

Chapter 1

Caller ID was a blessing and a curse. Rachel Mansfield rubbed the burn from her tired eyes and dragged her cell phone off the table. She shouldn't have fallen asleep in the first place. There were still things to get ready for tomorrow, and she wanted everything to be perfect for her baby brother's first weekend pass from the Marines.

But she couldn't, in good conscience, ignore the call from the hospital. Sighing, she hit the talk button. "This is Rachel."

"Hey, Rachel. Corinne Ross, Child Protective Services. Sorry to call so late. Do you have a minute?"

Rachel's foggy brain flashed to a time when a call from CPS might've involved her brother. But that time had long since passed. She released a breath and checked her watch. Past Eleven. Must be important. "Of course. How can I help, Corinne?"

"We have a situation that requires your expertise."

Rachel sat up straighter, rolling her neck in a vain attempt to recover from her impromptu nap in the chair. "Emergency room?"

"Yes, there's a little girl here who's hearing impaired."

"I'm assuming the parents are deaf, too?" Rachel stood and stretched.

"Ah, well. That's the thing. We don't know. She's alone. We're going off the note pinned to her shirt."

Certain she'd misunderstood, Rachel pressed the phone closer to her ear. "Excuse me? Did you say a note pinned to her?"

"Yes." The disgust in Corinne's voice was clear. "It says, 'My name is Lily. I can't hear. Please take care of me.' That's all we've got to go on."

Incredulous, Rachel shook her head. As a sign interpreter for the hospital, she'd worked several cases over the years with Protective Services, but this was a first. "Any idea on age? Is she hurt? What else do you know?" She rushed to her bedroom and shimmied into a clean pair of jeans, the phone wedged between her ear and shoulder.

"If I had to guess, I'd say she's probably four or five. I just got here a few minutes ago. From what I understand, the emergency room was hot tonight. There was a four-car wreck out on Lake Road – a bunch of teenagers celebrating the beginning of summer. Anyway, it was a total train wreck here, all hands on deck. It wasn't until everything calmed back down that a janitor straightening the waiting room found her asleep in a chair."

"She's not a patient, then?"

"Not yet, but they want to examine her to be sure she doesn't need to be admitted. Problem is, she's agitated, and no one can calm her down. Can you come? Now?"

"I'm on my way." Ten minutes later, Rachel whipped into the parking lot of Olathe Medical Center and hurried through the sliding double doors, her gaze landing on Corinne. "Where is she?"

Corinne waved her toward the examination rooms. Anxious moans reached Rachel's ears before she was halfway down the hall. Breaking into a run, she followed the sound and pulled back the curtain.

A waif of a girl with a pile of wayward strawberry-blond curls cowered in the corner of the bed, her frightened eyes darting around the room. Squeezing between two male nurses, Rachel stepped to the bed, her hands extended and open, speaking aloud as she signed. “Hi there, sweetheart. My name is Rachel. You don’t need to be afraid. We just want to help you.”

Beautiful green eyes that reminded her of the darkest part of a forest, followed her movements then scanned Rachel’s face, but the little girl didn’t respond. Rachel tried again, finger-spelling her name. “Lily?”

If anything, the girl shrunk further back against the bed, a low guttural sound escaping from her lips. Rachel glanced around, her heart aching for the girl. There were six other adults in the room, all focused on Lily. Not exactly calming. “Hey guys, give me a few minutes here. Corinne, Doctor, stay if you would, please. Everybody else, we’ll call if we need you.”

Rachel shuffled them out and pulled the doctor and Corinne toward the exit. “Hang out over here for a minute. I think she’s overwhelmed.” Rachel walked back over to the bed, but Lily had dropped from the mattress and was wedged behind it, eyes closed, her small body rocking to a private rhythm. Careful not to touch her, Rachel sat down on the floor.

After a few minutes, the rocking stopped, and Lily opened her eyes. Rachel smiled and lifted her hand to gently smooth Lily’s curls, pleased when she didn’t pull away.

Taking a chance, Rachel rose from the floor and held out her hand, waiting to see what Lily would do. She smiled again, silently encouraging. Patience was something Rachel had gotten pretty good at, and she could wait all night if she had to. The decision had to be Lily’s.

She was rewarded as Lily slowly emerged from her hiding place and slipped her small hand into Rachel’s. Her big eyes were still wary as she surveyed the room, but Lily wasn’t in panic mode anymore.

Now, to figure out how to communicate and determine what Lily knew. Obviously, her grasp on American Sign Language was very limited. That was okay, though. Rachel welcomed the surge of energy that came with the challenge.

