# The Daughter He Never Knew

Secret child • Second chance • Forced proximity

A PlotAfter story — free preview

# Chapter One

There are moments when your body understands danger before your brain does. Mine happened at Gate 32.

"Mama, Bunny wants the window."

"I know, baby."

"No. Bunny needs the window."

I looked down at my three-year-old daughter, who was clutching a stuffed rabbit by one ear and staring at me with the kind of seriousness usually reserved for international negotiations.

"Bunny can have the window."

"And me."

"And you."

"And you sit here."

She pointed to the middle seat.

"That's the plan."

Satisfied, Lily hugged Bunny against her chest.

I smiled.

Then I looked up.

And forgot how to breathe.

Daniel Vale was standing twenty feet away.

Three years. Three years since I'd seen that face anywhere except inside memories I tried not to visit.

He hadn't noticed me.

Not yet. He was standing near the boarding line, phone in one hand, dark coat folded over his arm.

His hair was slightly shorter.

His shoulders looked broader.

Everything else was painfully familiar.

The line of his jaw. The crease between his eyebrows when he read something he didn't like. The watch I'd once teased him for wearing even in bed. My stomach dropped.

"Mama?"

I looked down. Lily was watching me.

"What?"

"You squeezed me."

I realized I was gripping her hand.

"Sorry, baby."

I loosened my fingers.

Then looked back.

Daniel was gone. For one ridiculous second, I wondered if I'd imagined him.

Then boarding began.

And I knew I hadn't. I spent the entire walk down the jet bridge telling myself there were hundreds of seats on the plane.

Maybe he was in business class.

Maybe he was twenty rows away.

Maybe he'd changed flights. Maybe the universe had already tortured me enough.

"Mama, airplane!"

"Yes."

"Big airplane."

"Very big."

"Does it have snacks?"

"The important questions."

Lily giggled.

We found row fourteen.

I put her beside the window.

Bunny beside her.

Me in the middle.

Seat 14B.

The aisle seat was empty.

I stared at it.

No.

Absolutely not.

That would be absurd.

Statistically ridiculous.

Cosmically cruel.

Passengers kept walking past.

An elderly man.

A teenager.

A woman with headphones.

A family. Then polished black shoes stopped beside our row.

I didn't look up. I didn't need to.

"Maya?"

My entire body went still. Lily looked at me.

"Mama?"

Slowly, I raised my eyes.

Daniel stared down at me.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

His face changed in stages.

Surprise.

Disbelief.

Something softer.

Then he saw Lily.

Everything disappeared. His eyes moved from her face—to mine—back to hers.

Lily smiled at him.

Because of course she did. She had never met a stranger she couldn't emotionally adopt within thirty seconds.

"Hi."

Daniel didn't answer.

"I'm Lily."

Still nothing. She pointed at the aisle seat.

"You sit there."

His eyes snapped to mine.

"Maya."

"Daniel."

"What—" Someone behind him sighed loudly.

"Sir, can you sit down?"

Daniel looked over his shoulder.

Then at the seat.

Then at me. For one beautiful second, I thought he might keep walking.

Instead, he sat.

Of course he did.

The plane took off twelve minutes later.

Daniel didn't say a word.

Neither did I.

Lily filled the silence for us.

She told Bunny about the clouds.

She asked why houses looked tiny. She asked whether birds got angry when airplanes flew near them.

Daniel stared straight ahead.

I stared at the seat in front of me.

My heart hadn't slowed down once. Eventually, Lily became interested in her coloring book.

Daniel spoke. Quietly.

"Maya."

"Don't."

His head turned.

"Don't what?"

"Not here."

"Then where?"

"I don't know."

"That's convenient."

I looked at him.

His jaw tightened.

Three years disappeared.

There he was. The man who could irritate me with four words.

"You don't get to be angry."

His expression changed.

"I don't?"

"No."

He looked toward Lily.

Then back at me. His voice dropped.

"Who is she?"

I couldn't answer.

Not because I didn't know what to say.

Because I knew exactly what I had to say. And once I said it, nothing would ever be the same.

"Maya."

Lily held up a purple crayon.

"Mama, look."

I forced a smile.

"Beautiful."

"It's a dinosaur."

"Obviously."

Daniel looked at the page.

Then at her.

His face went pale.

Lily had my nose.

My smile.

My stubbornness.

But her eyes—those were Daniel's. And when she smiled wide enough, a tiny dimple appeared in her left cheek.

His dimple.

Daniel saw it.

I watched the exact moment he knew.

He leaned back slowly. His hands tightened on the armrests.

"How old is she?"

My mouth went dry.

"Daniel."

"How old?"

Lily answered for me.

"Three."

His eyes closed.

Three.

The math was easy.

Painfully easy.

He turned toward the window.

For several seconds, he didn't speak. Then: "When's her birthday?"

"Daniel—"

"When?"

"April seventeenth."

He nodded once.

As if confirming something to himself.

Then he looked at me.

There was no anger in his face now.

That would have been easier.

There was hurt.

Raw.

Confused. Devastated hurt.

"Does she know?"

I shook my head.

He looked at Lily.

She was humming while coloring. Completely unaware that her life had just changed.

Daniel swallowed.

Then leaned closer. His voice was barely above a whisper.

"So..."

He looked at me. Then at our daughter.

"When were you going to tell me I have a daughter?"

I closed my eyes.

There it was. The question I'd imagined a thousand times. In none of those versions had I been trapped beside him thirty thousand feet above the ground.

"I don't know."

His laugh was quiet. Disbelieving.

"You don't know."

"No."

"Three years, Maya."

"I know."

"Three years."

"I know."

"I missed—" He stopped.

His voice broke.

He looked away. And for the first time, guilt hit harder than fear.

"I had reasons."

His eyes returned to mine.

"You'd better."

I looked at Lily.

At the tiny dimple in her cheek. At the father who had already recognized himself in her.

"We have six hours."

Daniel's expression hardened.

"Good."

He leaned back.

"Start talking."

Daniel thought the worst thing I'd done was hide his daughter from him.

He had no idea. Because three years ago, I hadn't simply left. I'd been given a reason to believe leaving was the only way to protect her. And I had six hours to tell him why I'd made sure he never was.

## End of the free preview

Daniel has just discovered that Lily is his daughter. Now Maya has six hours to explain why she disappeared — and who made her believe Daniel never wanted their child.

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