

Chapter 7. The ER Visit

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For a long while after Rhys leaves, I'm left numb, standing there behind the door with Evie still latched onto my leg. I feel hollow, like someone has clutched out my heart from my chest. Only when Evie calls out to me, do I realize I'm shaking and that I've been crying.

He knows that Evie is his daughter now. A truth I hid from him without really needing to because he left and never tried to contact me or ask me anything about my life. For six f*****g years. Not once did he think that he should check up on me—the woman he claimed to love.

How foolish was I to believe that he loved me? How pathetic was it to feel that warmth in my chest when I saw him at the diner for the first time? Hearing him say that he wanted me back, in his life and in his bed. He said I belonged with him. But that's not the truth. I belong here, with my daughter and with my mother. They will always be here with me. They will never betray me.

What is Rhys going to do now? Will he still continue to play his stupid game? Will he try to take Evie away from me? Will he promise to take up responsibility only to leave us hanging soon?

I don't trust him. I can't.

Quickly, I wipe the tears from my face and pick Evie up, holding her close. Pressing tiny kisses on her little head, I whisper, "I'm alright. Let's go wake up Grammy, okay?"

She nods and kisses my cheek softly, making me smile despite the circumstance. As I slowly climb the stairs to our rooms, I curse myself for letting my emotions resurface. I'd done a good job keeping them concealed. I know Evie will remember this, and she will ask me about it. And I hate lying to my daughter.

Nothing prepares me for what comes next.

I don't know how I manage to get away from my mother's bedroom and into the ER. All I know is the blaring siren that echoed in my mind on seeing my mother sprawled across the floor, barely breathing, with a bleeding nose.

I find myself breathing raggedly minutes, or probably hours, later, waiting outside the ER. Trish, my neighbour, is sitting beside me, her hand rubbing my back in an attempt to soothe me. But I'm too shaken, too afraid to move, or think, or loosen my grip on Evie, who is pressed tightly against my side.

I don't even know how Trish got here. Maybe she heard me scream and came along with me in the car, or perhaps she drove me... It's all fuzzy in my head right now.

All I can think is: I can't lose my mother. No. Not so soon. Not like this.

I don't know how many times I repeat it to myself until a doctor walks up to the bench we're sitting on. For a moment, I freeze, unsure what to do. He lowers his gaze to the writing pad in his hand and asks, "Cassandra Howard?"

"Y-Yes," I stammer, fumbling with the easiest word, but he doesn't react. Of course, he's used to people reacting like this. Glancing back at Trish, I tighten my hold on Evie. When she gives me a reassuring nod, I stand up, letting Evie be held by her.

The doctor walks a few steps away, a silent signal for me to follow, before he speaks in a cool, collected voice, "Hello, I'm Dr. Neil, one of the emergency physicians taking care of Lily Howard. I want to assure you that we are doing everything we can to take care of her and ensure she receives the best possible care. Now, it says you're her daughter?"

I nod, clearing my throat before I say, "Yes. I am."

He flips the pages on his writing pad, his eyes narrowing briefly before he writes something out in completely illegible handwriting. He continues, "Right now, Lily is stable, and we are closely monitoring her vital signs. We have performed an initial physical examination and started some diagnostic tests, including blood tests and a chest X-ray. The results will be here in a few minutes. Can you tell me about her medical history?"

I blink at him, turning my head and taking a quick glance back at Evie to ensure she's alright. She's sleeping with her head leaned against Trish's shoulder. I return my focus to the doctor who's looking at me with a raised eyebrow, appearing not so patient. "Uh, yes. She was... um, I'm sorry," I mutter, running my hands through my hair. "I'm a little shaken."

"I understand," he says, his voice still flat. To him, I'm just another panicked, dishevelled family member. "I just need your help to make this easier," he explains.

I breathe in, nodding my head. "Uh, she just had a biopsy for a mass found in her lung. A few days ago. About nine days, I guess. We haven't got the report yet. She's been having trouble breathing and chest pain. I found her passed out on the floor this morning. She didn't get up on time, as she usually does. And she was barely breathing and her nose was bleeding. It was all blood... This has happened before, I mean... she has passed out, but the nose bleed, it's... new and scary. Is she gonna be okay, Dr... Dr. Neil?"

"She's stable for now. Do you have the medical records on you right now? Any lab results, medication lists, consultation notes?" he inquires, scribbling more illegible words down.

I think about it for a moment. "I'll have them in my car."

"Can you fetch them immediately?"

"Yes," I say without missing a beat.

Several minutes later, Dr. Neil comes back, his forehead creased. "After reviewing the test results and imaging studies, we have determined that your mother has pneumonia. Do you understand what that is?"

I nod, gulping as the horrifying realisation dawns on me. "Yeah."

"We have already started Lily on antibiotics to treat the infection. This is the standard treatment for bacterial pneumonia. If the infection is viral, the treatment approach might be different, but antibiotics are a good starting point while we await further test results. We are also providing oxygen to help with breathing and IV fluids to keep her hydrated. But we will need to admit her to keep a close eye on her. Do you understand that?"

It's a lot to take in, my brain too fuzzy to make sense of everything. "Yes," I whisper.

When I've completed all the formalities, I return to Trish. She has two cups of coffee in her hand and Evie is examining a plant a small distance from the bench, her stuffed monkey clutched tightly in her hand. She looks much better than how she was in the morning. I crouch down and press the back of my hand against Evie's forehead. It's no longer warm, but she does have some snot on her upper lip.

"Yuck, yuck," she mumbles, shaking her hand as I wipe it off with a tissue and throw it away in the bin, cleaning my hand immediately after at a sanitiser pumping station.

"Has she been sick? Evie, I mean?" Trish asks, offering me one of the coffees in her hand.

"Yeah. She had a fever in the morning. She looks okay now," I tell her. She nods quietly. Her eyes are warm and comforting, a soothing aura radiating about her. This woman has been a constant support. I realize it the moment I grab the coffee cup and sit down beside her.

She was there whenever I was too chaotic to respond to such a situation. She was there when I had Evie and for several weeks after, when I felt like I couldn't do it anymore. Where everything was too hard and too overwhelming.

She has done more for me than Rhys ever has.

And I've never thanked her enough for it.

"Thank you, Trish. For everything," I tell her, my voice muffled.

She waves her hand, giving me a smile. "You would do the same for me, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I say, holding back tears as I nod. "Thank you for coming. You should go home now."

"Victor is on his way to pick me up. Should I take Evie with me? Give her a warm bath and get her changed?" she offers in an easy voice.

It gnaws at me to have Evie away from me, but if there's anyone else I can trust with her, it is Trish. "Yes, thank you. If she's too much trouble, just tell me, I'll get her back."

She gives a short laugh. "Nonsense! Evie is an angel. I don't spend enough time with her. What about the diner?"

"Oh, I said I wasn't showing up because of Evie," I mumble, tearing my gaze back to my daughter who's lost in her own world, now twirling as she gazes at the ceiling lights. Maybe this event will make her forget about Rhys's arrival in the morning. But this is in no way a good thing.

"Call me if you need anything, okay?" is the last thing Trish says before she takes Evie with her.

I sit there on the bench to check my phone and find texts from Mila.

Mila: I heard from Tim.

Mila: How is Evie now?

Just as I'm about to type in a response, I hear approaching footsteps.

"Cassie?" a familiar voice greets my ears.

I look up, gasping when my eyes meet Liam's.