

Chapter 2. Back Where I Belong

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It's Rhys, waiting for me on the other side.

Rhys Sinclair, the man I fell in love with at first sight ten years ago. The man I'd given everything to—my virginity, my heart, and my love. The man who had left me for another woman six years ago.

He's back now. And he's sexier.

I can't even see his face yet—he has his back to me. But what a back it is. The white shirt he's wearing fits him like a second skin, the muscles of his arms and back rippling under the fabric as he moves slightly. He always did have that effect on me, making my heart race with just a glimpse.

Why does he want to see me? And what does he want from me?

I take small, quiet steps toward him, but I think he hears me approach because he turns abruptly, and those striking blue-green eyes meet mine. It's like falling for him all over again, but this time, I know the disaster it'll eventually lead to.

He takes a good look at me, his eyes sizing me up hungrily. He smirks, knowing very well the control he has on me. Even after all this time. "Hello, love," he says, his voice smooth as butter, sending my heart into a frenzy.

"Rhys," I whisper his name. I'm standing right next to him, only the table keeping us apart. For a moment, he says nothing, allowing me to play back all the sweaty nights we spent together, curled up in each other's arms. All the kisses and the words we exchanged come back to me, stabbing my chest. I break free from the spell and ask the question that's torturing me, "What are you doing here?"

"That's not a nice way to welcome me," he remarks, frowning dramatically. "Aren't you happy to see me? Come on, love. Sit down."

I look at Mila, unsure of what to say, but she's at the couple's table giving them their orders. She gives me a slight nod. 'I've got your back,' it says.

I gather all the courage I can when truly all I want to do is crumble right here. I'm not the woman I was six years ago. I can never be that woman again—not after what I've faced. "I can't sit with you. My manager will be here soon, and he won't appreciate me sitting down with random customers during work hours," I tell him with my chin held high.

"He?" Rhys says, running his finger over the rim of a glass in front of him. "Let him come. He won't mind it if his boss is asking an employee to sit down and talk to him."

I gasp, realising what he's trying to say. "I don't believe it."

"I understand that. A restaurant is not what I'd usually invest in. Especially a local diner like this one. But this is more than business, Cassie," he explains, with a tilt of his head. I know that look, I've seen it way too many times to not know.

I own you, it says.

But he doesn't.

Rhys Sinclair doesn't own me.

But I know arguing with him is only going to delay this further. So, I listen to him. I sit down.

As I settle into the chair opposite him, Rhys leans back, his eyes never leaving mine. "You've changed, Cassie," he says, his tone harder, more possessive. "There's a re in you now. I like it."

I can't help but scoff. "You don't know anything about who I am now, Rhys. The past six years weren't kind to me."

His expression remains unmoved, a flicker of a smirk playing at the corner of his lips. "I don't need to know the details to see it. You're stronger. Good. It'll make things more interesting."

"Interesting?" I echo, incredulous. "You think this is some kind of game?"

His eyes darken, and he leans forward, his voice low and commanding. "Everything is a game, Cassie. The question is, do you want to play?"

I bristle at his words, at the audacity of his arrogance. "I'm not interested in playing your games, Rhys. Not anymore."

He chuckles, a deep, rumbling sound that sends shivers down my spine. "Oh, but you are. You always were. And you will be again."

I spit out, my voice tinged with disbelief. "You walked away from me, remember? You don't get to come back and claim ownership. How's Amanda doing, by the way? I thought it'd be a couple more years before she grew tired of you."

He leans forward, his presence overwhelming. "I never stopped thinking about you, Cassie. Never. I had my reasons for leaving, but those reasons don't matter anymore. I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere."

I glare at him, anger bubbling up inside me. "You think you can just waltz back into my life and everything will be ne? That I'll just fall back into your arms?"

Rhys' smirk returns, more confident than ever. "You can get it all you want, love, but you and I both know how this ends. I always get what I want."

I glare at him, fighting the urge to reach across the table and slap that smug look off his face. "What do you want from me?"

His gaze intensifies, and he leans back, crossing his arms over his chest. "I want you. Back in my life, back in my bed. Where you belong."

"Belong?" I spit the word out, my hands trembling with anger. "I'm not something you own, Rhys."

His arrogance stirs a mixture of anger and undeniable attraction within me. From the corner of my eyes, I can see that the couple has now begun arguing. About food. I look at Mila, who's now wiping down another counter, pretending not to eavesdrop. She catches my eye and gives me an encouraging smile.

I turn back to Rhys, taking a deep breath. "You have five minutes, Rhys. Make them count."

He leans back, folding his arms across his chest. "Five minutes is all I need. Let's start with this: I'm buying this diner. And you're coming back to work for me. We'll pick up right where we left off."

His words hang in the air, a blatant declaration of his intentions.

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to gauge if he's serious. His expression is infuriatingly calm, almost daring me to challenge him. "You think you can just buy this place and me along with it?"

Rhys doesn't inch. "I'm not just buying the diner, Cassie. I'm buying back the time we lost. I'm giving us another chance."

I scoff, shaking my head in disbelief. "You really think it's that simple? That money can buy everything?"

"It's a start," he says, his voice unwavering. "And I know you, Cassie. Deep down, you still feel the same way I do. You can't deny it."

I laugh bitterly. "You're unbelievable. You don't get to dictate my life. Not anymore. You see that couple there? That's how we would've ended up, Rhys. So, in a way you did me a favour by abandoning me."

He leans in, his gaze piercing through me. "Maybe not. But you'll find that you don't want to walk away. Not from me."

I stand up abruptly, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. "Your time's up, Rhys. I have work to do."

As I turn to leave, his hand shoots out, grabbing my wrist. His touch sends an electric shock through my body, and for a moment, I'm paralyzed, caught in the intensity of his grip. "Cassie," he says, his voice a low growl. "This isn't over. Not by a long shot."

I pull my hand free, glaring at him. "Yes, it is, Rhys. Whatever we had, it's over. You don't own me, and you never will."

I walk away, feeling his eyes burn into my back. Every step feels like a victory, but also a defeat, because part of me knows he's right. The relationship between us has never really died. But I can't let him see that. Not now, not ever.

Mila catches my eye again as I return to the counter, and her concerned look softens into one of support. Rhys is long gone by then. "You okay?" she asks quietly.

I nod, forcing a smile. "Yeah, I'm ne. Just another day, right?"

"We'll talk about it later?"

"We'll talk about it later," I confirm.

The man is first to leave, rising abruptly after slamming his hands on the table. His burger is half-eaten. The woman waits. She eats everything that was served to her, and then she pays diligently, tipping me generously before she leaves with a smile. "I'm kicking him out of my life. Right now," she tells me in a whisper before she leaves the diner happily.

Thoughts of Liam creep in. I have to meet him tonight. I don't feel so sure about it anymore. And I think of what awaits me at home. How will Rhys react when he finds out what I've hidden from him all these years?

As I busy myself with the tasks at hand, I can't shake the feeling that Rhys Sinclair is far from done with me. And that maybe, just maybe, I'm not as done with him as I'd like to be.