

The Princess to Eight Uncles Chapter 1 - 10

Chapter 1 Don't Get Up Until You Apologize

Lambridge City, Promenade 1st Villa Area – the Hatcher Mansion.

Today was the Lantern festival. Colorful lights were decorated around the house, giving a touch of warmth to the cold atmosphere of the Hatcher family.

Suddenly, a scream echoed across the mansion.

“Ah-”

Followed by thudding, a large-bellied woman fell from the stairs!

Everyone was surprised and hurried toward her.

Stephen Hatcher, the president of Ador Hatcher Corporation, quickly asked, “Debbie, are you alright?”

The woman's face turned pale when she saw fresh blood trickling down her legs.

Horrified, she replied, “Stephen, it hurts... Our baby... Quickly, save our baby!”

The house's madam, Paula Anderson, panicked and asked, “What happened?!”

Debbie looked toward the top of the stairs with tears in her eyes.

Everyone looked up and saw a girl, about three years old, standing at the top of the stairs.

Upon seeing everyone's gaze, she hugged the toy rabbit in her arms tightly in fear.

Richard Hatcher roared angrily, “Were you the one that pushed Debbie?!”

The little girl pouted. “It’s not me, and I didn’t...”

While crying, Debbie begged, “No... Dad, it’s not Lilly’s fault. She’s still young, and she didn’t mean it...”

Her words quickly reaffirmed that it was Lilly’s fault.

Stephen’s eyes darkened, and he immediately ordered, “Lock her in the attic! I’ll deal with her once I return!”

The other hurriedly sent Debbie to the hospital while the servants dragged Lilly upstairs.

Even when a shoe fell off, she kept a stubborn face and did not beg or cry for help.

No light or heat could reach the dark and cold attic. The windows squeaked as if a monster would appear at any moment...

Lilly hugged her stuffed bunny tightly and curled up in a corner.

It’s so cold...

The truth was she never pushed anyone, but no one believed her.

As it was cold spring weather, the snow and the wind made their way into the attic through the window cracks, piling layers of coldness onto little Lilly.

Soon, an entire day had passed by.

No one cared about Lilly, and no one even knew that Debbie had punished her the day before. She was already in a daze as she had yet to eat anything.

Richard had ordered that she was not allowed to leave until she admitted that it was her fault.

“Mommy...”

Lilly’s lips were turning purple from the cold, and she was shivering. She could only close her eyes and mumble, “Mommy... I didn’t do anything wrong... It’s not my fault...”

She knew that her mother had died from an illness a year ago.

After her mother passed on, her dad found another woman, and soon the woman was pregnant with a baby...

However, the woman was two-faced. She was only nice to Lilly when others were present; otherwise, she would act like a demon punishing her.

Mommy... Lilly thought as she squeezed her toy rabbit’s ears before losing consciousness.

Not knowing how long it had been, the door suddenly opened with a loud bang.

Stephen was furious when he picked up the unconscious Lilly, dragging her down the stairs and throwing her outside into the snow!

Lilly shivered from the cold surface and struggled to open her eyes...

“Daddy... I’m hungry...” She muttered.

Stephen scoffed. “You killed Debbie’s unborn child, and the first thing you’re telling me is that you’re hungry?! I can’t believe I have such an evil daughter!”

Lilly’s eyes were hollow, and she could not speak as she was frozen stiff.

The more Stephen looked at her, the angrier he became. Why is she still acting stubborn despite being at fault? You malicious child!

“It is my fault as a parent that you’re behaving this way! Now that you’ve killed your unborn brother, who knows if you will start murdering people when you grow up? As your father, I must teach you a lesson!”

He looked around and picked up a broom from the corner, snapping the broom head off.

The thick broomstick landed on Lilly’s body with a thud, causing her to scream in pain!

“Is it your fault?!” Stephen glared.

“It’s not me. It was really... not me!” Lilly bit her lips and maintained a stubborn face.

Stephen was getting more furious upon hearing her words. “Then are you saying your stepmother willingly fell down the stairs?! Why would she want to fall after being six months pregnant?!”

He could not help but think back to what happened in the hospital. Debbie was bleeding heavily, and the doctor had declared her situation as critical twice, but even on the brink of death, she insisted on asking him to not blame Lilly!

She said that Lilly was still young when her mother passed away. She was simply afraid that her baby brother might get the attention away from her and did not mean to push her.

Stephen felt angrier as he thought. He beat Lilly while scolding, “You’re still trying to deny it! Stop denying it!”

With every sentence, Lilly would get hit by the broomstick.

He was so engrossed in hitting her that he did not even realize that his phone had fallen out of his pocket. When Lilly was severely beaten, he finally stopped, so she lay paralyzed on the snowy ground.

“Stay here and kneel until your stepmother is discharged!”

Stephen tugged his tie after he scolded her and left the broomstick behind before walking away.

He had been feeling irritated recently as his company had been facing a loophole for half a month and had yet to receive help resolving it.

Then today, Debbie fell from the stairs and lost their unborn child, losing the only hope for the Hatcher family.

The consecutive unfortunate events stressed him, and he could not help but vent it all out on Lilly.

Lilly’s rabbit toy had already been beaten to pieces. She tried to stand up but fell back onto the snowy ground with a thud...

She felt that she was on the brink of death.

If I die, will I finally be able to see mommy?

At that moment, she heard a blurry voice.

“Lilly, call for your uncle! Your uncle is Gilbert Crawford, his phone number is 159xxxxx...”

“Call...” Lilly opened her eyes and noticed the black phone lying in the snow. Her survival instincts kicked in as she desperately crawled toward it.

“159...”

Lilly stuttered and stammered, her stiff fingers struggling to move, and finally, she managed to make the call...

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Meanwhile, Hugh Crawford lectured at a courtyard house in Clodston, “Another year has passed. Gilbert Crawford, when will you take the test for the Chief Physician role?!”

The eight brothers of the Crawford family looked at each other while Gilbert touched his nose.

Suddenly the old man changed the topic and asked,

“Also, it’s been four years, and have you not found your sister?”

The looks on the brothers’ faces changed, with their lips pursed. Their indifferent eyes now had a slight hint of sorrow.

Their younger sister, Jean Crawford, was diagnosed with acute promyelocytic leukemia at a young age. Since then, she had been carefully nursed by the Crawford family as she went through blood transfusions, anti-infection treatments, and bone marrow transplants...

However, her condition worsened and even affected her memory.

Then, four years ago, she suddenly went missing.

Gilbert was a physician at the Shercaster Cancer Hospital and was in charge of Jean’s treatment.

That day, he had to save a critically ill patient, and it was at that moment... that Jean disappeared.

For the past four years, guilt and regret had been tormenting him. Even with his outstanding medical talent, he had been unable to move forward since then.

The Crawford family had eight sons, and Jean was the only daughter.

After their daughter's disappearance, Bettany suddenly fell ill, and Hugh's temper grew unstable.

A heavy stone lay in the hearts of everyone in the Crawford family, rendering them restless.

The eldest son, Anthony Crawford – the CEO of the Crawford family's business empire – worked day and night tirelessly, causing his health to worsen and requiring him to take daily medication.

The third son, Bryson Crawford – the outstanding pilot of Swift Airlines- failed the psychological tests and had been resting at home for the past four years.

The others...

The study room fell into silence before suddenly, Gilbert's phone rang!

Chapter 2 Get Her Out Of Here

Hugh had his rules, one of which was that phones should be turned off during morning meetings.

Gilbert quickly retrieved his phone and was about to end the call.

Hugh scolded, “Take it!”

Gilbert then coughed. “Dad, it was an unknown number, I...”

Hugh put his teacup aside and ordered, “Take the call and put it on speakers!”

Bryson and Jonas looked pitifully at Gilbert.

Gilbert had no choice but to pick up the call and put it on speakers.

