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Rosehead

a novel by Ksenia Anske

127,472 words

## **Rosehead**

Noun

1. A many-sided pyramidal head upon a nail; also a nail with such a head; a rose-nail.
2. A head, on a nail or spike, having corrugations or facets; an enlarged end on a mill, or milling-cutter.

History

"For nail making, iron ore was heated with carbon to form a dense spongy mass of metal which was then fashioned into the shape of square rods and left to cool. The metal produced was wrought iron. After re-heating the rod in a forge, the blacksmith would cut off a nail length and hammer all four sides of the softened end to form a point. Then the nail maker would insert the hot nail into a hole in a nail header or anvil and with four glancing blows of the hammer would form the rosehead (a shallow pyramid shape). This shape of nail had the benefit of four sharp edges on the shank which cut deep into timber and the tapered shank provided friction down its full length. The wood fibres would often swell if damp and bind round the nail making an extremely strong fixing."

## Chapter 1. Arrival

The garden reeked of rotten sweetness as if the roses were not blooming, but rather decomposing in the heat. The sea of them, like a hungry red tongue, licked the west side of an enormous white mansion, forming a spectacular dead end. On its east side scores of linden trees framed the sky in a lacquered pattern of green. As far as the eye could see, the entire road was planted with these trees, which confirmed the name on a tall post, *Lindenstrasse* in German. Lilith Bloom wrinkled her nose and pushed the button to roll up the car window, having a peculiar feeling that once she steps into this house, she won't be able to get out. It will swallow her whole and smack its lips in the process. Goodbye 8<sup>th</sup> grade, goodbye ballet lessons, goodbye books. She shuddered, feeling frozen despite the hot weather.

"Panther." Lilith whispered. "Panther, wake up." She reached out and urgently shook a black curled up shape on the back seat to her left, warm from the sun. The shape shivered and yawned, revealing a long pink tongue and rows of pearl-white teeth, then promptly sat up, looking up expectantly at his mistress. It wasn't exactly a dog, not in the most typical sense

of how one would describe it. It was rather a cat in a dog's body, an independent creature with lithe movements and a mind of his own. In one word, a whippet, Lilith's pet and best friend. Faithful, smart, and, as Lilith would ascertain her parents, a talking one too. Of course, they refused to believe her.

Panther was the runt of the litter. Lilith's father, Alexander Bloom, or Al for short, was a whippet breeder and he gave Panther to her for her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday last year. That was back in July, in her hometown in Massachusetts. Now it was June, and they just arrived to Germany this afternoon, driving up to her grandfather's house on the outskirts of Berlin for the grand Bloom family reunion.

"Does it stink to you too?" Lilith asked Panther to confirm her suspicions. Panther tipped his head to the right, blinking his black jewel eyes. He didn't dare talking in front of her parents, lest they decide to take him away and show him off to their whippet breeder friends like some otherworldly miracle.

"I thought so." Lilith palmed the end of her skirt.

"Well, we're here." Her father professed, without glancing back, turning off the car engine and pulling up the parking break.

"Did you take your pills?" That would be Lilith's mother, Gabrielle Bloom, swiftly twisting in passenger seat and gazing

through metal-rimmed glasses with her typical demand, her fingers in a momentary pause from constant knitting.

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Pills are for sick people, mother."

"Well, did you?" Her mother insisted, her lower lip beginning to tremble slightly. Overall, she looked like a lost bird perched on top of a roof, not knowing whether she wants to take off and fly towards summer or stay and nest for winter, risking to freeze off her feathers and talons and such. Her greying brown hair stuck out this way and that in a sort of an artistic halo, and she liked sticking in her knitting needles behind her ears where they would stay and sometimes drop into the frying pan while she was cooking dinner.

"Lilith, answer your mother." Her father demanded softly, without turning his head, rummaging in his pockets.

"I flushed them down the toilet on the airplane. They looked like two tiny boats in an excruciatingly blue liquid." Lilith said with an innocent face. She liked using sophisticated words like *excruciatingly*, especially when annoying her parents.

"Al?" Gabrielle addressed Lilith's father.

He only shrugged his shoulders, without looking. "Oh, Gabi, no use for worry. She can skip a day, can't she?"

"Lilith!" What followed was a frenzy of activity, her mother's hands performing an intricate dance of pulling out her

bag, stuffing rolls of wool into it, her half-knit sweater, a bunch of needles, and then rummaging for the vial of pills.

Lilith and Panther exchanged a glance, suppressing a collective giggle, as much as you can imagine a dog giggling.

Next, her mother stuffed a small translucent cylinder into her daughter's hands and watched her reluctantly open it and take out two bright blue capsules.

"Now." Her mother said, and Lilith obediently stuck two pills under her tongue, with the intention of spitting them out as soon as she stepped out of the car. Which her father did already, slamming the driver's door carelessly and stretching out his legs.

Here we can take a good look at him, tall and awkward and scrawny, kind of like a whippet himself. You know how they say, show me your dog, and I will tell you who you are? Yes, like that. His mess of black hair matched the shade of Panther's black fur exactly, not a single silver line in it, contrary to his wife of fourteen years. His left shoulder was higher, right shoulder lower, his neck long, and his head small, balancing on the very tip of it. He wore beat up jeans and an old polo shirt, with dog hair all over it, from hugging and kissing and squeezing his 7 whippets, oh, about 20 hours ago, upon departure to the airport and giving last instructions to Missis Parks, a

neighbor and an avid dog lover who would be taking care of the litter for the week that the Bloom family was gone.

Lilith patted Panther, and with words, "Come on," opened the car door and stepped onto gravel, promptly covering her nose and coughing into it.

"It smells wonderful, doesn't it?" Her mother exclaimed, and hurried off to open up the car trunk and take out multiple bags. Lilith and Panther exchanged another glance, now standing in the middle of a neat oval-shaped plaza, covered with gravel and packed with cars of all types, Bloom's rental Audi being the very last.

Now is a good time to take a look at Lilith herself, a slender and petite for her age twelve year old girl about to turn thirteen, sporting an indigo pleated skirt, a white-blue marine shirt, striped knee socks, and black patent-leather mary-janes, with which she energetically ground two pills into dirt, having just spit them out. Her head tilted, she fetched a stray hazel lock and tucked it behind her ear, straightening her ruby knit beret, the one her mother knit for her. She had a collection of those, blush beret for going to ballet lessons, black one to take Panther on walks, blue one for reading, lavender one for gazing at the clouds, and ruby one for special occasions. For festive outings which rarely happened, and so it was a big deal for her to be able to wear it now, covering up

the top of her head and making her dark-blond shoulder length hair attain a special shine. Her freckled nose sat between two huge blue eyes, forever open in wonder or daydreaming. Her lips were always parted, as if ready to utter something yet not sure of themselves, doubting, and falling silent in the end.

She dragged out her knit bag and slung it on her shoulder. Her mother made it as well, from navy wool, shaped like a messenger bag, which held a few useless now dollars inside a dog-shaped wallet, a plane ticket, a passport, a pack of Kleenex tissues, a few dried flowers forgotten in one of the pockets, a lip balm, a light pink leotard, tutu, tights, and ballet slippers, for emergency ballet training, a journal with a pen stuck between pages, and a book. Always a book. Presently it was Sir Arthur Canon Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a corner bent on page 21.

Promptly, Lilith took out a tissue and buried her face into it, overwhelmed by the smell, a sickening mix of delicious rose fragrance and a certain other sweetness, the one that wafts on a breeze from decaying organic matter, not buried but slowly falling apart in the sun. The image of what it could be nearly made Lilith reel and lose her balance.

"What is it, sweetie, are you okay?" Lilith's mother stepped up to her with concern in her voice, but then another second she forgot all about it, smiling broadly at a solitary

figure that emerged from the giant front door and was now approaching them, down the steps, with outstretched arms in a gesture of welcome.

"Ah! I see you made it after all. Come in, come in. We were just about to start dinner." The voice that spoke it was soft, firm, and charming, with a barely discernable accent, one of those voices belonging to retired radio announcers who possess a certain timbre that makes you instantly love them. The broad-shouldered stout figure that owned the voice was that of Alfred Bloom, still handsome for his age, clad in a fine suit, white fluff tickling his ears, small eyes piercing everything around him from under bushy eyebrows. The famous rose gardener who commanded astronomical prices for his flowers, supplying them fresh all over the world to celebrities, for their weddings and all sorts of other events. It was rumored that he had a special secret rose meal that he fed to his garden. None of his competitors were able to match the beauty of his roses, the brilliance of their color, or the strength of their perfume.

That, however, was not what concerned Lilith at the moment. She even forgot all about the smell, letting the tissue slip out of her hand. What concerned her was what she saw at her grandpa's right leg. And what concerned her was how Panther will react to it, and if she would be allowed to sleep with him in

the same room or if they would take him away, to sleep together with that... with that... monster.

The monster was a big pewter mastiff, rolls of cheeks and forehead skins forming his squarish head, thick paws stepping in tempo with his master's polished shoes, his hunches rising and falling slowly, in menace. If Panther looked rather like a cat, this thing looked like a bear. A bear in a body of a dog. Thick, heavy, and unforgiving. There was something sinister in the dog's eyes, a dry glitter of interest, as in, food. He looked at Lilith like food, studying her.

Lilith swiftly picked up Panther and held him in front of her, shielding him with her arms. He licked her face and stuck his nose in her ear.

"I eat mastiffs for breakfast, just so you know." He said very quietly, his speaking words rolling off his tongue in short whispering growls.

"That is, if it doesn't slurp you in as an aperitif first." *Aperitif* was another fancy word Lilith liked to use, but in case of Panther it was not for aggravation, rather for stating her point to make sure he understands that she is being serious.

"I'm too bony for that." Was Panther's laconic answer.

Lilith whispered with fervor. "I don't think he would care."

"Can you... loosen... your grip a little?" Panther licked her ear and produced a kind of a doggy smile.

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Sorry."

That wasn't all. Only now she noticed two white marble statues of mastiffs on either side of the grand staircase leading up to mansion entrance, framed by a portico. She heard from her dad that grandpa had a pack of mastiffs he used to guard his property, rose garden in particular, but she never thought he was as obsessed with his dogs as her father. It seemed a family trait, including her own obsession with Panther.

Meanwhile, a whole slew of activity ensued. Greetings were exchanged, pairs of hands were shaken, car doors were slammed, car trunk opened and closed, luggage wheeled up the steps and then carried over them, on Alfred Bloom's soft remark that the wheels might actually scratch the marble. No more cars arrived, they were late, as usual, with the rest of the family having arrived in the morning and already acquainted with the house, unpacked, dressed, and waiting for dinner.

Lilith wondered how many people there would be and if there would be anyone her age to while the time away, which she actually hoped there wouldn't, leaving her quiet time to read her books and in general disappear in her room until this parade was over and they would be flying home, back to her hometown and her ballet lessons.

Besides, another shiver went through her, a premonition of sorts, when looking up at the house, a big rectangular block of stone, perhaps almost 100 feet long, with chiseled high-arched windows on lower story, ten total, more narrow windows on the upper story, and even more square ones on the third story, inset deeper into the house, like a layer of a cake, with 5 stone vases precariously balanced on the roof balustrade, a marble rose protruding from each. Somehow it didn't feel welcome. It felt like a tomb that is alive, knowing a certain secret and hiding it in its bowels, until it would be nighttime and all kinds of things would come out from every corner, growing in a way vines grow, crumbling walls in their wake. The atmosphere only deepened by the bright red tint of the sea of roses to the left, to a squinted eye easily mistaken for a pool of blood.

"I wonder if rooms in this house move too, like they do in our house." Lilith said under her breath, secured her shoulder bag, clasped Panther tighter, and forced herself to walk up the steps, to the front door standing slightly ajar, her parents disappearing behind it, and her grandfather waving for her to come in, his mastiff having retreated into the cheery chatter of guests, the tinkling of wine glasses and otherwise a merry concoction of noises usually associated with big fancy dinners.

## Chapter 2. Dinner

The chandelier. The enormous crystal chandelier dangling high up on the ceiling and sparkling a million iridescent sun bunnies was the first thing that Lilith saw upon entering the house and hearing the door snap behind her like a metal jaw, with a loud click. Below the lights stood her grandfather with an affixed welcoming smile on his face, his eyes burrowing holes in her. Or it seemed so one moment, another he was back to his charming self. Behind him a gaping mouth of a fireplace opened its darkness into an absence of fire on this hot June day. Two circular staircases snaked up to the second story on either side of the fireplace, and a painting of glowing incarnadine roses hung above it. To her left, Lilith saw an opening into a long empty hall that ended in a cascade of glass doors leading to rose garden. To her right, in an identical hall, a crowd of various people milled about, some with drinks in their hands, chatting.

"Well... look at you, all grown up." Alfred took a step towards Lilith and some instinct inside her cried to run, but she stood her ground. It wasn't polite to behave like a scared

little girl in front of her family now, was it? Panther slightly bit on her arm, for encouragement. She squeezed him, holding on.

"Hello." Said Lilith timidly, testing the waters.

"Last time I saw you, you were... oh, about this big?" Alfred hovered his palm by his mid-thigh, indicating Lilith's height at almost 3 years old, standing barely forty inches above the checkered marble floor.

"Do you remember me? Your grandpa? Your... Opa?" His way of elongating his speech, his sharp consonants and slightly nasal sounding vowels brought images back to Lilith, the one and only time she visited before, for her grandmother's 25<sup>th</sup> death anniversary 10 years ago. The crowd, all in black. The flowers, all red. The talking tones, all hushed. This family reunion was in her memory, and in celebration of grandpa's successful flower business. At least that's what her father told her on the way here, in the airplane, during one of his rare lucid moments, before getting distracted by a new idea for faster whippet breeding and attempting to discuss it with his wife, who was speedily knitting away in the seat next to him.

"I mostly remember your knees." Lilith managed, being completely honest for once and truly trying her best.

"Knees?" Alfred raised the multitude of his eyebrows.

"You know, from my point of view back then, that's what I saw. And your nostrils -- when looking up -- the hair in them,

rather." At this Panther chuckled and Lilith coughed politely, to cover it up.

"Dad!" Came from the hall.

"Coming!" Alfred threw back, in a low beautiful baritone. "What a... peculiar child you are. And what is this... creature?" He was now pointing his gnarled finger to her pet.

"Oh, excuse me. I forgot to introduce you. Panther - grandpa. Grandpa - Panther." Panther raised both of his ears and smiled a sinister looking row of teeth.

"DAD!" Came louder.

"Al and his hobbies." Alfred muttered under his breath. "I'm afraid, Lilith, we will have to transplant, um, Panther, where he belongs." He snapped his fingers. "GUSTAV?"

A tall grey-haired waiter-type man scaffolded out of nowhere on shaky bent legs and appeared expectantly hanging in the air, his egg of a head shining with years of polished servitude.

"Herr?" He squeezed between two lines of watery lips.

Grandpa Bloom fired off something in German. The only word Lilith understood was *hund*, which meant *dog*. And the only reason she knew it, it was because she looked up the word *hound* when reading *The Hound of the Baskervilles* for the first time two years ago, tracing it back to Old English *hund*, which, in turn, led her to *hund* in German.

Opening her mouth to politely retort, she saw Panther being unceremoniously yanked out of her grip and to his protestant whining carried off in Gustav's outstretched hands like a piece of particularly revolting slime.

"Panther!" Lilith exclaimed.

"Shall we?" Her grandpa curled his arm around hers and at once wheeled her around in the direction of the hall, overwhelming her senses with that same sickening sweet fragrance that balanced on the precipice of being exquisite yet hiding a certain death within.

They entered the hall, and as much as Lilith was trying to come up with a way to demand her furry friend back, for a moment she stood enthralled with the sight. The room nearly doubled itself, trying to dazzle her with its size and endless mirrors and shiny windows and numerous vases filled with roses all shades of red, from rich burgundy, to vivid cardinal, to garnet, to rouge, to scarlet strawberry and shockingly bright carmine.

"Ah." She let out a sigh, at once inhaling the sophisticated scent devoid of that spoiled reek she detected outside.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" Grandpa confidentially whispered in her ear.

"Rosaceae." Lilith said, unable to help herself.

"That's correct!" Grandpa said, bemused. "Ro-sa-ce-ae. It's the name of the family roses belong to. I'm impressed."

The noise of the chatter spilled around them.

"Look at this. There is ze child!" A shrill call cut above the concerto of voices.

A large pavonine in stature woman sheathed in violet silk dress, her yellow hair high up in a bun and excessive makeup plastered all over her face, broke off from a circle of talking people by the far end of the table in the middle of the hall and strolled directly towards Lilith, tugging two identical preteen girls behind her. The way she said *there is the child* sounded more like *zere iz ze chaaald*, and Lilith immediately decided that she didn't like her, desperately seeking out her parents among the guests.

"At last. *Mutter* found a child for you, *maedchens*." Her three chins jiggling, she huffed and puffed on arrival, addressing both of her twin girls, who were fat, blonde, and ugly.

"Excuse me, but I would appreciate it if you didn't call me a child." Lilith stuck out one of her feet, pointed as if at a ballet lesson. "I'm not a child. I'm an adult trapped in a child's body. Thank you very much." She smiled sweetly and with a fast swipe of her right hand snatched one of the peacock feathers from this lady's purse and slipped it into her bag, to

dip it in chocolate later. The thing is, Lilith liked very much to dip strange organic objects in chocolate to see how they would taste. They had a bet with Panther about this, Lilith insisting that she can eat anything if it's dipped in chocolate, and Panther fiercely opposing the idea.

The two girls sniggered. Their colorless pigtails swung closer to each other as they exchanged a particularly juicy detail about Lilith and her appearance between themselves. Because, of course, they were dressed in matching purple gowns, and Lilith immediately despised her choice of knee socks, pleated skirt and sailor shirt.

"Oh-la-la!" The woman nearly sang. "I like a child wiz a fierce character." *Karakter*, it sounded. "My name iz Irma Schlitzburger. I'm your grandfazer'z cousin and neighbor. And thiz iz Gwen and Daphne who were both very much looking forward to your arrival." She pointed her heavily laden with rings hand at the girls, and they broke into braced smiles, with bracket mountings on their teeth matching their dresses, as in, purple.

*Yeah, right, they were.* Lilith thought.

"Hallo." They squealed in unison, staring her down.

"I'm Daphne. What iz your name?" Asked the one on the right with surprisingly very little accent, probably the brighter of the two. Her lower jaw was stuck out, indicating utter distaste. Lilith imagined the hell she would be put in if forced to hang

out with the pair and thought best to end all kinds of friendliness on the spot.

"My name is Lilith Bloom," Lilith flashed her flawless American smile back, "how very nice to meet you. Say, are these shoes eggplant or fuchsia in shade? I can't decide." She pointed at the high heels the girl was wearing.

"Lila. In German. But I suppose American girls don't study foreign languages like we European girls do." At this Daphne radiated victory, and her sister sniggered.

"No." Said Lilith, holding her breath steady after the insult. "We only study Martian. In case, you know, aliens take over and we have to converse with them, pointing out the best specimen to leave alive for each nation. The tallest, the prettiest, the *thinnest* kind."

Daphne's face turned into a beet, color spreading to her neck and chest. "Mutter!" She wailed, adding something else in German, jabbing her finger in the direction of her newly established enemy, when Lilith became aware that throughout this exchange her grandfather never left her side, squeezing now her elbow gently.

"Well... dinner is about to be served, I believe." He said, covering the awkwardness with his charming blanket of a voice, and all moved and shuffled and pulled out the chairs and set down and Lilith found herself seated opposite her smiling

parents and in between Daphne and Gwen, who promptly turned and pinched her hard on each side, whispering in her ear simultaneously,

"Willkommen to Berlin, Lily." This came from Gwen.

"It's Lilith." Lilith hissed back.

"We will make sure you like your week here." This came from Daphne.

"The German way." Finished her sister.

The rest of the evening passed for Lilith in a myriad of colorful dishes served on elaborate plates with rose motif, high crystal pitchers with sparkling pink lemonade, a gigantic wild boar with an apple stuffed in its mouth, its hides sliced and diced by a masterful chef, the drinking, the eating, and ceaseless human chatter with phrases she would snatch out here and there, primarily of the heated argument between her father, the little Al, as he was called in the family, and the big Al, or Alfred Bloom, her grandfather, over the best dog breed, and how whippets are not dogs but rather a joke (that was Alfred's opinion), and how mastiffs are such big clumsy brutes (that was her father's opinion), and her mother quickly finding admirers for her work, wheeling into the dining room one of her luggage bags and pulling out fantastically looking knit sweaters and dresses and hats and bags, and money exchanging hands, and threatening whispers from both Daphne and Gwen into her ears.

The blinking lights. The roasting pungent sour sweet bitter tart smells. The clinking and clanking of the dishes and utensils. The fast twanging of her own heart, her dry mouth and sore throat and jet-lagged brain. It was too much, too loud, too chaotic. All Lilith wanted was to run upstairs, lock herself in her room and stick her nose into book, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Preferably with Panther on her side, of whom she has completely forgotten, when she spotted a thin tired-looking boy looking at her from the far end of the table, untouched food on his plate, his pale face planted between both palms, brown hair unkempt. She judged him being about her age. They locked their eyes for a brief moment, his brown, hers blue, and understanding flashed between them.

He seemed to say, *Annoying, aren't they?*

And Lilith seemed to answer, *Do you have to put up with this often?*

And he shrugged and dropped his eyes, and looked up again, and parted his lips, as if saying, *I pretend they're not there.*

*Me too*, mouthed Lilith back.

"That's Ed, our third cousin. He's mute." Hot whisper jerked Lilith out of her keen observation. It was, of course, Daphne.

"He has no tongue, they cut it out." That was Gwen.

Lilith whirred around from shock, when Daphne nearly stuck her slimy lips into her ear, excitedly firing off the next bit of information. "He licked a frozen steel door. It waz winter. Of course, would anyone *normal* try to lick a door? Anyway - his tongue got stuck to it, and froze, so it had to be cut out."

"They tried sawing it, though. It didn't--" Gwen interjected.

"Shut up." Daphne made an angry face, and Gwen promptly pressed her two slug-lips together. Lilith was pressed between their hot bodies like a slice of bread in a toaster, and she urgently wanted to pop up.

"Where was I... Ah! He hates sign language, so he just doesn't talk. He writes letters. And he flips lights on and off in his room, like he's sending some messages to someone. It's creepy." Finally, she removed her face from Lilith enough to allow her to breathe. Daphne nodded with importance several times and threw a conspicuous glance at Ed, who seemed to have been starting into nothing this whole time.

"How do you know all this?" Lilith asked sharply.

"We live across each other." Gwen offered. "Our houses were owned by Bloom family since the dawn of time, *mutter* says."

"Look at his face. It's like a face of a ghost." Daphne continued her observation, and took another deep breath to rally into more, when Lilith decided she'd had it.

"I think he looks rather handsome." Lilith said icily and stood up so fast, that the chair she was sitting on almost tipped and fell over.

At this point the floor moved. Or maybe it seemed to Lilith alone like it moved. Because nobody noticed anything, buzzing away merrily over their drinks, stuffing their faces with free food and meaningless conversations. Lilith stuck out both her arms to the sides for balance, remembering her ballet lessons and involuntarily standing on tippy toes.

Another sharp jolt. This time a few glasses tinkled on the table, and again nobody noticed. Lilith knew exactly what was going on. She knew it would do it from the start, from the very first moment she laid her eyes on this strange house, a mansion of doom, a gloomy sleepy tomb that was waking up, because a cool summer evening rolled around in the meantime, and night was not too far away.

"It *is* moving. It *is* shifting. I *knew* it." Mouthed Lilith and felt the floor come out from under her feet as if the hall was a gigantic elevator cabin and someone has pushed a button to send it down, underground, to the very first floor, or maybe even to the floor number zero. The darkness behind the windows wouldn't make any difference, whether night or underground.

Her heart hammered in her chest, her palms felt clammy and cold sweat broke on her forehead. Her mouth tasted bitter. She

glanced up, wanting to scream, to get someone's attention, so that maybe for once someone, anyone, would believe her. Her parents talked to each other quietly, their heads bent over, no use trying to tell them. Lilith knew that from years of experience. Her grandfather laughed heartily at something Irma Schlitzburder just said. The rest of the people, about thirty of them total, blurred into a talking gesticulating soup. A little girl was tugging on her mother's sleeve, demanding more cake. A group of ladies were showing off their newly acquired sweaters.

*Panther, I need you right now,* thought Lilith, as she kept searching with her eyes, desperate, sliding over heads illuminated by the crystal chandelier, through piles of dishes on the long grand table, through the multitude of red roses casting an almost burning halo around them, to one place that radiated sanity.

Ed. He held her gaze and he nodded. He knew.

The floor moved as if the elevator came to a stop. Lilith lost her balance and promptly collapsed on the floor.

## Chapter 3. Morning

The rooms moved. Every house, in Lilith's opinion, had its own talent, but grandpa's mansion seemed to be the most grand and accommodating of them all. Certainly, it was more magnificent than their two-story condo back in Massachusetts. Waking up the next morning in an unfamiliar bed, Lilith learned that the mansion could grow and shrink and rearrange itself at any time of the day, perhaps on grandpa's command, not changing its appearance on the outside, remaining the same, yet spewing guests out into different parts of its surrounding rose garden to their delight and surprised shrieks. That is what woke Lilith and that is what she was observing now through her open second story window. Everybody seemed to love it, it was certainly the perfect party house to them. Everybody, except Lilith. She hated it. She knew that there was another side to this fun, this glory, something smelly and sinister, and she was determined to find out what it was.

The floor tilted. Lilith grabbed the edge of the window to steady herself, trying to remember how she got into this room and who changed her out of her pleated skirt and marine shirt into her light pink nightgown. Rosy, she would call it. Rosy,

that shade of very diluted pink that reminded her of white petals blushing, was her favorite color, in combination with all things blue, preferably striped, red, lavender, and black. As were her berets, one of which she was putting on right now, the red one, of course, because this was a special occasion and she didn't get to wear it as often, even though her the intention was to find Panther and take him on a walk (which required a black beret) and perhaps convincing her grandfather to let her keep him in this room. Which, by the way, now that she studied it, was perfect.

About ten by ten feet, square, it gleamed in the morning sun with its white walls, white painted old-style iron bed with white bedding. In fact, everything in this room was white, even several doors leading out several ways. Lilith, now fully clothed in navy capris, a rosy cardigan with shiny black buttons, and red ballet flats matching her red beret, stepped over to one of them and clicked it open.

She immediately wanted the house to stop moving and to have her room stay where it was at all times, to feel secure, to *not* have to find a new way to go pee each morning, as she imagined she would do for a whole week, because what she thought was her bathroom door suddenly opened into one other older lady's bathroom, the one who snatched her mother's knit hat last night, her stooping elderly body dry like a stick, her head full of

hair curling rollers, and a green mask on her flabby face, screaming. For the next several minutes Lilith had to endure a gnarly shaking index finger two inches from her nose and a high-pitched ululating voice telling her what a naughty girl she was to barge in like this, without knocking first, the lady's other hand on her throat theatrically showing off her utmost distress at the appalling lack of Lilith's manners.

Lilith promptly shut the door, breathing heavily and eyeing the rest of them. 4 total. Any normal room would have only 2 doors, where are these other doors leading? One for bathroom, one to exit, two for closets? She didn't have to decide.

One of the doors on the wall opposite the window swung open and her mother slid in, carrying with her a distinct cinnamon smell that was a welcome reprieve to the stink gliding in on the wind from the rose garden.

"Pills. *Three.*" He mother said, scurrying closer and shoving a translucent orange vial into Lilith's hand. "And I'm not leaving until you swallow."

"But mom—" Lilith began.

"I don't want to hear any excuses. You scared the bejesus out of me yesterday. *Now.*" She shoved a glass of water into Lilith's other hand. Then sighed, perhaps realizing that there was no way for Lilith to open the vial while holding a glass of water in another hand, took the vial back and popped 3 blue

capsules out, holding them to Lilith's nose in an outstretched hand.

"Drink." She commanded, her face contorted in that parental care that usually delivers torture to children, despite best efforts and intentions. Her hair looked particularly messy this morning, three knitting needles already stuck behind her ears.

"This house moves - by the way -- just like ours." Lilith threw in, desperately trying to sound serious, and with a heavy heart swallowed the pills, fantasizing about gagging herself to puke them out later. She tried many times before, unsuccessfully, maybe this time it will work.

Her mother rolled her eyes, in a bird-like manner, like it's about to die and fall off the roof. "We've been through this before, Lilith. Now, I want you to have a good time while we're here, hang out with those girls, Gina and Daisy, and--"

"Gwen and Daphne, mom."

"--walk around the garden, socialize a little bit, you know. Get out of this room and forget about your books. I don't know, maybe--"

"Mom, books are my life."

"--go out with them and get some ice cream. Here," she produced a crumpled foreign looking bill and some coins and slid them into Lilith's pant pocket. "Your father and I -- we'll spend some time with your grandfather this afternoon, he will be

showing us his newest rose bushes. You're welcome to join us, or you can--"

"Mom, I need to pee."

"--anyway--breakfast will be served any minute now, so you better--"

"Mom, I *really* - *excruciatingly* -- need to pee and I don't know which of these doors lead to my bathroom." Lilith said loudly.

Her mother continued chatting away her daily agenda, and, unperturbed, like all mothers have a knack to do, opened the first door to her right, without even looking, and pushed Lilith in. Sure enough, it was her bathroom, small and white, like the bedroom, with a tiny narrow window overlooking the rose garden. That meant that Lilith's room was in the west side of the house.

Disoriented and deciding to figure out her geographical location later, Lilith kneeled, stuck two fingers in her throat, and, flushing the toilet simultaneously, leaning over it, managed for the first time in her life to throw up the nasty blue little devils that she had been forced to swallow ever since she started school, after teachers complained about her not paying attention in class and constantly drifting into daydreaming or spontaneously starting to dance in the middle of the class. And none of them, not one, would believe her that the

school building was alive, it moved, and it's only when Lilith moved, it seemed to stand still. As if it was watching her.

Needless to say, she was the laughing stock of other children from day one. Her escape was books (about Sherlock Holmes, primarily.) Ballet lessons (the classes were held in the only building that didn't move). Sniffing flowers in the summer (to block out other revolting street smells). And dipping things into chocolate. All sorts of things, from petals to leaves to twigs to even fallen out bird feathers, one of which she had in her possession now, the peacock feather from Mrs. Schlitzburder's bag. It made breakfast sound interesting for her, and she hurried to get ready and get out of the bathroom.

Following her mother, she marveled at the long corridor lined with doors leading to other rooms, at the polished marble staircase, and at the hall resplendent in the morning sun, twinkling linden tree leaves behind tall windows and freshly cut flaming red roses in several vases on the table. Between them she expected heaps of omelet and bacon,

*I will have to dip bacon in chocolate, how did I never think of that before?* Lilith thought,

but instead the table was stocked with all kinds of jam, strawberry jam, raspberry jam, blueberry jam, orange marmalade, apple butter, rhubarb jelly, and loads of toast, and waffles, and yoghurt. In other words, German breakfast style.

Needless to say, both Gwen and Daphne were already at the table, devouring toast laden with butter and a concoction of jams, their lips scarlet red from it, both dressed in matching (again!) outfits of tight tank tops that made them look even more fat, and shorts, from which their legs stuck out like four very ripe sausages, ready to burst. Lilith halted, knowing she must appear out of place again, in her capris and long-sleeve cardigan. What could she do? Despite hot weather, she felt cold. Always cold, and it's only last year that she was able to remedy that by placing her hands on Panther's belly, which was always warm in the warmest sense of the word.

"Panther!" She exclaimed urgently, holding on to the doorframe, lest the hall decided to move. "I forgot all about Panther! Oh, how could I. Oh, how *disgraceful*. Oh--"

Only now she noticed her grandfather, sitting at the end of the table in an off-white linen suit, matching both house interior and exterior and his puffy circle of colorless hair. His small burrowing eyes were studying her the entire time. Nobody else seemed to have noticed her presence yet.

"GUSTAV!" He bellowed in that magnificent baritone of this. At once, without a few second's time, Gustav appeared on his long shaky legs out of nowhere and was handing trembling Panther back into Lilith's hands.

"Oh, Panther!" Lilith cradled him gently and kissed his forehead, his eyes, each in turn, his nose, while he licked her cheeks furiously, as if they have been separated for an entire year and not just one night.

"I missed you. *Terribly.*" She whispered under the fold of his ear.

"--too." He growled quietly back. Which meant, *I missed you terribly too, but I can't really summarize the extent of my misery just now, with all these strange people staring at us like we're two circus elephants painted pink and balancing on a dolphin's nose, about to drop.*

Lilith jerked her face upright, grateful to her grandfather, and willing to thank him, when he silently appeared next to her.

"Good morning, my dear. I take it you slept well?" He stretched his lips into a smile.

"Yes. Yes, *absolumonto.*" Lilith replied. Now, for all intents and purposes, *absolumonto* is not really a word, and it's not even a modified Spanish *absolutamente*. When in extreme distress, when even books wouldn't help Lilith to calm herself down, she would invent words, because sometimes language seemed to her inadequate in being able to fully express her emotions.

"Good." He said, which sounded more like German *gut*. "I understand you missed your... creature. I'm afraid, however, that

we can't have him with us for breakfast. He will have to wait by the door. You see, I won't allow Baer to come in here either."

"Baer? Is that..." Lilith asked.

"...my mastiff. I take it you had the *pleasure* to meet him when you arrived yesterday?"

"Ah, that... that..." Lilith almost said monster, but bit her tongue just in time. Baer, she suddenly remembered, meant bear in English. How convenient. I matched him perfectly, she thought. And it gave her another shudder of premonition.

After ignoring both Gwen and Daphne chatting her ears off and barely touching any food, searching desperately for Ed among guests, enduring her father's clumsy hug, smelling of coffee and yesterdays' whippet squeezing, half-listening to her mother's lecture on not leaving the grounds of the house under any circumstances and to *please* have some fresh air and to *please* socialize and to *PLEASE* be back in time for dinner and for the big important announcement her grandfather was going to make, Lilith finally managed to escape, untie Panther from the loaned leash by the door and slink out into the garden.

Here she stopped and took a deep breath, only to double down and nearly choking herself with desire to throw up all over again, because the rotten sweetness that she first detected out of the window of the car was back, and stronger this time,

perhaps due to the fact that she was standing directly in the garden this time.

"Rosaceae." She said, overtaken by the living breathing whispering in the breeze blanket of roses, with clumps of bushes neatly aligned into numerous rows, gravel pathways slung between them, forming a labyrinth, its flow interrupted here and there by wrought iron garden arbors looking like crocheted gates, covered with even more roses. Lilith liked teaching Panther scientific names of things or new words that she picked up from reading books.

"Do you hear me, Panther? Repeat. Ro-sa-ce-ae. It's like my last name, Bloom, only for roses. So, I'm Lilith Bloom, and that—" Lilith pointed at the closest rose,

"—would be Rose Rosaceae. Do you get it?"

"Nice name. Can I go pee on it now?" Panther mused and clawed impatiently with his legs in the air.

Lilith lowered him on the ground with a stern look.

"Panther!"

"What, I'm a dog, okay?" He ran up to the nearest bush, sniffed it and turned away, with an utter look of disgust, as much as you can imagine a whippet contort his nose in disgust. It made him look funny, and Lilith snickered into her hand.

"On second thought..." Panther barked. "It stinks in here." And he sauntered away, closer to Lilith, stepping with care, as

if his feet would be marred by some eternal stench if he stayed any closer to the roses.

"YES! I noticed it first thing yesterday. I want to know what's causing it. Are you up to investigate with me? Like Sherlock Holmes and Watson?"

Panther looked up, obviously annoyed at the idea.

"Pretty please?" Lilith pleaded with the most innocent face she could muster. "With a... with a... with a chicken bone on top?"

"You know I don't like chicken." Panther stuck out his tongue. "Fine. There seems to be a rather unfortunate lack of squirrels." He shifted his head left and right to make sure there wasn't any other rodent to chase.

At the same moment, a rose bush sighed. No, it was not exactly a sigh, it was a whimper. How Lilith was certain it was a rose bush that did that and not a person, she didn't know, but she knew it came from the very end of the garden, from the corner right by the intricate iron fence that looked like her mother has knit it out of some steely yarn and painted it white.

"Did you hear...?" Lilith looked down at Panther, her heart jumping in her ribcage, but she didn't need an answer. She knew he did, by his flattened ears and tucked tail. Without a word, they both ran off into the thicket of the garden, not noticing that someone was their witness.

Across the street, standing by the fence of the small cottage, Ed lowered his binoculars, turned on his heels and went into his house.

## Chapter 4. Garden

They sprinted deeper into scarlet sea of sweetness, petals, and thorns, to reach the source of the stink and the sigh. The garden appeared not larger than the plaza in front of the mansion, when observed from marble steps leading into it, but once in it, it seemed to grow to the size of an orchard, then two orchards, then three. No matter how fast Lilith and Panther ran, the white fence at the end only moved farther away, instead of coming closer. Rose bushes grew taller, turning into tangled shrubs, passages between them became narrower. Now and then a stray rose stem stuck out, grabbing at Lilith's cardigan and tearing holes in it with its thorns. One of them sliced at her ankles, producing a few brilliant drops of blood. Panting, she stopped, letting Panther lick the blood away and petting him in gratitude, happy that she chose long clothing on this hot summer day, when, in fact, they now stood in a cool shadow, sun completely obscured by fragrant buds of endless roses.

"What is this place?" She asked, licking her lips and wishing she took a bottle of water with her. "It's getting bigger! Did you notice?"

"Fine by me," Panther snarled between teeth, his tongue lolling out. "I've been stuck all night in a cage next to that - - brute -- they call Baer." He barked once, for emphasis. "The stench that thing produces, you have no idea. He farted a million times, I thought I would faint. Nice to have a good run outside." He pawed at the ground, which could only mean, *Come on, let's run some more!*

Lilith stuck out her tongue at him. Her stomach rumbled. Suddenly she was sorry she barely had any breakfast, turning her attention to roses around.

"You know, I wonder how a rose would taste, dipped in dark chocolate." She swooned, dreamily. "Come on, let's get one for later." She stretched out her arm, but the rose bush moved. It swiftly bent its nearest stem and slapped her hand.

"OWWWW!" Lilith screamed and jumped.

Distant voices penetrated shimmering greenery. Lilith was able to distinguish the high-pitched timbre of her father and the low baritone of her grandfather. *That's right*, she remembered, *he was going to show mom and dad his new rose bushes*. Her first instinct was to call out and run over to them, because the garden didn't feel welcome to her anymore. On second thought, she had a feeling that nor her, nor Panther were supposed to be in this part of the garden and they would get in trouble if discovered.

"Shhhh!" She put her index finger to her lips, eyeing Panther. He only nodded, trembling and stepping closer.

They both backed away from the sound of voices by instinct, pressing into the nearest bush, when it circled them around with two thorny arms and pulled them in, to the sound of another sigh, this time closer. It took all will power for Lilith not to scream, because one second they were standing in a relatively sunny pathway, albeit obscured by human size rose bushes entangled above her head, another they were falling on the ground of musty wet and dark leaves, dusk and fog rolling over them, making the garden look like a pool of white substance spilled in the air, filling living tunnels with mist. Because pathways on this side of the rose bush resembled dug out tunnels, they were so dark and tightly woven. Sun disappeared.

Time itself stopped having any meaning, turning on its head and suddenly transforming early afternoon into an evening. Distant sighing resumed once more, now with added cries of pain, like someone was wounded and dying and yelped her last anguish in longs OOOOHHH's and AAAAAHHH's. It was a *her*, Lilith had no doubt now.

They exchanged a glance with Panther, not daring to talk. Yet by some invisible force that children seem to possess when faced with a potential adventure, despite fear and doubt and obvious reasons to not continue, they walked on. Lilith

stretched out her arms, in case she was going to bump into an obstacle of some sort. Panther quietly whimpered and ran by her legs, now between them, now by the left, now by the right, fidgeting and nervous.

A gush of sickly warm wind moved the fog, and incredible stench like the one from a decaying animal took over Lilith and made her cough in revulsion. Her heart pounded in her head like an enormous bell, her whole body shivered and every muscle convulsed in disgust, but it was too late to turn back. They had to come and see what was making this racket and spewing this incredible odor.

Another turn, and they found themselves face to face with Baer, the mastiff. He growled loudly, it sounded like a drill cutting into thick stone, and at the end of it he snapped his huge jaws so close to Lilith's knees that she jumped away with a shriek. Panther barked hysterically, his eye whites rolled up in distress. Lilith took a step back. Her foot caught on a stone and she fell, scratching her palms and tearing a long cut in her leg pant. The ground was not simply covered with fallen leaves, it was covered with rose vines that now slithered about, moved around Lilith, catching Panther by his legs and pulling him down. Meanwhile, Baer advanced. From milky darkness another mastiff stepped out, and then another. They joined the chorus of the most hideous snarling Lilith ever heard.

"Panther, I think we're toast." She whispered.

"I hope they choke on my bones." He barked indignantly and stood in front of his mistress.

Thick saliva dripped from numerous folds of skin hanging on either side of Baer's muzzle. Another few steps, and all three of them would be on top of Lilith. A wild idea overtook her. She grabbed her red beret (*thank goodness I decided to wear red instead of black today!*) and waved it frantically in front of her face, hoping to catch Baer's attention. Sure enough, for a split second his menacing gaze glazed over and followed this new bright object with interest.

That was enough for Lilith.

"Come on, boy -" She swung her arm wide, throwing it into the fog, "go get it!"

She was ready to take off her red ballet flats for the same purpose, when she heard a piercing wail, as if her beret was a stone and it hit someone, to which all three mastiffs responded with an uncharacteristic for their size whimpering, as if they were wounded. Immediately, they broke into a run to lunge at Lilith, their growl rolling like thunder. At the same time, a tall thin figure parted the rolling mist, and there stood Gustav, his balding egg-head stretched and shiny, eyeballs rolled-out and staring. He seized Baer by the scruff of his neck, pulling up a thousand layers of hanging skin and revealing

his molars, with the other hand he grabbed the second mastiff, trapping third one between his legs.

"Heraus! HERAUS!" He screeched.

Lilith didn't need to be told twice. Whatever it meant in German, to her it meant to get out. Oblivious to scratches and torn clothes, she yanked herself up and ran, Panther at her feet. They ran and ran and ran, twisting and turning and getting lost in the labyrinth, sinking into oncoming lavender dusk that threatened to turn into evening darkness by the minute. Until, finally, they both hit a fence, the very fence she spied originally standing on the staircase, surrounded by roses everywhere she could look. Lilith broke into involuntary sobs.

They were obviously lost, hungry, bleeding, and without any hope of finding any help whatsoever. On top of this, they were probably late for dinner by now. And Lilith lost her precious red beret, her mother will be asking about that one for sure. She slid down on the ground, and Panther nudged his nose between her hands, licking off her tears.

"I thought they were cute." He yapped gently.

"Who?" Lilith raised her face, sniffing, uncomprehending.

"The dogs - the mastiffs." Panther sneered, planting another big lick on Lilith's check.

"Cute? Are you out of your mind??? They could've eaten us alive! They..."

"But they didn't." He stuck his into her ear and snorted, which meant utter and irrevocable pet love.

"...and that *taciturn* creepy guy..."

"Number one, I don't know what *taciturn* means..."

"Uncommunicative."

"...number two, he's not *that* creepy. He's the dog master. He fed me steak yesterday." Panther passed his tongue over his nose like only dogs can do.

Lilith's stomach grumbled. "Don't remind me. Something is not right here. Something about these roses gives me a *squalid* feeling."

"Will you stop talking like a walking dictionary?"

"Don't you feel it?" Lilith continued, her gaze elsewhere, her hand scratching behind her whippet's ears absentmindedly.

"*The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.*"

"You sound like an adult." Panther scowled.

"I *am* an adult. And it's not me who said it, it's Sir Arthur Conan Doyle." She paused, thinking. "This garden... it's moving, it's changing -- growing. I wish I could figure out why -- and whose voice we heard -- and what's up with the dogs guarding it -- and why grandpa --"

A light flickered in the distance.

"Saw that?" Lilith wheeled around, peering into darkness between two iron leaves on the fence. The light flickered once more. Now she saw its shape, rectangular.

"It's a window!" She exclaimed, waiting for another signal, remembering what Daphne told her at welcome dinner yesterday. "I think it's Ed."

And it was Ed. Across the road, or Lindenstrasse if we were to call it by its proper name, in the oncoming night his little cottage stood out like a grey ghost. Ed turned the light in his room on and off in a string of timed flashes. Neither Lilith nor Panther knew Morse code, if that's what it was. But the next time the light flashed across the window pane, they clearly saw a black arrow pointing left. The light has gone out.

"He's telling us which way to go!" Lilith whispered excitedly.

"How do you know?" Panther inquired.

"I just do."

Without another word and fueled with hope, her hear beating fast, Lilith picked up Panther and started tearing through the bushes, shielding her face with an outstretched right hand, cradling her pet's body to her chest with her left. Occasionally she would stop, standing at the fork of several tunnels, and faithfully the light in the distant window blinked and an arrow told her which way to go, once confusing her with pointing

upward, and it took Panther to explain to her that he probably meant *straight*.

Bushes became scarce, yielding from wild overgrowth to more or less groomed order, with gravel appearing on the ground in place of fallen leaves, roses forming neat clumps on either side of... A pathway! They made it out, panting and desperate, into the exact spot from which they sprinted into the thicket of perfume what seemed like ages ago, and was only this morning.

Panther urgently scraped the air with his legs, slid out of Lilith's grip and quickly raised his hind leg next to a bush, letting out a fizzing steaming line of urine.

"Panther!" Lilith cried, aghast.

"LILITH!" That was her mother, running up to her, her knitting needles sticking out of her hair and sparkling in the crystal outdoor sconce light, shining from all corners of the mansion. Night swallowed the rest out of sight.

"I was beyond myself... your father - where have you been? What on earth did you do? Look at this - your clothes -- ruined." Having made it close to Lilith by now, she turned her this way and that, recording the damage through her metal-rimmed glasses, shining light reflections mercilessly into Lilith's eyes, watering from all this light.

"You missed dinner!" It was her mother's conclusion to her observation and it sounded like the end of the world. To Lilith,

however, it sounded like a beginning of an adventure to what, she thought, would be the most boring and annoying trip of her life. Not mentioning being lucky to miss both Gwen and Daphne.

"Mom!" She caught her breath, forgetting to sound sarcastic, too excited, in fact.

"Mom, you wouldn't believe what we found!" And as soon as she said it, Lilith knew it to be true.

There was no use trying to explain the crying rose bush, which, by the way, neither of them saw, the murderous mastiffs, the stench, the fog, the moving living roses, Gustav, Ed and his flashing lights. And the garden, the growing changing shifting living breathing monstrous garden that looked like the sea of darkened blood in the artificial light cast from the house.

"What?" Her mother inquired, furiously rubbing Lilith's face with a kerchief that she promptly produced out of nowhere, like all mothers do.

"Nothing." Lilith's voice has fallen. She glanced at Panther, at his shining black jewel eyes, for some understanding. He blinked back and sighed an almost human sigh. Lilith did not dare to turn and look, but she would have sworn on a dozen chocolate covered crickets that Ed flashed his window one more time, meaning to say *I'm glad you found the way out, happy to help any time. Your friend. Ed.*

"Your friend..." Lilith muttered under her breath, bending down and picking up her whippet, her only real friend.

"Where is your red beret?" Gabrielle Bloom asked suddenly in a very official manner, ruffling her hair. "I think I saw you put it on this morning?"

"Wild crocodiles ate it, mother. They thought it was a gigantic strawberry from Mars. In fact, this garden is full of them. And kangaroos. And pandas crawling all over. They tore my pants, see? I'm sorry we're late for dinner," Lilith now simply couldn't help herself to stop, "we were watching a pack of sloths climbing on top of the tallest rose bush and doing a private ballet performance for us. Right, Panther?"

Panther raised his ears in surprise and flashed her the look that could only mean, *Are you out of your mind, talking to me in front of your mother?*

"Lilith!" Her mother's lips began to tremble their hurt-parent dance. "I've had enough of your nonsense for today. Off you go into your room." She prodded her in the small of her back, up the stairs, across the hall, into the dark foyer, and up the circular staircase. The mansion was strangely quiet, for the amount of people it held, Lilith thought it would at least have adults milling around. She wondered what time it was.

"We will have a talk about this in the morning. Your father was very upset. Your grandfather sent out his guests to search for you. His guests! These are our relatives who came here to -"

The rest Lilith tuned out, breathless in her happiness that among the confusion and the haste, nobody pried Panther out of her hands and she was safely deposited in her guest bedroom, with her mother's last words reminding her to take her pills in the morning. Or else. She closed the door and departed, muttering something about possibly increasing the dosage.

Lilith let out her breath, without realizing she held it all this time.

"We're together!" She whispered urgently. Panther licked her face, and they both dropped on bed, not caring to change or slide under covers, happy and dirty and exhausted.

"Perfectomonto..." Mumbled Lilith another one of her made up words, drifting off into dreamless sleep, not knowing she will be rudely awakened several hours later by chopping noises coming in from the open window. Chopping noises sounding like someone is chopping off heads with an axe.

## Chapter 5. Bedroom

Thud. Thud-thud. Lilith felt like something heavy is falling down hard, and then something is rolling. Again and again. It took her sleepy brain a while to process the noises and her heavy eyelids to finally flutter open. Moon shone into the room, dead in the middle of the night. The usual sweet odor of the garden had an almost metallic taste to it. Something... no, someone, was breathing laboriously, performing what must be a strenuous physical task. Lilith jumped off the bed and crouched by the window, not daring to look out, peering through white cotton curtain down. What she saw froze her to the spot. She didn't even feel Panther curl around her feet, then stand on his hind legs to look, investigating with her.

Outside, in the pool of silver moonlight, as seen through the cotton sheet in black and white silhouettes, a male figure that was unmistakably short and stout like her grandfather, was raising arms high up and lowering them, no, lowering an axe held in them, on the ground where... where... Oh, Lilith blinked several times and quickly breathed into the cotton to make sure she saw right... several women's bodies clothed in long flowing nightgowns, with long flowing hair glistening on the gravel,

were lined up neatly in one row, apparently already dead, and her grandfather carefully stepped between them, lowering his axe and picking up their severed heads by the hair, piling them onto--

Lilith couldn't watch anymore. Her knees buckled and she nearly fainted, stepping away and backing off until she hit one of the bed's legs with her right foot and nearly yelped, stifling her cry just in time. Cold sweat broke all over her face and her body, sending an icy wet line down her spine. Her heart threatened to jump out of her chest, and her ears produced an annoying buzz. White dots blinked and swarmed in front of her eyes. She forced herself to lie down to prevent herself from fainting.

Not that it helped. Panther jumped on the bed and began licking her face, when he stopped abruptly, as the chopping noises stopped as well. Lilith could've sworn there were 5 of them, not more. Then a few crunching sounds broke through the wall above her bed's headboard, sounding like someone was pulling out feet stuck in mud.

"He'll chop off your head too, if you won't sleep." A raspy woman's voice floated from above.

Lilith tilted her head to look and wished she didn't. On the wall, protruding from the dim greyness of the peeling paint, as if hammered into it from the other side to appear on this one

like living ornaments, five heads looked down on her, sunk into the wall up to their ears, their matted hair hanging freely, ropes of dark blood running from their severed necks and dripping onto her pristine white pillow, blooming into black flowers. Sharp metallic tang hung in the air, strongly smelling of a butcher's shop. Lilith was so terrified, she didn't dare pinch her nose.

The head's lips moved with a smack as they spoke, one over another, with grimaces of delight and contempt and hate intermixed into one facial gesticular chaos.

"...no, he won't. He's rather fond of her, didn't you see it at dinner?"

"...like you would know, remember what he said before..."

"...your hair is a royal mess, missy, didn't you brush..."

"...I say, she's his bait, for that thing, that -- what do you call that kind again..."

"You're number 21." The first head suddenly said, looking serious. "There are 21 women in this house. You remember my words tomorrow. Count them. You'll see." At that, it closed its mouth and appeared to have gone to sleep with its eyes open, or maybe it went dead. They all did.

Lilith also felt dead throughout this whole episode, not daring to move or breathe or talk, horrified by the sight, yet a small part of her, deep down, wanted to stand up, reach out and

touch one of the heads, just to make sure they're real and not her imagination. She wasn't *really* afraid or grossed out, she realized. Perhaps it was due to her helping baby whippets being born ever since she could remember herself, with all the blood and guts and gory stuff that comes with it. Or perhaps it was because her maternal grandmother used to show her illustrated anatomy books (instead of cute bunny picture books, claiming that a *real* woman doesn't need to have her head stuffed with fairy tales) and tell her stories about how she, when she was young and a medical student, got locked up by other girls in the morgue and had to feel her way out in the dark, bumping on her way into dead people. Of course, this storytelling only lasted until her mother discovered exactly *what kind* of stories granny was feeding Lilith, and they had to look at the books in secret.

Lilith waited a beat. Nothing happened, except maybe the heads crusted over with plaster, or their skin turned to plaster, so that they appeared more or less a decoration. After a minute, or maybe an hour, Lilith couldn't tell, she finally mustered the courage to raise her head and glance at Panther, her eyes wide.

Panther whined quietly, horrified as much as she and unable to talk. Lilith licked her dry lips and propped herself up on her elbows, then, before she would get so scared that she wouldn't dare, she stood, took the peacock feather out of her

torn pants pocket (there was *no way* she was touching them with her finger, and there was *NO WAY* she was going to dip this feather in chocolate later to taste it, *no*, thank you very much) and brushed the center head lightly. Feather hairs slid over the head's nose. Lilith's stomach churned. She jumped away, causing the bed mattress to squeak, and waited. Nothing happened.

After another eternity, Lilith took a step, then two, until she was about three feet away from the heads, to take a better look.

"Quincunx." She said in astonishment.

"This! ...Is one time when I love the fact that you're into complicated words simply for the reason of being able to hear your lovely voice as opposed to that hideous hacking and smacking and chopping and yanking and..." Panther said all of this very fast, muttering and growling, but Lilith cut him off.

"Shhh!" She petted him, without looking down, studying the heads.

"Quincunx is a geometric pattern consisting of five points arranged in a cross, see?" She pointed to the center head. "Four points form a square, and one more is added in the middle."

The heads didn't blink, didn't move, taking in the room with dead calm. They did, indeed, form a quincunx, like those you see on a rolling dice. They were women's heads, about seven feet high on the wall and about a foot apart from each other.

The left top one had sallow skin, a crooked nose and thinning hair. Her eyes were staring into nothing and made Lilith's skin crawl. She wanted to close the head's eyelids but didn't dare. The head next to it was plump, with juicy lips, dark skin, and long curly eyelashes, black curly hair framed it. It sort of looked to its right, as if waiting for a command from the sallow head. Two heads on the bottom were both flat and round faced, their eyes elongated, their noses wide, lips thin. Sisters? The head in the middle, however, looked very familiar, but Lilith couldn't place her at the moment. Everything about it was stern. A stern gaze, a stern nose, a stern chin, like it was a teacher of some sort and her shapeless hair belonged in a bun rather than hanging freely in clumps. That is the head that told her about number 21. It had a huge forehead that made her look like its owner would bump her fist into your forehead, claiming it was too small. She had no fist, however. None of them did. They had no necks either, smoothly cut off right at the very base.

"Is this real?" Lilith pinched herself, hard. No use, the heads were still there. "Do you see... the same things I see?" She asked Panther, who was trembling by her legs.

He licked his paws, apparently upset. "Lilith. Let me be perfectly frank. I didn't sign up for this. No squirrels, no buddies to run around with, no clean smelling bushes to pee at.

