

Chapter 3. His Daughter

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The mid-afternoon sun casts a golden hue over the playground as I stand at the edge, scanning the sea of children for my ve-year old daughter, Evie. The sight of her dark blonde curls bouncing as she runs toward me lls me with a warmth that melts away the day's tension. Evie's smile is as bright as ever, her small backpack bouncing on her shoulders.

"Mommy!" Evie calls out, her voice a sweet melody that cuts through the noise.

"Hey, sweetheart!" I crouch down, enveloping my daughter in a tight hug. "How was school today?"

"It was fun! We made clay animals!" Evie's blue-green eyes glisten as she shows off a misshapen but charming clay cat.

I chuckle, taking her hand. "That's wonderful, Evie. I can't wait for Grammy to see it when we get home."

"Where's your car, Mommy?" she asks, looking around the parking lot, trying to search for my father's 1995 Honda Civic—the only good thing he left behind for me.

"The car's broken down, Evie. It's at the mechanic. I hope we could walk today and get ice cream on the way?" I tell her in a hopeful voice, but my mind is already worried about how much xing the car is going to cost.

"Ice-cream?" she repeats, squealing gleefully. "Yes, Mommy!"

As we walk home, my mind drifts to the encounter with Rhys earlier today. His sudden reappearance has thrown me off balance, reopening old wounds I thought had healed. But as I glance down at Evie, I know I can't afford to let Rhys disrupt our lives. The secret I've kept for ve years—that Rhys is Evie's father—has to remain just that: a secret.

"Why are you not eating ice-cream, Mommy?" Evie asks me as she continues to lick the chocolate ice-cream cone in her tiny hand.

"I don't want to fall sick, baby. Mommy has to work, right?" is what I say to her, but what I think is, ice-cream is an indulgence. These two dollars can become the very two dollars I may need to pay a full bill later.

Although Evie nods, she pushes the cone towards me. "A little taste won't hurt, no?"

I laugh at her, wondering how I managed to get a daughter like her. For her sake, I take the smallest of licks, and she giggles. At this moment, I'm happy. Just my daughter and me, that's all I really need.

Upon arriving home, my mother, frail and tired, greets us from the couch. She manages a weak smile for her granddaughter. "Hello, my darlings."

"Hi, grammy!" Evie chirps, running over to give her a gentle hug. "I ate ice-cream today! Oh, did you want ice-cream too, grammy?" Evie asked, frowning.

"No, my darling. I can't eat sweet things," she tells her in a gentle voice.

I kneel beside my mother. "How are you feeling, Mom?"

"Better, now that you're both here," she replies, though the lines of pain etched on her face tell a different story. For the last few weeks, she has had trouble breathing with occasional chest pain. She tried to hide it from us until I found her passed out on the oor a week ago. The physician we met recommended a bunch of tests that mounted up to hundred of dollars in bills; we're now awaiting results of a biopsy of a suspicious mass found in her lung.

I know where we're heading, but I'm hoping for a miracle to occur. For her illness to turn out to be nothing but her ageing and the lump to be benign. But fate has been cruel to me for the last decade.

"Cass?" My mother calls out, intruding on my thoughts. "The electricity bill is due."

I shake my head. "No, I paid that," I tell her with a shrug as I walk to the fridge where all the bills are stuck.

"Honey, I think it was the water bill you paid," she says in a small voice.

"Oh," I say as my eyes nd the bill on the fridge. It is unpaid. One-hundred and sixty seven dollars. "The royalty check from my publisher isn't coming until June. That's two months from now. And from the diner..." I bite my lip, realising I just said it out loud.

"I'm sorry, darling. I wish I could help," my mother says in a genuinely apologetic voice.

I shake my head. "It's alright. I'll nd a way."

My phone buzzes with a new text. It's from Liam.

Liam: Hey, aren't you coming over? I'm waiting.

I completely forgot about that.

"I need to go out for a bit tonight, but I'll be back soon. I've got some pasta from the diner for dinner tonight. Heat it up if I'm too late," I say, glancing at Evie, who is now engrossed in her clay creation. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

My mother nods. "We'll be ne, dear. You go take care of what you need to."

I kiss her forehead and hug my daughter tightly before heading out the door. I can't shake the unease gnawing at me as I make my way to Liam's place. I need to remind myself that I'm in control, that Rhys's return doesn't mean I have to fall back into old patterns.