They were taken aback when they heard a small voice.

“Hello... is this uncle? I’m Lilly Hatcher... My mommy is Jean Crawford... Are you my Uncle Gilbert?”

The little girl’s voice was weak and indescribably monotonous, like a small robot, with no discernible emotions in her tone.

The looks of the Crawford family changed drastically!

Clack... Hugh’s pen cap dropped from his hand.

They could not utter a single sound, as if everyone had their throats strangled.

The child’s tender voice sounded again on the other end of the phone.

“Uncle... I’m so cold and hungry... I didn’t push my stepmother, but they don’t believe me... Daddy dragged me to the gate to kneel... but I’m cold... Uncle, will you help me...”

As she spoke, her voice grew weaker and weaker.

The sound of the snowstorm blowing could still be heard from the other end of the call, but her voice had abruptly stopped.

Gilbert finally got back to his senses and grabbed his phone, holding it close to his mouth as he yelled frantically,

“Hey, Li-Lilly? Where are you? Tell me your location now!”

However, there was no response.

Hugh, panicked, stood up, and his previously rigid and stern look had already gone as if he had aged in an instant.

“Quick! Quickly! Investigate the number and location now!”

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Lilly passed out before finishing the call and dropped the phone in the snow.

Stephen then returned to look for his phone and saw Lilly lying there, not moving.

He kicked her and snarled, “It’d be better if she’s dead!”

Four years ago, he found a woman on the street who was poorly dressed and in bad condition. He took her back to his apartment out of kindness.

After the woman cleaned up, he discovered that she was gorgeous.

She had amnesia and appeared to be confused. As Stephen was enamored by her cuteness, he took care of her.

Like a fool in love, he doted on her, telling her to not force herself to do anything as he cared for her...

Now that Stephen thought about it, he found it revolting.

Who knows if a female beggar like her was taken advantage of when she was wandering about the streets?

Otherwise, why doesn’t Lilly have any resemblance to me?

Although suspicious, Stephen never wanted to do a paternity test because if it turned out that he was not the father, he would be the most foolish man in South City!

Stephen grabbed his phone and walked away. He continuously made calls in his warm study room.

“Hello... Mr. Burton, it’s me, Stephen! I’m wondering if you are acquainted with the Crawford family from Clodston?”

“Greetings, Mr. Ledger! Happy new year! Are you acquainted with the Crawford family? Oh, my company’s just having a minor issue...”

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The snowstorm outside the study room was intense, and Lilly was still lying on the snow. It was only a matter of time before the day got dark.

She was a little conscious but could no longer force her eyes to open.

She had never cried since her mother died. Even if her father abused her, she never shed a single tear.

Yet, she wanted to cry at that moment.

When she called her uncle, there was no response from the other end.

Do they hate me too? Then no one likes me at all.

What about mommy? If I die and mommy sees me, will she hate me too?

Lilly’s lips, turning purple from the cold, were pressed together as she kept thinking.

Mommy... I won’t cry... Lilly’s a good girl...

Suddenly, she heard a loud noise.

About seven cars arrived at the Hatcher mansion, and a man wearing a black down coat got out of the first car and opened the mansion’s gate!

As there was a massive snowstorm, the snow had already covered Lilly’s petite figure.

Gilbert anxiously looked around. On the phone, Lilly said she was kneeling at the gate!

Suddenly his face turned pale as he noticed a small pile of snow at the gate.

He immediately rushed over and shoved the snow away, causing his hands to redden from the cold. Finally, he found a small figure under the snow!

“Lilly?!”

Gilbert hurriedly picked up the young girl, and the moment he saw Lilly's face, he knew that this was their Lilly – her face was a splitting image of their sister when she was young...

Their most beloved and cherished sister's child – Lilly!

Lilly felt as if she had fallen into a warm embrace, and the person had even taken off their coat to wrap her around.

Lilly was numb from being frozen for too long, and after feeling an instant of warmth, she still felt bone-chillingly cold, causing her to shiver uncontrollably.

Lilly struggled to open her eyes and finally saw the man before her – he looked somewhat similar to her mother but also different.

Lilly's lips twitched as she asked weakly, "Are you... uncle... I didn't push anyone... uncle..."

At that moment, Lilly was murmuring as she had lost consciousness.

She was like a cold, emotionless robot compared to Gilbert's agitated self.

Gilbert was on the verge of crying.

The young child in his arms was only wearing thin sleepwear – pure cotton autumn clothing – with no padding at all.

Her small face had already turned purple from the cold, and her lips were cracked and turning dark.

Like a frozen sculpture, her tiny figure could not move, making Gilbert afraid that he would break her with a single touch.

"Lilly... Uncle's here, and I'm bringing you home."

Gilbert choked. He could not imagine how Lilly managed to survive independently with her condition.

He was even scared to think she would have died if they arrived later.

Gilbert carefully held Lilly, focusing solely on her. He rushed back to the car.

“Lilly, stay with me.” Gilbert’s voice turned hoarse as he urged, “Don’t sleep... Lilly, can you say something to uncle? Lilly...”

Lilly had already lost consciousness.

Hugh staggered a little as he rushed over. Seeing Gilbert’s piled-up clothes, he anxiously asked, “How is she?”

Gilbert was already panicking. “Quick, we must go to the hospital now!”

The Crawford family felt their hearts were in their throats and immediately headed toward the hospital.

Meanwhile, Stephen, who had just received the news of their arrival, hurriedly rushed downstairs with a mixture of excitement and elation on his face.

When the Crawford family was rushing into the mansion, they were stopped by the security guard. Once Anthony revealed his name, the guard quickly went to inform Stephen.

As he was wracking his brains trying to find a way to be acquainted with the Crawford family, Stephen was taken aback by the news!

Although he did not know why the Crawford family suddenly appeared before the mansion, he knew he had a chance as long as they were there.

There’s hope for the Hatcher family, after all!

Suddenly, Stephen remembered something and quickly turned to a servant, saying, “Is that deadbeat still lying in the yard? Get her out of here immediately!”

That jinx had cursed her mother to death, and now my company will go bankrupt from her curse too.

Stephen would not allow her to ruin this opportunity to meet with the Crawford family.

Chapter 3 Lilly’s Eight Uncles To The Rescue!

Everything happened so fast that the Hatchers had no time to react.

By the time Stephen rushed out, he saw Anthony preparing to get into his car and drive off. However, he had not been in time to see Gilbert brushing the snow off Lilly and picking her up from where she had been kneeling by the gate.

“My goodness! It’s Mr. Anthony Crawford!” Stephen plastered a bright smile onto his face and greeted the other cheerfully. “What brings you here? It’s an honor to have you visiting our humble abode!”

By then, Richard, Paula, and some of the Hatcher servants had hurried out to join Stephen as well, their faces wreathed in smiles of welcome.

When they saw Anthony’s stern, aloof countenance, they became even more fawning and obsequious.

Anthony Crawford was the current head of the Crawford family’s business empire and the CEO of Crawford Holdings!

The Crawford family was one of Clodston’s four influential families; everyone wanted to butter them up and curry favor.

A true aristocratic family like this with old money and such deep ties to Clodston was rare. The Crawfords were an elusive, mysterious entity; they kept themselves out of the limelight. The only thing anyone in Clodston knew for sure was that the Crawfords had eight sons, but even then, few had even set eyes on them.

Anthony was occasionally featured in the headlines of the financial news, which was why the Hatchers had recognized him.

“Mr. Crawford, please come in! It’s freezing out here. We’d love to have you stay a little while if you don’t mind such humble surroundings,” Richard said enthusiastically.

“Yes, yes, please do come in and have something hot!” Stephen chimed in, smiling.

Now that they were in the presence of a truly distinguished person, all the Hatchers could not help trying to ingratiate themselves with him.

The Ador Hatcher Corporation was in dire straits; for the Hatcher family, this was a catastrophe.