I mean -- I'm trying to sleep -- some madman wakes me up from my dream. It was the best dream -- I was chasing butterflies" He rolled his eyes up dreamily, "-- and when I caught them, they tasted..."

"Panther." Lilith whispered urgently. "Answer me, please. Is - this..." She pointed at the heads. "--real? Or am I going crazy?"

"Why don't you touch them and find out?" He sneered.

"Oh, is this what you want me to do? Okay, I will touch one. I will even take it off the wall, if you will eat it." This she delivered in an icy drawl.

They both signed at this and looked up at the wall, then at each other.

"*The bodies!*" They exclaimed at the same time, and hurried back to the window.

Nothing. The gravel looked pristine, there was no sign of bodies, or even any disturbance, like something heavy was dragged, no blood spots. A sudden slurping sound emanated from behind their backs. They glanced at each other and wheeled around. The heads were sinking into the wall, as if it wasn't a wall but simply a bog surface, swallowing them slowly.

"Hey!" Lilith called, and, forgetting her fear, ran to the bed. "Wait!" But by the time she jumped on her bed, they were gone. The last one to vanish was the middle head, the stern one,

and its lips silently formed 21 and then were gone. Lilith touched the wall, at first apprehensively, then banging on it in frustration.

"I'm trying to sleep, young lady!" Came shrill voice from behind the wall. "Is it not enough for you to barge into my bathroom in the mornings, you also won't let me sleep at night? This is not a hotel here, young lady. This is a private residence. This..."

Lilith covered her ears and sat down, waiting for the old lady to shut up. Her hands still over her ear, she slid down and, followed by her faithful whippet, trotted back to the open window. She got used to the sickly sweet smell by now and leaned out, finally taking her hands off and listening to the silence, leaning out far and taking in the night.

"They were here, weren't they?" She asked with doubt in her voice.

"Can we talk about something else? Squirrels, for example." Panther growled tiredly.

"I need to know. Tell me - you saw them too, didn't you?" Lilith pressed on. "Please."

Panther, looking rather busy, began furiously scratching behind his ear, making thumping noises every time his leg missed and slid on the floor.

"PLEASE?"

"I think I have fleas. Do you think I have fleas? German fleas, I heard..."

"PANTHER!" Lilith dropped to her knees and took his muzzle into her hands, kissing his nose. "I need to know. Tell me."

"I didn't want to tell you, but..." He began and averted his black jewel eyes.

"Didn't want to tell me *what*?" Lilith breathed heavily.

"I heard it last night too, the chopping... when I was - you know - locked up with that brute. I pretended like I slept. Then in the middle of the night, that scrawny looking butler guy, the one that hates to touch me - Gustav is his name? - he came and took Baer out, and..." Panther suddenly began chopping on his back, in an effort to scratch that hard to reach place.

Lilith waited patiently. "And...?"

"And... nothing. I just thought it was, rather, peculiar."

"*Elementary*." Lilith's face looked as if it just got struck with a flash of genius.

"You and your words." Panther licked her hand.

"It's not me - not - ugh. Sherlock Holmes says that to Watson. He knows how to solve puzzles, so when Watson says, *Excellent!*, Sherlock Holmes just shrugs his shoulders and says, *Elementary*, like he figured it all out already. I think I just figured it out." Her eyes were blazing in the dark from excitement.

"Did you, now?" Panther tilted his head in a way a human would raise eyebrows, unbelieving. "Let's hear it."

"So..." Lilith sat down by the window, her back to the wall, stroking her pet's fur absentmindedly, her brain working hard.

"Grandpa has invited all these people for the family reunion, because he needs women in particular, for something, I don't know what yet. He kills them, and... Buries them under the rose bushes? Maybe that's his secret. Remember how dad said he has this special secret to growing his roses? Something that no other gardener was able to duplicate. *Of course* no other gardener can duplicate that. He's a murderer!" She trembled now.

"I need to stop him. We need to stop him."

"*We?*" Panther retorted.

"You said you would help me investigate!" Lilith said, exasperated.

"I didn't know it would involve sniffing out dead bodies from under rose bushes. Personally, it's not my view of a vacation, thank you."

"But you're a dog!" Lilith said incredulously. "You like sniffing dead things, don't you?"

Before Panther had a chance to say anything, Lilith continued, overtaken by adventure fever. "We are going to be a team, just like Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Lilith Bloom and --- wait. We need to give you a last name too."

Panther rolled his eyes. "Here we go." He growled inaudibly, and of course Lilith didn't hear him.

"Let's see... I remember dad said a whippet means snap dog - whatever that means - anyway, Panther Snap. Would that be a good detective name? What do you think?"

Panther opened his mouth and closed it again. There was no chance to stick in a single word into Lilith's monologue, nor did she wait for his answers, rushing into unfurling her idea.

"I think it sounds great. Lilith Bloom and Panther Snap. Yes? No? Okay, just Lilith Bloom and Panther? No, that sounds too close to Sherlock Holmes and Watson. We need to be original, we need to..."

Panther coughed ever so politely. "May I... interject?"

"...on the other hand, it sounds *snappy* without the actual *Snap* part in it, so we could..."

Panther coughed louder.

"What?" Lilith glanced at him with irritation.

"You forgot one very small insignificant fact." Panther sat up and puffed out his chest.

"And what is that?"

"I," Panther stuck out his right paw, for importance, "did not agree to this. I..."

"Oh, but you must! I'll give you anything you want when we get home."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"All right." Panther scratched behind his ear again, to help him think. "A new leash."

"A new leash."

"And I want a new bed. Old one is falling apart."

"Okay."

"And that cute jacket we saw at the pet store the other day, remember?"

"The pink one???" Lilith raised her eyebrows.

"So? Pink is my favorite color. Besides, that jacket is not really pink, it's more rosy. A royal color, if you ask me. Very delicate. It matches my tongue. And why not? Why do dogs have to adhere to the same stupid rules humans invented? Boys in blue, girls in pink? I say, it's utter rubbish."

"All right. Anything else?"

"Steak. Anytime you can steal it. And 1 hour - not your usual 30 minutes - I want 1 hour walks. And I get to chase squirrels off leash."

"FINE." Lilith said. "Do we have a deal?"

Panther stretched out his right paw and Lilith shook it.

"And I don't want to be called Snap. Just Panther."

"Okay, just Panther."

Relieved, overjoyed, and morbidly curious, Lilith grabbed her faithful pet, pressed him to his chest, covered him with kisses and stood up to look out the window one last time, just in case she missed something, some important clue. She thought she saw a distant light flicker in between dark lacquered linden leaves. It could only be one person.

"Ed." She whispered, peering into darkness. Sure enough, judging by the distance, the light was a lit window on the top floor of Ed's little cottage across the street, hidden by thick foliage, yet still visible. Lilith tentatively waived her right hand. The light blinked once and went out.

Lilith couldn't help herself but smile. *Lilith Bloom, Panther, and Ed. We got ourselves an addition to the team,* she thought.

The rest of the night she spent in a series of fits accompanied by angry growls from Panther (who finally escaped on the floor), tossing and turning and trying to make her brain to stop working, but it simply kept throwing at her one fantastical idea after another, not letting her rest until the light behind the window signified morning.

## Chapter 6. Breakfast

Lilith gave up on trying to find sleep. She slid out from under the covers and took an extra long shower, which, she knew, would leave her mother pleased. But it was not for her mother that she did it. Showers helped her think. Running water made everything still and calm, and she needed to get ready for a big day. She needed to take stock on the exact number of guests and calculate all women present. She also needed to scrutinize the garden closer, to examine its every little corner, spy on every shadow and footprint and sound. She hoped she would hear that rose bush sighing again, but this time she would be prepared. She needed to have Panther sniff at every shrub, every mound of dirt, to make sure there isn't a dead body hiding underneath. She was also hoping Ed would show up for breakfast and wanted to talk to him. *And*, she needed to find out what was that important announcement her grandpa made yesterday that she missed, together with dinner.

"Grandpa." His image, his face, his thick muscular arms gave her a shiver, so that she had to add hot water, momentarily feeling cold.

Bathroom moved. It jolted, and, with a screech, dropped down. Lilith turned off the shower, wrapped the towel around herself, and cursed the fact that she didn't think about bringing a change of clothes here, leaving them spread out on her bed (the pillow, by the way, was pristinely white this morning, as if no blood has spilled on it in the middle of the night). What if she opened the door and ended up in somebody else's bedroom?

Movement stopped. Then the bathroom shot upward again, and Lilith held on to the sink. This sliding and gliding proceeded in a very violent elevatory fashion, as if the entire mansion was rearranging itself, waking up, stretching, getting rooms ready for the day, putting them in proper place after nightly outings. Or, *innings*, what you should call them, not the game term, but rather a word that means, everything was happening *in*. Inside. In the house.

Lilith waited for the room to stay still and slowly opened the door.

"Thank goodness." She exhaled. It was her room, after all.

She chose a proper detective outfit. Dark slim jeans, black lace-up oxford shoes (in case there was running involved, because ballet flats tend to fall off one's feet), black button-up cardigan (the buttons were polished, round, and shiny, and

they would perfectly match Panther's eyes), and black beret. She checked herself in the mirror, feeling ready.

"Panther." She shook him awake.

Panther yawned his brilliant white rows of teeth, lolling out his tongue, blinking his eyes open. "Already? I haven't slept all night. I'm on vacation..." He proceeded to stick his nose under his paw.

"Pills!" She exclaimed, upon hearing her mother's footsteps in the corridor. A new idea seized Lilith.

"How did I not think about this before..." Muttering under her breath, quickly, she took out two bright blue capsules from the vial, and twisted one open. After all, it was simply a container for powdered drug that was supposed to make her pay attention in class and stop her spontaneous dancing or fainting fits in school. She despised it. She hated it. It dulled her senses, it made her feel stupid and sluggish and slow, and it made life boring. Smells turned grey, buildings stopped moving, noises toned down to one white uniform buzz, and her heart rammed in her chest slowly, as if she was dying. It also made her sweat. Not mentioning the fact that when she couldn't fall asleep, she had to take two other pills, bright orange, just for sleeping, and she saw no dreams. Absolutely none. It was terrible.

On pills, she didn't feel herself.

She ran off to the bathroom, dumped white powder out of both capsules, flushed it down the toilet, and returned just in time for mother poking her head into the room.

"You're awake!" She cried out, astounded. "And dressed. And..." She came closer and took a lock of Lilith's hair, examining it between her fingers. "...you took a shower without me reminding you. Excellent!"

*Elementary*, almost said Lilith, but caught herself in time.

"Good morning to you too, mother." She said ever so politely. "You would be pleased to find out that I'm also planning to socialize today. I want to get to know every single guest to..." She couldn't say *count*, so she said, "...find out more about them. They're my relatives, after all."

"Really?" Her mother's jaw dropped open.

"And I'm taking my pills. Like you asked me to." It was very important to get her mother out of the way today, Lilith thought, as she stuck out her palm with two empty blue capsules, and then, exaggerating every gesture, took the glass of water from her mother's hands, placed both capsules on her tongue, and swallowed them, smiling.

"I can't believe what I'm seeing. What changed you overnight?" Her mother inquired.

"Um..." Lilith started, very tempted to say, *Well, grandpa woke me up in the middle of the night chopping off heads from*

*five dead women in the garden, then the heads appeared on my wall and wouldn't shut up, not letting me sleep, then me and Panther, who, as you know, can talk, discussed how we can stop grandpa from murdering more innocent women, devising a plan to uncover his true intentions for this family reunion. Because we think that his rumored secret for producing such beautiful roses is having them feed on human bodies. Women. One of the heads told me. But, aside from that, and aside from the foul garden stench that makes me want to throw up every night, nothing else significant happened.*

"Perhaps I got bitten by a flea? A German flea?" Lilith said instead innocently, stealing a glance at Panther who meanwhile stretched out on the carpet by the bed, wagging his tail. He pretended like he didn't hear her. Her mother did, however.

"Lilith!" She chastised her. "That is not a very sensible thing to say. Germany is the land of your ancestors. You have to respect your roots. Blooms date back to Luedeke Blome in 13<sup>th</sup> century..."

"...who was the resident of Hamburg." Lilith finished. "Mom, I know. I'm just - hungry." And she was, having barely had a morsel of breakfast yesterday and nothing else. Couple that with a lot of running around in the forever growing rose garden, and you got yourself a very ravenous girl.

"Your grandfather wants to spend time with you today. You're his only granddaughter, remember?"

Lilith's heart sunk.

"Be nice. He's waiting for you to hurry up and have breakfast." She pushed her glasses up, with an air of significance. "He wants to tell you all about his announcement that you missed yesterday. *Personally.*" She smiled, with was a rare sight. This was serious.

Lilith swallowed, suddenly feeling dizzy.

"He'll be showing you around the garden while you two talk." She passed her hand through her hair, attempting to untangle it. "Anyway -- your dad wants to go to a whippet race this Saturday, so we're leaving to buy tickets - drive to Berlin, look around - the usual. We'll skip breakfast and be back by dinner. You okay?" Her mother suddenly said with concern, one of her knitting needles falling out of hair as she tilted her head, to look at Lilith's face.

Lilith went very pale. The prospect of spending an entire day with her grandfather, after having seen what she had seen in the night, sucked out all courage from her little twelve-year-old heart. And what was so important about this announcement? Panther, always feeling when his mistress was in distress, stood up on his hind legs, tapping his paws on her jeans. Lilith bent and picked him up. His warmth made her feel better.

"Yeah. Fine. Just hungry."

On unbending legs, her ears stuffed with cotton and her stomach doing flip-flops, Lilith proceeded after her trotting mother through the corridor, down the marble staircase and to the hall entrance, where people already milled around, piling plates high with toast and waffles and jam and butter, pouring tea and coffee and spooning yoghurt into delicate glass bowls. Her mother kissed her goodbye, her father waved from the window of their car through wide open front door of the mansion, and they were off.

*So much for being worried sick about me yesterday,* thought Lilith, walking in.

Scores of freshly cut roses graced the entire length of the table, like tiny eruptions of blood red lava.

Lilith avoided looking at them as best she could.

They say you can miss a gorilla, of you're not looking for one. Attuned to the number of guests and to spotting women among them, Lilith noticed for the first time since arrival, to her astonishment, that there were other kids, albeit much younger than her and Gwen and Daphne and Ed, ones she chose to ignore before. They were sitting at the table with parents and grandparents. The whole party perhaps counted close to 40 people total.

*21 women,* thought Lilith.

Bloom was a very large family, with their legacy primarily rooted in gardening business. Naturally, the majority of guests were older ladies, floral experts and such, various cousins and second cousins and third cousins to Alfred Bloom, who was the only child, who had only one child in turn, Alexander Bloom, who also had only one child. Lilith. Technically, that meant that one day this mansion, with its garden, will belong to her. This fact made her more determined to find out what secrets it held, because there was no way she would ever want to live in a house that had bones of murdered women buried in its garden.

She inhaled, exhaled, kissed Panther, whispered to him to wait for her by the door, and stepped inside.

As soon as she came up to the table, the Schlitzburger twins surfaced, their mother in tow. And Lilith could've sworn that all heads at the table turned in her direction briefly, where as 2 days ago hardly anyone paid any attention to her.

"We heard you got lost yesterday." Daphne said with a toothy smile, pulling out the chair to sit.

"In ze rose garden." Gwen added with a snigger, promptly plopping into the chair her sister pulled out, for which Daphne immediately slapped the back of her head.

Before answering, Lilith desperately searched the table, looking for Ed. It seemed that he wasn't here again. Her hopes

fell, and she poured as much icy sarcasm into her conversation as she could, to compensate for her disappointment.

"One of my favorite pastimes is searching for bones of dead people -" she turned to face the twins, "- you know, skulls and stuff - then covering them in fluorescent paint and dangling them at night in front of people's windows. It took me a while to find one yesterday. It's a nice once, still has all of its teeth intact. What room are you staying in, by the way?"

Daphne's face lost color just in time for her mother to arrive.

"Mutter!" She exclaimed, pointing at Lilith and firing off a long string of German words that sounded like whining. Her mother, an obvious lover of all things purple, strolled up closer, clad in a lavender sweater that only made her make-up look more artificial. She had the same purse dangling on her wrist, and Lilith wondered if she could seize yet another peacock feather off it.

"Tsk-Tsk, Daphne. Be nice. It iz not nice to speak in German in front of your friend, when your friend doesn't understand a word of it. Am I right, Liliz?" Said Irma Schlitzburger loudly. No doubt several other guests heard her.

Lilith felt her face turn hot.

"Aber mutter, sie..." Continued her drawl Daphne.

They sparred in what sounded like scolding, coming from her mother (Lilith caught two words, *sprechen* and *morgen*, which meant *talking* and *morning*), and shrill accusations, coming from Daphne. Meanwhile, Gwen happily devoured a helping of waffles, happily left alone.

"Hello." Someone tugged on Lilith's sleeve, saving her from having to come up with something better than a *Martian language* remark. She wheeled around.

A boy aged 10 or so stood in front of her. He had a very smart look about him, from furrowed dark eyebrows, to pursed lips, to an ironed suit and shiny shoes. A little businessman who never grew up.

"Um... I'm Patrick. Patrick Rosenthal. It's very nice to meet you, cousin." He stretched out his hand in a practiced movement, his round face splitting into a practiced smile. It was obvious his parents sent him.

"...and - um - this is my sister, Petra." He pushed a little girl ahead of him, barely 5, her dark long hair pulled up into a pony tail. It was the girl who insisted on more cake. Lilith remembered her now.

"Hallo!" She said, looking up, "My name is Petra Rosenthal. What is your name?" Petra grinned a smile that was missing one tooth, and it was the first genuine smile Lilith has seen since her arrival in the mansion.

"Lilith Bloom." Lilith said automatically, astounded at how well all of them spoke English. As far as she knew, her father, Alexander Bloom, was frowned upon in the family for leaving Germany.

"Why are you so sad? My cousin Ed said to give this to you." She suddenly whispered and pressed a piece of paper into Lilith's hand. "I like letters." She kept grinning. "Is it a secret love letter? My bother says..."

"Petra!" Her older brother said sternly. "He's *not* our cousin, he's *half*-cousin. We're not even *related*. Mom told you not to talk—"

"Sabrina. Sabrina Rosenthal. How delightful to meet you, Lilith." A tall dark-haired woman was shaking Lilith's hand, and Lilith recognized with horror the face of the sallow head, with a slightly crooked nose, but fully alive in this version. Her knees nearly buckled and she pulled out a chair to sit on.

Ed's note began burning Lilith's hand.

"There she is, the lovely girl. You were hiding from us, weren't you? Norman Rosenthal. I happen to be your father's *only* second cousin." A round heavy-set man, the grown-up version of Patrick, with the same smart look about him, was shaking Lilith's hand now. She decided he looked like a dentist, one of those who says it won't hurt, and then it hurts like hell.

Holding on to her seat with one hand and gripping Ed's note for dear life with another, poor Lilith found herself surrounded with scores of relatives who were eager to introduce themselves to her, even if it meant turning her chair around and talking inches away from her face, offering her facts that were supposed to make each and every person memorable.

"Trude Brandt, pleased to meet you." A short moon-faced lady with narrow eyes and a big flat nose uttered, apparently in her fifties, wearing an old-fashioned dress.

"Monika Brandt. Welcome, welcome." An almost exact copy of Trude shuffled up in an identical dress, and Lilith thought she will choke on her own saliva. These two were the lower heads she saw on the wall. Sisters.

Lilith's mouth went dry and she licked her lips to wet them, to be able to speak, which consisted of repeating her name to all these strangers, and thanking them, and expressing her delight at meeting them in turn. Her head was elsewhere. She was counting.

Five. There were five heads on the wall. She identified three. Does this mean it was only a dream? Would Ed know something about this? Now she missed only two more, the dark-skinned curly hair one, and the stern looking one who spoke to her, but as hard as Lilith looked around herself, none of the women she saw resembled the two.

"Hanna Haas, a degree in botany, a growing field, I must say, a vital part of our society..." A mousy-looking woman with large teeth and even larger glasses was pushing forward an old lady in a wheelchair. How did Lilith not notice the pair before, she did not know. Her plan to introduce herself to every single guest seemed to have just become much easier. There was no need, they were surrounding her themselves like fleas attracted to honey.

"...and this is my mother, Heidemarie Haas." She spoke something softly into her mother's ear, who resembled a dried out ghost sitting amidst blankets and cushions, her thin hair a dandelion halo around her head. The worst were her eyes, wide open, large, and milky. There were no pupils, no irises, as far as Lilith could see. Heidemarie stuck out her shaky hands and promptly seized Lilith's face, palpating it, nearly poking her eyes out with long yellow nails, grabbing her cheeks, squeezing her chin, and then unceremoniously feeling her neck, shoulders, chest and waist. At last, with a satisfied foul-smelling grin, she relayed something in German to Hanna.

"She said you look just like your father, when he was your age. He used to come and visit us often."

Lilith swallowed, counting off on her fingers and running out of them. That made it 11. 11 women so far. 10 more to find. Did little girls count? She didn't know, wishing she could've

inconspicuously whipped out her notepad and written down the names of all of them, to make an inventory later. Alas, her left hand was busy holding a precious piece of paper, and her right was being shaking non-stop. She used it to nibble on some food, sick to her stomach and not hungry anymore.

## Chapter 7. Bloom heir

Breakfast turned into the worst breakfast of Lilith's life, with people chatting her up across the table, people offering her more food, when she didn't want any, people pouring her juice, even giving her their business cards, smiling, taking pictures with her, until at last she managed to excuse herself under the pretext of needing to use the bathroom and walked out of the hall, holding herself back so as not to break into a run, dying to read Ed's note clutched in her sweaty palm, afraid that it was so crumpled by now that his words have somehow erased themselves and she won't ever know what he wanted to tell her.

Panther was already waiting by the door, leashed and whining, knowing that something went amiss.

"I'll tell you later," said Lilith quietly, to answer his urgent lick, sliding the collar off his neck, picking him up and rushing off to another hall, so busy in her distress that she didn't notice servers coming out of the kitchen, carrying an elaborately garnished tray of dessert.

She ran into them head-on, causing them to lose balance and sending trays full of tarts and cookies and cakes scattering around the marble floor with a loud twang. Ed's note flew out of

Lilith's hand and landed under a particularly rich and creamy piece of pie.

"Oh... I'm sorry!" Lilith cried out, darting for the note. Two ladies in black dresses and white frilly aprons bent over and blocked her, picking up their fallen load, when one of them straightened out and Lilith nearly fell to the floor herself.

The stern looking head belonged to this woman, and of course Lilith saw her before. She served them dinner, took dirty plates away and brought clean ones. Her watery eyes pierced through the girl, and she muttered something like a curse in German. The second servant stood up, and there was the dark-skinned plump looking head, with curly hair tucked away with bobby pins, on top of a voluptuous shapely body. She smiled, showing rows of brilliant pearly teeth.

"Did little miss hurt herself?" Asked the stern looking one without any remorse in her eyes whatsoever, her hair pulled away into a tight bun, and Lilith thought that her and that Gustav guy could easily be husband and wife, they matched each other so much in their bloodcurdling creepiness. The butlers, her grandfather's butlers, that's what they were.

"I -- I didn't see you -- I'm so sorry." Said Lilith with feeling, meaning every word of it. "I apologize for knocking you over. I truly *am* sorry. Can I help--"

The stern one pushed Lilith aside and fired off a command to the plump one, pointing out the mess on the floor, to which the plump one replied with, "Ja, Frau Agatha."

Lilith helplessly watched her scoop up Ed's note together with the piece of pie and bits of broken plates onto the tray. She desperately wished she brought her phone with her, but foreign calls were expensive and her parents decided it best for Lilith to take a break from technology. Not like she had any friends to call her, anyway. But she at least could've given Ed her number...

"No dezzert for little miss zis morning, I'm afraid." Said Agatha coldly. "Little miss needz to learn how to do thingz properly. Properly walk, properly eat, properly *sleep*." Her piercing eyes flashed terrible knowledge, and Lilith took off at once, her new leather soles skidding on the polished marble floor, until she made it out into the rose garden, breathless.

"What was all that about?" Panther licked her ear.

"Did you see her face? Did you - did you *recognize* it?" Whispered Lilith urgently.

"No, to my regret, I was sniffing on your underarms. Anything splendid I missed?" Panther raised his head. They couldn't continue conversing, unfortunately. Lilith's grandfather, Alfred Bloom, strolled towards them in his very

charming gait, with faithful Baer by his leg who growled immediately at the sight of the whippet.

Lilith only had enough time to compose herself and not faint, noticing an unusual surge of foul sweetness in the air and glancing up to the white sky that promised a humid day with a possible ending in a warm summer rain, if all went well.

She lowered her gaze just in time to meet those little shifty cricket-eyes belonging to her grandfather. The garden seemed to move in closer with him, backing him up with its reddish glow. He wore a dark burgundy suit that stood out as bloody against the scarlet and crimson and ruby of the roses.

"Good morning, my dear girl!" He said with exuberance. "Did you have trouble getting away from the lot of them?" He waived in the direction of the mansion.

Lilith could only nod in answer.

"Ah, don't you mind them. They're eager... of course, to make your acquaintance after my dinner announcement yesterday - the one you... missed." He added with an air of importance and disapproval. Bear growled. Panther growled in return, raising his head and baring his teeth. What, from the safe distance of being three feet off the ground, safely in the arms of his mistress, of course he could.

"Please excuse me, grandfather. We got lost." Lilith said thickly, making sure her voice sounded steady enough.

"Lost? In my rose garden?" He continued the mockery that Daphne started this morning, and somehow Lilith thought that mentioning her hobby of dangling human skulls in front of people's windows wouldn't do the trick this time.

"Who do you mean by... *we*?" He continued with avid interest, walking closer.

Lilith involuntarily took a step back. "Well - it was me and - and, Panther here..."

"You got lost with his... *creature*? In *my* garden? Honestly, Lilith. I always thought dogs were supposed to help you find your way out, not get you lost. Think about it, my dear girl. A whippet is not really dog, it's a joke, in my opinion. A breeder's mistake, if you ask me." He said with contempt.

Panther snarled and his tail twitched lightly. Lilith wished her father was here, to back her up.

"Wouldn't you agree?" Her grandfather continued nonchalantly. "This—" He grabbed a handful of skin behind Bear's ears, to which the mastiff rolled his eyes in pleasure, "—is a dog. A *Dog* from capital letter. I can get you a puppy, if you'd like, to take home with you. What do you say?"

Lilith sensed Panther stiffen in her arms.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I have to decline." Said Lilith ever so politely. "At my age, when responsibility is merely a word that doesn't have much meaning, taking care of someone as

*exquisite* as a mastiff might be beyond my abilities. But thank you for this incredible offer. Thank you very much." She was tempted to do a curtsy but decided it would be too much.

"Pity." Said her grandfather, his smile dying. "Oh, well. Perhaps it's for the best. Why don't you train on this... parody of a dog of yours, before you can decide whether or not you want a real one."

"But—"

"From this day on, I do not allow your... *creature* to be in my garden, for your information. Baer is trained not to pollute my roses. Gustav told me he saw your... pet relieve himself right underneath this bush." Grandfather waved in the direction of particularly gnarly shrub and petted Bear heavily behind his ears. Lilith stared at his muscular arms moving with grace yet offering an image of something powerful. An axe. Chopping off the heads. In the night. She shivered.

Meanwhile, caught unaware, she only had time to notice the menacing figure of Gustav appear out of thin air, as if he could read his master's thoughts, and yank Panther out of her arms to his and hers loud protesting. He barked hysterically, causing Baer to launch into a series of guttural roars.

"Please, he won't do it anymore. Please!" Lilith kneaded her hands and made to rush after Panther, when, ignoring her pleading, Alfred Bloom swiftly curled his arm around hers and

forcefully walked with her into the thicket of the garden, where scarlet glow permeated air, making it almost pink.

Breakfast was over and enthusiastic relatives began pouring out of every hole in the mansion to come and acquaint themselves with her. Lilith's skin crawled, yet on some level she was happy her grandfather took her away. It meant reprieve from all those countless relatives and their inquiries and attempts to make their children her best friends.

Within a few minutes of concentrated walking, they were close to the middle of the garden and finally slowed down.

"Now, where... were we?" Her grandfather said dreamily. "Ah - - dinner announcement -- I have read my will." He stopped and turned Lilith to face him, holding her firmly by both shoulders. They were in one of the narrow alleys, with gigantic rose bushes towering on each side, eavesdropping.

"Lilith Bloom. My *only* granddaughter. I have decided to make you my *sole* heir to this mansion, this garden, and the rest of the Bloom's property when I die."

He burrowed his small beady eyes into hers.

Lilith felt rooted to the spot. No, she felt like falling through the ground, traveling all the way to the other side and emerging in some jungle with a loud pop. Anything, but this. The fact that she suspected it, didn't matter.

"Oh, I'm - I'm eternally grateful." She finally managed apprehensively, playing the polite card, instead of exclaiming, *dead bodies and all?* "Thank you, dear grandfather. So is this... The rest of - is there more?"

"When you arrived... every building you saw at the end of Lindenstrasse," he spread his arms, "three on this side, my mansion last, and two on the opposite side, belong to me -- belong to the Bloom family. And the garden, of course. The best part about this property is the garden." He sneered.

A trickle of cold sweat run the length of Lilith's back.

"What I tell you next I want to stay strictly between you and me. Do we have an agreement?" He took her hand. His fingers brushed hers with ancient calluses, rough and warm. And it's the warmth that Lilith despised, she'd rather his fingers be cold and deadly, warmth only made them sicker.

She held steady and nodded. What else could she do?

"I tell you this. I don't expect your father to be interested in the garden. The second I pass it on to him, he'll rip out every single bush and turn it into one of those dog race rings, for his... creatures. I can't rely on him. You, on the other hand..." He peered into her face, his wheezing breath inches away, "...seem to be rather interested in plants and other *organic* matter."

*What do you mean -- organic matter?* Lilith almost cried out, swallowing her words in time.

"You are my only hope. Besides, I don't know if your father is eager to move back to Germany. So." He straightened and reached with his other hand between two nearest bushes that grew so close, they formed a green wall dotted with a multitude of flaming rose buds. Next he thrust a pair of enormous gardening sheers into Lilith's hands.

"A true rose gardener is not afraid of a few scrapes and drops of blood. I want you to prune this bush, without gloves. Go on, fancy your old grandfather."

"Pardon me," said Lilith feebly, struggling to hold the heavy tool upright, two large wooden sticks four feet long, crossing at the last foot and ending in sharp knives that could look like scissors but looked like an instrument to cut off people's limbs instead. "--but I don't know how..." The thing was too large, too bulky, too gruesome to be perceived as a normal gardening tool.

Fast like lightning, despite his age, and with a passing of fury across his features, Alfred Bloom snatched the sheers out of Lilith's hands and began heatedly hacking away at the bush, so that Lilith lost him in the rain of leaves, twigs, and green dust.

"This -" he kept lecturing her, "-is how a master rosarian does it." He started on the other side. "Watch and learn, my dear girl, watch and learn." He danced around in almost feverish glee, firing off terms, describing what he does, clicking the sheers with incredible speed.

"...summer pruning let's them breathe..."

"...you snap off old heads -- it's called deadheading -- for new buds to bloom..."

"...roses are delicate and capricious, like women, you have to grab them by the throat while they're timid, before they know what hit them. Viola! They're yours..."

Lilith's knees buckled. The energy with which Alfred Bloom performed the pruning, the tails of his burgundy jacket flying, puffs of his hair sticking to his head from sweat, all of it reminded her about the nightmare she saw, and all of it made her think.

*Maybe I did imagine the whole massacre* (massacre was yet another fancy word she liked to use, this time to convince herself). *I dreamed it, I was too tired. It's the jetlag, that's what it is. And no pills.* Just as she thought that, another sigh, an almost shudder, passed through the garden, and her grandfather made the last loud clicking noise with the sheers, slamming them shut and sticking them into the ground, ramming

their metal part to the point where only the wooden handles were visible.

"Well..." He wheeled around, studying her, holding something behind his back. "What do you think?"

"Err..." Lilith began tentatively and lost her thought. Not only that, her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth, and desperately wished to pass out, wondering if he would wield an axe and finish her off right here.

Alfred Bloom swiftly took out his other hand. In it was a freshly cut bouquet of fragrant roses. He offered them to Lilith with a sinister smile.

Lilith took it, and sharp hard thorns promptly dug into her palms, drawing blood. Drops of it trickled into gravel on the pathway, disappearing without trace, as if the garden was sucking every bit of it and wanted more.

"You want to cut old stems, so you can put them in a vase." Grandpa offered silkily. "It doesn't hurt to cut a long stem, for new growth to come off where the old one has been. Roses grow so fast... the thing is, you've got to feed them, in order for them to grow quickly... to produce flowers."

Everything, grandpa's burgundy outfit, ruby roses, pinkish air, overpowering rotten fragrance, folded into a point and hit Lilith smack in the middle of her head to a sharp headache.

Lilith decided, it's now or never. She won't have another chance, and if she won't find out this instant, she might as well decide that her brain has permanently gone coo coo, pills or not.

"How do you... *feed* a rose?" She asked, her right hand numb with pain, warm blood running down the stems freely.

"Ah! Excellent question. I prefer... *organic matter*. It's the best thing, my dear girl, it makes them want more, makes them hungry, greedy." His eyes sparkled with grandiosity of sorts. "I spread organic matter on top. Then I add both granular and water-soluble fertilizers. The key here is not to overdo it. Roses burn easily, you see."

Only now did Lilith notice what her grandfather has done to the rose bush. He turned it into a woman. There she stood, nearly ten feet tall, her round green head punctured with flashes of red all around, two particularly large blossoms doubling as her eyes. The rest of the bush was shaped like a female figure, complete with a heavy bosom and wide curving thighs, splotches of crimson topping anatomically correct representations of pink dabs on a bare woman's body. Only it was green, and prickly, and it moved. It lowered its head slowly, wanting to participate in the conversation.

Lilith couldn't hold it anymore. She dropped the roses on the ground and shrieked, making for the run. A stinging grip stopped her.

"One more thing." He grandfather viciously whispered in her ear. "I take it you lost this?" He stuck his hand in the pocked and pulled out her the red beret, smudged with dirt but intact. "I found it in a rather strange place."

"Yes!" Lilith croaked breathlessly, taking it with shaking hands. "I--"

"Listen carefully." Alfred said with force, and any gentleness has evaporated from his eyes, if there ever was some. His fingers dug deeper into Lilith's arm, she winced but didn't utter a sound, holding his watery gaze. A certain rage began swelling inside her. It was utter rubbish to feel this way, yet she couldn't help it.

"Do not say a word to anyone about what we have discussed, lest you want to end up... not the one gardening, but the one being gardened *on*." He smiled sweetly.

Lilith didn't like the sound of this phrase at all.

"I need your answer by the end of your stay. If you answer me sooner, you get to go out and enjoy German summer -- go sightseeing Berlin -- anything you want. But until you tell me yes or no, you may not leave this house -- nor this garden -- nor do I want to catch you and your... creature wandering around

where you shouldn't, when you shouldn't. I will have Gustav fetch you, when I need you. Is that understood?"

"Yes." Lilith swallowed.

"Good." He beamed his charming self and let her go.

Was it wise to launch into bitter sarcasm just now? Lilith didn't have time to think logical thoughts, she only wanted to hurt him back, enraged for those innocent ladies he must have murdered to feed his roses, she was sure of it now. She wasn't crazy after all. Whether or not anyone believed her, was another matter entirely.

"This was a... fantastic presentation, thank you." Said Lilith graciously, noticing a hint of pride creep into her grandfather's face. "I have never seen anything quite like it. Will you forgive me - if I -" she was choosing her words carefully, "-- come to ask you more... questions on the matter, while I'm giving it my utmost thought?"

"But of course, my dear girl! Anything you want." He beamed, standing so close to the bush he pruned, that it looked like the enormous rose woman was hugging him. Lilith stared, determined not to look away.

"Excellent." She made herself say. "Then I will be able to give you an answer soon. *Absolumonto*. I promise. However, may I ask for one small favor? You see, I like dipping things in chocolate. I wonder how a rose would taste when dipped in

chocolate. P—" She almost said, *Panther and I have this bet...*

"Perhaps I may go into the kitchen and experiment? May I ask you to point out to me the oldest bush..." this was the most important part, "where I may *deadhead* a few blooms, in case the first one didn't work out?" *I have to show him interest, I have to make him believe I'm up for the job.* "I dare not do it myself, in the presence of a master rosarian. You know so much, I can only hope my knowledge will ever extend to the same level."

Flattery can take you places.

"A rose?" Her grandfather said with amusement.

Lilith nodded.

"Dipped in chocolate?"

Lilith nodded energetically.

"How very odd and... erudite you are, for a 12 year old girl, I'm impressed! Roses in chocolate... I might want to try that. Come along." Alfred Bloom exclaimed, clearly pleased with himself.

And so, in once move, Lilith bought herself temporary protection from countless relatives who were bound to launch at her as soon as she emerged from the garden, as well as her grandfather's permission to mutilate and otherwise hang around a rose bush, in the garden, under the pretext of eating its petals.

*There is nothing like first-hand evidence, thought Lilith, as Sherlock Holmes would've said. I must eliminate all other factors, to find truth that remains.*

## Chapter 8. Old bush

They strolled towards the end of the garden, hearing voices of other guests in the distance but miraculously not coming across a single one. In Lilith's memory the place they were headed for was remarkably close to the location of the sigh that she heard the first time, where her and Panther were pressed into the hedge and found themselves in the foggy creepy grotto where mastiffs were guarding something. Or someone. Here the iron fence, painted white so many times that its wrought iron edges, once sharp, were smooth and round, came to a corner. It's from here that Lilith saw Ed flash his window light. And it's here where he stood now, sporting crumpled jeans and shirt as if he slept in them and just crawled out of bed, a tiny pillow feather still stuck to his mound of dark hair, an open notepad and pen in his hands. He was furiously scribbling something.

"Ed! What a surprise to find you here, my dear boy." Alfred cried cheerily. "Why alone? Drawing another rose, I take it?" And, without waiting for an answer, he snatched the notepad out of Ed's hand, scrutinizing it closely.

Ed and Lilith exchanged a glance that meant one word, *brute*.

"Well, this doesn't look like a real rose, I must say. More of a... peony, almost. You can do better - certainly - you can do way better. Practice, my dear, practice... Although I'd prefer it," he pointed to Ed's cottage, "if you sketched from the comfort of your own home. Snip a rose, stick it in a vase. Still life. Better concentration that way. Too many people here today to distract you."

Preceded with barely audible gritting of the gravel, Gustav appeared out of nowhere, to which Lilith has gotten used to by now, and with words,

"Herr! Mine Herr!"

hotly whispered something urgent into Alfred Bloom's eager ear. Lilith watched his facial expression turn from sunny to thunderous, and with a curt,

"I'm afraid, I must leave you two for the time being,"

he was off. Lilith's stomach churned at the thought of Panther being locked up because of her. She watched the tall knobbly figure of Gustav and the short stout presence of her grandfather diminish in size. They both disappeared behind a large rose bush at the end of a pathway, and now Lilith stood studying Ed who swiftly produced another notepad and pen from his jeans pocket, as grandfather happened to carry the first one off in his haste.

He scribbled something on it.

"Hi." Said Lilith, remembering her manners and stretching out her hand. "I don't think I have introduced myself properly. I'm Lilith - Lilith Bloom." *And this is Panther*, she wanted to add, biting her lip bitterly.

Ed shook her hand, stuffing his notepad under her nose.

*Ed Vogel*, It said in large circular scribbles.

"Are you mute?" Lilith uttered before she could stop herself. Ed's dark brown eyes widened, his arching eyebrows crept up and up and...

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, it's just that - we don't have much time -" She looked behind her, fully expecting either the butler to show up, or her grandfather, or Baer, or the twins, or some other artifact of the family reunion she never asked to be a part of.

He nodded, an expression of utter puzzlement on his tanned pointed face. From some strange place in her recent memory (reading English-German picture dictionary her mother insisted on, in the airplane, has been paying off) Lilith extracted the meaning of the word *vogel*, the image of it, rather. It meant *bird*. Ed did look a little like a bird, inquisitive, stretching out his neck and quickly flicking his shiny brown eyes left and right. And that feather in his hair...

"Is it true - what they're saying - the frozen door, your, err..." she stuck out her tongue and pointed to it, dying for him

to open his mouth and show her and at the same time chasing the idea away.

Ed shook his head negative.

"I knew it - that stupid Daphne girl..." Lilith hissed, her face hot.

Ed grinned, revealing two rows of small teeth and dimples in his cheeks. He nearly touched the pad with his nose, quickly doodling something, then presented Lilith with an almost exact copy of Daphne drawn as a plump balloon floating in the sky. He pointed his pencil in the middle, where her belly button should be, and formed an 'P' with his lips.

"POP!" Lilith provided the desired soundtrack, and they burst into laughter. There was a beginning of friendship in the air, and they both knew it. They immediately launched into their business, the way children do, without any dancing around.

Ed beckoned Lilith with his finger, and they meandered out of the pathway towards a particularly heavily overgrown archway that formed yet another grotto, nearly dark inside.

Lilith's mind spun with questions.

"Why can't you talk - if you don't mind me asking -"

Ed shook his head.

"What happened?"

They paused between two particularly large rose bushes. Ed scribbled on the pad, then gave up, and pulled on Lilith's hand

until they were all the way under the protection of the arcade. His hand felt smooth and cool, and Lilith liked his hold, gentle yet firm. Ed plopped on the ground, his back sunk into roses. Lilith did the same, sweet fragrance immediately overwhelming her senses, yet she couldn't detect any stink from these particular blooms. It smelled wonderful. Ed smelled wonderful. He smelled like cookies, and Lilith fought the urge to stick her nose into his hair and take a deep inhale. She retrained herself, watching his fingers, stained with ink, dance swiftly across the pad.

He drew a train and a man on the tracks in front of it. Then he scrawled all over it in angry broad lines, tears springing in his eyes.

"The train... someone got under the train?" Lilith offered timidly.

Ed nodded. He drew an arrow to the male figure and wrote, *DAD* in all capital letters.

"Your dad got hit by a train?!?" Lilith gasped.

Ed wrote, *jumped*.

"He jumped... *under* the train?" Said Lilith quietly.

Ed hung his head in a yes.

"Oh - Oh, I'm sorry for asking. I'm so sorry for your loss. But why?" Lilith asked incredulously, before she could hold the

question back, knowing that it's very inappropriate to ask such a personal question, yet somehow she knew Ed wouldn't mind.

He didn't. In fact, it appeared he was dying to tell someone. For the next half an hour or so, he drew picture after picture, explaining everything about his life, from the fact that he is 14, to the fact that 2 years ago his father, a painter, finally decided to call it quits, after yet another year of financial fiasco, when nobody wanted to buy his paintings. Paintings of roses, which, Ed wrote, were *amazing*. Stricken with grief, his dream of becoming an artist just like his dad crushed, Ed stopped talking. It's not that he couldn't, words simply wouldn't come. It was easier to draw.

"I get it." Whispered Lilith. "You don't need to explain."

There was a misty gratitude in Ed's eyes that made Lilith's little heart skip a beat and she cleared her throat hastily.

He proceeded telling her via his quick pencil sketches that his mom died when he was born (a coffin with flowers), and his dad remarried when he was 5 (a pair under flowers). His step-mom worked as a stewardess (a plane, a woman, Ed's stretched out arms to simulate flight), and that after dad died, she started working double-shifts and was rarely home.

"So you're living alone???" Lilith's eyes opened wide.

*Sort of. In a way. Yeah. I guess.* Ed wrote and drew a picture of a lonely boy looking out an empty window.

"Was it you... turning your light on and off? When... when..."

Lilith decided it was safe to spill her secret, and she quickly adopted Ed's manner of showing. She jumped up, placed her red beret on the ground, black one next to it, unlaced her left oxford shoe, her right, positioned them in a row next to berets, and finally added her knit navy bag. She stood over them, 5 objects exactly, raising her arms as if wielding an ax and crushing it down. Some things are better not spoken about, but seen.

She turned to look at Ed, and she knew that he knew. Utter comprehension, the type that doesn't need to be explained with words, was written all over his face. He nodded. He saw what she saw, and he probably didn't dare telling anyone either.

Lilith was putting her left shoe back on, smearing blood from her injured palm on it, when Ed grabbed her hand with a question on his eyes.

"Grandfather... made me hold a bouquet of roses with bare hands. But, it's okay, really. Anyway -" Lilith glanced around, to make sure nobody was eavesdropping. "The note you sent me with that little girl, Petra - I'm sorry, I lost it without reading it. Did you mean to tell me that... that... grandpa kills women and feeds them to the roses, right?"

Ed nodded and shook his head immediately after it.

*Yes and no.* He scribbled.

"What do you mean?" Lilith whispered hotly into his ear, so close to him, her lips were almost touching his earlobe.

Loud smooching sounds caused them both to jump apart.

Heaving their fat bodies, bare shiny legs stuck into shorts, identical bellies taut under lavender tops (like mother like daughters), the Schlizburger twins marched into the shadow of the grotto.

"Guck mal! Look, Gwen! Ed has got himself a girlfriend." Daphne almost sang it, to Gwen sniggering into her hands.

"Why don't you give her a flower?" Gwen grabbed a nearby rose and cracked its stem. Was it Lilith's imagination, or did the rosebush produce an angry sigh in response? She certainly hoped she was right, seeing a vivid picture of both Daphne and Gwen being devoured by the garden, screaming and flailing their arms.

"Leave him alone, you two." Lilith threw back, her upper lip curled. Ed stood up and joined her, glaring.

"I suppose you lost your sense of *American* humor? Without your sidekick Panther, did you? I think they are cooking him for dinner, we saw him in the kitchen." Daphne snapped with a click of her braced teeth, their color matching lavender tops this morning.

"A serving woman was holding him." Gwen added with satisfaction.

Lilith's stomach churned. She wondered why Gustav summoned her grandfather so urgently. Did he feed dogs to the rose bushes too? Could they be telling the truth?

"Did you, really? I thought you couldn't see much beyond your noses from those small piggy *German* eyes of yours." Lilith hissed, astounded at her own nastiness.

Meanwhile, Ed quickly sketched something, tore off a piece of paper and now held it in front of Daphne's face. Her face went purple, and so did Gwen's, who swiftly snatched the piece of paper out of Ed's hands and tore it into little pieces.

"About that skull..." Said Lilith slyly, moving shoulder to shoulder with Ed, "there is a pile of them buried - right where you're standing -" she pointed to Daphne's feet, "- wanna see?"

Daphne jumped with a shriek, bumped into her sister, and they both toppled over each other, scrambling to their feet like two frightened over-sized piglets, squealing, their knees scraped bloody on the rocks. Lilith thought she saw the rose bushes lean a little closer for a better look.

"You're *mental!*" Threw Gwen over her shoulder, standing, her lower lip trembling, her blonde curls jiggling.

"You're *both* mental!" Proclaimed Daphne. "Komm!" She tagged at her sister's arm, and they waddled away like two injured hippos.

"Ed! Ich hab' getan! Ich hab' getan! I did it, I did it!" Little 5-year-old Petra came running out of nowhere, her older brother Patrick behind her, scowling. According to him, it was not a good idea for Petra to mingle with non-family. According to him, since Ed's step-mother was the direct descendant of the Bloom family, that made him *not* Bloom.

One thing was clear to Lilith, they will have no piece, now that their place of seclusion has been discovered. Sure enough, an enraged Irma Schlitzburger stomped their way, with wailing Gwen on her left arm, and wailing Daphne on her right.

"Is that true, young lady? How dare you..." She caught her breath, "how dare you push my daughters, you..." She was looking for an appropriate word, "you... are a disgrace to the family. You..." Her heavy bosom was moving up and down.

"Ah, Lilith!" Sabrina Rosenthal cried, her husband, Norman the dentist, on her arm, strolling from the opposite end of the pathway.

Lilith's heart dropped to her knees at the sight of Sabrina and her sallow head, remembering it stuck on her wall.

"Why, we were looking all over for you." Norman Rosenthal joined eagerly to his wife's sentiments. "We think it would be splendid if you spent some time with Patrick, he wants to show you his collection of butterflies." He pushed unhappy Patrick forward into the small of his back. "Go on, tell her."

Patrick opened his mouth and launched into a very intelligent, obviously, in his view, explanation of his butterfly catching hobby and the specimen he was able to find, attracted particularly in this time of summer, but these particular types of roses.

"Um... A butterfly is a day-flying insect that can be spotted..." His face serious, like he was standing in school in front of a teacher, he droned on.

"Butterflies." Repeated Lilith quietly, at a loss for words. "All I need right now is, *butterflies*." She added under her breath, glancing at Ed with pleading in her eyes. *Save me from this lot, save me! Can you?*

They were trapped. On one side of the arcade, Irma Schlitzburger continued her lecture on bad manners, into which, to Lilith's horror, joined an old lady, whose voice she recognized. It was her neighbor, the lady from behind the wall who screeched at her the other night about her waking her up, and into whose bathroom Lilith opened the door by accident. Her white locks covered her head like that of a poodle, and her frilly colorless dress jittered at her every word.

On the other side, the Rosenthal family advanced with the intention to get Lilith to socialize with their children, fully ignoring Ed's presence, like he was invisible. You know what they say about crowd mentality? Well, hearing the racket in this

part of the garden, the rest of the guest seemed to be heading their way. Soon a wheelchair creaked behind Rosenthals. It was Hanna Haas, the botanist, pushing her blind mother, Heidemarie Haas, to join the party. There were more footsteps and echoing calls, indicating a large group of people walking briskly.

Lilith and Ed glanced at each other.

The only way out was to tear through the side of the arcade and risk their faces being scratched bloody in the process. Or hope that the ground would open and swallow them. Or the sky would suck them in, but that would involve bursting through a ceiling of interwoven rose tangles.

They backed away involuntarily, pressing their backs into the carpet of blooms, when, to their surprise, it parted.

The crowd gasped. Lilith and Ed fell on the ground, into stench, fog, and loud growling of three mastiffs. They were on the other side, watching with horror rose vines shuffling themselves back into place, holding trembling hands. This archway must have been the passage to it, to that secret underbelly of the garden's reality. This must be the place where Lilith entered it for the first time. Only this second time it was worse, much much worse, because out of the fog two figures stepped out, one tall and lanky, bent like a hook, and another... broad-shouldered and muscular.

"Well, well, well... who do we have here?" Alfred Bloom said cheerily. "Ed, didn't I ask you to draw your roses from the comfort of your house? And Lilith, my dear girl, didn't we agree on you not being seen where you are *not supposed* to be seen? I remember we just talked about this a few hours ago, did we not?" Her grandfather advanced, and then all of them turned their heads.

Because as ear-splitting and blood-chilling shriek pierced the air. This time it was not a simple wail, this time it sounded like someone was being tortured.

Lilith's hair stood on end and she nearly fainted.

## Chapter 9. Other garden

Foul rotten odor rolled over all of them in waves, warm and clinging. Its long misty tongues licked them all into oblivion for a few seconds, before moving on, disappearing between rows of bushes. It was the type of smell that penetrated every fiber of your clothes and no matter how many times you washed it, it stayed on them forever. It reeked of decomposing organic matter, like a pile of slimy last year's leaves with an added metallic tang to it and a note of something sickly sweet and pungent. Lilith coughed and thought that whatever little breakfast she managed to put inside her stomach, was very eager to come out. Then the very ground shuddered under thunderous steps of someone heavy. A rush of wind followed, swirling with torn off leaves and twigs, and then that passed too and all was still.

Baer and his doggie brothers were baring their teeth at them in a guttural snarl. Gustav grabbed all three by their necks and whispered something in their ears, which calmed them down. Ed squeezed Lilith's hand and they stood, facing their grandfather.

"Sadly, I will have to separate you two." Alfred spoke up in a lecturing way. "My... *gardening* business is a very important

affair and it can't be meddled with by two children. It seems like simple talking won't do. You two are making me to resort to rather drastic measures." He stroked his chin, and only now Lilith noticed that his burgundy suit and the shirt underneath were in tatters, torn and sliced into ropes as if he fought a gigantic cat. There were deep bleeding gashes in his chest, neck and face like from claws. Or was it from thorns of a, perhaps, gigantic rose?

Lilith thought back to the bush he shaped into a woman. If that thing fought you, would it be able to kill you? Maybe not, but it would certainly painfully scratch you all over.

Meanwhile, grandpa motioned to Gustav to take his mastiffs away, and they were left alone in the mist.

"Ed, I think I will talk to your mother tomorrow. Long overdue, actually. I believe your rental agreement is over at the end of the month?"

Ed swallowed loudly.

"Right. I think it's time for you move on. You need to get out of this place, change schools, find new friends. No use sulking over your father's death. You have to keep living, my dear boy, and put those silly ideas about becoming an artist out of your head."

And so it always is, thought Lilith, the minute I manage to find a new friend, he's being taken away from me. She sighed.

"Lilith, my dear girl, I would prefer it if you stayed in your room from now on, until I tell you otherwise. I'm afraid, I will have to take your... creature away from you for the duration of your stay, if don't humor me with your excellent behavior. Do you agree?"

Lilith's heart nearly froze at the idea of Panther being away from her for more than a day. She nodded miserably.

"I need an actual answer. Yes or no?" Grandfather insisted.

"Yes, grandfather." She mumbled. What else could she say? This was not the time for a sarcastic come-back, somehow she knew it would only make things worse.

"Good." Alfred exhaled heavily, and for a moment Lilith thought she saw her true grandfather flash underneath this mask of an eccentric and a wealthy owner of a successful business, as well as a patron to the whole Bloom family. He was a tired old man, and a pang of pity stung her. Whatever it was he was doing, took a toll on him. His eyes sunk into ashen face, and his muscular hands trembled.

Lilith nearly jumped when he took a step toward her, fully expecting another mini-earthquake or a terrible scream or stinky wind. It was none of those. He simply stepped between the children, and, taking both of them under their arms, led them out the back way, twisting and turning so many times, that Lilith left all hope trying to remember the way. It truly was a

rose garden labyrinth the size of an enormous orchard or a mini-forest that didn't seem to end. It kept going on and on, the only difference was the bushes themselves. From tall and dark they gradually turned to short and light, with the red of the roses resembling not so much blood but more red silk, rich and velvety in the cloudy June afternoon.

All three of them stayed quiet for the entire journey, Lilith not daring to steal a single glance at Ed and bitterly regretting not asking him more questions about her grandfather and the garden, chewing on her stray lock and propping her beret up every now and then. It was too late now.

They arrived not to the entrance into the garden from the west side of the mansion, but to its backyard edge, way north and on the opposite side of the main Lindentrasse street. If you looked at the entire property from above, the garden was not simply on the west side of the house, it sort of licked it and spilled over half-way on both its front and its back. It ended right by the kitchen door where staff milled about, carrying in provisions for dinner and in general busting with life that consisted of a slew of servants, kitchen maids, gardeners, and, of course, the butlers, one of whom, Agatha, was holding the door open, expectantly.

"Herr Bloom, herr." She nodded and let them in, not a muscle twitching in her face at the sight of his ragged bloody appearance.

Unbearable noise crashed on Lilith's head at once. Pots were being smacked on top of the stove, dishes clinked and clanked and tinkled. Silvery made this rusting metallic sound, as did footsteps, chef's calls, and the constant running around that usually happened in expensive restaurants, hidden from the eyes of esteemed guests. Delicious smell compensated for the noise, and Lilith inhaled a lungful of it, the chicken soup and rosemary and other herbs, and fried potatoes and roasting meat, fresh bread being cut and boiling jam, made from scratch for breakfast.

