didn’t turn. Didn’t look up. I kept staring straight ahead, memorizing the tiny yellow-blue print on Dax’s black shirt. What did they call those amoeba shapes? Paisley.

Raleigh stopped beside our table. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the little clear buttons at the bottom of his white shirt, the edge of his brown twill blazer, his belt buckle and the attached blue and gold badge, the outline of his holster.

He said, “Dax. Caz.”

“Haven’t seen you in here for a while,” Dax said.

That was for my benefit. To assure me Raleigh had not been hanging out in bars living the good life while I'd been in lockup.

I watched the slow, regular fall of Raleigh's crisp white shirt—no more uniforms for him. He was plainclothes now. A real live detective. He'd wanted it so much for so long. And now he had it. Everything he ever wanted.

I could feel his indecision as he stood there. Once again trying to be the adult in the room.

The problem with hate is it's a very unsatisfying emotion. Anger is great. Anger gives you energy and drive and direction. But hatred is empty, bottomless. Sure, it can give energy, drive, focus, but it always leads to a standstill. Nothing you do appeases it. Nothing is enough to stop it, soothe it, quiet it. It's there eating at you all the time, like an idling engine draining you dry.

As much as I didn't want to recall anything, I couldn't help knowing so many stupid little things about him: how much he loved iced cinnamon rolls and dogs and the smell of pine trees. I couldn't help remembering that he was the first guy—first anybody—who bought me flowers for Valentine's Day and how deep his laugh sounded when my head was resting on his chest. All those useless pointless bits of knowledge: that he sang in the shower, was allergic to red wine, had a scar on the back of his calf where a German Shepherd bit him his first week on patrol. The way he used to wrap his arms around me from behind or kiss the back of my neck. The way his eyes used to get glittery with emotion when we made—when we fucked.

None of that was helpful. None of that comforted me.

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“Caz, could we talk for a minute?” Raleigh sounded so normal. Like it was a reasonable thing to ask.

The horrifying part was that I wanted to. I wanted to get up and go with him. I wanted him to tell me something that would allow me to make sense of what had happened, that would show me a way to forgive him.

I picked up my drink, said to Dax, “Gosh, it’s so noisy in here I can hardly hear myself drink.” I sipped my lemon drop.

Raleigh didn’t say anything. The moment stretched. He continued to stand there beside our table. Dax and I continued to drink. Then, at last, he moved away.

I did not let myself look at where he went. I felt physically ill. Like I was the one who had done something unfair, unjustified.

Dax murmured, “Jesus. That was brutal. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“You learn so much in stir.”

After a moment he said, “Okay, but it was county jail, right?”

I tried to match his tone, meet the moment. I said airily, “Same-same.”

Dax giggled.

Now that was a sound I hadn’t heard in a very long time. It made me smile, though

my heart still felt like a lead weight in my chest.

Dax and I continued to talk. I don't think it was about anything important. We had dinner eventually. I don't remember what I ate. It wasn't much. There wasn't room in my belly with all that churning bile. I didn't look for Raleigh. I didn't even know if he stayed beyond grabbing a quick beer. I never so much as glanced around the room.

Dax and I had a final drink—Mexican-style coffee, I think—and then I left.

Dax told me he was staying for another drink. It crossed my mind he might have been planning to meet someone.

I walked out alone, the wooden doors swinging shut on the noise of the restaurant. After the cocoon-like warmth, the night was shockingly cold. And quiet. The scrape of my boots on the frosty pavement, the buzz of a power transformer overhead, were the only sounds as I walked around the building to the parking lot. There were still plenty of cars in the lot, sharp angles and precise details blanketed in glittering frost. I didn't look to see if an LCPD SUV was parked in the rows of moonlit vehicles. It took a couple of tugs to unstick the driver's side door of the Range Rover. I yanked it open, slid into the what felt like a refrigerator, and sat for a few minutes letting the windows defrost, listening to a song on the CD player.

The song that had been playing the night I was arrested.

“Little Moments” by John Coggins.

In a moment everything changes.

Yeah, not exactly an original thought, and yet my throat closed up, my eyes flooded. Jesus, not this again. What the hell had happened to me that I couldn't face Raleigh without nearly having a panic attack or hear a sentimental song without

wanting to cry my heart out?

This wasn't me. This wasn't who I had been. Why couldn't I be that guy again? Why was I stuck in this sad, bitter, vindictive shell of man?

I got control, turned off the player, and turned the key in the ignition. The Range Rover grumbled into life. I carefully reversed out of my parking slot, pulled out of the parking lot.

The streets were mostly clear but icy in patches. After I left town limits, the roads were empty and a lot slicker. It hadn't snowed for the last couple of days, but the constant cycle of snow melting during the day and refreezing at night made for tricky driving conditions. I drove at a sensible and sedate speed. I wasn't smashed—I'd given up on that idea after Raleigh had walked into the restaurant—but I was probably over the legal limit, and getting pulled over was now very high on my list of things to avoid.

It was only about a thirty-minute drive from Little Copenhagen. The highway was dark and empty, snowy fields glimmering to either side. Overhead, the night sky was crystal clear and dazzling with stars. I loved driving at night. Sometimes Raleigh and I would—

Hey, think about something useful for a change.

Easier said than done, because I was thinking of Freyja as I drove past Hiraeth Hollow.

Nothing helpful. That goes without saying. She had to have been hit by a car or fallen through the ice. Maybe a farmer had shot her. Something terrible had to have happened. She'd never run away for more than a few hours—and that was usually because she lost her way.

She would have been lonely without Astrid at the house.

Even so.

She wouldn't know what to do except come home. She wasn't Call of the Wildbreed.

So yes, I was watching the side of the road, keeping an eye out for her. The Rover's headlights cut a path across the snow and black shadows. The highway ahead endlessly unrolled beneath the starlit sky. I was going a good clip. The odometer ticking toward seventy. The hum of the engine was a reassuring soundtrack to the solitude of the late-hour void.



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The bang came out nowhere, a sound so violently out of place it felt faraway, unreal. It was real, though. The steering wheel jumped in my hands, the Rover lurched, yanking hard to the left, as if the vehicle had suddenly come to life.

“Shit.”

I grabbed the wheel, adrenaline surging through my veins as I fought that furious opposing force. The instinct was to hit the brakes, but I knew that was wrong. Even reducing speed too quickly would be a mistake, but we were going fast and I could feel the Rover starting to skid on black ice.

Flap-Flap-Flap-Flap-Flap

I knew what that sound was. Rubber slapping asphalt. A blow-out. Because, of course. That’s what this godforsaken night needed... The front left of the vehicle dipped sharply. I just focused on easing my foot off the gas, on keeping control of the wheel which continued to tug at my grip like it was alive and fighting me.

The world narrowed to a tunnel of focus, peripheral vision fading away as I put everything I had into staying on the road, into not sliding off into a ditch or spinning into that towering wall of trees.

We were slowing.

Slowing.

Slower.

Slow.

Flap-Flap-Flap-Flap-Flap

Somehow, I managed to wrestle the car to the roadside where we bumped hard over the snow and rocks, the damaged tire rim grating against the ground. The front of the car sank into snow, rocked to a hard stop. The engine was still cheerily humming like all in a night's work!

I reached out, automatically turned off the engine. I pulled the parking brake, turned on the emergency lights, then sat motionless, heart till pounding, listening to the silence echoing from the woods a few yards beyond.

What the hell now?

The highway ahead of me melted into blackness. This was not a busy road during the day, let alone at night.

Did I try to change the tire or start walking? Did I even have a working spare?

Was there any point in trying to call for roadside assistance at this time of night? It would probably take them as long to arrive as it would me to hike home.

Uneasily, I looked over at the towering black wall of sentinel pines. A crawly feeling prickled at the back of my neck. A feeling I had learned not to ignore over the past eleven months.

But I was in the middle of nowhere. No one was watching me. There was no looming threat.

Yet I continued to sit motionless, watching the trees, waiting for...

Brightness in my rearview mirror as it turned out.

My eyes jerked up to watch the swift gliding approach of headlights. Even as I tried to process whether this was somehow a threat or unexpected help, the berries and cherries—emergency lights on a cop car—flashed on.

“Are you kidding me?” I demanded of no one.

The SUV pulled right up behind me, headlights flooding through my rear window, and I sat rigid and silent and waiting. My heart was thrumming in my ears.

I knew it was Raleigh.

Knew before the driver’s side door opened and he got out, a tall silhouette in the moonlight, walking toward me.

## Chapter Seven

He’s not going to arrest you.

He’s not... He’s not a monster.

He won’t do that to you.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 3:41 am*

But yeah, of course he would. Because he was a monster. The “could-not-love-thee-dear-so-much-lov’d-I-not-honour-more” breed of monster.

I waited, heart in my throat, as he reached my window. After a moment, he tapped lightly on the glass.

I tried to roll down the window but, of course, the engine was off. Beyond frazzled, I turned on the engine, rolled down the window, turned off the engine, stammered, “I-I had a blowout.”

He said without emotion, “I know. I saw. Are you okay?”

You’d think after that whole performance with the window he’d have... I don’t know. But I think it was just...the last straw. The strain of not knowing what was going to happen next. Emotional overload. I just couldn’t take one single fucking thing more. But more was coming. And would keep coming. And I just... couldn’t.

I turned away, pressed my hands against my face and took a couple of hard, shuddering breaths as I fought to get control.

Which had to look pretty suspicious from where Raleigh was standing.

After a second or two, he said in a different voice, “Caz?”

It was his late-at-night voice. Quiet and gentle. When it was just us lying together, warm and content, knowing in a few hours we would be up and moving, each of us going about our day—knowing that at day’s end we would be together again. Once

upon a time when the world used to make sense.

I dug my fingers as hard as I could into my face, so hard I had to be leaving indents, and the pain helped me pull myself together. I let out a shuddering breath, turned back to him.

“Yeah. Yep.” The tightest, tersest of words.

“Is your spare—”

“I don’t know.”

“You want me to drive you home?” So gentle. So understanding.

A humiliating sound tore out of my throat. “Could you...just...not...” I begged.

There was a moment of shocked silence.

But then he said, steady and calm as ever, “Let me drive you home.”

I didn’t move. He tried the door handle. The door was still locked. I scrambled to open the door—and my seatbelt yanked me back into place. I swore, fumbled with the seatbelt clasp, and Raleigh, apparently thinking I needed help, drew off his gloves and also reached for the seatbelt buckle. Our hands groped...fingers, palms...and for an instant we held each other tight. Gripped each other with all our strength, like each of us was hanging over a cliff and our only lifeline was the other, like we would never let go.

I knew his hands so well. The texture of his skin, the shape of his fingers. How could you know someone so well and not know them at all?

We both let go. I sat back in my seat. “No. It’s okay. I already called the Auto Club.”

“No.” No doubt there. “You didn’t have time.”

I stared heavenward, howled, “Haven’t you done enough to me?”

He reared back a little. I couldn’t see his face because my eyes blurred, but I could make out his bulky outline. After a hesitation, I felt him lean in. His breath was warm against my face.

“Caz, I swear to God, I’m not g-going to hurt you. I won’t ever—I won’t even try to talk to you tonight. Let me see you safely home. That’s all. I promise.”

He had to think I was a complete lunatic by that point. I sure did. I hastily wiped my eyes, nodded. Couldn’t trust my voice.

Couldn’t even look at him as I climbed unsteadily out of the Ranger Rover.

He startled me, by taking my arm. Not in a police custody way, but cautiously, carefully, like he was trying to help a disintegrating scarecrow across a dangerous intersection.

I felt a little like a disintegrating scarecrow.

It was slippery on the hard-packed snow, no lie. Raleigh helped me into his SUV, leaning over to buckle me in as if I was too helpless to do it myself. He was saying quietly, reassuringly, “You don’t know it, but you’re in shock. That was a close call. I thought for sure you were going to lose control and flip over.”

It had happened so fast. My memories were confused. I had reacted totally on instinct and there hadn’t been time to think, let alone notice details beyond the fact that I was

flying towards the trees. An unpredictable few seconds, for sure.

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I said automatically, “I didn’t bother to check the tires.” The vehicles were always maintained. It hadn’t even occurred to me to do more than see that there was gas in the tank.

Raleigh reached in past me, turned the heater vents in my direction, and slammed the passenger door shut. Dully, I watched him return to the Range Rover. Watched him go through the front seat. I listened to the police radio chatter, tried to reassure myself he wasn’t searching for something incriminating.

He came back with my wallet, keys, sunglasses, and scarf, bundling them into my lap.

I cleared my throat. “Thanks.”

“Mm-hm.” He started the engine, putting his hand on the back of my seat as he half turned, watching as we reversed back onto the road. I could hear his wristwatch ticking. There wasn’t a car coming in either direction for as far as the eye could see.

“I’ll say one thing, that was good driving,” he observed.

I nodded. Not because I agreed. I had no idea if it had been good driving or not. But because I was trying to make an effort to behave normally. When you have your pride, you have everything. Or something.

To my relief, Raleigh didn’t say anything else on the drive back to the Gingerbread House.



He parked in his old place behind the cottage, turned off the engine, and came around to open the door for me.

By then, I was thinking he was probably right about it having been a close call. I could feel the burn on my chest where the shoulder harness had grabbed hard. My neck and shoulders were stiff, too.

“I’m going to make sure you get inside safely.” he said.

Did he think I was so rattled I couldn’t find my way across a couple of yards of patchy snow? Probably.

The were howling mournfully in their kennel.

“What the hell is that?” Raleigh asked.

“The Gang of Four. Malcolm is keeping them in the kennel now.”

“Why?”

“He says they remind him too much of Astrid.”

