

Chapter 1. A Blast from the Past

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"You smell amazing, Cass," Liam tells me in a whisper, sending a shiver down my spine. He buries his nose in the crook of my neck, gently pressing teasing kisses up its length before he begins nibbling at my earlobe.

I hold back a moan as my fingers comb through his dark hair. I have to be careful not to make any noise—although my coworker, Mila, is totally aware of what I'm doing inside here in the restroom.

Liam grabs my neck and kisses me without a warning—it's wild and amazing, something I'm starting to get used to. His hand travels slowly up my thigh and my waist before it hooks at my breast, his lips never leaving mine.

Dangerous thoughts invade my mind. Irrational desires.

I want him to strip me naked right here in this cubicle and do whatever he pleases with me, but the moment I realise he's trying to lower my shirt so he can suck my n****s, I have no choice but to protest. It's barely a protest.

"Hey, hey. We c-can't. Not here," I murmur against his lips. "My break's about to end."

He kisses me more furiously. I lean in further, pulling him towards me more even though my mind tells me I shouldn't.

"Cassie!" Mila's loud but merry voice jerks us apart.

I laugh, despite breathing heavily. Leaning forward, I kiss him one last time before letting him go.

"I'll see you tonight at my house?" he asks, brushing his thumb across my cheek.

I nod. "Yeah," I say in a whisper.

He pushes the cubicle door open and leaves. It takes me a good minute to calm down. I button my shirt and x the apron before I head out.

"Hey, Cassie, someone left this for you a while ago," Mila, my coworker at Swirls and Shakes, tells me with a nasty smirk as she passes me an envelope. It's a rare occurrence for us to receive personal mail at work, especially handwritten. The neat script on the front bears my full name, Cassandra Howard, in elegant strokes.

With a puzzled frown, I tuck it inside one of the pockets in my apron, feeling its presence like a subtle weight against my hip. Whatever it contains, it can surely wait until after my shift. Retrieving my notepad from the other pocket, I stride purposefully towards the newest customers, their arrival marked by the cheerful jingle of the entrance bell.

"Hello, madam. Hello, sir. Welcome to Swirls and Shakes. Are you ready to order?" I greet them with a practised smile, one honed through countless interactions with patrons over my time here.

The woman, her eyes scanning the menu with genuine interest, offers a warm smile in return before deferring to her husband, who seems preoccupied with the menu's contents. "What's the best y'all have?" he nally asks, his voice carrying a hint of weariness.

"How about you try our 'Sizzle Supreme Burger Combo'?" I suggest, describing the dish with a touch of culinary air. "It includes our signature juicy beef patty topped with sizzling bacon, melted cheddar cheese, crispy lettuce, ripe tomatoes, and tangy pickles, served with a side of golden fries or onion rings and a refreshing swirl of our classic vanilla milkshake."

"Yeah, I'll have that," he responds, his tone lacking the enthusiasm his words suggest.

"Onion rings."

I jot down his order, making a mental note to infuse a little extra care into its preparation. "One 'Sizzle Supreme Burger Combo' with onion rings for you. And for you, ma'am?"

She hesitates, her gaze ickering uncertainly before she ventures, "Do you offer a vegan version of the same?"

Her husband shoots her a disapproving glance, their matching rings glinting in the soft glow of the diner's lights. Ignoring his silent reproach, I focus on her query. "Certainly, ma'am. It comes with vegan cheese, a tofu patty, and a soy milk milkshake."

"That's great. I'll have that. And a side of golden fries," she decides, her smile growing more content as she finalises her order.

"I'll be right back with your orders," I assure them before returning to the counter, where Mila awaits with a bouquet of roses cradled delicately in her hands.

"Woah," I exclaim, genuinely surprised by the unexpected delivery. "Who's been sending you flowers?"

"Oh, I wish. These came for you. See? Cassandra Howard," she announces with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, thrusting the bouquet towards me like an offering.

