

## Unforgiven

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The day I found out my husband was dead, it broke my heart. But I collected enough of myself to drive into town and corner the sheriff for answers. The jail was around the corner from Main Street, a tidy rectangle of a building with a pair of Art Deco angels guarding the entrance. Back in the day, my little hometown had big dreams for itself; like my own, those had been crushed to dust.

“Cassie! I was just heading over to see you,” the sheriff said when I walked in. That was an obvious lie. He was at his desk, with a spread from In-N-Out Burger laid in front of him.

I didn’t waste any time. “I’m here about Ray.”

The sheriff nodded and wiped his face with a napkin. He was red-faced and bulky, with a nose that had been broken a few times. It was hard to say if his face flushed, because he was always overheated. “You have no idea how sorry I am,” he said.

“I heard he died in jail.”

“Who told you that?”

“My father,” I lied.

That earned a stiff little nod. “Okay. Yeah. We came back and found him in his cell. I feel terrible, Cassie. I wish I’d been able to stop him.”

“Stop him?” I repeated, my voice flat.

“From killing himself. You know...you know Ray killed himself, right?”

“He would never do that.”

“I know it’s hard to believe, Cassie. Your husband’s been having issues lately. Drinking a lot. Maybe it was PTSD. So many guys in the service come back like that. Ray did, what, two full tours in Iraq, didn’t he?”

I nodded.

“So, who’s to say what kind of demons he brought home with him,” the sheriff went on. “You never really know, do you?”

“I want to see Ray’s body.”

“That’s not a good idea. Look, maybe you should talk to your dad. He’s handling all the arrangements.”

“Why would my dad do that?”

“Well, you’re away so much, Cassie. And I guess everyone knows you and Ray were living separate lives. You can’t hide much in a little town like Constantine.”

I swallowed my anger, aware I needed to stay calm. My father controlled everything in our tiny town, including the sheriff. If I was ever going to get to the truth about what had happened, it wouldn’t be by blowing up.

“How did Ray die?”

“He cut his wrists open. It was bad.”

Automatically, I glanced in the direction of the town’s single jail cell. It was pristine and empty. The acrid aroma of bleach hung in the air.

“How on earth did Ray get a knife into his cell?” I asked.

“He used a piece of metal he broke off the cot. We got rid of that cot first thing, of course. Damned dangerous to have it around.”

He looked down at his rapidly cooling burger and fries and I wondered if some part of him felt bad about lying to me. He wasn't an evil man, from what I knew, just an obedient one.

“There's one thing I don't understand in all of this,” I said. “Why did you arrest Ray in the first place?”

The sheriff shifted his bulk in his seat and the chair squeaked under him. “He was drunk and disorderly. Screaming his head off. I only brought him in to calm him down. I figured he'd sleep it off.”

“Are you saying it had nothing to do with Ray going over to my father's house?”

“How did you...” For the first time, the sheriff's weak chin quivered. “I mean, like I said, Ray was going bonkers, yelling and stuff. Your dad called me because he was worried about him. He told you about that?”

“No, he didn't,” I answered. “But that doesn't matter. Like you said, you can't hide much in this little town.”

Constantine wasn't the kind of place that came to mind when you heard *California*. It was far from the warm, balmy coast, caught between cheap land where oranges struggled to grow and the unforgiving heat of the desert. It existed in a strange time warp, where modern technology co-existed with strict 1950s values. It wasn't poor, exactly, but all its wealth was concentrated in the hands of one man, my father. You'd think that would give me a privileged perch, but I'd been trying to escape the town for most of my life. I'd believed that marrying Ray would finally let me leave, but Ray was snagged in my father's silvery web. He'd worked for my father and he'd ended up dead.

When I left the jail and got back into my car, I looked at my phone. There was the last message my husband had sent me: *Your father is a murderer. I'm going to make him pay for what he's done.*

I hadn't seen the message until a couple of hours after he sent it, and then there was a long string of confused messages from me that Ray never answered.

*What are you taking about?*

*What did he do?*

*Did you see him do it?*

*Are you okay?*

*Where are you?*

*Is this about my mother?*

I read them over with a knot tightening in the pit of my stomach. The night before, I'd been furious with Ray for not answering me. It was only just dawning on me that he hadn't been able to.