I shared his silent disapproval.

The porch light shone cozily as we came up the flagstone walk.

As we walked through the gate, I thought of all the other times we’d passed through that little gate: the nights we couldn’t get to the front door fast enough; the days we lugged in groceries, half-falling over Freyja and Loki, laughing, we were always laughing back then; coming home from the movies, from dinner out, from dining at the Big House. All those happy times. I’d thought that was how the rest of my life

was going to go.

Raleigh had all but moved in by then. After Tom was killed, he couldn't haul his stuff out of there fast enough.

My keys were ready so I could get through the door as quickly and painlessly as possible.

And that's how it went.

Key in, turn lock, open door. Mission accomplished. I turned to say goodnight and saw Raleigh's expression in the porchlight.

I wished I hadn't. I didn't want to know. He didn't have a right to look like that. Stoic and wrecked all at the same time.

Anything he felt, he'd brought on himself.

"You were following me, weren't you?" I could hear the harsh suspicion in my voice.

"Yes." He met my gaze, didn't hesitate.

"Why?"

"I need to talk to you."

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“There’s nothing left to say. There’s nothing you could say that I want to hear.”

That should have been clear enough, but seemed to have the opposite effect of opening the floodgates.

He stepped forward, earnest and pleading. “Caz, I’d do anything if I could take it all back. If I’d known then what I know now—what it was going to do to you. How hard it would be for you. I’d have deleted your message the second I heard it. I wouldn’t have asked you a single goddamned question. Even if you had been guilty. But I can’t undo it. I can’t...think of anything except to tell you how sorry I am. How much I regret it. How much I missed you, still miss you, will always miss you. Will always love you.”

In the face of that raw pain, unchecked emotion, something cracked open inside me, too.

I launched forward, slammed both fists into his chest, cried, “Why did you do that? How could you? Why couldn’t you believe me? Trust me? You say you love me, but you don’t even know me. You never did.”

Raleigh gripped my forearms. Not hurting me. Not pushing me away. Holding me against him.

“Honest to God, I don’t know. I used to think sometimes it was so good, so perfect between us that it couldn’t be real. I’ve gone over it again and again. I feel like I must have been crazy.” I could see he was struggling it. “Maybe partly it’s because, being a cop, you see things, find out things that change how you see everyone. You find out

a neighbor knocks his wife around or the pastor is cheating on his wife or the kindergarten teacher stole the candy drive money—or tried to hire someone to kill her husband.

Yeah, all of those things had actually happened in our little town. Except the kindergarten teacher. She didn't steal the candy drive money.

"It changes you," Raleigh admitted. "It changes your understanding of people. Your understanding of the world. It teaches you to look for the bad in everyone. You expect to find out the worst."

"I'm not everyone! I wasn't your neighbor or your pastor or-or—" I was crying so hard I was swallowing tears, could hardly get the breath for words. "It was me you thought those things about. That I would kill someone because I didn't like him? Because he was a pain in the ass, I planned to murder him?"

"I never believed it was premeditated."

"Well, it would have had to have been, since I would have had to have purchased the gun ahead of time."

"The gun was never connected to you."

I thumped his chest again. Hard. "Kind of my point!"

He cradled my hands in his. "But Caz, Peyton was such a dick, and he was on your ass all the time, going straight to Astrid any time he felt you were challenging him, questioning him, not showing him the proper deference. He fought your being made assistant VP. You hated him."

"I didn't hate him."

“It sure seemed like it. It sure sounded like it. You talked about how much you wanted him gone, how much better off the company would be.”

How much better off we’d all have been. Because of Astrid’s stupid affair with the least likely guy on the planet—a guy who worked for the company, who was her subordinate. Even so, I’d never said I wanted to kill him.

Raleigh, in that heartwarming way of his, was still building his case against me. “You were young—”

“I was thirty.”

“You only turned thirty last month. Either way you were...a little sheltered.”

“No need to tiptoe. You thought I was immature.”

“You were sheltered, that’s what I’m saying. You were...used to getting your way. You were used to having what you wanted whenever you wanted it. And you didn’t just not like Peyton, you loathed him.”

I made a sound that was supposed to be a laugh. “Right. I was immature, spoiled, and pampered and so I thought I could get away with murder?”

Raleigh’s expression was pained and guilty. “You’re asking me to come up with a logical explanation—”

“No.” I shook my head, pulled away from him. “No. I’m not. I’m the one who said there was nothing left to say, and this is why. The more you try to explain it, the worse it is.”

He didn’t say a word.

“Just go,” I said wearily. “Get the fuck out.”

“Okay.” He nodded but didn’t move. “This isn’t actually what I wanted to talk to you about, though.”

I think my jaw dropped. “Huh?”

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To my astonishment, he stepped all the way inside and closed the front door. “I’ve been looking into Astrid’s death.”

I said automatically, “The case is closed. She committed suicide.”

“Officially, it is. But in my spare time, I’ve been going over some things that I don’t think add up.”

“Like what?”

“Were you allowed to read her suicide note?”

My mouth was dry. “No.”

“I thought that might be the case. I made a copy to show you.”

“I don’t...”

He said quickly, “I know. It doesn’t have to be now. But it does have to be soon.”

“Why? Why would I have to read that?”

“Honey—” Raleigh stopped himself. “I know it’s painful. I know you don’t want to. But it’s important.”

“But why? Why would it be important?”

Raleigh hesitated. “I think there’s a possibility Astrid didn’t commit suicide.”

There was a high-pitched humming in my ears. I reached out for the arm of the sofa and sat down. Dimly, I was aware of Raleigh sitting beside me on the sofa. He put his hand on my back.

“It’s okay. This can wait until tomorrow.”

I rested my face in my hands.”

He rose, went into the kitchenette, poured a glass of water and brought it back to the sofa.

“Here you go. Take a couple of swallows.”

I lowered my hands, took the glass, took a couple of swallows. I did actually feel a little better.

Raleigh took the glass, set it on the table within reach, sat beside me again. He didn’t say anything.

I drew a couple of long, wavering breaths, said finally, “What you’re saying is, you think Astrid was murdered.”

He didn’t answer. He stroked my back.

I turned my head to stare at him. “That’s what you think, isn’t it? You’re not saying you think it was an accident.”

“No. I don’t think it was an accident. But we don’t have to go through everything tonight. Tomorrow morning—”



“Then you do think it was murder.”

He said reluctantly, “I think it was probably murder.”

“Who? Who do you think killed her?”

Raleigh looked startled, then he glanced at the front door. If that wasn’t a giveaway, I don’t know what would be.

“Malcolm?”

“I didn’t say that.”

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“You do,” I said. “You think Malcolm murdered my sister. Why would he?”

I could see he didn’t want to say it—and for good reason. “He’s the obvious—”

“Jesus. Like I was the obvious suspect? That’s your case?”

“I don’t have a case yet. That’s the problem.”

“And you’re not going to have a case because, as usual, you’re on the wrong track.”

“Now, wait a minute.” Raleigh was clearly trying to be patient. “The spouse, the significant other, has to be considered.”

“Okay. But keep in mind, Malcolm doesn’t inherit anything. The house—the estate—goes to me. Bredahl goes to me.”

“Astrid had a million-dollar life insurance policy.”

“Yes, same as Malcolm. Those policies have been in effect for fifteen years. They took them out when they married. And you know what? That million-dollar policy is a fraction of Malcolm’s shared income with Astrid. Your theory is he waited fifteen years and then cut his income by two thirds? Clearly, he’s a mastermind!”

Raleigh’s lips tightened, but he said mildly, “Okay, all that means is he didn’t kill her for the money.”

“Why did he kill her?”

Raleigh hesitated, possibly out of consideration for my sensitive feelings. “Because of her affair with Tom Peyton.”

I looked ceilingward. “So, he killed Tom too? He’s what? A serial killer now?”

Raleigh ignored that. “He was there that night. At Bredahl’s. The alarm system’s activity history showed that he left the building a little before Astrid, about ninety minutes before Peyton’s estimated time of death. But half an hour after Astrid left, someone used the universal access code to get into the administrative building. Only Astrid and leadership, including department heads, had that code.”

I was so shocked I couldn’t say anything for a moment. “When did you find that out?”

“During the initial investigation.” His gray gaze met mine and then fell.

“So, from the very beginning, you knew—youallknew—that someone else had been in the building.”

“The prevailing theory was that you went out through an unmonitored point of egress—maybe a window—”

“Went out through a window? Was I fucking Huck Finn?”

“—then used the universal code to get back in the building in order to make it look like someone else had been in the building with you and Peyton.”

“Why was that never mentioned?”

I could see he didn’t want to say it. “It would have come out in discovery.”

I opened my mouth, but then all I could do was stare at him.

“It wasn’t helping your case.” Raleigh sounded like he thought that explained everything.

“It should have. You’re telling me, knowing someone else could have been in the building, didn’t give you second thoughts about whether I was guilty?”

That seemed to get under his skin. “You think I didn’t have second thoughts? Second, third, fucking fourth thoughts? I couldn’t believe you did it. But that’s where the evidence led. I heard you confess. I thought. I thought that’s what I heard. I was afraid I would let my feelings for you blind me to the truth.”

“Instead, you let your fear of your feelings blind you to the truth.”

He blinked, said more quietly, “Yes. You’re right. That is what I did. Which is why I’m determined to get this right now. For you.”

“By taking away the last living family member I have?”

“Hon—Caz, if Malcolm killed Astrid—”

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“He didn’t. He had no reason to. He had no reason. That affair meant nothing to Astrid, and Malcolm knew it.”

I talked right over Raleigh’s attempt to speak. “First of all, the relationship ended a month earlier, which is why the idea that Astrid killed Tom is ridiculous. And why it’s even more ridiculous that Malcolm would have killed him and then waited almost a year to kill Astrid. On what fucking interplanetary soap opera does that make sense? Besides, Tom wasn’t Astrid’s first affair.”

Now that caught him off guard. His eyes went dark and wide. “What? Wait. You didn’t know Astrid was—You didn’t know about Peyton, let alone— You never said a word.”

“No. I didn’t. It wasn’t your business. It wasn’t even mine. But yes, I knew about the relationship with Tom. I knew about the others as well. They didn’t matter. It’s just how she was. She and Malcolm were a great team. She valued that partnership. The others were just... flings. Malcolm isn’t a romantic guy. He knew about the affairs. I mean, I don’t think they talked about it, I don’t think he liked it, but he knew. Astrid made sure he understood he was always going to come first.”

Raleigh was shaking his head. “I don’t buy it. Astrid wasn’t like that.”

I laughed. “Really? Why? Because she was good at business? Because she was a great sister? An upstanding member of the community? A loving wife? She was all those things. She was...she was a wonderful person. Who sometimes needed more, something besides what she had with Malcolm. I guess. I’m not saying I get it. Or that I liked it. But it’s how it was. I don’t have any reason to lie about this. Malcolm

had no motive for wanting Astrid dead. He's wandering around that house like a ghost. He can't even bear to have her dogs around. You're going to have to find someone else to blame this on." I added bitterly, "Thank God, I have an alibi this time."

I saw the wince, though he tried to stay stoic. He let out a long breath. "Okay. You're right. You know more about this than anyone else. Which is why—do you think you're up to reading the note she left?"

Sooner or later, I would have to face it. I said wearily, "Do you have it with you?"

He nodded. "I was hoping to talk to you tonight. I stopped by here, but you had already left. Malcolm said—"

"Where did you run into Malcolm?"

"He was driving out as I was driving in. He mentioned he was on his way to have dinner with friends and that you were meeting Dax at Cutter's Mill."

Had I told Malcolm I was meeting Dax? I couldn't remember.

Raleigh unzipped his jacket, reached inside, pulled out a folded sheet in a plain envelope. "This is a copy."

I took the sheet out of the envelope, unfolded it, smoothed it out and began to read.

Darling,

I know this is going to hurt you terribly. I'm so sorry. You know it's the last thing I want. But Tom's death haunts me more with each passing day. It was so stupid, so needless. I kept trying to tell myself, I had no choice, but of course I did. Tom had his

faults, but he didn't deserve to die. I should have had the courage to come forward months ago, but I was afraid. Now I'm more afraid that there will be an even greater tragedy if I don't act. I truly couldn't survive that.

I can't bear to think that I've ruined your life. You're still young. Young enough to go on and find happiness again. I hope you can forgive me for everything I've done, as well as what I'm about to do. You know I love you. Nothing changes that.

A.

I read it twice.

What in the hell had she been talking about? Not suicide, that was for sure. I could tell she'd written it quickly and that she'd been emotional. Her handwriting was usually elegant and controlled. This was spiky and tight. Something had happened, that was for sure.

Hopefully, not that last visit with me. I hadn't been in a good place. The idea of spending Christmas in jail, the realization we would soon be coming up on the one-year anniversary of my incarceration, that my trial was still months away...

No, I hadn't tried to put a brave face on things, and for that, I was always going to feel guilty.

When I had finished reading the second time, I said, "This was my get-out-of-jail-free card?"

"Combined with her suicide? It's pretty convincing."

"Is it?"

Raleigh said cautiously, “It convinced everyone who read it that you weren’t involved. Yes.”

“But you don’t believe she committed suicide.”

“No.”

Now that I’d read the letter, I was starting not to believe it either, but I wondered what had tipped off Raleigh.

He said, “This letter was supposedly left for Malcolm. Malcolm said Astrid left it folded on his pillow. His story is he took his sales team out to dinner, and that by the time he arrived home and found her, it was too late.”



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I closed my eyes. She'd taken a handful of sleeping pills, climbed into a hot bath, and gone to sleep. It wasn't impossible. She did take baths to unwind. She did take sleeping pills sometimes. Not together. Not that I knew of.