I examine the blooms, their vibrant colours contrasting against the neutral tones of the diner's interior. "That's very strange. An envelope and a bouquet?"

"It's romantic, I say. Is this from the Liam guy?" Mila inquires, her curiosity piqued as she leans in closer.

I shake my head, a wry smile playing at the corners of my lips. "Nah, all Liam and I do is f**k. He won't do this romantic s**t for me. Besides, he was just inside there with me, wasn't he? Who gave it anyway?"

"Joe knows. He said it came in the morning. He kept it aside and forgot about it until now."

"Joe and his fading memory," I mutter.

"Open the envelope, will you?" Mila urges eagerly, her anticipation palpable as she wiggles her neatly trimmed eyebrows. "It came together. Come on, come on, do it."

"Alright, wait," I agree, laughing as I tear off the edge and retrieve a small note from within. I read it aloud, the words lingering in the air like a whispered secret. "Have you missed me? R.S."

"Oooh, that's intriguing," Mila remarks, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she reaches for the note. "The handwriting is even sexier. Who's R.S.?"

"I-It's Rhys Sinclair," I confess, my voice barely audible even to myself. I can hardly believe what I've just read. It feels surreal, like a scene from a forgotten dream resurfacing in vivid detail. "I need a moment, Mila," I murmur before hastily retreating to the restroom.

For a couple of minutes, I'm settled in the restroom, the dull hum of the diner's activity muted by the closed door. My breath comes in shallow gasps, and beads of sweat form on my forehead.

Can you believe it's been a whopping six years since he last reached out to me? Six whole years where I've been living life to the fullest, basking in the glow of my newfound independence. I thought I had locked those old memories in a mental box, thrown away the key, and let them collect dust in the attic of my brain.

But, as luck would have it, the past has a sneaky way of tapping you on the shoulder when you least expect it. Just when I managed to convince myself that I'd moved on, that I left all the drama and mystery behind, this note shows up—signed with the enigmatic R.S.—Rhys Sinclair—and it threatens to undo all the stitching on my brand-new life.

It's a stark reminder of a chapter I thought I had slammed shut. A chapter lled with ery love, chaos, and scars on my heart.

I had this whole narrative in my head, you know? That I'd move on, become this strong, unshakeable woman. But that note is a game-changer, making me realise the past isn't a closed book. It's more like a smouldering ember just waiting to burst into flames.

What does he want after all this time? Why does he choose this moment to reappear, shaking up the serene routine I've built? And the big question: am I ready to face the emotional rollercoaster this reunion might trigger?

"Cassie?" Mila's voice breaks through the haze of my thoughts, her concern palpable even through the closed door. "Are you alright? Come outside, please. There's a man waiting for you."

My heart lurches at her words, the implications sinking in like a stone in my stomach. He's here. Outside, waiting for me.

But why?

I could stay here, holed up in the relative safety of the restroom, for a few minutes longer. Maybe an hour, at most, before the inevitable arrival of our manager forces me out. But deep down, I know that I can't hide forever. So, with a resigned sigh, I steel myself and step out into the harsh uorescent light of reality.

"You alright, babe?" Mila asks, enveloping me in a comforting embrace as I emerge from the restroom.

I offer her a weak nod, my facade of composure crumbling in the face of the storm raging within me. "Yeah, just an old flame."

"Wait... you mean the man outside?" Mila's eyes widen with excitement.

I shrug, my gaze drifting towards the entrance where he probably waits, a solitary gure bathed in the soft glow of the diner's lights. "Probably."

She lets out an excited squeal, barely able to contain her enthusiasm. "He's smoking hot. And he looks rich. Like, really rich, girl. And he sent you that note and bouquet?"

I offer her a wry smile, the weight of uncertainty pressing down on me like a leaden cloak. "Mila, I won't know unless I see him, okay?"

"Then what are you waiting for? Go!" she urges, giving me a gentle shove towards the door.

And so, with trepidation gnawing at my insides, I take a deep breath and step forward, bracing myself for whatever lies ahead.