

Chapter 9. Selfish Reasons

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Evie is tucked in snugly, her small hands gripping her beloved stuffed monkey. The night is short for me, consumed by the chores I couldn't complete during the day. My mind is restless, xated on the unwashed dishes that await me in the morning.

To distract myself, I plug in my earbuds and lose myself in Taylor Swift's songs as I tackle the dishes. Rhy's texts burn in the back of my mind, urging me to respond with a tirade of anger, but I bury the impulse.

I manage only two hours of sleep, yet wake feeling oddly refreshed. Checking Evie's forehead, I'm relieved to nd her fever has subsided. This small mercy feels like a preparation for the challenges ahead.

Tim's reaction is as expected when I inform him that my mother is hospitalized. It's Sunday, the diner's busiest day, and he needs me. Missing two days in a row must have tested his patience, though he's kept his frustration in check.

The drive to the hospital is slow and serene. I pray that my mother's condition has improved and she can go home soon. But, given her situation, I fear I'm out of luck. Evie, on the other hand, is thrilled—both because it's Sunday and she misses her grammy. I ask her about her time at Trish's, and her eyes light up as she recounts the treat of a chocolate bar.

Seeing Liam in the lounge, I sigh, reminding myself not to be harsh. He's just trying to help. His eyes meet mine, and he smiles warmly.

"Hey," he greets, tilting his head slightly before turning his attention to Evie. "Is this Evie?"

"Yes," I mumble, crouching down to introduce her. "This is Uncle Liam. Say hi."

"Hi, Uncle Liam," she says softly, waving her tiny hand. "I'm Evie. E-V-I-E!"

Liam chuckles, kneeling to her level. "You know how to spell that!"

"Yup," she says, emphasising the 'p.' "And this is Maddy, my monkey."

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. I didn't know her monkey had a name. A pang of insecurity hits me—am I not spending enough time with my daughter?

Liam stands, his smile fading. "Your mom is conscious now. She can't wait to go home."

"Y-You met her?" I ask, unable to mask my surprise. My mother met Liam before I had the chance to introduce him. And to introduce him as what? The guy I f**k on weekends?

He nods, looking apologetic. "I'm sorry if I overstepped."

"Does it matter now?" I mutter, feeling a spark of irritation. Turning to Evie, I say, "Let's go see grammy, okay?"

I don't say anything to Liam as I walk out of the lounge and into my mother's hospital room. Evie squeals with delight when she sees her grandmother, and I have to shush her so she doesn't disturb the other patients.

My mother tries to sit up, her eyes widening in recognition. She coughs harshly, looking much older than she did yesterday. Hospitals have a way of ageing you.

"How are you feeling, Mom?" I ask, placing my hand over hers.

Her eyes ll with tears, and one slides down her wrinkled cheek. "I'm so sorry, Cassie. I've troubled you so much."

My heart breaks at the pain in her voice. I ght hard to hold back my own tears. "No, Mom," I begin, leaning forward. "You could never trouble me."

"All of this. I must've scared you," she says, shifting uncomfortably and wincing. "And little Evie."

"A little, yeah," I confess, pressing my lips against the back of her hand. "But you're going to be okay now."

"What are you going to do about the bills?" she asks, her forehead creasing with worry. Another dry, painful cough escapes her throat.

I wave my hand dismissively. "Is that what you're thinking about? The hospital bills?"

"Would you scold me if I am?" she asks, a hint of a smile playing on her old face.

I nod my head furiously. "I will."

"It's something to be thought about," she admits, looking away into the distance.

"I'll nd a way. I always do, right?" I assure her.

She nods. "Just tell the doctors to let me go. I feel perfect already," she insists.

"It's not about how you feel, Mom; it's about how your body is doing. And these machines don't lie," I explain gently, as if she were a child.

Dr. Neil arrives just in time. "Miss Howard, hello. Your mother is stable now, but we're still awaiting a few more test reports—"

"More reports?" my mother exclaims in disbelief.

Dr. Neil continues, unbothered, "She'll need to stay here. She's had a fever, and the infection still persists."