Busy bodies passed them in the sea of activity, parting gently in front of their boss, Alfred Bloom.

"Grandfather," Lilith began nervously, "I apologize for my inquiry, but does this mean I won't be able to, err... deadhead roses from that old bush and dip their petals in dark chocolate?" She eyed a big boiling pot of syrupy mass to her left, steam rising out of it in clouds.

"Gustav will bring you the roses. I can't break my promise, my dear girl, can I now?"

They turned into a quieter fore-room, where servants decorated dishes already made on the plates and where gardeners

were cutting stems to length and populating vases with freshly picked roses.

*This is where the other women must be, the servants, the maids, those 10 that will make it 21 total, Lilith thought. If only I knew what it meant, if only...*

But her train of thought was interrupted at the sight of the plump dark-skinned maid that she ran into this morning in the hall. Panther sitting in her lap, she was feeding him from her hand, with what looked like top-choice pieces of steak, and her whippet, to a pang of jealousy in Lilith's stomach, licked the maid's face profusely, to which she giggled, her eyes misty with adoration.

"Panther!" Forgetting everything, Lilith darted across the room, narrowly avoiding one of the servers carrying a tray of dirty dishes back into the kitchen, and slid on the floor on her knees, reaching with her open arms to take her beloved pet and smother him with affection, tell him how much she missed him, tell him all about what happened and seek his counsel.

Panther whimpered loudly, his steak abandoned, and leapt to Lilith, scratching madly at her with his paws and smearing his wet nose all over her face.

"I love your dog. He iz *darling*." The maid said with a wide smile. "If zey take him away again - if you ever need him-" She added very quietly and winked her one large eye, quickly

glancing up and composing herself, which meant springing up and bowing deeply. Because her grandfather was standing behind them, studying the scene inquisitively.

She rattled something to her grandpa, of which Lilith understood only two things, *herr* and *hund*, which meant dog, of course. Alfred answered something very harsh back, because the maid scrambled out of the way, her voluptuous body hunched, head low.

"You may go to your room now." Grandpa said in a manner that didn't invite any room for arguing, at which point Lilith looked around for Ed. He was gone. In the mass of moving bodies and scuttle and the hassle of their arrival, he slipped away. Lilith's heart sunk and she wanted to cry.

It took her an eternity to find a way out and to lift her feet rhythmically over the steps of the marble staircase, to walk on unbending legs by closed doors, listening to her footsteps and holding Panther tightly to her chest, until she found her door. It was the last one, so it was easy to spot. Her back crawled, sensing a penetrating stare. She turned. There stood Gustav, at the end of the corridor, no doubt making sure she actually made it into her room. With a heavy sigh, Lilith clicked the door open and sunk on the floor, shutting it with her back and leaning her head on it, staring into nothing.

"Oh, Panther..." She said longingly, stroking his head, "I missed you so much. So many miraculous and dreadful things have happened - I have so much to tell you - where do I start?"

"It depends on where you ended, of course." He licked her face. "And I missed you terribly too." He growled, clearly too happy with himself after being fed steak, and unable to think logically at the moment, sliding out of her embrace and rolling onto his back, legs in the air, inviting her to scratch his full belly.

Lilith did absentmindedly, with her left hand, her right hand slid down on the wooden floor. But it wasn't floor that she felt. It was a piece of paper. She was sitting on top of it, and it could only be one thing.

"Ed left me a note!" She exclaimed, taking off her bag, her beret, picking up the note from the floor and migrating to her bed, to read it. Or, rather, to study it, because when she unfolded it, it was, of course, a drawing.

"Who is Ed?" Panther inquired in a miffed sort of way, scrambling to his fours.

"You don't remember? Ed! He lives across the street - he flashed those arrows in his window, to get us out. Ed, my friend?" She added to puzzled Panther's muzzle.

"You're *friends* with him now? That was fast. I was only gone for a couple hours." Panther said grudgingly from the floor. Lilith ignored him, deep in the thrill of discovery.

Ed must have taken precautions, in case a maid or someone else came across his sketch before Lilith did. To an unsuspecting eye it would have looked like an elaborate ornament composed of dots and lines, faintly resembling entwined roses, but Lilith knew immediately what it was.

It was a map of the garden.

"Look." Lilith pointed to Panther, who jumped on the bed and was sticking his nose over the piece of paper, making sure he took part in this new adventure, and, of course, desperately vying for attention.

They bent their heads over it.

The paper was small, the size of an adult palm, neatly torn out of the pocket notebook. It was covered in penciled dots indicating rose bushes strewn along pathways in the quincunx pattern. Lines across them formed arcades, numerous arcades, one of them positioned in the very corner and colored thicker than the rest, with a tiny arrow next to it.

"This is where we got into that other garden today. We got there by accident, *again*." Lilith whispered urgently into her whippet's ear.

"You *did*? I don't believe my paws."

"Oh no, now that I think about it, it wasn't an accident. Ed must have known it was the entrance, if he drew this map?" Lilith's eyes widened.

Panther whined, the end of his tail trembled.

"So this is where the entrance to the other side is..." She pointed to the other half of the drawing, which was mirroring the first, as if the paper was folded in two to leave a faint imprint. The pattern was the same, and yet it wasn't. Instead of organized rows and archways it curled and twisted and at its far left corner one of the dots was circled with a tiny barely visible exclamation mark next to it.

"I think this is where we have to go."

"Do we really have to?" Panther licked his whole muzzle and proceeded chewing lightly on his paw.

"Yes. Yes, I think we do. You agreed to help, remember?"

"Are there any squirrels?" Panther added hopelessly.

"Negative."

For the next hour or so Lilith relayed to Panther everything that happened, from Ed telling her about his parents dying and him living with his step-mom, to annoying Schlitzburger twins that interrupted everything, to guests swarming to her, to them falling into the other garden, and to the blood-chilling shriek that they heard.

"I thought I would die on the spot. It was horrible." She said breathlessly, blinking rapidly, her face pale.

Panther, however, proceeded licking his furry coat, very nonchalantly at that.

"What, you don't find this fascinating? You're so *desultory* sometimes." Lilith said with feeling, using again one of the rare words for an added effect.

"No, it's not that - whatever *desultory* means - it's that - I knew it all already." Panther stretched his doggy lips above his pink gums, revealing teeth.

"What do you mean, you *knew it already*?" Lilith gasped in shock.

"Remember where I was left? Servants talk, and bad news spreads fast, with the speed of the fastest squirrel out there, running away from wildfire. I know something else too, something you *don't* know..." He scratched his back, full of himself for knowing something Lilith didn't and determined to drip out information only in an exchange or appropriate affection that he has missed.

"Oh yeah? What's that?" Lilith folded her arms on her chest.

"Scratch my back, pretty please?"

Lilith did.

"Right there, a little to the left, no, now to the right, ohh..." Panther made a sound that was more appropriate for a cat and sounded suspiciously like a purr.

"Well?" Lilith demanded.

"Something big is going to happen. I would imagine, something as big as an invasion of mad squirrels." At this humor vanished from Panther's growl, and Lilith leaned in despite herself, eager to hear more. "They don't know when *it* will happen - they were talking about it being *due* - like it has a specific deadline, or like someone was in debt to someone - none of them mentioned it by any name except..."

"Wait, since when do you know German?" Lilith suddenly interrupted him.

"Your father talks to us in German, it's his special whippet breeding thing or something, to keep secrets from other breeders. Silly, if you ask me. Anyway-" Panther suddenly stood up, his ears erect.

"We're about to have company. Your parents are back."

Lilith stifled a shriek, tuning in to distant car engine sounds wafting into the open window, opening and closing doors, running feet. This was the worst time to have a row with her mother. Her very insides told her that that's what was about to happen.

"Quickly, tell me the rest!" She pleaded.

There was no time for this, however. The door handle turned, the door opened, and her mother stood there, furious, her crazy hair askew. Lilith's father peeked out from behind her back.

## Chapter 10. Nightmare

Lilith gulped. It was a frightening sight. Knitting needles stuck behind ears, like always, and two huge bags bulging with purchases of what could only be more wool yarn or some other knitting material, Gabrielle Bloom marched into the room and shut the door behind her, making Al Bloom jump in its wake. Her mother dropped both bags on the floor (it looked like she rushed here straight from the car without first dropping off the things in their room across). Arms on her hips, eyes ablaze with fury, glasses balancing at the very tip of her nose, she opened her mouth and both Lilith and her father cringed in what they instinctively knew was going to be a tirade of the month, to be remembered vividly after the trip was over. Lilith swiftly slid Ed's note under her thigh. Panther barked angrily, and all hell broke loose.

"Don't you bark at me!" Lilith's mother cut him short.

"- and you, missy, what did you get yourself into? I want to hear *all* about it. Your grandfather says you've caused trouble and are not allowed in the garden anymore - until he decides to change his mind. Is that true? I have a very sneaky suspicion on *where* this is coming from." Without waiting for

Lilith to answer, she snatched the orange vial of pills from the bedside table and examined it closely, counting the pills.

"Gabi, maybe you shouldn't be so harsh on her." Al put in hesitantly, stepping up from behind and kneading his hands. "She's simply jetlagged. We all are. Let's not make any rush decisions..." He spread his arms in an attempt at peace, knowing that it was futile but still trying to be the good guy.

"Jetlagged?" Gabrielle whirled around to face him. "You call this behavior - JETLAGGED?" She jabbed her finger at Lilith, who used this moment to crumple Ed's note and stuff it in her pant pocket. Safer that way.

"Al, we've talked about this a million times." Gabi said in a higher than normal voice. "What if she's going into relapse? Here? When we're away from Dr. Marshall? Jet lag? I don't think it's simple jet lag. Jet lag..." She puffed through her lips, mocking her husband, glancing up at Lilith.

Lilith composed her face, ready for battle.

"Jet lag is typically classified by medical professionals as a circadian rhythm sleep disorder. I'm perfectly fine with another disorder to be added to my collection. I'm rather fond of them, mother. Do you think they have pills for that?" Said Lilith softly, stretching her lips into a fake smile.

"Don't you start your nonsense with me, Lilith. Don't you--"

"But it's not nonsense, mother. How can a child like myself produce nonsense, if I have no sense whatsoever to begin with? I must have some, to counterbalance it with an opposite, don't you think?"

Her mother glared at her, speechless for a few seconds.

"Gabi, I really think we should-" Al spoke up, only to be interrupted again.

"There is no *should*, we must act, before it escalates into something else - something we can't handle. Look at her! Did you hear what she just said? There is absolutely no emotion in it. None. It's scary, Al, if you ask me, it's getting worse." She rubbed her nose, propping glasses back into place. "That is your daughter too, remember? Don't you care for her wellbeing? Don't you ever think what could've happened if she had no supervision and simply wandered off into the street? Here, in Germany, when she doesn't know any German?"

Her mother continued throwing reasons for her argument at her father, while Lilith increasingly felt like the third wheel. She was used to be spoken about like an object who is not in the room, discussed like a culprit, a hooligan, a disabled adolescent that has to be taken care of like a flower, meaning, she had to be fed, have a roof over her head, and properly medicated. But nobody ever asked her what it felt like, nobody ever understood, not even Dr. Marshall, whom she hated. Dr.

Marshall, Louisa Marshall, was this overpowering inquisitive being stuffed into a column of frilly blouses and wool skirts (her mother knit them on order, of course), who had a knack for soft talking that seeped under your skin and made you talk in a sick way, like your brain was wired wrongly, after all. Every time a session was over, Lilith walked out dazed, feeling the ground shift from under her feet and the building itself grab her at the ankles, not letting her get out on the street. Not that she could, of course, she was under constant supervision. Normal 12 year olds took the bus to school, but Lilith was still ferried to and fro by her father, who had an emptier schedule than her mother.

"-said she ruined a couple of rose bushes, literally, dug them out and tore off every single bud, and had Panther pee on it after!"

Lilith tuned back in, listening to her grandfather's accusations with avid interest. Whatever it was he was protecting, must have been very important, to make him lie like that.

"I don't remember him saying that." Retorted Al.

"He told me on the phone, of course you didn't hear it."

They both looked at Lilith, as if aware of her listening for the first time, their faces contorted with worry.

"What can I say, I was bored." Lilith produced with utmost calm. "I thought I could take a whole rose bush and dip it into chocolate in the kitchen, you know, to munch on later, for dinner."

"You're not into your chocolate dipping thing back again, missy, are you?" Gabi said with alarm.

"I am, of course. Inspired by this garden, actually." Lilith clamped Panther's muzzle shut because he started growling and was about to bark again. "I found a few skulls, in the back, over there..." she waved her hand at the open window, where evening gathered with cunning speed. "...they were, rather, *diaphanous*, like skulls of little girls? I don't know - anyway - I already asked grandpa's permission to dip them in chocolate in the kitchen ton-"

"STOP IT!" Her mother shrieked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, mother, does my story upset you?" Said Lilith gently. "I'll tell you a different story then. I w-"

"No more stories!" Her mother fumed. "I've had enough stories for today! Your grandfather had to pull you out of his most precious shrubs, breaking his most expensive roses, scratching his face in the process. He is paying for you to be here, it's an honor, really. He named you heir to this property in his will!"

"Gabi-" Al started, stretching out his hand.

"Don't touch me!" She shook her head irritable.

"And what do you do in return?" This was addressed back to Lilith again. "You refuse to take your pills," at this, she rattled the vial, "you wreck your grandfather's garden, you wake up your neighbors in the middle of the night with chopping noises, you lie to me about socializing for once with your relatives and then refuse to talk to your cousin about his butterflies. He was very upset, you know? You hang out with that boy who, I hear, is sick in his head - imagine the influence - and then you scare everyone by hiding inside the rose bushes, making your poor grandfather--"

"I - did - not - make - him - *anything*." Said Lilith icily, anger rising in her in a throbbing red curtain.

The sight of her father standing like a puppet with his arms hung, unable to stand up to his wife's outburst only added to Lilith's agitation. She was tired of seeing it, tired of having to put up with, tired of being called sick, tired of people not understanding her, ever since she started to talk, trying to explain what she saw, what she smelled, tired, tired, tired!

"Between your grandfather and you, who do you think has more authority? A well respected businessman with a lifetime of experience, perfectly sane for his age, or a 12 year old girl with a severe disability --"

"Gabi!" Cried Al in horror.

"What?" Her mother barked back. "She will find out the truth at some point, and I'd rather her hear it from us than from some bullies at school. This a doggy dog world, you said it yourself. I don't want her growing up wearing pink glasses."

She turned back to Lilith, her lower lip trembling. "Who do you think I will believe, after you feeding me stories about finding girl skulls in the garden?"

Lilith had it. Unable to hold back, on an insane impulse to make her mother pay attention to her, to the *real* her, and not a sick daughter that needs to be protected and taken care off, Lilith screamed.

"HE'S A MURDERER!" She took a breath and screamed louder. "GRANDPA IS A MURDERER! HE KILLS WOMEN AND FEEDS THEM TO THE GARDEN! THAT'S THE SECRET TO HIS SUCCESS - HIS ROSES - DON'T YOU GET IT? THE GARDEN IS ALIVE!" Angry tears rolled down her cheeks when she was done, hyperventilating.

Dead silence fell over the room. Lilith has a sneaky suspicion that her old lady neighbor was eavesdropping from behind the wall, because it suddenly fell dead silent too, where as seconds ago she could've sworn she head slippers shuffling on the floor. A moment later, slipper quickly shuffled out of the room and the door slammed. Her neighbor was no doubt in pursuit

of spreading this new delicious rumor about Alfred Bloom and his coo coo descendant, Lilith Bloom. Lovely.

"So much for finding the perfect moment to say it..." Lilith muttered. Even Panther gave her a disapproving look.

Seconds stretched into minutes, and Lilith wished she could put on her lavender beret and gaze at the clouds, or put on her blush beret and do her ballet moves, or put on her blue one and escape into reading *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, because it was more and more difficult sitting on her bed completely immobile, waiting for the silence to dissipate.

"Al?" Said Gabi finally in a weak voice, tears in her eyes. "What do we do now?"

"Hey, sweetie, are you okay?" This was her father's time, the usual pattern. Mother screams, father endures, father cajoles, mother cries. Al sat next to Lilith, his hand on her forehead. "Did you sleep okay last night?"

Lilith decided, all is lost and there is no use in hiding the facts anymore, she might as well spill them now. Besides, her father was always more understanding, a daydreamer himself.

"Nope." She said indifferently.

"You didn't? Did you have another nightmare?" He smoothed her hair in that automatic parental gesture aimed to comfort.

"Yep."

"What was it?"

"Well, grandpa killed his butler's wife, Agatha, and one other maid, the dark-skinned one, I don't know her name, and Sabrina Rosenthal, and those ladies, I think Monika and Trude are their names."

Her father was nodding, listening. Her mother covered her ears and cried softly.

"Anyway - would you like me to continue?" Lilith asked politely.

"Sure, sure, go ahead."

"So, he lined them up in the garden and chopped their heads off, then the heads came alive on my wall, right there," she pointed, "and told me that there are 21 women who will die, or something to that effect. That's it." Lilith smoothes wrinkles on her pants, half-listening to her parents hushed exchange on whether or not it would be a good idea to let her sleep with them just this one night and see how tomorrow goes, and maybe even calling in a local doctor to have her seen. She was definitely getting a dose of sleeping pills tonight.

A knock on the door made them all look up, and there stood brightly smiling Petra, announcing the fact that dinner is ready and that her bother told her, he hopes Lilith doesn't go crazy like their grandma did.

"Bad news travels with the speed of the fastest squirrel." Whispered Lilith, stealing a glance at Panther, who by now made her pant-knee wet, by constantly licking it.

How she made it to the dining room, she didn't remember. She was flanked on both sides by her parents, with Panther left behind in her room, which was better for him than standing at the entrance of the hall and watching the Bloom family gorge itself up on free food.

Needles to say, the contrast in the atmosphere was like that between a hot and a cold shower. Whereas earlier in the day every single guest was vying for Lilith's attention, now they parted in front of her like a cold river, throwing puzzled, pitiful and at times mournful looks, beaming at her in that artificial manner one smiles to crazy people, so as not to make them upset. Petra wanted to run up to Lilith, but her brother Patrick held her back, scornfully whispering something in her ear, to which she twisted out of his grip and ran out of the hall, wailing loudly, Irma and Norman Rosenthal on her heels.

Even the Schlitzburger twins were polite, their banged up kneed bandaged with purple band-aids, their smiles ugly and full of matching purple brackets for their braces.

"Good evening, Lilith, how are you?" Daphne said tonelessly, her mother's hand squeezing her shoulder.

"Splendid, thank you very much, never been better." Said Lilith floridly, pulling out the chair from the table to sit.

"How are you this lovely evening?"

"Good." That took another squeeze from Irma.

"I think your cardigan matches the tone of your face very well." Gwen chimed in, sitting on the other side, under studying glances of Lilith's parents across the table. The apparently decided it was best to keep things as they are and letting Lilith sit on her own.

"Oh-la-la! What a nice compliment, my love." Irma Schlitzburger reached over and kissed her daughter on the temple, at which she beamed, her blonde pigtails jiggling. Lilith wanted to vomit right there and then, desperately wishing for Ed to appear. But he didn't come. Her grandfather, however, did, the gashes on his face washed and closed and barely visible, yet still there. A crisp light-blue cotton suit pleasantly complimented his brushed white hair.

At his entrance dinner chatter ceased, because he inadvertently joined the laughing stock club. How on Earth could a man of such stature write off everything he owned to a girl who is not right in her mind? Does this mean he didn't know? Does this mean now that he *knows*, he will change his mind? Will he change his will? Eager whispering broke out all over the table, and Lilith decided that this is the perfect time to take

stock of the Bloom family and prove to everyone later that she's right, that she has not gone mad, she might be the only sane person in the room. Her determination was the only thing she had left. And Panther, Panther will help her. He promised.

Lilith carefully slid out her notebook from her bag and started scribbling down names of people under the table, drawing a sort of a map of the table and chairs next to it as dots, writing names on top, conveniently forgotten by her parents who, their heads bent together, no doubt were discussing their daughter's bleak future. Both Daphne and Gwen were busy stuffing themselves with food, so the timing this time was perfect.

On person number 20 Lilith felt the floor move.

"Here we go again..." She muttered to herself, not even bothering to look up to see if anyone noticed. Night descended, coloring roses bloody black, making linden tree leaves a lacquered shade of dark emeralds, and then the hall dropped down. The black velvet of the night behind the windows turned to black velvet of the underground. The whole room was speeding into the very guts of the mansion, closing for the night.

"Like a flower..." Suddenly whispered Lilith under her breath, "...it's closing for the night like a flower - like a rose. And the rooms are its petals." Her skin broke into goosebumps. She felt a stare burn a hole in her forehead and quickly looked up.

There, across countless vases of roses, sparkling dishes with roast and potatoes and salads and sauces and jams, there, among moving hands, sparkling silverware glinting in the light from the gigantic crystal chandelier, there, amidst excitedly talking people, their chewing mouths, their shining eyes from drinking perhaps a tad too much wine, there, at the very end of the table, there he sat like the proper owner of the house, her grandfather. Alfred Bloom.

His small sharp eyes pinned her to her chair, a glint of steel in them. His bushy eyebrows furrowed. His body tensed, rigid. His entire being expressed only one phrase, and Lilith knew what it was without it being spoken aloud.

*Keep your mouth shut,* is what drifted into her mind.

It was one of those things two people involved in a crime together pass between each other without speaking. Her grandfather waited. Licking her lips nervously, Lilith nodded.

Grandpa smiled in approval, then immediately raised his wine glass, tinkling on it with his fork. At the same time the hall stopped moving. They arrived. The mansion has closed until morning. Everyone stopped talking, expectant.

"My dear guests, I would like to propose a toast." Alfred Bloom stood up. "I'd like to raise a drink for Lilith Bloom, the future heir of my rose garden and the entire Bloom family property, which includes this house, two neighboring houses, and

two houses across Lindenstrasse. Five total - five, like five petals of a rose."

*Was that a hint for me?* Lilith wondered, suddenly remembering a picture from a book, a graphic representation of a rose with its base five petals. Always five, not one less, not one more. *And five heads... there were five heads on the wall...*

"I'm sure she will do an excellent job. I wanted to ask you all to be gentle on her. Adolescents are especially prone to debilitating side effects of jet lag, and it was a long journey from America to Berlin for her. Wasn't it, my dear girl?"

*He's sweetening his proposal, clever old fart.* Thought Lilith and grinned back, strangely feeling a certain connection to her grandfather that she didn't feel before. No matter what evil things he did, he was the only adult who believed her, he knew that she knew, and he knew it was true. It was hard to fight this logic.

Now she noticed everyone looking at her, waiting for an answer.

"Err... certainly, it was, dear grandfather." Lilith said with an absolute sincerity. In fact, she sounded so sincere, that she almost believed herself. "It's a *miniscule* price to pay, however, for the *exaltation* of my stay here." Two fancy words in a row, Lilith was very proud of herself, standing a bit more straight. "It was worth the trouble, grandfather, really.

Oh, the week of wonder and enchantment in the rose garden that seems to live and breathe," she saw a muscle working in her grandfather's jaw at these words, "its splendor, merging my imagination with the poetry in my mind. The aroma, the crimson halo, the vastness of it... oh, I'm at a loss for words. I bow to you in gratitude for such offer, grandfather." She finished, indeed bowing, to the astounded faces of the Bloom crowd turning to her.

Promptly, a collective sigh washed over the room and it exploded in applause. Lilith's face flushed deep magenta. Even her parents stood up, clapping. Her grandfather wasn't done, however.

"Does that mean that you accept the offer, my dear child?" He said inquisitively, putting her on the spot in front of all these people who has absolutely no clue what they were witnessing, taking it at face value.

"Was there ever any doubt, grandfather?" Lilith retorted. She learned this trick from her doctor, Louisa Marshall, as many other tricks for fooling people. No matter how many times she tried asking the doctor a question (she was tired of constantly being asked questions by her doctor), she always turned it around by responding with a question back.

It was impossible to continue talking, as attention was back on Lilith by puzzled Bloom family members who couldn't

decide where their alliances belonged anymore. Was the girl crazy? Was her grandfather crazy? Were they both crazy? Their greed for the garden that never failed to produce a runt rose and was financially blooming drove them to overlook these little nuances, and now everyone was competing for Lilith's attention again.

Lilith dodged conversations as best she could, her mind elsewhere. How this week were going to turn out in the end, she had no idea, but she had a very vivid idea about another matter. Across the table, a pair of pearly eyes stared her down in an open warning. Lilith smiled sweetly, mouthing inaudibly.

*If you want war, grandfather, war it will be. I'm not accepting your offer until I find out what secret your rose garden hides.*

## Chapter 11. Rose harvest

This night was uneventful partially due to the fact that both Al and Gabi Bloom stood over Lilith until she swallowed two orange pills and finally collapsed on the daybed that was carried into the room, specifically for Lilith to spend the night with her parents (upon Gabi's insistence); and partially it was uneventful because Lilith blacked out and saw no dreams at all, waking up to the sound of trucks grumbling on the street and Panther licking her face. At least he was allowed to curl up under daybed and not sent to sleep with Baer and the rest of the mastiffs. Lilith yawned and propped herself up on her elbows, wondering what the commotion was about. Both of her parents were still asleep, layers of white covers strewn about on their bed, their two heads stuffed into pillows on the opposite sides.

"Wanna look?" Lilith asked Panther, who nodded, and they both quietly trotted to the open window, looking out.

Her parents' room was facing the backside of the mansion, positioned almost directly above the door into kitchen and the very edge of the rose garden. It was raining. The air smelled of wet dust and pollen and warm summer. At last, there was no stink present, and Lilith inhaled in relief.

Droplets pummeled roofs of numerous trucks with bright roses painted on their sides, her grandfather's company logo, BLOOM & CO. A slew of gardeners stuffed the trucks with crates full of freshly cut flowers, covered with plastic to protect them from excessive moisture. Even the crates beared the logos, looking important and reliable. Of course, they had to, these roses where shipped all over the world, sold to celebrities for astronomical amounts of money, flown to Paris, to New York, to Tokyo, to name the few cities where BLOOM & CO's business, for lack of another world, bloomed (Berlin was the biggest of them all, with several stores open in the center of the city). And why wouldn't it?

A typical rose's vase life stretched anywhere from 4 to 12 days, depending on the time roses spent in transit, the climate they were grown in, and, of course, the growing method itself. Alfred Bloom's roses lasted up to 21 days, guaranteed, in rare cases up to 30 days, twice, almost triple the amount of standard. To add to that, they didn't wilt when being shipped, so the company experienced no loss whatsoever. None of the petals were ever damaged, every bloom was perfect, ranging in many shades of red, from scarlet to cardinal to crimson to ruby to burgundy. No wedding, no funeral, no important celebration was possible without Bloom's roses, they were sort of a legend, what, with Bloom family rooted into this particular spot since

13<sup>th</sup> century, when Luedke Blome moved to Berlin, attracted by the opportunity to make money in the newly developing city, stumbling upon a wild growth of roses and setting up to culture them, to make them into what BLOOM & CO was today.

Lilith remembered these details vividly, having been told this story over and over by her mother, who was strangely excited to come to the family reunion. Not her father, who could care less. He was out of touch with Alfred Bloom precisely for the reason of not wanting to continue the family business, escaping Germany, setting in America, and becoming a whippet breeder, growing the very "creatures" his father despised.

This morning seemed so perfectly ordinary. It was one of those mornings when everything that happened the day before lost its drama overnight and was far *far* in the past, like it never existed in the first place. Lilith desperately wished for it to stay this way. Nobody was killing anybody, the garden wasn't alive after all, she didn't need to save 21 women from imminent death. The house wasn't moving, perhaps it already opened up for the day while they were sleeping? Perhaps it never really moved at all. The stink from the garden was absent, instead the air was filled with delicate fragrance of roses, the type you would expect to smell in a florist's store. Maybe there was a whiff of something unusual, but Lilith chose to ignore it in favor of her

fantasy. And, best of all, there were no weird noises in the garden, no rustling wind, no sighs, no chopping sounds, no...

Something, or someone, knocked sharply on the roof, in a way an angry elderly teacher would rap on your forehead, to make you listen, in the olden school days. Lilith jumped, her heart promptly launching into loud hammering.

"Did you hear that?" She whispered to Panther.

"I heard several things, obviously," Panther licked his paws in his grooming ritual, "one of them was, your questions on whether or not I heard *that*, depending, of course, what *that* in your universe means, because in my universe..."

Gabi mumbled and turned over in bed, causing the mattress to creak. Both Lilith and Panther froze, holding their breath. It was such a good morning, neither of them wanted to disrupt it with the wrath of Gabrielle Bloom. And Gabrielle Bloom in the mornings, before she had her coffee (always black, no cream, no sugar, thank you), was a terrible sight to behold, not mentioning her angry hair that only added to the horror of the one being peered at. Which, usually, was Lilith's fate.

It took another several painful minutes for Gabi's breath to slow down, when another sharp knock made Lilith slap her hands on her mouth in order to stifle a cry.

Tap. Tap-tap. Thud!

Unable to speak, Lilith only rolled her eyes at Panther, who rolled his eyes back and shrugged his shoulders, as much as you can imagine a whippet shrugging shoulders. Now knocks rained down now in a rapid succession, producing a sort of drumming, and at last Lilith mastered the courage to lean out of the window far enough so she could twist and crane her neck to look up, which was a very bad idea, because as soon as she did that, two very out of ordinary things happened, ruining what promised to be a perfectly normal morning.

Rain burned her face with a new type of stink, not the foul stench of decomposing organic matter from the garden, but rather a very fishy rank odor that made it smell like the guts of a rotten fish, falling from the sky. How that was possible, Lilith didn't know, nor did she have the time to think anymore, because a huge crow took off from the roof one story above and swooped down on Lilith's face, cawing madly and aiming its beak at her eyes. Lilith instinctively shielded her face with her hands, but that caused her to lose hold of the windowsill and nearly topple out of the window, on top of one of the trucks that was presently leaving. The crow grabbed two handfuls of Lilith's hair into its claws, nabbed sharply the very top of her head and was off, tearing a few hairs out in the process and complaining all the way.

"Owwww!" Lilith cried, waving her arms around frantically.

Panther barked and grabbed the hem of her nightgown, which didn't do any good, because his teeth were very sharp and promptly ripped a hole. Lilith leaned out dangerously, when a hand caught her.

"Lilith, what on *earth* are you doing?" The wrath of Gabi Bloom has come at last.

"Feeding - crows - with - my blood - obviously..." Lilith squeezed out in between gasps, wiping her hair and watching her fingers turn red. She was bloodied indeed, after all. "...and good morning to you too, mom." She slumped on the floor by the window, while her mother stood over her, glaring, her hands on her hips, her husband tearing his eyes open behind her, incomprehensively. Panther's hair bristled and he growled lowly, ready to snap at an opportune moment.

*That's what it is*, Lilith suddenly understood, eyeing her mother's look of disgust aimed at her faithful pet, *that's why mom is so fond of grandpa, they both despise whippets.*

"What happened? What is going on?" Al Bloom shuffled up yawning and ruffling his untidy hair.

"Your daughter managed to get in trouble before breakfast, that's what happened. I think your grandfather was right, Lilith, I think it would be best for you to stay in your room today. No need to come out into the garden in this rain-" She sniffed noisily. "-it smells strange..."

"Do you smell it too?" Lilith exclaimed, her voice full of hope. Could this be the beginning of her proving she was right?

"Smell what?" Her mother inquired sternly.

"Nothing." Lilith replied tonelessly, unable to bring herself to any kind of retort at all.

"You're bleeding!" Al exclaimed, running up to Lilith and examining her head. "Gabi, look at this." He proceeded wiping off the blood on the sleeve of his pajamas.

"Yes, I saw it. Not like she doesn't deserve it." Gabi said irritably. "It will teach her not to stick her nose into other people's business, not to hang out of windows first thing in the morning, before brushing her teeth or getting dressed. Which reminds me-" She took off in the direction of the bathroom and came back with a glass of water and two hideously blue pills in her outstretched hand, shoving both under Lilith's face.

Al participated in this by wringing his hands and casting sorry dog-eyes looks at Lilith's head where the blood stopped running in the meantime.

Lilith was cornered. No matter what she did, she knew her mother would stand over her and wait until the gelatinous capsules dissolved in her stomach, sending white powder of the drug to work. She took both pills with a churning stomach and was about to drop them into her mouth, when a loud knock in the door made Gabi and Al turn, and Lilith promptly threw the pills

out the window, chucking the water and composing her face into a mask of innocence.

"Mister and Missis Bloom, breakfast iz ready." Came from behind the door in what could only be the voice of Agatha, butler's wife. By the time Gabi turned back, Lilith made it half way through the glass of water, glancing up with the utmost purity of the soul she could muster, adding a little bit of disappointment into the mixture, just so she didn't appear too happy. It worked. Her mother still stood over her, waiting for Al to disappear into the bathroom, and then watching her daughter change into yesterday's clothes (Lilith was overjoyed to feel Ed's note still crumpled in her pocket, her mother evidently having forgotten to rummage through her pockets like she typically did whenever Lilith blacked out). Lilith opened her navy knit bag and pulled out her blush beret. The one used only in the case of ballet lessons.

"I'm sorry I'm such a nuisance, mom. I know it takes toll on you, looking after me and whatnot. I will be dancing today, it helps me calm down." Lilith said with sadness.

Gabi took a long breath and let it out.

"Sweetie, I love you, you know that. I'm simply very worried about your well being, that's all." She leaned in and caressed Lilith's cheek, pecking on it in what was supposed to be a kiss.

*My physical well being, you mean, Lilith wanted to say, not my emotional well being, of which you have no idea. Zero. Zilch. Nada. Nothing at all.* But she made herself to kiss her mother back.

Later, when the entire Bloom family was dressed and ready, Lilith was marched into her room across and locked, with Panther taken out by Gustav for a walk (and him holding the dog like it was diseased and will spread something nasty if pressed any closer), and just when Panther was shoved back into her room, Agatha came in with a tray of steaming waffles on it. Lilith was to eat in her room, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and stay there all day, while her parents were going to consult with Alfred Bloom and see if he would be able to recommend to them a local psychotherapist who specialized in extreme cases of adolescent mental disorders, which was a rare fish to find even in America. At home, Lilith has been through at least four specialists before she finally landed on Dr. Marshall, which, she suspected, was not due to the fact that her treatment made any significant difference, but more due to the fact that Louisa Marshall adored her mother's needlework, and mother, of course, adored her therapeutic skills in return.

"Well, here we are." Said Lilith anxiously, sitting on her bed next to an empty tray and stroking Panther's fur. She turned out to be very hungry, clearing her plates, wolfing down all

jam, all butter, all waffles, all yoghurt, drinking all apple juice (yes, they strangely served apple juice and sparkling water for breakfast in Germany) and still wanting more. She stuck her finger into the empty jar, slid it along the rim and licked it absentmindedly, with her other hand rubbing the spot where the crow nabbed her. "Now what?"

"Now we're finally left alone - we can investigate properly what, in blazing squirrels, is going on in this house and this garden." Panther growled crossly.

"So you are going to help me, after all?" Lilith's eyes glinted with mischief.

"Of course! How could you even doubt me. You hurt me. You hurt my feelings. Really. I'm almost inclined to change my mind. In fact, I will change my mind, but... of course... if you rubbed my belly, then... I might still stick to it." He grinned in the doggy grin way and fell into bed with all four of his legs pedaling high in the air.

Lilith rolled her eyes. "You're such a pest!" But she obliged by scratching and stroking and giving enough attention to her beloved whippet until he almost purred.

"I need to think. And to think, I need to move." Lilith said urgently. "It's time for an emergency ballet escapade. What do you say, we sneak out of here and find an empty room, where I can practice?"

Upon Panther's worried look, Lilith added, "Maybe we'll even make it down into the kitchens, to see if that maid is there--"

"-Katharina-" growled Panther rather with affection.

"-Katharina, I'm sure she won't tell anyone, and maybe she'll feed you some steak. What do you say?"

And, of course, what could Panther say? As logical as he was, he was a dog first and foremost, and as much as Lilith burned with desire to solve the mystery of the Bloom house, she was only a 12 year old girl, and girls and dogs are simply not meant to be locked up in a room, they will either die of boredom, or shred everything into ropes chasing each other around the bed, or fall asleep like a furry childish ball of the ultimate cuddle club, but neither of them wanted to succumb to napping.

Like in every story, there comes a point when the danger is clear, the unknown mystery is still a mystery, but the path to solve it becomes evident, and the insane thirst for wander and discovery takes over whatever common sense there is left, leading one into the rooms that should not be unlocked, dark dungeons that should not be stepped into, and living breathing gardens that should be avoided at all costs.

This is the point of the story when both Lilith were overtaken with fever of pursuit, without caring much what their

actual pursuit will be, as long as they got to do something dangerously exciting.

Lilith only wished that Ed was with them, and secretly decided to try and sneak out across the street to pay him a visit. Surely she could do that, with everyone thinking she was locked up in her room. The only thing she needed right now was very simple, really. She only needed to become invisible. Oh, not to mention the fact that the door to her room was locked and neither her nor Panther had the key.

But children, of course, don't worry about such matters until they are faces with them head to head.

## Chapter 12. Third floor

In the spirit of youth and excitement, the next hour flew by as Lilith tidied up her room, to make sure everything was lined up perfectly in its place, then took out her ballet attire and donned pale pink tights, pale pink leotard, her favorite rosy tutu, matching ballet slippers, and the blush beret. Of course, the blush beret had to be put on. It was her thinking cap, it kept her thoughts and ideas together while she was dancing, making them work in the background. Her father had to politely explain to ballet teacher Miss Valentina Krasnova why Lilith couldn't take off her headwear in class like all other girls did. Needless to say, she was teased for it mercilessly, called names like Muffin Head (because of the beret) and Slats (for being so skinny) and Loony (for behaving strangely). The benefits of ballet outweighed all this and Lilith continued faithfully attending her lessons. She was the best, so Miss Krasnova forgave her the beret.

"How do I look?" Lilith inquired, twirling in front of the mirror, *not* to make sure that she looked good, but to make sure that every detail was in order, that there were no snags or dirty spots or creases. It had to be perfect, because ballet was

one of those things that demanded perfection, which is why Lilith loved it so much. It was *her* type of sport.

"Splendid, as always, madam." Panther yapped with a concealed snigger. He only called Lilith *madam* on special occasions, when he truly wanted to make fun of her.

Lilith gave him the look.

"Women." He scoffed. "Dogs! Now *dogs* is where it's at! Look at me, I'm ready to go at a moment's notice, no need for excessive frills or thrills or—"

"I don't want to hear it." Lilith said disapprovingly. "Who asked for a pink jacket, huh? Who, I would like to know?"

"Not *pink* - rosy - a royal color. Big difference." Panther produced a hurt bark.

"Whatever." Lilith uttered in exasperation.

The argument died quickly, because the prospect of breaking rules excited both of them immensely. Lilith slung navy knit bag across her shoulder, opening the flap and rummaging to check that all necessary detective tools were present. A journal (check), a pen (check), Ed's note (check), and Sir Arthur Canon Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a corner *still* bent on page 9. Check.

"I haven't had any time to read, you know - it's terrible - dreadful, really -" Said Lilith, as they eagerly marched to the door, only to realize that it was hopelessly and irresistibly

locked, and it was still another hour until lunch time, so any hope of pushing the door open when Agatha brought the tray with the food was out of the question. Besides, Lilith was not sure the butler's wife would let them out. Her sinister poise suggested powerful arms of those old ladies who grab you and won't let you go, like particularly strong roots of a tree that you have to saw off yourself to get out. Clutches, in one word.

"Great." Exhaled Lilith, twisting the nob this way and that in a futile attempt to make it click open.

"Maybe we could pick it with one of your hair pins?" Panther suggested, scratching his back.

"Like I know how to do this..." Lilith's mind worked feverishly. She dropped her bag, ran over to her bed, opened the drawer of the bedside table, extracted one of her hairpins, and ran back. She bent the pin open and stuck one end into the opening of the doorknob, when a sudden mental image struck her.

"How did I not notice this before?" She exclaimed.

"Not notice what?" Panther nudged her hand out of the way, studying the door.

"Don't you see it?" Lilith spread her arms in exasperation.

Like the exterior of this mansion, its interior details adhered to the same style. They were blank in terms of color, yet ornamental, white, yet carved into reliefs, doorknobs being no different.

"It's a rose!"

"What's a rose..." Panther sniffed at the door, but Lilith was already off, eager to test her theory. In a few seconds time she trotted back, carefully walking as fast as she could so as not to spill a full glass of water in her hand. She gently moved Panther aside, and, before he could protest, doused the entire glass of water on the doorknob.

"The whole house is a rose." Lilith whispered. "That's why it's moving, the rooms are like - wow, watch!"

The door itself, painted white and so old that it was peeling, was a tudor arch in shape, with its top curved and pointed in the middle as if it was an outline of a flower bud. Lilith could've sworn she heard it sigh in what sounded like relief, and she could've sworn that one of the paint peels glued itself back to the frame. Her eyes, however, were pinned to the doorknob. It was made of iron, worn and old and nearly black in color, carved into a form of an opening bloom.

It shifted. It shuddered. It shook. It slowly sucked in every single drop of water and began to open, to unravel petal by petal, turning at the same time.

Another few seconds, and the door swung open.

Lilith and Panther exchanged an astounded glance, peeking out the door. The corridor was deserted. The time was ripe for a lazy after-breakfast conversation or a stroll in the garden, but

since it was raining, Lilith thought most of the guests were probably in their rooms, grooming and lazily waiting for lunch. Or gossiping. What else was there to do? Her grandfather was old-fashioned in the most old-fashioned way there was, with no TV in the entire mansion and only one rotary dial phone hanging on the wall by the entrance, which, she remembered, was always answered by Gustav or some other servant, when father tried calling to let him know they were on their way to the airport and will be arriving late. Whether or not her grandfather had a mobile phone, remained to be yet another mystery, because Lilith hasn't seen him using it once. How he could conduct business in such manner, was beyond her.

Now, however, was not the time to trouble herself with such trivial facts, Lilith decided. She was elated that she found the secret to the house and was dying to show her mom how it worked, if only to witness the priceless look of astonishment on her face.

"To continue on your remark regardless *it* being a rose -" Panther waved his head in a way only dogs can, "- does this mean you will be dipping an entire manor in chocolate, to see how it would taste?"

Lilith picked up her bag, stuck out her tongue at him and they took off, running in a way two convicts escape their

prison, door by door, stopping and pressing themselves into each indentation to make sure the coast was clear.

"Since when do you know what *manor* means?" Lilith hissed, sticking out her head beyond one of the doors they happened to press their backs into.

The Bloom house was very old and each door stood deep in the wall, leaving a gap of almost six inches between the door frame and the actual wall. If you were thin enough, like Lilith and Panther, you could flatten yourself and become invisible to anyone who happened to glance into the corridor from the main marble staircase. Not that anybody did at the moment, no doubt busy with packing roses for delivery downstairs.

There was another problem with this method of fleeing. Any minute anyone could open a door from one of the rooms and that would constitute an end to their journey. So far they made it three doors down, with two more to go. That was 5 rooms on one side of the staircase, and 5 rooms on the other side. Plus identical rooms across those, so 10 more rooms, 20 rooms total on the second floor.

"I'm number 21, but it doesn't make any sense..." Whispered Lilith automatically, carried away into the math of her thoughts, when a high-pitched shriek caused her to forget what she was thinking about, because it came from behind the door to which their backs were pressed into.

"...ich moechte einen Baskenmuetze wie ihrs, ich muss, ich muss, ich muss es haben, Mutter, ich..." A heavy body slammed on the floor and what sounded like fists pounded on the wooden boards with a smack. The voice was unmistakably Daphne's, and the scene was unmistakably a toddler tantrum performed by an plump blonde pig-headed teenager in pursuit of something she wanted very badly and was determined to have her mother get for her, that much Lilith understood, but what exactly it was...

"Muetze... muetze... I know I've heard this word before..." Lilith stole a glance at Panther, who she now knew could easily converse in German. Panther lifted his paw, lowered his head, and patted himself on it. Behind the door, Irma Schlitzburger proceeded to murmur soothing sentences in an attempt to calm her one of her twin daughters.

"Head?" Lilith asked inaudibly, with only her lips moving. Panther shook his head with an impatient twitch of his tail.

"Hair?" Lilith asked.

Panther shook his head even more vigorously.

"Beret? My beret?"

"She wants to have a beret like yours." He growled quietly. "And if I were you, I would've stepped away from that door, because -"

With wide crashing footsteps, someone made their way to exit the room and twisted the doorknob. Both Lilith and her dog fled to the next doorframe, pressing themselves in, Lilith holding down her tutu that was so puffy that it stuck out. Then suddenly the door behind them gave way and they crashed on the floor, at which time the door slammed itself shut and the room shot upward, to the third floor (because where else was there to go?), where nobody was permitted except Alfred Bloom himself, as that was his secret laboratory for producing the very secret food for his precious roses. Or so Lilith's mother told her on the plane, in a lecturing voice, demanding that Lilith made sure she didn't disturb her grandfather once they arrived at his Berlin mansion.

It's one thing to think that the house is moving, is alive, to merely notice it, and it's another when your theory is not only confirmed, but acted upon, in a way of interaction with the house, when the house itself becomes aware of the fact that you know its secret. It's kind of like believing in a monster under your bed vs the monster believing that you actually truly believe in said monster. Some things are better left unknown, only not Lilith nor Panther could turn their backs now.

They had no time to look at their surroundings, which were not much different from any interior of Bloom's mansion, pristinely white, with painted white walls, white ceiling, white

doors, white curtains on the windows, white bed with white bedding. Wooden floor with no rug. Presently, both Lilith and Panther rolled on the floor towards what looked like bathroom door. The floor tilted itself to help them in their journey.

Aimlessly scratching at polishes parquet, Panther yapped.

"Remind me, why did we have to leave your room to practice ballet?" His lithe cat-like body twisted and turned in the air, a long curled black baton of a shape with flailing legs attached to it.

"There was not enough space there - I need a big room - a studio - no furniture -" Lilith emitted in between her own revolutions, one of her hands holding on to her beret, another to her bag.

"- and this, in your opinion, is a large enough room? It seems to me it's rather - identical -" Panther sneered, finally coming to a halt in the corner by the bathroom door.

"This one - certainly - is rather not my preferable choice, however - " Lilith crashed on top of Panther, and the bathroom door swung open on its own, smacking both of them.

"OWWW!" They cried as one, rubbing their foreheads and standing up. The floor tilted again, and they both happily got deposited onto the marble tile floor of the bathroom.

For the next several minutes any attempt to escape it resulted in the floor sloping at an angle, just inclined enough

to make them retreat. When they stayed in the bathroom for a few minutes, the floor slowly flattened itself to its normal position.

"I think it wants something..." Lilith said, her eyes huge from both fear and excitement. It's not every day that you get a chance to interact with a moody old house that behaves like a capricious rose, if such a thing existed and was applicable in this case. But Lilith couldn't come up with a better explanation.

"I'm sure if you asked it politely, it would tell you what, and how much, and where, and how bloody, because I am certainly in the mood for a bloody steak right now." Panther licked his muzzle impatiently.

"The fact that it moves doesn't mean it can talk..." Lilith failed to detect sarcasm in her pet's answer, still enthralled by what she was witnessing first hand. "What could it be?" She took a step to the door, the floor tilted. She stepped back, the floor leveled itself out.

For the next half an hour, instead of practicing her ballet dance moves, Lilith practiced a dance of attempting to walk in and out of the bathroom, which could've been constituted as a circus act, if observed from the side, only as the time went on, the bathroom seemed to be shrinking, the ceiling lowering, and at some point the game didn't seem fun anymore, because both

Lilith and Panther were trapped and were possibly headed in the direction of being crushed to death if they didn't figure out what the mansion wanted.

"Think. Think." She told herself, holding on to the sink. "What would Sherlock Holmes have done?" She turned on the water to splash her sweaty face for some relief.

"Sherlock Holmes probably wouldn't have gotten himself into such a predicament in the first place, because Sherlock Holmes..." But Panther didn't get a chance to finish.

A few droplets from Lilith washing her face splattered on the floor, and it sucked them in greedily.

"It wants more water!" Lilith cried, scooping up a handful and letting it spill. The bathroom began to grow back to its normal size. Lilith splashed more water, and more, and finally plugged in the sink and let the water run until it ran over in a cascade and, surprisingly, didn't flood the bathroom but rather got devoured by it.

"Do you think I should let it running?" She asked Panther alarmingly. But the answer presented itself by water creating a small puddle on the floor. The room stopped absorbing it, and Lilith turned the faucet off.

"I tell you, I've seen things, crazy squirrels chasing their own tail like dogs do, dogs climbing trees like squirrels do, but I've never seen a house behave like a flower, demanding

to be watered." Panther said in a high yap and quickly stepped out of the shallow puddle. They both darted out of the bathroom and towards the entrance door, in hopes of finding it open. It was. In fact, it was very eager to open, the door itself appearing fat and damp, its wood engorged by the moisture it sucked in.

They were literally spit out by the room into third floor corridor. Promptly, the door behind them shut and they heard the room descend down to its own level. They didn't give it much thought, however, because their legs couldn't move and their hearts, a 12 year old girl's heart and a little whippet's heart, rammed so loudly, Lilith was afraid someone would hear.

The corridor glowed. It was like being deposited into the guts of someone very bloody and alive. As much as the second floor was white, the third floor was red. Excruciatingly and skin-burstingly red, the type of red that makes you want to scream and shield your eyes from its brightness, its incessant color saturation. Faint light poured seemingly out of nowhere, as if the walls and the ceiling radiated certain luminosity themselves. Even the floor was red, dark cherry red wood, polished to a deep sheen that reminded Lilith of a coagulated blood. She was tempted to jump up and hang in the air, so that her feet didn't touch it. Panther whimpered and clawed at her legs, demanding to be taken in her arms in a typical doggy

manner, temporarily losing his ability to talk and turning into a shivering frightened pet.

"What is this place..." Lilith had time to utter, before she heard voices, two voices and two sets of foot steps, unmistakably belonging to her grandfather and Gustav, coming from behind the corner in the middle of the corridor, which must have been a connecting passage over the marble stair case on the second floor. Gustav rapidly fired off what sounded like complaints, in German, and her grandfather answered with a curt "Ja, ja."

Only now Lilith understood the other difference between this floor and the one below. It had no doors. The walls were smooth, stretching their silk from one end of the corridor to another, and there were no windows at the end of it, like there were on the floor below.

*But there must have been rooms, Lilith thought, I saw the windows from down below!*

She had no choice. Another minute, and both her grandfather and his butler would turn the corner, and she would be seen, in her rosy ballet attire, her per whipped pressed to her chest, her navy bag slung over her shoulder, sticking out like a sore thumb among the sea of red. She had to run. But where?

When panic takes over, we make the stupidest decisions, only to wonder why we did in the first place, once the danger is

over. So did Lilith. Instead of running towards the middle of the mansion, risking to be seen yet having perhaps a sliver of a chance to run past her unsuspecting pursuers, counting on their surprise, she ran towards the end of the corridor, which was a dead end, with no way out.

It took her only a few frantic strides to realize that she also dressed in the wrong attire for this adventure. Her ballet slippers, their leather soles worn and smooth, slid from under her on the parquet floor that resembled a mirror, it was that sleek. With a shriek, she collapsed straight into the wall to her left, right above where her room should be, sprawling and banging her head in the process. Hot blood shot out of her nose, and she heard voices and footsteps pause, listening.

"We're done for - Panther - they're coming - we're done for -" She sobbed, surely thinking there was no point anymore in keeping quiet. She pressed her hand under her nose and smeared the blood it on her fingers, then pressed it into the wall it the last desperate attempt to escape. Her grandfather shouted something in German, breaking into a run. At the same time the wall behind Lilith split into an opening, sucking in both the girl and her dog, and pressed itself shut. Velvety silence surrounded them. Lilith put her hand on the floor, and the floor licked the blood off her fingers with a gentle lapping sound.

## Chapter 13. Gallery

At first Lilith thought it was Panther who licked her fingers, but Panther was curled up safely in her left arm, trembling and whimpering quietly. Lilith tore her right hand off the floor to look it. It was clean, all blood gone. For a moment, she couldn't speak, couldn't move, feeling warm liquid seep out of her nose, dripping on her leotard, staining it with blooming roses, dripping on the floor through the gauze of her tutu, and disappearing into it with a sucking pop. The room was drinking her blood. The room opened up to her because she offered her blood to it, when she touched the wall, the way the room below opened to her water offering. There must be no doorknobs in these doors, none needed. The floor below was white, or colorless, the way water is. *This* floor was red, the color of blood, and it was the very liquid it fed on. *Organic matter*, as her grandfather would have said. Lilith's whole body has gone rigid with horror, awaiting the room to swallow her whole and suck out her juices.

Both girl and dog sat stock still, listening for any disturbance from behind the door and letting their eyes adjust to soft lighting. There was not a single noise that came from

the outside. In fact, it was eerily quiet, without a slightest movement in the air, with only a barely noticeable tinge of a weird smell to it, like dry stink, a stink left over from something that rotted first and then dried out, leaving a faint memory of its original smell in its dehydrated fiber. It was worse than the garden's smell, it was ancient in its odor, sprinkled with the scent of the centuries that gave Lilith the creeps.

And it wasn't yet another bedroom. It was a gallery. A gallery of paintings set in thick lacquered scarlet frames, shiny at one point of their life, covered in a layer of dust now. Each painting was protected by a pane of glass, so it was impossible to see from where Lilith sat what exactly they represented. The room had no furniture, no door to the bathroom, only four walls with 5 portraits on each, making it a total of 20, and one pedestal in the middle, an empty waist-height round column, shaped like a thick thorny stem of a rose without its head, as if awaiting for something to be propped on top of it, for display.

"What is this place..." Lilith dared to whisper, her skin crawling, her hands getting cold and clammy.

"I don't know what this place is, and I certainly have no desire to find out." Panther squeaked and attempted to climb higher on Lilith, which meant to sit on top of her head.

"STOP IT!" Lilith whispered harshly, and pressed him gently into her lap. "What is wrong with you? Are you a dog or not? Use your senses. Can you smell what I smell?"

She attempted to stand, but Panther protested viciously.

"I will bark if you move!" He panted.

"What good is it gonna do, sitting here for hours until someone *maybe* finds us? Or until *grandpa* finds us? Is that what you want? You want to rot here, or do you want to find out what this room is and how we can get out of it? Weren't we supposed to look for clues? Well, here they are. Look -"

She pointed to the paintings, "- count. Twenty exactly. And this -"

But Panther refused to look, hiding his muzzle under his legs, his muscles jittering.

Lilith pointed to the pedestal, "- is number 21. Agatha's head told me, remember, I'm number 21 -"

A morbid chill has spread all over Lilith.

"Does this mean... does this mean..." She mumbled, afraid to say aloud what she already realized. "...it's a place for my head, Panther." Her mouth has gone suddenly very dry. "My head, number 21. Then those are..."

She placed wriggling Panther on the floor and stood, slowly making her way to the closest frame, her heart beating wildly,

sweat breaking out on her forehead, until she was all the way directly across it, making herself look into the glass.

A face stared back at her. A dead face. A death mask of a woman, with soft features and long hair. Its eyes were closed.

"It's just a painting, it's just a painting..." Lilith soothed herself, but she knew perfectly well it was not. She could sense it with her skin, with her entire being. It certainly appeared as a painting, its thick brush-strokes in layer upon layer of paint, making it look almost three-dimensional and appear like, appear like...

Lilith swallowed, rooted to the spot.

