

Chapter 4. A Mother

The next morning, I wake up to the soft sound of rain pattering against the window. The grey skies match the heaviness in my heart as I sit up in bed, running a hand through my tangled hair.

Evie's still asleep, her small form curled up under the covers. I watch her for a moment, a surge of love warming my chest. She's the light of my life, my reason for pushing forward even when the weight of the world feels too heavy to bear.

But Rhys's return has thrown everything into chaos. His presence looms over me like a dark cloud, threatening to unravel the fragile peace I've worked so hard to build. Last night, my sleep was plagued with dreams featuring him, an unending cycle of love, betrayal and heartbreak.

I need to focus on what's best for Evie, I remind myself. She deserves stability and security, something I'm not sure Rhys can provide. But keeping him away means keeping her away from her father—a choice I'm not sure I have the right to make.

With a heavy sigh, I swing my legs out of bed and make my way to the kitchen. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air as I prepare a pot, the rhythmic drip-drip-drip a comforting backdrop to my thoughts.

As I sip my coffee, I pull out my phone and scroll through the messages I've received overnight. There's one from Liam, his words a mix of confusion and hurt.

Liam: Hey Cassie, I've been thinking a lot about what you said. I'm really confused. I thought things were going well between us, and then you just pushed me away. It feels like there's something you're not telling me, and I'm not sure why. I care about you and Evie a lot, and it hurts to be kept in the dark like this. Can we please talk? I just want to understand and be there for you.

I bite my lip, guilt gnawing at me as I read his message again and again.

But I know I've made the right decision. Evie and I need to be our own little island, safe from the storms that rage outside. And if that means sacrificing my own happiness, then so be it.

With a determined set to my jaw, I make a mental list of everything I need to do today. There are bills to pay, groceries to buy, and the looming spectre of Rhys to avoid.

I guide Evie through her morning routine, her laughter momentarily lifting the weight from my shoulders as she admires her reaction after I braid her hair. Her blue-green eyes sparkle with delight, and she twirls around, the braids swinging. "I look like a princess!" she exclaims, giggling at her reaction in the long mirror placed by my bed.

"You are a princess," I tell her, pressing a kiss on her forehead.

We head downstairs where my mother has prepared breakfast for us—french toast and buttered mushrooms. The kitchen is filled with the comforting smell of cinnamon and melted butter. For a moment, I forget that she has been sick. She moves with a determined grace, masking her frailty with a bright smile. "You didn't have to do this, Mom," I say softly as I plop Evie onto a chair at our small dining table. The tablecloth is a cheerful yellow, dotted with small owls.

She brushes my words off with a wave of her hand, giving a short laugh. "I'm not so old, honey!"

"You know that's not what I mean," I mumble, feeling a pang of guilt for the worry she hides behind her laughter. I sit down, the wooden chair creaking under my weight. "I'll see what can be done with the bill today. I have to get my car back from the mechanic..." my voice trails off as I realize what that means. I glance at the kitchen clock, the ticking echoing in my ears.

Evie chatters away, her small hands reaching for the syrup, her face lighting up with each bite. Her joy is infectious, but my thoughts are a tangled mess of worry and guilt. I nosh my breakfast mechanically, the food tasting like ash in my mouth.

With Evie safely at school, I prepare myself to face the day's responsibilities, including retrieving my car from Liam's repair shop. The thought of facing him adds another layer of unease to an already heavy burden.

Before tackling the day's tasks, I know I must confront my mother with the truth about Rhys. It's a conversation I've been dreading, but it's one that needs to happen if we're going to navigate the storm that's brewing on the horizon.

Summoning courage, I approach my mother, her pale face betraying the weight of her illness. "Mom, we need to talk," I begin, the words heavy on my tongue.

Concern floods her eyes as she meets my gaze. "Is everything alright?"

Taking her hand in mine, I steel myself for the confession. "It's about Rhys," I explain, the words tumbling out in a rush. "Rhys Sinclair. He's back in town, and... he's Evie's father."

Shock registers on my mother's face, her hand flying to her mouth in disbelief. "Rhys? But I thought..."

"I never told you," I confess, the weight of my silence lifting with each word. "I was scared, Mom. Scared of your reaction, scared of what he might do. But I don't know now what I should do. He doesn't know about Evie, of course. I haven't told him."

My mother's gentle voice is laced with reason as she says. "It's alright now. You've come out of it as a strong woman. You've given her everything that you could in your capacity as her mother. But... Evie deserves to know her father, even if he's not the man we hoped he would be."

I gape at her words, disappointment spreading across my chest like a wildfire. She wants me to welcome Rhys back into our lives? "But he left me, Mom!" I argue, my voice desperate and trembling. "When I needed him the most. He just vanished without a word."

My mother's eyes soften with understanding, yet she remains firm. "But do you think he'd do that if he knew about Evie?" she asks, clasping my hand tighter. "Every child deserves a father. I watched you grow up crying because you missed a father you never had. It won't be long before Evie begins asking the same questions as you did. I think you must at least tell him about Evie, even if you decide to not let him be a part of her life. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"He'll leave again. And Evie will be a mess. It's best if she never finds out about him rather than mourn his absence later with the handful of memories he might give her," I declare, my voice resolute. The thought of Rhys leaving again, shattering Evie's heart, is unbearable.

She nods her head, but I can see the conflict in her eyes. She doesn't agree, but she respects my decision. "You're her mother, Cassie. You know what's best for her. And you'll do just that," she says.