However, just a word from Anthony would revive their flagging fortunes!

If luck favored them, they might even become one of Clodston’s top ten influential families...

Anthony’s face betrayed no hint of expression; instead, he studied Stephen with keen eyes.

Was this Lilly’s father?

Still without expression, Anthony declined Richard’s offer coolly and enigmatically.

“Very well, Mr. Hatcher and family.”

Without another word, he got into his car and drove off.

The Hatchers stood there, confused and dazed, watching him leave.

Paula was the first to speak. “Mr. Crawford said very well... Does that mean he’s intending to help us?”

Richard frowned. “Given his expression, I don’t think he meant anything complimentary.”

Stephen ordered the servants to enlighten him about what had happened earlier.

They related how the Crawfords had shown up en masse at the Hatcher Mansion and taken Lilly away, and that a man in black had stripped off his coat and wrapped it around her, cradling her in his arms. He had also identified himself as her uncle...

When Stephen heard this, he was thunderstruck. Suddenly, everything became terrifyingly clear.

It was common knowledge that the Crawfords had eight sons and a daughter. However, the daughter's health was frail, and she had never appeared in public before.

Did this mean that the woman he had rescued four years ago was the Crawford family's one and only precious daughter?!

The rest of the Hatcher family felt their hearts sinking. How they bitterly regretted their actions!

Paula's lips trembled. "So Jean was the Crawfords' daughter... hurry, we need to go and get Lilly back..."

They would never have forced Lilly to kneel in the snow if they had known!

In fact, they would have treated her like a goddess and worshiped at her feet!

Stephen regretted his actions as well; when he recalled how he had disciplined Lilly so harshly, he felt uneasy.

Angrily he snapped, "How are you going to get her back? Do you think we can walk in and take her away just like that?"

Richard frowned so hard his brow looked like a wrinkled prune. After a long moment of consideration, he said, "Well, regardless, we're still Lilly's blood relations. We're her

grandparents, after all! The Crawfords can't deny that, no matter how angry they are. Then again, Lilly did cause Debbie's miscarriage, that's a fact..."

All they had wanted to do was to teach Lilly not to be an irresponsible little liar!

Unfortunately, Stephen had let his temper get the better of him and had disciplined her more severely than he should have...

The Hatchers felt confident that they would be able to clear up any misunderstandings with the Crawfords. All they had to do was to have a satisfactory explanation for everything. Once that was settled, they would be able to look forward to a future of wealth and prestige...

...

Instead of returning to Clodston after rescuing Lilly, the Crawfords went straight to the nearest hospital.

The hitherto vacant VIP suite in South Town's best hospital was now a hive of frantic activity.

No one dared to raise their voices. The atmosphere was extremely tense, punctuated by the sounds of hospital equipment beeping and doctors and nurses hurrying to and fro.

Hugh Crawford paced back and forth with the help of his walking stick. "Why are they still in there?" He muttered fretfully.

Anthony glanced at the time, then gently told his father, "Dad, you should sit down."

Lilly had immediately been whisked off to the emergency room as soon as they reached the hospital. Gilbert had gone with her; up until now, neither of them had emerged.

In the emergency room, Gilbert examined Lilly's bruised body with shaking hands.

Broken bones were the worst thing that could happen in cases of severe frostbite. A more detailed examination revealed that Lily had been badly beaten; in fact, her arms, ribs, and shins had been fractured.

There were numerous patches of frostbite all over her body. Some of the areas were so severely frostbitten they would require surgical intervention.

Lilly was only three or four years old, and she had been made to undergo such torment...

Hot tears stung Gilbert's eyes. Leaning down, he murmured, "Lilly, this is your Uncle Gilbert. Can you hear me? If you can, please hang in there. You'll make it through, I promise..."

Lilly's eyes were tightly closed, but she had the oddest sensation of her body feeling very light and warm all over. It was the first time she had ever felt so comfortable.

Everything was very quiet, except for a voice by her ear that constantly murmured, "Lilly...Lilly dear...little Tulip...Can you see me? Can you hear me?"

Who was this mysterious person?

Lilly tried very hard to open her eyes, but she was unable to do so.

She wanted to reply that she could hear this person talking to her as well, but she could not make a sound, no matter how frantically she tried.

...

It took three hours of surgical procedures before Lilly was out of danger, and the doctors all felt this was a miracle!

The little girl was wheeled into a hospital room, IV tubes plastered all over her body.

Gilbert's face was stony as he handed Anthony the report from Lilly's examination. When the Crawfords read it, they were incensed.

Hugh growled in fury, "A fine, upstanding bunch, these Hatchers! They even had the nerve to lay hands on a three-and-a-half-year-old child!"

Anthony had already done a background check on the Hatcher family. In a frosty voice, he replied, "The Hatcher family's business goods are under suspicion of being contraband. The company is in pretty desperate straits. Recently they've been trying to find some point of connection so that we'll help them."

Hugh merely laughed derisively. "Help them? They can count themselves lucky if I don't ruin them entirely!"

The old gentleman was so enraged that he wanted to tear the entire Hatcher family to pieces there and then.

"Don't worry, Dad," Anthony answered. "They won't last long."

Hugh bit his lower lip and fell silent. After a while, he murmured, "Then how about Jean...what's happened to her...?"

Anthony did not say anything, merely stayed silent.

Clodston and South Town were around 1200 miles apart.

Four years ago, Jean had somehow found her way to South Town, seriously ill and having lost her memory. Stephen had found her, and taken her home.

She had almost died giving birth to Lilly but miraculously recovered and held on for another two years before succumbing to her illness, leaving Lilly alone in the world.

The Crawford brothers' beloved sister had died quietly in some remote town without a nod to her status or even a mention of her name...

Anthony's fists clenched tightly as his anger grew; the expression on his face became even stonier.

Hugh did not dare probe any further; he was afraid he would not be able to handle the truth.

Gilbert asked, "Why would they beat Lilly like that?"

Anthony replied in a voice as cold as ice, "Stephen Hatcher's wife, Debbie, fell downstairs and had a miscarriage. Stephen believed that Lilly pushed her."

The other Crawfords could not help frowning at this.

While this discussion was taking place, the Hatchers had finally tracked Lilly to the hospital.

Anthony's assistant hurriedly entered the room and said in low voice, "Mr. Anthony, the Hatchers are here. They want to see their granddaughter..."

Anthony gave a scornful bark of laughter, then ordered, "Turn off the heating outside on this floor and open the windows. Let them wait."

**

Stephen, Richard, and Paula waited outside on the top floor corridor for a very long time.

The VIP suites on this level were located inside an access-controlled door; the Hatchers were in the outer area, so they were unable to go in.

Anthony's assistant had arrived earlier, asking them to wait for a while, then had left. The Hatchers had not seen him since.

Paula grumbled, "Why won't they let us in? Lilly's our granddaughter, after all! Why would they make us wait outside here?"

Stephen snapped, "Oh, just wait!"

He had beaten Lilly more severely than intended; it was understandable that the Crawfords would be angry.

However, the Hatchers soon realized that something was amiss. The corridor was rapidly getting colder. Not only that, their waiting area was beside the windows, and the frosty winter wind blew in, causing them to shrink away and shiver from the cold!

"This weather is dreadful! Nobody can wait around like this!" Paula, who had been pampered and sheltered her entire life, could not take it anymore.

"Stephen, you'd better find someone and ask what's going on!" Richard agreed, frowning heavily.

If the Crawfords were angry, deliberately making the Hatchers wait for a while was understandable. However, they had already been here for half an hour; that was a bit too long.

No one would be able to stand waiting in such bitterly cold weather.

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!

...

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 Crawford swearing vengeance against the Hatcher family!

Chapter 5 A Family

The rest of the Crawford brothers narrowed their eyes when they heard Anthony’s words.

