

Chapter 4 Would They Abandon Her Again?

Stephen went around the hospital looking for people, trying to find out what was going on. However, everyone he encountered told him that they did not know what was happening either.

By now, the Hatchers were so cold they were shivering uncontrollably in the icy corridor. The Crawfords would not see them either. It was becoming unbearable to wait there.

Paula was the first to admit defeat. "I'm going to see Debbie..."

Debbie was also warded at this hospital, but she was in the maternity wing.

Stephen and Richard could not stand it any longer either, but they did not want to leave so they had no choice but to keep on waiting in the interminable cold...

Incessant complaints filled their minds. They had no idea, however, that this was only the beginning of their troubles!

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Lilly could hear the quiet beeping of machines around her. There were also people talking, but very indistinctly.

However, there was one voice in particular that was very clear.

"Lilly...Lilly dear...hey, little Tulip! You have to wake up soon, okay? If you don't, I'll..."

Lilly felt as if a small swarm of bees was buzzing beside her ear and chattering to her. It was just a little bit tiresome.

Who was this person talking to her?

Lilly's eyelids fluttered slightly and she finally opened her eyes, only to see a snowy-white wall right in front of her.

A group of people surrounded her bed. Pursing her lips, she carefully scrutinized them.

Gilbert reacted enthusiastically; he was also the first to speak. "Lilly! You're awake now! I'm your Uncle Gilbert..."

The rest of the Crawfords did not even dare to breathe; they watched Lilly tensely.

Lilly found herself at a loss. "Uncle Gilbert?"

Her pretty little face was expressionless and wooden. She looked just like a fragile porcelain doll.

It sounded as if she were repeating a foreign phrase.

Hugh's mouth tightened into a hard line. Lilly was very thin; she was so tiny that the hospital bed seemed very large.

It hurt to see her like that, so much so that it was hard to breathe.

Gilbert spoke more gently. "Lilly, I'm your mother's brother. My name is Gilbert. You telephoned me earlier, do you remember?"

Lilly furrowed her brow. After a moment, she let out a soft "Ohh."

She remembered now.

She had called Uncle Gilbert's phone number.

He had ignored her though.

Didn't her uncles want her?

"Did you...did you come to look for me?" Lilly asked in a thread of a voice.

All the men around the bed nodded vigorously. Bryson added, "Lilly, I'm your Uncle Bryson. We're all here to take you back home with us."

Hugh felt as if something were constricting his throat. He drew a deep breath, then said, "That's right. We're here to take you home, Lilly.

In the future, no one will dare to bully you or harass you. If anyone tries, your Grandpa Hugh will have something to say about that."

Lilly looked at each of the men in turn.

They were going to take her home?

She wasn't sure if they would abandon her again once they brought her home.

Would they beat her and starve her?

Seeing how silent she was, the Crawfords felt even more tense than ever.

None of them had much experience handling children. One by one, they looked at Anthony and Liam.

Anthony was the eldest Crawford boy; he was 40 years old and had two children. Liam, the second son, was 38 and also had two young ones.

However, Anthony was not very good at interacting with children; after hesitating for a moment, he asked bluntly, "Lilly, what are you worried about?"

Since he said this in his customary inflexible, rather harsh way, his siblings all glared at him.

Liam coughed slightly in embarrassment. By nature, he was a taciturn person and found it difficult to say much.

The tension in the air was so thick one could cut it with a knife.

Gilbert gave a deep sigh. He inched closer to Lilly's bed and very tenderly caressed her hair. In as gentle a voice as he could muster, he asked, "Lilly darling, why don't you tell us all what your proper name is?"

Lilly stared at the ceiling in silence for a while before replying, "I don't have any other name except Lilly."

Daddy had told her that she didn't need a proper name; they'd discuss that when her stepmother gave birth to her baby brother.

Lilly had been what Mommy named her. She didn't have any other name besides that.