She suddenly understood how her grandmother has felt, in her medical student days, when being locked up in a morgue by her classmates for fun, feeling her way out and bumping into dead bodies. Lilith laughed each time her grandma told her the story, but now it didn't seem so funny. It was scary, to be so close in the presence of death, and it took all her willpower to stay put and think. Perhaps pictures from anatomy books helped, perhaps the amount of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's books that she read.

*"There is nothing like first-hand evidence."* Whispered Lilith Sherlock Holmes' famous words and sniffed.

"I know what it is - it's skin. It smells like skin..." She continued in disbelief, and then repeated herself again. "It's

skin of a face, Panther, look!" It wasn't anyone she knew, the face was completely foreign to her.

Panther, meanwhile, proceeded to wet himself, and the stink of his urine upset the balance of what perhaps promised to be the biggest discovery Lilith has made to date in her pursuit to understand the secret to her legacy.

"Panther!" She shrieked, but it was too late. The room has noticed it too. While it adored offerings of blood, it sure despised any other liquids, particularly those of animals, *particularly* waste products, and it began to spin, obviously getting ready to expel them in the rudest possible manner, revolving around the pedestal like around its anchor.

Lilith lost her footing and slid across the room into a corner.

"My apologies - I simply couldn't hold it anymore - you didn't take me out this morning - my bladder is only this big..." Barked Panther apologetically, while landing right on top of Lilith's beret.

"My fault!" Cried Lilith, "I completely forgot!"

The room spun faster. Terrible portraits swung from their hooks, gawking at both girl and her dog with their closed eyes, their mass of clumped hair glistening in the gloom of the room wildly. From a distance they resembled roses, their matted hair forming a sort of a flower corolla, their faces representing the

center of the bloom, or stigma, the place where its yellow pistils grew. Their skin did indeed appear yellowish, sallow even. Lilith and Panther bumped along the corners and all around the central pedestal, faster, faster, until Lilith thought she would lose her breakfast, her sense of orientation completely wrecked, her one hand on beret, her other pressing Panther to her chest, when finally one of the walls unzipped with a crack and they were falling into darkness.

It never crossed Lilith's mind that the mansion could have a basement, it did cross her mind, however, at the present moment, because wherever it is they were falling, it smelled of freshly dug out earth, moist and wormy. They landed on hard packed ground and rolled into the middle of what appeared to be a conical inverted surface, a gigantic funnel of sorts, with an opening in the middle that was too narrow for them to pass through, but wide enough to emit a terrible stench and freezing cold, a vertical shaft into the underground chamber or some container, some place that collected a certain liquid, because Lilith heard it splashing against mud walls.

They rolled into a pile directly over the funnel opening and stopped. For a few seconds Lilith cried her terror out in high-pitched screams and Panther barked hysterically, they backs to each other, both of their voices quickly dying without any echo, digested by the moist darkness and the dugout dirt around

them. Freezing air lapped their bottoms and it felt like sitting over one of those outdoor latrines, dug out organic style pit toilets. Then something started moving, its noise resembling closely the slithering of a snake, or several enormous snakes, or dozens of them. One grabbed Lilith's ankle, and she felt a sharp prickle of thorns on her skin.

"Roots!" She yelled. "It's the roots of the house! Panther, we've got to get out of here before it eats us alive!" She thrashed in an attempt to shake them off.

"Rose roots have no thorns, for your information." Panther yelped in a feeble whimper, feeling the prickle of his furry skin on both hind legs. "Rose stems, however..." he gave a sharp cry of pain.

"Water, you stupid thing! Remember? I gave you water!" Lilith suffocated in the rose vines, tearing them off her legs, when more circled her arms. "Let's be friends now! I fed you! Come on!" But the rose vines didn't listen, they had no ears, after all, and why would they let go of two very juicy specimens walking so readily into their realm?

Unable to think of anything else, Lilith managed to reach into her bag and feel for her pen that she usually tucked into her journal. It was a good sturdy pen her father gave her for journaling in any weather. It was made of steel and was supposed to be waterproof. It's amazing what a simple pen can do. With a

furious victorious shriek, Lilith plunged it into one of the vines. It quickly retracted. Elated by her immediate success, Lilith proceeded shrieking, egging herself on, and stabbing left and right in the darkness, feeling with her back the hot body of her faithful whippet, who barked, "Get them, Lilith, get them!"

With enough freedom to move, Lilith dropped the pen, grabbed Panther, who was free of vines now too, and made for a mad climb up a steep ground slope, hearing slithering rose stems advance behind them, when a small spot of light flickered in the distance in front of them, perhaps a good hundred feet away. Lilith couldn't tell the shape of the enclosure they were in, but it appeared to be a circular funnel and now they made it into one of the tunnels leading up to it (Lilith immediately thought there must be 5 of them), with the slope leveling out finally. Far ahead of them, in the darkness, light flickered again. Daylight. Precious daylight that made Lilith nearly shriek in delight. It looked like someone was digging an opening at the end of it.

Happy to get out of their predicament and without a second thought on whether or not there was more danger ahead, both Lilith and Panther, scratched, bloody, and at the point of complete exhaustion, stubbornly scrambled forward on their fours, because the tunnel didn't allow Lilith to stand up, it

was perhaps only 3 feet high. At last, she could see a shovel, and a face.

It was Ed. Ed was digging them out.

"Ed! Ed!" Lilith cried on repeat, hot tears surging down her filthy face, relief adding her strength to move quicker.

After what seemed like an eternity, they rolled out onto green grass at the foot of a small hill where Ed dug a hole. A single rose bush sat on top of the hill, but it was unlike the rose bushes that Alfred Bloom bred. This one looked unkempt, wild and non-threatening, even its roses were calmly red, not screaming their color in your face like Bloom's roses did.

Lilith sat up and looked around. They were behind Ed's mansion. At first she couldn't say anything except repeating Ed's name, pressing Panther to her chest, and letting warm rain wash her face. Then she promptly put Panther on the ground (to his jealous growls) and flung herself on Ed in an attempt to express her gratitude for saving them, something she usually reserved within herself and was only able to express with her grandmother, who hugged her back so tightly, her ribs cracked.

For the next several minutes, Lilith held on to Ed in a desperate clutch of someone who nearly drowned and has been brought to safety, her scratched face pressing into his shirt at first, then into his ear, sobbing and mumbling everything that had happened, her grandfather putting her on the spot in front

of guests at dinner, the number 21, her being locked up in her room, the pills, the crow pecking at her head, the moving room that drinks water, the red floor, the gallery of dead faces, the basement with a terrible liquid in its guts, the root vines, and everything in between.

Ed felt very hot and very stiff, barely breathing, and when Lilith finally let go, his tanned face turned pink, as did the ends of his ears. He looked up at Lilith with his large brown eyes that turned slightly misty, like those of an exotic bird in a zoo that singles you out among other visitors, suddenly finding you very interesting.

An echo of distant shouts and incredible commotion reached them, as if a circus troupe has arrived next door and was setting up its portable tent. There were human voices, bird cries and barking of numerous dogs.

"What's with the racket? Is the entire family helping Patrick catch butterflies or something?" Lilith wiped her nose with the sleeve of her leotard, turning to look. She saw the edge of Bloom's rose garden from across the street, where the bushes themselves seemed to be moving, disturbed by the multitude of people running along pathways, yelling, calling. Calling her name.

"They're -" Lilith started, but Ed pressed his finger across her lips, and Lilith felt her face get extremely hot at his touch.

Ed motioned them to follow. Lilith trotted behind him to the backdoor of his little cottage, with Panther on her heels, all of them ducking so as not to be seen from across the street. Only now she noticed that she lost her blush beret in the commotion, and she couldn't remember exactly where. Her insides momentarily turned to ice at the thought of her grandfather finding it in his gallery, knowing that she's been there, that she's found out his mansion's secret, that she's been to the third floor in violation of his rules.

## Chapter 14. Cottage

Ed stopped by the back door, placed a finger across his lips, and pressed his ear against dark wood, listening. Lilith took a moment to steal a glance at the place he lived in. His cottage was of a typical German fachwerk construction, a beautiful pattern of dark brown beams set against white-painted walls. It stood alone in the middle of a very green lawn with no flowers, the only rose bush growing on top of the hill in the back by the wrought iron fence. Behind the fence an endless field stretched out in every direction the eye could see, finally disappearing into a forest. On the street side, tall linden trees formed a natural barrier between the property and Lindenstrasse. After a short while, Ed nodded, clicked the door open and they slunk in, quickly and quietly running up the stairs to the second floor and into his room. He was closing the door, when...

"Ed - is that you?" A woman's voice called from below. It sounded drawn out and dreamy, like that of fortune-teller or a particularly attractive female radio announcer. This voice reminded Lilith of her grandfather, *must be a Bloom family trait.*

Ed turned to both Lilith and Panther, miming that he'll be right back and that they can hide under his bed, if they hear anything. He left.

Lilith, eager to stay hidden for as long as possible, dragged Panther with her into a foot high gap between the underbelly of a mattress and the wooden floor, when the door opened again. Lilith stopped breathing, but it was only Ed, he clicked the lock shut and beckoned them to get out.

They emerged to Ed smiling shyly, eyeing both Lilith and Panther up and down.

"What?" Hissed Lilith, glancing at herself.

Her ballet attire was unrecognizable, pale pink color turned to brown, torn in places to shreds, her tutu hanging askew, her arms and legs scratched, her bag caked with mud. On top of it, she was covered with a layer of dust collected from under Ed's bed. Panther looked a little better, but his silky black fur resembled a mangled coat of a particularly shabby stray dog, or even a cat, if you squinted enough and pretended that his snout was shorter.

"Thank you for the compliment. I do look fabulous, don't I? Is there a bathroom? Can I - ?" Lilith raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Ed scratched his chin, as if thinking. Panther produced something close to a snigger, though tried to make it sound like a cough.

Ed, with an utter look of innocence on his face, finally nodded, took Lilith by the hand (her heart went aflutter) and led her out of the room (unlocking it slowly, with barely any noise) towards the door at the opposite end of the second floor landing.

"Don't forget to turn off the water, darling!" Came from downstairs.

Trembling all over, terrified of being discovered, Lilith quickly peed (her bladder was ready to burst by now), washed her face (water turned murky grey), brushed her hair with her fingers and smoothed her clothes as best she could, fully expecting the bathroom to drop out from under her feet. But it didn't, and she emerged, to be led by Ed back into his room.

"Dinner at 6, my love, don't forget!" The female voice announced.

"Is that your mom?" Lilith inquired, once the door was safely locked and they sat on Ed's bed, Panther in Lilith's lap, for once relaxed and nearly purring.

Ed shook his head, grabbed a notepad from his desk that stood by the window, and scribbled on it.

*No, step-mom.*

"Ah, yeah... that's right - I forgot - sorry." Lilith mumbled awkwardly. "Then why is she talking to you in English?" She couldn't hold the question, and it burst from her lips.

*She travels. Stewardess. Loves America. She likes to think she is teaching me. Doing me good.*

"Ah." Lilith. "I know what you mean." She let out a long sigh and looked about, taking in the room. And there was a lot to take in, now that she was relaxed enough to notice her surroundings.

It was small, compared to the room she stayed in the mansion across the street, maybe only ten by ten feet. In fact, Ed's entire cottage felt very small, after the grandiosity of her grandfather's house, but Lilith liked it immediately, there was something cozy about it, and she felt like she wanted to stay here and never go back to that pristine whiteness and cold order that was more suitable to a hotel than to a place with a genuine lived-in feeling, which Ed's room had.

It had a small window. A writing desk stood right next to it, with an untidy pile of scattered papers on top, comprised of numerous drawings and sketches, some only started, some finished. To add to this mess, a multitude of pencils were strewn about, intermixed with charcoal sticks, erasers, pencil sharpeners, pencil shavings, an exacto knife, and a stack of fresh blank paper in the very corner, balancing precariously and

threatening to fall off any moment. Next to it was an old style wooden office chair on rollers, and its back hung huge old-style binoculars.

Pushed against the right wall was Ed's bed, long and narrow, the one they were sitting on right now, sunk into a concoction of blankets that were checkered once, but now faded to an indistinguishable pattern. Across the bed stood an old-fashioned wardrobe, where Ed must have kept his clothes. There was no mirror in the room, but it's not something that took Lilith's breath away. What struck her most was the fact that she couldn't tell the color of the walls. Because she couldn't see the walls. They were covered with paintings.

A wooden cornice ran along the ceiling, tracing the top perimeter of all four walls. Numerous hooks attached to it, thin strings fanning out and holding a canvas upon canvas upon canvas. These paintings were nothing like the ones Lilith saw in the red gallery. They had no frames, no glass panes to protect them, they elicited a feeling of an artist's studio, that unfinished raw appearance that is best for displaying for any art.

Lilith carefully rolled Panther onto blanket, stood and walked up to one, studying it. It was a painting of a rose, a wild rose, brilliantly scarlet against rich greenery, and yet, when she looked closer, it wasn't simply a rose, it was a

woman's face framed in petals. Lilith nearly jumped away, but held her ground. It was *not* polite to freak out in front of a new friend, especially not about things in his room. She looked at another canvas. It portrayed a big rose that appeared to be flattened against the ground, but when examined closer, Lilith saw that each of its petals resembled a roof of a house, and pistils in the middle doubled as roads. She looked at another, and this one made the hair on her neck stand up. It was a cross cut of a rose, almost botanically academic in nature, one of those pictures you see in textbooks explaining to you parts of things.

This one didn't have parts written out. Lilith didn't need them, however, she remembered them from reading books on roses.

"Stigma..." She whispered, tracing the image that resembled the pedestal in the red gallery to an exact detail, a protruding female part of the rose.

"Hypanthium..." It was the crosscut of the actual flower bud from where petals grew, looking very much like the funnel enclosure her and Panther recently escaped.

"Sepals..." Sharp green leaves underneath the rose's head cut through the fabric of the painting like connecting tunnels, spreading out to both edges of the canvas. Lilith vaguely remembered that a rose had 5 base petals and 5 sepals. She glanced at the bottom of the painting.

"Juergen Vogel..." She wheeled around, her eyes wide.

"Are these your dad's -?"

Ed nodded simply, stroking Panther, who conveniently migrated into his lap as if it was Lilith's. Lilith pretended like she didn't feel a sharp pang of hurt at the sight of her beloved pet being so fondly affectionate toward someone else besides his rightful mistress.

"So this... this..." Lilith couldn't find words to describe what she felt, what she saw, how it made perfect sense, how it connected the dots for her.

*This is why...* Ed offered her, holding up his notepad and pointing to his scribbles.

"This is why grandpa is keeping you away from me? He was afraid you'd show me - he was afraid I would find out?"

Ed began furiously scribbling in his notepad.

"Wait!" Lilith quickly put up her hand. "Before I forget -" She composed her face. "In the garden, remember? When you told me, *yes and no* - when I asked you if grandpa was killing women and feeding them to the garden - what did you mean by that? How can it be both *yes and no*?"

She waited for Ed's answer with abated breath.

*I'll have to show you.* Ed scribbled and held up the pad.

"Panther, tell him!" Lilith demanded in exasperation.

Panther raised his head, and without any of them thinking it

strange or out of place or not permitted or crazy or impossible, spoke to Ed in his usual sarcastic manner.

"*Madam* means that time is running short, lad, and, if by some unfortunate circumstance we happen to be interrupted in the next few minutes or, worse, *seconds*," he stuck out his chest importantly. "She is afraid that *she* will be separated from you *again* and might not be able to glimpse the full extent of the rose garden's secret to be able to solve it in time, which constitutes a herculean task of saving lives of 21 women in the mansion, two of whom, as you are well aware, despise her very guts, yet the kindness of her heart does not permit her to simply let them vanish into the garden's thorny clutches." He threw Lilith a quick glance. "It means that *madam* here is a saint and never, never in her most terrible dreams, did she imagine both Daphne and Gwen Schlitzburger being devoured by roses with extensive crunching and slurping and smacking of its petal lips."

"That's enough!" Lilith cried, forgetting to keep her voice down and glaring at her pet with contempt, her face hot.

"And I love you too." Panther growled disapprovingly and stuck his nose back under Ed's hand. He knew her too well, after all.

Lilith, unaware that the face of Gabrielle Bloom was showing its ugly side through her right now, kept glaring. It

didn't even cross her mind to explain to Ed that Panther talks and ask him if he could hear him. If didn't even cross Ed's mind to comment that indeed her pet whippet talks and it's the most wondrous thing in the world. Besides the fact that he can hear him too.

He simply nodded again, and quickly scribbled one word on the pad.

*Both.*

"How can it be *both*?" Lilith exclaimed, confused. Her blood stopped boiling, and she reluctantly stepped over and sat down next to Ed, not quite touching Panther, petting his back gently. Panther shrugged her off.

"Hey, I'm sorry, I didn't mean what I said, I'm just... it's just... I'm confused... and tired, and hungry... and... scared." She added timidly, admitting to something which she resolved at keeping to herself, but the presence of another human being who didn't question her, didn't scold her, didn't write off her thoughts and emotions and stories due to her sickness, a human being who allowed her to be herself, has made her come unglued.

She stared at her palms. Warm tears started dripping into them, when Ed took her right hand, examining tiny scabs left from Lilith holding the bouquet of roses that her grandfather thrust at her in the garden the other day.

He pointed to the scabs, then to the garden behind the window, then to the scabs again. Then he shook his head and doodled.

*I'm not supposed to tell you, but... I don't care. I want you to know. You deserve to know.* He paused, chewing on the pencil, studying Lilith.

Lilith held her breath, her eyes wide. "Hey... You don't have to. I don't want you to get in trouble because of me. I've caused enough trouble already. Really, don't -" She held out her hand to stop him, but he was already writing.

*Garden kills, grandpa helps.* He chewed on his pencil again, looking up apprehensively to see the impact of this news.

Lilith let out a shattered sigh. "But... *why? Why* would he help?" She smeared tears all over her face, sniffing and trying to compose herself back to her usual stoic demeanor. Unfortunately, it didn't work the way it typically did, and she broke into crying again, mad at herself for being such a cry baby in front of a new friend, terrified at what he will think of her now, yet unable to stop. It all came out running, every single terror she experienced since coming here three days ago. Water gushed out of her so fast, that even Panther couldn't lick tears fast enough from her face, suddenly forgetting about his little grudge.

"I'm sorry..." She whispered to both of them in an embarrassed tone, covering her face.

Ed gently peeled off her right hand and was pointing to her scabs again.

*Garden drinks blood. He made you hold the bouquet so it could taste you. The garden, I mean.*

"What? Why? How do you know all this? Did your dad know too? Did - did he - " She motioned to the paintings. "Are those maps of the houses, or cross section plans or whatever you call them - ?"

Ed nodded.

"How - how did he know? Who *told* him?" Lilith's tongue got caught in her throat, a million questions pressed on her mind, and she didn't know where to begin, anxious about being discovered and losing her only connection to information, not mentioning losing her friend all together, all too vividly remembering her grandfather talking to Ed about the rent for the cottage and urging him to switch living arrangements.

*My step-mom did. He crossed out the word "did". Told. She's Bloom. Grandpa was desperate. He tried every relative already. The garden rejected them all. So he called a family reunion, to test the kids and other distant female relatives. It's about to regenerate itself. The garden. It needs a new heir, because -*

Ed scribbled so fast, that at the end of the last word the pencil's tip broke off. Grunting in disappointment, which was the first noise Lilith heard from Ed, he jumped up to his table to find a new pencil, accidentally knocking the pile of clean paper flying, sending sheets of it and his drawings everywhere. He stood up, grabbed his head and froze, looking out the window, pointing at something.

"What is it?" Lilith jumped off the bed, Panther trailing behind her.

For the first time she saw the whole Bloom rose garden from the side, in its entire length and ruby splendor, a sea of fragrant flowers, no, not a sea, an ocean, with a clear distinction in the middle, where the *other* side of the garden began, migrating from vivid crimson to dull burgundy, from falling rain to clumps of rolling fog, from emerald green leaves and straight royal stems packed into uniformly shaped bushes to wild clumps of menacing over-grown jungle, a labyrinth gone wrong, the type that makes you feel lost the second you step into it, with no way out. It spread itself across at least a hundred yards, if not more, peeking out in between slender linden tree trunks planted along both pedestrian walks of Lindenstrasse. And it kept getting taller the further away it grew from the house, with the very end of it butting against the forest, the one Lilith saw behind Ed's cottage. Evidently, it

ran its course around the dead-end of the street, passed by the garden, and continued on for miles, stretching further north.

If that was the only sight to behold, Lilith certainly would have found her breath again, but she didn't, because something was wrong with the garden itself, with its shiny public side. Red roses were dotted with black. Tiny black shapes moved about and in the center of the garden congregated into one living mass.

"Are those -" Lilith pointed, "crows?"

Ed nodded, his hands still in his hair, as if he wanted to tear it out.

"Where did they come from? They weren't here three days ago." Lilith leaned over the table and pushed the window open.

Mad cawing hit her in the face at once. The crows were loudly screeching and flapping their wings, and occasionally fluttering up, only to land back on another bush. And stench. More of that sickly sweet decomposing stench.

"One of them wanted to peck out my eyes this morning..." Lilith muttered, wrinkling her nose and tuning in to distant shouting and people milling about the garden. Their movement caused the garden to shake like a gigantic lake, only its waves were rows of rose bushes, its flecks of water were torn off leaves and petals flying into the air. Lilith involuntarily traced the surface of the garden from one end to the other, and

then immediately wished she didn't. She thought at first Ed was in such distress because he spotted the crows. She was wrong. Ed was looking at what she was looking right now. There, at the very spot where the garden ended in the forest, by the back iron fence, rose bushes literally moved as if the entire thing was breathing, and one of them in particular kept flailing long vines into the air in a way a giant octopus flings its tentacles about in an effort to grab its next victim.

"Is that what stinks so bad?" She whispered next to Ed's ear, pointing.

He nodded, without turning.

"What *is* that thing?"

To add to it, Lilith heard the same sigh she heard several days ago, when she first landed on the other side of the garden, except this time the sigh didn't end, it grew, it became a grumble, a noise similar to someone inhaling a lungful of air, and then it turned into a shriek, penetrating in its sharpness, rolling over the entire street, causing the whole flock of crows to take off at once, cawing in displeasure.

Ed quickly grabbed a piece of paper, wrote on it, and stuck his notepad in front of Lilith's face, *any day now*, when she saw something else, and felt her legs give out.

Alfred Bloom, led by leashed Baer, something dirty pink in his mouth, and her mother and father in tow, all emerged from

the front door of the mansion and were quickly crossing the street in the direction of Ed's cottage.

## Chapter 15. Escape

Ed pulled Lilith away from the window just in time, when she noticed her grandfather raising his head to glance up. She could tell he was very angry even from this distance, and she could tell that the pink thing the burly mastiff held in his jaws was, no doubt, her beret, soaked in that monster's saliva. That's why it didn't look rosy anymore. Pink. Lilith hated bright pink. It was not sophisticated enough, but none of it mattered now. Ed urged both of them to hide under his bed again, to which Lilith protested in urgent whispers, because in her opinion the first thing Baer would do is sniff her out, grab her by the ankles and pull her out, then do the same to Panther, and then, for sure, they all would be toast. Lilith and Panther would be punished for sneaking out, and Ed for helping them hide. Ed's wardrobe would have been Lilith's preference, but Ed stuck a torn piece of paper under her face.

*TRUST ME.* It said in big pleading letters.

They locked their eyes for a moment, and without knowing why she did it, Lilith asked.

"What's your secret - the *secretest* secret - the one you haven't told anyone about?"

Ed paused for the smallest fraction of the shortest second, and then he scribbled on the other side of the paper.

*I can see things, like a hawk.*

"I can smell things, like a dog." Whispered Lilith, quickly kissed Ed on the cheek and promptly disappeared under the bed, tucking herself into the back as close to the wall as possible, hugging Panther and circling her hand around his muzzle to keep it shut. Her heart pounded like a wild stallion ready to burst out into the wild and gallop through flower fields.

"I'm not an idiot, you know." Muttered Panther through clamped teeth.

"SHHHH!" Lilith hissed.

"What, I don't get a kiss?"

"Panther!"

But then there was a sharp knock on the front door, and Lilith thought that she felt the entire cottage shudder like a frightened leaf in the wind.

"Ed? Please get the door, darling." The female radio voice trailed through the open door, as Ed, anticipating his duty, was already halfway out. Meanwhile, Lilith stared at the bottom of the door, her feet tucked as close to her body as possible, her breath as shallow as was tolerable, her hands itching to scratch at the newly forming scabs on her legs and arms just this very moment, like it always does. Her nose full of dust, she sneezed

quietly into her elbow, curled up around Panther, who growled, displeased at her tight hold. Lilith ignored him, only one image in her mind, her grandfather's face peeking under the bed. Anyone who decided to look under would immediately see them. Lilith sneezed again, silently, her entire body shivering. In an effort to stop it, she pinched her nose.

Voices trailed from below. She couldn't distinguish what was being said through the closed door of the room, neither could she understand German, but it seems like for the sake of her parents they were conversing in English and she could clearly hear the low charming baritone of her grandfather, the high-pitched squeaking of her mother, and the nonexistent voice of her father who was probably sulkily trailing along for the imminent execution of his daughter and her pet, both runts of the litter in their own unique ways.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs followed a few light ones, together with the scratching of the claws on the wood, which could only belong to Baer. So they were taking him upstairs after all. Lilith felt her stomach turn inside out and twist into a knot.

The door opened. A pair of high-heeled hot pink patent leather pumps strolled in.

"...but of course!" The shoes belonged to the same dreamy female voice. "Really, I think our guest hall would've been a

much better choice than Ed's room, if you ask me, uncle. The lighting in there is divine at this time of day."

Next came in Ed's sneakers, her mother's flats, black, always black, her father's shoes, soft and worn loafers, and then highly polished lace-ups belonging to her grandfather.

"Ah! What a quaint little studio, I rather like it here, thank you, Rosalinde." Alfred Bloom said cheerily. "Ed, I hope you don't mind."

Her parents stood quietly on his either side.

Finally, four humongous paws budged in, then stopped immediately as they entered, and to her horror Lilith saw Baer lower his enormous squarish head to the floor, her beret still clumped in his mouth. He sniffed loudly and obnoxiously, then pointed his little beady eyes from under thousands of skin-folds directly at Lilith, dropped the beret and barked what sounded like mini-thunder.

At the same precise moment, the edge of the bed and that part of the floor that was directly under it, clamped shut. Just like that, like two petals of a rose that was annoyed at the day for stretching out too long and decided to close for the night early. Both Lilith and Panther were plunged into complete darkness, sensing the floor giving out under them, stretching and expanding, until the entire enclosure, a few seconds ago barely one foot high, grew to a more or less comfortable

compartment three feet tall and about six feet wide in each direction. Its walls began seeping in the light, reddish light, as if it was coming through petals of a gigantic crimson rose, and before long Lilith saw moving silhouettes of people, mere shadows, but nonetheless, clearly visible.

*This house... it's a wild rose, that's what it is. The runt of the litter, like we are,* thought Lilith, then swiftly bent and kissed the floor on impulse. The floor wafted back at her a delicious honey fragrance, and Lilith grinned from ear to ear. This was definitely the house she would've spent the rest of her life in. She only wished she had a bottle of water with her, if only to give her gratitude.

Several stools were brought out, sat upon, and the conversation in the room has already started. Lilith tuned into what they were talking about with anxious apprehension.

"...never fails. Dogs can't lie, my dear. Their noses never lie. She was here. Would you like to tell us when that happened, how she got here and where she went after? Or, dare I ask, may she still be present in your room, hiding perhaps?" That was a soft inquisitive voice belonging to Alfred Bloom, no doubt directed at Ed, who, no doubt, remained silent. Lilith didn't see him draw anything either, only saw his hunched figure by the desk. That meant, he simply refused to cooperate, but that also

meant that her grandfather by now has figured out that Ed simply doesn't want to tell the truth.

"Really, darling, did you let that girl in our house without letting me know? I thought we trusted each other." Rosalinde added with disappointment in her voice, her profile making Lilith think of American movies from the 60's, the pin up hair, the bows, bright red lips and long eyelashes laden with mascara. She couldn't see Ed's step-mother except for her outline, but she could vividly imagine what she looked like, tucked into a tight form-fitting pink dress to match her shoes, which certainly sharply contrasted with the typical outfit of her mother.

"How very tragic, I must say - I can't imagine - I simply can't imagine. Is there anything I can do for you? Please, search the entire house, if you must. Ed, would you kindly answer your grandfather's question?"

Ed hung his head even deeper.

"I don't know what we're doing here, Alfred, we're clearly wasting our time. It's obvious that the boy won't talk. He doesn't talk in general, does he?" That was the voice of Lilith's mother, and it sounded exhausted and irritated.

"Gabi, I don't think - " Her father began.

"Generally, he only talks when he deems it suitable. If he has nothing to say, there is no point for him to say anything. I

rather think it's a clever conservation of energy." Rosalinde nearly sang in her drawn-out liquid manner, her voice trembling slightly.

"Ed, is there anything you want to tell us?" Lilith was astounded to hear her father chime in, a genuine worry in his voice.

Ed looked up, dropped his head back down again and shook it.

"That is a rather nice cardigan you are wearing, miss -?" Rosalinde nearly sang.

"Bloom. Gabrielle Bloom."

"Rosalinde Vogel. Another Bloom, I'm delighted. I never understood crafts. To me it's such a waste of time, and it doesn't look... polished enough. I rather prefer silk."

"I rather prefer we talked about the problem at hand, if you wouldn't mind." Gabi retorted icily, and Lilith detected the first notes of her mother's wrath trickling in. "I understand your son is sitting in front of you and you have nothing to worry about. However, my daughter might be wandering the streets in a foreign country right now, not knowing the language, lost, confused, and scared. For heaven's sake, can't you *make* him talk?" The last remark came out a bit too shrill to Lilith's taste.

"Is that how they raise children in America nowadays, by *making* them do things?" Rosalinde produced in a high-pitched tone.

This was getting interesting, and Lilith dared to move closer to the edge of their glowing reddish enclosure and press her nose into it, wanting to absorb as much as she could, when a shadow shielded her vision. The enormous muzzle of Baer the mastiff stuck its huge wet nose right to the spot where Lilith's face was, barely an inch away, only a thin membrane of the rose petal separating them. The dog sniffed loudly. Lilith felt Panther's fur rise on his back. They both froze, not daring to move. Baer growling menacingly, and waddled off in the direction of the wardrobe. Lilith felt Panther's hot tongue on her cheek, trembling slightly. She swiftly kissed him back on the nose, hugging him tight.

"My dear ladies, we won't succeed if we continue in this manner. May I interrupt?" Said Alfred Bloom reverently.

The room fell silent. Lilith could just feel the glowering that was no doubt happening between her mother and Ed's step-mother, both of them being so diametrically different.

"Ed, let me ask you this question. Do you want to see your friend again, alive?"

The double-meaning of what her grandfather just said pinned Lilith to the floor, spilling fear into her very bone marrow,

her mind reeling with images of blood-thirsty rose bushes ganging up at her and tackling her into the deepest corner of their most entangled spot on the *other* side of the garden.

Ed raised his head at this, to Lilith's dismay. She held her breath, waiting for him to point under the bed, where they hid, temporarily clumped shut in between two gigantic rose petals. But he didn't. Instead, he took his notepad and began furiously scrawling something on it, shoving it under his grandfather's nose with force when done.

"I see. Very well." Said grandfather with poison in his voice.

"May I see?" Gabi demanded.

"I'm afraid this is between me and my grandson." Alfred said venomously and this made Lilith's mother almost audibly clamp her mouth shut. In the very few days that they were here, she was not used to being told 'no' by her distant relative, the object of her admiration, in fact, she rather regarded him as being on her team, concerning her distaste for whippets and her manner of making people do things her way, even if it required blunt force.

Alfred ignored her, however, turning to his niece.

"Rosalinde, do you mind giving Gabi Ed's doctor's phone number? What was his name again -"

"But of course! Wilhelmus Baumgartner." Rosalinde eagerly obliged, standing up and clacking her high heels to the table, in search of a piece of paper and a sharp enough pencil.

"Good. Thank you, my dear. I believe Gabi wanted her daughter to be seen and evaluated, once she turns up, of course." Grandfather continued in his sweetest demeanor. "Which I'm sure she will, eventually. I'm sure she will get hungry and thirsty and will ultimately decide to grace us with her erudite presence - which, I must say, I enjoyed immensely the other night - *especially* now, when we're so close to perfume rose harvest and there will be a large amount of extra rose heads that could be dipped in chocolate."

Lilith stomach grumbled. She instantly clutched at it, terrified if anyone heard it. For a few seconds time stood still for her. It seemed like nobody noticed anything. Nonetheless, the way her grandfather spoke, it was as if he knew she was there and was simply warning her, that it's going to be either his way, or else.

"Is that what you propose? That we sit here and wait for her to turn up? Doing nothing? Doing absolutely nothing?" The wrath of Gabrielle Bloom has arrived, and full of terrible shrill at that. "She is sick! Don't you understand it?" She stood up so swiftly, that the stool she was sitting on tipped and dropped on the floor. "She needs help! She can harm herself,

she doesn't know any better! She is very naïve, she wouldn't be able to tell between a kind stranger and a stranger who would want to take advantage of her. We need to call the police. Al?" She called to her husband in exasperation.

"I don't think we need to go to such extreme measures, Gabi." Said grandfather, masking his alarm.

This was the first time when Lilith wished for her mother to continue, happy that she had this ability to press her point no matter what, wishing she would get her way, calling numerous police squads and have them turn that hateful mansion upside down, have them find the terrible red gallery and determine the true origin of those paintings, see for what they really are. Surely their trained dogs will sniff it out, like Lilith did, surely they will realize that those are not paintings but remains of dead women, all chopped up and fed to the garden. Or so Lilith saw it in her head, chopping noises vividly intermingling in her memory with the shadow of her grandfather that she saw through the window curtain on her second night. She could almost see their forest green uniforms, their green berets, so unlike American police, yet so fitting with the rose garden. She could see them filing out of the cars in a green storm on justice and seize Alfred Bloom, unaware, with an utter look of shock on his face, to take him away in one of those

German police cars, take him away forever, make him pay of his hideous crimes, make him leave her alone, make him...

*But he can't kill me, Lilith suddenly realized. The garden can't kill me either. I'm the heir, it chose me as the heir, it wants to use me for something, but it definitely is not going to kill me. Maybe I can control it somehow, maybe I can make it stop craving blood and murdering people?*

A sudden commotion told her that the conversation was over and she has missed a considerable chunk of it, escaping into her wishful thinking. Lilith bit her lip, bitterly regretting the fact that her brain tended to do this to her in the most important moments of discovery, carried away by the possibilities and missing small obvious things right under her nose.

"Ah, yes, almost forgot." Said her grandfather's voice by the door. "Rosalinde, my dear, I believe your rental agreement ends in exactly two days, is that right? First week of July?"

"Oh!" Rosalinde exclaimed, her heels stopping their clicking mid-step. "Certainly - yes - I believe so." There was a slight tremble to her dreaminess now.

"Well, I apologize for such short notice, but I have other plans for this quaint little house. I believe I won't be renewing your contract, my dear. I take it, two days will be

enough for both of you to pack your things? There isn't much here, is there."

"Oh." Said Rosalinde again, clearly speechless. "Let me - let me gather my thoughts, it is rather hot in here. I need some air, yes, yes, I need some air." Then she quickly passed through the door opening and her heels produced a rapid staccato down the stairs, where it seems like Lilith's mother and father were already waiting, because Lilith saw only three outlines left through the reddish gloom, those of Ed, Alfred Bloom and his mastiff. Lilith and Panther, both breathless, pressed into each other in their flowery enclosure.

"I warned you before, boy." Grandfather stuck his finger into Ed's chest. "I'm warning you again. If I find out you breathed a word to your friend, worse, if I find out you helped her in any way -"

Ed gesticulated something furiously and pushed his grandfather's hand away, standing with his fists clenched and his head stuck out in defiance.

"We talked about this before, didn't we? You don't want to meet your father's fate."

And with that, he turned around and strolled out, Baer emitting one last low rumbling bark and following him out the door.

## Chapter 16. Ed's drawing

It took another half an hour for all activity to die in the cottage and for Ed to pry rose petals open, making them promptly return to their normal state at the touch of his fingers. One moment Lilith saw his shadow from behind crimson membrane, another she was looking at his tanned pointed face suspended midair between the floor and the underbelly of his mattress. Lilith climbed out, quivering and coughing into the sleeve of her ruined leotard. Panther followed her, trembling from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail. There was a creak of the floor and the distinct tinkling of glasses in the kitchen. It interrupted Lilith mid-breath. She wanted to gush about Ed's awesome hiding place. Afraid to talk and be heard, she threw a terrified look at the door, but Ed shook his head vigorously, stepping over to the table and scribbling another note on a piece of paper.

*She's drinking. She won't hear you.* He sighed as he saw Lilith read it and digest the information.

"I see... Some people drink, some knit, what's the difference? Drinking might be actually better for you, at least

it makes you get out of your skin and do silly things for once.” She said bitterly, thinking about her mother.

“Some people chase squirrels.” Came from below, but it got lost in the air of present seriousness.

Ed opened his mouth in what looked like an attempt to say something, and promptly closed it.

“Wait - were you going to say something? Please? Just for me? I won’t tell anyone, I swear.” Lilith made the cutest toddler face she could make, the one she used to beg her father with for sweets or to skipping school without telling her mother.

Ed narrowed his eyes and sighed, shaking his head and rubbing his nose awkwardly, which left smudges of charcoal on his face.

“All right, all right, sorry I asked.” A different question burned Lilith’s tongue, she wanted to find out what her grandfather meant by “meet your father’s fate”, but she couldn’t bring herself to say it, couldn’t bear bringing more pain to Ed. Not after the news that he had to move out, out of what looked like a house that he loved and that loved him back.

“Hey, awesome hiding place, by the way! My house - at home, I mean - moves too, but it can’t do things like this.” Lilith said excitedly.

Ed’s face lit up.

"Your house, it's... it's a rose, is it? They all are, all five of them, right?"

Ed nodded vigorously.

"How long did you know this?"

*Since we moved in.*

"When was that?"

*When I was five.*

Here was that number again. Five. Did it have any meaning or was it just a coincidence? The smallest girl visiting grandpa's mansion, Petra, was also five. There weren't any children younger than that. Lilith bit her lip.

"And... now you have to move out? That must hurt. You love this house, don't you? Isn't there anything you can do to convince him to let you stay? Anything at all? Is there anything I can do?" Lilith said feverishly, without realizing that in 2 days time she will be gone back home too and perhaps will never see Ed again. All she cared about right now was how to make him feel better. He saved her and Panther, and it was her turn to help him, or at least try.

"I'll talk to him. I'll talk to grandpa." She proclaimed with finality.

Panther yelped his displeasure. Ed shook his head energetically, so energetically, that Lilith was afraid for a second that it will fly off his shoulders.

NO! YOU WON'T! He scribbled very fast, pressing his lips together and thrusting his notepad forward.

There was a loud bang below and a yelp, as if someone had tripped and fell.

"ED? ED!" The rest was yelled in German. Lilith was astounded at how much the previously divine slow voice of Rosalinde Vogel has changed into this horrible drunken tirade. She was clearly very upset about having to move out and attempted to douse her pain with alcohol.

*I need to get you back to the mansion. You can't stay here.*

"No!" Lilith exclaimed almost too loudly. "I'll go by myself. You've had enough trouble already." She badly wanted to give Ed a hug and was restraining herself, remembering how stiff he got the last time she did it. Ed stood frozen on the spot, his ears pink, as if waiting for it. Panther pricked up his ears expectantly.

Lilith made a motion, then stopped herself and sighed. It seemed like Ed deflated at this, as did Panther. Lilith didn't notice, she wanted to ask all about the tunnels, about how he knew where they were, how did he know when and where to dig them out, what things grandpa's house can do, does he know about what happens when you pour water on it, and on and on and on, when another memory flashed through her mind.

"Wait - I forgot to ask you. That map that you slid under my door - thank you, by the way - you circled a spot on it... Was it the same spot where saw that... that thing... moving?" She pointed to the window. "The one that screamed? What was it? Why did you circle it?"

But then loud clacking of high heels that are not entirely sure of their footing interrupted them and without any time to spare, Lilith and Panther pressed themselves into the wall, when the door sprung open and in rained a long string of slurry German words, in between sobs, sounding both accusatory and heart-broken at the same time. Lilith pinched her nose. The air promptly filled with that after-party breath, reeking with alcohol and half-digested crackers.

Ed hung his head once more, taking it in. The stream ended with one more drunken slur, one last sob, and the door closed shut. Heels proceeded clicking unsteadily downstairs, and there was more rattling in the kitchen and something made of glass shattered.

Ed motioned to Panther. Panther nodded, standing guard by the door. Ed quickly trotted over to his table, sat down, took a clean piece of paper and started drawing a diagram for Lilith, resembling his father's painting very much, the one with the crosscut section of a rose.

Neither of them noticed how the day turned lavender with dusk, and how eerily quiet it was behind the open window, with not a soul in the garden searching for Lilith. Even the crows sat stock-still.

Absorbed in Ed's creation, Lilith peeked at it over his shoulder, at one point forgetting herself and leaning on his back, her hands holding on to his left arm like to a fence in a zoo, in an effort to see better what's beyond. It was amazing to see Ed work. His elegant fingers held the pencil in a way a musical conductor holds his baton, making it fly across the page and not really drawing, but merely uncovering the masterpiece that was already there, even though he was simply sketching. The entire Bloom property unfolded in front of Lilith's eyes.

A thick pencil line across the paper signified the horizon. Above it Ed drew 5 houses, of which Lilith visited 2. The other 3 were classical looking suburban German homes, smaller than Alfred Bloom's mansion, but much bigger than Ed Vogel's cottage, 3 on the north side of Lindenstrasse, 2 on the south one. To the right the road stretched into the edge of the paper, to the left it ran along the rose garden that ended at the opposite edge of the paper, with not enough space to draw the forest.

At the very end of the rose garden he drew several twisted vines sticking out into the air and circled the whole thing, like he did on the map he gave Lilith.

*I think this is where it eats them, for regeneration. Rose garden regenerates after the harvest. But I'm not sure about this. Dad said it happens every 35 years or so.*

"Wow..." Lilith felt her stomach clench. "Does it eat only one woman, or several - to - to regenerate itself?"

Ed shrugged.

"Does it eat women only?" Lilith asked breathlessly.

Ed nodded sullenly.

"Why?"

*They lend their beauty to the garden. Their hearts, their blood. It's what makes roses all those different shades of red. It's why dad was painting them, he wanted to tell people, because nobody believed him. Nobody, except me.*

"I'm so sorry..." Suddenly Lilith wasn't hungry for dinner anymore. She was both terrified and fascinated, but what was more fascinating was what Ed now drew below the horizon line.

Five tunnels led from each of the houses down into a circular chamber, the rose hypanthium, that, in turn, narrowed into a single vertical tunnel that looked very much like a rose stem and ran all the way to the bottom edge of the paper. Ed proceeded doodling small oval shapes inside the hypanthium.

"Are those seeds? Rose seeds?" Lilith whispered in his ear, her lips brushing his earlobe. He nodded, suddenly tense. Lilith promptly removed herself away from his shoulder, her face hot.

She counted. "Twenty. There are twenty seeds..."

Ed colored every single one of them with his pencil, then drew another seed in the middle, only an outline, then turned and pointed at Lilith.

"...and I'm seed number 21." Said Lilith with horror, calculating in her head. "Is *that* what grandpa is looking for? Woman number 21 for his garden's regeneration? That explains twenty paintings..." Lilith folded her fingers, looking down at them, thinking back to Luedke Blome who discovered this garden in 13<sup>th</sup> century.

"It's been roughly 700 years ago... If the garden regenerates itself every 35 years, that makes it 20 times exactly to this day. That means... that means..." Her knees buckled. Ed jumped out of his chair in time to help her sit on the edge of his bed.

Lilith sunk into the multitude of blankets, her face deathly pale, imagining herself, her own facial skin flattened under layers of oil paint. Her whole body shuddered. Then she thought of the pedestal in the middle of the gallery, and promptly shook her head, before her mind conjured any more exquisitely detailed gory pictures.

"But, Ed, why 21? What will happen after he gets it, will there be number 22? And why," she almost stomped her foot in anger, "did he name me heir of the entire Bloom property, if his plan was simply to kill me? Why invite all these people at once,

when he could've tested them one by one? I don't understand... Unless..." She said, wondering aloud. "Unless... it's some kind of a ceremony like they did way back, with more people buried to keep company for the deceased, in a ritual sacrifice..." Lilith felt her heart freeze and drop down to her knees. Pictures flashed through her mind, pictures of little Petra, the Schlitzburger twins with their faithful mother in tow, the old bind lady and her daughter, other women guests, the servants, and then, last, her mother.

Lilith grabbed onto Ed's shoulders. "What else do you know?"

Ed simply shrugged, penciling in his answer. That's it. *It's all I know. It's all dad ever told me.*

He folded the drawing and gave it to Lilith, tucking the pencil behind his ear in a way Gabi Bloom tucked knitting needles behind hers. Lilith, still shaking, forced herself to smile and tucked his drawing into the middle of her book, dropping it back into her bag. Her mother always searched through her pockets and her bag, but it never occurred to her to look in Lilith's books, where she hid dry flowers and notes with various secrets on them. Her mother... Lilith couldn't stop thinking about her mother and the danger she didn't know about.

Panther barked warningly, and at the same time more wailing and movement came from below.

"What about your step-mom?" She said quietly.

*It's why grandpa wants us to move.*

Then Ed stood and urged Lilith towards the door.

That made sense, Lilith thought, he doesn't want his own family blood to be spilled. "Yes, yes, I know, I've got to go, but I have so many questions to ask you! When will I see you again? Can we maybe meet in some secret place?" Said Lilith with hidden hope, biting her lip, hoping she didn't come across as too desperate, and having a hard time not to stare at Ed's arched eyebrows and brown eyes.

Panther cleared his throat. Lilith pretended she didn't hear. Ed didn't answer, he simply reached for the light switch by the door and flipped it several times on and off.

"The light! I'll watch for it! I'll watch for the light signal! What should I do when I see it?"

Ed bit on his finger, thinking, then grabbed the pencil from behind his ear and wrote on his notepad.

*Field?*

"The one behind your house? Absolumonto. When I see you flip the light, I will try to get out of the mansion and - wait -" Lilith bit on her finger too, imitating Ed, "- how will I get out, what if they lock me up again? And even if they don't lock me up, where would I find the entrance to the tunnel?"

Ed, through a series of gestures, asked her permission to pull out his drawing and traced with his finger the tunnel under Bloom's mansion all the way across the hypanthium, to the tunnel under his cottage and beyond the fence into the field.

"But where -" Lilith began.

Kitchen. Ed pointed to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the mansion, but they didn't get to talk more, because at this point loud stomping proceeded all the way to Ed's door, together with exclamations calling his name and proclaiming something in a very angry tone with sounded particularly nasty to Lilith because she couldn't understand German. She only had enough time to grab Panther and press him to her chest, when the door swung open and a leering figure of disheveled Rosalinde Vogel emerged, her blonde curled hair a royal mess, her pink dress (just like Lilith guessed) stained with alcohol. She trotted in, her one high-heeled leg caught on the rug and she crashed to the floor, her glossy pumps flying off her feet.

At this moment, Ed forcefully pushed Lilith and Panther out the door, shutting it closed on the other side.

"I'm sorry." Whispered Lilith. "I thought my mom was bad."

Ed shrugged, in way of saying, *I know, I'm used to it.*

"What did grandpa mean when he told you, you don't want to meet your father's fate?" Lilith couldn't hold this question anymore, and it burst from her before she arrested it.

There was a moan, and Ed lowered his head and shook it NO, as if he wanted to say, *I'll tell you, but now is not a very good time.*

"Sorry." Lilith whispered, and before her girly cowardice seized her again, using the darkness on the second floor landing as her ally, she leaned in and pecked Ed on the lips, then scurried down the stairs so fast, that she nearly fell at the very bottom, her tattered ballet slippers sliding this way and that on the worn-in wood.

"You never kissed me on the lips." Came a disgruntled growl from between her arms.

"Oh, shut it, Panther!" Lilith clicked the front door open, slammed it behind her and lowered him on the ground. "If you want to be jealous, now is not the time."

Panther growled his displeasure, but didn't say anything.

For a moment Lilith stood, looking around. It was a full-blown evening. Grandpa's mansion had its million lights on. The rose garden stood still, even the crows that sat on top of the roses didn't move, sleeping. The sky turned that shade of purple that at the first opportune moment slides into the velvety blackness of the night. Linden trees stood against it in black vertical stripes, their glittering leaves resembling plumage of gigantic shivering birds. And that foul sickening stench

disappeared, replaced with intoxicating floral fragrance that seemed to be coming from everywhere.

"Tilia." Whispered Lilith, inhaling. "Panther, I just now remembered its name. Another name for linden tree is tilia. And it's blooming. I want to collect a few flowers, to dip them in chocolate. I think they would taste excruciatingly *divine*."

Lilith easily picked up new words from strangers, and this was clearly a word that Rosalinde has used several times.

"...and the crows. The crows are here for the feast. They must know what's coming." Lilith whispered grimly, feeling the chill slide down her spine.

Panther trotted forward without turning to look, his demeanor hurt and indignant, like he didn't hear her. Lilith followed with a sigh.

They passed the unlocked front gate and walked along the pedestrian sidewalk on the south side of the street, getting ready to cross it in that delicious dusky murk when it's not dark enough for the street lights to go on, but dark enough already for shadows to start dancing and blurring in the oncoming evening, when a big undistinguishable shape detached itself from behind a linden tree twenty feet ahead of them and floated in their direction.

Lilith opened her mouth involuntarily to scream and placed her hand over it in time to stay quiet. Her heart threatened to

jump out of her throat, and Panther growled alarmingly. But it was only a homeless woman. She looked huge, obese, and clothed in a thousand shawls, floating over the road like a big mushroom. Within a single minute, she glided up to Lilith and asked in a very demanding voice.

"Wo hast du meine Spielsachen?"

"Err... excuse me, I don't speak German..." Lilith said, taking a step back.

"Where did you put my toys?" The woman repeated, her little eyes sparkled in the darkness, framed by a moon of a face. She spoke in a very clean English, without barely any accent.

"Excuse me, b—" Lilith began politely.

"Where," the woman jabbed a finger at Lilith's chest, "I ask you, did you put my toys? Where is my elephant? Where is Moppel? Where is he? I miss him..." She began to sob, clutching onto Lilith for balance.

"Excuse me, but—" said Lilith again, taking a step back to hopefully get out of the woman's hold. Panther growled again, stepping closer to make sure nobody hurts his mistress.

"He took it!" The mushroom woman suddenly pointed her finger at grandpa's house. "I saw him. He did. All of my dolls - gone now - all of my precious porcelain dolls!" She shook her head tragically and lets go of Lilith's shoulders at once.

Lilith sighed in relief, but curiosity took hold of her.

"What dolls?" She asked innocently.

"Magda, Sandra, and Arabella." The woman said and quickly floated to the other side of the road as if she lost all interest in the conversation.

"Wait!" Lilith shouted and ran after her, Panther following her, his claws making a scratching sound against the pavement.

"Shoo! Go away from me! Go! Go!" The woman waved her hands in a dismissive gesture and sped up, running full out towards the end of the garden, to the street's dead-end. Her small feet shuffling along with astounding speed, carrying her voluptuous body like a dollop of chocolate pudding on a thousand mechanical cockroaches. And then she disappeared into the field beyond linden trees, swallowed by the night. At the same time, streetlights clicked on and Lilith blinked, her eyes watering.

"Who was that?" She asked Panther. "And what was that nonsense she talked about grandpa taking her dolls?"

"I dunno." Panther shrugged. "I think we need to get back to the house, quickly, before her elephant Moppel appears and tramples us into dust. Besides, I'm hungry."

Lilith's stomach produced a few very unpleasant grumbles.

"Right. Yes. We need to. Hey," She kneeled in front of Panther, taking his front paws into her hands and promptly giving him a smooch below his nose.

"There, I gave you a kiss on the lips. Are we friends again?"

Panther averted his eyes, clearly straining not to jump from joy.

"Come on, I need your help. This garden," she motioned behind the fence, "is evil. And it will eat me, too, if you won't help me. Besides - you promised - we had a deal, remember? Steak? Pink jacket?"

"Not pink. Rosy." Growled Panther trying to sound hurt.

"Fine, rosy. Are with me? Panther, tell me, are you with me?" Lilith said questioningly.

Panther rolled his eyes and suddenly licked Lilith's face vigorously, wagging his tail like mad, making her giggle.

"That's my boy! Let's do it." Lilith petted his head, took a deep breath, readying herself for what was to come, deciding to go full out and suffer though it stoically and all at once, because it will be less painful this way. It's like tearing off a band-aid, quickly ripping it off hurt, but it was over fast. And so they marched in the thickening darkness, Panther ahead, throwing worried glances at his mistress, who pressed her lips into a thin line, curled her fingers into fists and marched ahead, to the brightly lit mansion from which delicious smells of dinner drifted on a barely detectable wind.

## Chapter 17. Return

Inadvertently, Lilith picked the perfect time and place to make her return. If she were to come an hour earlier, she would've had to face her parents and her grandfather separately, not mentioning the Schlitzburger twins who got whiff of Lilith's escapade and planned to tease her about it, Daphne having begged out the blush beret from Gustav (he wanted to throw it out), parading around the corridors, her blonde pigtails jiggling triumphantly. Now, however, the entire Bloom family reunion crowd just sat down to dinner, mulling over Lilith's terrible future and sharing made-up scenarios of her being kidnapped (Irma Schlitzburger proclaimed so), shipped overseas by pirates (Patrick was telling Petra), or worse, eaten by a gang of forest bears (that was Gwen's idea). Unaware of any of it, her teeth clenched for courage, Lilith pushed the heavy front door open, and, without a pause, hiked straight into middle of the dinner hall, causing jaws to fall open and an uneasy silence to wash over her.

It took a second or two for her parents to register whom they were seeing, and another couple seconds for the rest of the guests. In fact, they didn't even recognize her at first. Her

hands and face were scratched. Her hair was dirty and matted, standing up every which way, twigs still stuck to it. Her pale pink leotard and tights were in tatters, with dried mud and blood all over them. Her ballet slippers were so dirty, they looked rather brown. Her knit navy bag was caked with dry mud. Her tutu was torn in places and hung on her like an old moth-eaten piece of gauze. To top the picture, a fine layer of dust from Ed's secret hiding place was covering her from head to toe.

There was a collective gasp, and then the hall broke into shouting voices, shuffling feet, moving chairs, and calls of her name. Lilith wisely closed her eyes, no, she *squinted* them really hard, because for the next hour or so she had to endure the following.

First, it was her mother. She didn't see her, but she felt her strong grip, smelled her cinnamon fragrance. "Lilith! Where on earth have you been?" Gabrielle Bloom methodically grabbed Lilith's waist, arms, shoulders, perhaps to check if anything was broken or not, and then finally took Lilith's face in her hands. "Open your eyes!" Lilith squinted harder still. "Look at me, tell me where you've been! Who did this to you? How on earth... Al!" She didn't get a chance to finish.

Lilith's father arrived. Al Bloom gently moved Gabi aside and hugged his daughter, pressing her face into his shirt, whispering urgently into her ear. "Oh, sweetie, you scared us.

You scared us so much. We thought - we thought - we didn't know what to think. If not for your grandfather..."