Gilbert loosened his wrists and cracked his knuckles; Edward, an architectural engineer with a fiery temper and tanned skin, scoffed and grabbed a rebar from nowhere.

“We’re law-abiding citizens. How can we openly assault someone in public?” Bryson, the good-natured Captain, said gently. He interjected a nurse nearby and said, “Hello, do you have a gunny sack in the storeroom?”

The nurse stuttered, “Yeah... yeah... we have a polybag and some paper boxes in the pharmacy.” She suggested the paper boxes instead, assuming they wanted to store something.

Bryson smiled and said, “Thank you. A gunny sack will be sufficient.”

The Crawford brothers thought, a sack will be useful to beat up someone.

Meanwhile, Stephen shivered in the cold as he waited outside the VIP wards. He swore in his heart, I’ve been up all night, and it’s almost daylight. Where the hell are the Crawfords?

Richard left earlier because he could not stand the cold any longer. He reminded Stephen to stay put and demonstrate their sincerity before he left.

Spring nights were colder than winter nights. Stephen could feel the biting cold filling his lungs with every breath of the stale air. The long wait had also left him hungry and exhausted. All he wanted to do was return home, take a warm, relaxing shower, and sleep the rest of the day away.

Things became even more unbearable when he considered the cozy environment he could be at. Stephen decided it was pointless to wait any longer after another hour had passed.

The man spoke on the phone while walking to the underground car park. “Remember to call me once the Crawfords leave...” Before he could continue, he experienced total darkness surrounding him. He was covered in a gunny sack!

“What the hell! Who are you?” Stephen screamed in agony as his attackers landed forceful punches.

The perpetrators were none other than the eight brothers from the Crawford family. They did not typically get their hands dirty but could not help themselves when they considered Lilly’s unfortunate situation. Their resentment grew as they remembered Lilly’s body of injuries and how she had cautiously asked if there would be food when she returned home and if they would hurt her.

“Stop it!” Stephen begged. He was helpless and at his captors’ mercy. “Do you know who I am? I’m the President of Ador Hatcher Corporation. How dare you attack me! I swear that I’ll...”

Anthony scoffed and loosened his tie. He then motioned for his brothers to stop the assault. Everyone complied with his instructions, and Edward clung to the rebar as he prepared to resume the attack.

Stephen heaved a sigh of relief after his opponents appeared to have backed down. However, the rebar landed forcefully on his leg, much to his surprise.

“Ahh!” His agonizing cries rang out throughout the parking lot.

Although Stephen survived the attack, he was injured so badly that he had to be carried into the hospital. What made matters worse was that he had no idea whom was to blame and had no way of finding out. His adversaries did not leave any clues suggesting their identity.

“Are you feeling better, Stephen?” Debbie sobbed beside the man’s bedside. If he were awake, he would notice the lack of sincerity in her eyes. The woman appeared to be a worried wife, but she was secretly distraught over Lilly’s unexpected newfound identity in the Crawford family.

Debbie was appalled when Paula told her of the news yesterday. She fumed inwardly, how did that bastard become the only beloved daughter of the Crawford family?!

In truth, Lilly was not responsible for the miscarriage; Debbie had intentionally caused the fall so that she could get rid of the baby. She knew that the Hatchers were experiencing financial difficulties and that Stephen was on the verge of bankruptcy after incurring numerous debts. Debbie believed that a young and beautiful lady like her had a good chance of finding a new husband; one who was wealthier and more powerful than Stephen. If she had a child, remarriage would be more difficult for her. As a result, she needed to find a way to make the baby vanish while avoiding responsibility.

Debbie knew that Lilly was a lonely child loved by no one. Since her birth, the Hatchers had never been kind to her. Stephen had even admitted in his drunken stupor that he despised her presence. Hence, Debbie felt that it was safe to pin the blame on her lost child on Lilly. Little did she know that the girl was part of the Crawford family.

Debbie’s spine tingled at the prospect of offending one of the four greatest families. What should I do? I’ll be in trouble if they find out the truth. I need to figure out how to keep Lilly silent forever...

At the VIP ward, Lilly opened her eyes once again. This time, the room was completely empty and deathly quiet. She was feeling insecure and uneasy as she thought everyone had left.

A few moments later, there was a soft knock at the door. Her face lit up when she saw Gilbert enter the room. Hugh had instructed them to wait outside the ward in order to avoid crowding the room, and improve ventilation.

“How are you feeling, Lilly? Shall I get you some breakfast?” Gilbert said warmly. When Lilly nodded, he gave the order to serve breakfast.

The rest of the Crawfords were awakened by the noise and went into the room to check on Lilly.

“What do you like to eat, Lilly? There are sandwiches, donuts, oatmeal...” Hugh asked tenderly.

Edward pushed his way in and exclaimed, “How about meatball spaghetti? It’s delicious!”

Hugh reprimanded Edward by hitting his leg with his walking cane. “Lilly has only just awoken. How is she going to eat the meatball spaghetti?” He picked up a plate and suggested, “How about some sandwiches? It’s tasty.”

Bryson smiled as he picked up a bowl. “Or some oatmeal would be good too.”

Lilly pursed her lips, and tears shimmered in her eyes. Recognition dawned on her that she may now have a family. She sniffled and said cautiously, “I would like to have some sandwiches, Grandpa.”

“Great! Come, have the sandwiches!” Hugh nodded fervently, his tear-reddened eyes fixed on Lilly, who reminded him of a younger Jean. However, unlike Lilly, Jean was willful and hyperactive when she was a little girl. She led a carefree life and often bickered with her brothers. However, the little girl before him was melancholic, and

careful with her words. She must have been through a lot to be this mature at the age of three and a half.

The Crawfords only left the room after Lilly had finished her meal and tucked into bed. However, the moment Lilly closed her eyes, a voice sounded in her ear. “Tulip! Tulip!”

She opened her eyes, but the room was empty. Lilly tried to sleep again, convinced that she was dreaming. The voice spoke again as she closed her eyes. “Lilly, Lilly, Tulip!”

Lilly clutched the sheets nervously as she searched for the source of the voice.

Chapter 6 My Master

Lilly looked around, yet she still saw only an empty room. “Who are you?” she asked in a shaking voice.

“I’m your master,” the voice answered calmly.

The little girl scowled at the absurd response. “I don’t have a master,” she said firmly.

Suddenly, a shadowy figure sat in the chair next to the bed. The young man, dressed in a white robe, was not visible to the rest. He had blood-red lips, piercing grey eyes, and a high nose. He exuded a cold, sinister aura.

The man glared at the little girl before him and thought, I thought she was going to be an ignorant dumb child. It seems like it isn’t that easy to fool her...

“Tulip.” Before he could continue, Lilly hissed, “My name is not Tulip. I’m Lilly.”

The man rubbed his chin and said, “I’m really your master. Your mum asked me to be your master when she was still around.”

“No, she won’t,” Lilly protested. She did not believe her mother would give her up to a stranger.

The man was speechless at her denial. When Jean was about to die, she saw him and begged him to protect Lilly and the Crawfords. The little girl was only two years old then and could not see his spiritual body. However, the fact remains that he was her master! When Lilly was on the verge of death two days ago, she could finally hear his voice. Nonetheless, she refused to believe his words.

The man rubbed his nose and stated, “Jean Crawford is your mother, and you are Lilly Hatcher. I know who you are.”

Lilly pursed her lips and retorted, “Everyone knows that.”

What a clever young lady. The Hatchers would never be able to bully her if it weren’t for her petite stature and desire to be loved.

The man smirked and replied, “Don’t overthink everything, little one. When you are well enough, we can do the ceremonious activities. My name is Pablo Belmont. I was a formidable man in my past life.”

Noticing Lilly’s confused expression, Pablo explained, “It’s natural that you don’t know who I am because I wasn’t born in your era. However, I’m a talented man. I can teach you many things, such as to protect yourself from bullies.”

