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I sit at the kitchen table after having the difficult conversation with my mother, staring at the open pages of my diary. The sky is clear now and the soft glow from the morning sunlight casts gentle shadows, making the task list I have written seem even more daunting. I flip to the back, where I keep a list of financial goals and emergency funds. The birthday fund for Evie catches my eye, a painful reminder of how tight things have become.

I sigh, rubbing my temples. "I'm sorry, Evie," I whisper to myself. "I promise I'll replace it."

With a heavy heart, I note the amount I need to withdraw to cover the electricity bill, car repair, and groceries. It's always the last resort, but Evie's birthday isn't for a few months. I have time to make it up.

I close my diary, adding a reminder to my task list to replace the money within the next two months. I can't afford to let my daughter down, no matter what. I promise myself I'll find a way to make ends meet, even if it means working double shifts every day.

As I rummage through my closet, my fingers brush against a maroon blouse. I hesitate, remembering how Rhys once said it was his favourite color on me. With a sigh, I pull it out and pair it with black pants. I don't have the luxury to care about sentimental attachments to clothing right now; I have bills to pay.

I grab my umbrella and head out. The sky has cleared, but I don't want to count on my luck.

Paying the electricity bill on the way, I continue on the path that leads to the diner. True to my fears, it starts to rain heavily all at once. I arrive at the diner just in time, shaking off the dampness from my umbrella as I walk in. The familiar scent of coffee and fresh pastries greets me. Mila is already there, setting up the counter. She turns and smiles at me. "Hey, babe. You look like you didn't sleep a wink."

I hesitate, my mind racing. I've been keeping the secret for so long, it feels almost unnatural to speak it aloud. But Mila has always been there for me. Maybe it's time. "It's Rhys," I say nally, getting around the counter, my voice barely above a whisper. "The man who was here yesterday. He's Evie's father."

Mila's eyes widen. "Oh, my god... I found him all over the news today. He's the new CEO of the most famous tech startup in our state! He's your baby daddy?"

Although this is something new to me, I'm not surprised. Rhys was always set up for the greatest things and him becoming the CEO of a great company is very believable. I nod, the weight of my confession pressing down on me. "Yeah. I never told him. And now he's back, showing up here, and I don't know what to do."

Before Mila can respond, the diner's manager, Timothy, walks in. I straighten up, trying to shake off the emotional conversation. "Good morning, Tim."

"Good morning, Cassie," he greets. "How are you today?"

"I'm fine," I reply, forcing a smile. "Actually, I was wondering if I could pick up an extra shift today. I need the money."

He gives me a scrutinising look but nods. "Sure, we could use the extra help."

I breathe a sigh of relief. More hours mean more money, and right now, every little bit helps. I move behind the counter, tying my apron and preparing for the day ahead.

The morning rush begins, and I throw myself into work, grateful for the distraction. But as the hours pass, I can't shake the feeling of being watched. I glance up occasionally, expecting to see Rhys walk through the door again. When he doesn't, I feel a strange mix of relief and disappointment.

Around midday, just as the lunch crowd is thinning out, the bell above the door rings, and Rhys walks in, hands tucked inside the pockets of his pants. His presence is commanding, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. I see a young dark haired woman try to discreetly take a picture of him, likely to upload it on her social media account.

Seeing him makes my heart skip a beat, but I quickly compose myself. I can't afford to let him get under my skin.

"Mila," I call out, "Can you take his order?"

Mila glances at Rhys and back at me, understanding immediately. "Sure."

But Rhys has already spotted me and makes his way directly to me. "Good afternoon, Cassie," he says, his voice smooth and warm. "I'd like to be served by you today."

I feel Timothy's curious gaze on us, aware of the implications of Rhys Sinclair, the diner's new owner, showing such interest.

I plaster on my best professional smile. "Of course, Mr. Sinclair. What can I get for you?"

He leans closer, his eyes lingering on my maroon blouse. His voice is deliberately husky when he says, "Maroon suits you. It always has. Are you free this evening?"

Ignoring the flutter in my stomach, I keep my tone business-like. "I'm afraid I'm working late today. What would you like to order?"

Rhys chuckles, a playful glint in his eye. "Just sh tacos, please."

I nod and go to the kitchen to convey his order, feeling his gaze follow my every move. When I return with his order, he has taken a seat on a table closest to the counter. I place it in front of him with a polite smile. "Here you go. Enjoy."

Just as I reach the counter again, the bell above the door chimes, and I look up to see Liam walk in. My heart sinks. I hadn't expected to see him so soon, especially after ending things with him over a text.

Liam walks up to the counter, his expression unreadable. I'm almost prepared to hear him beg for an explanation and a second chance when he surprises me with his calm voice, saying, "Hey, Cassie. I just wanted to drop these off." He holds out my car keys.

My eyes widen in surprise. "You used it already?"

He nods. "Yeah. It's all set."

I reach for my wallet, but he shakes his head. "Don't worry about it. It's the least I could do."

I frown, urging him, "No, please. You have to charge me."

He shakes his head again adamantly, taking a step back. "Not gonna happen."

"Thank you, Liam," I say softly, feeling a pang of guilt. I had hurt him, and yet he was still here, helping me. "Thanks a lot."

Liam gives me a small, longing smile and turns to leave. I watch him go, my heart still pounding. When I turn back, I find Rhys watching me, a curious expression on his face.

When he comes to pay for his meal, Rhys leans in slightly, his blue-green eyes fixed gazing intently into mine. "Who was that?"

My heart skips a beat. Is he jealous? I push the thought away. It doesn't matter. "Just a friend," I say casually. A second later, I think of how I didn't need to answer his question.

Rhys studies me for a moment before nodding. "I see. Well, have a good day, Cassie."

As he walks out of the diner, I let out a breath I didn't realise I had been holding. I need to focus on my work and not let Rhys' return unsettle me. I have a daughter to think about, bills to pay, and a life to maintain.

My shift ends late in the evening, and I drive home in my car, exhausted. I can't shake the feeling that my life is teetering on the edge of something monumental. Rhys seems sworn on chasing me, and with him comes the possibility of upheaval. But I have to stay strong, for Evie's sake, even though the thought of him finding out about her eventually is crushing me.

When I arrive home, I find Evie fast asleep, her tiny frame nestled under the soft blankets. In her hand, she tightly clutches a painting she probably proudly made earlier that day. The artwork is a burst of colours—vibrant blues and yellows swirl together in joyful chaos, with streaks of red and green dancing across the paper. It's an abstract masterpiece in the eyes of a ve-year-old, filled with innocence and boundless creativity.

I lean down quietly, brushing a gentle kiss on her forehead. Evie stirs slightly, murmuring in her sleep, but doesn't wake. As I gaze at her peaceful face, my chest warms. No matter what unfolds with Rhys, I am steadfast in my promise to protect Evie, to nurture her dreams, and to provide a loving and stable home for her.