His whispers drowned in the general chatter that finally surrounded the little Bloom family, pressing in, eager to touch the girl who returned from the dead, to talk to her, to give her their version of how she felt, how she disappeared, what she should do in the future to prevent this, what her parents should do in the future to prevent this, how they should raise her, how child rearing in America is not at its best, how child rearing in Germany compares to it in its superiority, and on and on and on it went.

"- Daphne says you found graves in the garden, is that true? Did they invite you over for dinner, the dead people, is that why you're so filthy?"

"No, it's because *they* wanted to have her for dinner. Sadly, she escaped, see the scratches?"

"- let my mother feel her face, let her feel it! She can tell what happened to a child by feeling her face, she -"

"- Petra, don't touch her tutu, it's dirty!"

"- fierce child, I tell you, in my age and time -"

"- I thought for once I'll have a peaceful night. Alfred, I request you move this girl into another room. It's not a hotel here. Alfred! Alfred, I insist!" That was the old jittering neighbor lady Lilith shared the wall with, the wall of their

adjoining rooms. At last, there were slow deliberate yet soft steps of her grandfather, joining the commotion.

Sensing him a few feet away by his unmistakably sickly sweet fragrance, Lilith opened her eyes wide.

Their stares crossed and locked. Her grandfather's little sharp eyes burrowed into her head, in an attempt to uncover what was going on in her brain. Lilith held his gaze, determined not to give in.

It was open war, and they both knew it.

There was no use hiding or playing any games anymore, Lilith decided. She hasn't got much time. She didn't know when exactly the garden was supposed to regenerate, but judging by all the activity, it could happen any day. Most old roses have been harvested away, the crows swooped in, no doubt ready for a bloody feast to occur, the garden, or something in the back of the garden, was clearly hungry and produced all kinds of disturbances, noises, demanding food. Gustav has been summoning Alfred Bloom for all kinds of emergencies that must have dealt with that. Rosalinde appeared to be Alfred's favorite niece, confirming his desire to have her moved out by the first week of July. That was two days away, leaving Lilith two days to figure everything out, if not less. Not mentioning the fact that she barely had any hope to connect with Ed.

The rest of the guests noticed the tension between Lilith and Alfred and momentarily ceased their chatter. Al Bloom relaxed his hug and stepped aside, Gabrielle Bloom fell quiet.

"Grandfather, how *old* are you?" Lilith asked in a very clear and loud voice, letting it ring uncomfortably into the silence. The only sound she could hear was the wild beating of her own heart and the urgent hissing from Daphne, "He tells everyone he's 18. It's a joke, of course. He says it's not good for business to let people know you're *old*."

There was a blitz-second of lightning between two pairs of their eyes, granddaughter's and grandfather's, a fleeting look of surprise on his face, quickly replaced with utter hatred, and then...

"She doesn't know what she's saying." Alfred Bloom pronounced soothingly, turning his lip corners down and conjuring a sad expression on his face, clasping his hands together in front of him. "She must be delirious. Gabi, I suggest -"

"What happened to grandma?" Lilith pressed on, having just now realized that nobody ever told her anything about it, since her death occurred such a long time ago. Her father was only a few years old back then. "What happened to her? How did she die?"

At this, a few uncomfortable murmurs broke out in the crowd, people leaning their heads together and energetically whispering to each other the dark secret of the Bloom family.

"Lilith! How *dare* you! We came here to honor your grandmother's memory, not to make fun of it, and certainly not to remind your grandfather about his very personal pain!" Gabi Bloom took matters into her own hands, gripping Lilith's shoulders and turning her around. Lilith, terrified that she will miss her chance, proceeded resisting vigorously, slipping out of her mother's hold and yelling at the top of her lungs, barely a foot away from Alfred Bloom, not being worried about anything anymore, since everyone thought she was crazy already, so there was really nothing for her to lose, if not gain some strange popularity with which people surround mentally sick in their ill-advised interest.

"Grandpa, come on! It will save us both precious time. You named me heir to your property. Why? I have the right to know. And if you won't tell me, I *will* figure it out on my own, no matter where you lock me up, you know that by now, don't you? Why don't you tell these lovely people where you found my blush beret?" At this, Lilith expertly turned around and snatched her knit beret off of Daphne's head to her loud protesting squeals.

"It was not me, my dear, who found it. I'm afraid you'll have to thank Baer for this." Baer stepped to the foot of his

master, rumbling menacingly, giving Lilith that same look he gave her when she first arrived at the mansion, the hungry look of a predator sizing up his prey.

"Dad, don't frighten her with your beast, please." Al Bloom stepped between them protectively. "Have Gustav take him away. Look at her, she's shaking. She's just been through a terrible ordeal. We don't even know where she was." Her father said it with an acrid tone he reserved for his quarrels with his father regarding dogs and dog breeds and whippets being obviously superior to mastiffs.

"Grandpa *knows* where I was." Lilith interjected forcefully.

Her father turned to her, an uncomprehending look on his face. "Do we really need to have this conversation right now? Sweetie, let's go to your room. You'll take a shower, change, eat dinner, we'll talk..."

"No need asking her, Al, let's just carry her if she won't cooperate. And I want to call that doctor immediately, so we can schedule a reevaluation tomorrow." Gabi Bloom seized Lilith under her armpits, ready to heave her if that's what it took.

"No need, mother, I can still walk and tell left from right, thank you very much." Lilith said icily. "I'm not so sure about up and down, however, or in and out. But I take it the doors in this house will guide me, won't they? Or do they have a nasty habit of leading people not where they intended to go,

opening into rooms they weren't intended to see?" She threw a venomous glance at her grandfather, whose face remained a calm mask, his bushy eyebrows raised in a question.

The rest of the guests watched this familial exchange with their mouths open, their hands clutched together, ready to erupt into most delicious gossip the second Blooms left the hall.

Which they did. As Gabi marched both her daughter and husband out of the dinner hall, Lilith felt mounting excitement with her back, her neck hairs rising at the idea of all those poor people being slaughtered in the matter of days. Well, not all of them, women only. And girls. Even little 5 year old Petra. For what? To benefit the malevolent Alfred Bloom's business, BLOOM & CO, to make him more money, to strengthen whatever pact he has entered into with the garden for that. Hatred unlike one Lilith knew in her short 12 year long life, surged through her veins in hot steaming trains.

She had to do something. She had to stop this. She had to find out how it all started, she had to know the rules, who does what and why and when. And, until she found out if it was her alone to be fed to the garden or the rest of the female guests together with her, until then, she had to devise a plan on how to protect them all and how to make them aware of the danger. The worst part of it being, how to make them believe she was sane and was telling the truth. Suddenly, Lilith bitterly

regretted her outburst, wishing she didn't appear crazy after all. Who will listen to her now? But the damage was done, it was what it was, and Sherlock Holmes would have said, *nothing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person*. She had to talk, had to try, no matter the outcome.

Deep in thought, Lilith didn't notice how Panther joined them on the stairs, how Gabi furiously opposed the idea of Panther spending the night with Lilith or being in her room at all, and how Al, shaking off his usual inertness, argued back that this is *why* he gave the runt of the litter to Lilith for her birthday last year in the first place, so she could have a loyal friend, and how she needed him right now, more than ever before. Neither did Lilith notice her mother's precious facial expression, how she balked at her husband contradicting her, how she remained alarmingly silent until they reached the door to Lilith's room, how they entered and sat down, or how Katharina opened the door, and with a sly smile on her plump face and blowing kisses to suddenly wriggly Panther left a tray with dinner for Lilith and regretfully left the room.

Lilith didn't even notice the tray placed on her knees, automatically picking up the fork and sticking it into a cold German sausage with a juicy crunch, biting into it and chewing it without tasting it, thinking all along about what she will do next, how she will pull out that list of 20 names she made the

other night at dinner, planning to keep a close watch on all of them, which would make her break up her day into...

*12 waking hours divided by 20 would be... Lilith furrowed her brow, chewing. One hour has 60 minutes, so if I wake up at 8 in the morning and go back to my room at 8 at night after dinner, I will have - 720 minutes, divided by 20 will be 36 minutes each - I will have half an hour per person, that means...*

Meanwhile, her mother has dialed the number for Ed's doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner, and was slowly apologizing for such a late urgent call and explaining her dire need for him to come out first thing in the morning tomorrow and have a session with her daughter. Several times she had to repeat herself, while Lilith's father was watching Lilith eat, holding his head in his hands, mesmerized and relieved in the way a parent is relieved to see his child after a scare of a disappearance.

"Dad," Lilith said suddenly in an urgent whisper, seeing her mother's back, busy talking, "how did grandma die?" Lilith finished chewing and swallowed, her eyes full of hope on her father's face. He looked scrawny and tired, blue circles traced his forever dancing eyes, his black hair bunched up into an unruly mess that suited a teenager more than it suited an adult with a teenage daughter.

"Um... let's talk about this tomorrow, sweetie, after you have rested, okay? It's not a very easy story for me to tell."

"Do you remember her at all? How old were you when she died?" Lilith, unperturbed, grabbed her chance by the throat, eyeing her mother's back, ready to stop at a moment's notice, feeling Panther curl protectively around her feet.

"I was 5." Said her father dully.

There was that number 5 again. Lilith felt her hand stop, cold sausage frozen in the air inches away from her face. She lowered the fork on the plate.

"What happened?"

Al glanced back nervously, seeing his wife gesticulating and negotiating a time for tomorrow, repeating herself over and over, as if the recipient on the other end didn't understand English very well.

"All right. You see," Al scratched his chin, looking into distance, "she had the same disorder, err... I don't mean anything bad by this word, sweetie, it's simply..."

"It's okay, dad, don't worry, I don't mind it - really - and?" Lilith urged him on, her cold sausage forgotten. Panther silkily snuck up to her knees and, with a wave of approval from Lilith, stole it and dragged it to the floor, munching on it noisily.

"She had the same disorder that you have. It's genetic, in many cases."

Lilith nodded, having read numerous books about it, trying to understand what it is that was wrong with her, because to herself she felt perfectly normal.

Her father was massaging the collar of his crumpled polo shirt now, still looking away into some distant point in the past.

"She didn't really have a good sense of direction or orientation. She could literally get lost in a clump of trees, sliding into a panic, hyperventilating, going into a spasm, and passing out, eventually. It happened to her many times, so my father, your grandfather, had to take care of me alone. The rose garden was the only place where she didn't get lost, where she felt at home. She loved roses, loved smelling them, arranging bouquets from them, and your grandfather planted extra bushes for her, way in the back, stringing them over a garden arch and creating a sort of a grotto. It was her secret place when she needed a refuge. It calmed her down, you see. Then, one day -"

"AL! ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?"

Neither Al Bloom, not Lilith noticed that for the past minute Gabi Bloom stood over them, her hands pressed into her hips, her vicious eyes glaring at her husband from behind her glasses, which slid to the tip of her nose, as they always did in the advent of her terrible wrath.

"This is the last story she needs to hear right now, especially before bedtime! I can't believe it. Have you got absolutely no sense?"

"Gabi, she will find out eventually, what's the harm..."

"Stop it! Am I the only one here who has to keep a straight head? I'm not made of steel, you know?" There were tears in her voice now, and her lower lip trembled. One of her knitting needles was dangerously close to falling out of her hair. "I thought my baby was lost forever, our baby, Al, our baby. But somebody has to call the doctor, and it's me. Somebody always has to keep the tabs and keep things moving forward, and it's always me, always me. I can't do this anymore. I simply can't. Al..." Her mother broke into tears.

"Oh, Gabi, I'm-" Al began.

"Don't touch me!" She cried, wiping her face and composing herself very quickly.

"You will take a shower, you will take these -" Gabi placed two orange pills on Lilith's bedside table, "and we will see you in the morning. Now, rest, please. Sleep. You must sleep." Something broke in her mother's voice, and to Lilith's utter surprise, she scooped her into a bone-crunching hug and pressed her face into her neck, kissing it. Lilith let her arms hang idly, not sure if she could hug her mother back, then she timidly caressed her shoulders.

"I love you, never forget that." Her mother whispered into her ear, and then, as if embarrassed, grabbed her husband by the hand, marched out of the room, and swiftly shut the door behind her, turning a key in the lock.

Lilith stared at the door, then at Panther, who was licking his muzzle, having dined on a fine fat German sausage and in general feeling very pleased with himself for scoring such a fine meal without being scolded by Gabrielle Bloom.

"What was *that* about?" Said Lilith suspiciously.

"*That* is called marriage, and I take it you're still ages away from it, so please put it out of your adolescent head. We've got business to attend to." Panther professed, sticking out his chest importantly.

"Look who's talking!" Lilith exclaimed, nevertheless grinning from ear to ear. As dangerous as it sounded, their investigation into the secret of Bloom's rose garden was about to begin in earnest.

## Chapter 18. The wall

Night threw its purple veil over the rose garden, hushing all noises and making the wind die. If it was in another place and in another time, Lilith could've allowed herself to think that this was a peaceful prelude to a good night's sleep, accompanied by the velvety beauty of the outside landscape, merging with her dreams and waking her to a glorious morning sun playing hop bunnies on her pillow. Unfortunately, it wasn't what it seemed. This quiet disturbed Lilith, she'd rather for it to be chaotic, not lying low in the anticipation of the perfect moment to strike, to make its final lethal move. She couldn't tell how she knew, she just felt it with her very skin. Any day now, like Ed said, any day. To keep her thoughts in check, for the next hour, Lilith stripped out of her ruined clothes, took a shower, combed her hair, washed her knit bag, wiped Panther (to his loud displeasure) with a wet towel, and changed into her reading outfit, donning a blue beret, blue skirt, striped knee socks, and a navy cardigan.

"You're not planning on sleeping, then?" Panther said with a long yawn, revealing two rows of brilliant teeth and a long curly tongue.

Lilith was climbing on top of her bed and turned to answer, one leg hanging over the edge. "You may give peace to your old bones, *oh Panther*, the amicable good-humored gentle partner of mine. You poor paws need rest, take my word, as we are about to embark on a journey that might involve stepping over a multitude of bones, some of which might crumble to dust, some others, however might still be fresh and will therefore splinter upon you stepping on them, which will result in some very unfortunate \_"

"Grrrr. I get it!" Panther exclaimed hastily. "Can I at least have a short nap?" He growled hopefully.

"No. And stop acting like a cat." Lilith said crossly.

She turned on the bed side lamp, propped herself up against two pillows, leaning on the bed's headboard, surveying her possessions spread about: Ed's map of the garden, Ed's cross-section drawing of the Bloom property, her own journal open on the page where she made a list of 20 female guests, herself not included, and her favorite book, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the corner *still* bent on page 9.

"Panther, I've lost my pen. Down in - remember, in that space... hypanthium. How will I write now? I need a new pen."

"Um... are you sure this is the most desirable position for the night? May I suggest, you reverse and suffer hunching over your things on the opposite end, just so that in the tragic

event of more heads appearing on the wall, they won't be breathing down your neck?" Panther yapped quietly, eyeing the spot on the wall where two nights ago five heads appeared out of plaster.

With a stifled shriek, Lilith jumped away and sat across the wall, staring at it, panting. She has completely forgotten about this vivid nightmare the other night. The wall didn't move, nothing was on it, but for a split second Lilith thought that it was sighing, as if the house was in distress, and despite Panther's urgent protests, Lilith fussed over across the blankets and petted the spot, like one would pet a frightened animal.

"Hey, it's okay, it's gonna be okay, I promise. Will you help me again?" She whispered into plaster, which was a very strange sight indeed, and if anyone in the Bloom family saw her right now, any doubts regarding her sanity would've been wiped clean from their minds. None of them were present, however, and the only living being who saw her was her pet whippet.

"I'm distressed too, you know." Came from behind, but Lilith ignored him. He was clearly bent on every opportunity to get her attention, still a wee bit jealous of the kiss she gave to Ed.

The wall bulged once and smoothed under her hand. Seized by a sudden idea, Lilith jumped off the bed and ran to the

bathroom, then turned around, grabbed two orange pills from her bedside table, and ran into the bathroom again.

"What are you doing?" Panther demanded, trotting behind her.

Lilith flushed the pills down the toilet, then filled a glass full of water and walked hastily back to her bed, carefully trickling the liquid down the wall. The second water touched it, the wall absorbed every single drop without a trace, and then heaved, as if it wanted more.

"You remember what happened last time when you fed it, right?" Panther growled in a manner an old man would mutter under his breath, disgruntled at something very obvious. Lilith ignored him again, running off and coming back with another glass of water. For the next fifteen minutes, she kept running back and forth, emptying glass upon glass of water into the wall, which it was drinking greedily, but nothing happened. It didn't even appear damp or swollen in the slightest. At last, tired of this repetitive task, Lilith allowed herself to simply sit on the bed, empty glass on the floor, her face in her hands.

"It's not doing anything. What do I do now?" She asked Panther.

Panther expressed his pride by jumping off the bed and strolling towards the open window, his tail erect like that of a particularly lofty cat. "You may have registered the fact that I

was giving out precious advice only minutes earlier. You chose to dismiss it. Well, what can I say *now*. I feel like it doesn't matter what I say, you won't listen, so why bother?"

"FINE." Snapped Lilith irritably, seizing the book and leafing through it absentmindedly.

"What are you doing?" Panther inquired curiously.

"Seeking advice from someone who doesn't demand steak or fancy pink -"

"Rosy -"

"- *pink* jackets or 24 hours a day, 7 days a week attention. Someone who, in case the attention happens to be interrupted by a mere second, doesn't throw a fit not worthy of a true crime investigator."

Panther was taken aback, his ears erect, his muzzle miffed

Not waiting for him to respond, Lilith thumbed to a random page in *The Hounds of the Baskervilles*, closed her eyes, and pointed her finger into it blindly. This was her favorite way of finding out answers to life's problems, whenever her father was not around (which was most of the time). Because whenever she asked her mother, she got an extensive lecture on what she should do that had nothing to do with her original question. She did it since she learned how to read, which was when she was 3, and it was a hard habit to break. She still used this method at dire times, even after discovering one night that her pet

whippet could talk (she had a fever and he started licking her forehead and singing her a song) and relaying to him every single one of her little problems since then. She also knew that this will positively hurt him, but she didn't care at moment. Time was slipping through her fingers and she had to act, not to waste her energy on a capricious pet who decided all of a sudden to be jealous.

Lilith opened her eyes, finger firmly pressed to the page. "*When a crisis comes,*" she read aloud, "*as it will do,*" she couldn't help herself but to glance at Panther, who couldn't help himself but to glance back at her, their recent conflict completely forgotten at the sound of these words, "*I will direct how you shall act. I suppose that by Saturday all might be ready?*"

Lilith felt as though a rough chunk of ice slid into her stomach and lodged there without melting. She swallowed.

"Panther, what day is today?"

"Dogs in general are not supposed to know days of the week. I, however, happen to have studied -"

"Oh, come on, you know I love you more than anything - anyone." Lilith corrected herself quickly, sliding off the bed, scooping Panther into a happy purring bundle and climbing back onto the bed. He licked her, and thus their peace was sealed. For the moment.

"Thursday, I think." He growled happily, wagging his tail.  
"We arrived on Monday, and this is our fourth night."

"Right." Echoed Lilith thoughtfully. "And mom and dad are leaving this Saturday to go see that whippet race, to which, I'm sure, I'm not invited. How convenient. That means we have only one more day, tomorrow. Whatever garden regeneration means, it will happen on Saturday!" Lilith whispered urgently, looking at Panther with wide eyes.

"Since I'm supposed to be your sounding board, may I voice my opinion?" Said Panther timidly.

"Absolumonto. Go for it."

"We live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as you well may have noticed." Panther began with an air of importance.

"And?" Lilith raised her eyebrows suspiciously.

"And, in 21<sup>st</sup> century, most, I say *most*, children know what thrusting their finger into a book and deeming whatever it is they read as the truth, is, how to say it politely, not necessarily a good idea to find out what will happen, as books are not exactly the tools to predict the future." He finished triumphantly.

"Oh, I see. May I add to your, err... statement?" Lilith asked inquisitively.

Panther nodded.

"Well, most children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be also delighted to find out that, no matter what society teaches them, houses do actually move, gardens can eat people, and, oh, dare I forget the most important detail, dogs can *talk*." She crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Panther swallowed loudly, averting his eyes.

"I also believe that authors create books to connect our minds. No matter what they write, it's our collective knowledge preserved on pages, so any word from any book happens to be a word of wisdom. Humph." She added at the end.

"All right. You win." Said Panther with a sigh. "Can I try?" He added energetically.

Lilith grinned a triumphant smile. "You're seriously going to give in without a fight?" She added incredulously, obviously not expecting an answer, and without another word they both leaned over the book, leafing through it.

"Here?" Asked Panther. Lilith nodded, her mouth too dry to talk, and her faithful pet stuck his wet nose directly onto the page of the book, making sure his eyes were closed before he did it, although Lilith knew perfectly well that he couldn't read. His nose left a wet mark on the page, and as he leaned back, Lilith read with fervor.

*"The moon was shining bright upon the clearing, and there in the centre lay the unhappy maid where she had fallen, dead of*

*fear and fatigue.*" Lilith glanced up at the window just in time to see the moon trail out from behind the clouds.

"Who is the maid, me?" Said Lilith breathlessly. "One of the maids from the house? Or -"

But Panther didn't get a chance to answer, because the entire house trembled slightly, as if shifting off its base, and then a hideous crack pierced the night. It sounded like the walls splitting, entire construction groaning and breaking apart. The bedside lamp went out at once. Lilith held on to the bed, when Panther motioned with his nose towards the wall by the bed board. It speared swollen. It kept bulging out like a balloon filled with water, thin lines of cracks traversing in a dangerous looking net, until one big gap started growing across the wall, from the floor all the way to the ceiling. It closely resembled a phenomenon of a gigantic tree growing very fast and smashing every obstacle in its way. It was the wall that separated Lilith and her neighboring old lady, who didn't make a sound, signifying that either she slept deeply through his rumble, or was already devoured by it.

Lilith held on to Panther, Panther held on to Lilith. They both sat at the back edge of the bed, staring, mesmerizing and terrified at the same time.

Chunks of plaster flew, white dust swirled in the air, cracks deepened, and a slithering sound emanated from deep

fissures, signifying a passage of something long and twisted. At last, it emerged. They emerged. The heads. They appeared on the crumbling wall, each stuck in its own hole, tearing thorough with their eyes closed, 8 of them this time. At once, the chopping noises of an axe outside of the house resumed, just like two nights ago, producing 8 distinct thuds, 8 smacks and 8 crunching rolls. Lilith didn't have the time to run up to the window and look, nor would her muscles move. Then all went still and the heads opened their eyes at once.

"I told you he'll chop off your head too, if you won't sleep, didn't I?" Agatha's raspy voice floated through her thin lips. Lilith didn't answer, nor could she, staring at one head in particular, a new one, to the left of Agatha, with a couple other new heads flanking her, forming a kind of two quincunxes merged together, with 3 heads each in top and bottom rows, and 2 in the middle. Lilith blinked, to make sure she saw it right, pointing silently at it to Panther.

"Do you..." She croaked. "Do you - see - what I see?" She asked her loyal whippet, who nodded, licking himself nervously.

The head in question opened its eyes and smiled at Lilith broadly, at which instance Lilith felt her every single nerve snap and her muscles crying out for a long healthy run without ever having to look back, possibly hitting a brick wall just so that every single memory of the present scene might conveniently

evaporate from her mind. Because the head that was looking at was her own. Lilith didn't pay attention to the fact that 2 other new heads flanking hers were Daphne's and Gwen's. She didn't seem to be capable to feel or see anything else.

"Hello." Said her own head back to herself. "Excuse me. Do you terribly mind adjusting my beret? It keeps sliding down..."

Lilith, cold sweat breaking out on her forehead, her very being realizing that she brought this upon herself by pouring water on the wall, made herself crawl forward, tangling in the blankets, until she reached the heads, stood, and, with shaking hands, pulled the beret a little bit back, to free the forehead of her own head.

"Why, thank you, this is so much better." Said the head, and Lilith, her eyes adjusting to darkness, noticed the color of the beret. Lavender. For gazing at the clouds. Which the head promptly did, gazing out the window at the passing clouds that kept covering up the Moon and then letting it shine freely again.

"I'm thirsty." Said Daphne's head.

"Me too. I want a glass of water." Chimed in Gwen's head and Lilith slid down the bed, ran off to the bathroom, filled a glass full of water and came back timidly, not sure how exactly to give them precious liquid that she held in her hand.

"Don't just stand there, go on." Urged her Agatha's head.

Seeing Lilith's uncertainty, Katharina's head came to her aid, "Just pour it on us, darling girl. That's right."

Lilith did. First her own head, then the Schlitzburger twins, then Agatha's, Katharina's, Brandt sisters, and Sabrina Rosenthal's. The more she poured, the more they stuck out their necks out of the wall, until at last, on a fifth glass of water, Agatha suddenly sprouted up to her waist and snatched the glass of water into her gnarly hand. Lilith gulped, letting it go. But Agatha merely stuck her nose inside and see that it was empty, thrust the glass into Lilith's trembling hand.

"More." She demanded.

Lilith obliged, partly out of fear, partly out of curiosity as to what will happen next. And what happened was very simple yet otherworldly at the same time, although it fit into the overall rose garden story very nicely. Each head grew out of the wall, revealing long torsos that elongated into rose vines below their waists, with only arms reminiscing their upper parts of human appearance, mostly resembling gigantic roses with women's heads and a pair of upper leaves rolled into arms. They grew and grew and grew, twisting and turning and overtaking the wall, until it looked like a wall of an ancient garden with a particularly large wild rose bush climbing higher and higher with its thorny vines.

The ceiling dropped lower, the walls shifted closer, and Lilith could've sworn that she was no longer in her room, but in one of those dense garden archways covered with a plush carpet of roses and their stems, intertwined so thickly that the sky disappeared below them.

Meanwhile, heads and torsos silently moved closer, their arms outstretched. Lilith and Panther both retreated slowly, until they hit the opposite wall with their backs, and there was nowhere else to retreat.

"You still think watering the wall was a good idea?" Hissed Panther accusingly.

"At least now we have someone else to ask for clues." Lilith whispered back, trying to sound certain and not doing a very good job.

"Excellent, why don't you go ahead and ask them then." Growled Panther.

"And so I will." Said Lilith, but her throat got hoarse, because all 8 heads, including her own, were hanging in mid air now, level with her, about two feet away, staring her up and down silently, as if getting ready to lunge.

"Excuse me... may I ask you a question?" Lilith produced in a feeble voice.

"Little miss wants to ask us a question." Sneered Agatha and turned to Katharina, who chuckled, passing on the virus of

raspy laughter to Trude and Monika Brandt, and then to Sabrina Rosenthal. Gwen and Daphne picked it up too, but Lilith's head only smiled politely.

Lilith was burning to ask, *what are you*, but it seemed impolite, and asking, *who are you*, felt weird.

"Whose side are you on?" Blurted out Lilith finally.

"There are no sides, little miss, there is only ze garden." Said the head and moved a bit closer.

Lilith swallowed, her heart pounding in her ears now, the sweet stench coming from the heads overwhelming her at this distance, so that she felt like fainting.

"Are you - part of the garden then?"

"Everything is part of the garden, little miss. And garden is part of everything."

This didn't go very well, considering the fact that very cold fingers belonging to the heads were stroking her arms and legs now, as if looking for a spot to pinch her, or stab her with their thorns. Lilith pressed herself as much as she could into the wall, but the wall seemed to be moving her forward. Panther pressed himself to Lilith's right leg, trembling.

"May I... May I ask you about rose garden regeneration? About - about what is going to happen this Saturday?"

"She knows the day. Little miss knows the day." Agatha's head was impressed, judging by its sallow skin going taut and

her thin eyebrows flying upward. Other heads nodded their approval.

"I will - I will water you some more. If you tell me." Added Lilith hopefully, digging her fingers into the wall behind her.

"And why should we? Why should we tell you anything at all?" Asked Agatha, her crooked nose now inches away from Lilith's face.

"I'm - I was - I will be heir to this property, entire Bloom property, to the rose garden, I think I have the right to know. One way or another, I will find out eventually, right?"

The heads swiftly turned away and congregated in a semi-circle, whispering something urgently. It sounded like rustling leaves in the wind, and Lilith couldn't understand what they were talking about, straining her ears to hear. She leaned and picked up Panther, who licked her gratefully.

"You have been exceptionally nice to us so far." Finally spat Agatha, turning around so fast and hovering so close, that Lilith's knees almost gave out. "We will show you." Other heads echoed Agatha's sentiment, and at once they squeezed Lilith and Panther into their midst, like into the middle of a very tangled rose bush, and dashed for the ceiling.

## Chapter 19. Rose bush

Lilith only had enough time to register that the ceiling above them parted with a crack, and then they were speeding in what must have been dark space between the floors, filling the sleeping house with the sound of exceptionally loud rumble and grumble. Lilith felt her innards freeze, horror struck, thinking that they will wake up everyone and ruin the mansion, but soon relaxed and allowed herself to breathe (and Panther to breathe as well, because he nearly suffocated in her tight nervous grip and now coughed politely into his paws). Even the foul sickening tang wafting at her from the heads stopped having its effect. Forgetting herself, her troubles, her discomfort of being pressed between hard cold rose vines and held by equally cold hands, Lilith gaped at the sight of what she saw, unable to speak, unable to move, or blink, or think.

Two heads with flat round faces, those of sisters Trude and Monica, broke through what must have been the ceiling of the room that the old neighboring lady occupied next door (Lilith by now lost all sense of orientation), and soon the entire formation of 8 rose torsos with Lilith pressed in the middle, Panther in her right arm, her left hand pressing blue beret to

her head, all dangled upside down, right above the bed where under a multitude of blankets slept the old lady herself, her wrinkly face sunk into at least 4 frilly pillows, a glass full of water with removable dentures on her bed side table, identical to the one Lilith had. The old lady snored in that annoying way, not loud enough to wake up anyone, but not quiet enough to appear unobtrusive.

"Count, little miss. Count." Agatha whispered into Lilith's ear, her chilly lips brushing it lightly and giving Lilith a shiver. "This is number one."

Lilith mentally noted the picture, turning around to look about the room, but they were moving again. Next, to her utter surprise and then grim satisfaction, was the Schlitzburger room, with Irma Schlitzburder sleeping broadly on a king size bed, blankets thrown on the floor, her voluptuous body covered with a long shiny purple nightgown, her twin daughters sleeping on twin beds by the opposite wall, both their bedding and their nightgowns various shades of lavender, their unkempt blonde hair strewn over pillows, glistening in the moonlight. Gwen was sucking on her thumb, smacking her lips occasionally, and Daphne clutching something dearly to her chest.

"Four. Are you counting? Number two, three, and four." Said Agatha's head in a grim voice.

"Can I..." began Lilith shyly, burning from curiosity, but it's as if the heads understood her desire, they moved her closer to the twin beds, and she saw what Daphne's plump hands were holding. It was a plush toy, a stuffed elephant, very fat and very round.

"It's... it's Moppel," Whispered Lilith to Panther, "the toy that homeless woman was talking about!" Lilith glanced around the room, looking for the porcelain dolls the woman mentioned, Magda, Sandra, and Arabella, and failing to see anything in the royal mess their room was, with clothes covering every inch of the floor, mixed with candy wrappers, empty chips bags, numerous shopping mall bags and shoes. Lots and lots of shoes.

"I figured as much." Growled Panther back, but they were already crashing along to the next room, and the next, and the next. Each time the routine was the same. The Brandt sisters broke through the ceiling, the entire company hung upside down above the bed of the guest for barely a minute, and then they lifted upward and continued their journey, Agatha whispering the numbers into Lilith's ear.

Lilith saw that night some very peculiar sights, ashamed at first at her own spying, but soon overtaken with mischief and badly covered up curiosity, gaping openly at various nightgowns, nightdresses, and nightshirts, negligees, robes, pajamas, heads full of hair rollers, half-eaten dinners on the plates, half-

drunk bottles of alcohol, slippers, booties, night caps, and, in one case, a long flowing silk concoction in bright red that Heidemarie Haas, the blind ancient lady wore, complete with red silk bedding and red silk slippers. They even visited bedrooms on the first floor where the maids slept, Agatha and Katharina and other women servants and gardeners Lilith didn't know by name.

Finally they crashed into the room before the last on the second floor, and Lilith saw to her surprise both Trude and Monika Brandt sleeping peacefully in their hairnets.

"How can you be in two places at once?" Lilith hissed to the two top heads, before she could restrain herself.

"We're not." Both heads answered with an air of being greatly misunderstood and offended by it.

Lilith bit her tongue, and then she was hanging right above her parents' bed, both Gabi and Al Bloom soundly asleep, layers of white covers strewn about on their bed, as Lilith remembered them from the night she spent in their room, their two heads stuffed into pillows on two opposite sides.

*Marriage. Thought Lilith. If this is what marriage is about, I'm never getting married.*

"Twenty, little miss. You see? Your mother makes it 20. And you are number 21." Agatha whispered, and at once they were back in Lilith's room.

"What's going to happen to all of them?" Lilith asked in a trembling voice, biting on her finger like Ed did and wishing he were here, finding herself on her bed next to Panther, who nibbled at her other hand affectionately.

"Whatever ze garden wants to happen to them." Said Agatha's head. The rest of them retreated back into the wall, gazing at her solemnly.

"And what does it want to happen to them, exactly?" Lilith pressed on, forgetting herself.

"Little miss iz asking too many questions. Little miss is trying our patience." Agatha's head produced in a low grumble, and other heads, including the one that looked like Lilith, sneered in a very unpleasant way. "Simple water won't do for questions like zese."

Lilith's stomach shrunk to the size of a small frozen bunny, jittering in fear. "I'll give you my blood, if that's what you want." She said before she could stop herself, to an alarmed almost bark from Panther.

"Will you? Oh, what a darling girl!" That was Katharina's head.

"I want a bloody lollipop!" Exclaimed Daphne hungrily.

"Lollipops are boring. I want a bloody toffee!" Chimed in Gwen.

All of the heads' arms broke through the wall again, reaching out for Lilith hungrily, their sharp thorns glistening in the moonlight, their muttering turning into indiscernible gabble and gibberish.

"Later!" Agatha's head hushed them, then turned back to Lilith. "Later, miss, let's not rush the night. We shall do one task at a time, shall we? It does not become a young lady like yourself to grow up impatient. Your grandfather will not approve of this."

"What about grandpa? Where does he sleep?" Lilith said and then bit on her tongue hard, lest she can't hold it back again the next time a question pops up in her head. Hot blood trickled into her mouth giving it a metallic taste.

"Grandpa sleeps on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor." Professed Daphne's head.

"We saw him going there every night. We did." Added Gwen, nodding vigorously.

"Can I see his bedroom?" Asked Lilith, hoping she could maybe glimpse some explanation to his murderous obsession and be able to put him on the spot, then promptly covered her mouth with both hands.

"I repeat myself. Too many questions, young miss. You only asked us to tell you about the rose garden regeneration, and this is what we are doing. Your grandfather has nothing to do with this process." Agatha's head spat out, irritated.

"Oh, he doesn't?" Lilith mumbled through her fingers, feeling confused.

"We can show you that as well, if you'd like, only it will take more than water, of course. More than even a little blood that I are tasting right now."

Lilith stopped sucking on her tongue, horrified.

"Do you want to pay for that as well? To pay with your sweet pulsing nectar? He is on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, and that floor is mighty hungry this time of the night. I think 8 glasses full will do it, I would have to ask it." Agatha's head sneered, showing pointed teeth, and Lilith felt a trickle of cold sweat run down her back.

"Well, err - on second thought - I think I'm fine for now, how about we do it some other time?" Lilith retreated hastily.

"As you wish, little miss. Now, if you please hold on to the window sill..."

Numb all over, Lilith slid off the bed on unbending legs and trotted to the open window, when with a jolt the entire house seemed to have begun lengthening, increasing in height, like it turned into a stem of a rose, rapidly shooting up into the sky and then bending over the rose garden, passing by neat rows of bushes planted tightly next to each other, interwoven pathways running along rows and rows of fragrant shrubs. Flocks of sleeping crows dotted the garden in black patches of moving

breathing feathers. Their number increased, and it seemed like they had no desire to vacate the garden.

"Saturday." Whispered Lilith.

Then clear night air swirled and dipped into a sweetly smelling fog. The atmosphere changed. They passed into the other side of the garden. Surprisingly, there were no crows here.

Lilith's skin prickled from fright, Panther clawing at her to hold him tighter, afraid to fall, because the window now hung almost perpendicularly to the ground, so to Lilith it felt like they were lying on the floor above a large square opening the size of a window, their heads hanging out to see.

Night was pitch black here, with hardly any light coming from the moon, like it was swallowed by utter blackness. Lilith could barely see, but she could smell and hear very well.

At once, sighing noises penetrated misty stillness, like heavy breathing of a large organism in obvious pain. Rose bushes grew taller, thornier, looking unkempt, wild patches of red sticking out here and there like unblinking blood-shot eyes. The house kept stretching itself farther, and Lilith now saw white iron fence in the distance. It was the only barrier between the forest and the end of the garden, where roses grew as tall as trees, and finally the house stopped moving.

It was so abrupt that both Lilith and Panther nearly rolled out of the window. Her heart beating like a mad butterfly,

Lilith held on to the windowsill for dear life, peering into the shifting fog underneath. They were hanging a good five feet over the tips of the tallest rose bushes. Lilith didn't dare to ask any of the heads what she was supposed to see, afraid to inadvertently anger Agatha's head, which seemed to be the boss of the others.

"I smell it. Grrrrr..." Growled Panther quietly, his fur bristling, his tail standing up erect in alarm.

"Smell what?" Lilith kept sniffing and searching with her eyes for something, anything, until she saw it and wished she didn't.

But it was too late to burn that image out of her head.

Directly below them, right by what appeared to be a rose grotto similar to the one she and Ed were hiding in not too long ago, amidst the tangle of rose shrubs, lay a shape that Lilith recognized at once. It was the bush that her grandfather fashioned into a woman's body, complete with heavy bosom and other curves in every anatomically appropriate place. Last time Lilith saw it, it was about 10 feet high. Now it seemed to have doubled in size, and not only that, it was thicker somehow, stuffed, stuffed right in the middle, right where...

Lilith's eyes flew wide open in recognition. "Panther..." She croaked, blinking several times to make sure she saw it right.

"Panther, I think it's pregnant."

"What's pregnant?" Panther growled back nervously, sniffing the air.

"The bush. You smelled it. Look!" Lilith pointed at the round bulging in the middle of the shape, where it had its waist last time she saw it and now appeared swollen, the whole thorny thing breathing heavily, emitting low moans and rolls of fog from its leafy mouth, each smelling fouler than the first. Every few seconds the woman-bush would clench its viny fingers into fists and pound on the ground, creating the effect of a mini-earthquake which Lilith immediately recognized, thinking back to when she was lost in the garden and has fallen into its other side by accident.

A few other familiar growls joined the scene, and Lilith now saw three mastiff patrolling the space around the bush, their angry eyes rolling underneath a million folds of skin, their heavy paws making dull thuds. None of them smart enough to look up and see their enemies hanging right above them. Lilith almost expected a tall gnarly shape of Gustav to join the party, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Panther took a breath to snarl, but Lilith clutched his muzzle shut just in time, shushing him.

A wave of tremble passed through the ground, and the bush raised its enormous head, its blood-red rose eyes rotating

wildly, its mouth opening into a hole the size of a barrel, and released an ear-splitting shriek.

"It's having contractions!" Yelled Lilith over the roar and the new wave of stink.

"It's what?" Panther barked.

"Garden regeneration! That's what it means. It will give birth to a new bush, a baby bush. It must be doing it every 35 years or something like that. It means it will need food. The newborn bush will need food, do you get it?"

But Panther didn't answer. Mastiffs heard them and raised their ugly squarish heads at once, spotting both Lilith and her whippet. They opened their huge jaws full of teeth and howled for their master in a manner an injured wolf would, rousing cawing crows from their sleep and causing the sky blacken from their madly flopping wings.

Chaos was about to erupt. The house instantly retreated, shrinking back to its normal size so fast, that both Lilith and Panther were thrown away from the window onto the floor, but not before Lilith noticed a flicker of yellow light through linden trees. It flashed only once, but it was enough for her to know that Ed was sending her a signal and she had to find a way to get out of the mansion and into the field. Clutching Panther to her chest and rolling towards the bed, Lilith feverishly talked into his ear.

"Did you see that? That was Ed. He was sending me the signal, like he promised!"

Panther didn't seem to share Lilith's excitement, grunting and bumping his head on the wall, yowling in pain.

"Owww!" Lilith wailed, feeling her head collapse with the corner leg of her bedside table. It was made of iron, like the bed, and its sharp edge split the skin on Lilith's forehead open, letting out a thin trickle of blood. It dripped on the wooden floor and instantly vanished from it, to a satisfied gurgle of the house.

"It tasted us. It doesn't like us. It will eat only those whose taste it likes." Heard Lilith from somewhere above in what must have been Agatha's voice, then all noise and movement stopped.

The mansion stood still, like mansions are supposed to do.

In another second, the door into Lilith's room opened with a bang and there stood Gabrielle Bloom, her crazy hair in a halo, her sleepy eyes swollen and angry, hands propped into her hips, bony naked feet sticking out from the bottom of her nightgown, the only article of clothing her mother didn't attempt to knit, to Lilith's relief. Lilith usually served at the lab rabbit, having to wear her mother's creations and be paraded around the room to show them off for new clients.

"What's with the noise? What is going on?" Said Gabi shrilly, and then gasped. "Lilith!" She ran over to Lilith, lifting her up and propping her against the wall. "What happened?"

For a moment Lilith felt disoriented and wanted to confide in her mother the importance of the news she just learned, to warn her of the impending danger, which, according to what Ed said, and to what the heads disclosed, stretched to her mother, whose head was not on the wall, meaning, the garden didn't taste her blood yet and could very well decide that it likes her, once it does. Though Lilith has deep doubts about the fact that anyone would want to eat Gabrielle Bloom, who could easily rip anyone apart who tried.

She had to answer something, as by now Al Bloom joined in, lowering his worried face and squinting in the dark, trying to see what's going on, then turning on the bedside table lamp.

Now both of Lilith's parents exclaimed a loud "Oh!" Because Lilith's face was streaked with blood still oozing from the gash in her forehead.

"Sweetie!" Cried her father. "You're bleeding!"

"What on earth did you do? Why are you dressed?" Joined her mother.

Lilith racked her brain for a passable story, until it hit her. Brilliant, as always.

"According to latest research I read before leaving for Berlin, mother, at your urging, may I mention, adolescent children with mental disorders such as mine tend to sleepwalk. Now, it hasn't happened to me yet, but the stress of facing a strange doctor tomorrow with whom I'm not acquainted, dare I say, wouldn't let me sleep. I thought it would be embarrassing if I was found in my nightgown patrolling the halls, and it would only add to more *scurrilous* gossip that is already circulating about me among grandfather's guests, which, in turn, throws a dark spot on your reputation. I was so very worried about your new clients. Alas, I fell asleep dressed and then fell off my bed, splitting my forehead in the process. My *temerity* is at fault here, and I apologize profusely for rousing you out of bed, dear mother. How very *lugubrious*, wouldn't you say?" Lilith looked up at her mother innocently, unblinking. This was by far the longest tirade she ever delivered uninterrupted, scoring not two, but whole three sophisticated words.

Gabi was holding her head, a look of utter incredulity on her face, her mouth open, speechless, her eyes darting at her husband, who shrugged his shoulders and then walked off to the bathroom to get a towel, to wipe off Lilith's blood.

"Lilith, if you want to sleep in your clothes, that's okay. I understand. Let me put you back to bed, all right?" Finally managed her mother, in a frightened voice.

Both parents sat on either side of Lilith's bed, tucking her in like when she was 5 (it's the last time she remembers when they both did it), her father wiping her skin clean, her mother giving her a kiss, and Lilith hugging Panther under the blankets, grinning happily, thinking, that if this is what it took, she would gladly split her head open again and again and again. It felt real. It felt normal. For 5 minutes, they were a family, and nobody mentioned her sickness, nobody scolded her, nobody gave her pity or tried to feed her pills. They both kissed her good night on either cheek, and it was the best night of Lilith's visit to her grandfather so far.

## Chapter 20. New doctor

Both Lilith and Panther fell asleep almost instantly, exhausted from everything that happened in the night and comforted by their discovery. At least now they weren't facing as many mysteries anymore, it felt like the pieces of the puzzle began falling into place. Plus, Lilith thought dreamily before drifting off completely, she had something she could use at the last resort, and she had plenty of it. Her blood. If worse came to worst, she had close to 3 quarts of blood, according to one of her grandma's anatomical books, calculated based on her weight of 90 pounds. A quart of blood yielded about 3 full glasses. She would be left with 1 glass after giving the house the other 8. She should be okay with that, shouldn't she? Children regenerate faster than gardens do, don't they? At last, overtaken by sleep, Lilith's thoughts stopped, never even considering the fact that giving away this much blood might kill her.

Incessant cawing of the crows woke both of them up with a start the next morning. Lilith promptly sat up in bed, her head reeling. The house just finished readjusting itself for the morning with one final jolt that caused Lilith to nearly fall

back into the pillows. Used to it by now, she didn't pay it much attention. Panther, on the other hand, crawled deeper under the blanket, sliding over Lilith's knees and attempting to hide beneath her feet.

"No, you're not. Come on, we only have one day left, and that's *today!*" Lilith said in a lecturing tone, unceremoniously pulling her pet out by his tail, to his disgruntled protests, and even an attempt to bite her.

"Ouch!" Lilith blew on her hand. "You didn't just do that!"

"Yes, I did. I'm sleeping. I need my thinking sleep for thinking, otherwise my thinking is not thinking but merely ruminating last night's thoughts that by this morning will surely prove to be obsolete. Now, if you don't mind -" He attempted to stuff himself under the pillow.

"Come on! I can't do this alone."

"I demand steak." Growled Panther. For a moment he reminded Lilith of her mother before she had her morning coffee.

"You're *excruciatingly* impossible." She smirked and scratched behind his ears.

Panther stretched out his neck in delight producing a noise close to a purr. "That's more like it."

"Ed's drawings!" Lilith cried suddenly, remembering the ruminations the house went through yesterday and looking around wildly. The blanket was empty. Lilith jumped out of bed, and,

skidding on the polished floor in her knee socks, looked under. There, as if someone stacked her belongings neatly, lay her navy knit bag. She reached for it and with her heart pounding in her ears and her hands shaking, opened the flap, pulling out pieces of paper as if she herself has put them inside the night before. Ed's cross-section drawing. Ed's garden map. Her own journal, with a list of 20 female guests on its first page. And her book, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Lilith automatically touched her head.

"My beret!" Was her next exclamation. "Panther, did you see what happened to my blue beret?" Her hand still in her hair as if keeping it there would help her somehow, she ran off to the open window, looking out into the cloud of flying crows, squinting into distance.

The weather itself seemed to have been coming from the other side of the rose garden. Thick tongues of fog rolled in, together with the usual stench unusually sharp in its potency, as if whatever organic matter has gone bad overnight, has tripled or quadrupled in its size, overwhelming the atmosphere with intoxicating reek. Lilith clamped her nose shut, looking back at Panther, who was licking himself with a wrinkly nose, sniffing and sneezing occasionally.

"Dreadful, simply dreadful." He yapped contemptuously.

"Oh, no!" Lilith shouted, pointing into the fog.

One of the crows was cawing madly, swooping around in circles, with its prize hanging down limply, dampened by the moisture in the air. It was Lilith's blue beret, and the crow, looking suspiciously like the one that nabbed Lilith in the temple, appeared to be winking at the girl nastily, before turning to the other side of the garden, flying to its very end, then flapping wings once, enough for Lilith to see how it opened its beak and dropped the beret down, where long vines flailed themselves up into the air, no doubt arms and legs of the gigantic rose-woman both Lilith and her pet saw in the night.

"NO!" Yelled Lilith, but it was too late. Dumbstruck, unable to move, she stood by the window for what seemed like an eternity and watched, as if in a trance, how Gustav appeared out of nowhere, stealing off into the thicket of the garden and then emerging with all three mastiffs tugging at the leashes and dragging him forward in a jog, one of them, Baer, holding her blue beret in its jaws, his little piggy eyes swiveling upward, his muzzle delivering a menacing growl through clamped jaws.

History seemed to have repeated itself.

There was a loud bang of the kitchen door, and still Lilith stood frozen to the spot. What will happen now? What will her grandfather do to her, after Gustav tells him he found her beret in the same spot, meaning that she broke his rules and was out there with Panther again? Will he take Panther away for good?

Will he feed *him* to the garden? Will he feed *her* to the garden? Panther meanwhile was dancing around Lilith's legs, barking and saying something, but Lilith didn't hear. Her ability to discern speech suddenly vanished, and everything attained a stage of blur around her, as if she looked and listened through a thick layer of water. Time itself slowed down. There was commotion downstairs, running feet, shouts, barks. There was ringing in her ears. And then, as if in slow motion, the door into her room opened and there stood Agatha, with a tray of breakfast and the blue beret lying next to the plate of freshly baked waffles.

It's the smell of the waffles that jerked Lilith back to reality, making the world come into focus again.

*Gustav didn't give it grandpa? Why?* Lilith wanted to ask, but her tongue got glued to the roof of her mouth and wouldn't move, thick and dry.

"Little miss haz lost something again?" Said Agatha tonelessly, her eyes glinting. "She better get it before her grandfazer will see. She better eat. She haz a long day ahead of her. Ze doctor iz arriving very soon." Agatha pressed her lips into a thin line, indicating that she will say no more, and stepped into the room, placing the tray on the bed and disappearing in a flash, swiftly locking the door behind her.

Lilith stared. She was in a stupor that follows particularly vivid dreams, when you see someone you know in your

dream performing something completely unimaginable and then see the same person in real life. It's hard to separate the two. It was hard for Lilith to separate the image of Agatha's head floating in mid-air, attached to a torso comprised from rose vines, yellowish in appearance, and now seeing her in flesh, in reality, walking on two legs like all people do, and not swinging back and forth as a head on a stem.

She rubbed her eyes.

"You saw her yesterday, right? Her head?" She asked Panther hesitantly, her throat hoarse.

Panther, however, paid no attention to what Lilith was saying, jumping on the bed and devouring an entire dish of finely diced steak that, no doubt, was brought specifically for him, and, no doubt, was done by Katharina, probably begging Agatha not to tell anyone, her heart bursting from love to the whippet, whom she called *darling*. Within seconds it was gone, and he was licking the bowl clean, looking up with his shiny black eyes.

"Huh? Did you say something?" Without waiting for an answer, Panther stuck his nose back into the empty bowl, sniffing at it, perhaps hoping it would magically fill itself up again.

Blood rushed to Lilith's head. She stomped her foot irritably. "I said, did you see Agatha's head floating on a rose stem from the wall yesterday? You did, didn't you?"

"Of course I did!" Panther replied politely, now eyeing the waffle.

"Hey, stop sniffing that. That's mine! You'll sniff all the smell out of it!" Lilith ran up to the bed, and for the next few quiet minutes that nonetheless felt like long furious minutes inside her head, lathered the waffle with butter and jam and ate all of its four quarters, belching at the end and chasing it off with a full glass of apple juice.

"You're such a dog sometimes, you know that?" She wiped her mouth.

"Since when are you unhappy about it?" Panther tilted his head to the side inquisitively, when a knock on the door interrupted them.

There was a click of the key, and Al Bloom's head stuck in. His face looked haggard, thinner than before, his skin having a papery quality to it, hair a royal mess. He blinked.

"Sweetie? Doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner is here. He's ready to see you in your grandfather's study. Are you done with breakfast? You mother and I -"

But the rest Lilith didn't hear. Grandfather's study. Two magical words, *grandfather's study*, were dancing around in her

head, bouncing off its walls and making her tremble with anticipation. She finally will get to see his thinking place, maybe it will hold some new clues, maybe it will explain the mystery of the numbers. Number 5, to start with, 5 petals of a rose, 5 heads on the wall, 5 year old Petra, 5 houses belonging to the Bloom's property, and number 21, 21 victims to garden's regeneration, well, 21 including herself, 21 paintings, no, 20 paintings and one pedestal for her, for her... for Lilith's head. If that was its purpose. And then out of those twenty one 8 women whose blood the garden has already tasted, Agatha's and Katharina's and Sabrina's Rosenthal, and that of Trude and Monika, the sisters, and hers when she held the bouquet in her hands, bleeding into the ground, and when Gwen's and Daphne's when they both fell and scratched their knees, and...

" - need more time, sweetie?" Her father's raspy voice pulled her out of her calculations, and Lilith reluctantly made herself return to the present.

He didn't ask her if she took her pills. She didn't have to lie. For that she was grateful.

"Yes. No. I'm ready. Sorry. Just a moment." She quickly scooped Ed's drawings, her journal and book into her bag, relieved that her father didn't seem to ask anything about them, nor did he seem to notice. She slung the bag over her shoulder, dashed to the closet and retrieved her last clean beret (she was

not going to put on her blue one, not after Baer chewed on it), the gazing at the clouds one, the one she hasn't worn or lost yet, donning it on her sleepy locks, pausing for a split second. She wished she had time to change. Her clothes looked all wrinkled and well slept in.

"Dad?"

"Yes?" Her father already turned away, his thoughts no doubt on the whippet race this Saturday.

"I can't take Panther with me, can I?"

"No, sweetie." He said it without thinking, eyes glassy.

"Can you please take him out on a walk? I forgot last time..." She bit her lip, reaching for the door's handle.

"Certainly. I will come back and will take him out on a walk. Does this hurt?" Her father traced the now dry spot where Lilith split her forehead.

"No. It's fine." Lilith twisted out from under his hand and ran up to her faithful pet, curled up on the cushion and eyeing the empty bowl from the steak.

"I'll be back soon, hopefully with more clues. See if you can gather anything in the meantime." She whispered into his ear, smooched him on the nose, and was off, marching behind her dad at a brisk pace, smoothing her cardigan and skirt, dancing on one leg, then on another, pulling up her knee socks and securing her flats in which she stepped hastily right before

leaving her room. Last, she took off her beret, smoothed her hair as best she could, then put it on again, finally satisfied with her appearance. There was no reason to give a false impression on this new doctor, she was done playing *those* types of games. This time she intended to turn the session around, and, using the many tricks she learned from her psychotherapist Louisa Marshall and her four predecessors, squeeze out information about Ed, maybe glimpsing a little more of the Bloom family history.

Before long, she found herself trailing behind her father through an unlocked door that she didn't see before, up a narrow marble staircase, red carpet panned to it with golden pegs, golden rods running along the steps to hold it in place, when to her gasp they emerged on the third floor, its walls painted ruby red all the way, the intensity of the color causing Lilith to cringe, her skin bursting into goosebumps. She glanced down and realized that what she took for cherry wood the last time she was here, was in fact deep red marble polished to a mirror-like quality.

"Stunning, isn't it?" Her dad has mistaken her facial expression as awe. "First time I came up here, I couldn't believe my eyes. Each room is painted a specific color of the rose, 21 types total, roses your grandfather grows." Their steps produced a dull echo along the corridor.

"Twenty one?" Lilith asked in surprise. "But there are only 20 rooms here." And then she bit her tongue.

"How do you know?"

"I - well - the floor below has 20 rooms, so I thought -"

Her father stopped and bent over her, his gaunt shape strangely tense. "Sweetie, I was meaning to ask you, are you feeling all right? If this is too stressful for you, we can buy return tickets and fly home - I don't care how much it costs - you can see Dr. Marshall - read your books - stay -"

"No!" Lilith shrieked forcefully. "No." She repeated quieter, seeing a look of alarm on her father's face. "No, really, I'm fine. I'm actually really looking forward to meeting Dr. Wilhelmus Baumgartner. He might just have a fresh look on my problem, exactly what I need right now, a *wastrel* like me." She said dryly.