Raleigh was still talking. "But she doesn't mention suicide and she doesn't actually confess to killing Peyton. That's what everyone has inferred, but she doesn't actually say that. She says she's responsible and feels guilty. She says she thought she didn't have a choice, but I think that means keeping quiet about whatever it was she knew."

Yes. Probably.

"She's talking about not being able to survive something if she doesn't come forward," I said. I had a sick feeling I knew what that was.

"Exactly. I don't think she planned on killing herself. But you knew her better than anyone. Would Astrid have killed Peyton if he was, I don't know, blackmailing her maybe?"

"Hell, no. She'd have told him to jump in a lake and then fired him."

"Would she kill herself to get out of something painful or embarrassing?"

"No." That had always felt wrong. As wrong as the idea that she'd have killed Tom for ending their affair, although at the time that had been the only reason I could come up with. I felt obliged to add, "I don't think so. But maybe I didn't know my sister as well as I thought I did."

Raleigh studied me gravely. “I think this letter was intended for you, Caz. I think this was her promise to you that she was going to come forward with what she knew about Peyton’s death. I think she was asking you to forgive her for waiting so long to tell the truth.”

I said slowly, “I don’t think she did know at first.”

Raleigh’s brows drew together. “Why do you say that?”

“Because she wouldn’t have left me there.”

I felt like I’d been trapped beneath a bombed-out building, but now the stones and rubble and timbers had been lifted off me. I felt like I could see again. Like I could breathe again.

She’d suspected something. But it had taken her some time to figure it out—whatever realization it was that had changed everything—but once she knew, she had resolved to come forward.

Raleigh was silent, skimming over the letter, though he probably had it memorized by now.

I stared at his profile, said a little mockingly, “Didn’t anyone believe you when you tried to tell them it wasn’t a confession?”

He glanced at me, glanced away. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

“You didn’t?”

“I haven’t shared this theory with anyone but you.”

After a moment, I asked, “Why?”

His throat moved as he swallowed. “Because it was the fastest way to get you out of jail. The charges had to be dropped. I c-couldn’t risk you maybe having to wait through months of a new investigation, maybe months of another trial, assuming the investigation even got us that far. What if we couldn’t get another trial? What if there wasn’t enough evidence to clear you?” He shook his head. “No. I threw in one thousand percent behind the confession theory.”

My breath huffed out in a little gulp.

He turned to me, said earnestly, “Caz, I know you can’t forgive me. I don’t blame you. I don’t know that I deserve forgiving. But I do love you. And I’ll do whatever I can to make it up to you.”

I can’t say that I forgave him in that moment. But the knowledge that Astrid had not left me to be punished for something she did—combined with the knowledge that I had wronged her in believing she had killed Tom Peyton—those things did make a difference. Did assuage a lot of the pain and hurt and rage.

As did learning that Raleigh had tried to help me. He’d deliberately kept his mouth shut when he saw the truth about that so-called confession and, knowing Raleigh, that was no small compromise. A big part of why I was sitting in my cozy living room at that moment, and not in my former cell at Chippewa Falls County Jail, was Raleigh.

It was very late. It had been a long and difficult day.

I didn’t say anything. I leaned in and rested my face in the curve of his shoulder. I closed my eyes.

“Caz,” he whispered. His arm slid around me. He kissed my temple. He didn’t say

anything, either.

For a few moments we sat there, just breathing quietly, so carefully, our bodies settling into familiar curves as though there had been no time apart. I could hear his heartbeat, hear the funny little occasional hitch in his breathing like he was trying not to cry.

I was too tired for tears. Too bruised and empty to feel much but relief. Relief that I had not really been abandoned. Relief that I had not been forgotten. Crossed-off and discarded like an old 'Things to Do' list.

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I said, without opening my eyes, “The note wasn’t for me.”

I felt his surprise. I opened my eyes, raised my head. Met his gray gaze.

“But...”

I said, “The note was for Dax.”

Chapter Eight

“Dax?”

“I think so.”

Raleigh said in disbelief. “Your pal Dashiell Reid?”

“Same.”

“The guy with a girl in every charging station? Dax was seeing Astrid?”

“Probably more of her than I want to think about.”

“Do you have any proof of that? Any—”

“No. But I’m pretty sure.”

Raleigh made a faint sound—probably disappointment. “Okay, well, I can’t do much

with feelings. Why do you feel they were having an affair?" He added, "Honestly, the words Dax and affair don't even go together in my mind. He's always been more of wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am guy. Whereas Astrid..."

Truth.

I said, "It's not just that he seems older, different. Something's changed inside him."

"You've been gone eleven months," Raleigh said gently. "You're going to see some changes."

"I know. But that's not what I mean. He's not seeing anyone right now. But it's not like he's between girls. He's acting more like someone trying to get over a bad breakup. Someone who's still invested. And he didn't want to talk about it."

"Okay. Well."

It sounded pretty thin, I knew. But I kept trying to put what I sensed into words. "He seems more hostile to Malcolm. We used to both sort of..."

"Dismiss him," Raleigh said.

My gaze flashed to his. I made a face. "Yeah, probably. But now, Dax seems more aggressive. It's not overt, but I can feel it. And he's more defensive of Astrid. It's hard for him to talk about her."

"It's hard for you to talk about her."

I nodded. It was painful. Less painful than when I thought she'd closed the chapter on me. "Yes, and she was like a big sister to Dax for a long time. But when we got in our teens, they actually were more like friends. They used to joke around, tease each

other. I knew he had a little bit of a thing for her. I never dreamed it would be reciprocated.”

Raleigh was silent, thinking. “I mean, there’s not much to go on, but I’ll check into it.” He said it kindly, so he was mostly humoring me.

“I think he’d probably admit it if I asked him directly. Maybe.”

His gaze sharpened. “You think so?”

I nodded.

“Because when I told him I was looking into her death, he played dumb.”

“I think he’d tell me.”

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Raleigh looked doubtful, but he said, “That would certainly be helpful.”

The clock suddenly chimed two. Had we really been talking for hours?

Raleigh glanced at his watch, as though verifying the hour. He said tiredly, “It’s late. I should go.”

I nodded.

Neither of us moved.

It was painful to acknowledge how much I didn’t want him to go.

Into the silence stretching between us, Raleigh said to the floor, “Unless you want to take mercy on me and let me sleep here?”

I stared at him in disbelief.

He glanced sideways, and actually smiled, though it was a lopsided smile. “I’m not an idiot. I mean actually let me sleep here. It’s not like I’ve never spent the night on this couch before.”

No, he’d slept on the sofa when I had flu. I’d slept on the sofa when he’d wrenched his back chasing down and tackling a Peeping Tom.

I said, “I...guess it would be ungrateful to turn you out after you were kind enough to drive me home.”



Also, though I didn't want to admit it, the discussion of whether Astrid might have been murdered had left me feeling uneasy. I knew Malcolm had no reason to harm Astrid. I also knew there were only so many possibilities.

"Maybe it was an accident," I said abruptly. "She did like to relax in the bathtub. She did take sleeping pills sometimes. Especially during the full moon." Even now, that memory could make me smile a little. "She always said she couldn't sleep with Old Man Moon staring through her window."

"It'd be pretty coincidental that she accidentally overdosed after writing that particular note."

Yes. Fair enough. That was hard to believe.

I said, "Okay. You win. I'm officially freaked out. You can sleep on the couch."

He stared at me, said gravely, "Uh...yay?" That was so totally like the Raleigh I'd fallen in love with, that I laughed.

For a moment we gazed at each other, smiling, and my heart ached because I missed him so much. Even when I'd hated him the most, I'd missed him, or at least missed who I thought he was. And I was going to have to spend the rest of my life missing him.

Maybe eventually we could find our way back to being friends. That wouldn't be so bad. Better than nothing.

As if he read my mind, Raleigh stopped smiling, said, "You know, if our positions were reversed, I don't know that I could forgive, either."

I said, and I'm sure we both heard the acid in my tone, "Our positions would never be

reversed. Because you always do the right thing. No matter what. You wouldn't have called me. You wouldn't have left a hysterical, frightened phone message that could be misinterpreted as an admission of guilt. You'd have called the cops and called your lawyer and kept your mouth shut instead of being a helpful idiot who couldn't get it through his thick head we were on opposite sides."

Maybe it was the muted light, but he seemed to lose color.

"Sweet dreams," I said, and went into the bedroom and closed the door.

Then I dropped down on the side of the bed and put my face in my hands. It was like shooting ducks in a gallery, except the bullets kept ricocheting and going through my heart.

I'd wanted him to pay, to suffer, to understand how wrong he'd been, to know that he'd destroyed everything between us for nothing. For nothing. And he did. He was sad and sorry. He was suffering just like I was. And just like me, he did not know how to fix it.

Because he couldn't.

The mistake had been his. He had inflicted the injury.

But it was up to me to fix it.

And the only way to do that was to forgive him.

Or not.

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I knew he was sorry. I knew he meant it when he said he would take it all back if he could. He couldn't be more sorry than he already was. I could see that.

What do you think he should have done? Made a run for the border with you? The Jacksons have been chasing bad guys as long as the Bredahls have been baking cookies. Cop is in his DNA.

Dax had a point.

We hadn't been together long. Long enough that I felt Raleigh should have known me better. But I'd known Astrid all my life, and because I knew about the affair and I smelled her perfume that night, I'd come to the conclusion that she had to have killed Peyton.

Granted, I'd kept my mouth shut. I hadn't tried to find more evidence in order to bury her. I hadn't told her that as much as I loved her, she was no longer my sister.

My eyes stung, remembering.

It hurt. It was always going to hurt. It was always going to be there. That betrayal. But I did still love him. And the idea of life without him was even more painful than the betrayal.

That was the truth.

Sure, maybe in time, I'd get over him.

It didn't feel like it.

Either way, Dax was correct about how good it had been between us. How easy and right. How it had all fallen into place that first night at Cutter's Mill. Like we had known all our lives that eventually it was going to be me and Raleigh.

I wiped my eyes, rose, and opened the door to the bedroom.

Raleigh was sitting on the sofa, bent forward, head in his hands. He had taken off his jacket but was otherwise still dressed. At the sound of the bedroom door, he was on his feet in one quick movement. He jerked out, "Hey, would you have an extra blanket?"

Even across the room, I could see his eyes were red.

My heart shrank a couple of sizes. "Raleigh—"

I went to him, he put his arms out automatically, hugged me when I stepped into that protective circle.

"I can't—"

"I know, Caz. It's okay."

I raised my head, met his gaze. "No. I keep telling myself we can't—I can't—get past this. But I still love you. I just do."

He kissed my forehead, held me with gentle strength, not asking for anything, just there.

Probably confused as hell. But definitely there.

“Can we just...lie down like we used to? Just be close. I think that’s one of the things I used to miss the most.”

I barely heard his, “Yeah, of course.” He said more clearly, “I miss that, too.”

We went into the bedroom, and I turned off the overhead light, darkness falling like a stage curtain dropping. We undressed in the moonlit shadows, climbed into the bed and moved into each other’s arms. It was as if those eleven months had never happened, as if they’d passed in the blink of an eye.

“I can’t talk anymore tonight,” I said.

“No. Me neither. We need to sleep.” He tucked my head against his chest, rested his chin on my hair. Kind of heartbreaking how easy and familiar it was. But also, I felt the first peace I’d known since I’d climbed out of this bed to go into work that final day.

It was possibly the best sleep I’d ever had.

Certainly, the best sleep I’d had in eleven months.

I slept until nine and probably would have continued sleeping, if somewhere in a confused dream about finding Freyja in cell 3B6 I hadn’t heard Raleigh say clearly, “Holyshit.”

My eyes popped open.

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Raleigh was up and pulling on his Levi's. He glanced at me, said, "I overslept."

I shoved my hair out of my eyes. "Okay."

"I'll call you this evening. If Malcolm didn't kill Astrid or Peyton, someone sure as hell did. Maybe, once you've had time to think about it, you'll have some ideas."

"If you're thinking Dax—"

"I'm still thinking Malcolm," Raleigh interrupted. "But I've been wrong before. So, I'd like to hear your thoughts."

It felt like a concession. "Right—" A yawn cut me off. "Wait. No. Come to think of it. Tonight is Bredahl's holiday party. Malcolm really wants me to go."

Raleigh shrugged into his shirt and began to do up the buttons. "Okay. Would you do me a favor? Don't drive with Malcolm. Don't go up to the mansion for drinks. Stay clear of Malcolm as much as you can without looking like you're trying to avoid him. Until we can figure this out?"

"I have to call Triple A and get that tire changed."

"Did you hear me, Caz? Try to avoid being alone with Malcolm. Also, I think you need to get the locks changed. Today."

I looked up. Raleigh's expression was somber.

“Yes. I heard. I think you are way off track.” I sighed. “But yes, I’ll try to tactfully avoid Malcolm. I don’t know how long that’s going to work because he’s going to think it’s a little peculiar if I refuse to have Christmas dinner with him.”

“Just give me a couple of days to follow up a few leads.”

“Oka-ay.” It came out less of an okay and more of a I guess-you-think-you-know-what-you’re-doing.

Raleigh made a faint sound of amusement, but what he said was, “And you’ll talk to Dax? If he was involved with your sister, he has to have some insight into what she was thinking, what was happening in her life.”

I nodded. “I’ll phone him as soon as I deal with the Range Rover.”

“Also—”

I laughed. Not that it was all that funny. Raleigh smiled uncertainly. “Also, if you could try to think back to the day Peyton was killed.”

“Jesus.” I groaned. “Like we haven’t been over that ground enough?”