“Will great men perish?” Lilly inquired. When she realized her question had met with silence, she asked again, “If you’re as capable as you said, how did you die?”

Pablo was rendered speechless by her difficult questions. Lilly clutched her sheets and pursed her lips. “If you’re really my master, why did you leave me alone?” Nobody cared about her since her mother died, not even when she was crying or hurt. For the past year,

she tried her best to avoid stepping on anyone's toes. Despite her efforts, her father and grandparents did not adore her. Debbie even beat her up at times.

"From now on, I'll protect you," Pablo stated solemnly. His face hardened, and he offered no further explanation. Lilly bit her lower lip and turned away from him.

Pablo patted Lilly's head and said, "Get some rest. I'll be back later. This is my welcome gift for you." He had rushed to see Lilly and needed to return to tie up any loose ends.

Lilly felt a searing sensation and found red threads circling her wrist. The room fell silent once again. She looked around but saw no one. To her surprise, her aching body felt better, and her heart was at peace.

After ten days, Lilly's wounds mostly recovered. Finally, she was well enough to return home.

"This is a miracle. She has managed to heal so quickly. Given the severity of her injuries, I expected it to take three months," a doctor said incredulously.

Gilbert soon arrived and observed Lilly on the bed, her eyes glued to the red string around her wrist. She looked immensely lonely and afraid.

"Lilly, what's wrong?" He reached out and patted her head gently. "What's this?" He pointed to the red string and asked curiously. He did not remember seeing the item on Lilly's wrist last night.

Lilly raised her head and asked, "Where's my rabbit, Uncle Gilbert?"

Gilbert recalled that while Lilly was unconscious, she held on to a worn-out rabbit stuffed animal. He quickly wiped the snow off the little girl and emptied her bag to get her ready for the emergency room. He tossed the filthy rabbit aside in his moment of panic.

“Was the rabbit important, Lilly? I’m afraid that it’s gone,” Gilbert spoke gently. He quickly added, “I can get you a brand new rabbit toy. I’m going to buy it right now!”

Lilly bit her lips as her eyes started to redden. She tried desperately to stop the tears from streaming down her cheeks. She squeaked, “Mommy got me the rabbit.”

Daddy threw all of Mommy’s belongings away. The little rabbit was the only thing left. It was the only thing Mommy had left for me, and it was now gone. Mommy’s gone, my so-called master is gone, and my rabbit is gone.

When Anthony entered the room and saw Gilbert and a tearful Lilly, he scowled and asked solemnly, “What happened?”

“It’s not my fault, Anthony! Lilly had left her rabbit at the Hatcher Mansion,” Gilbert said innocently. He did not want to admit the rabbit was gone for good for fear of upsetting Lilly. If he said it was with the Hatchers, there was a glimmer of hope.

Anthony said warmly, “I’ll get you a brand new toy, Lilly. Don’t be upset.” He was more than capable of purchasing all the rabbit toys in the world if she desired.

“It’s the only gift Jean left for Lilly,” Gilbert said, shaking his head.

“Let’s go get it back,” Anthony instructed. He did not know whether the rabbit was still at the Hatcher Mansion. If it wasn’t, he swore to dig through all the bins in South City to get it back.

“I want to go too, Uncle Anthony!” Lilly said. Apart from the rabbit, she still had something important to retrieve.

At the Hatcher Mansion, Richard and Stephen were seated in the living room, looking unkempt. The place had lost much of its former splendor after the debtors seized everything of value.

Stephen sat on the couch, unshaven and tired-looking.

“Why did you owe so much money, Stephen? What are we going to do?” Paula cried.

The Hatchers were declared bankrupt the day Stephen was admitted to the hospital. Not only were their assets seized by the creditors, but the Hatcher Mansion was also forcefully reclaimed. They were now without a place to stay.

Richard yelled, “Why the hell are you crying? None of this would happen if you treated Lilly better.”

“Why are you blaming it all on me? You weren’t nice to your granddaughter either!” Paula protested.

“Stop arguing!” Stephen bellowed. He had spent the entire day dealing with his company’s bankruptcy. Furthermore, he could face jail time as the court became involved in the case.

Richard and Paula remained silent, regretting their previous mistreatment of Lilly. Given her relations with the Crawfords, they might have had a chance to join the upper echelons of society had they been kind to her.

“Ungrateful brat. She has completely forgotten about us after becoming rich,” Paula said bitterly.

We are her grandparents after all. How can she be so heartless and ungrateful? A family is where we learn to forgive and forget. Moreover, this wasn't even our fault. She pushed Debbie down the stairs and caused her miscarriage.

Just then, Debbie walked down the stairs and coaxed, "Don't worry. Lilly will definitely come back."

Chapter 7 Return to the Hatcher Mansion

Debbie clutched a toy rabbit belonging to Lilly. "Don't worry, Dad, Mum. Lilly left her toy rabbit at home. I'm sure she'll come and get it back."

Only Debbie understood the significance of the rabbit. It was the only present Jean had left her daughter. As a result, Lilly hugged it every day; even as she was nearly beaten to death, she could not bear to let go. Debbie remembered Lilly did not cry despite her constant pinching and yelling. Yet, when she grabbed the bunny and cut off an ear, the little girl immediately burst into tears.

"Are you sure she'll be back?" Stephen looked at the tattered toy and asked skeptically. He did not see any value in the dirty toy rabbit.

Debbie smiled and said confidently, "You wouldn't know this was her favorite toy since you didn't spend much time with Lilly, Stephen. It holds a special place in her heart because her mom left this for her."

Paula pondered for a moment before agreeing with Debbie's analysis. She remembered Lilly always brought the rabbit everywhere she went, including the restroom.

"That's great! I hope she'll be back!" Paula said in exhilaration. She was confident of her abilities to coax a little girl.

Debbie's eyes flickered as she thought, Lilly will return for the rabbit and the parrot. I'm not certain who owns the parrot, but it resides in the forest behind the Hatcher Mansion. No one can get close to it except for Lilly. Hence, she'll personally return to fetch the parrot. It's impossible to ask anyone to collect it on her behalf.

"I've already stitched and cleaned the rabbit just now. Lilly will be overjoyed to see it in a good state," Debbie shared.

Stephen hugged his wife and said merrily, "Debbie, you're the best! You're so nice to Lilly, even though she has caused you so much pain. You not only forgave her, but you also fixed her rabbit. I'll repay your kindness when the Hatchers regain our former glory."

Debbie leaned on the man and pretended to be overjoyed. "I wish to help you in any way I can, Stephen."

"Hurry, tidy the place!" Paula instructed Debbie. The servants were dismissed from the mansion after the Hatchers went bankrupt. Hence, there was no one left to instruct except for Debbie. Even though she did as she was told, the woman's eyes flashed with hatred when no one was looking.

A few black Maybachs pulled up outside the porch of Hatcher Mansion. Anyone would be taken aback by the eight charming young men alongside the mighty Hugh Crawford alighting from the cars. And yet, all of this commotion was to retrieve a toy rabbit.

Debbie, on the other hand, chose to stay on the third floor and observe the events from the balcony. She felt envious when she saw the eight Crawford brothers and was thinking how her life would change if she could win one of the men's hearts.

Debbie's heart stopped when she saw the man wearing a black silk shirt. He pushed his golden-rimmed spectacles on his nose bridge while looking around the room with one hand in his pocket. The man with the badass attitude was none other than Jonas Crawford!

Debbie was ecstatic to see the man of her dreams. Jonas was one of the most famous actors in the country. It was the first time she saw him up close. She covered her mouth to muffle her screams; her heart raced rapidly, and her face reddened in excitement.

The Hatchers hurried to the gate to greet the Crawfords right away.