She brought her fingers to her mouth. “Are you hungry?”

Lily’s eyes followed her hand, and she duplicated the movement and nodded, repeating Rachel’s words.

Rachel glanced at Corinne, her eyes wide. “Did you hear that? That sounded like hungry. Can you get me something?” Signing as she spoke to Corinne, Rachel returned her gaze to Lily. How was she able to verbalize without any hearing? She shelved the thought as the blatant distrust in Lily’s eyes consumed her attention. How many people had let this little girl down already in her young life? She tried a few more signs as she waited for Corinne to return but didn’t have any luck.

Dr. Gibson tapped her shoulder. “We’d like to examine her, make sure she’s okay.”

Rachel nodded. “I think that’s a good idea.”

She patted the bed and tilted her head toward it. Lily shook her head, and the fear was back in her eyes, front and center. Bringing Lily’s anxiety back down before it got out of control again was critical. Rachel climbed onto the mattress then motioned toward Lily. After several long seconds, Lily joined her. Sheltering Lily in a gentle embrace, Rachel nodded to the doctor who made quick work of his initial exam. Fingers clenched around Rachel’s wrists, Lily squeezed herself tight against Rachel, crying out when the nurse drew a vial of blood.

Rachel soothed the little girl, and by the time the doctor returned with the results, Lily had finished a package of animal crackers and drained a juice box.

“She’s a bit undernourished but, overall, in pretty good shape. Whoever brought her in seems to have done a fair job taking care of her. I can’t see a reason to admit her as a patient.”

Rachel felt Lily's weight as it sagged against her middle. Poor little girl had run out of steam. "What do we do now?"

Corinne snapped her phone closed. "Hopefully we'll get a hit on her tomorrow through the endangered child registry, but for now we have someone lined up. We can take her as soon as she's released."

Rachel's heart tripped as she looked at the crust and dirt smudges on Lily's face. She'd met her only a couple of hours earlier, but something about Lily's beguiling eyes and tarnished innocence pulled at her. Shaking her head, she ignored the feeling. Protective Services was simply doing its job.

Shifting, she roused Lily awake. There was no slow, easy awakening though. In a heartbeat, the little girl was wide-eyed and fearful. Rachel touched her arm, drawing her attention, as she once again wondered what on earth Lily had been through.

Corinne moved forward and Rachel scooted off the bed, but Lily scooted right along with her, scrambling behind her back and forcing Rachel to act as a barrier between them. Lily's fingers dug into Rachel's hip. With gentle hands, Rachel pried herself loose and squatted down next to her.

The little girl's eyes filled with tears. "Stay. With you."

Her words were barely distinguishable, but the near panic behind them caused an answering sting of tears to prick Rachel's eyes. The plans for reunion weekend with her siblings tumbled through her mind, but there was always room for one more. And they would love Lily.

"Corinne, Lily is obviously traumatized. I have background clearance through the hospital to work with children. Under the circumstances, is there any reason she couldn't stay with me until her family is located?"

Corinne frowned. "You sure you want that responsibility?" At Rachel's nod, she pulled out her phone. "Let me make a call." She left the room, and Rachel wiped Lily's nose then rocked her in silence as they waited.

Lily's ramrod posture stiffened further when the agent returned. "Good news. My supervisor's allowing some latitude." Smiling, she laid out paperwork on the counter. "They've given us permission to let Lily go with you. Record your contact information here, then I'll need your signature in a couple of places."

Rachel felt Lily's worried gaze and simply signed "yes" and nodded. Her shy answering smile was all the validation Rachel needed that she'd made the right decision. After endorsing the documents, Rachel jotted down her home and cell phone numbers, and her physical address. She touched Corinne's hand and was met with another smiling face. "Thank you for making this happen."

"My pleasure. Thank *you*. I'm glad you were on call tonight."

The first pink fingers of sunrise tinged the eastern sky as Rachel hoisted Lily from the back seat and climbed the stairs. Her third floor apartment had been an intentional choice to augment her regular cardio workouts, but right now, her back wasn't buying it. Of course, she wasn't used to hauling forty-three pounds of sleeping girl, either, but Lily had been through enough for one night and Rachel didn't have the heart to wake her again.

She dropped her purse in the entry hall then laid Lily's sleeping form on the sofa. Exhaustion might've triggered the extra tug at her heart, but Rachel couldn't deny that it felt good to be needed again. As she tucked a throw around the slender girl and wondered again about her circumstances, the momma-bear instincts she'd honed over the years slipped back into place like well-worn gloves.

No matter what else happened, she'd do everything in her power to make sure Lily was never abandoned again.