

Prologue

At eight years old, Lily considered herself quite the grown-up– she was only two years younger than her brother after all. That didn't mean that she could walk home alone though. Lily was walking home from school on that day, following her brother Sam and his friend, Kyle, like she always did.

Kyle was their next-door neighbor so he walked home with them from school every day. He was also the boy that Lily was planning on marrying, whether he liked it or not. She just knew that he was the one– her mate. She hoped that one day he would look at her like her dad looked at her mom–as if she was his whole world.

She was so busy daydreaming about her future marriage that she didn't notice the two boys had started running home without her.

"Sam wait!" she shouted, trying to catch up with them on her tiny legs. "Kyle!"

Either they didn't hear her, or they didn't care that she was far behind them now. They kept running until they were so far ahead of her there was no way she could catch up. She tried to run faster, hating that they had left her behind, but she ended up tripping on the uneven sidewalk, scraping her knees and hands on the rough ground.

She looked down at her knees and when she saw the torn skin and blood, she couldn't hold back her tears. She hated crying because crying was for babies, but she hated blood even more. After looking at her scraped-up hands, she cried even harder, her sobs loud and ugly. Even though she knew the way home, she didn't know if she could walk there all alone now. She wanted her mom or her dad.

She waited for a few minutes, hoping Sam and Kyle would come back for her but when there was no sign of them, she struggled to her feet. Her legs felt stiff and sore as she stood up. She started hobbling down the street but stopped when she heard a car driving slowly next to her. She looked to the side to see a man pulling over and getting out of his car. He walked over, stopping a few feet away from her.

"Hi there. I saw you fall down. Are you okay?" he asked.

Lily knew that she wasn't meant to talk to strangers, so she kept quiet and took a small step back.

"Hey, it's alright. I just want to help," he said soothingly. "I can see you're hurt."

Lily nodded, letting a few more tears escape. "It's sore," she whispered, but he seemed to hear her quiet words.

"I know, honey. Maybe I can help you get home," he suggested, pointing to his car.

"Mom said I mustn't get into cars with strangers," Lily said with a frown.

"I'm not a stranger though. I know your parents."

"If you know them then what are their names?" she asked, thinking that was a good test to prove his words.

He smiled at her. "Rose and Greyson. And your name is Lily."

"Oh," Lily said in surprise.

"I can take you home to your mom, Lily. I'm sure you want to see her, don't you?"

Lily bit her lip while she thought about it. Her mom did say that it was only strangers she mustn't trust, and this man didn't seem like a stranger. "I don't know...I guess it's ok," she eventually agreed.

She was about to take his hand when she heard her mom scream her name. Lily spun to see her mom running towards them, looking panicked.

"Mommy," Lily exclaimed in happiness. She tried to run to her mom, but the man was holding her hand and wouldn't let go. She looked at him with a frown. "I want my mom," she told him.

Instead of letting her go though he started pulling her towards his car.

"No! Let her go," her mom shouted as she got closer.

Lily started crying again, not understanding what was happening. Just as the man was pushing her into the car, her mom grabbed his arm and Lily heard a snap. The man screamed in pain and let go of Lily's hand.

"You b***h," he roared.

"Run, Lily!" her mom shouted.

Lily watched in horror as the man slapped her mom across the face. He hit her so hard that she landed on the ground a few feet away. He walked to her and picked her up by the hair.

"Mommy!" Lily screamed, running towards them. She kicked the man's leg, hoping he would let her mom go, but it didn't seem to affect him. He pushed her away while still holding onto her mother.

The man jostled Lily's mother. "Stop struggling!" he yelled into her face, making her inch. "I was told to get the girl, but the Alpha's wife might be even better," he said, grinning evilly.

Her mom turned her face towards Lily and frantically mouthed the word 'run'. Lily stayed long enough to see her mom knee the man between his legs and kick his chest when he fell to his knees. Lily turned and ran towards home, hoping that her dad was there so he could go help her mom. She ran as fast as could and when she saw their house, she screamed, "Daddy!" at the top of her lungs.

She could see him playing catch with Sam and Kyle in the yard, but when he heard her scream his gaze snapped to her. His eyes widened in shock and he ran towards her. When he got to her, he looked her up and down, focusing on the blood on her knees.

"You have to help mommy," she told him quickly, tears choking her voice. "There's a bad man."

He didn't wait to hear another word before he started running in the direction she had come from. She followed after him, and soon Sam and Kyle were running with her too. By the time Lily got to where she had left her mom, everyone else was already there. The man's car wasn't there anymore, but Lily wasn't sure if that was a good thing. She could see her dad was on the ground cradling something in his lap and when she walked closer, she saw it was her mother's body.

"Mom?" she said softly, but her mother's body didn't move and her eyes stayed closed. "Mommy?" she said louder, but her mom still didn't wake up.

Sam and Kyle were looking down at her body with wide eyes and serious faces. Lily looked at her father, hoping he would tell her everything was going to be okay, but he had tears streaming from his eyes. Her dad never cried. "Daddy?" she whispered.

"She's dead," he said. "She's dead," he repeated in a daze. His words shattered her, but he didn't seem to notice even as he looked at her. "What happened, Lily?" he asked.

She was too shocked to reply to him, his words echoing cruelly in her heart. She's dead. When she just shook her head in denial and didn't reply, he shouted the question again. He was scary when he shouted.

"It...it was the bad man," she explained through her sobs. "He saw me fall...and...and he said he would take me home. I was going with him, but then mommy came and he didn't want to let go of my hand," she tried to explain.

Her dad looked angry now and she didn't like that. Her dad was an Alpha and she knew that meant he was the strongest in their pack. He lifted her mother's body off of his lap and placed it gently on the ground, but his clenched jaw showed that he was ready to punch something like he always did when he was mad.

"I'm sorry daddy," Lily said desperately.

He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and shook her violently. "Didn't we teach you anything? We told you not to get into cars with strangers!" he screamed at her.

"He knew our names so I thought it was okay to go with him," she cried, trying to make him understand.

"Are you stupid?" he shouted, before shoving her to the ground. "Why didn't you just run home? Maybe then she would still be alive." His voice broke as he started crying again.

His words were like knives slicing into her skin. She felt every one of them cutting her open. Lily looked to her brother for help, but he averted his gaze.

"Sam?" she said brokenly, but he refused to look at her. She turned her gaze to Kyle next only to find disgust in his eyes.

Her mom was dead and everyone else she loved thought it was her fault. Maybe it was her fault. Maybe her dad was right. She walked to her mom's body and tried to take her hand, still holding out hope that her mom might just be sleeping. When she reached out though, her dad slapped her hand away.

"Don't touch her!" he screamed.

Her brother added to her new pain by pushing her back. "Just go away. We don't want you here. This is your fault!" he spat at her.

She stumbled away from them, not understanding how everything had gone so wrong. She turned and ran home, not stopping until she was curled up under her blanket on her bed. She wanted to hide from the world and from her family, wishing that when she woke up tomorrow everything would be back to normal and her mom would still be alive. If only she knew then that things were only going to get worse from then– much, much worse.