"Greetings, my in-laws. Welcome, Mr. Anthony!" Stephen called out warmly and extended his hand for a handshake. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm was met with a lukewarm response as Anthony gave him a side glance and kept his hands in his pockets.

"Is this your first time visiting the South City? I was wondering why the weather is excellent today. It must be because you have decided to visit our city. Come on in!" Richard said to Hugh gleefully.

"The weather is great indeed. It's cold enough to send my granddaughter to the hospital. The Hatchers are indeed one-of-a-kind," Hugh hissed in response.

While Richard was still trying to recover from his embarrassment, Paula laughed and said, "You're a funny man, Mr. Crawford. We have always been taking good care of Lilly. She was throwing a tantrum and argued with Debbie the other day. Her father decided to teach her a lesson so that she will mind her manners." She turned to look at Lilly lovingly, "Give Grandma a hug, will you? I haven't seen you for days. I miss you so much!" The little girl bit her lower lip and clutched Gilbert's shirt.

“Don’t you think it’s an odd way to teach manners? You caused my granddaughter to have broken bones and forced her to kneel in the snow with her pajamas,” Hugh hissed.

The Hatchers wore fearful expressions like they were even afraid to breathe. They felt they had received their just punishments now that they were bankrupt, and Stephen was brutally attacked.

“Please, come in! In any case, Stephen is Lilly’s father. A child needs to have a fatherly presence while growing up.” Richard nudged Hugh into the house as he spoke, having recognized the importance of maintaining a cordial relationship with their in-laws.

Stephen caught on the elderly man’s signal and added, “That’s right. I’m sorry for hurting you, Lilly. Will you forgive Daddy? I shouldn’t have been so harsh even when you made a mistake.” As he approached Lilly, he wore a guilty and pained expression. The bodyguards, however, stopped him before he could even get close.

The little girl kept her eyes on Gilbert and refused to look at Stephen. The latter thought in exasperation, what the hell is wrong with her? Doesn’t she know how important this meeting is for the Hatcher family? Why is she throwing a tantrum?

“Lilly,” Stephen said in a deep voice. She always followed his instructions when he used a threatening tone. The little girl trembled slightly when she heard the familiar tone.

The Crawford brothers’ resentment grew as they witnessed Lilly’s fear. They chided themselves for showing Stephen mercy the other day.

“There’s no need to discuss this further. We’re here to pick up some things,” Gilbert said.

Hugh tightened his grip on the walking cane and said coldly, “Where’s Lilly’s rabbit?”

Paula nodded. “It’s here. However, it was damaged when it was thrown into the snow. Luckily, Lilly’s aunt picked it up and fixed it for her. Why don’t we all come in and take a seat!”

A few men in black barged into the house after Anthony raised his hand. Stephen’s first instinct was to cover his head, fearful of being beaten again. However, he looked up awkwardly when he realized the men were entering the house.

“Are you afraid?” Anthony challenged. The man did not display such fear when he punished Lilly.

“It’s my fault. All of this is my fault. Lilly, shall we speak inside?” Stephen coaxed.

Just as Gilbert was about to reject his offer, Lilly tugged his sleeve and said, “Uncle Gilbert...” She looked into the house forlornly as she thought about her parrot.

The Hatchers were overjoyed to see her response because they had assumed she had given in. She’s just a little girl and this is her home. How can she disown her father and refuse to return home?

“Come on in. Welcome to the Hatcher Mansion!” Paula and Richard said enthusiastically, excited to welcome the Crawfords.

Anthony looked at Lilly, perplexed as to why she wanted to return to the Hatcher Mansion. But, whatever the case may be, he would wholeheartedly support her decision.

Even though the Hatchers’ mansion was quite large and well-furnished, the affluent Crawfords thought it was subpar. They entered the house with a look of disgust as they thought about how Lilly had spent her days at the worn-down place.

The bodyguard searched through the house and brought all the toys to the ground floor. Lilly broke free from Gilbert's arms and ran to pick up the dirtiest rabbit toy in the pile.

I'm here for you, Bunny. I'll never abandon you. Lilly smiled as she looked lovingly at her toy. Apart from the toy rabbit, she had another good friend – Polly.

Lilly dashed to the backyard, but stopped halfway and returned to grab Gilbert's hand.

Debbie hid in the backyard, patiently awaiting Lilly's arrival. She knew the little girl would go out of her way to find the parrot because it was afraid of strangers. As a result, all she needed was Lilly to appear in order to carry out her plan...

Chapter 8 Unworthy to Be Lilly's Mother

Lilly looked around the garden and shouted, "Polly!"

A loud squawk was heard, followed by the flight of a colorful parrot out of the woods. However, after flying one round around Lilly, it quickly flew back into the trees.

"Polly is scared of you, Uncle Gilbert," the little girl whispered, motioning for Gilbert to remain silent. Her large watery eyes and endearing actions made her look adorable. He looked at the garden and suggested, "Lilly, why don't I send someone to catch Polly so we can bring it home?"

She frowned and shook her head. "No." As though worried that the parrot was eavesdropping, she checked her surroundings, she added, "We can't catch Polly because it will be scared. It's a good bird."

Even though Lilly's rationale amused Gilbert, he nodded and agreed to her plan.

“Don’t move, Uncle Gilbert,” the little girl tapped on his shoulder and instructed. She then walked into the garden and called for Polly once more.

“A Dumb Dumb! A Dumb! Dumb!” Polly sat on the tree branch and chirped.

Lilly chided, “Uncle Gilbert isn’t a Dumb Dumb, Polly.”

“A Bad Dog! A Bad Dog!” Polly chirped once more.

“Uncle Gilbert isn’t a Bad Dog,” the little girl explained. Gilbert was speechless at the incredulous conversation.

Regardless of Lilly’s assurance, Polly refused to get off the tree branch. She found herself walking deeper into the garden. Suddenly, she heard a sound. When she turned to look at the source of the noise, she noticed a pair of familiar eyes staring back at her. When Lilly was about to flee, Debbie grabbed her arm and said, “You are finally here, Lilly.”

The woman covered Lilly’s mouth to muffle her cries. “Aren’t you happy to see me, Lilly?”

Debbie did not know that Gilbert was in the garden. She pinched the little girl’s face and said with a look of menace, “I don’t like that attitude of yours, Lilly. I’m still your mother, you know?”

The little girl struggled to break free from Debbie’s clutches. Debbie thought furiously, since when is the little brat so strong?

“You killed my baby, Lilly. Why are you treating me like this when I’m still willing to care for you?” Debbie hissed. She looked different from when she hit Lilly in the past.

Seeing that Lilly shook her head anxiously, Debbie continued, “You said you didn’t push me. But why would I fall if it weren’t for your sudden appearance? You should be

responsible for my baby's death. I'm in a miserable state. If your uncles asked about the incident, you need to say that you pushed me down the stairs. Do you understand?"

Debbie tried to coax the little girl, thinking it would be effortless to force her to follow instructions. However, Lilly bit her lip and remained silent. She refused to admit to a mistake that she did not commit.

Debbie scowled as she thought, Lilly is testing my patience. She's such a useless brat who refuses to listen. This is so frustrating!

She threatened, "You're a disobedient child, Lilly. If you continue to act so stubbornly, I'll hit you."

There was no footage of the incident, and no one observed what caused me to fall. The Crawfords will unquestionably believe Lilly's story. I can't let her ruin my reputation; I'm still planning to seduce my idol.

Debbie once saw a news article about a teacher who abused a student and threatened to use his binoculars to spy on him. He was so terrified because he thought the teacher could hear everything he said. Because of this, the teacher could keep the parents in the dark. Intrigued by the ingenuity of the idea, she cautioned, "I'm warning you, Lilly. It doesn't matter if your uncles promise to protect you. I'll be able to use my magic powers to find where you are."