“We’ve been over what you did that day. But try to remember what Astrid did. What Peyton did. What Malcolm did. Was there something going on at the bakery? Maybe there’s something we missed.”

“Oh, do you really think so?” I said sarcastically.

He grimaced, but didn’t respond. He sat on the side of the bed to put his shoes and socks on. I studied the curved line of his back, the nape of his neck where his dark hair curled just a little against his collar. His hair grew really fast.

It was very, very odd that we were having this conversation. That we were talking at all. That we had spent the night in each other's arms. So much was still unresolved but, for me, maybe the biggest question was answered.

I brushed my hand down his back, smoothing the wrinkles out of his white shirt. He glanced over his shoulder, straightened, took my hand. His gray eyes were serious, steady, as they met mine. But then he didn't say anything.

"What?" I asked uncertainly.

"I don't know."

"That's not helping."

He squeezed my hand comfortingly. "I'm hoping that last night meant there's maybe still a chance for us. Is there?"

I hesitated, said, "I...hope so."

His gaze softened, he leaned over and kissed me. It was the lightest kiss, like the flick of a butterfly's wing, the tenderest brush of mouth-on-mouth, and then he was up and off the bed, heading for the door.

"I'll call you," he said.



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After Raleigh left, I jumped in the shower, shaved, and dressed in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt.

After eleven months of jail scrubs, I didn't think I'd ever again take for granted the simple pleasure of comfortable, well-made clothes. Though, to be honest, the scrubs were just clothes. The biggest humiliation had been having to strip down so a CO could visually inspect my genitals, buttocks, anus. That had been followed by a shower with lice shampoo in front of fifty other guys. Then, finally, I'd pulled on my jail uniform. That's when it really hit home. When I was standing there in the middle of a bunch of strangers, all dressed identically. That's when it sank in that I was now officially nobody. I was a number in a uniform and nobody trusted me or believed me or even saw me anymore.

I was still having trouble seeing me. I stared in the steamy bathroom mirror at that pale, bony face. Malcolm was right. I was too thin, too pale. My eyes looked too bright and too big in my gaunt face. Alien eyes. I did not look well.

Or hey, maybe I just looked older and wiser.

I had a nice haircut anyway. That was something.

When I picked up my cell to call Triple A, I saw that Raleigh had left a message while I'd been luxuriating in herbal shower gel and gallons of hot water.

I pressed play.

His recorded voice sounded harsh and a little out of breath, and I could hear what

sounded like boots on crusted snow. Like he was hiking somewhere.

“Caz, I stopped to check out your Range Rover. That blow-out last night? I think someone shot your tire out.”

## Chapter Nine

Oh God, Raleigh. Why did I do it? I didn't think it would—I didn't mean for this to happen. I don't know what to do. What should I do? Tom's dead. I'm in his office. There's so much blood. Jesus. Astrid's— Please pick up?

I knew every single one of those forty-five damning words.

Knew them by heart. Because that recording had been played for me over and over again in interrogation rooms.

To Raleigh, and nearly everyone else who heard that nearly incoherent message, it apparently sounded like I was confessing to killing Tom. In fact, I was distraught because I had gone to Astrid that morning and told her that I was going to leave Bredahl's if she didn't get Tom off my back. When I found Tom that night, I thought maybe they'd argued, she'd fired him, and he'd killed himself. The company and his position meant everything to him.

I thought it was all my fault.

I thought wrong, as it turned out.

But then, so did everyone else.

If I considered that message objectively, I could see why some people got the wrong idea. I couldn't see why Raleigh, who I thought knew me better than anyone, got the

wrong idea, but I understood that, at best, I'd sent a mixed message.

Astrid backed me up, of course. One hundred thousand percent. But Astrid was not just my sister, she'd raised me. At twenty, practically a kid herself, she had taken on the responsibility of becoming Bredahl's CEO and becoming my legal guardian. It couldn't have been a picnic trying to take care of an emotionally distraught little kid. Back then I suffered from panic attacks, nightmares, and separation anxiety. I was sure Astrid was going to die as well, and I told her so frequently. In a way, we grew up together. For a long time, it was just her and me. We were as close as two siblings could possibly be.

So, no, nobody in law enforcement believed her. If they did, they decided her testimony was irrelevant because I'd clearly decided to take matters into my own hands.

This was the kind of thing I was going to have to let go of, if Raleigh and I were going to have any chance at a future relationship.

There was a certain illogic to being able to excuse myself for thinking the worst of Astrid, or forgiving other people for the same mistakes Raleigh made, but not forgiving Raleigh—even though I loved Raleigh more than all those other people put together.

It's the most wonderful time of the year...

Holiday music was playing as I walked into MPR Motors later that morning.

"This is a surprise," Dax said when I was shown into his office a couple of minutes later. "Have a seat."

No glittery garland or shiny glass bulbs in this space. I sat in one of the two matching

chairs in front of Dax's surprisingly organized-looking desk. On the shelf behind him was a framed photo of his parents and sister and a smaller framed photo of the two of us when we'd climbed Liberty Pole Hill in our twenties.

"I wanted to take you to lunch if you're free."

His expression was apologetic. "I wish. No. Saturdays are crazy. Especially during the holidays. Maybe later next week?"

"Sure. But since I'm here, do you have a couple of minutes?"

His expression didn't change, but I saw something like caution flicker in his eyes. He glanced at the glass wall separating us from the main sales room. "Uh, yeah. That's about all I have."

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That being the case, I didn't waste time on preliminaries.

"Were you and Astrid having an affair?"

He froze. I could see him trying to read my face, weighing how much to tell, wondering how the hell I'd figured it out.

"You're taking too long to answer," I said. "So, yes."

Dax swallowed. "Caz—"

I rubbed my forehead. "Look, she was a grown woman. You're a grown man. I'm not going to judge. Not at this point."

"It happened because of you. Because of what happened to you," he said quickly. "We were both so—"

"Okay, that I don't want to hear," I interrupted. "I don't want to know the gory details."

He flushed. "It wasn't gory. It was the most beautiful, important thing that ever happened to me. Astrid was—she was—"

"She was my sister and this is the part I don't want to hear. Really. I hope you supported and comforted each other. I really do. But I don't need or want to know."

"Okay. Then..."

“Did Malcolm know?”

He didn’t hesitate. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Astrid thought that—our age difference and the fact that you and I were friends—might be a bridge too far for him. She didn’t want you to know, either. That was one reason she didn’t believe me coming to visit you was a good idea.”

He watched me as I thought that over. There had probably been a time when I’d have been pretty upset by this development, but so much had happened to me in the past year—was still happening to me—that I simply didn’t have the bandwidth.

I said, “Raleigh showed me—”

“Raleigh? You saw Raleigh?”

“Yeah. He drove me home last night. I had a blow-out near the woods.” I watched to see if this was actually news to him. Not that I thought Dax had raced out after me and cut across country in order to shoot my tire out. Not that he couldn’t have. He knew the area and he was a decent shot. But what was in it for him? Still, the news that someone had caused that blow-out left me feeling paranoid.

“Well? What happened with Raleigh? How did that go?”

I shrugged. “We talked a little. To be continued.”

Dax tipped his head to the side, studied me. “It seems like you’re leaving a lot out of this story.”

“I’ll save it for when we have lunch. Anyway, he showed me a copy of the note Astrid left.”

Dax paled. “Did she—what did she—”

“He thought the note was intended for me.”

“I thought it was left for George.”

That had hurt him. I could see it in his eyes. I shook my head. “I think it was intended for you.”

He stared at me, then pinched the bridge of his nose, hard. When he could meet my gaze again, he asked, “Do you—?”

“No. I’ll see if I can persuade Raleigh to make a copy for you, but you’ve got to be honest with me now.”

“I am being honest!” he said indignantly.

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“Then you need to keep being honest. In the days before she died, did Astrid say anything that made you think she might take her life?”

“No. No way. She was completely focused on getting you out of that hellhole as fast as possible. No matter what it took.”

“What does that mean, though? No matter what it took? That makes it sound like maybe it was going to take some special effort.”

Dax gaped at me. “It did take some special effort. She had to kill herself for anyone to do anything!”

I frowned. “Do you think Astrid killed Tom?”

“Hell, no.” He seemed genuinely outraged. “Do you?”

“No. So why would she kill herself?”

“Huh? You know why. She thought—that last visit with you. She thought you were either going to top yourself or crack up completely.”

“But that’s my point,” I said. “Astrid was my best and strongest advocate. She wouldn’t have trusted getting me out of there to anyone else.”

I could see him trying to work it out. He said slowly, “But by taking her own life, she was going to get you out.”



“Maybe. But there was no guarantee that would get me released. She was too smart not to know that. I’m honestly surprised the charges were dropped. Plus, we’re talking about Astrid. Never in a million years will I believe Astrid thought the only way she could solve a problem was by removing herself from the equation.”

“But if she didn’t kill herself, why did she leave a note?”

“I don’t think it was a suicide note. I think she was apologizing to you for something she was going to do. Something that I think—or she thought—meant the end of your relationship.”

“Nothing would have ended it except one of us dying.”

I didn’t try to answer that. Dax was grieving. I didn’t need to add to his pain by informing him that he was not the first extra-marital relationship Astrid had. And he probably wouldn’t have been the last. Though, who knows? Her feelings for him had to have been pretty strong for her to poach one of my closest friends. Someone she’d known since childhood.

“Aside from taking her own life, can you think of what she might have meant?”

Dax slowly shook his head. “No.”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“Two days after her final visit to you. Like I said, she was scared. For you.”

And two days after she’d seen Dax, Astrid was dead.

“Okay, when you saw each other, she was scared but not suicidal. What else was going on with her?”

He seemed to be thinking back. “Not much beyond getting you out...” He was still thinking it over. “There might have been something going on at the bakery.”

“We’d be gearing up for the holidays, so that’s a given.”

“Right. But it wasn’t just that she was busy. I think she was concerned about something. But she never really talked about work.”

She was discreet, that was for sure. Which was how she’d managed to keep her very complicated private life private.

Dax said suddenly, “She had a meeting coming up with one of the managers. I remember now because she got a phone call confirming.” His eyes lightened. “That’s right. It stuck in my memory because they were meeting afterhours and because they were keeping it quiet.”

“Do you know which manager?”

“Personnel maybe? I think it was a personnel issue.”

“A personnel issue that was so private it couldn’t be addressed in the office?”

“I’m partly guessing. All I know for sure is she was meeting offsite with one of the managers and it was supposed to be kept quiet.”

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“That’s interesting. Okay. Did she ever say or do anything that made you think she was suspicious of Malcolm?”

Dax’s brows shot up. “No. Suspicious of him why?”

“Of killing Tom.”

Dax seemed amused at the idea. “No.”

“Did she ever seem afraid of him?”

“Afraid of George?” Dax gave a short, unpleasant laugh. “Of what? Boring her to death?”

I let it go, but I was a little irked on Malcolm’s behalf. Whether Dax liked it or not, Astrid had valued her marriage and her partnership with Malcolm.

In fact, given how smitten Dax seemed, I had to wonder how he would have taken it, if Astrid had told him she was ending their relationship?

Still, he had no earthly reason—or means—of murdering Tom. Was it possible Astrid’s and Tom’s deaths werenotconnected?

What I said was, “If I’m right and Astrid didn’t commit suicide, can you think of—”

“It wouldn’t be an accident,” Dax interrupted. “You know how careful she was about things like mixing booze and pills or drinking in the hot tub or driving and drinking.

She was smart. She was sensible.”

He made smart and sensible sound sexy. But then Astrid had been sexy, too. She had been the full package. So, yes, sometimes I too used to wonder why she’d chosen someone like Malcolm who, sure, was a little dull, a bit stodgy. But Malcolm was solid and dependable, and I think he made her feel secure. We’d faced a lot of insecurity growing up. Also, they did enjoy a lot of the same things: entertaining, hunting, riding, fishing. They enjoyed living well. They had the same goals and they made a great team.

Anyway, no one really knows what goes on behind closed doors. Especially bedroom doors.

Dax added suddenly, darkly, “If you’re right, if someone really did kill her, you don’t have to look any farther than George.”

I wasn’t surprised he thought so because he was jealous and because the husband is always the main suspect. “Why would he kill her, though?”

“Because somehow he found out about us.”

I nodded noncommittally. Malcolm had means and opportunity, of course. However, if he’d killed Astrid, it wasn’t because of her relationship with Dax.

But Malcolm was certainly one of three possibilities: Malcolm, the mysterious manager who had scheduled a secret meeting with Astrid, and, as much as I hated to even consider the idea, Dax.

I almost didn’t attend the Bredahl holiday party.

For one thing, it was bound to be stressful, and I had a very low stress threshold.

For another, I was afraid that “word on the street” might have spread, and Bredahl’s employees might not be feeling too friendly toward the person who was considering pulling the rug out from under them.

Not that I had any such intention, but even the discussion of bringing in a new director was liable to upset people. Traditions meant a lot in Little Copenhagen and at Bredahl Cakes and Cookies.

However, Malcolm phoned not long after I returned from speaking to Mike Baer at Baer, Baer and Baer, to ask if I felt “well enough” to attend.

Even though on Thursday evening I’d been telling him I didn’t think I was up to it, that particular phrasing and the kindly concern in his tone, put my back up. I was determined to go to that damned party if it killed me.

“Yep. Cocktail hour starts at six?” I asked.

“Yes, but there’s no need to push yourself when you’re struggling.”

I closed my eyes, counted to three, and said cheerfully, “Nope, not struggling tonight. I think it will do me good to get out of the house.”