Steeling myself for the worst, I drove to my father's house. It was a sprawling Victorian mansion that couldn't have been more out of place on the edge of the desert. No one answered the door when I knocked, which seemed unlikely. Part of me was relieved; I wasn't ready to confront my father. He had a way of making me feel as if I were being petulant and childish whenever I questioned him. The person I really wanted to see was my baby sister, Chloe. She was the one who'd called me that morning, just after I got

home from my shift at a hospital in Long Beach. Her voice was barely a whisper. *I overheard Dad this morning. He said Ray's dead. I don't know what happened, but Ray was here last night, freaking out. Dad had him arrested.* Before I could formulate a question, she'd added, *He'll kill me if he catches me with a phone. I'm so sorry, Cassie.* The call was all of fifteen seconds long, but I knew Ray's death was a fact.

I couldn't call Chloe back; she'd undoubtedly borrowed her mother's cell to call me. My stepmother, Marielle, was a sweet woman, but she'd never been able to stand up to my father. She rarely left the house, and I had the uneasy feeling she was hiding in the shadowy hallway, holding her breath until I left. I didn't have a key; my father had never trusted me with one. Breaking in would get me nowhere. Instead, I left my car parked in the long driveway and crossed the road. There was a smaller house there, pretty, like a gingerbread confection, where my older sister, Caron, lived with her husband and three children. When I knocked she answered the door with a wailing baby on one hip.

"Cassie. Oh, honey, I'm so sorry about Ray." She pulled me in for an awkward hug. "Are you okay?"

"No. The sheriff is trying to convince me that Ray killed himself and I know that's not true."

"He used something in the cell to cut his wrists. Dad told me this morning."

"Dad says a lot of things that aren't true. Can I come in?"

Caron's house was elegantly decorated with antique furniture, much like our father's was, but there were signs of kid-inspired chaos. Caron kicked a red truck under the piano bench. "Sorry the place is such a disaster. I have to get it cleaned before Mike gets home."

My sister was living the same life our mother had when we were young, before she'd vanished. I bit my tongue; we'd had too many arguments about her choice to live the life our father wanted for her and my decision to rebel. Truth was, neither option was working out well.

"I know you're busy," I said. "I just want to hear about what happened last night when Ray confronted Dad."

Caron shot me a pained look as she bounced the baby on her hip. "I don't know anything."

"You're right across the street. You must've heard something." When she didn't answer, I pulled out my phone. "Ray sent me this." I watched her face as she took it in.

"Why would Ray say that?" Her voice was soft. For a moment, I thought how incredible it was, that hearing someone call our father a murderer didn't make us blink an eyelash. "It doesn't make any sense. He's always got along with Dad. Better than Mike does. Dad loves Ray because he was in the Army."

Caron's husband, Mike, was a nice enough guy, but he often came across as if he'd been dropped on his head when he was a kid, maybe more than once. He was the son of one of my father's business partners, so their pairing had been welcomed by my dad, but he didn't hide the fact he thought Mike was a dummy.

"Dad used to like Ray," I said. "But something's been off for a while. I don't know what happened."

"Didn't you ask?"

"I did, but..." My voice trailed off. "You know I've been working the night shift at a hospital, right?"

“The one you won’t tell anyone the name of, so Dad can’t get you fired?”

My father hadn’t minded me going to school to become a nurse, but it turned out that was because he wanted someone on call to help with his diabetes and arthritis. He didn’t think a woman should have a job outside the home. I was twenty-eight years old and sneaking around just to work.

“The point is, Ray and I haven’t been seeing much of each other,” I admitted. “He didn’t tell me what was going on. Except for that text. I think he knew something bad would happen to him if he confronted Dad.” I took a deep breath. “Do you think Ray discovered something about Mom?”

“Stop it, Cassie.” She was angry, which was how she reacted whenever I brought up the subject. “Dad didn’t do anything to Mom. She left us. End of story.”

“What kind of woman leaves her eight and ten-year-olds and never contacts them again?” I asked. “I don’t believe Dad. I never have.”

“You’ve made that clear. Look, no one wants to believe their mother would leave them, but it happens every day.”

“Would you leave *your* kids?” I challenged.

