

Chapter 6. Your baby

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Rhys doesn't leave my thoughts that night either.

It's difficult to fall asleep, as I keep thinking about how Liam dropped off my car without charging me anything. I think of his text and how I didn't respond because I didn't want to hurt him but ended up hurting him anyway by ignoring him. I blame him a little, though. I've always been clear about not wanting a serious relationship. And he had agreed to the idea of keeping it casual, only to end up falling for me.

When I finally fall asleep, I dream of the time we went on a road trip just before Rhys left me, the very night Evie was conceived. I've thought of it so many times that it feels like a movie playing in my head. I hate that I know every detail of his face perfectly—the tiny lines that crease the side of his mouth when he smiles, how he scratches the edge of his jaw whenever he's nervous, and how he hates the way his hair curls at the nape of his neck. It sucks to have a photographic memory. Each moment, each gesture, etched into my mind as if it just happened yesterday. Even the scent of his cologne and the sound of his laughter linger in my senses, refusing to fade away.

But whatever I remember belongs to the man I loved. This man who has returned is not the same. He could never be the day after he left me six years ago, pregnant and heartbroken.

I'm woken up by the sound of a crying Evie. Leaping out of bed, I charge through the hallway to reach her, my heart pounding. My mother is still asleep, her blanket pulled up to her neck. She's a heavy sleeper; she always has been.

Evie is bundled up in a corner of the room, clutching her stuffed monkey as her wails turn to whimpers. I crouch down and envelop her in my arms, picking her up. I run my fingers through her curly hair, pushing it away from her face as I mumble softly, "What happened to my baby? Evie?"

I have a brief moment to notice the snot running down her pink nose and the warmth of her face before she wraps her arms around my neck and buries her face in my chest, continuing to whimper.

"You have a fever?" I mutter, my voice falling. "Oh, Evie. You do have a fever."

Her hands around my neck tighten, and she coughs. My heart drops.

I'd spent my whole day away at the diner working a double shift, but I'd check up on Evie through calls with my mother. When I came home, she seemed alright. How did it get so bad overnight?

I carry her down the stairs in my arms and reach the cabinet in the hallway, scuing through the items in the drawer to find the thermometer. "It's here," I say as she lifts her head to look at me. "Can you talk?"

"Yes, mommy," she says, her voice coming out thick and odd.

Placing her gently on the couch, I kneel beside her and lift her arm to insert the thermometer in her armpit. "Hold your arm tight, okay? I'll make some hot soup for you."

"No," she says, not letting go of her arm that's hooked around my neck.

"I'm right here, Evie. You can see me from here, okay? I'm going to the kitchen," I tell her softly, grabbing a tissue and cleaning the snot that's reached her lips. "All done, baby."

Keeping the soup on the stove, I rush up the stairs to get my phone. I may need to take her to Dr. Kavya, so I drop her a quick text asking if she'd be in her clinic.

Evie's eyes are closed when I return, the beeping of the thermometer not really bothering her. The sound of her breath is ragged due to the cold.

101.5°F. Not that bad.

But I can see her shivering lightly, which means it'll get bad soon, so I cover her up with a blanket. It's Saturday, so she wouldn't have to go to kindergarten. I'm sure I can't cover the shift at the diner today. My manager is quick to respond to my text.

Tim: It's okay. We'll reschedule it. Take care of your daughter.

The clock shows 7 a.m., and it is strange because my mother is an early riser and should've been up by now.

Evie doesn't protest when I try to feed her the soup. She just insists on sitting on my lap, her head against my chest, which makes the task harder. I clean up some more of the snot that runs down her nose with a tissue before I tuck her back in. A few minutes later, she falls asleep, her breathing slightly better. When I check her temperature, it has reduced to 100.9°F.

Although I gulp down a whole cup of coffee, when I slump on the couch beside her, I fall into a heavy slumber.

The doorbell wakes me up this time. I yawn, gathering up my hair in an unkempt bun as I pull a sweater over my head. It's half past nine now, but I don't spot my mother in the kitchen. The doorbell rings again, and I groan.

I open the door to find the most unexpected man standing in front of me.

Rhys is here, dressed in a white shirt, holding a bouquet of roses. His dark blonde hair catches the rays of sunshine as his smile widens when he sees my very-tired-I-just-woke-up face. "Good morning, beautiful," he mumbles as he leans forward.

I almost shut the door in his face, but he holds his hand against it. "Oh, no. I didn't mean to surprise you like that," he admits through the crack.

With a sigh, I open the door wider. "What do you want, Rhys?" I ask, folding my arms.

He chuckles. "You."

"That's funny. Now please go away," I say, putting my hand on the door again to close it, but he's stronger and faster. He has a foot inside the house already.

Rhys begins, "It's not funny. I'm very serious, Cassie. What about this looks funny to you? I was very clear to you at the diner that day. I want you back."

"I can't do this right now. You need to go," I mumble nervously as my eyes icker to the couch where Evie sleeps. He can't see her, he can't!

"I didn't realise you moved. I went to your old house, but it belongs to an old man now. This place is smaller and cute," he says, his eyes glancing around the kitchen and the connected living room.

"Now you know I don't work at the diner as a hobby," I say and push him, my hand pressed against his chest. He doesn't even budge but begins to smirk as his eyes fall on my hand.

"That's one way to turn me on," he whispers.

I sigh, starting to feel the panic kick in. "Please, Rhys. Leave."

"Why?"

"I don't want you here!"

"You don't mean that," he teases, wrapping his fingers around my hand and leaning forward. The smell of his cologne invades my senses, and I want to push him away, but the way his eyes are looking at me, I freeze.

"Mommy! Who is that?" Evie's voice suddenly cuts through the room and reaches me. She is standing on the couch, her chin resting on the top of the backrest.

Rhys freezes. His eyes dart to Evie and then back to me. His whole composure shifts. I see his brain trying to work it out when his forehead creases. This is it.

"Mommy?" Evie calls out again.

I look at her, fighting back tears as I mumble, "It's just mommy's friend, baby. Go back to sleep."

Rhys takes a step back, gulping. "Is that...?" he's not even able to complete his sentence as his voice trails off.

He trains his eyes back on Evie, who gets off the couch, grabbing the blanket along with her before she latches her arms around my leg. "Why is he looking at me?" she asks innocently.

Rhys shakes his head. "How old is she?" he questions, his eyes brimming with denial.

I don't lie. There's no point lying. "Five and a half."

"And she's your daughter?" he says in the void, turning to look away.

"Doesn't she look like mine?" I retort, placing my hand on Evie's back.

Rhys takes a deep breath. "She looks a lot like... but it's not possible. It can't be."

"Just leave, Rhys," I plead, lowering my eyes to Evie, unable to face him anymore.

"I will leave. Just tell me that—that she is..." he stammers, gulping once again.

A lone tear slips out of my eye as I put the truth in front of him, "She's yours."

He nods slowly, his eyes ickering back to Evie one last time before he turns around and leaves.