Being with Liam will make me forget all about Rhys. We can continue right where we left off in the diner this afternoon.

When I arrive at Liam's house, I take a deep breath and knock on the door. Liam opens it almost immediately, his dark eyes lighting up at the sight of me. "Cassie, come in," he says, stepping aside to let me enter.

The moment I step inside, I'm taken aback by the sight before me. Candles icker softly on every available surface, casting a warm, romantic glow. A table set for two stands in the centre of the room, adorned with a bouquet of fresh owers and two glasses of wine.

"What's all this?" I ask, taking a step back instinctively, my voice tinged with surprise.

Liam smiles nervously—something odd, something I've never seen him do. He cuts straight to the chase. "I wanted to do something special for you. Cassie, we've been seeing each other for a while now, and... I really like you. I want us to be more than just... what we've been."

My heart races, conicting emotions swirling within me. I came here to escape the chaos Rhys brought back into my life, to rearm that I can control my own destiny. But now, faced with Liam's unexpected gesture, I feel a pang of guilt. Liam is a good man, and I don't want to hurt him.

"Liam, I..." I begin, searching for the right words.

He takes my hands in his, his gaze earnest. "Cassie, I want you to be my girlfriend. I know it might seem sudden, but I've never felt this way about anyone. I think we could have something really special."

I bite my lip, my mind racing. I've always kept my relationship with Liam casual, a way to stave off loneliness and avoid the pain of getting too close to someone again. But now, as he looks at me with such hope and sincerity, I realise that continuing this way isn't fair to either of us.

"I need to be honest with you, Liam," I say softly, pulling my hands away. "There are things in my life—complicated things—that you don't know about. And I'm sure I'm not ready for a serious relationship right now."

Liam's face falls, but he nods. A few moments of silence pass between us before he speaks, "I see. Can you at least tell me what's going on?"

I sigh, feeling the weight of the secrets I carry. We've never talked about our personal lives—it has just been f**k and leave. All he knows about me is that I have a daughter and a sick mother, and a scarcely paying job at the diner. "It's not something I can explain easily. I just need more time."

Liam mumbles, "Cassie, I get it. I really do."

"I'm actually starving," I say in a direct attempt to diffuse the attention.

Liam blinks. "I-I have cooked."

"Let's eat, then."

It's impossible to go back to how we were, I realise minutes later, when I'm in Liam's bed—naked beneath him. His kisses are softer, more cautious. The way he's thrusting inside me doesn't feel like f****g. It feels like making love.

All the while I think of Rhys—wondering if he's thinking about me. Wondering what he's doing. Wondering if he's aware of Evie and the fact that she's his daughter.

When Liam is done, he lays down beside me. I wait until he falls asleep before silently sneaking out.

The walk home is quiet, the hum of the wind providing a soothing backdrop to my racing thoughts. Evie's face oats in my mind, her innocent eyes and infectious laughter. She deserves a stable, loving environment, not the chaos Rhys's return threatens to bring. I can't let him know about her—not now, maybe not ever. Growing up without a father is hard, I know that better than anyone. But the alternative could be worse: a life where Rhys swoops in and out, leaving destruction in his wake.

When I get home, the house is quiet. My mother is resting, and Evie is fast asleep, clutching her clay cat. I stand in her doorway for a moment, watching her chest rise and fall with each breath. She's my everything, my reason for pushing through the pain and uncertainty.

Slipping into my own room, I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at the mine as my smile at the camera. It's a reminder of why I've kept this secret, why I've built a wall around my heart.

I think of Rhys and the man he used to be—the man I fell in love with. And I think of Liam's words, his earnest eyes and genuine care for me. The contrast between them is stark.

Liam offers stability and something safe and real, I think. Rhys... Rhys is a storm, unpredictable and consuming.

Pulling out my phone, I draft a message to Liam.

"Thank you for tonight. But I don't think we can continue this any longer. It's best that we stop seeing each other. I don't want to hurt you. I hope you understand."

I hit send and let out a shaky breath. I need to protect Evie, but I also need to gure out my own heart. And that means keeping any and every man at a distance to keep them from breaking me. It means keeping Rhys at a distance, no matter how much my heart aches when I think of what we once had.