"You're *not* a wastrel. Never say that." Her father replied, shaking his head sadly and rubbing his chin, perhaps wanting to add something soothing, but there were quick, jogging almost, footsteps in the corridor and a jolly looking fellow teetered tottered towards them, flocks of flaming copper hair above his ears nearly impossible to comprehend due to red walls throwing their own crimson shade on his head, making his bald scalp shine pink.

"Looking forward, you say? Now zat's ze spirit! I love patients like yourzelv, miss Liliz Bloom." His shoes clicked on the marble floor very fast, his arms moved as if they were attached to his body by an unskilled puppeteer, his belly jiggled ever so slightly under his pinstriped suit. He held a bulging attaché case in one hand, and snapped his fingers in obvious delight with another, stopping a few feet in front of them, bending down and extending his hand to her father.

He smelled like sardines and bad coffee. Lilith stifled a gag.

"Dr. Wilhelmus Baumgartner, Psychologischer Psychotherapeut, Kinder- und Jugendlichenpsychotherapeut, Heilpraktiker für Psychologie, Diplom-Psycholog -" He fired off a long string of titles in German so fast that they all blurred into one word for Lilith, then he took a deep breath, and fired off some more, clutching Al Bloom's hand with his short stubby fingers, red hairs growing thickly on them, shaking it so vigorously that Lilith thought he will tear it off completely. It took another few seconds for him to be done.

Her father mumbled something in return, something that sounded polite and German.

Doctor's bulbous nose twitched as he righted himself up and stretched his round face into a smile, leering at Lilith, sticking out his hairy hand to shake hers. Lilith involuntarily

took a step back, feeling her bones crush in his firm grip, sensing the oil on his skin, still fresh from whatever fishy breakfast he ate. She's seen therapists all right, all off them somber and professional, but never has she seen such enthusiasm.

"I'm a very very buzy man. My schedule is packed, oh, it iz packed. I made very special arrangements to be here today, very special. Alfred Bloom is an old friend, you see. Now, if you don't mind, I will take her from here, mister Alekzander Bloom. We have a lot to cover in 1 hour. How very exciting." Pronounced the doctor to Al Bloom with such authority, that Lilith's father didn't even have time to blink or answer, in shock of someone calling him so officially by his full name, and the doctor was already glancing at his watch and addressing Lilith. He spoke in a very good English, albeit with a horrible accent, so that Lilith could barely understand him.

"After you, miss Liliz Bloom." He motioned her up.

This was another surprise. Turns out, they were standing by a hidden door opening into yet another staircase, carved out of same bloody red marble as the floor, wedged neatly between two doors and leading up at a sharp angle, disappearing into the ruby ceiling. Black velvet lined its steps. Lilith cautiously stepped on the first one, glancing back at her father. He motioned her that she will be okay and that he was going to walk Panther in the meantime, stalking off.

"Ze key, miss Bloom, ze key!" Came from behind Lilith as she was half-way up, turning to look back and seeing a little golden key protruding from fat fingers of doctor Baumgartner, his smile revealing rows of uneven teeth suitable more for a horse than for a balding man. She took it reluctantly, suddenly scared of this enclosure, wishing for Panther to be with her, or Ed, mistrustful of this doctor's enthusiasm, sensing it as fake. The doctor, unperturbed by her glances, followed her at a polite distance, whistling a tune and overall appearing as if he was returning home after a particularly entertaining party.

Lilith came up all the way, and, crouching, stuck the key into a golden lock above her head, turned it once, then twice, and then the door swung open in a smooth soft motion, revealing a large rectangular hole and handrails. Lilith clasped them and followed remaining steps into complete darkness.

"Ze switch iz on the right, miss Liliz Bloom, on ze right!" Directed her the doctor. Lilith reached out to the wall, smooth as silk, and found the switch, which felt like it was carved in a shape of a rose. She flipped it up and dim light flooded the room the likes of which she's never seen in her life. She stifled a gasp, stunned.

## Chapter 21. Therapy session

As transparent as the house was on its ground level, mostly comprised of tall glass windows, mirrors on the walls and crystal chandeliers on the ceiling, as white as it was on the second floor, with its painted walls and iron beds and cotton curtains, as red as it was on the third floor, with bloody surfaces screaming all possible shades of scarlet and cardinal and vermillion, fourth floor, or, rather, just this room, was completely and utterly black. It appeared to be no more than about twenty by twenty feet, its interior made of some polished dark stone, perhaps granite, covered with golden frames holding awards to BLOOM & CO, each with an individual spot light like in a museum. In the middle of the room was a black furry rug, three heavy leather chairs around it and across it a dark desk with a single lamp on it, golden in shade, floor to ceiling bookcases behind it, with rows and rows of books. There were no windows.

Lilith took one big nervous breath and stepped aside, letting the doctor climb up behind her and lower the door softly into the floor.

"Here we are, Miss Liliz Bloom, how very very gracious of your grandfazer to let us use hiz study. There are,

unfortunately, no other rooms in zis house where we can have absolute privacy. Theze walls are sound proof." He said it all in cheery way of an executioner boasting about his space, because this is what it looked like.

Lilith felt her throat constrict, wondering if anyone will hear her yelling, in case she had to. The walls of the room pressed on her, unhappy, sensing that her presence was interrupting their normal flow, sending her a signal that she didn't belong here with her silly locks and lavender beret, she wasn't welcome. There will be no gazing at the clouds here. There were no windows for that. Lilith felt buried alive.

"Trust! Trust iz important, miss. I trust my patients, and zey trust me in return. May I have the key back?" Wilhelm's jocular voice cause Lilith to jump. She handed him back the key.

Doctor Wilhelm Baugartner took it into his hairy hands, sprung on his spindly legs and sauntered off towards the desk, pulled out an enormous leather chair and plopped happily into it, whistling all the while, pocketing the key, spreading open his attaché case, taking out papers, leafing through them and exclaiming something very fast in German here and there, until, to his satisfaction, he seemed to have found what he was looking for.

Lilith timidly stepped forward on unbending legs and slowly lowered herself into one of the stuffed leather chairs, that

immediately swallowed her whole, leaving her legs dangle, it was so deep and soft. Used to psychiatric sessions, Lilith did everything automatically, picking out the spot directly across the table to be in plain visibility of the doctor. This is how they liked it, they liked looking you in the eye and study your movements as you talked. This session, Lilith was sure, will be no different.

Oblivious to his surroundings, the doctor pulled out a piece of paper and was now reading it, and Lilith had a few moments to study his face. It was freckled, in fact, the freckles were so huge that they made him look tanned. His thick fingers were drumming a rhythm on the table's surface, devoid of anything except an empty crystal vase, perhaps for roses, a stack of clean paper under a stone, and a glistening paper knife that looked very menacing in this atmosphere.

"Zo." Proclaimed doctor Baumgartner suddenly, weaving his hands together in front of him. "How very very delightful to meet you, miss Liliz Bloom." He showed off his teeth.

"It's Lilith." Lilith said coolly, thinking that if he says very one more time, she will have to fight a strong desire to strangle him.

"Pardon me. Liliz it iz."

Lilith sighed. It was useless to argue.

Unperturbed, the doctor continued. "Tell me a little bit about yourself." Despite the accent, the words came out of his mouth smoothly, in that particularly professional manner. And the rest was the usual. The expectant face mask. The slightly leaned forward torso. The plastered professional smile. The unblinking drilling eyes. The quiet breath of anticipation. And no empathy, never true empathy, only a heightened curiosity attributed to such a colorful subject to work on. It was Lilith's typical fare, she was used to it by now.

For a second Lilith doubted her strategy, but then she decided that this is not America, after all, and from what she read, people like to cut here straight to the chase. Maybe she will be able to glimpse the truth in his eyes if she was careful to follow the shrinking or dilating of his pupils. *You know my method, Sherlock Holmes would have said, it is founded upon the observation of trifles.*

Trifles. Little things. She had to focus on little things, on the details. Lilith smoothed the folds of her skirt thoughtfully, inhaled deeply, exhaled sharply, and went ahead with ferocity, which she reserved for dire situations only, and this was definitely one of them, with real lives depending on her and her alone. This was not the time to mince the words, this was the time of war, and it was her turn to attack.

"Excuse me, dear Wilhelmus Baumgartner," she cleared throat politely, "you said you were a very very busy man. Let me assure you that I am also a very VERY busy girl. Let's not waste each other's time. You are doing a favor for your old friend, I am doing a favor for my parents. We both despise it. We both would be rather doing something else right now. In light of these facts, may I ask, what exactly do you wish to know, which you already don't?" Lilith pointed to the piece of paper Wilhelmus was holding up that looked suspiciously like her medical record, no doubt freshly printed out this morning.

For a second she thought that she went down the wrong path, but then Wilhelmus' eyes sparkled in a glorious mutual understanding, his pupils pulsing once, and he cracked his first genuine smile, which Lilith answered.

"You are, indeed, your grandfazer's granddaughter." He said delightedly, clicking his tongue and snapping his fingers for an added effect.

"Very well. I have to work ze 1 hour I'm paid." He consulted his paper. "We will go right in. It sayz here, let's see... Severe attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, borderline Asperger syndrome, inability to connect with people suggesting potential placement in the autism spectrum... depression, panic attacks, potential post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety - diagnosed at age 5 and

progressing very nicely..." He scanned the paper up and down, tracing lines with his fat finger, mouthing something under his breath. "How very interesting. Nice bouquet you got here, miss Liliz. Tell me about more zis. Do you remember what happened to you when you were 5?"

"My grandmother has died." Lilith said quietly, not wanting to think about it, about hours and hours of poring over anatomy books in search of the cure, in search of something that will revive that old wrinkled body, that one and only refuge Lilith had from the world, the one and only who understood her, until she got Panther, and until she found Ed.

"Oh, but you are mistaken. Your grandmozer died before you were born." Doctor's eyebrows flew up dangerously high, threatening to climb on top of his bald head.

"Not my dad's mom, my mom's mom. My maternal grandmother." Lilith explained impatiently. Did this doctor have any brains at all, did he even read her personal history? What were his true intentions? Was this an interview of some sort? It certainly started to feel like it.

"Tell me, how did it make you feel?" He asked with a plastered smile, his fingers no longer drumming.

"How did *what* make me feel?" Lilith answered irritably. This was quickly becoming intolerable. There was no clock on the

room, and Lilith couldn't tell how much time has passed, but she was sure that she already lost at least 10 precious minutes.

"Oh, your grandmozer's death, of course." He interlaced his fingers, face expectant.

Blood began throbbing in Lilith's veins, as it always did at this question regarding her emotions. What did any of these people know? How could they possibly understand what it felt like to be in her shoes without ever having been subjected to what she's been subjected to since she could remember herself? What benefit were they hoping to derive by listening to her awkward attempts at describing moving houses, and future predicting books, and talking pets, for that matter? How could they ever comprehend that standing still was the worst torture she had to endure, and that ballet was her one way to sanity, reading books another? And how could she ever explain her very acute sense of smell, something that nobody else around her was able to replicate? How she was sure of where someone was buried by simply smelling their essence coming up from the ground? Who would ever believe that?

"Why, it made me feel hungry, of course. I loved her so much, I was wondering how she would taste like, garnished with sardines." Said Lilith testily. It had an immediate and desired effect.

Doctor Baumgartner's eyes widened, and he broke into sweat. Lilith could smell it from her seat. He grabbed a pen and quickly scribbled something on the printed piece of paper. He was a coward, judged Lilith, the perfect culprit for her to dissect.

"That is a very very interesting way to think about someone dear to you." He finally said in a feeble voice. "What made you, err... would you explain a little more to me, about how that felt?" He leaned forward, eager, his fake smile back, sporting two rows of horse-like teeth.

But Lilith was done answering questions. She was about to start asking her own, in a rapid fire type of way, hoping to take the doctor by surprise.

"Most certainly." Lilith leaned forward as well, faking her own body language, making sure she caught him unaware. "This is very important to me, can you please promise me you won't tell anyone?" She made an innocent childish face.

"Oh, of course, I promise." Doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner was beyond himself with glee again, expecting to extract no doubt fascinating information on his subject. Or so he thought. Because it's not what Lilith had in mind, tense that her nerves will fail her if she doesn't act now.

"Why did grandpa kill Juergen Vogel?" Lilith suddenly shouted into the doctor's face, going for the shock effect,

standing up in her seat a little, her eyes bulging out of their sockets, attempting to detect the merest change.

The doctor gasped. Then he blinked. Then his pupils grew large, then small again, his breath sped up, his heart rate escalated, his hands began to tremble. And he stunk, it was not sweat that Lilith smelled, it was the stench of fear. All of it occurred within a split second, and all of it would have been invisible to a casual observer, but Lilith had her answer. She especially had her answer when the doctor licked his thin lips with a pointy tongue in an attempt to compose himself and then said something that confirmed her suspicion, roused for the first time when she heard her grandfather utter to Ed, *You don't want to meet your father's fate.*

"Pardon me, who iz zis person you are talking about?" He said slyly, obviously lying. She could tell by an unnatural stillness of his eyes and his rigid pose.

"Ed's father, of course. You're Ed's psychotherapist, are you not?" Probed Lilith, her certainty shaken just a notch. What if she was wrong, after all?

"And who, may I ask, told you that?"

"Well, it was Ed's step-mom. Roselinde? She gave my mom your number, she said..." And then Lilith realized that she slipped her guard and lost advantage. The doctor was asking her questions, and she, like a proper lab rabbit, was feeling guilty

and nervous and wanted to please him with giving him the correct information. She balled her hands into fists.

"She said... ?" Prompted her the doctor.

"It doesn't matter what she said. What matters is that you're working for a *monster*, and you know it." Lilith finished icily.

"Iz zat zo?" Doctor Wilhelmus leaned back into the chair, his interlaced hairy fingers resting on his belly. Did Lilith have a wrong inkling, or did it just feel like the whole room shrunk a little, as if giving them less space and attempting to suffocate Lilith with its lack of fresh air and windows? Or perhaps it was trying to suffocate Doctor Baumgartner? He definitely deserved it, plainly lying to her like that, making her feel like a small stupid helpless child.

A curtain of fury slid over her vision. "No, of course it isn't." She couldn't contain herself any longer, words burst out of her mouth before she could hold them back. "I have imagined it, I'm very good at it, you know. Imagining things that other people can't see or hear or smell. In fact, I can't tell reality from fantasy. For example, right now I'm imagining a doctor sitting in front of me, asking me elaborate questions the meaning of which he can't quite grasp himself, as applicable to the complexity of my diagnosis, carefully collected over the years by countless specialists, *nor* does he care about the

actual source of my symptoms, merely attempting to fulfill his 1 hour for which he got paid, yearning to leave this house as soon as possible because it gives him the creeps."

Lilith caught her breath at the end, glaring. This time the doctor seemed to have expected her bite, so he just sat there, a mask on his face, his eyebrows slowly creeping upward, pressing his lips together forcefully and waiting for more.

When Lilith sat quietly for what seemed like one very long minute, Wilhelmus broke the silence by leaning forward again.

"Do you know ze meaning of ze word *delusion*, miss Liliz Bloom?" He asked probingly, professional warmth gone out of his voice.

Lilith mustered her courage, which was quickly deserting her, thinking about grabbing it by the tail like she grabbed Panther this morning, not letting it go no matter how hard it tried to run away and hide. She wasn't going to doubt herself, not now, not this moment when she was so close to her goal of discovering what this mystery was about, when she almost had a chance of finding out the real reason for Ed's father's death. And Saturday rolled around tomorrow, which signified a beginning of a massive slaughter, a massacre, of all 21 women, one for each type of rose. She would be the last, of course, having to witness it all.

"I'm not delusional." Said Lilith, her face red and boiling with anger, her voice quivering. "And I can prove it to you. Right now."

"I would be most delighted to hear about it, this is why your grandfazer, who loves you very much, by the way, and worries about your well being, haz arranged for me to come and talk to you. I am most interested in hearing more. I'm very very interested, in fact. Please, go ahead." Wilhelmus spread his arms in a forced welcoming gesture, and Lilith charged.

Within moments, she darted from her soft chair, seized the paper knife from the desk and with her heart jumping out of her chest, cut open her left palm, letting hot blood flow down on the floor, to be soaked into it without the slightest hesitation.

"Look!" She yelled, pointing to the floor, which arched itself in glee of tasting this liquid richness, clearly wanting more.

"Miss Liliz!" Exclaimed the doctor, rushing out of his chair and attempting to grab the knife from Lilith's hand.

"Give this back! At once!" He added some more shouting in German, but Lilith sprinted away, younger and faster on her muscular dancer's legs, than the doctor on his spindly ones, his belly in the way. They made a lap, then two around the desk. Lilith gave up in the attempt to show the doctor the spot where

her blood has been swallowed by the floor and decided on a different tactic. She ran wider circles, along the perimeter of the room, trailing her bloody hand and leaving a long dark streak along the walls, feeling a tingling sensation as if the walls were sucking the blood out of her like a hungry leech. In the gloomy light of the room, however, it was impossible to see if her blood remained on the walls or was soaked in.

Lilith has lost herself in her rage.

"I'm paying!" She yelled frantically at the room. "Look, I'm paying you! Like you asked! Show me! Show me what happened! What will happen! I need to know! I'm your heir, remember? I'm Lilith Bloom, of Bloom family stemming from Luedke Blome! I command you now! Show me! SHOW ME!"

The room sighed and shrunk. Walls moved swiftly, making the enclosure smaller and smaller, forcing Lilith and Doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner running smaller and smaller circles. The doctor was panting, and finally stopped, clutching his heart and leaning on the back of the chair, muttering in German what sounded like accusations.

Then he wheeled around and pointed at Lilith with his stubby finger, his eyes rotating wildly, his voice high pitched.

"Verrückt! Mad! I pronounce you mad! Schizophrenic! You need to be locked up! I will notify your grandfazer immediately! And your parents! I work for a monster?" He scoffed. "You!

You're a monster! A monster of a child! A *Loony!*" Mopping his sweaty forehead, he reached into his pocket for what appeared to be his phone, leaning over the desk and furiously scribbling something on the printed out report of Lilith's mental health.

At the word *Loony* Lilith stopped dead in her tracks.

A rush of images flooded Lilith's mind, all those kids at school calling her *Loony*, their laughing faces, their painful pinches, their stuck out legs to make her trip, the jokes, the taunting, girls yanking at her pig tails (that's why she despised pigtails), boys splitting her bag open or taking off with it, only to empty it out on the street, sending her books flying in all direction, the teachers giving her time outs, even the nurse trying to find something wrong with her. Faces multiplied, their mouth opened wider, their laughter intensified, and her pain hidden so carefully erupted anew, making her insides twist at the idea of being tucked into an asylum, making her shake from head to toe, her fists clenched in over-consuming hate.

In the next second, Lilith swiftly ran up and knocked the phone out of doctor's hand, sending it flying across the floor and ultimately shattering against the wall in a shower of broken glass and plastic. Then she kicked the report and the pen out of his other hand.

"NO!" She yelled, her manners, her politeness forgotten, gone, replaced with pulsing vivid anger. "You will *not* tell him that! You will not tell that to *anyone!*"

She stood a few feet away from the doctor, panting, her lavender beret askew, her left hand bloody, her right one clutching the paper knife, her lips stretched into a menacing sneer. The darkened room added to the effect splendidly. Any normal human being would've ran from her, ran for his life. And that is exactly what doctor Wilhelmus Baumgarnter did, his professionalism taking a hike in place of mundane self-preservation.

He charged for the door, skidding to his knees and hastily trying to jam in the key, then tossing it aside, perhaps remembering that the door was unlocked, now searching frantically for the ring to pull it up.

This was more than Lilith could take. On some instinct, she stomped to the door, found the light switch and turned it down, plunging the room into complete darkness. The doctor whimpered incoherently. Lilith jammed the light switch, the head of a miniature rose, into her cut palm, wincing at the pain, but knowing that she must do it, and whispered, barely containing her anger, her voice raspy.

"Take him. I will pay as much as you want. Take him."

The room happily obliged.

There was a great rustle of leaves, as if colossal roses sprouted from the walls, gaining in on the trembling doctor. Their slithering and whispering sounded like that in the rose garden. He shrieked one, twice. Lilith stood bolted to the spot, knowing that not a single soul will hear him, he said it himself, the room was soundproof. There was a sickening crunch like that of breaking bones, then one more shrill cry of agony that pierced Lilith from head to toes, and then all went still. A sucking of a gigantic vacuum issued from the walls, a gulp, a smack, and a burp.

Hairs stood up on Lilith's neck. Her anger evaporated in an instant, replaced with a sick heavy bloating in her pit.

Now she knew why this room was black. She knew it so clearly, like she knew her own name and age and her favorite books. The first floor was transparent for taking people's air, the second floor was white for taking their water, the third was red for taking their blood, this room was black for taking their lives.

## Chapter 22. Bloom secret

How long Lilith stood in complete darkness, she couldn't tell. She felt absolutely numb. Time ceased to exist, as did her vision, her hearing, even her acute sense of smell, overwhelmed by the metallic tang hanging in the air, the one that's present when a large animal has been freshly gutted. Her tongue felt bitter, her muscles turned to jelly, propping her up by some mysterious force, perhaps due to the fact that her bones didn't turn into jelly yet, though she was convinced they would any minute. White spots danced in front of her eyes, white noise filled her ears, and doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner's deathly scream bounced around in her head, hushing everything else and echoing madly, making Lilith want to bend and vomit out her breakfast, except she couldn't bend, she had no control of her body at the moment. She only had one very clear thought flash in her mind along his blood-curdling cry. *I'm a murderer.* It said in large red letters. *I'm a murderer.*

On the periphery of her senses she sensed something move. Someone. And then, before she saw anything, she knew it. The sickly sweet smells told her, the skin on her back told her, the tingling in her fingers told her, that hidden sixth sense that

tells us danger is coming, when the rest of our ability to discern reality screams otherwise, sounded an alert. Those of us who learn to listen to its voice, thank it later with our continued lives. Lilith turned just in time. Without a slightest noise or movement in the air, he materialized behind her. She didn't even need the light to know, to see.

"Grandfather." She said shakily, stating the obvious fact, talking into utter darkness.

Alfred Bloom turned on the light. "Nice work, my dear girl, nice work. I knew I was not mistaken in my choice. What good doctor, eh?"

There he stood, a charming smile making his eyes twinkle with genuine interest, clothed in a fine suit of black cotton, summer style, matching the interior of the room, his left hand nonchalantly thrust in his pocket, his right hand steadily rising and taking the paper knife out of Lilith's unbending hand.

"You don't need this anymore, I take it?" He asked encouragingly.

Lilith couldn't say a word, she couldn't even nod, glancing down for any sign of struggle. There was none. The room was clean, as it was when she entered an hour ago. The floor sparkled in a lake of mirror shine, the walls sported a golden frame upon a golden frame of BLOOM & Co achievements, the rug

lay unruffled in its place, surrounded by huge stuffed leather chairs precisely where they were before, though Lilith distinctly remembered shifting them in their mad race with the doctor. There were no papers, no attaché case on the table. It glowed gloomily in the dim light of the golden lamp.

Lilith could've sworn for a moment that perhaps she imagined everything, the doctor, the therapy session, the... the...

"How did it feel, my dear, if I may ask?"

She slowly turned her head back to look at her grandfather, uncomprehending. "Is he dead?" She croaked.

"Is *who* dead?" Said Alfred Bloom smoothly.

"The doctor." Forced Lilith, beginning to shake.

"Doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner? Why... would he be dead, my dear? He left in a hurry, he asked me to apologize to you for his quick departure, he had other clients to attend to today. A very busy man, very thought after psychotherapist, one of the best in his field. He left a report on you, however."

Grandfather pulled out a folded piece of paper from his pocket, unfolding it.

Lilith stared. She didn't remember what happened to this piece of paper after she kicked it off the table and was wondering how it landed in her grandfather's hands. She wasn't going to give up so easily this time, however.

"Did the room eat him?" She said, her voice a bit more steady.

"My dear, are you feeling all right?" Grandfather leaned forward with that parental care demeanor.

"Don't touch me!" Lilith shrieked, stepping back, a note in her voice like that of her mother, Gabi Bloom, whenever she was mad at her husband and yelled at him not to touch her.

Grandfather lowered his hand, dejected.

"What happened to the doctor?" She asked almost pleadingly, desperately wishing that was the doctor was indeed alive, yet realizing at the same time that nobody was here to witness what she witnessed, not Ed, not Panther. Who will believe a 12 year old girl who has been pronounced a *Loony* by a certified professional, the best of its kind?

"What do you think happened to him?" Inquired grandfather softly, folding the report back into his pocket.

A sudden inspiration seized Lilith. "You were here the whole time, weren't you?" She whispered, feeling her fists clench.

"What makes you say this? It would be grossly inappropriate for me to participate in your private therapy session unbeknownst to you, wouldn't you say?" Said Alfred with a smile.

"It is grossly inappropriate to lie to your own granddaughter whom you appointed heir of the entire Bloom

property, so why not eavesdrop too? I don't see much difference." Lilith felt her own self come back to her word after word, calming her down, her left palm stinging from the cut and at the same time reminding her that everything that happened was real, no matter what her grandfather said.

"Is that a yes I hear?" Grandfather asked, greedy glint back in his eyes.

"A yes to what?" Lilith was momentarily puzzled.

"Do you agree to be the heir to entire Bloom property?" He stood staring her down, expectantly. He stood over the closed door, and Lilith so no escape.

It was a trick question, Lilith knew, and yet she also knew that she already proclaimed herself as such to the room, to the entire house, not to the garden yet, but it was only a matter of time. And so on a whim, full of childish hope to make things right, thinking that maybe if she became the boss of it all, instead of her grandfather, perhaps she had a chance to stop it, to stop the garden from devouring people and to unravel its mystery, Lilith opened her mouth to say YES. But then Sherlock Holmes' words rung in her head, *It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data*. She had to gather more facts, to make her final decision. It seemed like the world itself was balanced on top of her answer, and would tip one way or the other as soon as she committed to her final say.

The air in the room stood very still, so still that even her grandfather's sweet fragrance didn't reach her.

"Why do I have to agree to something when you already named me heir to this property in your will?" Lilith asked, deciding to try and squeeze out as much information as she could, and stretching out the time to calm down.

"Because I want to make sure you're going into this willingly, my dear girl. I care for you, contrary to what you think. Besides, you only become heir after my death. Until then, all you have to do is agree, or disagree. I can make an adjustment in my will, while I'm still alive." Said Alfred reassuringly, his hands in his pockets. He rolled back and forth on the balls of his feet, standing directly over the closed door. There was no other way out of the room, and Lilith had a feeling that he won't let her out until he had her answer.

"When did it do this to you? The rose garden? When did you see it kill for the first time?" She said quickly, and saw a glimmer of uncertainty and what suspiciously looked like fear flash her Alfred's face, before he composed himself.

"What... are you talking about?" He asked politely, his beady eyes searching her.

"You were a kid, like me, weren't you?" Lilith pressed on. "It was an accident. Just like what happened to the doctor.

There was nothing you could do, and you thought it was your fault."

"I daresay, perhaps I agree with doctor Baumgartner after all." Her grandfather professed uncomfortably, stepping aside and bending down to lift the door by the ring.

"Wait!" Lilith yelled.

Grandfather looked up, annoyed. "Do I hear a yes?"

"Do I have a choice?" Lilith asked in a fallen voice.

"Why... of course! One always has a choice. This piece of paper, dare I mention, can be torn up immediately as you say the word." Grandfather took out the folded up report and smoothed it open.

"Fascinating diagnosis, I must say. Your mother will be beyond herself." He said soothingly, and Lilith imagined her mother insisting on shipping Lilith off into one of those closed institutions, *for your own good, Lilith*, she would say, her father doing nothing to stop it, and there, in that institution, they would feed her more pills. That meant goodbye ballet lessons, goodbye books, and, worst of all, goodbye Panther.

"Just one simple word. Three letters. You can do it, my dear girl, can't you?" Alfred coaxed her impatiently.

"Dad doesn't know, does he?" Lilith whispered almost inaudibly.

Grandfather didn't answer, only looked at her, *straight* at her, but something in his look waivered, and deep inside Lilith thought she saw a small frightened boy who has to come to possess a ferocious rose garden that threatened to dispose of him if he didn't take care of it, and so he did, his whole life he did, and here finally was his chance to shake it loose, to pass on this terrible responsibility to someone else, and to retire. He has shielded as many people from it as he could, he has shielded his own son, going as far as sending him out of country, but somebody in the family had to take over. Somebody strong enough to wrestle with it, to command it. And that somebody happened to be Lilith.

"Yes." Lilith said, for the first time wanting to reach out to her grandfather and hold his hand. "It is a yes. I agree to be heir to Bloom property." Immediately after she said it, the entire house shuddered, as if it waited for her answer with abated breath. The floor shifted, the walls shook, the ceiling bulged, and the multiple crystal chandeliers tinkled all across the house. A horrific blood-curdling cry issued from the garden, very much like the one she heard before, and Lilith thought of the rose bush woman in her epidural pain, ready to deliver a new bush into the garden. Was her answer a catalyst for it to happen? Was it only supposed to happen after she said yes? What if she said *no*? And how could she hear it, if this black room

was supposed to be soundproof? Lilith didn't know a single answer to these questions, nor did she hope anyone would ever explain anything to her. A certain bitterness flooded her, bitterness for her grandfather's weakness.

"Excellent!" Alfred Bloom pocketed the paper knife and was now rubbing his hands in a mixture of glee and, curiously, certain sadness.

"I don't suppose you will ever explain to me, how this works, being heir to Bloom property? What does it do, the rose garden - how does it feed on... organic matter? And what is supposed to happen tomorrow?" Lilith asked grumpily.

"Everything in its own time, my dear girl, we have two more days of you staying here, do we not?" Said grandfather cheerily, only there was no cheer in his cold calculating eyes.

"What will happen now?" Said Lilith, crestfallen.

"Why... we prepare for goodbye carnival tomorrow, of course. There will be circus artists - the gathering of roses - the lighting of candles in the garden - and the fireworks at the end, my dear girl. I'm sure you will enjoy every single bit of it, especially the gathering of the roses, down to the very last flower." He hissed the last word menacingly.

Lilith remembered how her grandfather performed for her the masterful art of a true rosarian, cutting the rose bush woman into her present shape with his sheers.

*"You want to cut old stems, so you can put them in a vase."*

She said, repeating his phrase word for word, and continuing to cite what Alfred Bloom told her that day, his entire speech etched clearly into her mind. *"It doesn't hurt to cut a long stem, for new growth to come off where the old one has been."* She looked at her grandfather with new understanding.

He ogled at her, apparently speechless.

"Roses grow very fast, don't they, grandfather? Old ones need to die, in order for the new ones to gain strength and bloom, am I right?"

"Very good, my girl. I'm impressed at how well you remembered what I said." He stepped off the door cautiously. Lilith took a step forward, new energy flooding her with a risky dare, the double meaning of it ringing true to her, her entire being tense in anticipation of finding out whether or not she was right.

She quickly stuck her mutilated hand over the light switch, plunging it inside and drawing new blood. The room sighed and lapped at her blood swiftly, not letting a single drop vanish in vain. There was a certain satisfaction Lilith derived in how her grandfather's eyes darted to her hand, and back to her, his pupils growing large.

"Lilith! Your hand!" He exclaimed, reaching for it and yet stopping at the last second.

Did that mean that after Lilith declared herself an official heir, the house decided listen to her and do her bidding, even if it meant hurting its previous rightful caretaker? Lilith was wondering if she dared to test her theory. She couldn't. Deep inside her, she was feeling sorry for her grandfather, for whatever it is he had to do, most likely not something he chose to do, but something that was probably thrust upon him, just like it was thrust upon Lilith now, making her give up her own worries for the benefit of the entire family.

"Oh, don't worry, grandfather." Said Lilith with grim satisfaction of knowledge. "A true rose gardener is not afraid of a few scrapes and drops of blood, right? You wanted me to prune a rose bush without gloves that day in the garden, remember? Incidentally, may I mention, I decided to practice, to know how to do this bloody business properly, cutting yourself and not being afraid of losing blood."

"I wouldn't disturb your wound any more if I were you. You will need your strength later." Said grandfather calmly. Lilith couldn't tell if he felt threatened or not, and so she lowered her hand.

"Why don't we go have some lunch? I'm sure your parents will want to know by now how your session went with doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner. Which went really well, by the way, did

it not?" Grandfather clapped on his pocket meaningfully, waiting for Lilith to answer.

"Absolumonto." Lilith agreed, probing a little more into how much influence she had over him now. "It went very well, it resolved to his very pronounced satisfaction, but, given the fact that he is such a very busy man, he had to depart quickly to attend to his other clients. He found me simply tired from jet lag, a rare occurrence of it that lasts close to a week. He told me that frequent walks in the rose garden might help my health, and, actually, leaving the house and the grounds, like, for example, vising a friend, Ed, per chance, who lives only across the street, might do me very well." Lilith fired this off in a fast slur of words, suddenly remembering the last thing she saw after the house went still the other night. Ed's window. It blinked once. It meant that he was waiting for her in the field outside of his house for who knows how many hours now.

Dreadful iciness dropped into Lilith's stomach. How could she forget? And one more thing. She promised him she would do one more thing.

"Certainly. You may stroll in the garden at your leisure. I will ask Gustav to accompany you everywhere you go. You may visit your friend as well, under supervision. I don't see any harm in that, now that we're in agreement." Alfred said with carefully concealed irritation in his voice.

Lilith racked her brain for something, anything, any advantage to her knowledge at all, to be able to use it as a weapon against her grandfather, but nothing was solid enough for her to show in front of witnesses. Nothing, nothing at all. Fear started creeping along her skin with its familiar icy fingers. Yet she had to ask, she promised.

"Dearest grandfather..." Lilith began, unsure how to approach the subject, rubbing her aching palm on the strap of her bag.

Alfred was bending over to reach for the ring, and now he straightened, studying Lilith. "Yes?"

"I have given you my answer, the one that you were expecting. Does this mean, that, if I may be so bold," Lilith's heart palpitated, "after everything that has recently transpired and is about to transpire," she swallowed, "Ed, per chance, doesn't have to move out of his cottage anymore?"

"That remains to be seen." Alfred's voice turned high and cold, it meant that pressing the subject any more might result in something unpleasant and irascible.

Lilith wisely didn't say anything.

"After you, my dear." Grandfather tugged on the rig and pointed to the open hole in the ground.

Lilith fixed her beret and, with a sigh, stepped down, rapidly disappearing into the dark.

## Chapter 23. Lunch

They descended in silence. The black staircase soon gave way to red marble one, and then to white marble one, at the foot of which stood Al Bloom with Panther on the leash and Gabi Bloom with her faithful knitting needles stuck behind her ears, a new piece of knitting in her hands, both talking quietly. As Lilith walked down the steps, various other guests were arriving for lunch, passing her by. Here were the Rosenthals with their serious Patrick and little Petra, who loudly greeted Lilith. Hanna Haas was pushing the wheelchair with her blind mother from garden hall into the dinner hall, and Lilith wondered if there was an elevator she didn't know about that allowed them to travel between floors. Trude and Monica sisters sauntered by, their arms encircled like those of two girlfriends for life. Finally, the old lady, Lilith's neighbor, shuffled down in her frilly dress. There was no sign of Schlitzburger twins, as there was no sign of Ed Vogel or his step-mom. Lilith let out a disappointed sigh.

"Alfred! What did the doctor say? May I speak to him? Where is he?" Were the first words out of her mother's mouth, when she spotted both of them, her eyes drilling her daughter's

appearance from behind her glasses. Not a greeting to Lilith, not a single question about how she felt or how the session went. Just this. Lilith quickly hid her bloodied hand behind her back, in fear of arousing more pointless questions none of which she could answer truthfully. She was very good at spinning sarcastic stories, but just right now, right this very instant she badly needed to talk to Ed and to Panther. Panther was gazing at his mistress with misty eyes, panting jovially, his tongue on the side, his tail wagging left and right like crazy. Al Bloom glanced up at Lilith and his face fell.

"Sweetie, how did it go?" He asked.

Lilith took another step down and nearly fell over. There was something wrong with her flats, like she stepped into something sticky. She tried again, losing one flat and feeling her kneesock glue to the steps. It was the floor, the floor of the house held her feet hostage, not letting her descend three more steps and be able to talk to her parents face to face. Shocked, Lilith tore her foot up and slipped it back into her flat, looking from her mom to her dad to Panther and to her mom again, badly wanting to collapse, to burst open, to fall into her mother's arms, to cry, to sob, and to confess.

*Mom, I just killed someone. Mom, what do I do now? I didn't mean to, I swear! Well, it wasn't exactly me who killed him. I commanded it. It was the room. It ate him - the doctor - it ate*

*him in seconds, bones and everything. And then I promised grandpa to be the heir - the heir of the house and the rest of the Bloom property... the house responded - it sighed - and now it won't let me walk where I want, it's making my shoes glue to its floor! I'm scared, I'm so scared, what will happen tomorrow? Tomorrow a new rose bush will be born, and I think it will eat all women in the house. With grandpa's help. I want to stop it but I don't know how! I don't even know when it will do it, where, and why, and... and...*

Lilith wanted to cry. Her self-imposed courage and stoic demeanor quickly crumbled, her knees buckled. She only made herself stand by sheer will and with the help of her grandfather's arm, which swiftly encircled hers and pulled her downstairs. The floor, under the authority of Alfred Bloom, let go, and Lilith's legs moved.

"Well? What did the doctor say?" Gabi Bloom pressed, addressing Alfred.

"He said, nothing major. Simple adjustment issues, disassociative behavior due to stress and the change in time zone, including the climate. He said she needs fresh air, as much as possible. Which, conveniently, may be provided by the garden. The fragrance, the splendor, the beauty, it will do her good." He tightened his grip on Lilith's arm. "I think we will

go with Lilith on daily strolls together now, won't we, my dear girl?" Alfred smiled charmingly, leaning closer.

Lilith stomach dropped deeper still. Her father reach out to her and patted her on top of her beret, producing a weak smile, mouthing, *you okay?* Lilith nodded.

"Oh, how gracious of you, Alfred. I'm so grateful. Thank you, thank you. I didn't know what else to try." Gabi nearly sprouted tears in her eyes, and Lilith had a sudden urge to vomit on her mother's knitting to turn her face sour. One, to make her notice that she was standing right there, in front of her, and two, to spoil whatever it is her mother was working on, because the smell would be impossible to wash out, so she won't be able to sell it and would have to start anew.

"Can you please make sure she takes her pills? I'm sure the doctor told you about it, I only wanted to confirm." Gabi pushed up her glasses, peering down at Lilith.

"Pills?" Came surprised voice of Alfred. "Oh, yes, pills. Of course, I will see to that."

"Thank you again." Gabi elbowed Al. "I'll be right back." She said hastily, waving to a group of ladies who were filing out the door of the hall, beaming, all of them displaying one or other article of clothing made by Lilith's mother.

"Yes, yes, thanks, dad." Al said dutifully. "You didn't change your mind about the race tomorrow, did you?" Lilith's

dad, his familial socializing duty now fulfilled, was back into the clouds of his hobby, the love of his life. His refuge. His dogs.

"Those... creatures? No, I have other more important things to do." Alfred said with contempt. "*That* is what I call a dog." He was pointing to Baer, who slinked through the front door, Gustav in his tow.

"Dad, both mastiffs and whippets are canine." Al said hotly, his gaunt face alight with fervor. Lilith wished that her father would show the same passion when arguing with her mother. "I don't see why you have such distaste for whippets. They were bred -"

"- to be the poor man's racehorse. Spare me the history, Al, will you?" Alfred said irritably in a dismissive type of tone.

There was hysterical laughter and the sound of breaking china on the floor, together with gasps of people. It was the only thing that prevented Lilith's father and her grandfather to continue their heated argument. Whoever dropped their dish, Lilith was grateful to that person, because Alfred let go of her arm and sped into the hall, to investigate. Lilith used the commotion and squatted next to Panther, pretending like she petted him and sticking her mouth deep into the folds of his ear.

"I have so much to tell you." She whispered urgently. "The doctor died. The room swallowed him." She gave a few details, cramming them in as few sentences as she could.

Panther instantly went stiff, sticking his nose into Lilith's ear, pretending like he licked it, growling in the lowest register he could muster. "Old news. Baer told me already. And something else too -"

"You talked to Baer??? Since when are you two on speaking terms?" Lilith forgot herself and spoke too loudly.

Baer, who happened to be within several feet, tugged angrily at the leash, which was in Gustav's firm grip, and howled at Lilith his disappointment like a wolf at the moon. Gustav hushed him in furious German.

"Did you say something, sweetie?" Al bent to Lilith, a distant question written on his face, but only for a split second.

A voluptuous shape appeared in the doorway of the dinner hall, floating forward on tiny feet like a dollop of pudding on a thousand mechanical cockroaches. Air filled with the smell of old sweat, unwashed clothes and general unkempt adult body of a woman who hasn't been taking care of herself properly.

Lilith stood up and wrinkled her nose, when two heavy hands landed on her shoulders.

"My dolls! I can't find my dolls!" Two thick tears rolled down the face of the homeless woman Lilith met before in the street next to Ed's house. Tears traced white lines in the grime of woman's plump swollen face. She shook Lilith, her crying quickly escalating into a rush of moisture dripping on her layers and layers of clothes, resulting in sniffing and foot shuffling and general distress of someone who ought to be a toddler and not a grown woman, an old woman, now that Lilith saw her hair in the light of day. It was short, matted, and had a touch of grey in it.

"I'm sorry, but -" Began Lilith politely.

"WHERE DID HE PUT THEM?" The woman shrieked, threatening to break Lilith's collar bones, she shook her so hard. Guests ran out of the hall, witnessing the scene and not daring to come close. Even Lilith's father, Al, stood rooted to the spot, his mouth open, holding Panther's leash automatically. Both Panther and Baer, however, as if they were friends from the day they were born, were yapping their heads off, barking so loudly that the sound reverberated in the foyer, making the chandelier above sway slightly and tinkle.

"ASK IT! ASK THE HOUSE!" The woman shrieked.

At this, Lilith thought she felt the house tremble.

"IT KNOWS, DOESN'T IT? IT *TALKS* TO YOU, DOESN'T IT? IT *LIKES* YOU. I CAN TELL, IT *LIKES* YOU." Two smelly palms were now

squishing Lilith's cheeks. "WILL YOU GIVE ME MY DOLLS AFTER HER RETURN? SHE'S COMING. SHE'S COMING FOR YOU. THERE, IN THE GARDEN. THERE -" But she could yell no more. Alfred Bloom clapped her mouth from behind and was dragging her towards the front door, apologizing loudly and profusely to everyone who gathered around, witnessing the scene.

"Lilith! Did she hurt you?" Al Bloom woke up from his trance, unable to hold Panther anymore who yanked the leash out of his hands and was now clamoring up Lilith's legs to get her to pick him up.

"No, I'm okay." Croaked Lilith, nauseated from the stink, and cradling Panther in her arms, feeling his tongue licking rapidly at the cut on her palm. With her other hand she wiped her face, attempting to clean it. "Who was that?"

"That's Mad Marta, grandpa's cousin." A familiar childish voice spoke into her ear. Daphne, chewing on a bun, crumbs littering her lavender sleeveless shirt, materialized next to Lilith, Gwen sneering next to her sister, an identical bun in her hand. Evidently, they were in the hall eating lunch and came out with the rest of the crowd to watch the commotion.

"She broke a whole bowl of soup. It splattered everywhere!" Gwen added with sinister glee, chewing vigorously.

There were now circles of guests, gossiping away this newest bit of entertainment of the Bloom family, no doubt

familiar with certain history that Lilith was missing. The Brandt sisters were gesticulating and whispering to each other. Petra was asking loud questions of her mom, her brother Patrick hissing at her to be quiet. Even blind Heidemarie Hass was surrounded by eager witnesses, her daughter, the old neighbor lady, and Irma Schlitzburger, all of whom leaned in and, with glint in their eyes, were describing what just happened. Albeit they spoke in short bursts of German, and Lilith couldn't understand a word of it. There was also group of ladies Lilith saw only briefly before, all of them clad in her mother's knit sweaters and skirts, replaying something to Gabi Bloom to which she shook her head, nodding energetically, throwing brief glances at her daughter like she was the object being discussed.

Lilith, hungry a minute ago, lost her appetite. "What was *she* doing here?" She asked incredulously, meaning the homeless woman and not addressing anyone in particular.

Always eager to give out information, Daphne produced a second bun from her pocket and bit into it with zest. "She vizits grandpa sometimes." She said, her jaws working hard. "He tells her not to, but she still does. She lives across ze street, in one of ze Bloom houses, didn't you know?"

More strangled shouts reached them from the street, then some whimpering and sobbing, and then all went quiet, except soft foot steps on gravel, disappearing into the distance.

"Why is her name Mad Marta?" Lilith couldn't help herself, the question slipped out of her mouth before she could hold it back.

"Because, obviously, she's mad. Like you." Said Daphne triumphantly, sending the last piece of bun in her mouth, mistaking Lilith's icy look for incomprehension. "Mad. Do you understand? A Loony." Daphne twisted an index finger at her temple.

It pushed a button. Panther, sensing his mistress's fury, bared his teeth and growled. Lilith glared, her anger pulsing, the picture of the garden tearing Daphne apart very vivid in front of her eyes. This was the girl whose life she was supposed to save. Lilith didn't need time to find the perfect comeback. It imprinted in her mind so clearly, she saw a photographic picture dancing across vision.

"I'd choose mad any minute over sleeping with a stuffed elephant like I'm five. What was his name again? Moppel, right?" There are moments when our evil side takes hold of us, causing us to derive pleasure from seeing pain on someone's face. This was Lilith's moment. Daphne's face contorted first in shock, then in disbelief, and then it gave way to a fit suggesting a toddler tantrum that was about to occur in a fat body of a blonde ugly teenage girl.

"Mutter!" She howled, calling her mother and pointing her chunky finger at Lilith. "Mutter, she spied on me when I was sleeping! She broke into our room! Mutter!"

Irma Schlitzburger promptly left her conversation with the elderly blind lady and was sauntering over.

"It's nothing, however, compared to -," Lilith swiftly turned to Gwen who was opening her mouth, perhaps to say something to protect her sister, "sucking on your thumb. Coincidentally, I was wondering, do you put salt and pepper on it, or do you steal jam from the kitchen? To make it taste good? Or is it fat - you know - bacon fat? I heard you eat it raw in Germany, isn't that right?" Gwen went apoplectic, breaking into a hysterical yowl and dancing on one spot.

"What did this she do to you this time?" Irma said suspiciously, rounding her girls under her arms like under her wings, then stretching one of her hands out and leering over Lilith as if she was about to slap her.

"You keep your hands away from my daughter." Gabrielle Bloom managed to make her way to Lilith in the meantime and now stood protectively in front of her daughter. And for once, Lilith loved the fact that her mother was so fierce.

Both women engaged in the juiciest row that ever fell upon Lilith's ears, Gabi dragging her husband to her side to participate in the conflict, turning every guests attention to

this new attraction, and Lilith chose this perfect diversion moment to sneak out, feeling her legs carry her, fast, faster, towards the front door, and out, into what turned out to be terrible weather. She clicked the massive front door behind her, breathing fast.

She was out of the house, and it didn't hold her back. Sheets of rain slapped her face and drenched her from head to toe, crows cawed madly in the moist air, their number nearly double, if not triple. The smell of the garden reminded Lilith of rotten foul stench, intense and overpowering. More horrible sighs trailed on the wind from the very end of the garden, moans of agony, like an enormous creature was trapped under something heavy and badly wanted to get rid of it, her out from under it.

Lilith shuddered and made herself move. She had to see where grandfather took Mad Marta, she had to.

"Don't you think Sherlock Holmes would've warned his esteemed colleague Watson about such dreadful weather, before embarking on a hunt for clues? I don't have my jacket on me, you know." Panther growled, licking the rain off his muzzle.

"Oh, shut it!" Lilith, absorbed in her dare, jogged past parked cars to the front gate, presently wide open, and stood under one of the linden trees, huge drops falling on her nose from above every time the wind ruffled its plumage.

Now Panther was quiet too, chewing on his leash in distress.

Across Linderstrasse, wet and looking haggard, Alfred Bloom was leading Mad Marta into the midst of an overgrown spot of property that Lilith took for part of land between two houses, Ed's cottage and the house that stood next to it. Well, almost next to it. It turned out that the patch of wild grass, untrimmed hedges and other overgrowth had a tiny shack covered in vines in the middle of it. It blended perfectly into the greenery, barely visible. This is where Alfred now led his cousin, parting bushes, whispering something in her ear, her head shaking, her shoulders rising and falling, as if she was crying all along. Lilith consciously for the first time observed the entire Bloom property that was fated to belong to her one day.

She thought all 5 houses reminded her of roses. In this sense, grandpa's mansion was the tallest, biggest, most beautiful of them all, the perfect rose with the perfect poise and appearance. The house to its left, where Schlitzburger twins lived, and the house across theirs, where, Lilith suspected, Heidemarie Hass lived with her daughter (because it had a wheelchair ramp in front of it) were, in turn, two ordinary roses, one fat and dull (Schlitzburger's, of course), the other bright and round (the one that must belong to Haas ladies). Ed's

cottage was a wild rose, pretty but uncultured, small and coquettish. And Mad Martha house was a rose's bud, the one that caught a disease and never developed, turning dark and looking sick.

This observation took Lilith a fraction of a second, and in another fraction of said second she forgot all about what she has just observed.

Without any warning, the ground shook. Crows flew up in a shouting cloud, turning the sky into a moving mass of black dots, glistening in the rain against the background of leaden clouds. Both Mad Marta and Alfred Bloom stopped in their tracks and wheeled around. Lilith met her grandfather's beady eyes fifty feet across the street and made herself look away with great difficulty, wishing she could have two pairs of eyes, one to watch her grandfather, one to watch what was going on in the garden.

A second later she wished herself blind. Because the rose garden was moving like a bloody sea, breathing and heaving, bulging and falling again, with a tall dark shape towering at the very end of it, where it met the forest. It stood erect, about twenty feet tall, a gigantic rose bush woman, the one that Lilith saw her grandfather trim. It was positively pregnant, an enormous belly-like round shape protruding from its middle. It shrieked, it wailed, it opened its dark scary mouth, it rotated

its scarlet eyes, it waved its arms around, sending a slew of emerald leaves about and dozens and dozens of bright red roses like splattering droplets of blood. It took another step, bent down as if in pain, and collapsed, sending powerful reverberations down the street.

## Chapter 24. Field

Lilith ran. She ran like she never ran in her life, her arms pressed tightly around Panther, her feet splashing into puddles. Panther slipping from her wet hands, she finally let him down, so that he could run next to his mistress. Rain pummeled both of them as they slid on wet asphalt and nearly fell. Lilith righted herself up in time, seeing her grandfather dart after her from her peripheral vision, panting and gasping. Aiming for Ed's cottage, Lilith redoubled her efforts, her heart pounding in her ears with heavy drums, Panther slightly head of her. Now they made it past the front gate. Now they made it across the lawn, now they ran behind the hill from where Ed extracted both of them not too long ago. Now they tore through a row of thickly planted shrubbery and were sprinting into the field, sliding and slipping on wet grass and mud. Only one thought pounded in Lilith's head, to get away, get away from that monster, get away from her grandfather, get away from the house, get away as far and as fast as she could.

The field stretched into near infinity, it seemed. After a few minutes an angry stitch in Lilith's side finally caused her to stop and bend over in sharp pain, wheezing.

"Ed -" She breathed to Panther, who was also breathing rapidly, like dogs do after a race, his tongue catching rain droplets. "Where is Ed? Do you see him?" Lilith had to wipe her face to be able to look around, blinking.

"I can't see him, but I can *smell* him, most unquestionably. Teenage hormones." Bristled Panther.

"Where?" Lilith asked.

"All over the place, he must have been here a few minutes ago. Unfortunately, wet conditions prevent me from giving you an accurate answer. If you pardon me, I need another minute."

"We don't have another minute! Where is he?" Lilith shrieked, peering at Ed's cottage, expecting her grandfather to appear any moment. Not seeing any sign of him, she wiped her face again, gazing around.

They ran about a hundred feet or more away from Ed's cottage, and the forest was another couple hundred feet away, easy, grinning at them with dark twisted trees in place of teeth. It traced the field around, continuing all the way to the rose garden behind them and onward, north, into wilderness that couldn't have stretched *that* far. After all, this was Berlin suburbia, and at some point there would've been houses and streets and small towns. At the moment, however, it looked to Lilith as wild as the end of the world, its edges lost, blurred by the rain.

"There!" She yelled shrilly, pointing at the edge of the woods. A feeble light blinked in the darkness and has gone out.

"I was about to say precisely that." Growled Panther. "Do you mind?" He stuck out his neck, and Lilith, her fingers slipping, took off his collar and leash and threw it into grass.

"Hurry!" She said, pulling her beret deeper down and preparing to run to the forest, when five solitary figures squeezed through tall hedges of Ed's garden. Lilith didn't even need to look closely to know who it was. Alfred Bloom, his faithful servant Gustav, and Baer, woofing ominously into the rain, flanked by his two doggy brothers.

Whatever her grandfather's intentions were, they couldn't have been very good, Lilith sensed it with the back of her skin, she could smell it, even from this distance. Her feet slipped, her leg muscles screamed in agony, water ran down her face obscuring her vision, and her soggy clothes glued to her skin, sending thousands of goose bumps from her head to her toes in waves. Lilith ignored all of it, pressing on, concentrating on counting her steps, running for life, keeping Panther as her beacon, who stopped every few paces to look back, to make sure his beloved mistress was still moving forward.

The distance between the girl and her pursuers quickly shrank. No matter how fast Lilith moved, her 12 year old body

was still no match to two grown men, one of whom was being pulled forward by a powerful mastiff.

The ground shuddered once more. Whatever it was that fell in the rose garden, has picked itself up and kept advancing. Where it went and why and how, Lilith didn't have time to think or turn and look. She knew that if she tarried, her chances of escape would be positively null, although it never crossed her mind that at some point mere exhaustion will take over and she will simply collapse, regardless of whether or not she made it to the forest by then.

Light flickered again between trees. Panther suddenly stopped and barked wildly what sounded like a string of sentences. He stood, expectantly. Lilith, on inertia, kept running and stumbled over him, falling into soggy grass.

"Panther! What are you *doing*?" She shrieked, scrambling to stand up, her left palm stinging from the mud getting inside the wound, her bare knees slipping on wet grass.

Panther, oblivious to her shouts, barked again. Lilith, abandoning all hope of keeping herself clean, plopped on her behind, to be able to see. Apparently, Panther was communicating something to Baer, something that nobody except another dog could understand. Presently, Baer stopped in his tracks, opened his huge jaws and closed them with a crunch on Alfred Bloom's

ankle, causing the old man to fall face forward into the ground and Gustav to stumble and topple over both of them.

"What did you tell him?" Lilith yelled over the commotion, standing up and shaking, her stomach hurting beyond pain now, not letting her to straighten all the way, her sodden knit bag hanging limply across her shoulder, making her want to drop it and leave it behind.

"I told him you're the Bloom heir now, and you command him to stop your pursuers." Panther barked in clear crisp words.

"No, I'm not! Not yet! Grandpa said -"

"It doesn't matter what grandpa said, the rose garden is the boss here, not him. Now, move." Panther authoritatively nudged Lilith with his nose.

"How do you know?" Lilith stared down at her pet in disbelief. His typical whining was gone, his complaining of the foul weather, of the lack of food or sleep or comfort seemed to have evaporated. What she saw was a ferocious little hunter in battle mode, fearless, intelligent and dignified. What caused this sudden change?

