

Chapter 10. The Bill

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The next four days blur together in a haze of exhaustion and stress. I work double shifts at the diner to make up for the time I missed. Tim, my manager, doesn't say a word, but his silent glances and the way he avoids eye contact speak volumes.

Mila and Trish take turns babysitting Evie after she gets home from school. Despite their kind offers, I can't help but feel guilty for imposing on them. Every time I apologize or try to tell them they don't have to, they scold me, insisting it's no trouble and that they're happy to help. Their support is a lifeline, but the guilt of leaning on them so heavily is hard to shake.

Each night, when I nally drag myself home, I sit at the kitchen table and count the money I've managed to save, trying to estimate how much the hospital bill will be. We have no insurance, so whatever the total, it's all on me. The numbers never add up to enough, and the mounting anxiety feels like a tight knot in my chest. I need to nd a way to pay for it, but I'm running out of options and time.

As I'd feared, Liam visits every day, but I've started to appreciate his presence. It would be a lie to say I don't like having someone next to me in the hospital, which is lled with strangers who I assume are all staring at me as if I'm a freak. I miss the time we spent together, even though I know that feeling won't take me anywhere. But that's all I can afford. I can't depend on him emotionally.

By the time it's my mother's last day in the hospital, Evie and Liam are almost best buddies. There's also Dr. Neil, who Evie has managed to coax a smile or two out of with her cute behaviour.

From Rhys, however, I hear nothing. He has been completely silent since the last call, and I nd myself repeatedly glancing back at my phone, hoping to see a text from me.

I grip the steering wheel tightly as I drive to the hospital, my mind still xated on the bill. The dread of the impending p*****t looms over me like a dark cloud, and I have no idea how I'll manage to cover it. The radio plays softly in the background, but I barely hear it, lost in my thoughts.

"Mommy, will we see Uncle Liam today?" Evie's sweet voice pulls me out of my thoughts. I glance at her in the rearview mirror, seeing the hopeful look in her eyes.

"Yes, baby," I reply, forcing a smile. "We'll see Uncle Liam today."

Evie claps her hands in delight. "Yay! I like Uncle Liam. He's fun."

My heart aches at her innocence. I wish I could share in Evie's joy without the heavy burden of adult responsibilities weighing me down. But Liam's presence has indeed become a source of comfort for both of us, and I am grateful for it.

When we arrive at the hospital, Liam is already there, waiting for us. He greets Evie with a wide grin and scoops her up into his arms.

"Hey, munchkin!" he says, spinning her around. "Ready for some fun?"

Evie giggles, her laughter infectious. "Yes, Uncle Liam! Are we going to play today?"

"Absolutely," Liam replies, setting her down gently. "But rst, let's go see your grammy rst, okay?"

We make our way to my mother's room, where Dr. Neil is already nishing up the discharge paperwork. He gives us a brief nod as we enter, his usual stoic demeanor rmly in place.

"Good evening, Lily," he says to my mother. "You're all set to go home today."

"Thank you, Dr. Neil," my mother replies, her voice weak. "I can't wait to leave this wretched place."

Dr. Neil simply nods again, his eyes icking brievely to me. I swallow hard and step forward, my nerves taut.

"Dr. Neil, about the bill..." I begin, my voice trembling slightly.

Dr. Neil glances at me and then back at his clipboard. "It's been taken care of."

I blink, not quite understanding. "What do you mean?"

"The bill has been paid in full," he says, looking at me directly. "I assumed you might not be able to afford it, so I contacted a charity to cover the costs."

Relief washes over me, but it's quickly followed by a pang of something else—pride, perhaps, or a sense of being cheated. I hadn't expected Dr. Neil to do that for me, especially given his usually indifferent attitude. But I can't deny the immense relief it brings.

"Thank you," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "I don't know how to repay you."

"No repayment is necessary," Dr. Neil replies curtly. "Just take care of your mother."

I nod, unable to nd the right words. I turn to my mother and help her into the wheelchair, ready to take her home.

"Let's get you home, Mom," I say softly.

The ride back home is quiet. My mother dozes off in the backseat, exhausted from her hospital stay. Evie watches her grandmother carefully, and with some sense of understanding remains quiet, clutching her stuffed monkey, Maddy.

When we arrive at the house, Liam helps me get my mother settled in. Despite her frailty, she insists that Liam stay for dinner.

"You must," she says, her voice gentle but rm. "Please, stay. It's the least we can do."

Liam hesitates for a moment, his eyes ickering to me. When I offer him an encouraging smile, he nods. "I'd be happy to."

Dinner is a quiet affair, lled with the soft murmur of conversation and the clinking of spoons over plates. I can't help but notice how Liam blends into the normalcy of our lives. Evie, too, seems more at ease with him around.

After dinner, I take Evie upstairs to tuck her into bed. As I kiss her forehead, she looks up at me with sleepy eyes.

"Goodnight, Mommy," she whispers. "I love you."

"I love you too, baby," I reply, my heart swelling with affection. I watch as Evie drifts off to sleep, her breathing steady and peaceful.

I decide it's best for my mother to sleep in the downstairs bedroom for a couple of days until she can walk condently on her own. I prepared the room before her arrival. She falls asleep even quicker than Evie. After locking her door, I nd Liam in the kitchen, washing the dishes. I stop in the doorway, watching him as a wave of emotion starts to bubble up inside me.

"You don't have to do that," I say softly, stopping right beside him. "Thank you for being here. You've been such a help."

Liam turns to face me, washing the soap from his hands before he wipes them dry with a towel. "It's no problem, Cassie. I told you I had selsh reasons and frankly, I didn't do much."

I take a deep breath, my emotions swirling. Before I know what I'm doing, I close the distance between us and lean in to kiss him.