Gilbert felt a dull ache in his heart. How had this child passed her days in the Hatcher household without even a name?

Suppressing his anger, he asked, "Well then, Lilly, can you tell your Uncle Gilbert what you're thinking right now?"

Lilly finally turned her gaze in his direction with an effort, staring at this person who called himself her Uncle Gilbert.

That day, her entire world had been so very dark but this man had broken through that darkness like a ray of light and rescued her.

Her mouth trembled slightly and she asked, "Uncle Gilbert...when we go home, am I...am I allowed to eat?"

All the Crawfords were dumbfounded when they heard this.

This child was asking if she was allowed to eat when she arrived home...

Before they could muster up a response, Lilly asked again in a tiny voice. "Will you hit me?"

Those simple four words almost made Hugh weep.

The little girl was afraid she would be starved and beaten.

What sort of abuse had she endured in the Hatcher household?!

She was half-starved and inadequately dressed for the winter.

When she had nightmares, no one would be there with her when she awoke in fright, and in summer no one would bother when she was drenched in sweat from the heat.

Hugh turned away, biting his lip until he almost drew blood so he could suppress the tears that threatened to spill down his cheeks.

The Crawford brothers were so enraged they clenched their fists tightly. However, they did not dare give vent to their anger for fear of scaring Lilly.

Gilbert reached out and took Lilly's tiny hand, placing it against his cheek. Hoarsely, he murmured, "Lilly darling, when we go home, you can eat whatever you want, and no one will hit you. Look, that's your Uncle Anthony there. That one's your Uncle Liam, and that's your Uncle Bryson...All of them are tough, strong men. All of us will protect you and no one will ever hurt you again."

Lilly clutched at the covers tightly with her other hand and was silent for a long time.

Just when the Crawfords thought that she was not going to say anything else, she suddenly burst out, "Uncle Gilbert, I didn't push anyone. Daddy and Grandpa kept telling me to own up, but I wouldn't..."

She repeated this stubbornly, a look of determination on her little face and a downcast expression in her eyes.

Did her uncles truly like her?

Now that she had told them she wouldn't own up despite being asked to, would they still want a disobedient child like her?

Gilbert felt as though a wad of cotton was constricting his throat. Tears welled up in his eyes, and even Hugh could not help brushing away his own tears.

Anthony said firmly and calmly, "Your Uncle Anthony believes you didn't do it. That was the right thing to do, not owning up to something that wasn't your fault."

Gilbert nodded as well. "They're the ones who are in the wrong. You didn't do anything wrong Lilly; you did the right thing."

When Lilly heard this, her mouth twisted briefly and tears began pouring down her cheeks.

It was as if all those bottled-up tears had finally found an outlet and refused to be suppressed any longer.

Lilly's little face still maintained that stubborn expression but her voice was punctuated by gulping sobs.

"But...but Daddy doesn't believe me. Daddy said I killed my baby brother and that if I didn't own up, he wouldn't let me out."

It seemed as if Lilly had finally found someone she could unload her grievances to, even as she sobbed these words.

Even a three-and-a-half-year-old child could feel ill-used no matter how stubborn or determined they were.

Gilbert's fury got the better of him. "He's not fit to be your Daddy!"

"Gilbert!" Anthony rapped out prohibitively.

Gilbert subsided into reluctant silence, but his rage was unabated. At the thought of Stephen still waiting outside, he wanted to tear the hospital bed apart, grab one of the metal tube supports and give that man the beating of his life.

Lilly sobbed out a few more things, cried a little longer, then fell asleep.

Once they were outside the room, Gilbert asked indignantly, "Anthony, are we really going to let those Hatchers off so lightly?"

Bankruptcy alone was not enough for the likes of them!

Anthony slowly unbuttoned his shirt sleeves and rolled them up. Blandly, he returned, "Eight against one, Gilbert. Is that enough for you?"

There would be eight Crawfords swearing vengeance against the Hatcher family!