Earth moved under them once more.

Panther flattened his ears. "You asked me for help -" He bared his teeth at her, which he has never done before. "- and here I am, helping, yet you're not willing to accept it! Would you like me to go back to demanding steak or will you listen and

get a move on, before we both end up as stew, because neither of us has enough meat on our bones to qualify as steak by your grandfather's dinner standards? As in, dinner for Baer and other mastiffs?"

He waited for Lilith to answer.

"What do you mean, dinner -?"

"Last time I checked, *madam*, dinner meant the main meal of the day, taken either at midday or in the evening. In case of your grandfather's mastiffs, if I may observe from my personal experience, it happens deep in the night. Bone crunching especially is impossible to ignore."

Horrified, without another word, without turning to look back out of fear what she might see, Lilith sprinted, her pet joining her. It took them another several minutes to cross the rest of the field, its ground quickly turning into a spongy sucking surface that threatened to tear off Lilith's flats, which by now were full of mushy dirt, staining her striped knee socks an undistinguishable brown color. They almost made it to the edge of the woods, when loud yapping tore through constant patter of the rain.

Lilith stopped and turned.

Gustav stood with his arms hanging limply, holding close to him the other two mastiffs, his bald egg of a head hanging down in a dejected kind of way. And Alfred Bloom, a gnarly stick in

his hand, which he must have picked up from the ground, was beating Baer. He raised and lowered his arm in a practiced motion, the one Lilith remembered vividly from him wielding the axe in the middle of the night upon women's dead bodies, severing their heads.

Baer crouched and yelped each time the end of the stick connected with his hide, his trembling shape resembling a grey wet pile of fur.

"NO!" Screamed Lilith and made to run back.

Panther barked at her and grabbed her ankle, gently yet firmly enough to restrict her movement.

"Stop it! Don't touch him!" Lilith screamed, attempting to pull Panther's jaws apart. Her grandfather didn't pay her any attention. Gustav, however, raised his head and glanced at Lilith with doleful sadness.

"Let me go!" She screamed at her faithful pet, but Panther, growling angrily, wouldn't. Lilith grabbed him by the tail, as she usually did when pulling him out from under the blanket, knowing that he hated it when she did that, but even this didn't help. Panther clamped his teeth only tighter, almost piercing her skin.

"Ow! It hurts!" Lilith proclaimed, now pulling on Panther's ears, at a loss of what else to do.

Distant yelping intensified. Grandfather's arm moved faster. Lilith, feeling helpless and enraged, began to cry loudly. Angry tears rolled down her cheeks, already wet from the rain. She felt like her own back split open each time Baer received another blow, unable to divert her eyes. You could judge people by how they treat children and animals. Lilith saw enough, and whatever pity she felt towards her grandfather in the black room, dissolved into hatred and hurt.

Something hit her head from behind. She turned.

Between two tall dark trees stood Ed, his jeans soaked, a rain jacket hood covering his head, a spare rain jacket tucked under his arm, a flashlight in his left hand, a small piece of bark in his other, raised, evidently getting ready to throw it at Lilith. Lilith was wise enough this time not to open her mouth and took off at once in his direction, running into him and hugging him so hard that she was afraid she might break his ribs. Ed stood frozen for a moment, then slowly circled his arms around Lilith, returning her hug.

"I'm sorry!" Lilith promptly said as she let him go, while Ed clumsily offered her his spare rain jacket, helping Lilith stick her arms into sleeves, wet cotton of her cardigan catching on its lining. "I'm sorry I'm so late! Did you wait for me for a long time? I saw your signal. And then I - well, I -" She didn't know how to begin explaining everything that had happened since

the moment she left Ed's cottage yesterday, starting from the homeless woman who turned out to be Mad Marta, grandfather's cousin, and then continuing to more heads appearing on the wall at night, her journey across the house, the therapy session with the doctor, how the room ate him, how the... But she couldn't think anymore.

The ground shook. If Lilith didn't know any better, she would have thought it was an earthquake.

Ed reached out for her hand, she grasped it, and they took off into the woods, lithe black whippet right behind them. They tore between trees for what seemed like a very long time, turning right and some more to the right, running along the edge of the field, but far away from it so as not to be visible to her grandfather and Gustav.

Air was filled with wet leaves and that distinct rain smell mixed with damp earth and the tang of pollen. Lilith inhaled it hungrily, happy to be away from the usual rose garden stench that she has gotten used to by now. Her bliss didn't last long. Wherever it is they were going, started smelling worse by the minute, as if they headed into a gigantic compost trash bin overgrown with woods. *Organic matter*, thought Lilith, and wondered once more what Panther meant by *dinner* for Baer.

At last, they came to a clearing and a thick gnarly oak in the middle of it, its multiple knobs and branch stumps polished,

suggesting extensive use, as if someone climbed up and down it for years. It stood perhaps close to seventy feet tall, its trunk so thick that Lilith wouldn't be able to connect her hands if she were to hug it. And in the deep green cloud of oak leaves above, amidst the intricate net of intersecting branches, Lilith saw a dark rectangular shape that made her heart leap.

"A tree house!" She exclaimed, promptly feeling Ed's index finger across her lips, shushing her. She couldn't resist staring into his brown eyes for a little bit longer than proper etiquette required, him patiently waiting at the foot of the tree.

"What about Panther?" Lilith whispered to Ed, afraid to speak loudly.

"I'm a dog, remember? I'll stand guard. Go on." Said Panther bravely, nonetheless eyeing the tree house with obvious longing.

"Speaking of dogs - what did you mean by dinner for Baer? Bone crunching? What was that about?" Said Lilith with apprehension.

Panther glanced at Ed, and they exchanged a look of understanding.

"Ed will tell you." Concluded Panther in a toneless growl.

"What is it you two know that I don't?" Erupted Lilith, causing Ed to shush her again. "It's infuriating to be left in

the dark like this, you know that, right?" Lilith hissed at both of them in exasperation.

Ed shook his head and kept pressing his fingers to his lips, requesting silence. Panther merely tilted his head, raising his eyebrows, as only whippets can do, giving Lilith an inquisitive look that meant, *are you sure you want to continue arguing with me?*

"All right. Stay safe and bark if anything." Lilith brandished her index finger at him.

Panther rolled his eyes. "As you wish, *madam.*"

Lilith stuck her tongue at him.

Ed stood at the base of the oak, motioning up. Catching her breath, and sticking her wet beret into her bag lest it decided to fall off her head again, Lilith found one handhold, then another, grabbing the knobbly spots, moving swiftly up, knowing that if she stopped and looked down, she will get scared and most certainly will fall. At last, she clamped onto the edge of the platform and two sticks nailed to it, serving as rails, and pulled herself up and over the edge, collapsing into a heap of sodden clothes and breathing hard.

She lay like this for another minute before Ed's tanned face appeared next to her, his hoodie pulled down now, his dark hair smelling of cookies, his pointed face smiling shyly.

Lilith rolled over on her stomach and propped herself up into a sitting position.

A crudely nailed together wooden platform the size of a large dinner table was wedged between two thick branches, easily a foot in diameter each, and the main tree trunk that disappeared into a hole at the edge of the platform. There was no wall on the side where Lililith climbed up, serving as an entrance, but the rest of the tree house consisted of three walls built from thin boards, crooked and darkened with age, and a roof that was yet another wooden platform with gaps here and there leaking in the rain. Overall, it was dry and welcoming in its general demeanor, with a wooden chest in one corner, heaps and heaps of old paper and blankets in the other, a pile of dusty pillows and a pair of binoculars by the window, if you could call a square hole in the wall a window.

"Wow!" Exclaimed Lilith, surveying the tree house with an expression of utter awe on her face and forgetting all her troublesome thoughts for a moment.

Ed smiled, casting his eyes down.

"Did you make it yourself?" Inquired Lilith, edging closer to Ed.

He nodded, blushing slightly, mostly his ears turning pink, because his tanned face didn't really show color.

"You've got the best - most awesome - *awesomest* hiding places I've ever been to." Gushed Lilith, her eyes ablaze with excitement.

"That bed in your house - I mean, that place under your bed - the one that was hiding us between two huge rose petals... and now this... Spectacularly *lavish!*"

Lilith slipped her sodden bag on the floor, kicked off her muddy flats and pulled off her knee socks, wringing brown liquid out of them over the edge of the platform. The rain was still pummeling dimly on the roof, but overall it was dry in Ed's tree house, and to her great relief, Lilith felt safe here, high up in the trees, away from the house, the rose garden, her grandfather, her parents Daphne and Gwen, away from unsolved mysteries. Her only two regrets were leaving Panther below and the ever-present stench in the air that made her eyes sting and water.

Relaxation always brings our pain to the surface. Lilith leaned on the wall, closing her eyes, and suddenly the heaviness of her recent experiences flooded her anew, the horror and the guilt and gnawing remorse at commanding the room to murder the doctor, the sound of his cries, the breaking sound of his bones. Lilith choked and hung her head, and then, unable to hold herself together, burst into silent tears, covering her face with her hands and convulsing silently, terrified about coming

apart in Ed's presence again. He had this special effect on her, and she both loved it and hated it.

After an awkward pause, Ed gently pried Lilith's hands from her face, tracing the deep cut on her palm with his finger. It opened again and was bleeding, but not as profusely as before.

Ed looked up at Lilith questioningly.

Lilith opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, shut it and shook her head, miserably, unable to begin.

Ed shuffled on all fours into the corner, opened the wooden chest, took out a piece of cloth and sat next to Lilith, taking her palm into his hand, tearing the cloth into strips and wrapping them around it.

"Is this your t-shirt?" Lilith croaked, watching the face of some unknown to her German band being ripped apart. Ed nodded and shrugged, indicating, *so what, I don't care.*

"You don't have to..." Protested Lilith weakly.

Ed ignored her, skillfully finishing his job.

After her hand was bandaged up, Lilith sniffled, wiped her running nose and shivered, wet clothes finally chilling her to the bone. Wrapping herself in the thin fabric of the rain jacket didn't help, and Lilith sat with her face stuck into her knees, trying to block out the stench, miserable and crest-fallen all over again, when Ed timidly circled his arm around her shoulders.

Lilith stopped trembling, wishing he wouldn't take it away, because it was warm, it was very warm, it was warm like a hot water bottle filled with boiling liquid, giving her the comfort of home, of being sick in bed and being tended to. They sat like this for a while, neither daring to move, Lilith not daring to say a word, Ed not daring to grab his notepad and start scribbling to her what seemed to have been splitting him along the seams.

Finally, Lilith couldn't ignore her curiosity anymore.

"Why did you signal? Yesterday night - when the house was - when I was - did you see me and Panther in the window?" She was hoping Ed will read between the lines and not think her completely out of her mind. He didn't blink when he heard her talking to Panther and it appeared he understood him too, but would he believe her if she said that grandfather's mansion stretched itself out like a stem of a rose and bend over the entire garden? Surely he would, what, with his own hiding place acting like a rose?

As if reading her thoughts, Ed let go of her and moved to the window, beckoning Lilith to come and look. Lilith eagerly stood up and nearly fell over when Ed blocked her vision with his back. He shook his head, then he took Lilith by the shoulders, breathing slowly in and out, signaling to her that

she do the same, peering straight into her eyes, his face wearing a very somber and serious expression.

It was the best type of communication, Lilith thought, they understood each other without words, and Ed was about to show her something important, for which she had to prepare herself, both mentally and physically.

Lilith nodded, breathing as instructed.

Ed raised his eyebrows, mouthing, *Ready?*

"Yes." Lilith answered curtly.

Ed placed his finger over his mouth, indicating silence, and then moved so that there was enough space for both of them to peer out of the square opening in the tree house wall. Lilith scooted over on her fours and sat on the pillows next to Ed, their shoulders pressing together, their heads touching. And then, when she saw what opened up to her eyes, she let out a stifled gasp. Ed was quick in placing a hand over her mouth, evidently prepared for her to scream.

## Chapter 25. Tree house

They were about thirty feet high above the ground and barely fifty feet away from the west side of the rose garden. Its very end came right to the edge of the forest, separated from it only by an intricately woven iron fence painted white. It was the other side of the garden, the dark and foggy and foreboding place where clouds of foul stench soared up in long misty tongues, licking up the rain. Tall twisted shrubs, covered with a endless scarlet and crimson and ruby and burgundy rose heads, parted close to the fence in a sort of a round clearing, where the rose bush woman stomped and trashed and wailed not too long ago. Now, however, she was what appeared like in deep sleep, her bulged sides rising and falling slowly, her belly larger than before. There were bushes torn out of the ground everywhere, littering the space around her, mutilated and stripped of their foliage and flowers.

Lilith turned to glance at Ed, her eyes wide, her throat too dry to say anything.

Ed grabbed a piece of paper from the pile, picked up a pencil from the floor, moistened it between his lips and scribbled in capital letters.

*ROSEHEAD.*

He held it out for Lilith to see.

"Rosehead?" Asked Lilith feebly, a pit of ice dropping in her stomach. "What exactly is *Rosehead*?"

Ed pointed outside to the rose bush woman and wrote under the first line. *Her name is Rosehead.*

"That thing? What is - who *is* she?" Said Lilith quietly.

Ed put up his hand for her to wait, reached down and gave Lilith the binoculars, pointing ahead, to the Bloom mansion that from here looked like a beautiful white refuge far far away, in another world, in another life, an impossible destination next to the dim horror of what lay next to them.

Lilith fixed the binoculars in front of her face, peering at the mansion. It took her a moment to adjust focus.

She saw the door from the hall open and her mother running out, frantic, wringing her hands, then running back in, then running back out with her husband, pulling him by the hand. He resisted her. She dropped his hand, wheeled around, her hands on her hips, and began what looked like screaming her head off. Agatha rushed out and disappeared behind the bushes. Patrick Rosenthal, the butterfly collector boy, was lecturing Petra on something, while Petra tried to wriggle out of his grip, finally leaving him with her cardigan and running off into the garden. Then came out Irma Schlitzburger with her two fat ugly

daughters. She was gesticulating. Lilith's mother turned to her and marched past her back into the house, nearly bumping into Sabrina Rosenthal, who promptly advanced on Patrick. Now Irma and Al Bloom engaged in a conversation, while both Daphne and Gwen were sniggering to each other. There was no doubt in Lilith's mind who there were talking about and what exactly they were saying.

She lowered the binoculars.

"They're looking for me." She said, turning to Ed. "Oh, I will be in so much trouble..."

Ed shrugged his shoulders, as if saying, *So what?* Then pointed to sleeping Rosehead. *This is more important.*

Lilith nodded, diving into her questions again, afraid that something else might interrupt them and she won't find out what she desperately needed to find out.

"So... What's the mansion got to do with Rosehead? Wait... who *is* this Rosehead woman - it's a woman, right?" The questions she held back tumbled out of her mouth, fast. "And what about this garden regeneration thing? What does it *mean*? Those houses, five of them, like five rose petals - grandpa's mansion," she pointed out the window, "it took my blood - can you imagine - as *payment* for information. It took me on a house tour yesterday night, from room to room. I saw all those people, sleeping! And the heads told me - they told me -" Words tangled themselves in

Lilith's mouth, she wanted to ask questions, she wanted to tell Ed about all that happened, and she was losing track of what was more important and what was less, or where she ought to begin.

For a brief second she was silent, breathing hard, watching Ed's expectant face, his eyebrows slightly raised.

"Ugh! There is much I need to tell you, I don't know where to start! What's going to happen tomorrow? Just - can you please tell me everything you know, every - single - *deplorable* - *woeful* - *austere* - *calamitous* - *pestilential* - detail?" Lilith thought that this was her personal record. Never in her life has she used five sophisticated words in a row, and that was saying something. She badly wanted to know, she needed to know, and she expressed it the only way she knew how.

Ed didn't need convincing. He was bursting to tell, as if waiting for Lilith's inquiry, nodding vigorously. He jumped up, scrambled over to the chest, took out a notebook, moistened the pencil between his lips again, and plopped next to Lilith, ready to draw.

A large grunt followed by creaking and crunching of twigs issued from the garden, chilling Lilith's bones. She exchanged a look with Ed.

"Is it waking up?" Whispered Lilith. It appeared that Rosehead has turned in her sleep, producing distinct noises that

hurtled Lilith down her memory of Wilhelmus Baumgartner's last cries and the breaking of his bones.

Ed shook his head. *She shouldn't. Sleeps for hours at a time*, he wrote, getting ready to write more. Suddenly Lilith stopped his hand, doctor's screams echoing around in her head, sure to stay there until the last days of her life. She stared at Ed openly.

Ed was her first true friend since she could remember herself. And true friends didn't hide anything from each other. He trusted her, she could feel it. He needed to know what kind of a monster she was, before it went too far. She couldn't stomach him looking at her with his honest eyes, ready to share his family secrets. *Her* family secrets.

"Wait." She said in a fallen voice.

Ed studied her, puzzled, pencil hovering above paper.

"Before you start... I have to tell you something. You are - you are my first real friend, and you deserve to know. Maybe after this you will *not* want to be my friend. And -" She raised her hand to stop Ed from shaking his head furiously, "- it's okay if you won't. I'll understand. I - I did something utterly and unexplainably horrible." She swallowed, gathering her wits, and then delivered one fast line, shaking as she did so.

"I ordered the room to kill the doctor." Lilith cast her eyes down and froze, sitting stock still, afraid to raise her

eyes, to see Ed's facial expression, to see him shoving his notepad under her nose, to see his message scribbles on it, *Get out of my tree house, you filthy waspish vociferous murderer!* Or something worse than that, perhaps a whole page full of terrible words like *wastrel* or *numbskull* or *hussy*. Her grandmother liked calling her *hussy* when she misbehaved in the most inappropriate way.

Lilith waited, her eyes squinted shut, feeling herself shrinking smaller and smaller, disappearing into the floor. Nothing happened. After what felt like an eternity, she tentatively looked up. His face gone bloodless, Ed was staring at her, as if he waited for her to notice him. He stretched out his hand, pointing to what he had written.

Very small untidy letters were spelling out two very simple words, as if he was scared to write them, trying to hide them, to make them tiny.

*Me too*, it said.

"What?" Gaspd Lilith. "What do you mean, *me too*? You've been there too - in the black room? You ordered it to kill someone too?"

Ed's tanned face has gone completely white. He hung his head, nodding.

"Who?" Breathed Lilith, wanting to touch Ed's hand and afraid.

*My doctor.*

"Your doctor? But - I just met him today, he was your psychotherapist, wasn't he? Did you - did the room - kill him twice? How -"

*No, it was a different doctor, the one I had before Wilhelms Baumgartner. It was my final test, to be able to command the house, before the garden got a taste of me. I was supposed to be heir to Bloom property, so grandpa wanted to prepare me ahead of time, to give me a better chance, but the garden rejected me, of course. I'm not Bloom by blood. Ed has handwritten it all very fast, as if a closed door into his mind has been opened and whatever it is he held back came out in a flood.*

"YOU? You were supposed to be heir?" Something clicked in Lilith's head. "That's horrible. I really *am* terribly sorry you had to go through this. Let me guess, it happened two years ago?"

Ed nodded.

"Is that why you stopped talking - wait - your dad knew, is that why he - you know -" Lilith couldn't bring herself to using the word *suicide*, looking up at Ed hopefully.

Ed produced a barely noticeable nod, making sure his face was hidden in the shadow.

"How - why - what *is* this Rosehead thing anyway? Why does it do this?" There were tears in Lilith's voice, tears of helplessness and a burgeoning urge to understand, and anger, mounting anger against the garden from the pain it caused, the pain it caused to her friend.

For the next hour or so, Ed's elegant fingers danced across sheets and sheets of paper, covering them with fast sketches, describing the entire Bloom family history, everything Ed knew, from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, starting with Loedke Blome and continuing into the modern day. He drew so fast that twice his pencil broke and he had to get a new one, adding elaborate explanations to his drawings wherever he could, leaving others blank, letting pictures speak for themselves.

Lilith lost herself in his story.

She bent over the notepad, breathless, her mouth open, the discomfort of her wet clothes forgotten, her heart racing in her ribcage, her insides turning and twisting at each new picture, at each new piece of information that she's been craving ever since she rolled down the window of the rental car on Monday and cringed at the rotten stench that hit her nose. Her talent was to smell, smell like a dog. Ed's talent was to see, see like a hawk. And see he did. This is what Lilith saw through his eyes, through his drawings, performed for her in a flurry of pages covered with pencil intricate, torn, almost moving lines.

*Luedke Blome came to Berlin in the first years the city was born, lured here by the prospect of becoming rich, hoping to open his own trade, having no idea what it would be, not being particularly skilled in anything (Ed drew a man in a forest). Poor and without any money, he arrived on foot and stumbled along the woods, coming across a wild rose garden in the middle of a field (a man in a rose garden). The roses were so bright red and healthy and fragrant, that nobility was eager to shell out money for collected flowers (coins exchanged). Luedke, as it turned out, possessed a green thumb, settling down and proceeding at culturing the garden. That was the beginning of BLOOM & CO.*

*He promptly married an English girl, Rose, a daughter of a traveling jester (a picture of a medieval clown and his traveling caravan). He was madly in love with her (big heart). She had lovely red hair, but she died giving birth to their fifth child (Ed started drawing the scene of birth, then decided the better of it, slashing lines all over and doodling 5 babies instead).*

*"Five children..."* Murmured Lilith.

*She was only 35,* scribbled Ed.

*"Grandmother - dad's mom - died at 35 too! You said that the rose garden regenerates every 35 years..."* muttered Lilith under her breath.

Ed nodded and continued to draw, explaining more.

*Stricken with grief, Luedke cut a bush in his garden to her likeness, calling it Rosehead, after his late wife's nickname, for the color of her hair and for her stubbornness, like that of an iron nail (Ed drew an identical copy of the rose bush woman). It was rumored that he buried her under that bush (at this Lilith gasped once more). He also changed his name from Blome to Bloom, in her memory, naming his flower trade BLOOM & CO, on an English manner. From then on, something happened.*

*BLOOM & CO took off, spawning generation upon generation of Blooms, except all of them were widowers (rows and rows of coffins), but not before their wives produced at least one son.*

"I'm the last Bloom, and I'm a girl..." Mumbled Lilith.

*Yes, that's why grandpa wanted me to be heir. Only a boy can have ownership of the garden.* Ed continued sketching.

*None of the women they married lived long, tragically dying, either disappearing in the wilderness surrounding the garden, or drowning, or falling ill and dying, dying, dying like flies (Ed got carried away, drawing elaborate scenarios of various deaths, until Lilith motioned to him that she got the idea).*

"So... does this happen every 35 years?" Said Lilith urgently.

Ed nodded.

Lilith bit her lip, thinking.

*Soon, people abandoned this part of land, selling their lots to Bloom family, members of which happily paid and expanded, building the mansion in place of its house, adding 4 more houses, losing all of them to fires set by angry mobs, rebuilding them anew, and prospering, prospering, prospering (houses, furious blasts of fire, more houses, more furious blasts of fire, bags and bags of money).*

"Did only Bloom wives die, or did other women die too?" Lilith asked, hoping to glimpse an answer to her worry of having to protect all 21 women currently residing as guests in her grandfather's mansion.

*The garden got greedy over time. It demanded more and more. Dad told me it started with one, and then each time the garden regenerated, it wanted one more, and one more. This year it will be 21. Ed looked up from drawing, the expression of his face a mixture of carefully concealed rage. My mom is grandpa's favorite niece, that's why he wants us to move out.*

"- and my mom is one of those 21. So... these women... Can I - can I ask how they die?" Said Lilith uneasily, thinking that she already knew the answer to this question, and thinking about her mother with a sinking feeling in her stomach. They had their differences, but never in the world would she want her mother to be eaten by an evil rose garden.

*That I'm not sure of. I only know that they walk into the garden, well, into the other part of the garden, and never come out. Then Gustav sends grandpa's mastiffs inside and... Ed's pencil stopped.*

"And -?" Prompted him Lilith, her voice tone changing from normal to that of a very frightened child, squeaking almost.

*I think they eat their bones, the dogs, because it's the only thing that remains left of them. The garden sucks out all the blood, I think, that's why the roses are so red. A different type of blood makes a different shade of red, a different kind of a rose.*

Ed passed a hand through his hair nervously, unable to go on, shaking from what appeared like fury and revulsion at the same time.

"Dad told me." Breathed Lilith, numb from head to toe. "21 kinds. 20 of them red, like the rooms on the second floor, and the 21<sup>st</sup>... 21<sup>st</sup>... is black."

*Like death.*

"Like death." Lilith chewed on her hair. "Waiting for number 21. Waiting to change to red. Waiting for me..." She stated it as a fact, knowing deep inside that this was evident from the very beginning. The garden wanted her the second she rolled down the window of their rental car, the second it smelled her aroma, and she felt it, felt it with every ending of her nerves.

"Have you... have you seen any of it, any disappearances... happening - from - from here?" Asked Lilith, pointing to the window, her hand shaking.

Ed shook his head tragically. *There was nothing to see until last week, when you came. That's when regeneration started.*

"Will it - will Rosehead give birth to - to something new? A new rose bush woman, is that it?" Lilith didn't recognize her own voice anymore. She spoke automatically, feeling a freezing sensation spread from her chest to her stomach to her legs, rendering her completely motionless, as if chiseled in stone and unable to move a single muscle.

*When she eats enough, she will give birth to a whole new crop of bushes, rebirthing the entire garden. But she needs food to do it. She's hungry.*

"- and it - she - Rosehead - is she the spirit of the garden - the garden's deity - its *malevolent* soul?" Said Lilith with her eyes nearly popping out of her head, fear flooding her with liquid dread.

*Nobody knows for sure. Dad said it goes back to the very life-source of the place itself. It tasted human blood by accident when Luedke Blome buried his wife there. It must have liked it. It took her shape and turned evil. I think.*

Panther barked below.

"Panther!" Exclaimed Lilith, leaning over the edge and peering into the gathering afternoon dimness. Rain stopped, and dusk rolled in its first violet streaks into the air. "What is it? Are you all right?"

"Yes! Watch out! It's moving!" He barked again.

A malicious groan broke through the evening air.

Both Lilith and Ed instinctively stuck their heads into the window, their hearts beating in unison. Rosehead was stirring. The unreality of it made Lilith dizzy. It was like watching some pagan idol, a 20 foot tall deity made entirely of twigs and leaves and roses, coming to life. It looked like a gigantic doll a poor child would fashion out of scraps and sticks and leaves found in the woods.

"It's gigantic." Croaked Lilith. "What's it gonna do now?"

Ed shrugged his shoulders, glued to the vision with the same ill-disguised interest as Lilith was, overtaken by that childish curiosity that blunts logic.

Rosehead grunted, pulled up her enormous legs and rolled in her side, shuddering the ground in the process. Lilith, despite being thoroughly enthralled and terrified by what she was witnessing, remembered Sherlock Holmes' words. *It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.* She had very little time left to gather her facts.

"What about the houses?" She whispered into Ed's ear feverishly. "And the heads on the wall? The tunnels underneath? The hypanthium and the seeds? Those 20 seeds that - "

There was no more time to talk. Rosehead, the colossal rose bush woman, swiftly rose to her feet and was revolving her head around, apparently looking for the source of the noise. Ed pressed his hand over Lilith's mouth, ducking down out of the view and pulling her down with him.

Panther started barking hysterically.

It felt like Rosehead took a step in their direction, because the ground shook so hard that the old oak creaked, threatening to throw the tree house off its branches. The walls and the roof groaned dangerously, and the platform underneath Ed and Lilith shifted.

"We need to get out of here!" Shrieked Lilith, tearing Ed's hand off her mouth and forgetting all about her manners.

Ed shook his head furiously, indicating silence.

"What do you mean, no? She's coming this way!" Lilith screamed and moved towards the edge of the platform. Ed was miming something, but Lilith, in her haste to depart, ignored him.

Dejected, Ed tried yanking on Lilith's bag to make her stop, but Lilith already slipped down. Ed had no choice but to follow, moving down the opposite side, descending in quick

familiar moves, skirting the trunk and making it underneath Lilith, showing her where to put her hand, where to put her foot. For a while nothing happened, and then, when they were only 10 feet away from the ground, earth shattered into a series of strong reverberations, accompanied by heavy thuds and loud painful wails. Ed managed to slide down fast and stood on the ground next to trembling Panther, petting him, motioning Lilith down.

Lilith's hands slipped on wet bark of the oak trunk, she couldn't move out of fear of falling. Then she felt someone looking at her. Slowly, as if in a dream, she turned her head to meet two huge rose flower eyes ogling at her from the distance of about twenty feet.

Rosehead was standing by the iron fence, bent down, her head level with Lilith's head, looking at her curiously, her gigantic mouth open in a way a hungry baby's mouth opens, with a streak of rose petals falling out of it like saliva, an intoxicating rotten stench emanating from inside. Next instant, without any warning, a long vine shot out of it like a tongue, swiping past the fence, oozing in a zooming line all the way across twenty feet and scraping Lilith's cheek, producing a shallow gash and swiping off a trickle of her blood, returning back to its owner with cunning speed.

Rosehead swallowed Lilith's blood hungrily.

Lilith uttered a bloodcurdling scream, her hands losing her hold, her feet slipping, her body scraping the oak trunk for several feet, then tumbling and falling on the ground with a loud smack.

## Chapter 26. Rosehead

For a second nobody moved or made a single sound, even Panther stood motionless and quiet. In the next second, stillness erupted into a chaos of whimpers (Panther performed a mad dance around Lilith), moans (Lilith grabbed her head, attempting to hold it together, because it was splitting), and aggravated hungry cries of fully awoken Rosehead, shaking the fence in her leafy fists and taking another fierce swipe of her vine-tongue at Lilith but missing and scratching Ed's shoulder instead, ripping a tear in his rain jacket and howling her displeasure, followed by stomping of the feet and more wailing cries. Watching Rosehead was like watching a gigantic capricious doll perform a toddler tantrum in a body suitable for a giantess, turning from upset to demanding to lethal in the matter of seconds. She started climbing the fence, but something prevented her from toppling over it on the other side, like an invisible barrier that ran along the fence. Her disappointment erupted in a series of shrill howls.

Lilith sat up, holding her head between her hands and reeling, trying to focus. Ed supported her back, a question written all over her face that Lilith knew he wanted to ask.

"I'm all right! I think! Nothing broken! I'll be able to stand in a minute!" Yelled Lilith over the racket, flexing her arms and legs and turning her head this way and that, rubbing her eyes to wipe the dizziness away, her heart hammering an ear-splitting staccato, only one thought on her mind, *to get away, they needed to get away, she needed to get up and they needed -* She watched Rosehead make another fruitless attempt at climbing over the fence.

Meanwhile, Ed pulled Lilith along the ground behind the vast oak tree trunk, to hide them from plain view. Panther jumped around Lilith, licking her face furiously and otherwise being very happy that his little mistress appeared to be in good health after such a frightful drop, but Lilith halted him with her hand, peeking out from behind the tree at the fence and ducking again as the vine took yet another swipe.

Rosehead's wails now turned into an upset grumble.

"Wait... She can't climb over the fence, can she?"

Understanding downed on Lilith.

Ed shook his head, echoing her question.

"I - oh, I'm sorry." Lilith said guiltily. "I didn't realize..."

*It's okay,* shrugged Ed, pointed to his eyes and made a face that could only mean one thing. *It's too late now, she's seen us.*

Lilith felt her face grow very hot and had a sudden urge to hide it in her hands. "Well, she heard Panther before she heard us, so... how come you didn't tell him to be quiet?" She addressed Ed, but it was Panther who answered.

"Why, thank you very much, madam, for offering me your gratitude for my tireless service." Scoffed Panther in a hurt tone of voice and made as if to stalk off, only there was nowhere to stalk off, as the tongue-vine kept striking on one side, then on other side of the trunk, accompanied by more disgruntled howls. Panther resolved to turning his back on Lilith and sitting down with his tail tucked in.

Ed looked up at the tree house. He left his paper and pencils up in the tree house, and now he struggled to gesticulate his answer, but it didn't make much sense Lilith, watching him fold the fingers of his one hand into a four-legged creature and running them on another hand.

"Dog? You mean, dog - dogs? What about dogs?" Lilith snapped impatiently.

Ed redoubled his efforts, contorting his face in concentration and making as if to swallow his four-legged hand.

"It doesn't eat dogs? Rosehad? Absolumonto. I thought that might be the case. It seems like grandpa's mastiffs have a free reign on the other side of the garden, don't they?" A twinge of

fury prickled her forehead, the scene of Alfred Bloom beating Baer fresh in her mind's eye.

Ed mimed something else back, and Lilith, her nerves near snapping point, felt a bubble of anger erupt in her next remark. "Stop doing this thing already, you can talk, so *talk!*" She was trembling all over, glaring at Ed.

Ed opened his eyes wide in a shock, hurt written all over his face, and let his arms fall down.

Rosehead's distant grumbling suddenly subsided into a barely audible rustle of rose leaves, as if she was a predator readying herself for an attack, but Lilith paid it no mind, her focus was on Ed.

"I - I'm sorry - I didn't mean it this way - here..." She squeaked, digging into her bag and taking out her journal that turned into a soggy mess, pages glued together with moisture. If she decided to twist it, she bet it would squeeze out dirty water in the process like a pair of dirty sodden socks. "Oh, it's no use." She wailed, taking out her beloved book, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, looking like it was dropped in a puddle and lay there for a whole day, forgotten.

"Oh, no!" Exclaimed Lilith, opening up the book and peeling wet pages apart, until her finger automatically landed on a line and she read it silently in her head. *Nor can it be denied that*

*many of the family have been unhappy in their deaths, which have been sudden, bloody, and mysterious.* Her insides twisted.

"We need to let the others know. About Rosehead, about tomorrow! Panther!" Panther didn't move, pretending like he didn't hear a word. Lilith attempted to stand up but had to hold on to the tree, her head reeling, her stomach lurching. Ed pressed his lips into a thin line, and with an effort pushed down on Lilith's shoulders to make her sit on the ground again.

"We can't stay here! *I* can't stay here! I need to tell my mom! When does it start, this garden regeneration? When does she start feeding, tomorrow morning? At midnight? When exactly will it happen, do you know?" Said Lilith shrilly.

Ed shook his head, stretching his arms wide apart.

Lilith stared at him, breathing heavily. He didn't lower his gaze, holding hers, apparently mad at her as well, fuming. Panther sat with his back to both of them, licking his fur defiantly.

Just then an ominous stillness spread itself across the evening, and a sharp odor of decay reached Lilith's nostrils. Her skin prickled with a sense of something being wrong, something going awry while they were busy bickering at each other, something that was about to happen and that they could've potentially prevented. How she came upon this knowledge, she didn't know, but she felt it and smelled and was instantly on

alert, jumping to her feet like her fall didn't happen, adrenaline surging through her veins and making her numb to pain. Ed felt it too, because his finger went automatically to his lips, and he turned his head in the direction of the rose garden, as did Panther, growling low.

"Ed!" Came a call from the garden. "Ed, wo bist du? Ed? Ed!" It was a frightened child's voice, and it sounded dangerously close. An image of Petra wiggling out of Patrick's grip and running into the garden flashed in Lilith's mind, an image glimpse not too long ago through binoculars. Her eyes met Ed's.

"Petra!" Yelled Lilith, to Ed mouthing soundlessly the same, and to Panther shouting the same.

The next instant, all three of them bounded from behind the tree towards the fence, to witness a chilling scene, the likes of which make you wake up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat and being happy that it was only a nightmare.

Through the wrought iron pattern of the iron fence, through the parted rose bushes growing next to the spot where Rosehead was ogling at Lilith not too long ago, they saw the round clearing in the garden, the mess of broken rose bushes littering its ground, and small Petra standing in the middle of it, her festive dress in tatters, her hands pressed together, her dark hair tucked back in a pony tail, loose strands falling on her

face as if she was tearing through shrubs for the last hour, her knees scratched bloody. But that was not the worst of it, the worst of it was what Petra didn't see, looking around and calling for Ed. Looking around and not looking up.

Because right above her Rosehead stood erect, her arms stretched out in preparation of grabbing Petra with her massive hands, her head hanging down, her bulging sides quivering, tense with anticipation of a meal that walked so readily into her clutches, about to snap, swipe off her feet and swallow the little girl whole. A trickle of rose petals dropped out of Rosehead's mouth on top of Petra's head. Petra looked up and let out a high-pitched piercing scream.

"Run, Petra, run!" Yelled Lilith, running to the fence as fast as she could, her knees buckling in effort, barking Panther on her heels, Ed jogging ahead of her, swiftly coming to the fence and beginning to climb it.

But it was too late. Rosehead pounced, her thorny arms snatching the girl in her midriff, raising her high up in the air, her long sharp vine-tongue swiping at her, a triumphant shout of glee erupting from its gigantic hole of a mouth. Petra screamed hysterically, flailing her arms and legs.

"Hold on, Petra, we're coming!" Shouted Lilith, climbing after Ed, her hands shaking from weakness.

Meanwhile, Panther squeezed past the fence and grabbed Rosehead by the ankle, which was to say more like he grabbed her by the shank, because her leg consisted of one thick cane, many thorny anchor roots making up her foot, and many strong thorny canes sprouting from it upward to form her leg.

Panther must have bitten her pretty hard, because Rosehead, her mouth wide open, screaming and thrashing Petra held tight above it, grunted and looked down, lifting her other leg and kicking Panther, sending him yelping and sprawling on the ground at the very edge of the clearing.

"NO, YOU DON'T! DON'T YOU *DARE* TOUCHING PANTHER, YOU STUPID ROSEHEAD COW!" Screamed Lilith, not caring if Rosehead understood English or German or understood anything at all, seething with anger that made her forget her fears, her pains and doubts, making her way up the 10 foot high fence, her wet flats slipping, her heavy bag weighing her down, her face hot, her thoughts set on fighting this monster to her death, if she had to.

Meanwhile, Ed somersaulted over the top ridge of the fence and not bothering to carefully descend down the other side, spread his arms wide open and jumped right onto Rosehead's back, gracefully, with the cunning of a true hawk, gliding through the distance of about 5 feet that separated them, landing with a soft crunch of breaking twigs and immediately beginning to tear

at thorny canes, smashing them and twisting them and tearing them apart, making a hole in Rosehead's back and sticking his head inside.

Another moment, Rosehead swayed, let out a wail of pain and sent Petra flying into the bushes, falling down on her knees with a thunderous thud and trying to reach her back with her arms, thrashing madly. Whimpering Panther, recovered from his fall, ran up and began biting furiously at Rosehead's knees.

By the time Lilith made it over the fence and down the other side, they managed to cause Rosehead fall onto her side, Ed's hands bleeding profusely, his face contorted with rage, his arms working like those of a machine, grabbing and pulling and breaking every single rose stem he could get a hold of, ripping off flowers and petals and leaves, his lithe frame moving around the monster woman's head, aiming for her eyes.

It took perhaps a few seconds total, but a 14 year old boy and a whippet couldn't so easily disable a 20 foot tall creature, and with a malevolent rustling movement deep inside the rose bush woman, she waved her arms, smacking Panther and Ed in turn, sending each of them tumbling into rose bushes and the surrounding fog, that by now became thick and milky, dusk quickly painting it purple, the rose bushes themselves moving closer and closer, making the clearing smaller, as if coming to Rosehead's aid. All Lilith saw was Ed's legs flashing in the

air, all she heard was Panther's painful yapping. She didn't hear anything else, and an acid bomb dropped into her stomach, ready to explode.

"Petra!" She screamed at the top of her lungs. "Petra, where are you?"

But instead of Petra is was Rosehead who answered her call, towering over her with her massive girth, her stomach heaving at the heavy burden it carried, her ruby red eyes ablaze with blood thirst, her many twigs and vines and stems shuffling one over another, repairing what little damage Ed and Panther did, growing her anew, sprouting leaves and rose flowers in front of astounded Lilith.

There was a fraction of an instant, a jiffy, a flash, when both the girl and the rose bush woman stood across each other, eyeing each other with ferocious intensity.

Lilith's first impulse was to run and hide, but then she decided the better of it. She was not going to be a coward like all of them before her, she was going to show this thing who was the boss here, she was the heir to Bloom property, and whatever grew in the rose garden belonged to her. This was between her and Rosehead, and she wasn't going to give this brainless creature the satisfaction of a retreat. If she couldn't control it now, she would never be able to control it, it's like her father said about his whippets. He always told her, *It's a doggy*

*dog world, Lilith. You've got to show the dog who's the boss the first time you meet, to establish and keep your alpha position, to ensure that the dog knows its place.* He then would scrunch up his nose and say his most favorite phrase, *A dog that knows its place is a happy dog.*

Trembling from head to toe, and gasping for air, Lilith took one step forward on numb legs and raised her head high.

"The owner eats before its dog, because the owner is the leader. I own you. I am your owner. I am Lilith Bloom, the heir to entire Bloom property. You are part of this property, and you won't eat unless I command you to eat, do you understand?" She said it forcefully, brightly, in a piercing voice of a performer aiming to overpower stage fright with pure will. Her guts have gone cold and she could smell the tang of freshly drawn blood and hear Ed's moans not too far away, but she forced herself to look straight into Rosehead's florid eyes.

Rosehead halted and inclined her massive head, as if she was truly listening.

"You won't eat unless I command you to eat! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" Repeated Lilith louder, her courage fading quickly. Something bumped against her back, and she realized with horror that while she was talking, the rose bushes have moved around her in an impenetrable wall, leaving only enough space for Rosehead to stand a mere five feet away from Lilith. Apparently,

her faltering was enough because in the next instant the rose bush woman grabbed Lilith swiftly with both hands, knocking off her shoulder bag, sending her flats flying from her feet and her lavender beret soaring into the garden. Rosehead's vast lipless mouth opened with a sickening crunch, a foul stench rising from it and causing Lilith's eyes to water.

"Luedke Blome!" Screamed Lilith, not knowing why his name popped into her head at the sight of writhing thorny guts she was able to glimpse through the mouth hole. "He loved you! He would've never wanted you to turn into a monster!"

Rosehead halted again. It's as if it did have a head and a brain. Lilith heard rustling, like some connecting nerves were moving back and forth, making sense of what she said, recalling something from a very distant past. It caused the bush woman to stand like this for a minute, holding Lilith in her fist. Lilith saw the misty garden around her ripple like the surface of the water, impatient, menacing, scary, when she heard footsteps and shouting in German.

"HERE!" Mad Marta broke through the greenery, carrying her voluptuous body like something large and full of blood, and pointing at Lilith. "THIS IS WHERE HE PUT THEM! OH, I KNEW IT." She wailed loudly, swarming with up to Rosehead's feet and beginning to rain her fists on them, pounding on them with all her might.

"YOU!" She rounded on Lilith, looking up at her, as if her tirade in English was meant for the girl to begin with. "I ASKED YOU! I ASKED YOU WHERE HE PUT THEM! YOU SAW HIM, YOU SAW HIM DO IT, DREADFUL GIRL, WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?" She was screaming hysterically, sobbing and overall creating such a racket, that Rosehead inclined her head to sniff her, because that's what it looked like. She sucked in the air loudly. Mad Marta continued shrieking and pounding her fists, slashing her hands bloody in the process. As if sensing something familiar, or perhaps because this promised to be a larger meal, Rosehead swiftly dropped Lilith and picked up Mad Marta instead.

Lilith, falling down from the distance of about ten feet was only saved from cracking her skull by the soft ground, littered with mutilated rose bushes. She sat up, dizzy, and witnessed Mad Marta being swallowed whole into the measureless mouth of Rosehead, but instead of eating her, within seconds with a sickening sucking sound, it sucked her dry, making her body go from a huge obese shape of a woman to a stick of a skeleton draped in excessive skin thin as paper, dry as bone, all moisture gone out of it.

Lilith didn't ask herself to wait for her second chance, she scurried on all fours into the bushes, oblivious to them tearing at her flesh, making sure she was out of sight by the time Rosehead looked around for her.

## Chapter 27. Garden chase

Trembling from the terror of what she has just witnessed, from the weakness in her body, from hunger and from shock, Lilith called out quietly for Panther, Ed, and Petra, crawling around in dirt, hearing Rosehead stomping around in mad search of her escaped prey, and finally collapsing for a nap, evidently full for the time being, producing large reverberating snores and gurgles that sounded very much like a boiling liquid in an enormous pot. Lilith would've retched, but thankfully she had nothing in her stomach, and she only coughed weakly, licking off salty tears that dripped down her face. Every time her bloodied knees connected with the ground, the ground sucked the blood out of her like a hungry leach, and Lilith knew that if she only stopped, she would be sucked dry and die in the same manner that Mad Marta died just now.

A moan to her right caused Lilith's hear to jump in her chest, and she quickly redirected her crawling in the direction of the sound, and that distinct smell of cookies she came to love so much.

"Ed! Ed!" Lilith whispered as loudly as she dared, then, hearing no change in the snoring, said louder. "Ed, is that you? Where are you?"

But of course, Ed didn't talk, so it took Lilith another few minutes to find his dark slumped shape curled up on the ground. It was hard to see in the dusk and the fog, what, with the night descending fast on the garden. Whatever terrible thing was going to start on Saturday, it either started early with the murder of Mad Marta, or it had something else in store, and Lilith wanted to make it out of the garden before midnight.

"Ed, are you all right?" She peered into his dark face, and he moaned back affirmatively, when whining Panther crouched from under the bush.

"Panther!" Exclaimed Lilith a little louder than she intended, hugging her faithful pet and kissing him all over. "That was a brave thing to do, attacking Rosehead! I'm so proud of you!"

Panther, his sides rising and falling in effort, let out his long tongue to hang and licked his mistress's face in gratitude. "She wasn't very tasty, you know, I still prefer steak." He growled. "What happened? I heard Rosehead get a hold of you. Did she just let you go?"

But Lilith didn't answer, not willing to relieve just yet what she saw and worried sick about the little girl. "Petra! We

need to find Petra!" Lilith said commandingly, looking around her wildly. "Petra!" She called. "Petra!" She called louder.

"Petra!" Panther joined her, and Ed sit up, rubbing his face and shaking his head, picking out twigs and leaves out of his hair.

They were in the middle of one of those twisted labyrinthine pathways of the other side of the garden, rolls of fog cursing through it, sweet stench marking the presence of its deity not too far away. The bushes rustled ominously around them, unhappy at this disturbance.

"That was unbelievable, how you jumped on her back, that was - wow - thank you! Did she get you bad?" Asked Lilith, examining Ed's bloody palms, but there wasn't much she could see in the dark. It appeared like Ed was badly scratched but otherwise fine, which he confirmed with a nod. He gesticulated, apparently wondering the same thing Panther was wondering.

Lilith ignored him. "I was beyond myself, I was so *excruciatingly* worried! We've got to find Petra. Come on, help me!" Pleaded Lilith with Ed.

Ed blinked, his whites shining in the thickening dark, his head swiveling around, taking in Rosehead's snores and turning his head to Lilith again, miming his question.

"Who cares!" Said Lilith, frustration rising in her anew. "I don't understand you, it's dark, and you can't draw. But you

can talk, I know you can, please, for Petra! We've got to find her! Help me! HELP ME!"

Ed opened and closed his mouth, like a beached fish, the same way he did in the forest, when Lilith thought for sure he will talk.

"Please!" She repeated. "Petra! Petra, where are you!" Squinting into pressing darkness, Lilith strained to listen for any sound, anything at all, but the groans and rolling thunder of Rosehead's snores overpowered her senses.

"Come on, you can see, you can see better in the dark, help me, call her name, please!" Maybe Lilith shouted too loud, or maybe Rosehead only needed one short little nap, but the snores abruptly stopped, and an eerie silence hung in the air, punctured here and there by settling cries of the crows, who it looked like appeared from the public side of the garden into the other side, in one black cloud, their wings flapping madly, their mass descending somewhere in the vicinity of Rosehead. Suddenly Lilith knew what they were after, whatever was left of poor Mad Marta, she also knew how the paintings came to be in the red gallery. Why, the only thing you had to do was to take the skin off the dry corpses. Who did those paintings? Before this went too far, Lilith chased the image out of her head.

"She killed Mad Marta!" Said Lilith with tears in her voice. "I saw her suck out the blood from her, all of it, and

then tossing her on the ground like an empty rag doll. This is what will happen to Petra, if she's the one who finds her first, do you hear me?"

"You do not say." Growled Panther menacingly. "I suppose for the moment I would prefer to sink my teeth into something else than just steak. Oh, it will give me an immense pleasure."

Ed began putting up a finger to his lips again, to shush both of them, but Lilith reached out and jerked his hand away in her anger.

"Fine! Sit here if this is what you want to do with your life - sit here and stay silent and hidden and weak, when your friend needs you. I see how you are!" It came tumbling out of Lilith's mouth at Ed in an immature kind of way, the way she hasn't spoken since she was very little, her polished adult-like demeanor melting away at the prospect of little Petra being devoured by a gigantic rose bush woman.

She hurt Ed, but she didn't care, if that's what it took to get him talking. Silence around them grew, and a sound of shallow breathing was added to it, like someone was listening. Lilith guesses they had only minutes left.

"Think about it. What would your dad do? Did he die in vain? Will you stay silent your whole life? Draw pictures? Is that it? Is that what you're gonna do? What good is drawing

pictures if your little cousin will die, huh? Can you answer *that?*" Lilith glared at Ed, her hands in fists.

Ed produced a choking noise that almost sounded like a word, or maybe one letter, pointing to his throat.

"I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU SAY! I KNOW YOU CAN TALK, DO IT!" Lilith screamed at Ed, and promptly there was movement. Rosehead was walking in their direction, breaking through bushes and crushing everything in her wake.

"PETRA!" Yelled Lilith and took off blindly, to go somewhere, to be able to hopefully find her before the rose bush woman did, when something broke through the air. A croak, a cough, and then a voice.

"Petra!" Ed called from behind Lilith, sounding wheezy and winded, like an old man who hasn't used his voice for years.

"Ed!" Came from the bushes to their left. Petra answered her favorite cousin, as if she was waiting for him to call her by the name all along.

Despite a thorny monster advancing on them, despite her scrapes and cuts and bleeding gashes, despite the need to find Petra before Rosehead did and make it out of the garden before midnight arrived, despite all that there was one thing Lilith badly needed to do, and it was more important than anything else in the world this very moment.

She turned around and in a feverish rush flung herself on Ed, kissing his cheeks, his nose, his face all over, like she usually kissed Panther, and then hugging him in a bone-crushing hold, talking fast into his ear.

"You talked! You talked! I knew it - oh, I knew it, I knew you could! I - I just - I love you." And on this childish dare of uttering words that adults like to litter with unnecessary meaning and heaviness and drama, and kids simply feel the magnitude of in their little hearts, not yet afraid to express it because it's truly how they feel, Lilith let him go, staring into his brown eyes.

It was impossible to tell if Ed blushed, twilight obscured his features, but Lilith felt the warmth come off his face like that off a hot teapot, mixed with the delicious smell of cookies wafting from his hair.

"I - Petra." Ed croaked in that same rusty voice.

They took off at once in the direction of Petra's calls, now more insistent, intermixed with sniffing and shuffling. As did Rosehead, galumphing through the thicket of the greenery that by now resembled black moving mass of a single living breathing organism. Their hands and knees slid in the mud, still wet from recent rain, as they crawled in between rows and rows of bushes, coming closer to Petra's voice, now so eager that she

shouted every few seconds, something in German and Ed's name repeatedly.

Rosehead followed them, either by the sounds they were making or by their scent, but at once two bushes parted and there she stood, directly in their path, her huge shape silhouetted against darkening sky in a black outline of a badly drawn giant. Both Lilith and Ed froze, looking up.

"What now?" Whispered Lilith, getting ready to stand up and face the beast, if that's what it took.

"There!" Croaked Ed, and Panther nudged Lilith into a groove made by passing water under rose bushes on one side of the pathway. They rolled into it in time to avoid the rose bush woman's swipe, seconds ago in the place where she now closed her right fist on nothing, howling loudly her displeasure.

Lilith's back plopped into chilly liquid that accumulated in the shallow ditch, and she shivered, wondering if anyone in the house noticed the commotion, noticed the ground moving and the screams coming from the garden. Surely somebody must have heard them and was coming to help? Surely her mother must have roused half the city by now, looking for her? But the mansion stood festively lit, gazing at them with its many merry windows, oblivious to what was going on outside, as if it sealed itself from the elements and was completely soundproof, shockproof, and worry proof.

Could it do that, if it chose so? Lilith supposed it could, if it took time to rearrange itself in the morning, and close off at night, and grow over the garden when it needed to. Which made her stomach seethe with acid. What if the house went underground after midnight? She saw it descend through the windows. Did that mean that the real hunt occurred on the surface, while those inside the mansion were safe from the horror or being sucked dry by the rose garden?

Lilith searched for Ed's hand, when he found hers, clutching it. They're hearts were hammering so fast and loud, Lilith swore she could hear Ed's heart answering rhythmically to hers. She licked her dry lips, wishing for water. They were waiting, Rosehead was waiting too. And, precisely at the wrong moment to do it, Petra wailed.

"Ed! Ed!" She cried softly, a few feet ahead of them, closer to Rosehead, who promptly issued a victorious cry, bending down and rummaging with her both huge leafy hands in all directions.

"There she is!" Breathed Lilith, pointing ahead of her.

Panther took off at once, aiming at Rosehead's fists.

"Panther! Stop! Wait!" Shrieked Lilith, scrambling to get up, but Ed beat her to it.

"Here!" Ed jumped up, took out the flashlight from his pocket, the one he was signaling with to Lilith at the edge of

the forest, turned it on and brandished it about to attract Rosehead's attention.

"HERE!" He yelled louder, waving his arm left and right.

"Scat!" He threw at Lilith, who understood at once. The only way they could escape their ordeal was to confuse Rosehead, scatter in all directions. She got up, ran a few paces ahead, ducked right between Rosehead's massive legs, and yelled from behind her.

"Hey, stupid Rosehead cow! I command you to catch me! Do you hear me? I'm Lilith Bloom, heir to rose garden, and I order you to catch me, do you understand? Do you think you can? Oh, you think your mammoth legs will run faster than mine? Huh? Want to test it? Want to see who wins?"

Rosehead made an attempt to turn around, which was not an easy task given her gigantic belly swaying and sloshing around, causing ripples of leaves and petals flutter in its wake. But Ed's flashlight seemed to be like an annoying firefly, and she kept turning back to look at him, lured by its brightness.

"The flashlight!" Yelled Lilith. "Throw it here!"

Momentarily, a small yellow glowing circle traced an arc in the nightly sky and landed promptly into Lilith's palm. It was up to her now to distract Rosehead. She could hear Ed pulling Petra out of her hiding place, breaking off branches and talking to her soothingly in German, and Petra hysterical and ecstatic

at the same time, hearing her favorite cousin talk to her for the first time.

"I will distract her, Lilith! Run and get help!" Barked Panther nearby, running off to the side of the path and issuing one of his piercing never-ending barks that could rouse an entire neighborhood in the middle of the night, it was so sharp and high-pitched.

Rosehead swerved at the noise.

"There won't be any help, Panther, are you out of your doggy mind? Who do you think will believe us? Here, catch the flashlight!" Lilith threw the light, and Rosehead trailed her huge arm behind it, missing it by inches. Panther caught it, judging by the metallic clunk of his teeth and the sudden absence of barking. He ran crisscrossing the paths, ducking under the bushes when Rosehead leaned to catch him, and led her a good 30 feet away, before dashing a mad curve, doubling back and making it to Lilith. She took the flashlight out of his mouth.

"Here, kitty kitty! Come and get it!" She yelled, waving her arm. Rosehead, sobbing and wailing and howling like an angered injured bear, stomped her way back to Lilith.

"Ed, get Petra out of here! I got her under control!" Screamed Lilith into darkness.