There was a little pause. I knew exactly how Malcolm would look: pained, because it was an awkward situation, but determined, because he did not duck awkward situations, and kind, because I was Astrid’s kid brother.

He said, “You know, you don’t have to put a brave face on with me, Casper. I know the situation. I only mention this because I don’t want to hide things from you. Astrid was planning to have you placed on suicide watch.”

I opened my mouth but no words were within grabbing distance.

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Malcolm was still talking in that grave, concerned way. “It’s important that we be honest now, so that when the holidays are over, we can look at getting you the help you need. There’s no shame in it. You’ve been through so much.”

“Right,” I said automatically. “Thank you. I appreciate your concern.” No one could ever say my sister didn’t teach me to be polite.

“If you’re still determined to go tonight, maybe it would be a good idea to drive together.”

“That’s very kind, but I might want to leave before you—”

“That’s not an issue. These things always run longer than I can take.”

“—or go out for drinks afterwards.”

Another of those little pauses.

“But thank you for the offer.”

“Are you sure? If you’re going to be drinking and driving...”

“I promise I’m going to behave. I’m not going to do anything to embarrass you or Bredahl.”

“You know there’s no question of that. I’m only speaking up because I can see you’re not...quite yourself. I think you know that, too. And I know Astrid would want me to

step in.”

I took a deep breath, said pleasantly, “I know. I understand. This isn’t any easier for you than it is for me. I know you have my best interests and Bredahl’s best interests at heart.”

“That’s exactly right.” Malcolm sounded relieved. “Thank you for being so sensible about this. It makes it easier for both of us, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s all right if you change your mind about tonight. It’s bound to be very stressful for you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll see you at the party then. Drive safely.”

“I will. You, too.”

I disconnected and phoned Raleigh.

“Hey, Caz.” He sounded startled and pleased.

I, on the other hand, hadn’t expected him to pick up, so I responded with, “Oh.”

“Wrong number?” Did he sound a little disappointed?

“No, not at all. I just—it doesn’t matter. Look, I want to get something on the record with you right away. I think Malcolm is attempting to lay the groundwork for claiming I’m not competent to take control of the company.”

“What do you mean?” Raleigh was all business now.

“He keeps talking to me about getting help for my mental health issues. He said Astrid had been planning to ask for me to be placed on suicide watch, but I know that’s a lie. If Astrid thought I was in imminent danger of doing away with myself, she wouldn’t wait five seconds to go to the authorities.”

“I agree. That doesn’t sound like your sister.”

“I’ll be the first to admit I’ve got some issues to work through, but I’m not cracking up.”

“No. I didn’t get that impression last night.”

Really? Because there had been a few minutes after he’d pulled over to render roadside assistance when I’d perhaps not appeared to be the picture of robust mental health.

“I think this is happening because Malcolm asked me to appoint him director and I declined.”



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“Malcolm as director?” I could hear the frown in Raleigh’s voice. “But the company’s yours now, right? You’re Astrid’s heir and successor. How would the sales manager be made director over you?”

“He wouldn’t. Unless I chose to make it so. In fairness, I did say I wasn’t sure I was ready or even wanted to be director. And also in fairness, I did say a few things on Thursday that probably concerned him.”

“Like what?”

“Like I wasn’t sure I was up to attending Bredahl’s holiday party.”

I heard Raleigh’s snort bouncing from cell tower to cell tower. “Okay, well, let’s get that straightjacket ready.”

I weighed whether to share some of the other even less pleasant things I’d mentioned in my interview with Matilda Seger. Frankly, I already regretted a lot of it. I had been too angry and emotional to be giving interviews. Not that I’d said anything that wasn’t true at that moment in time, but I was smart enough to know that, like the song says, in a moment everything changes. I knew it was highly unlikely I’d be selling the company—and almost as unlikely I’d be able to hand over the directorship to anyone else.

“It bothers me a lot that he lied about Astrid. But I don’t know that this means anything beyond his fear that if he doesn’t take action, I’m going to destroy the company while I’m still emotionally off-balance. His concern seemed genuine on Thursday. I think he sincerely believes I’m not well.”

After a moment, Raleigh said, “You don’t want me to assume this proves Malcolm had anything to do with Astrid’s death.”

“Right. Because I don’t know that it does. The two things might not be connected. But I do know, after our chat, that he would definitely prefer that I not be well enough to make decisions concerning Bredahl. I think he might take steps in that direction.”

“It’s not easy to get someone committed, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I laughed, which I think surprised us both. “I know. He might not. For now, I’m just going along with him, not arguing, playing it passive. I did decline to drive with him tonight.”

“Thank you for that. Did you talk to Dax?”

“I did. But I’m late getting ready for this party, so I can’t get into most of it. The main thing Dax said is Astrid was supposed to meet one of Bredahl’s managers for an offsite hush-hush meeting a couple of days before she died. He didn’t know when or what the meeting was about, but he thought that Astrid was maybe concerned with something going on at the bakery.”

“But he doesn’t have any idea what?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Raleigh sounded thoughtful.

“Also, Dax thinks Malcolm killed Astrid because he found out about their affair. I didn’t tell Dax he wasn’t the first and probably wouldn’t have been the last.”

“Right.” He said at a seeming tangent, “I don’t like that conversation you had with

Malcolm.”

“I didn’t enjoy it much either, but the fact that he might feel justified in taking drastic steps to save Bredahl Cakes and Cookies from a madman—”

“It’s not funny.”

“No. I agree. Okay, I’ve got to go—”

“Wait,” Raleigh said quickly.

I waited.

“What time will you be home tonight? Can I come by? Can we...talk?”

“I should be home by midnight.”

“Can I come by?”

I didn’t have to struggle with myself this time. “Yes. I... Yes.”

“I’ll see you around midnight. And Caz—?”

“Still here.”

“Please be careful tonight.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re always serious.” It wasn’t completely a joke. Not like we used to use to tease each other. But it was unexpectedly close.

There was no smile in Raleigh’s voice. “Listen, if Malcolm isn’t responsible for what happened to Astrid, then someone else is. That person could very well be at the party tonight.”

### Chapter Ten

I’d already been running late before the phone call with Raleigh.

By the time I showered, changed, and called an Uber—I wasn’t taking any chances on someone tampering with my vehicle or getting pulled over after a couple of drinks at the party—I was almost fifty minutes late.

That was going to look terrific. And probably further alarm Malcolm.

Although, maybe me actually showing up was the most alarming idea.

The Uber pulled into the crowded parking lot. I got out and went up the steps to the long wooden porch of the Hygge Haven Inn. Then I spent a couple of minutes trying to come up with excuses for why it wasn’t really necessary to attend this party.

What if they all still thought I was guilty of killing Tom?

What if they blamed me for Astrid's death?

What if word was out that I'd suggested I might sell the company? How soon before the Copenhagen Herald's Sunday edition hit the stands? Five a.m.? Earlier?

What if Malcolm was dropping hints that I was having a mental breakdown?

What if? What if? What if?

What would Astrid do?

I knew she would laugh at the very idea, and felt a bit better. Deep breath. I opened the large carved wood door with its pretty frosted glass panels, and stepped inside.

For the last fifty years, the Bredahl annual holiday party had been held in the charming old inn off Route 39. Just stepping through the doors and out of the bitter cold felt like receiving a warm hug. The lobby area was comfortingly scented with vanilla, cedar, and apples. Aged wooden beams gleamed overhead. The glossy floors were covered with thick, plush rugs. Deep leather sofas and armchairs were strategically placed in inviting groupings. In the heart of the room was the grand stone fireplace, its large mantel adorned with lush green garland intertwined with twinkling lights. A towering Christmas tree stood near a giant window, branches laden with handmade wooden ornaments, vintage baubles, and strings of cranberries and popcorn. Underneath its green branches was a landslide of gifts in old-fashioned wrapping paper.

Once upon a time—twenty years ago—I'd been fascinated by the promise of all those lovely, mysterious presents. Now I understood that they were just pretty, empty boxes. No, to be fair, they were symbols, not reality.

As always, several Bredahl employees had taken their drinks and slipped out of the banquet room to chat in cozy privacy. Usually, I'd have been one of them.

But tonight, I was a man on a mission. Even if I wasn't one hundred percent sure what my mission was.

I strode toward the banquet room, raising my hand in greeting to the one or two employees who automatically glanced my way. Wilma from customer service dropped her drink. I could hear the whispers—they weren't exactly whispers—and I kept walking.

As I reached the open double doors to the banquet room, I heard Malcolm's voice booming over the microphone, doing the honors on behalf of the Bredahl family. I had to stop for a moment to catch my breath. Not because I was so out of shape—I actually wasn't that out of shape; working in a prison laundry is hard work both physically and just about every other way you can think of—no, I felt a wave of sheer stage fright at those miles of linen-covered tables surrounded by a chairs and chairs of smiling, talking people. A sea of faces. Many whom I recognized. But many whom I did not. Eleven months is a long time.

"...past weeks have been nearly as difficult for you, but I speak for both Casper and myself when I say how much your kindness and support has meant. I know how much he would have liked to be here tonight, but I'm afraid at this time he's just not—"

My heart froze then jumped into action. The hell, I thought.

"Sorry I'm late!" I called loudly, walking swiftly through the tables. "The traffic on the 39 was unbelievable."

Malcolm said something that was lost in a sudden burst of feedback. There was a

moment of excruciating dead silence. I could feel every pair of eyes in the room pinned on me. Somehow, I kept walking, hanging on to my big fake ridiculous smile. A low murmur rippled through the crowd, and seemed to grow with each step I took. The murmur swelled into laughter—laughter?—and suddenly people were pushing back their chairs, rising, clapping. There were even a few cheers.

What the hell?

Was that actually for me or was dinner finally being served?

The mic screeched as Malcolm picked it up again and waved it beckoningly. “Late as usual! Come up here, you young rascal. Say hello to these good folks!”

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Yeah, no. My knees were shaking and I was too close to hyperventilating to risk that. Besides, this was Malcolm's gig. Tonight was most certainly Malcolm's. He had been the one struggling to keep the ship afloat after Astrid's death.

I raised my hands in the respect gesture and made a beeline for our corner table. People were still clapping and patting me on the back, like I'd done something genius by ending up in jail. I couldn't help wondering if Matilda Seger's aunties and brother were in the audience. I finally wriggled my way through the crowd to the large round table where the Bredahl family, and whichever department head and spouse was being honored with sharing the bread basket that year, had been seated since time immemorial.

The Chosen this year were Bente from personnel and Vinnie the warehouse and shipping overlord. There were quick hugs and kisses all around as we dodged the hovering waitstaff.

"Long time no see, kid." Vinnie thumped my back.

Bente said, "Oh God, Casper. I've been praying for this."

Her husband threw her a warning look, and I thought I saw something like guilt flash across her face.

What was that about? I had no time to analyze because Malcolm was still speaking, and people were taking their seats, reaching for their butter knives and dinner rolls.

I sat down, tugged on my tie. I felt flustered but relieved. But maybe I had



underestimated, well, a lot of things. I'd basically grown up at Bredahl. For real.

In that first year after our parents died, Astrid had taken me to work with her. I'd played with my cars and trucks on the floor of her office while she worked to reassure customers and investors that Bredahl was still as solid gold as the local butter we used in all our recipes.

I was the office "mailman" and the "official taster" for the bakery's new recipes.

Even after I went back to school, vacation days were spent helping out at Bredahl Cakes and Cookies. When I hit my teens there was never a question of what my summer job would be. It was only after I went away to college that I began to balk at the idea my destiny had been foretold in cookie crumbs and sprinkles.

Granted, it wasn't much of a balk. I always ducked conflict, always opted for keeping the peace. I expressed my doubts that I'd be happy running a cookie corporation, Astrid assured me I was quite wrong about that, and eventually I accepted the job of assistant VP to Tom Peyton—who shared my doubts about my suitability.

It was about the only thing Tom and I ever agreed on.

A waitress bent down to ask what I'd like to drink.

"Lemon drop martini."

She made a note, and asked if I wanted to run a tab.

"Isn't it a hosted bar?" I handed over my credit card, looking around the table in surprise.

"Nope," Vinnie said, a little grimly.

It was always a hosted bar. Treating the Bredahl work-family was the whole point of this shindig.

Reading my expression correctly, Vinnie muttered, "Necessary cutbacks."

I felt my eyebrows hit my hairline.

Bente shook her head. She leaned over and said softly, "You should speak to Brigid." She nodded meaningfully.

Brigid was our accounting manager.

"Right. Okay." I was very confused.

"Great speech, Malcolm!" Vinnie gazed past my head.

I managed not to jump as Malcolm came up behind me and rested his hands on my shoulders. He squeezed. "Well done, Casper. Astrid would be proud."

I turned my head, smiled politely. Astrid would be pleased because I managed to show up nearly an hour late to the holiday party? Not so much. I got it, though. I understood that this quiet praise for doing the bare minimum was intended to let the management team know the bare minimum was almost more than I was capable of these days.

Malcolm moved to take his place beside me at the table and not another significant word was spoken for the next hour. People talked about their Christmas plans, reminisced about the old days. In fact, everyone was so cheerful and pleasant, everything was so normal, I couldn't help wondering if I was imagining things.

Maybe we were having a rough year. It was hard to understand why, given how much

the economy had improved, but I'd been out of the loop for quite a while. Astrid had given no hint during our visits that Bredahl was experiencing a financial crunch, but she wouldn't. She'd made a point of keeping our visits upbeat and positive, focused on the bright and sunny days ahead, once I was exonerated.

When dinner—chicken instead of the usual prime rib and vegetarian options—was over, a DJ set up shop, and those with energy and enough to drink, hit the chessboard-sized dance floor at the front of the room.