“Never.” She glared at me and kissed the top of the baby’s head. “Don’t give me that look. Just because I wouldn’t doesn’t mean—”

“You know I can’t let it go. I’ve looked for her, and she’s nowhere to be found. Ray knew all about it. Maybe he figured something out—”

“This wasn’t about Mom,” Caron said. “Look, all I heard last night was one thing Ray shouted at Dad.”

“What?”

“He was banging on the door, and he yelled, ‘You murdered him, and I know how.’”

“Him?” I repeated. “You’re sure Ray said *him*?”

“Positive. Dad opened the door and brought him into the house. After that,” Caron paused and gazed at the baby, “I didn’t see Ray again.”

I didn’t confront my father until the day of Ray’s funeral. The truth was, I could’ve gone over to his house at any time, but I wasn’t ready to. I wanted to go through Ray’s things, find whatever evidence he’d turned up, make my case from that. Only, there was nothing. Ray hadn’t left behind so much as a suspicious matchbook. There were photographs and a handful of mementoes, mostly from Ray’s tours of duty. He’d always liked to talk about his band of brothers, as he called them, and there he was, tanned dark and with shades on, grinning as they stood together in the sun; sometimes there were Iraqi coworkers in the group. There was nothing from Ray’s childhood, but my husband had been orphaned young and shuttled through a series of foster homes. I knew he’d never cared to revisit those years. The Army was his real family.

On the day of Ray’s funeral, I donned a black dress and drove myself to the church three blocks from the jail where Ray had died. It was the first time I’d laid eyes on my father since Ray’s death. He was dressed in a dark suit that disguised some of his bulk, walking with a cane topped with a lion’s head that was one of his more theatrical affectations.

“This is a nice turnout,” my father said. “It’s good to see so many people paying their respects.”

“A lot of people miss Ray,” I said.

“They’re here for our family, Cassie.” He nodded to himself, gazing at the crowd. “They’re paying their respects to me. You know that.”

It was all about him, as it always was. But I didn’t care about his ardent narcissism that day. “What happened between you and Ray? You used to love him. Then something changed. What was it?”

My father’s big shoulders made the slightest of shrugs. “He wasn’t a good husband to you, Cassie. And believe it or not, family is all that matters to me. Nothing’s more important than doing right by family. I know you don’t want to hear it, but that’s a fact.”

“What are you saying? That Ray was cheating on me?” I shook my head. “Even when I was a kid, I knew you were cheating on Mom. You cheat on Marielle. You expect me to believe you would care if Ray cheated? To you, that’s what a normal man does.”

“In every part of life, there are rules you have to play by,” he shot back.

“Like what?”

“Like stick to your own kind.”

I stared at him as he walked away, my mind reeling. One of the things I’d loved about Ray was his open-mindedness about people. In some ways, he was a gun-toting, red-meat-eating conservative who fit into my father’s world, but he was also a champion for Iraqis who’d helped US forces, and he’d helped several families settle in the U.S. *You have no idea the risks those people took, working with us*, Ray would say. *There’s nobody who hates terrorists more than they do*. If Ray had fallen in love with one of those women, it wouldn’t have shocked me. I’d married Ray to escape my father, not because I’d been in deeply in love. Ray was a good man, but we’d never really been on the same wavelength.

During the service, I wondered if the woman in question would show up. If she did, I didn’t catch sight of her. But after the service, I went home and pulled out Ray’s photos again. There were several with an Iraqi man and woman who were brother and sister. The man was called Mohammed; he’d worked as a translator. I stared at the woman with her dark hair mostly hidden by a headscarf and her shy smile. Samya, that was her name; I’d met her a couple of times. And I knew exactly where to find her.

The day after Ray’s funeral, I escaped my family and drove west. I told myself all I wanted to see was the ocean, blue sky and water stretching into infinity on the horizon. But that wasn’t true. Samya and her brother had settled into a little house in Murrieta. Finding it wasn’t the hard part. What was a lot tougher was working up the nerve to knock on the door.

When Samya opened it, we stared at each other for a breathless moment. She was barefoot, in jeans and a loose white cotton shirt. There was no headscarf today. Her lustrous black hair cascaded around her shoulders.