"How many more days?" I ask, needing a timeline.

He narrows his eyes slightly. "Depends. But about a week or so."

"A week?" Both my mother and I repeat at the same time.

Evie looks between the two of us, her mouth open in surprise.

It takes some time to convince my mother, but when exhaustion nally takes over, she reluctantly agrees to stay.

An hour later, Evie and I head out into the lounge, ready to go home. I nd Liam still waiting there, coffee cups in hand. "You're still here?" I ask, striding up to him.

"Yes, I am," he says easily, his voice smoother than butter. He hands me one of the coffee cups. "Sorry for making you drop yours yesterday."

"There was barely anything left," I mumble.

A few minutes of silence pass between us before Liam speaks up again. "Do you want me to do anything?"

"Like?" I prompt, frowning.

Liam smiles. "I don't know. Anything."

"If you can cover my shift at the diner, it'd be great," I remark, sipping the warm coffee as my gaze lingers on Evie. She has already made the hospital lounge her playground.

"She is a good kid," he comments, leaning forward in his seat.

Unease spreads across my chest. "No, Liam. This isn't right. I never thought you'd meet Evie. Or my mom. She didn't even know about you, and maybe she was too embarrassed to ask."

"Embarrassed?" he asks bitterly.

I shrug. "Liam, let's not forget what we were. Until you decided to start something romantic. I stepped back... fast. Because the more I delayed, the more hurt you'd be. I'm not looking for anything serious. I can't. Look at my life."

"I understand," he claims, running a hand down the length of his neck. "I'm not doing this for you, to be very honest."

I keep my eyes glued on him, waiting for an explanation.

Sighing, he gives me one, "Cassie, I was fourteen when my mom passed away. I had no one by my side. It was horrible. I felt so... scared. I'm doing this because it helps heal what was broken inside of me. I want to be there for you for a completely selsh reason. And if you think this is going to hurt me, you're wrong. I respect your decision to end things. I'm not expecting anything from you."

His words shut me up. What else can I say beyond this? There's nothing valid to argue with, and yet, his presence is bothering me. Evie can see him. Evie can see that I'm talking to him. What if over the week he continues to visit and gets closer to my daughter? What then? Am I prepared to face the consequences of that?

"Thanks for not charging me for the car," I blurt out. "Turns out I need the money."

He nods, but I know he's struggling to keep himself from saying, "Let me lend you some."

I'll draw my limit at that. I do not want him to be any more involved in my life than he already is.

I turn my attention to Evie when my coffee cup is empty. Grabbing some lunch from home, I could keep her at Trish's so I can pick up a shift at the diner. But bothering her for another day doesn't sit right with me. No matter how angelic my daughter is, she will still need to be looked after and I can't ask that from anyone who's not my family.

My phone buzzes with a text, and I fear it's another one from Rhys. But to my surprise, it's from Harper, a twelve-year-old I tutor on weekends for extra money.

Harper: hi, wanted to noe wen i can come over today? i've got homework

It completely slipped my mind yesterday that I had to call her. Cursing under my breath, I begin to type a reply when my phone rings loudly with an incoming call.

In the haste of thinking it's Harper calling and the panic of my phone ringing loudly inside a hospital, I swipe on the screen to answer, realising a moment too late that the number belongs to Rhys.

His voice from the other side is cold and hard as he speaks, "How dare you ignore me?"

A chill runs down my spine, and I feel a knot form in my stomach. "Rhys, I don't have time for this right now," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

"This is serious now, Cassie. I'm not playing a game with you anymore," he snaps. "I have a daughter? Seriously?"

I swallow hard, gulping down all the words I could bark back in response. "Not right now," I persist.

Rhys retorts. "You can't keep avoiding me. We need to talk about this."

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions in check. "Fine, but not now. I'll call you later."

"Why not now?" he demands, his voice growing harder.

"Because my mom's in the hospital, you i***t!" I nally snap, unable to hold back any longer.

There's a long pause on the line. I hear a loud exhale, and then, "Really?"

"Yes," I whisper, and it takes all of my strength to do it.

"Alright," he says curtly, and the line goes dead.