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I sipped my drink and waited for Malcolm to get up and do the rounds, but either he'd already done the rounds before I arrived or he felt obligated to keep an eye on me. I couldn't help suspecting the latter.

Bente and her husband got up to dance. I noticed as they wended their way to the dance floor, she stopped by Brigid's table. She and Brigid spoke together for half a moment, and Brigid glanced over at me. I wasn't sure what her expression meant, but it kind of looked like she was S-O-S-ing me with her eyes. Was she asking to be delivered from Bente or was the message something else?

"How are you feeling?" Malcolm asked suddenly. "About ready to call it a night?"

I glanced at him in surprise. I could feel Vinnie and his wife watching our exchange.

"I'm good. It's nice seeing everyone enjoy themselves."

"It's nice seeing you enjoy yourself." Malcolm's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. He glanced at his Rolex. "I can wait a bit longer, if you want to stay a while."

I didn't try to hide my puzzlement. "No need to stay. I'll just phone for an Uber when I'm ready to go."

He made a scoffing sound. "Of course not. I'm happy to keep you company."

Since when?

I swallowed the last of my martini, said, "Yeah? Up to you. I'm going to circulate a

bit. Say hi to some people.” I rose, patted his shoulder—Vinnie and his wife were looking at each other—and moved away from the table.

Not my imagination. Malcolm wanted to keep tabs on me. Maybe it was out of genuine concern, but my niggling doubts were starting to blossom into full-blown suspicion. I truly did not want to believe he could have had anything to do with Astrid’s death—it still seemed surreal—but something was really wrong. I could feel it. It had started with my hesitation to appoint him director, but my threat to sell the company had definitely escalated matters.

Why would Malcolm want—need?—to be made director?

Why would Malcolm be terrified of the idea of my selling the company?

I could believe that on one level it was concern for our employees and the community. But in all honesty, Malcolm had never really exhibited that much...civic duty before. He was a decent guy. He did all the right things. But I’d never really known him to put himself to great inconvenience just to make other people—other than Astrid—happy.

I was careful not to head straight for Brigid’s table. I wandered over to speak to Rhoda, to Carl, to Patty, who had been Astrid’s PA. I kissed cheeks, shook hands, smiled and nodded and said thanks, said how glad I was to be home, said I was looking forward to getting back to work. I did everything I could to reassure people that I was back and the company was in good hands.

Nearly every time I glanced over at our table, Malcolm was watching me. I knew him well enough to tell he was getting irritated. He never stayed this long at the company parties. But tonight, he was determined to wait for me. It did not give me a warm and cozy feeling.

What happened when you sold a company?

Change.

Changes in personnel were likely. Changes in policies and procedures. Changes in management maybe. Not always. If a company was doing great, the smart move was to leave a successful leadership team in place. But was Bredahl Cakes and Cookies doing great if they couldn't afford a hosted bar or a decent meal at the annual holiday party?

What was something else that happened when a business was sold?

A complete financial audit.

I glanced instinctively across the room at Brigid. She was staring at me hopefully.

I pretended not to see her.

Instead, I turned and headed off Bente and her husband as they were coming off the dance floor.

“Hey.” I kissed Bente's cheek. “You're leaving now.”

Bente's blue eyes widened. “I-I am?”

“Yep.” I shook her husband's—Ralph, Ralph was his name; I needed to get better at this—hand. “You're going to say goodnight to everyone at our table, and on your way to the door, you're going to stop to say goodnight to Brigid.”

“Okay.” I could see the light dawning.

“You’re going to tell her that she’s also leaving now. She’s going to bring her car around to the back and wait for me. We’re going to go have a quick drink and a private chat.” My idiot grin was wide enough to reach the back rows. “Got it?”

“Got it.” Ralph drew her forward. “Come on, babe. This is exactly what you’ve been praying for.”

I headed straight over to say hello to the sales team.

I didn't watch to see what Bente did next. I continued to circulate for another five minutes. When I started for the men's room, I spared a glance at Brigid's table and saw that her seat was empty.

I didn't look at Malcolm, but I could feel his gaze pinned on me. The fact that he still hadn't left for home said a lot. I sauntered down the hall toward the bathrooms, kept walking, jogged all the way down to the emergency exit, and dived out the door.

Brigid's blue Honda Civic sat idling a few feet away, exhaust drifting up into the cold night air.

### Chapter Eleven

We drove to Pete's Roadhouse, which has always been a dive and the last place anyone would look for us—or at least Brigid—and I had the worst lemon drop martini of my life.

That was only partly due to the whip cream the bartender added to my drink—did they mistake a martini for liquified lemon meringue pie?—but mostly the nausea came after I heard all Brigid had to say.

“I wasn't sure if Astrid had a chance to talk to you before...” She shook her head.

I'd known Brigid most of my life. She'd started at Bredahl as an accounting clerk the same week our father made Astrid his vice president. Back then, Brigid was a



cheerful, chubby girl with bright red hair and freckles. The freckles had faded and she had slimmed down, but she was still cheerful and very good at her job. Astrid had trusted her implicitly.

“No. I didn’t realize anything was seriously wrong until tonight.”

“It’s been wrong for a long time. Tom was the first one who suspected there was a problem. Of course, being Tom, he insisted he would handle the situation himself; so, after he died, it took me nearly a year to figure out what was actually going on.”

“Whatisactually going on?” I asked.

“Over the past nine years, almost twenty million dollars have vanished.”

I choked on my lemon drop.

Brigid said grimly, “I know. It’s alotof money.”

I nodded, still coughing and spluttering, and the bar door opened. Raleigh walked in.

I’d called him on the drive over to Pete’s, but he’d sounded so terse and distant that I wasn’t sure if he was going to come or not. I was relieved to see him, but couldn’t help thinking he still looked grim, even a little gray in the sallow light. He scanned the bar, spotted us in the far booth, and walked over, sliding in beside me. I noticed there was a tightly folded newspaper sticking out of his jacket pocket.

“Thanks for coming,” I said.

He regarded me unsmilingly. Nodded.

Okay. I didn’t expect him to fall all over me, but...

A tired-looking waitress stopped at our booth. “Last call. Anybody want anything?”

We all declined. I glanced at my watch and then glanced again. It was already after one.

I introduced Raleigh to Brigid and told him, “Brigid just told me that someone has embezzled twenty million dollars from the bakery over the past nine years.”

He stared at me, stared at Brigid. “Jesus.”

“She hasn’t come right out and suggested Malcolm was involved, but I think that’s the inevitable conclusion.” I looked at Brigid. “Am I right?”

Her expression was uncomfortable and sad. “I don’t want to think so. But.”

“How does twenty million go missing and no one notices?” Raleigh inquiring.

I shook my head. “Astrid used to tease him about padding his expense account, but people would have noticed twenty million dollars’ worth of padding.”

“Yes. They would,” Brigid said. “No, the money was siphoned away slowly but surely in relatively small increments.”

An all but forgotten memory unexpectedly returned to me. I said slowly, “The invoices submitted to the customer didn’t match the purchase orders submitted to accounting.”

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Brigid nodded approvingly. “That’s the bare bones of it. It was more sophisticated than simply turning in different paperwork, but when you boil it down, yes.”

“I remember Tom complaining about it that last week. He didn’t elaborate, but since he never wanted me included in the loop, I didn’t think much about it.”

Brigid said to Raleigh, “As you can imagine, once Tom and Casper were gone, we lost a lot of oversight. Astrid refused to replace Tom because she said the VP position would be Casper’s once he was exonerated.” She met my eyes. “I think that was her way of reassuring herself that you were coming back.”

My throat closed. I nodded.

“But we did need that extra aegis. Astrid was, understandably, distracted this past year. It was a-a difficult year for her. Not as difficult as it was for you, of course.” Her smile was sympathetic.

Raleigh said, “What happened when you went to Astrid with your suspicions?”

“Obviously, it was a delicate situation,” Brigid said. “She was my boss. Malcolm was her husband. In the end, I didn’t need to spell it out. She understood immediately and said she would deal with it.”

I made a pained sound—it just slipped out.

Brigid reached across the table to cover my hand. “I’m so sorry, Casper.”

Raleigh was as still and silent as a block of stone beside me.

Brigid said, “Once I understood what was at stake, how much money was involved, I realized that Malcolm was almost certainly involved in Tom’s death.” She said to me, “I want you to know, Casper, not for one instant did I believe you had anything to do with that. I didn’t want to think it was anyone of us. I was sure it had to be an outsider. That someone had gained access to the universal code.”

I nodded.

“But once I understood that Malcolm was embezzling from the company, I knew he had to be the one who killed Tom. Even then, it was so hard to believe. Astrid and I didn’t even mention that aspect of it when we spoke that evening. But we knew what the other was thinking.”

Raleigh said unemotionally, “Do you have physical evidence of the embezzlement?”

“Yes. I have boxes of evidence sitting in my garage. I removed as many files from the office as I safely could without arousing suspicion. That was after Astrid...”

I said, “Thank you for that.”

“Ofcourse.”

The overhead lights flashed twice. The bartender called, “Closing time, folks. Drive safely. See you tomorrow night.”

The diehard patrons still scattered around the room began to shuffle toward the door.

Brigid hastily gathered her purse and coat. “My gosh, it’s so late! My husband will be wondering what happened to me.”

I said to Raleigh, “Will give you give me a ride home?”

I had sort of taken it for granted, but he was sitting there silent and unmoving, as if he’d forgotten where he was.

He looked at me—it was a long, strange look—and then he slid out of the booth. “Yes. Of course.” He did not sound thrilled at the prospect.

What the hell? My gaze fell on the rolled newspaper sticking out of his jacket pocket, and abruptly, I knew exactly what the hell it was.

My heart plummeted about fifty feet.

Well, I’d known it was coming. I’d intended to give him a heads up when he dropped by that evening. I hadn’t said anything I didn’t believe to be the truth during that interview. All the same, I knew that, had I been interviewed that morning instead of Friday, I’d have tempered my answers, at least as far as Raleigh was concerned.

The jukebox was still playing as we walked out of the bar into the frigid night.

...holiday greetings and gay happy meetings...

Not so much, as it turned out.

The three of us crossed the parking lot together. I kissed Brigid goodnight. We watched her start her car and pull out onto the highway, and then Raleigh and I walked in silence to his SUV.

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Silence as we settled in the front seat, shrugged out of our jackets; silence as we buckled up; silence as he started the engine.

Even his police radio was silent.

I said, “You read my interview with Matilda Seger.”

“Yep.” He adjusted his rearview mirror, all his attention on the road ahead.

“I gave that interview Friday morning. Before we talked.”

“I know.”

“Can I read it?”

“Help yourself.”

I drew the newspaper out and he flicked on the cab light so that I could see. Which might have been an act of consideration, but struck me as ominous.

I began to read.

In some ways he looks younger than his thirty years. In others, he seems much older. Casper Bredahl, sole heir to the Bredahl Cakes and Cookes fortune, is tall and slender and quiet. His hair is brown and his eyes are bluer than Crystal Lake. He flinches at loud noises, keeps his head down, and doesn’t make eye contact unless you speak to him directly. His smile is quick and guarded, as though he suspects the joke is on

him.

And no wonder.

It went on from there, and it was difficult to read.

Even though I agreed with almost every single thing Matilda wrote, it was difficult to read. She ripped the investigation into Tom's murder to shreds. She savaged LCPD, ridiculed the District Attorney's office, and all but crucified Raleigh.

"Yeah. I'd have trusted him with my life." Casper's smile is bitter. "I did trust him with my life."

I almost couldn't keep reading. I did though. I read every word. And when I finished, I thought I needed to get the Copenhagen Herald to print a statement from me ASAP to the effect that I wasn't going to close or even sell the bakery. That was one of many thoughts.

I folded up the paper. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Raleigh wasn't cold but he wasn't comforting either. It was like he was speaking from a great distance. "You told the truth. You shared how you feel about what happened to you."

"Yes, I did. I'm not going to apologize for that."

"No one is asking you to. You don't have anything to apologize for."

"But you're angry with me."

He glanced briefly from the road. "No. I'm not. But—"

“But?”

“I can’t stop you from suing the police department. I can’t stop you from doing anything. But I’m asking you not to close the bakery. I know you’re angry and bitter, but it isn’t right, it isn’t fair to blame the entire town for what happened to you. You have to know that’s not what your sister would have wanted. You also know, if you close the bakery, what it means to everyone who works there. What it means to Little Copenhagen. To the entire damn county.”

Fair? You know what wasn’t fair? But I let that thought go.

I said quietly, “I’m not going to close the bakery. I’m not going to sell.”

“I realize, from your perspective, it’s not enough, but I’ve already told Dad—the chief—I’m turning in my badge. I’ll submit my letter of resignation today.”

“What?” I stared at his steely profile. “Why would you do that?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do. My getting it wrong—getting Tom’s homicide wrong—has destroyed your life, my life, Astrid’s life—”

I turned in my seat to regard him. “You didn’t destroy my life. Jesus. I still plan on having a life. You did some damage, yeah. But you didn’t do it by yourself. You had plenty of help. Matilda makes that clear in the article.”



He said nothing.

I said, “You know, I’m not the one who said you should resign. That’s all her. I never said that.”

“I know.”

“I-I don’t even think that.” Although I undoubtedly had at one point. “You’re the one who realized Astrid’s death wasn’t suicide. You kept digging after the case was closed. You’re the one who figured out Malcolm’s role in...” I couldn’t finish it because that disaster was still in motion.

Twenty million dollars? I didn’t even fully understand what that meant. Would Bredahl be able to survive that kind of blood loss? Maybe selling the bakery wasn’t even my choice anymore.