“Cassie,” she said finally. “You’re...Ray’s wife.”

“Sorry to drop in on you like this. If it’s a bad time—”

“No, no. It is good to see you.” Her dark eyes were filling with tears. “I am so sorry about Ray.”

I hadn’t been certain how she’d react to finding me on her doorstep. It had been at least six months since I’d seen her. She was thinner than I remembered, and I saw the

dark half-moons under her eyes, the shadow over her delicate features. She was in mourning, of that I had no doubt. I had no idea how I was going to say what I needed to say to her.

“Where are my manners? Please, please, come in,” she said.

I followed her, easy as a lamb. Her home was simply and sparsely furnished, which made it elegant. I’d been prepared for her to be angry or fearful, but her tenderness and sorrow disarmed me.

“I was just making tea,” she said. “Let me pour you a cup.”

She did, but she didn’t say another word. We slid into seats across from each other. “How have you been?” I asked.

“This has been the saddest time of my life,” she answered softly. “Worse than that war. It feels like I have lost everything.”

I stared at her. On the drive there, I’d been wondering how to broach the subject of her relationship with Ray. It hadn’t occurred to me that she’d bring it up herself. *You were sleeping with my husband*, I wanted to say, but my mouth was parched. I took a sip of tea.

“Ray did so much for Mo and me,” Samya continued. “He helped us come here, helped us get a place to live and furniture and work. He and Mo...” Her voice cracked, and she started to sob. She choked out a few more words, but I couldn’t understand them.

“I didn’t realize you loved him,” I said softly. “I’m so sorry.”

Samya wiped her tears away, smearing her makeup. “I have been a mess since he died,” she admitted. “I cannot eat. I cannot sleep. I keep seeing his face in front of my eyes. Only it was not his face anymore, because it was so broken.”

“They...they let you see his body?”

Samya gulped and nodded. “I insisted. Because I knew he would never drive drunk. He would not drink at all.”

I stared at her, realizing we were having two entirely separate conversations. “I don’t understand,” I said. “They told me Ray killed himself. That he cut his wrists—”

She shook her head. “I was talking about Mo. He died almost a month ago.”

“Your brother...” The knowledge swept over me like a wave. I reached out for her hand. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am. Please believe me. I didn’t know.”

“Ray didn’t tell you?”

“We hadn’t seen much of each other lately.” That was an understatement. Our marriage had always been a long-distance affair, even when we were in the same room.

Samya looked down at her hands. “Ray and Mo were so close.”

The knowledge landed like a gut punch, knocking the wind out of me, only it didn’t hurt. Suddenly, I understood exactly what she meant. I’d been a little jealous about the idea of Ray being involved with another woman; on some ridiculous level, it made me feel like a failure. The fact that he was in love with a man meant it had nothing to do with me.

I took a deep breath. “Tell me how your brother died.”

“The official story or the real one?” Samya asked, meeting my eyes again.

“Both.”

“Officially, he drove his car off the road and it crashed in a ravine. They claim his blood alcohol was sky-high. But that’s a lie. Mo never drank alcohol in his life.” She pulled her arms around herself, as if suddenly chilled. “There were other things that were wrong. The car fell twenty feet. It wasn’t smashed up. But Mo...” She took a breath. “He

was so broken and bloody he didn't look like a person anymore. They said it was because he didn't have his seatbelt on. No. It was staged. All of it. I knew it and Ray knew it. Ray told me he was going to prove it."

"Did Ray tell you who did it?"

Samya gave me a long look, her dark eyes fearful.

"It was my father, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "Ray told me it wasn't the first time your father had someone killed that way."

Sunday dinner at my father's house was a longstanding family tradition. My stepmother, Marielle, cooked up a feast, as usual. There was pot roast and mashed potatoes, grilled root vegetables and heavy dressed salad. Midway through the meal, my father hoisted his glass of pinot noir in the air. "I don't suppose there's any reason to keep this secret any longer," he said. "To Chloe, who will be the most beautiful bride in the world this June."

There was silence around the table. "Charles, please," Marielle said. "You promised we would talk about this—"

"I've made up my mind," my father said. "It's in her best interest."

"Excuse me," Marielle whispered, getting up and rushing out of the room.