Lilly bit her hard on the hand, much to her astonishment. She let out a yell before immediately slapping the girl. Just as her palm landed squarely on Lilly's face, the red string around her wrist glowed.

When Debbie saw the little girl's hand approaching, she sneered inwardly, her limbs is so short and powerless. Does she think she can hurt me?

Suddenly, Debbie was launched into the marsh before she realized it. Gilbert had arrived and picked Lilly up right away. The latter looked at her palm and then at Gilbert, wondering who was to blame for Debbie's awful plight.

Gilbert asked himself the same question, as he did not feel like he kicked hard enough to knock Debbie to the ground. He wondered if his eyes had been playing tricks on him.

"How dare you hit Lilly," Gilbert snarled. He fixed his gaze on Debbie as he carried Lilly and inched closer.

The woman panicked as she did not know that Gilbert was present. She waved her hand and said meekly, "This must be a misunderstanding, Mr. Gilbert. Why will I hit Lilly? I'm her mother too..."

Gilbert's expression hardened as he yelled, "You aren't worthy to be Lilly's mother!" He covered Lilly's ears and placed her on his chest so she would not see what happened next.

"Mr. Gilbert, please..." Debbie begged as she stared in dread at the approaching man.

"Ahh!" she cried in pain when Gilbert pinned her face down on the ground with his shoe. The rough edges ripped at her skin and cut her flesh.

"Bad Dog! Bad Dog!"

"Dumb Dumb!"

Even though Debbie was on the verge of tears, Gilbert showed no signs of letting her off easy.

"Mr. Gilbert, please let me go! Please, I beg of you! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" She sobbed, terrified that the man's sheer force would crush her head.

The man decided to release Debbie as he thought using violence in front of a child was inappropriate. However, he could not help but give her a final kick, resulting in a broken nose.

“Get lost!” he ordered.

Debbie covered her injured face with her hands and ran to her room without saying a word. Silent tears were streaming down her face as she attempted to pull the rock shards free, her frustration mounting. She stared at herself in the mirror to examine her broken nose and bloodied face.

How could Gilbert bear to hit a woman! And with such brutality! I thought I could scare Lilly into lying for me. I never expected things to turn out this way. Not only did I fail to get that bastard to take the blame, but I was also badly beaten up by Gilbert.

When she lightly touched her nose, she felt tremendous pain. “My face! My face!” She had always been proud of her flawless face. However, she would now be disfigured, given that the cuts would leave permanent scars.

“Ahh!” Debbie screamed and smashed the mirror on the floor. She could not accept that her face was ruined.

Chapter 9 Stubborn

Gilbert continued to accompany Lilly in her efforts to persuade the parrot after chasing Debbie away. He was irritated at the prospect of having to sweet-talk an animal into following them home rather than trapping it.

“Come on, Polly. I’ll feed you delicious meat if you come down,” the man coaxed.

The parrot stared at Gilbert and shook its head. “No meat. No meat! No fat!”

When he saw the animal was refusing to cooperate, he took a deep breath and resorted to his last resort, “Lilly, let’s go. Ignore the parrot.”

Tears welled up in Lilly’s eyes as she clutched Gilbert’s shirt and begged, “Please, Uncle Gilbert. Don’t abandon Polly.”

It broke his heart to watch Lilly in such distress. Hence, he apologized, “I’m sorry, Lilly. This is all my fault. I shouldn’t have said that.” He wanted to slap himself hard when he realized that he had forgotten the little girl was overly protective of her friends.

Lilly was surprised because that was the first time anyone had apologized to her. She smiled and patted Gilbert on the shoulder. “It’s all right, Uncle Gilbert.”

Even though she had expressed her regrets in the past, no one had assured her that everything was fine. The little girl promptly comforted her uncle, knowing that the apologizer would feel horrible if she did not respond.

They then turned their focus to the parrot.

“Polly, be good now. Uncle Gilbert didn’t mean to trick you. He isn’t a bad person,” Lilly assured.

“I’m sorry, Polly. Please come down. We are going to Clodston and the garden there was huge. We can even find you a female friend...”

Bryson, Edward, and Jonas went to the backyard to look for Lilly and Gilbert after they had been missing for a long time. They were taken aback by the duo’s peculiar behavior, and upon further clarification, they discovered that Lilly had returned to the Hatcher mansion in search of the parrot. The ordinary bird with green feathers watched on as the Crawfords quibbled.

“Are you kidding me, Gilbert? What’s so difficult about persuading a parrot? Why are you so useless?” Edward hissed.

Bryson and Jonas remained mute, knowing that fooling the parrot would be difficult; Gilbert had spent a lot of effort on this with no results.

Suddenly, Polly started singing, “Gilby Gilby! Stupid Gilby!”

Gilbert scowled and retorted, “Why don’t you do it if you’re so capable?”

“Watch and learn!” Edward scoffed and raised one arm. “Squawk! Squawk! Squawk!” The man patted his raised arm to signal the parrot to land on it.

Lilly widened her eyes and thought, Uncle Edward looks like a gorilla!

While Bryson watched on with a mocking smile, Jonas crossed his arms and uttered, “It’s just a parrot. Why does he need to embarrass himself?”

“Dumb Dumb! Dumb Dumb!” Polly chirped.

Infuriated by the lack of response, Edward pointed at the parrot and screamed, “Damn it! Get down here right now!”

“No! Don’t trick me!” Polly flapped its wings and replied.

Lilly giggled as she observed Edward’s incredulous expression; he was horrified by the animal’s intelligence.

Uncle Edward may appear scary but he isn’t that fierce. Uncle Gilbert and Uncle Bryson are nice and gentle. Uncle Jonas looks obedient but deep down he’s mean. Uncle Edward looks like a fiery dragon, always on the verge of exploding. My mummy’s brothers are so

unique. I think I like my uncles better than my daddy, grandma, and grandpa. They seem different.

When her eyes met Jonas', she averted her gaze and pretended everything was all right. The man smirked when he saw how timid the little girl was. He then spoke, "Don't waste your effort, Edward. This parrot only listens to Lilly."

"And how would you know that?" Edward challenged.

Jonas burst out laughing and replied, "Are you an airhead?"

Just as Edward was about to throw a tantrum, Bryson called out, "Jonas is right. Let's all take a step back."

Gilbert stepped aside to join his brothers, leaving the girl with her toy rabbit. She turned to face the parrot and urged, "Polly, hurry. We're getting ready to leave. My uncles are good people!"

The Crawford brothers enjoyed seeing Lilly persuade the parrot with her cuteness. Even Edward's heart was softened; she reminded him of his sister, Jean, when she was younger.

The parrot tilted its head toward Lilly. It then flapped its wings toward the girl, but as it was ready to land on her shoulder, Paula's voice echoed through the backyard. "There you are!"

Polly flew back to the tree again, terrified by the loud noise.

Lilly scrunched up her face, pursed her lips, and hid behind Edward as everyone stared at Paula in silence.

The old woman did not seem to realize their disdain as she continued merrily, “Are you catching a parrot? Let me handle this. I’ll get a professional to do it.” She was trying her best to get into the Crawfords good books. However, she was secretly lamenting about wasting time and resources on a mediocre parrot.

Just as Paula was about to whip out her phone and call for assistance, Edward bellowed, “Get lost! Stop causing trouble.” The woman dropped her phone as she was startled by his abrupt reprimand. She thought, he has such terrible manners. Doesn’t he know how to respect the elderly and love the young?

The noise attracted Hugh and Anthony, who soon joined the group in the garden, with Richard and Stephen not far behind.

Richard immediately suggested, “This parrot is sneaky. Let us catch it!”

Stephen added, “It’s hard to catch the bird if you show it kindness. I know that the animal shelter has a cage that can trap the parrot. If that fails, we can inject the parrot with anesthesia.”

It was as though the parrot could understand everything they said. It flapped its wings and landed on a taller tree.