“Astrid would still be alive if I hadn’t fucked up.”

I didn’t know what to say. There was probably some difficult truth in it. But why would one person, frankly, the smallest link in the chain of command, have to pay the biggest price for the mistakes that had been made?

“I’m telling you, that’s not what I want. Your resignation. I don’t want that.”

He let out a breath, said, “Thanks. But...”

No thanks?

“Raleigh, I’d barely been out of jail forty-eight hours when I talked to Matilda. I was still...shattered. If I were to give that interview today, I would have kept—I wouldn’t say—I don’t even feel the same way. Not about everything.”

By now we had reached the drive to the estate. Raleigh turned off the little side road that led to the Gingerbread House, his headlights sweeping the snowy shrubs and bushes, catching a birdbath in the spotlight, highlighting the little cottage. I’d left the lights on, and it looked warm and welcoming.

I felt a rush of fear that if we left things like this, there would not be any going back.

I did my best to sound calm. “So, what happens now?”

He said with equal calm, “Tomorrow I hand over everything I have on the case and request that a warrant be issued for Malcolm’s arrest. With Brigid’s testimony and the evidence she preserved, we can definitely hold him on the embezzlement charge. And I don’t think it’s going to be difficult proving his involvement in both Peyton and Astrid’s deaths.” He glanced at me. “I’ll push for an emergency warrant, but in the meantime, I’d continue to avoid any alone time with him.”

“Sure. Okay.”

He threw me a quick look. “There’s not much point in his coming after you. He’s not stupid. He knows everything is already in motion.”

Oh, yes. Malcolm knew things were in motion.

I said stiffly, “So that’s it? You’re done?”

“I’m done. Yeah.” He pulled up behind the cottage, but did not turn the engine off.

My voice shook a little as I said, “I thought we were going to talk tonight?”

He didn’t look at me, but I saw his profile smile in self-mockery. “I think you had it right, Caz. There isn’t a lot left to say. Even if you wanted to forgive me, I think that article makes clear, you’d never be able to. Not really. There are things there’s no going back from. This is one of them.”

I made a sound that came out like amusement, but was just the opposite. I wasn’t going to sit there and cry, though. I knew from excruciating experience, once Raleigh made his mind up, it was like trying to flag down a bullet train. I opened the passenger side door. “Okay. Well. Thanks for the ride.”

He said gruffly, “I’m sorry, Caz. For all of it.”

“So you said.” I slammed shut the door.

I heard the SUV reverse and start back down the road as I walked cautiously up the icy path. In the distance the hounds were howling mournfully. I went through the little gate. The porch light prised through the tears I was blinking back. I was trying to drum up a little anger, but I just felt numb.

I unlocked the front door, thinking about Raleigh’s advice to steer clear of Malcolm. Since the locksmith was not going to be able to come out before Christmas, maybe I’d be smart to throw some things in a carryall and spend the next few days at a hotel in the next county. I really didn’t think I’d be able to take Christmas dinner with Malcolm, even if I wasn’t concerned he might slip hallucinogens in my food.

I pushed open the door, stepped inside and stared across the room as Malcolm rose from the sofa. He was holding a Henry Big Boy X Lever Action Centerfire Rifle, which he aimed straight at me.

It was a shock, but it felt faraway, distant. I'd had so many shocks lately, I was getting used to them.

“Come in and lock the door behind you.” Malcolm sounded composed, but his eyes were like two black holes in his face.

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I realized Raleigh and I had made a crucial error in assuming Malcolm was still behaving rationally.

I stared at him for a second, then turned and quickly flipped the deadbolt locked and then open again. If you're not listening closely, it simply sounds like you've locked the door. I turned to face him. "What's going on? What's the rifle for?"

"Take your jacket off. Put your keys, phone, and wallet on the counter."

I obeyed. "You're not going to tell me what's going on? Because I have no—"

"Where have you been, Casper?"

My gaze never wavered from the blue-black barrel pointed dead center at my chest. I swallowed, said calmly, "Raleigh picked me up and we went for a drink at Pete's Roadhouse."

He made a sound of disgust. "Please. When did I give you the impression that I'm stupid?"

"I'm telling you the truth. I don't know what this is about. Why do you feel you need to keep me at gunpoint?"

Malcolm said impatiently, "Do you really think I didn't see all the telegraphing between you and Bente at dinner? What did she tell you?"

"Bente? She told me goodnight and Merry Christmas."

His lips tightened. He nodded toward the kitchenette. "Make yourself a lemon drop and then come over and sit down."

"Uh... Okay. Can I fixyoua drink."

"Don't be funny. I'm trying to make this as painless as possible for you. Whywouldn't you let me get you the help you clearly need? Why did you have to force this?"

I pressed my lips shut on my reply, moved into the kitchenette and proceeded to make myself a lemon drop martini. I went automatically through the motions, but poured no more than a dash of citrus vodka, a dash of limoncello, and whole lot of Lori's lemonade into a martini glass.

Drink made, I stepped toward the living room, and Malcolm said, "Drink it. Fast."

I swallowed the "martini" in two gulps.

"Make another one."

As I made the second martini, the clock struck two. Pretty unlikely at that hour to have a helpful distraction like a UPS delivery. My best course of action was to get out the front door and somehow make it through the garden to the fields beyond. But how did I do that without getting a bullet in my back? Malcolm was a very good shot.

Plan B would be to try to get to the bedroom and lock the door, but again, the odds were against my making it to the doorway alive. On the other hand, how the hell would Malcolm explain a bullet hole? Especially in my back? He would surely try his best to avoid shooting me. So maybe just play along and wait for an opening?

"Drink it," Malcolm ordered, when I'd fixed the second martini.

I obeyed.

Although I'd made the drinks about as weak as I could without raising suspicion, I was out of the habit of drinking much, and I felt a little sick with a mix of alcohol and fear.

"Make another and bring it over here."

I obeyed and carried the third martini over to the living area. It was crazy how normal everything looked, with the exception of Malcolm and his hunting rifle on my sofa.

He gestured with the rifle and I folded into the chair across from him.

"Are you really not going to explain to me what this about."

He tipped his head sideways. "Pour those into your drink. All of them."

Until that moment I hadn't noticed the small brown bottle of prescription medication on the side table next to the chair.

I picked up the bottle, read the label. Zaleplon. Sleeping pills. Prescribed for Astrid Bredahl-Melber.

I said, "Nobody's going to believe I accidentally poured an entire bottle of sleeping pills into my drink."

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He said coolly, “Of course not. This isn’t an accidental death. This is an obvious case of suicide. A distraught, emotionally unbalanced young man, unable to cope with the pain and shame of his incarceration—and the loss of his beloved sister—tragically takes his own life. I’ve already expressed my fears over your rapidly deteriorating mental health to Mike Baer and to Dr. Marlowe. They didn’t question the idea at all. In fact, Dr. Marlowe believes a serious breakdown had to be anticipated.” His smile was ever-so-slightly spiteful. “You did yourself no favors giving that interview, Casper.”

I said nothing. I’d already discussed with Mike Baer Malcolm’s difficulty accepting my refusal to hand over the directorship.

Malcolm’s sigh sounded genuinely regretful. “Why couldn’t you just cooperate, Casper? This is the last thing I wanted.”

“Apparently not.”

He shook his head. “You’re wrong, I’ve always been fond of you. I was horrified when you were arrested. It’s not as though I’d tried to frame you. I didn’t want that. I was relieved when you were released. I know you never had any interest in running Bredahl. I was taking nothing from you. Nothing. Even when you started talking about selling, I was willing to find an alternative to-to...”

“Murdering me?” I asked politely.

His face tightened. “You pushed this outcome. If you had simply accepted that you need a rest, a break from everything, I’d have happily made sure you were well taken



care of until I could fix the situation. Then you could have come home and everything would have been all right.”

“How were you planning to fix twenty million dollars going missing?”

He let out a long, aggravated sigh. “She did tell you then.”

“Bente? Hell no. How would she know that? Raleigh’s been looking into Astrid’s death. I’m telling you the truth. I didn’t meet with Bente. I swear to God. You don’t need to do anything to Bente. I met with Raleigh, and he knows everything. He knows everything I know, and he’s already requested a warrant for your arrest. So, this is pointless. It’s over. Whether you know it or not.”

“Bullshit. Pour the pills in the glass.”

I took a steadying breath. “You may as well shoot me. I’m not going to drink that.”

“Yes. You will,” he said coolly. “Or, regretfully, I will shoot you. I’ll claim you lost your mind, accused me of murdering your sister, and attacked me. I had no choice.”

“Malcolm, you’re not listening. The police don’t believe Astrid killed herself. They sure as hell aren’t going to believe I also conveniently committed suicide. They know you embezzled twenty million dollars. You don’t think they’ll see a connection?”

He frowned, considered, said firmly, “They don’t have any proof.”

My jaw dropped. “I’m pretty sure they can get the proof.” Even as I said it, I realized I was wasting my breath. Maybe getting away with two murders had convinced Malcolm he was bulletproof. He sounded rational—sort of—but he was not. The best I could hope for was keep him talking until I could make a grab for the rifle.

I popped the lid off the sleeping pills, poured them into the martini, and said, “You know what hurts? I really thought you loved Astrid.”

That got to him.

“I did love her!” Malcolm sounded outraged. “Your sister was my world. My life is hell now. I’d have done anything not to have to lose her like that.”

Did he really not hear himself? “If you’d have done anything, she’d still be with us.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he snapped. “She gave me no choice.”

“That seems to happen to you a lot.”

He didn’t get mad. Instead, he seemed to want to persuade me to seeing things his way, saying earnestly, “If I’d had a little more time, I could have figured out how to pay the money back. No one would have had to know. She could have given me that time. It’s our company. Instead, she insisted we would have to pay the money back out of our savings and investments. She wanted to liquidate our retirement! I worked for that money! I busted my butt for years. I earned every penny of that.”

Good old Malcolm turned out to be a total sociopath. And none of us had ever had a clue.

“She told me that I would have to resign. That once you were released, she would resign as well.”

Someone knocked quietly on the front door. “Caz?” Raleigh called. His voice sounded muffled through the wood.

Malcolm went rigid, swung the rifle toward the door, and I launched myself out of

the chair and grabbed for the rifle. Malcolm half-turned, trying to twist the rifle out of my grip. As the long barrel swung up, the gun went off, blasting a hole through the ceiling. Plaster rained down on us.

I shouted, “Raleigh...” while still wrestling for the rifle.

Behind me, the cottage door burst open as I managed to wrest the rifle from Malcolm. I swung the butt down with all my strength and hit him in the face. He went down like a building getting slammed by a wrecking ball, slumping onto the sofa, then spilling onto the floor.

“Jesus Christ.” Raleigh reached me, weapon trained on Malcolm’s prone body. He grabbed my arm, examining from head to toe. “You’re not shot? You’re okay?”

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I nodded, slipping out of his hold and dropping into the chair I'd been sitting in earlier. "I'm okay."

"You're sure?"

"Sure."

"Are you dizzy? Put your head between your knees." He had already turned away and was yanking Malcolm's arms back to cuff him.

Malcolm appeared to be out cold. At least, I hoped he was out cold.

I said, "I hope I didn't kill him because I'm not going back to jail."

"You're not going to jail. And you didn't kill him."

He rose, spared me another quick look. We stared at each other. Then Raleigh reached in his pocket, pulled out his cell, and phoned for backup.

### Epilogue

I know. Not very romantic.

Cops and crime scenes. They're not very romantic.

After Raleigh called for backup, he took my statement. He was kind but businesslike. Not exactly impersonal, but not what I needed right then. But then, it was becoming

clear to me that Raleigh was not going to be able to give me what I needed. No longer seemed to have any interest in trying.

More cops arrived.

Eventually, Malcolm, still unconscious, was carted off to the hospital. Raleigh vanished shortly after, without a word. Without so much as a glance my way.

I mean, honestly, what was one more hurt on top of all the others?

The rest of the night was spent answering questions, more questions, and still more questions from law enforcement. I will say, I received the kid glove treatment, whether because I was so obviously the victim this time, or because of Matilda Seger's article. I was offered medical attention, which I didn't need, someone brought me a coffee—which was helpful after those extra lemon drops, but had the unfortunate result of making me sick—whereupon I was once again offered medical treatment. Which I once again declined.

What I Did on My Christmas Vacation.

The sun was coming up by the time the last cop car pulled out of my driveway.

I slept for eight hours and woke to a phone call from Police Chief Jackson, who informed me that Malcolm had regained consciousness and that I was going to receive a search warrant later in the day for the Big House. He was sorry for the inconvenience. I assured him it was no inconvenience. He formally apologized on behalf of Little Copenhagen Police Department for the wrongs that I had suffered.

“Did Raleigh resign?” I asked.

I'd known the chief for years, had several “family” dinners under his roof when

Raleigh and I were seeing each other. I could hear him bristling when he replied, “He offered his resignation. I’ve refused to accept it. Rally’s a good cop and a good detective. He doesn’t deserve to be made the scapegoat. The decision to take the case to the DA was mine.”

“I told Raleigh last night I didn’t want him to resign.”

“Then I don’t know why the hell you two can’t work this out.”

That surprised me so much, I didn’t have an answer. In any case, the chief was done talking to me.

Matilda Seger phoned almost the minute I hung up, asking for another interview. I said I wasn’t giving interviews for the time being.

“Weren’t you happy with your interview?” she asked.