"She'll come around," my father said. "Women love nothing better than planning a wedding."

My sister Caron blanched. "But Chloe's sixteen."

"She'll be seventeen then," my father answered. "Chloe will be marrying the son of my good friend Glenn."

"Awesome! Glenn rocks," Caron's husband, Mike, leaned forward. "When we were in college, he was the kegger king."

Caron glanced at me. "Glenn Junior? But...isn't he thirty-four or -five? And divorced?"

"Which only means he'll be able to guide Chloe. That's what a girl needs. A good man to guide her."

"Amen to that!" Mike raised his glass and emptied it in a gulp. "Bitches be crazy without men to guide them. That's what I always say."

Caron shot me a look. Normally, I was the one who got upset with my father. Instead I raised my own glass. "Well, then. To Chloe and Glenn Junior."

I didn't even try to meet either of my sisters' eyes. Instead, I let my father prattle on, then asked about his gout. There was nothing he liked talking about more than his own health. I asked the occasional question but let him go on, not even commenting when he complained about his diabetes while consuming his second helping of apple pie a la mode.

After dinner, he asked me to look at his blood-sugar monitor and give him an injection. I knew he would; if there was one thing my father loved almost as much as throwing his weight around, it was being fussed over.

"These numbers aren't so good," I told him. That was the truth. "We should probably test your sugar level now, thanks to dinner and all that pie."

He sat calmly while I lanced his finger.

“You’re not really going to marry Chloe off to Glenn Junior, are you?” I asked him. “Marielle seemed so sad. Chloe looked miserable about it.”

“She’s too young to know what’s good for her. That’s the problem with women: you give them choices, and they’ll only make bad ones.”

“Hmm, your blood sugar’s through the roof right now. I’m going to give you a small shot of insulin, and we’ll test again in a moment, okay?”

“Okay.”

I gave him the injection. “Of course, it’s not only women who make bad choices.”

He eyed me suspiciously. “Oh, really?”

“I’m sure you think Ray made bad decisions.”

“That’s true. At least, in one area. He was a good man. It’s a shame what happened to him.”

It was amazing to hear him speak about it, as if whatever happened to Ray didn’t involve him in the slightest. That was the way it was with my father; I was never going to get the answers I wanted from him.

“You really need to be more careful about what you eat,” I said, lancing the tip of another finger and giving him a second shot. “You don’t make the best decisions for yourself.”

“Of course, I do.” He was only mildly affronted. “But you’re going to die of something one day. May as well enjoy yourself.”

“Then it’s a rational decision. A calculation.”

“That’s right. I weigh the options. Then I do the best I can for my family.”

“Only things don’t work out well for your family. Just for you.”

His eyelids were fluttering now, and he was sweating. “I don’t feel right.” His was flushed and fearful. “What was in those shots?”

“Just your insulin. Only they were very big shots.”

“You’re trying to kill me.”

“No,” I said softly. “Even though maybe you deserve that. I’m not a killer. But I’m not going to stand by and let you ruin more lives. You’ve done enough harm already.”

“What’s...what’s happening to me?” he gasped. Sweat poured down his face.

“You’re going into insulin shock. Give it a few minutes, and you’ll be in a coma. You’re going to stay in that coma for the rest of your life.”

“Why?” he gasped. “Ray never even loved you.”

“It’s not just about Ray,” I said, patting his arm. “You know that, don’t you?”

“You won’t get away with it.”

“Yes, I will. I’m a nurse. And guess what? I’m doing what you wanted and quitting my job. I’m going to be devoting my time to your care, Dad.”

His eyes were rolling up in their sockets.

“I know you killed Mom. Even though you’d never admit it.”

“If I did...would you stop?”

“No, I’ll never forgive you for that. Anyway, you’d just go on hurting people. It’s all you know how to do.”

He wasn’t able to speak. His whole body was trembling. It was harder to watch that I’d expected. The prospect of losing control had always terrified my father. Now that it was actually happening, his face was a mask of terror.

“I don’t want you to worry, Dad.” I leaned in close. “You always said you did things for the good of our family. I promise you, I’ll always try to do right by them.” We’d never been affectionate with each other, but I reached out and held his hand until he slipped out of consciousness.