“Don’t hit Polly. It’s very obedient,” Lilly said panickedly.

Gilbert hissed, “Did you hear that? We don’t need your help. Leave immediately.”

Stephen snarled while making a phone call, “What does a kid know? She’s wrong about this. We aren’t hitting the parrot. It’s just anesthesia.”

The Hatchers were stubborn individuals who refused to listen and insisted on taking matters into their own hands.

Chapter 10 Teach You a Lesson

Eight security guards rushed up and yanked the Hatchers away when they saw Anthony's signal. They complained as they dragged the Hatchers out of the mansion.

“Mr. Anthony asked you to leave. Are you deaf?”

“Why are you causing trouble everywhere? What a bother!”

The commotion generated by Crawford's entrance piqued the interest of the nearby houses. Some purported to have tea on their balcony, while others pretended to take their dog on a walk. They were all expecting the Hatchers to make a fool of themselves.

Richard and Paula were red-faced with embarrassment and rage. This is my house. How dare the Crawfords chase us out? They are so unreasonable!

The Hatchers were accustomed to living the good life and could not stand such disrespect. However, they had to tolerate the mistreatment as they were dealing with the reputable Crawford family. They had to stand at their gate and wait for the Crawfords to leave their house.

Meanwhile, Lilly continued to humor the parrot now that the Hatchers were no longer present to distract her. “Come on, Polly! Look at this!” She lifted her palm and revealed half a piece of apple. She hid the apple that Gilbert had peeled before leaving the hospital this morning.

Polly started swirling on the branch as though it was assessing the Crawfords, who stood at a distance. Hugh gripped his walking cane solemnly, albeit there was a glint of apprehension in his eyes. Gilbert was also concerned about the situation. He hoped he had wings so he could grab the parrot. He felt sorry for Lilly for raising her arms until they hurt.

“Here’s some delicious grains. Do you want it?” Gilbert managed to find some parrot feed and held it in his palm.

Lilly nodded fervently and said, “Uncle Gilbert is a good man. Come down so that we can leave, Polly.”

The Crawfords watched Gilbert and Lilly’s close interaction with sullen envy. They had no idea when the pair became so well-acquainted.

Suddenly, Polly flew away from the tree and landed on Gilbert’s head. The Crawfords looked at Lilly in disbelief when she giggled at the amusing sight. Since they met her, she had spoken with no intonation and behaved like an emotionless robot. She remained a straight face and was cautious of her actions during the ten-day stay in the hospital.

Hugh’s eyes glistened with tears; he believed that old age had made him more emotional, and he frequently found himself sobbing uncontrollably.

“Bastard! Bastard!” Polly croaked as he flapped his wings delightfully. It appeared arrogant to have succeeded in making Lilly grin.

Lilly could not help but giggle once more. She then corrected Polly with a solemn expression, “It’s Uncle Gilbert, not Bastard!”

“Gilby! Gilby!” Polly squawked.

Gilbert’s mouth twitched, wanting to rip the bird to pieces. Although he thought it was absurd to have a colorful parrot on his head, he was not upset when he saw how happy Lilly was. He opened his palm to reveal the bird’s feed, and while the parrot was concentrating on eating it, he grabbed its feet when it didn’t notice.

The bird chirped, “Save me! Save me! Don’t eat me! Don’t eat me!”

Everyone was annoyed by the parrot's antics. At long last, they managed to chain the parrot and leave the Hatcher mansion.

Lilly patted the parrot and whispered in its ear, "Don't worry, it's just a chain. You look great in it, Polly! I'll take it out for you once we reach home."

Hugh leaned on his walking stick and surveyed the mansion. This was where my precious daughter lived before she died. I wonder if they fed her well. Did she sleep well? Did anyone care for her when she was ill? Did she often play in the backyard? Did she often stare out of the window to look at the trees?

The old man's heart wrenched when he thought of Jean; the Crawford brothers felt a sting of melancholy when they saw their father in a miserable state.

The Hatchers went up to the Crawfords when they saw them exiting the mansion. They decided to try their luck with Lilly, given that the Hatchers ignored them.

Richard praised, "Our in-laws are brilliant indeed. They managed to catch the parrot!" Stephen added, "Does Lilly like parrots? I promise to buy you many more parrots in the future, okay?"

The little girl lowered her head to avoid looking at her father's pretentious smiling face. She hugged her rabbit and parrot tightly as she thought, I don't want many parrots. All I longed for was a hug from Daddy ever since Mommy died. But instead of showing me concern, all he had done was hit and scold me. I thought Daddy was going to beat me to death the other day. I always believed Grandma's remarks that I was an unlucky girl loved by no one. However, during my stay at the hospital, my grandpa and uncles were extremely good to me. They chatted with me and said it wasn't my fault. I... I don't want Daddy anymore.

Lilly did not know if it was wrong to harbor such ill thoughts. However, she mustered her courage and said, “No! I don’t want you to buy parrots for me. I don’t want you anymore.”

Stephen was stunned by his daughter’s sudden outburst. Richard and Paula were also astonished at Lilly’s decision to turn her back on them; they thought she had been drawn by the Crawford’s wealth.

Stephen frowned and bellowed, “Lilly Hatcher!” Although he was aware that his daughter was obstinate and would only cave into beatings, he made an effort to avoid physical lectures in front of the Crawfords.

Paula sighed, and said disapprovingly, “Even though your father may be a little strict with you, you shouldn’t have said such disrespectful words! Every child needs a father.”

Richard tried to change the topic by suggesting, “What an ignorant child! Shall we have lunch, our dear in-laws? We can take the time to get to each other better.”

“That’s right! It’s so rare for us to meet. Jean hardly talks about all of you,” Stephen added merrily.

The Hatchers took turns to pander and emphasize their close relationship with the Crawfords.

Edward could no longer control his rage when he heard Stephen narrate his fond memories of Jean and how he had been a good husband. He cracked his knuckles and grabbed the man by the neck to slam him hard on the mansion gate.

He yelled, “Are you done with this nonsense? You are unworthy of being our in-laws! Stop with this nonsense.”

The force of being struck against the metal fence caused Stephen's head to bleed heavily.

"We will wait in the car." Gilbert carried Lilly and left without looking back.

The Crawford family did not condemn Edward's actions. If they did not have to concentrate on Lilly and her parrot, they would have pulled the blows themselves.

Stephen was shocked at the sudden attack. He was mindful of his words and did not know when he had offended the man.

"Stop!"

Boom!

"Please, stop!"

Boom! Boom!

Richard and Paula watched in horror as their son had been beaten to a pulp. It was evident that an architectural engineer like Edward did not care about his mannerism as he repeatedly grabbed Stephen's head and smashed into against the wall.

Paula cried aloud, "Stop! Let's speak like civilized people. We are family!"

"Please calm down, Edward," Richard urged.

Edward glared at the elderly couple and threatened, "I don't usually hit women and the old. However, I may do so if the situation calls for it. Don't blame me for being nasty if you dare speak another word."

He spat on the ground and mustered his strength to smash Stephen's head against the wall once more. He then kicked the victim in his vulnerable spot, which hurt the most.

Many neighbors came to watch the commotion when they heard Stephen's loud wails reverberating throughout the estate. Finally, Edward had settled scores. How dare you betray my sister. You shall suffer for the rest of your life. You shall never have children ever again.

As they saw their son being tormented, the elderly couple's bodies grew cold with fear. They only dared burst into tears when the Crawfords left.

"Are they crazy? How can they be so nasty!" Paula shrieked.

Richard, too, was startled because he had never met such an irrational individual as Edward. He instructed, "Stop crying. Let's hurry to the hospital."

Paula immediately whipped out her phone to call an ambulance. Her phone line was disconnected because of the late bill payment, much to her chagrin.

The Hatchers could only watch Stephen suffer as they had no money to see a doctor.