“I kind of wish I’d kept my mouth shut,” I said truthfully. My gaze fell on the remnants of the pecan custard coffee cake in the glass cake dome. I had to believe that cake was a sincerely kind gesture on Malcolm’s part. That he had felt affection for me. That Astrid had been his world. Unfortunately, for the Malcolms of the world, their own survival—hell, just their own welfare or maybe even pleasure—was always going to come before anyone else. I’d met a lot of people in jail who shared that trait.

“Did I misquote you or misrepresent anything you said?” Matilda asked.

“No. But a lot of what I said was spoken in anger, when I still felt like someone needed to pay for what I went through. Is there a way I can go on the record to reassure people I’m not planning to close or even sell Bredahl?”

She said quickly, “Yes! That would be great news. We can edit the online edition with

that update today.”

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“I’d appreciate it,” I said wearily.

I was very tired. Emotionally, physically, mentally. I took the Gang of Four for a long run in the field behind the estate. When I got back, I called Dax and asked if I could spend the night with him.

I spent Sunday night with Dax. Monday was a flurry of phone calls to Bredahl management to assure them their jobs were safe and the company would continue. I had endless phone calls with lawyers, including Malcolm’s lawyer—who wanted me to use my clout with LCPD to get Malcolm out on bail. I declined.

I slept at Dax’s again on Monday, but on Tuesday, Christmas Eve, I returned home to the Gingerbread Cottage. The Big House had been searched twice, but no one at LCPD was keeping me up to date on what had been found or not found.

I hadn’t seen or heard from Raleigh since Saturday night.

I can’t pretend it didn’t hurt, but I wasn’t surprised. When he’d cut me off the last time, after he’d visited me in County, that had been that. There had been no follow-up then. What would there be to follow-up on now?

Just calling to say we’re still never going to be together!

Why wasn’t I the one who felt like that? I had felt like that, but then he’d seemed so genuinely horrified and sorry, so hopeful that we could still find a way to be together. Like a goddamned lunatic, I’d let down my guard. With predictable results. I really needed to work on developing that skill: the ability to cut people off and never again



think of them. It would be so useful in my situation.

Anyway.

After I took the Gang of Four for another long, wet romp in the fields, I hiked up to the Big House to wish Sammie a Merry Christmas and tell her I was giving her the next two weeks as paid vacation.

She didn't seem as thrilled with this Christmas present as I'd expected. "Do you plan to stay in the Gingerbread House?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Not permanently. I don't have enough room for the dogs down there."

"Miss Astrid would have wanted you here."

"I know. It's a lot of house for me and four dogs. But I know."

It had been a lot of house for me and Astrid, too, in those early days. We'd been happy. It was not unreasonable I'd find a way to be happy again. Every day I was little better. A little calmer, a little clearer in thought.

I still occasionally wanted to phone Raleigh. Wanted to reach out just to say hey. He'd been a fixture in my life for so long—even before he became an actual fixture. But no. Raleigh was the one who'd walked away on Saturday. Driven away, technically, and twice. I didn't see an opening in the wall he'd constructed between us. Or maybe I'd been hurt so many times, I just didn't have the courage to risk it again. Not even to salvage a friendship out of the wreckage.

It was less painful to think that maybe when things had calmed down, when some of the wounds had healed, we might, oh, maybe casually run into each other one night at

Cutter's Mill, and have a drink for old times' sake?

Luckily, there had been a lot to do, a lot to occupy my mind. I wasn't brooding. Well, maybe at night when the silence made it hard to sleep, when the memories kept me tossing and turning, reliving every word, every moment.

I walked through the lovely, festive rooms of the Big House. There were so many prettily presents beneath the giant tree. Presents for Malcolm. Presents with my name on them too. Astrid would have bought them early in the season, when she'd still thought she'd be delivering them to me at County.

I stared at her handwriting on the tags for a long time. I'd have given almost anything to be able to talk to her again for even five minutes.

Maybe I would walk up here on Christmas Day, light the tree, and open my gifts. It would be a way of honoring Astrid's memory.

It sounded pretty damn lonely, too.

It was snowing lightly as I left the Big House and hiked back through the garden. I was just about to the Gingerbread House when I heard a dog barking hysterically in the distance. For a moment I thought the Gang of Four had broken out, but then my heart jumped. I knew that bark. That was Freyja's bark.

I knew it couldn't be, but...

I put my fingers to my lips, whistled, nearly slipping twice on the flagstones as I hurried down the walk.

As I reached the bottom, a golden retriever burst of the pyramid of shrubbery, and knocked me down into the snow.

“Freyja?” I gasped between wet-rough retriever kisses. I sat up, grabbed her face, stared into her soft-brown eyes. She pulled free and continued her frantic licking. She had a collar, but it wasn’t Freyja’s. She didn’t have any tags. She was a lot skinnier. But it was definitely Freyja. I knew my own dog. She knew me.

“Christ, Freyja.” Raleigh strode up the path, lifted Freyja off me. She transferred her attentions briefly to him, then wriggled free and tried to crawl on top of me. “Freyja.” Raleigh said to me, “This isn’t quite how I planned it. She had a bow. Are you okay?”

I sat up, wrapped my arms around Freyja, buried my face in her fur. She was silky-soft and she smelled of dog shampoo, so...

“Where did you find her?” My voice was muffled in Freyja’s neck.

“Dane County.”

“What?” I raised my head, stared up at him. “You’re telling me she ran all the way to Dane County?”

He had been smiling a little, watching us, but his expression hardened. “She was dumped on the side of the road. Animal Control finally managed to catch her. I was the one who took her to be chipped, so my name was on her registration.”

“She...”

“The car was caught on security footage. The license wasn’t captured, but the vehicle was a Chevy Tahoe.”

“Malcolm?”

“That’s how it looks.” He reached down to me.

“But why?” I kissed Freyja’s nose, took Raleigh’s gloved hand, and he pulled me to my feet.

“I guess he didn’t want her around.”

“I don’t understand. What the hell did Freyja ever do to him?” My voice wobbled. Of all the things that Malcolm had done, no lie, that seemed the absolute cruelest.

“Maybe she was too much of a reminder. Of Astrid. Of you. Of everything he didn’t

want to think about. I'm just grateful as hell he didn't shoot her and bury her behind the kennels." He saw my expression and said, "Hey, he didn't do that. He probably even thought dropping her off was the kinder option."

"Jesus Christ, that bastard—" The next moment Freyja tried to vault into my arms, and Raleigh managed to grab us both before I fell back in the snow.

"Oh-kay. Maybe we should take this inside."

It was nice to be in his arms, even for that short moment, even sharing that comforting hold with sixty-five pounds of enthusiastic dog. Raleigh smiled that little half-smile, gray eyes gazing down at me. He reached out and brushed my cheek. He said gently, "Are those snowflakes or tears?"

Even though his hand was gloved, I felt that touch in every pore of my face. "Beats me."

"You got her back, honey. She's home."

I don't think he even noticed that little word slipped out.

"Yeah, thank you."

He said ruefully, "I didn't do a whole hell of a lot."

Freyja seemed to disagree, wriggling up to lick his face.

"Okay, I have to put you down. You're going to kill us both." I dropped her and she scrambled up, racing ahead, barking like a maniac, then circling back toward us. That had nothing to do with her recent trauma; she'd always been crazy.

Raleigh and I continued toward the cottage, boots crunching snow.

After a moment, he said, “So, you’re Bredahl’s new director.”

“Yeah, well, there’s nobody else left.”

He shook his head. “You never gave yourself any credit, Caz. You were a good VP. The employees thought the world of you.”

“Ohplease. The boss’s kid brother. What are they going to say?”

“You’ll be a great director. You’re ten years older than Astrid was when she took charge, and she trained you. You’ll do fine. People are thrilled.”

“I guess even I’m preferable to a murdering embezzler.”

“See, that’s my point,” he said solemnly, and I laughed. Raleigh put his arm around my shoulders. “Seriously. How are you doing?”

I said, “Are you being polite? Or do you actually care? Because you couldn’t get out of here fast enough on Saturday.”

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There was one of those excruciating pauses, before he replied, “Technically, it was Sunday morning. I had to go. I had reports to file, your brother-in-law to arrest.”

“Yep. You’re a busy guy.”

By then we’d reached the cottage gate. Freyja waited for us, tail wagging.

“Are you coming in?” I asked.

He hesitated.

“No,” I said. “Okay, well, thanks for Freyja. That’s the best Christmas gift I could have wished for. I mean that.”

“Yeah, I’ll come in,” Raleigh said.

But he sounded so sad and serious that my heart began to pound in sick thumps. I knew I was about to hear something I really didn’t want to hear.

But no point postponing the inevitable. I opened the gate; we walked through and went inside the cottage.

Raleigh glanced around, but made no comment on the continuing lack of anything remotely related to the holidays. His family, my family, always made a huge fuss of Christmas. It was going to take me while to disassociate Christmas from disaster.

Freyja proceeded to noisily, frantically sniff every corner of the room. Raleigh

watched her, like he was on stakeout and she was his prime suspect.

“Did you want a drink? I have a feeling I’m going to need one.”

Raleigh looked at me with quick surprise. “Caz, I’m not trying to hurt you. The last thing I ever want to do again is hurt you.”

“But you’re doing it anyway.”

He swallowed.

“It’s okay. I get it. It’s over.” I shrugged, went into the kitchen and began to fix a lemon drop. “Sure you don’t want something?”

I was startled when he came up behind me, put his arms around me. I closed my eyes, stood very still. For a moment, we stayed like that, just breathing quietly in unison.

He said finally, very quietly, “I wish there was a way forward for us. You don’t know how much I want that. I wish there was a magical way to undo it all. But there isn’t. There just isn’t.”

I nodded. I couldn’t have spoken if my life depended on it. It felt like it did.

“I thought I was doing the right thing. It wasn’t prison. You were going to have a trial. If you were innocent, it would come out. There would be justice.”

I said shakily, “Justice? Jesus Christ, Raleigh. There is no fucking justice. Do you think I’m getting justice now?”

“No. I don’t. And If I’d known then—I couldn’t have—I don’t think I would have been able to do it.”



He'd told me that before. On Friday night.

I laughed. It was a watery kind of laugh. "Am I supposed to feel bad about that?"

"Yes. I don't know! Maybe. Because, had you been guilty, it would have been the right thing to do. Murder is not okay. It's not acceptable. And it's especially not acceptable because I'm a cop. I do believe in justice."

I turned to face him, and his arms dropped to his side. "But I was innocent!"

"I know. It's a fucking disaster. A disaster that something like that happened to you. A disaster that I was any part of it. I'll never forgive myself."

There was so much pain, so much anger in that—anger at himself, not me—that I didn't know what to say. Freja whined in the silence that followed.

Raleigh said finally, with alarming weariness, "It doesn't matter if you can forgive me. I'm never going to forgive myself."

"Yes." I let out a long breath. "I know. You really did think I was guilty." I even dredged up some kind of a smile. "It was an honest mistake."

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He flinched, as if I'd slapped him. But I wasn't saying it to punish him. I was coming to terms with the truth of it.

"I guess what hurts the most is that you knew me so little. We'd known each other our entire lives. But, yeah, we didn't know each other intimately. We were only together a few months."

The best months of my life. But who was counting?

His eyes got very bright and shiny, though he said steadily. "I'm so sorry, Caz."

He meant it with all his heart. As he had on Thursday, on Friday, on Saturday. How many sorries would it take to fill that well inside me?

I said haltingly, "But here's the thing. This is what's killing me. I still love you. Even when I hated you, I loved you. And I don't see that ever changing."

He closed his eyes like I had said something beyond bearing.

"I know what you're saying. It's true. You can't be with someone, share their life, who you can't forgive. That would end up destroying both of us."

He nodded painfully. "Yeah. It would."

I drew in a long, shaky breath. "But I do forgive you. That's the part you don't seem to understand. I'm not saying it doesn't still hurt. But I can accept that you did the wrong things for the right reasons. That, for you, it was never about whether

you...loved me or not..." My voice was wobbling like I'd had a blow-out. You could practically hear the flap-flap-flap of my heart. "If you don't feel the same, that's a whole different thing..."

Raleigh's face came back to life. He wrapped his arms around me so tightly, I gasped. "I've always loved you, Caz. Even when you were a happy-go-lucky goofball back in junior high, I thought you were the cutest, sweetest guy in the world. That's never going to change."

"Then why can't we work this out? If I can forgive you, what the hell sense does it make for you to refuse to forgive yourself? Especially, when it means hurting someone. I mean, I don't get it, Raleigh. I really don't."

He looked confused.

"If you really don't care enough to try and work through this—"

"You know that's not what I'm saying," he protested.

"Then I don't know what you are saying. All I know is, I love you. And if you walk out that door, you're going to break my heart for the second time. And it's so goddamned unnecessary. Don't I deserve a little happiness?"

"Of course you do. You deserve...all the happiness in the world."

"Then why can't you pay your penance, or whatever it is you think you have to do, by trying to make me happy? Why do I have to be part of your noble sacrifice? Haven't we learned anything? Couldn't we try to spend the rest of our lives making each other happy?"

He looked bewildered.

“Caz, is that really what you what?” He sounded doubtful, shaken. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. That’s what I’m saying. Yes.” I gave up on words and kissed him, kissed him with all the pent-up longing and yearning and aching I’d tried for so long to smother, ignore, forget—and, after a startled instant, he kissed me back, hungrily, tenderly, lovingly. Yes, lovingly.

“I love you so much,” he whispered. “I don’t see why I should get rewarded— ” He kissed me again, softly, sweetly, remorsefully.

When I got my breath back, I murmured, “I’m not saying I won’t bring up sending me to jail the next time you tell me I’ve got something wrong—” I jumped as Freyja poked an inquisitive nose into other people’s business.

Raleigh laughed unsteadily, held me tighter.