"On our way! I will come back for you!" Came ahead of her, and with relief she saw a dark outline of Ed with Petra on his shoulders, jogging along the path and then turning out of sight. With a sinking feeling, Lilith realized that without Ed's window signals she has no idea how to get out of this part of the garden, but this was not the time to think about herself. Her job was to keep distracting Rosehead until her friend and his little cousin were a safe distance away.

She proceeded playing catch with Panther, throwing the flashlight to him and then retrieving it, running in circles, dashing left and right and zigzagging, attempting to tire Rosehead out, shrieking, echoing Panther's shrill yapping and prompting Rosehead to yowl and holler in her mounting frustration, until she stumbled on a root and sprawled face first on the ground, realizing with horror that she is completely and utterly exhausted, not having enough strength to get herself up, not even with Panther's frantic attempts to nudge his nose under her armpits, attempting to serve as a prop.

"Get up, get up, get up, she's behind us!" He growled urgently, but Lilith's muscles trembled and gave out.

"I can't!" She whined, rolling on her back to at least be able to face the gigantic creature in her last moments, her elbows digging painfully into the root that caused her to trip in the first place, her clothes dry from running but caked in

soil and decaying leaves and rose petals that covered this side of the ground in a layer of a century old slimy grime.

Rosehead advanced, a ravenous grin splitting her emerald face, her burgundy rose eyes sparkling with imminent peril. Lilith took one long deep breath, focusing herself to be calm in the face of her death.

## Chapter 28. Regeneration

Night enveloped the rose garden in a velvety darkness reeking of familiar rotten sweetness and dotted with hungry cawing of crows, done with their present meal and looking forward to another. First stars twinkled in the sky, watching the unfolding scene with unblinking interest. Panther desperately barked at Rosehead, yanking the flashlight out of Lilith's hand and running off, but it seemed like Rosehead caught on to the idea of the light being a mere distraction and the real meat lying in front of her, bloodied and tired and ready to be consumed, in the same manner Mad Marta was consumed not too long ago. She stomped forward, and Lilith thought that this time, for sure, she was doomed.

There was no point in crying or yelling or taunting. Lilith knew that no matter what she did, even though she has proclaimed herself as heir to the garden, and commanded the black room to eat doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner, it didn't seem to work on Rosehead. Lilith didn't know the key to controlling the deity, perhaps she was only going to be able to do so when her grandfather died, perhaps she wouldn't be able to do it at all, especially in light of the fact that all previous property

inheritors were men, and she was just a girl, just a small frightened girl who tried to pull a façade of bravado and failed miserably, watching the advancing gigantic shape coming closer and closer, watching Panther drop the light and attack Rosehead's feet with ear-splitting yelps, to no avail.

Rosehead kicked Panther aside like an annoying fly, and Lilith didn't even have the strength to stop her, to shout at her, her throat dry and hoarse from constant screaming, her vocal cords as if jammed, producing a couple feeble squeaks instead of words. To top it off, the battery in the flashlight fizzed out and impenetrable darkness hung over Lilith's head, distant painful yaps of her faithful pet only adding to her misery.

"Is this what you're after?" Lilith squeaked, her body numb, but her mind ablaze with fury at the injustice of it all. "Just blood? Meat and blood? Well, come and get it then, make it quick, Rosehead, see how your late husband Luedke Blome likes that. I would like to hear him turn in his grave, witnessing this *candelabra* of a monster he created!" Lilith trembled all over, not able to distinguish anymore if her skin was covered in goose bumps or if her muscles performed some kind of a pre-death dance.

Rosehead leaned over her, her gigantic mouth open, her vine-tongue darting out and slashing Lilith's one arm, then

another, as if in pre-taste to her meal, and then she took hold of the girl with both hands, rose thorns digging deep into her flesh.

"My name is Lilith Bloom!" Screamed Lilith in a shaky yet determined voice, "And I hope you *choke* on my blood! I hope it will *poison* you - make your roots *rot* - I hope it makes you *sick*, I hope it punctures your sides with its *venom*, I hope it gives you a stomachache so *vociferously* fierce, you'd wish you were *dead*!" And just as her feet dangled a foot away from the lipless hole, Rosehead let out a moan and convulsed, clutching her arms and Lilith with it to her belly. For a second, bewildered, Lilith thought that she managed to curse the creature and literally cause a stomachache with her words, but then understanding dawned on her.

A great shiver went through Rosehead in a rush of rustling leaves. She recovered, lifted Lilith once more, only to double down again, grunting in effort, while another spasm went through her, together with a restless movement in her belly, to which Lilith was pressed firmly, glimpsing disturbing flashes of red through gaps of tightly woven rose stems. Red eyes shaped like rosebuds, dozens of them, so bright, they were glowing in the dark.

Lilith nearly choked on her breath.

"Panther!" She called down, twisting to try and see.

"Panther, I think she's having contractions! I think - whatever it is - there is something inside - many things - I think they're about to be born!"

A violent fit made Rosehead moan and slacken her hold on Lilith, which she used to her advantage, a new surge of energy flooding her together with hope. Lilith attempted to wiggle out of the thorny latticework that comprised Rosehead's fingers, but there was no need. Another powerful cramp, and the monstrosity let go of her, falling forward on her thorny knees. Lilith fell on her back the third time this night, but it was not a hard landing like before, and from barely the height of three feet or so. Lilith sat up in time to witness Rosehead collapse on her behind, sending her legs asprawl and moaning loudly, holding on to her belly.

At once, a jet of clear cold liquid shot out at Lilith, dousing her from head to toe in what smelled like rose water gone stale, miasmatic even. Lilith sputtered and wiped her face, coughing in disgust, when a wet nose brushed her leg. Panther made it beside her, limping from the kick he received.

"Hey, I was so worried about you! What did she do to you? Are you injured?" Said Lilith apprehensively.

"I think I've been traumatized for life, and only a healthy dose of steak puree will nurse me back to health. If I may -"

but Panther didn't get to finish, because another jet of foul water drenched them, taking them both by surprise.

"What was *that* - her amniotic fluid?" Said Lilith disbelievingly, shaking it off, coughing and spitting and shuddering.

"Certainly smells like left-over water from soaking a great multitude of socks worn by a hormonally expressive teenager, if I may share my opinion." Offered Panther, and Lilith smiled, knowing that if her dog had the wits to joke, then he was okay.

"Gross! How long do you think it will take?" Asked Lilith, listening to Rosehead's moans and pulling off her wet knee socks in disgust, ready to flee at first sign of danger and frantically groping around her thoughts on the subject.

Having studied anatomy books with her late grandmother and helped her father deliver whippet babies numerous times, Lilith was well versed in the medical terms of pregnancy and childbirth, knowing exact definitions of such complex words like *dilation* and *effacement* and *expulsion*. She also knew that human labor took on average 12 to 18 hours the first time, and 7 hours every time after. In dogs it took up to 4 hours the first time and 2 hours every time after. Lilith didn't know, however, the exact length of labor of a rose bush woman 20 feet tall comprised of thorny vines and stems and powered by the living force of a rose garden itself, nor did she know how that varied

according to how many times she has given birth before. If what Ed told her was correct, this was Rosehead's 21<sup>st</sup> delivery in the last 700 years, which meant only one thing.

"I think - whatever it is that is going to be born out of her - is bound to be born fast." Said Lilith warningly.

"I hardly need an invitation." Growled her faithful whippet, ready to depart at first notice, but Lilith lingered.

"I so want to see what it is, though, don't you?" Burning curiosity blinded her common sense and the recent horror of almost being eaten by a monster has faded away in light of this new exciting event.

Rosehead was heaving, groaning loudly in pain and clutching her bulging sides that looked like they were about to burst.

"Madam, are you thinking, per chance, that those *babies* would be suitable for dipping in chocolate, is that your true intention in wanting to stay and watch said *being* deliver another *being* - or *beings* - just so that this time they can hunt us together?" Panther barked indignantly. "Besides, we need to depart at once. There appears to be -" But his next words were drowned in noise.

A fresh wave of contractions was making Rosehead wail and stomp her fists and feet and send her tongue-vine in the air, causing the ground to shake, and Lilith remembered the first time she witnessed something similar, from the safe distance of

the mansion, understanding now that those were pre-labor pains, and this was the real thing. It was a supervised pain, someone must have been watching her, like last time, especially now, especially because...

"Grandpa! I think he will be here any second! With Gustav and the mastiffs!"

"Ahead of you, madam, if you please. NOW." Panther nudged at her towards the nearest bush, just in time.

They both crouched so that to an outsider they weren't visible, but had a plain view of the newly created clearing from Rosehead's thrashing, and sure enough within a minute Alfred Bloom appeared, clothed from head to toe in a gardening suit, the waterproof kind, and Gustav behind him, clothed in the similar manner, holding a blazing lantern and carrying a tool kit with handles of enormous sheers protruding from it, three mastiffs behind him, with Baer stopping to growl and sniff at the bush where Lilith was hiding, but then coming nose to nose with Panther and falling quiet, as if they had a newly founded camaraderie between them.

"Schnell!" Gustav ordered them to come closer, positioning the lantern on the ground.

For the next half an hour or so, illuminated with grotesque yellow light, Lilith observed the most fantastical, repugnant, and bloodcurdling birth she knew she would never have a chance

to see in her entire life, wishing she had a camera with her, to document it.

*There is nothing like first-hand evidence, Sherlock Holmes would've said,* thought Lilith.

Alfred Bloom took out gigantic sheers and proceeded cutting a hole around Rosehead's pelvis, who needed to be held down by three mastiffs and Gustav, thrashing madly. The racket this produced was bound to wake up the entire neighborhood, yet there were no shouts, no disturbance whatsoever except the immediate noises in the clearing and the cawing of the crows.

Lilith's grandfather performed something close to a miracle, dancing around, avoiding blows, and still doing his job, muttering something under his breath in German, occasionally throwing in phrases like *master rosarian* and *roses are capricious like women* and *summer pruning*. His arms moved with incredible speed, operating sheers like a pair of enormous scissors, producing rusty clicking and creaking of breaking canes. Finally, her grandfather let out a cry of triumph.

As if only waiting for enough room to tumble out, first one, then another, then the third and the fourth and many more (Lilith thought there were 21 total), balls of tangled shrubs, the size of a 5 year old child each, squeezed out in a machine-gunning manner, filling the clearing with wriggling and writhing and squirming and screaming.

"These are rose bush babies." Whispered Lilith breathlessly to Panther, who breathed back, "Really? For a second I thought they were baby elephants." Lilith scowled at him in the dark.

All newborn shrubs were exact miniature copies of their mother, yet their colors were painfully bright. As soon as they stopped rolling, they unfolded, their feet touched the ground and they screeched an ear-splitting note. Alfred Bloom reached into the tool kit that Gustav brought and gave each of them a small bottle of some dark liquid.

"What is *that* he's giving them?" Lilith said, mortified. "You don't think it's -"

"Oh yes, I do." Growled Panther quietly back.

Baby rose bushes hungrily grabbed the bottles, tipped them up, devoured whatever was inside with loud sucking noises, then threw the bottles away and promptly scurried off into the surrounding greenery. One of the empty bottles rolled so close to Lilith, that she could smell the iron tang of fresh blood coming off it. Her heart rose and promptly sunk into her stomach, freezing there in place.

Not all of the baby bushes were eager to leave their mother. Those that lingered and clung to her were chased off by Baer and two other mastiffs, or hurtled with a stick that Gustav brandished at them, all the while muttering something nasty in German under his breath. Rosehead, meanwhile, appeared to have

dozed off, losing all interest in her litter, snoring into the night sky.

Lilith would not have known what happens to the babies, if she didn't see one of them slink into the bushes next to them, barely a few feet away, come to a halt next to a tall rose bush and sort of grow into the ground, stretching and darkening and turning into a shrub like any other in the garden, except you could still see its bright eyes blinking once in a while if you looked long enough.

"Look! Did you see that?" Lilith dared whispering into Panther's ear, trembling.

Panther nodded, his muzzle grim, eyes sparkling with anger.

"Oh, I know what this is for. The goodbye carnival, remember? Grandpa said there will be circus artists and the gathering of roses..." Lilith swallowed, "down to the very last flower. He said I will enjoy it very much. That's what he meant. That's when they'll eat me. And other women. All of us. Makes it easy, camouflaged like this." She bit on her finger to stop her from saying more, feeling the beginning of panic rise in her swiftly.

At this point one of the mastiffs that has gone off into the garden to chase rose bush babies, came back, Lilith's lavender beret and her bag in his jaws. As soon as he surfaced, Baer ran up to him, growling, attempting what looked like to

push the mastiff back into the bushes, to hide his prize, but Alfred Bloom already saw it and unceremoniously kicked Baer away with his boot.

"My stuff!" Exclaimed Lilith a little louder than she intended, covering her mouth. Too late. Her grandfather, as if he knew her precise hiding spot from the very beginning, wiped his sweaty brow, dropped the sheers on the ground and marched directly towards Lilith, rudely pushing Gustav aside, who strangely appeared to be blocking his master's view, busily collecting empty bottles and stuffing them back into the tool kit bag and overall being in his master's way.

Lilith felt her spine turn to ice and her arms and legs to icicles. Even Panther started shaking uncontrollably. She hugged him, staying as still as she possibly could.

Alfred Bloom came to a stop a few feet away and squatted, looking directly at Lilith, though she was sure there was no way he could see her from behind all these rose leaves. Or so she hoped, quickly losing every last shred of it.

"Fascinating things... aren't they?" His small beady eyes twinkled darkly. He waved towards the nearest rose bush baby that stood erect, blended into the greenery.

"You broke my rules, Lilith. I thought I was very clear in my desire for Gustav to accompany you everywhere, wasn't I? However, precisely because you ignored me, my dear girl, you

have just witnessed the work of a true rosarian, something you will have to perform yourself in the future. You're demonstrating a real aspiration, I must say. Though... I have seen the beginnings of your talent already and I'm duly impressed. You have shown exemplary characteristics of a proper Bloom heir, with a proper green thumb. You surprised me, in fact -" and then added in a barely audible whisper, "- luring in Marta like this."

But Lilith heard him. A vision of Mad Marta being sucked dry flashed through her mind, and a curtain of red anger blocked her vision. "I didn't lure her in!" She cried, then promptly plopped a hand on her mouth, but there was no use hiding now.

Lilith parted thorny stems and stepped out into the clearing, blinking and facing her grandfather who stood to his full height, inclining his head and studying his granddaughter closely, his hands in his pockets, rocking slightly back and forth on his heels.

"She was your cousin! How can you - how can you talk about her like she's just a piece of meat? And how will you explain her death to everybody?" Said Lilith triumphantly.

"Death? My dear girl, Marta has been admitted to a mental hospital for several months." Said Alfred nonchalantly.

"You just said I lured her in!"

"Did I, now?" He raised his eyebrows. "You're hearing things, I'm afraid."

A sudden comprehension downed on Lilith. "Her dolls... The dolls she was talking about, Magda, Sandra, and Arabella... They must have been her daughters! You must have fed them to the garden too... You're a *monster*." Said Lilith, seething with fury, her face scorchingly hot, her little hands balled into fists, her faithful pet growling threateningly by her leg.

"Is that so?" Her grandfather inquired, raising his eyebrows. "Please, kindly explain what you mean."

"I will tell everyone what you're doing here, what you've been doing for years. You and your company, BLOOM & CO. That's how grandma died, I get it now, you fed her to Rosehead! You're a murderer! You're killing innocent women, pretending like they disappear, or it's an accident, or - or something else." Lilith didn't have any facts to back this up, so her determination faltered a little, her voice shaking.

Grandfather's usual polite demeanor was replaced with a look of utter loathing. He bent over Lilith, talking directly into her face.

"And who will believe a 12 year old, an unstable child with a slew of mental disorders, confirmed by one of the top experts on child psychology in Germany?" Her grandfather was clearly enjoying himself, hissing out each word to dangerous sparkling

of his eyes. Lilith was unable to resort to her usual icy sarcasm, because every word he said stabbed her into an old wound that seemed to have been reopened and was bleeding.

"That doctor is dead. He was murdered." Stated Lilith with finality.

"Was he? Terrible news." Grandpa shook his head theatrically and straightened up. "How did you come across this information, my dear? Have you, by chance, learned German in the matter of a few days you were here? Did you read it in the newspaper? Did it say... who ordered that... *murder*?" Said Alfred cheerily.

"So you admit to it!" Said Lilith shrilly.

"Admit to what?" Grandfather was one impenetrable wall.

"Stop pretending!" Cried Lilith hysterically, breaking into sobs. "Stop making me think like I'm crazy! Because I'm not! I heard it! I HEARD IT! *I HEARD HIS BONES BREAK!*"

"Oh, did you, now?" Alfred hissed, his demeanor shifting momentarily from nastily playful to serious. He grabbed Lilith by the shoulders and shook her really hard, kicking Panther painfully in his ribs when he tried to bite his ankle. "What else did you hear, my dear girl, tell me?" Spit from her grandfather's mouth flew into Lilith's face.

If Lilith thought she was frozen before, she was mistaken. Her whole body felt encased in ice, she felt brittle, close to a

breaking point. She felt that the game of pretense was over, glimpsing the real face of her grandfather in the yellow gloom of the lantern, sullen and tired and mad, with the look of a professional assassinator getting ready to kill. Panic boiled in her, making her shudder uncontrollably.

"TELL ME!" He shouted, shaking her again.

"I - he - " Lilith stumbled, licking off tears, "the room - the room did it. I felt like it suffocated me, like - like the room made me ask it - made me do it." Lilith fell quiet.

"Really? I didn't think rooms could make people do things. Why, that is rather an extraordinary story, fit for the ears of your friends, no less."

Her grandfather let her go so fiercely, that she almost fell down on the ground, her knees buckling, Panther crouching back to her feet, growling.

"If you don't stop your... creature... from attacking me, I will make sure it ends up as dinner for Baer, do you understand?" Alfred Bloom spat, bent to pick up Lilith's beret and her bag and threw them to her feet. "And I would appreciate it if you stopped littering my rose garden with your things."

Baer growled disapprovingly.

Lilith slowly picked up her sodden bag, slung it across her shoulder, stuffed her beret in it, glanced at Panther, Panther glanced back, confirming his understanding. Alfred was rubbing

hands on his garden pants, evidently scrubbing off Lilith's blood and dirt, when Lilith was seized by new inspiration.

"Ed!" She exclaimed, taking a cautious step back. "Ed is talking now! He will back me up. And Petra. Rosehead almost ate Petra! She will tell her parents!"

Rosehead's snoring pattern changed upon Lilith screaming her name, but she still slept unconcernedly. Gustav was done cleaning the bottles and now stood expectantly a polite distance of 10 feet away, holding three mastiffs by their leashes.

"I suppose a boy with severe mental disabilities and a 5 year old girl would present a more credible source for your story, am I correct?" Threw at her Alfred.

Lilith trembled, wishing with all her might to do something, anything, to wipe that ugly satisfied smirk on her grandfather's face, but she couldn't think of anything smart to say back. It's as if her brain has deserted her, leaving her barren and empty.

"My dad will believe me." Mumbled Lilith, on the verge of tears.

"Will he, now? I'd like to see you try. Go on." Alfred Bloom waved his hand towards the mansion. "I'm done wasting my time on adolescent agonizing. Gustav!" He called, proceeding to give his servant what sounded like lengthy instructions in German.

Lilith couldn't believe her ears. This was too easy. Did he just let her go, just like that? Without any more interrogation, or lectures, or threats? With firm belief that she was no threat to him whatsoever? He dismissed her like a nobody? She looked down at Panther, who bared his teeth, clearly indicating a desire to rip her grandfather to pieces.

"I HATE YOU!" Screamed Lilith at Alfred Bloom, who didn't even turn to look. "*I-HATE-YOU-I-HATE-YOU-I-HATE-YOU!*"

Lilith didn't remember the last time she sounded so childish, but she didn't care, didn't notice hot tears splashing down her face. A burning wish to hurt him, to stop him, to do something, flooded her, and it needed an outlet. Screaming insults certainly wouldn't do any good, but trying to talk to the guests, however... And without a pause, shaking with anger and helplessness, eager to warn everyone of the impending massacre, Lilith broke into a blind run, Panther right next to her, to run somewhere, anywhere, away from this awful place, its foul stench, from Rosehead and her horrid rose bush babies, from the gloomy figure of Gustav, the hungry mastiffs, and her grandfather. Mad gardener and murderer, Alfred Bloom.

## Chapter 29. Heads on the wall

They dashed forward in a crazed rush, without a real sense of direction in suffocating foggy darkness except the diminishing odor of decay and Rosehead's thunderous snoring, parting bushes, stumbling through walls of shrubs, crossing pathways, darting under overgrown with rose stems archways that looked like black tunnels, rousing clouds of cawing crows in their wake, jogging along pathways, occasionally glimpsing a blink of a couple bright red rose-eyes, as if the bush babies were watching them. Lilith yelped each time her bare feet connected with a stray vine, its thorns digging sharply into her soles. She deeply regretted taking off her knee socks now. Panther barked several times, offering to lick her wounds, but Lilith urged him on, eager to get out of the garden, to rouse the entire mansion, to scream at the top of her lungs until someone, anyone, would believe her, hoping that Ed and Petra made it back okay and that they'll back her up. Finally they broke into what smelled like fresh air.

The garden changed abruptly. Tall hedges gave way to cultured small rose bushes, neatly lined in rows and rows of fragrant patches of dark emerald and dark ruby, illuminated only

by the light of the moon. They stretched all the way to the other side of the fence, behind which stood the stout house of Irma Schlitzburger. Its windows were dark. It was clearly way past midnight.

Lilith abruptly came to a halt.

"Where - is - the - mansion?" She said incredulously, panting and wheezing, her hands on her knees. She then slowly walked forward, cricking her neck left and right and not recognizing the place. The rose garden stretched seamlessly from fence to fence, rustling gently in an occasional gust of wind. Not only was there no sign of the house, the plaza with parked cars on it disappeared as well, as if the whole thing has been sucked underground, leaving nothing behind.

"Baer told me it might happen." Growled Panther.

"Told you what?" Asked Lilith, feeling strength drain out of her. Complete exhaustion and loss of blood made her dizzy, so that she had to sit down. She was hoping to run up to her parents' bedroom, to wake them up, to tell them all about Rosehead and her 21 rose bush babies that were going to feed on 21 women in the house, to ask them for help rousing everyone else up. Even deeper than this desire, she was hoping to find her parents fully dressed, worried sick about her, their eyes red and puffy from crying, especially her mother. Instead, she

saw what looked like stone sculptures ahead of them. Five stone vases, a marble rose protruding from each.

"Look! The top of the house! Right there!" She pointed enthusiastically, forcing herself to stand up and walk.

"Yes, exactly what Baer told me. The house seals itself off and sinks into the ground after midnight. That's why Gustav takes Baer and the others for feeding at night, leaving me behind." Panther sat and began licking himself vigorously.

"Feeding." Repeated Lilith. "Feeding on what?"

"What do you think? Bones, of course." Panther barked. "Makes me feel deeply ashamed for my own race. I mean, I'm a dog all right, but to descend to the level of -"

Panther continued growling his disapproval, but Lilith stopped listening. She didn't need to ask whose bones Baer fed on. Liquid fear spilled itself again in her stomach, making her mind reel with images of women sucked dry. To distract herself, she peered ahead of her, studying the stone vases.

She remembered seeing this balustrade on top of the mansion when they arrived 5 days ago, and it was at her feet now. It didn't feel welcome. She stepped on top of it, its protruding edges marking a rectangle about twenty by twenty feet, the exact size of the room below. It felt warm to her feet, and yet it felt like a top of the tomb that was alive underneath, craving to suck her into its bowels. She tried to chase away the image

of dry skin stretching over what was left of Mad Marta, but it wouldn't go, etched in her mind forever.

"So it doesn't sink all the way then?" She inquired aloud, stepping around on the polished stone, savoring the warmth despite herself.

"Apparently not." Panther echoed, miffed that she interrupted him and ignored his ruminations.

"I wonder if... I wonder if we can get inside through the roof..." Lilith began thinking out loud, looking around for a possible trap or any opening into the house. The stone was smooth her was smooth and flat and unnervingly heated, like a hide of a living animal.

"To make sure that it eats us in the process like it ate Ed's doctor? I would like to abstain from this adventure, thank you very much." Panther sat up defiantly. "It's warm here, for a change, I must admit." He curled up in a sleek black ball of fur, apparently exhausted as much as his mistress.

Lilith ignored him again, lost deep in connecting the dots of the puzzle, sitting down next to him, scratching behind his ears and letting out a weary sigh. "You know - that red gallery that we saw - I wonder who did those paintings..." She said thoughtfully, but her words came out slurry, and at first she slumped, then leaned on Panther like on a warm pillow, feeling her head become heavy, her eyes itching at the corners and

closing themselves against her will, her stomach hollow and hungry. She hasn't eaten anything since breakfast and spent the entire day and a part of the night running, getting drenched by the rain, smudged by the mud, scratched and torn by the rose bushes, not mentioning being nearly eaten by Rosehead and shaken by her grandfather. The aftermath of it all weighed heavily on her, covering her with a gigantic blanket of sleepy tiredness. She fought it for another few minutes, mumbling something under her breath, but the heat coming from the surface of the balustrade relaxed her, made her fingers and toes tingle pleasantly and at last fatigue took over.

Her last conscious thought was that of hearing Panther snore and attempting to scold him for it, but seconds later Lilith forgot where she was and descended into the smooth netherworld of sleep.

She felt like falling down, like the ground parted beneath her and she was flying into a black hole. She didn't care much, because although she couldn't see where she was, she felt warm and comfortable, like a couple dozen hands have carried her from the roof of the house all the way through the black room, then through the crimson corridors of the second floor, dimmed and darkened by the night, and finally into something white, almost silver in the moonlight. If this was a dream, it was the best dream Lilith had since coming to visit her grandfather in his

exquisite mansion. She dreamed about her mother's hands protruding from the wall and carrying her, joined by the hands of Petra, and the Brandt sisters, Agatha, Katharina, even the blind lady Haas was there, and many more women. They all whispered something soothing in her face, leaning over her, cradling her and gently lowering her into her bed, their heads hanging over her and shaking slightly. As if they were wobbly for some reason, as if they weren't really attached to their necks... as if they were...

Lilith promptly sat up, her sleepiness gone in an instant, replaced by mad hammering of the heart in her chest. She produced one stifled gasp, looking around.

She was in her room, sitting on top of her made up bed, her cardigan and skirt tattered and stained, her palms, knees and feet bloodied, her hair mangled into an uncombable mass, her muscles feeling stiff and skin taut and her vision blurry.

All around her bed, on all four sides of it and even above her, hung heads like the ones she saw on her second night here. They resembled gigantic roses, careening and shifting slightly on their neck stems as if in a wind, blinking and grimacing at her, completely silent. They were all here, all 21 one them, including Lilith's own head, its lips moving in the dim greyness of the night, a trickle of blood dripping on the floor from its severed neck, in tune to more blood dripping from the rest of

them, producing a soft patter of droplets on the floor. It appeared as if they were waiting for Lilith to do something, studying her expectantly. It was like sitting in a rose bush that turned itself outside in, pointing its flowers on the inside, each bud a head of a woman in real life size.

A noxious metallic odor hung in the air, cementing the fact that Lilith wasn't dreaming. Lilith rubbed her eyes and blinked several times to focus, groping around for Panther, who snored unaware.

"Panther!" Lilith shook him slightly, forcing herself to smile to the heads so as not to provoke them into anything.

"Panther!" Lilith hissed again out of the corner of her mouth. Panther growled uncomfortably, yawning widely, and mumbling something that sounded like a desire for her to *please* stop shaking him, to *please* not wake him up so he could *please* sleep in peace, because...

As if something bit him, Panther jumped and sat up, producing a wounded involuntary bark. A head to the left of him giggled. It was Daphne, she poked Panther with her thorny finger.

"Get you stubby fingers away from me, girl." Growled Panther menacingly, and Daphne growled back, imitating him and showing him her tongue.

"Don't touch him!" Warned her Lilith.

"Little miss is awake now?" Agatha's head asked, hanging in front of Lilith, her sallow skin looking more wrinkled and older than before, her crooked nose curling unpleasantly over her sneering mouth.

"Yes. Yes, I'm awake now. How did I get here?" Lilith looked wildly around, bits and pieces of her dream escaping her in to a hazy cloud of what's left of our dreams in the mornings when we desperately want to recollect them in our memory.

"We carried little miss into her room, of course. Did we not?" Agatha's head swiveled around on its thin neck, and the other heads bobbed up and down, murmuring their agreement, several of them calling out to each other.

" - oh but she was too heavy, if you ask me -"

" - heavy? Filthy more like it!"

" - she nearly twisted off my neck, grabbed me so hard -"

" - all American girls are spoiled, she could've as easily been on time, could've followed the rules for once - "

" - didn't take her pills, wretched girl. I daresay next time I will dip them in chocolate to make her eat them."

"Mom?" Lilith asked incredulously, seeing her mother's head float in the air to her right. "What are you doing here? Why -"

"She never listens to me! Never!" Shrieked her mother's head hysterically, breaking into nervous sobs and turning away.

"Now, now..." Irma Schlitzburger's head was patting her hand on top of Gabi's, attempting to soothe her. "One girl iz nothing. Imagine having to raise two at the same time -"

"Mutter!" Both Daphne and Gwen exclaimed simultaneously in a hurt kind of way.

Then the old lady's head, Lilith's neighbor, butted in, offering her advice on raising children, which was confirmed by Sabrina Rosenthal. "In my age and time girls were disciplined. I my age -"

Petra's head, meanwhile, sang some children's song, and the group of ladies whose names Lilith couldn't remember but who seemed to be in love with her mother's knitting, argued about the benefits of simply having no children at all, all of them evidently old maids. The cacophony of this multitude of women speaking at the same time was splitting Lilith's head, which started pounding with a headache. Lilith squinted her eyes and covered her ears, half-hoping that it was all one bad nightmare and she would open her eyes and find herself in her room back in her house in Massachusetts.

"They will talk like this all night if you won't stop them, you know?" A gentle voice reached her through the general squabble. "May I pet your darling?"

Lilith opened her eyes. It was Katharina's head, the one she usually saw attached to the plump dark-skinned servant.

Katharina's hand stretched out to touch Panther, who edged away from it closer to Lilith. The rest of the heads continued talking, their clamor escalating into a heated argument the point of which Lilith didn't comprehend anymore.

" - he doesn't know we're helping, so why would he -"

" - the man is a Loony, Gabi, he won't simply stop - "

" - why Sunday? I couldn't imagine the worst - "

" - but she is *heir!*"

" - impossible to be both heir and meal at the same time, if you ask me - "

" - better than mortality, to be reincarnated into a rose bush, why couldn't - "

"SHUT UP!" Lilith yelled, thumping her fists into bed for an added effect.

The heads suddenly feel silent, slowly drawing closer in one rustling mass of breathing and shifting and blinking.

"Little miss is finally paying attention to us." Sneered Agatha's head, the rest of them chuckling at this lightly and sniggering.

"What do you want from me?" Asked Lilith unceremoniously, irritated and tired, the events of several hours prior slowly coming back to her, a growing headache hammering the walls of her skull.

"Why, we want to help, of course, little miss." Professed Agatha in a slightly injured voice.

"Help me with what?" Retorted Lilith.

"With anything you want, darling." Chimed in Katharina's head with a wide toothy smile.

"Why? Why would you want to help me in the first place? You're part of the garden, aren't you?" Lilith demanded.

"We are. Sort of -" Daphne said dreamily.

" - and we aren't. Not really." Added Gwen in a similar sing-a-song kind of tone.

"Who are you anyway?" It rolled off Lilith's tongue before she could stop it. It was impolite to pose a question like this, but it was burning her from the very first time she saw the heads on the wall, and this time she was determined to find out.

"The house." Said Trude Brandt.

"The garden!" Contradicted Monika Brandt.

"The house and the garden together!" Screamed Petra gleefully, promptly returning to humming her song tune.

"We are phantoms of those whose blood the garden tastes. Or eats. Or both." Finished the head of Mad Marta, and Lilith stifled a shriek by covering her mouth in time. She didn't notice her in this multitude of grim bland faces.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to..." She began.

"Don't trouble yourself with excuses, girl, my time was up and decided it would be wise for me to join my daughters."

"Your daughters...?" Comprehension dawned in Lilith's face. "So I was right then. I thought they were, the dolls you mentioned. Magda, Sandra - "

"- and Arabella. Oh, don't remind me!" And with a shuddering sigh she reduced herself to quiet teary wails.

But Lilith wasn't fooled so easily this time into being distracted. "You didn't answer my question." She addressed Agatha, who seemed to have some kind of authority over this squabbling chatting chorus of heads. "Why do you want to help me?"

Agatha blissfully ignored her, bend down to Katharina, both of them discussing something important, judging by their concentrated faces.

"Hello! I'm talking to you!" Lilith felt that the further the night progressed, the more she lost her patience and with it all her usual politeness and manners. She had a huge job ahead of her, after all, and she was going to make these heads talk to give her much needed information one way or the other.

"Why do you want to help me?" She leaned and poked Agatha on her left cheek. It was smooth and silky to the touch, and gave way in the same manner a rose petal gives way, folding under her finger and feeling papery.

But it was not Agatha who answered.

"That iz a very very good question." And to her horror, Lilith recognized the jolly voice of the unfortunate psychotherapist Wilhelmus Baumgartner, his head squeezing in between those of blind Heidemarie Haas and her daughter Hanna Haas, pushing them aside. Lilith slowly turned to face him.

"You let us feed on a man." Continued the head merrily. "We haven't tasted a man in 2 years, and 2 years iz a very very long time for a hungry house. A very long time." The rest of the heads muttered their approval at these words.

"That other doctor wasn't yummy at all." Smirked Daphne.

"Nope, not at all." Echoed her Gwen.

"Speak for yourself!" A new head butted in between them, its features small and twitchy, like that of a squirrel. Lilith thought this must have been the doctor whom Ed inadvertently sent to his death.

"This one, however, was very very tasty." Said Wilhelmus's head, jabbing a finger at himself, and a murmur or agreement rustled though the heads like through leaves of a garden.

"Alfred Bloom iz a fierce soul, bless him, but he never fed us like this. Never gave us his blood either." Said Irma Schlitzburder with a hungry look in her eye, studying Lilith.

"So you're phantoms of everyone that the garden tasted or ate. Okay. Does that mean that my grandma, Eugenia Bloom -"

"I was hoping for a restful night, and I simply can't have peace in this house, can I?" A frustrated head shifted Agatha aside, peering down at Lilith curiously. "And who would you be, disturbing my peace?" The head had curly short hair, a small button of a nose and big flying eyebrows framing two large oval-shaped eyes. Lilith recognized her from the pictures her father has shown her, though she was born long after she died.

"Grandma!" She exclaimed, forgetting herself and making a motion to jump up and hug her. Eugenia's head shifted warily away with a protesting shriek. "I mean - I meant -" Lilith felt heat rise in her face. "I was just happy to meet you, although I know you're not really real."

"I was going to say..." Yapped Panther, of whose existence Lilith completely forgot. "Weren't you going to ask them for help, or will we spend the night yammering about dinner choices? I, for one, would appreciate a chance to chase me some squirrels." Panther glanced at the other doctor's head, which indeed looked like a human squirrel, and the head wisely hid from view.

"Well," began Lilith uncertainly, "if you are phantoms of everyone this house or garden, or, I guess, Bloom property tasted, that means that there should be - "

"233 of us! Counting both doctors." Petra cried brightly, and at once the room was filled with shuffling and shifting and

moving and creaking, as every surface teemed with more human heads breaking through the plaster on the walls and the ceiling, crowding an already crowded space.

"Stop! STOP! I don't need to see you all at once!" Shrieked Lilith, and the heads quickly disappeared where they came from, some evidently upset at such short notice, scowling and sticking out their tongues and otherwise making grotesque faces.

"You!" Suddenly said Lilith to Agatha, seized by what she remembered. "You lied to me. The last time I saw you, 8 of you, you told me that the garden tasted you and that it didn't like you. Rosehead didn't like you, and that the garden, or she, Rosehead, will only eat those whose taste she likes."

"She knows her name! She knows her name!" Rippled in a carrying whisper along the rows and rows of heads.

"Of course she does, the lot of you! Don't you happen to have heads on your shoulders?" Scolded them Agatha, pressing her lips into a thin line and turning to Lilith. "I didn't lie, little miss, Rosehead didn't like our taste, nor did she like yours. In fact, Rosehead is mad at your grandfather because he wouldn't give her any choice, he says he got 21 women like she asked, and that's it, he said he can't rally up 50 of them here, for her to make a selection. She is spoiled, Rosehead, you see? He spoiled her. She's angry now, because she has to eat what he got."

"Can you help me stop it - her? Rosehead? Can you help me stop grandpa from feeding her?"

A general buzz of anger flooded the room, every head was voicing its opinion which was not at all favorable to what Lilith has asked. They shouted at each other, gesticulated, and then finally they reached an agreement, and a new head appeared in the ceiling, swiftly lowering itself down.

"We may. If you pay the right price. Nothing comes for free in this world, my dear twenty-times-granddaughter. You ought to know this by now." A new head was now hanging inches from Lilith, leering at her in the most unpleasant way, licking her bloodless lips and narrowing her watery eyes. Apart from her ghostly appearance, she was stunning, with long beautiful hair framing her heart-shaped face.

"Rosehead?" Breathed Lilith, horrorstruck.

"I really don't like the sound of this." Snarled Panther, giving Lilith an encouraging lick in the cheek.

"Rose is my name. Rose Blome. Only my husband was allowed to call me by my nickname, granddaughter." The head snapped.

"My apologies." Said Lilith promptly, blushing. "I didn't - didn't mean to offend you - and it's very nice to meet you, er... grandmother. Is it true then? Will you stop if I pay? I'll pay anything you ask."

"Anything?" Rose Blome repeated incredulously.

"Anything." Confirmed Lilith quietly, her thoughts suddenly turning to that time when her dad and her mom tucked her into bed together, to those 5 minutes in which they all felt like family, and then her thoughts turned to her mother, her constant demands on feeding her pills, and Lilith understood for the first time in her 12 year old life that her mother loved her, loved her to death, and that she cared for her the only way she knew how, perhaps not knowing any better and being scared out of her mind half the time that her daughter would grow up into a real Loony and be taken advantage of, if she didn't toughen her up, didn't prepare her, for that doggy dog world, like her dad said. Instinctively, she knew what the house would ask of her, and she thought of all these other women in turn, little Petra, the annoying twins, the ladies obsessed with knitting, the servants, pegging her life against theirs.

"What do you want?" She repeated her question.

"Well, you see, the trouble is - " began Rose.

"- there are only 20 women for us to eat - " picked up Irma Schlitzburher.

" - we can't exactly eat the heir to the Bloom property. Besides, the heir was supposed to be a boy. So -" Said Lilith's own head with a sad expression on her face.

" - Zo, we need you give yourself away willingly. Like you did with me." Finished Wilhelmus's head cheerily.

"Is this the only way?" Asked Lilith in a fallen voice.

"What? Don't listen to them! Let's go wake up your mom and dad and get out of here! This is a mad house! A mad house!"

Panther barked, lightly biting Lilith on her hand.

"And your mother..." Started Rose's head. "Well, your mother was supposed to die first, like every proper Bloom wife did, at the age of 35. But if you will sacrifice yourself in her place, I don't think why we would object -"

Mortified, realizing that it all added up, Lilith scooped Panther into her arms for courage, and made her choice, before she dared to think too long and doubt her first impulse.

"Yes." She looked straight into beautiful watery eyes of Rose Blome.

"Are you out of your *girly* mind?" Yelped Panther.

Lilith spoke over him. "If this is the only way to stop you, my answer is yes. You can take me instead. If you promise the rest of the women will stay alive, my mother including." She said quickly, before courage deserted her, and immediately after she said it, a frozen wave of terror flooded her insides, making her ears ring with white noise and white dots dance in front of her eyes, rendering Panther's furious barking unintelligible, as well as the murmur of the heads, congratulating her on the right decision.

"I promise. At the carnival, my dear granddaughter, you shall see them all walk into the garden and return unscathed. You, however, shall walk in and never return." Rose cracked into a mad laugh.

"Never return! NEVER RETURN!" Other heads picked up.

With quick rapping sounds they whooshed up and away, popping back into the walls and the ceiling. The rapping grew louder and louder, until Lilith realized that someone was knocking loudly on the door, shaking it, as if it was locked, then it finally broke and burst open with a cloud of dust, and a new type of crowd fell into Lilith's room, promptly turning on the lights and taking the night away.

## Chapter 30. Family

Her mother ran in first, still in her day clothes, in a slim pants and sweater and her usual black flats, her hair worse than ever, no knitting needles sticking out of it, all lost, her eyes as red and puffy as Lilith imagined. Next was her father, his face looking deathly pale, his clothes muddy in appearance, as if he was running through the garden in the rain and let it dry like that. Ed was next, followed by his stepmother, miraculously maneuvering around the people in her high heels. Petra was following them, held back by her older brother Patrick, the butterfly boy, held back in turn by his mother, Sabrina Rosenthal, held back in turn by Norman, her husband. Immediately after them walked in Daphne and Gwen, evidently woken up by the commotion, both in their lavender nightgowns, their mother peering from behind them. The corridor quickly filled with shouts of Lilith's name and more footsteps echoed, as more people woke and came running to her room, to check on the miracle of a girl who returned after a disappearance of close to 20 hours.

"Lilith! Oh, Lilith! We heard voices! How did you get here? I was waiting for you in the hall - did you just walk past me? I

couldn't believe it, but your father insisted -" Her mother reached her first, flinging herself on her daughter and giving her a bone-crunching hug, because everything Gabi Bloom did was a little bit over the board. She let her go, emitting a gasp after gasp at seeing the amount of caked blood on her daughter's legs and arms and face, but it seemed like she was at a loss for words for once, finally speaking in a trembling voice. "What happened to you? Who did this to you? Where have you been? One minute you were standing next to me, and another - We thought you died!" She choked, covering her mouth.

"Lilith! Sweetie -" Now it was her father, running up to her, feeling her forehead, squeezing her shoulders to check for broken bones like he did with his whippets after the races. "Are you feeling all right? What *happened?* Panther!" He noticed Lilith's faithful pet to his very satisfied purring at all the attention.

"You made my son talk again, you darling girl!" Lilith found herself squished into the softness of Rosalinde's sizeable bosom, both arms tight around her, strong perfume making her eyes water. "You - "

"Not now, please. Later, if you don't mind?" Al Bloom interrupted her, freeing Lilith from her embrace.

"Lilith!" Ed ran up, with Petra chiming in. "We made it!" And then adding something in German, indicating the excitement

of the feat they made and his new ability to talk, as if he couldn't get enough, only to be interrupted by forever grumpy Patrick, whispering something fiercely into Petra's ear and pulling her away from Ed, to whom she clutched for dear life, breaking into tears and attempting to fight her brother.

Lilith stretched out her hand and Ed took it, squeezing it. They exchanged a meaningful glance, him raising his eyebrows, wanting to know what happened, her mouthing *later, I'll tell you later*, and knowing that it was a lie, that she would never tell him what she agreed to.

There were more exclamations, more shouts and jeering and warnings and other types of sounds people make when their worst fears have been dissipated and they melt into this curiosity stage, attempting to find out how exactly the inevitable end has been averted but not daring to question the actual victim of the unfortunate circumstances, resorting to guessing various scenarios aloud in the hopes of said victim interrupting them and professing the truth, but Lilith couldn't stop looking at her mother, who was silently crying, standing sort of aside, as if afraid to move closer, letting her husband wipe off Lilith's blood, measure her temperature and check her pupils.

"Mom, I love you." Croaked Lilith, hoping to overpower the noise. She couldn't remember the last time she told her mother these three simple words.

"What - what did you say?" Her mother edged closer and sat down, nervously wringing her hands, her eyes open wide, as if she thought she heard it wrong.

"I wanted to tell you, that I love you. Love you very much. And I wanted to thank you for caring for me, for always reminding me to take my pills, for - for everything. I'm sorry I wasn't more - *cooperative*." The will to add sophisticated words abandoned Lilith, and this slipped out by mere habit. None of it mattered anymore. She only wanted to spend as much time as she had left with her mother, having avoided her for as long as she could remember herself, always choosing the company of her father.

"You - you *what*, Lilith?" Her mother's lower lip trembled, and Lilith felt the room go quiet, her father staring at both of them incomprehensively, his efforts at checking Lilith's medical condition abandoned.

"I love you." Said Lilith clear and loud, and her mother dissolved into tears, promptly giving Lilith another bone-crunching hug and rocking her like this back and forth, until Lilith felt the need to breathe, indicating that to Panther with her eyes, who understood at once and nipped Gabrielle lightly, causing her to let go.

"I love you too, Lilith, I love you too!" Gabi Bloom kept mumbling, blinking in an embarrassed sort of way. "And those pills, you know, if you ever want a break -"

"Your daughter has been filling up my daughter's head with foul stories, I thought I'd let you know!" Came from furious Sabrina Rosenthal suddenly, her nightgown and hastily thrown over robe only exaggerating her gaunt frame and her big foreboding forehead.

"Don't you speak to me about my daughter in this manner!" Retorted Gabi dangerously, promptly standing up, hands on hips, Lilith's incantation of love apparently giving her new energy.

"Ladies, if I may - " Began Al, only to be interrupted.

"I would consider it a desirable option for your daughter to be sent to a school for mentally retarded children where she would be locked up and won't be able to spoil the minds of those whose minds are still in their developing stage!" Screamed Sabrina.

"What are you talking about?" Al said to Sabrina with a touch of fury in his voice. "Lilith is not mentally retarded. She's been lost for - "

" - close to 20 hours! Exactly! What normal 12 year old girl gets herself lost in the garden - IN THE GARDEN! - several times in a row in the matter of days? How does a child like that deserve to be heir to Bloom property, huh? I would like to see

that report from the doctor, I would!" Shouted Norman Rosenthal, heavy circles under his eyes, his pajamas crumpled and sweaty, his hands balled into fists. "How about it, Alfred?"

Because silently, in the midst of this uproar, Alfred Bloom appeared in front of Lilith's bed, staring her down with malevolently glittering eyes, dressed in a festive suit suitable for the carnival, of dark claret velour with a strikingly bright rose in his lapel, his silver hair clean and puffy as if he just took a shower, a sickly sweet fragrance hanging about him in a cloud.

"Well... I told you she would turn up eventually, didn't I? There was no need to worry after all." He addressed both Al and Gabi.

"Grandfather!" Pronounced Lilith clearly, her fear of him gone now that she faced certain death, her sense of sarcasm returning to her with the force of a galloping elephant. "I do apologize profusely for causing such an uproar in your house and disturbing your guests. It was very inconsiderate and egotistic of me, but I assure you that after tomorrow's carnival I will vanish from you life, never to bother your sacred presence again, only to return to this property after your imminent death, if I may so mention."

The room fell silent. If there were crickets in the mansion, you would be able to hear them, but there weren't any,

of course, all eaten by the crows after Rose Blome has been buried under the rose bush in 13<sup>th</sup> century.

"Has anyone called a doctor? Al? Don't just stand there. Listen to her! She doesn't know what she's talking about. What are you talking about, my dear girl?"

There was no use for Lilith to hide anything anymore, nor did she care what anyone would think. She only had another day to live, and she was bound to have her own fun her own way at that, which included confusing and scaring her grandfather out of his socks, spending a lot of time with her mother and watching her knit, taking a walk with her father, playing with Panther any game he wanted, maybe even finding a squirrel for him, and kissing Ed. That was definitely something she wanted to do, to know what it felt like to really kiss.

With all of this in mind, Lilith reluctantly let go of Ed's hand, slid down her bed, marched up to Alfred Bloom and poked her bloody finger into his chest, right by the rose.

"What I mean, grandfather, is that it's between me and Rosehead now, and you, sadly, are out of the picture." She flashed him a smile, elated at the utterly perplexed expression on his face, then turned on her heels and marched into the bathroom, shutting the door and locking herself up. She needed at least a minute to be alone, completely alone, even without Panther.

She slid to the floor, burying her face in her hands and convulsing in silent waves of crying, each stronger than the other, letting tears stream down her face and tuning out the talking that seeped inside from her bedroom. She tried looking at her life from beginning to the end, the way it was supposed to flash in front of your mind before dying, and she thought that she understood everything for the first time. All her worries and problems and grudges seemed unfounded now, silly, and childish.

"Sherlock Holmes would've said," breathed Lilith into her palms, sniffing, *"I confess that I have been blind as a mole, but it is better to learn wisdom late than never to learn it at all."*

"I am one stupid arrogant girl, that's who I am." She added, sniffing more, angry now.

Just then there were frantic scratching noises from outside of the door, and a long pink tongue tried slipping under the door. Lilith turned away, but the scratched only intensified, adding impatient whining to it that could drive any dog owner nuts in the matter of minutes. Lilith knew that once started, Panther, faithful to his stubbornness, won't stop, and it was no use covering her ears. Eventually his whimpering would get under her skin and she would have to let him in. Why not now?

"What?" Asked Lilith grumpily, opening the door a crack.

Immediately, a sleek black paw made its way into the gap, so that if Lilith wanted to shut the door, she would literally have to break it. "What now?" She repeated and opened the door a crack more. Panther stuck in his head and was in the process of squeezing in, when Lilith caught Ed staring at her tear stained face in between the silhouettes of talking people. Lilith covered her face, opened the door wide for a fraction of a second letting Panther in, and quickly shut it again, locking it.

"Can't you tell I want to be alone?" She sniffed and smeared the grime on her face even more instead of wiping it.

"I can, of course, and I can't let that happen, because you asked me for help, and I have agreed to help you. Besides, you're the best pet owner I ever knew, apart from the fact that I didn't know any other pet owners, but that's besides the point..." Panther was mumbling words, clearly distressed and not quite himself. "Lilith -" He said, inclining his head inquisitively.

Lilith couldn't remember the last time he addressed her by her first name like this.

"- that deal you made with the house, I can't let that happen. It was foolish, it was -"

"Oh, spare me the lecture, will you? Not you too." Lilith scoffed, standing up and starting to peel her destroyed clothes

off. Panther opened his jaws to say something, but Lilith cut him off. "Don't look!"

Panther politely averted his eyes. Lilith shed her undies, stepped into the bathtub, closed the curtain and turned on the shower. It felt wonderful to let the water wash off the dirt and blood off her face, yet it stung painfully on her forehead where it was cut, not mentioning her arms, hands, knees, and, worst of all, feet, that suddenly felt full of lead and were swollen and red, burning.

"I'm not looking!" Came from the corner of the tub where Panther stuck in his twitching nose. "I just want to make sure you hear me clearly."

"And what exactly do you want to tell me? You know there is no point, right? I made up my mind, and you with your little inquiries will only make it worse." Said Lilith crossly, on the verge of tears again, making a concentrating effort at suppressing her emotions and focusing on shampooing her hair, which she wasn't sure she would be able to comb out later, it was so tangled.

"Lilith - I - " began Panther again, which was so unlike him that Lilith paused, looking with curiosity at his muzzle and his long eyelashes that obscured his closed eyes, the delicate shape of his head, and she was ready to fall apart all over again.

"You what? WHAT?" She almost screamed.

There was a loud rapping on the door. "You okay there, sweetie?" Al's voice came through.

"Sorry, dad, just... just talking to myself!" Lilith lied.

"Lilith, when you're done, crack the door open, I have a fresh change of clothes for you, on the floor here -" Added Gabi's voice worryingly.

"Thanks, mom!" Lilith quickly rinsed off, turned off the water, wrapped a towel around herself, stepped out and squatted next to her faithful whippet, her wet hair sticking unpleasantly to her back. She lowered her face so it almost touched Panther's ear and whispered into it. "I'm sorry I yelled, it's just -"

"I understand." Growled Panther quietly, opening his sparkling jewel eyes, misty and sad. "Lilith - I -" He began tentatively again, passing his around his nose nervously. This time Lilith didn't interrupt him, waiting patiently for the rest to come.

"I adore you from the tip of your nose to the tip of your toes and I would lick the soles of your feet every day and not complain about squirrels and will be happy eating porridge and sleeping on the filthiest rug you will ever give me, and I will never ever call you madam and make fun of you and I - I -" He sighed heavily, as if it was a very hard thing to admit. "- I don't really need that rosy jacket either, I'm fine with my own

silky fur, if only - if you only you call off this deal with the house. *Please*, let's find another way to stop Rosehead. My poor little doggy heart can't stand the thought of losing you, it makes me want to throw myself into a pile of angry cats and be no more!" He added an injured bark at the end, delivering all of this in a rapid-fire way, and jumping at Lilith to lick her face.

Lilith plopped on the floor and held his head still, looking directly into his jewel eyes.

"There is no other way, Panther, you heard them. You heard Rosehead, she herself said -"

"How do you know she's not lying? We don't even know who she really is. Who all those heads are -"

" - they're phantoms of those whose blood -"

"Madam - err, I mean, Lilith - " Panther corrected himself guiltily, "how do you know they're telling the truth? I smell something fishy here."

"That would be grandfather." Lilith theatrically pinched her nose. "And I intend to give him hell before my *infernal* departure, rest assured."

"Tell your parents!"

"Like they would believe me."

"Convince them to depart right now -"

"- and leave all these other people to die? No, I can't do that."

"Since when do you feel responsible for them? They're strangers to you!"

"I'm the heir to Bloom property, Panther!" Lilith said with certain pride and regret at the same time, standing up and towering above him. "I'm responsible for the house, for the rose garden, and for everyone who happens to be staying here, don't you understand?"

"Then I'm going with you." Growled Panther quietly, his head hanging, his tail slack.

"What? No!"

There was a knock on the door, and a now familiar raspy voice said, "Me too."

Lilith, furious, unlocked the door, only to come face to face with Ed, whose face looked long and haggard, brown eyes determined and full of a kind of final gloom that borders on excitement, spurred by the prospect of daring death in the face, full of childish hope that somehow it would be possible to chase it away if one only tried hard enough.

"Ed!" Breathed Lilith. "Were you eavesdropping on us?"

"I... not really... I didn't mean to... your mom said... I stopped to knock... then overheard..." His voice sounded broken and it seemed as if he couldn't quite get used to completing his

sentences, still not accustomed to talking after 2 years of silence. He stretched out his hands guiltily, presenting Lilith with what her mother evidently busied herself while waiting for her daughter to appear.

"A new beret!" Lilith exclaimed, unable to help herself.

It was beautiful, knit from yarn of multiple red colors and forming the pattern that made it look exactly like a rose, scarlet red of the petals blending into maroon of the shade between them, each petal's edge protruding from the beret, crocheted on top of it separately, making it look like almost an exact three dimensional replica of a rose. "It looks like a rose... and if I will wear it, it will make me... a Rosehead..." She whispered with horror.

Upon hearing her name, Rosehead wailed loudly and impatiently in the rose garden through the open window of Lilith's bedroom, and the house shuddered in a tremulous sigh, creaking and cracking its joints as if it was opening its mouth so wide that its jaws popped, in preparation of an exquisite meal, having waited for it for the last 35 years.

## Chapter 31. Lilith's story

There was a hushed silence for a moment in the room, giving Lilith a false hope that perhaps they all heard it too, and then Petra let out an agonizing scream of terror, breaking into hysterical sobs, which caused Sabrina Rosenthal to yell at Gabi Bloom with renewed force, pointing at Lilith and finally rushing her five year old daughter out of the room to her loud protests. Petra groped the air in the direction of Ed, calling his name and causing him run up to her, only for Sabrina to shut the door in his face. The rest of the guests have filed out by now, leaving only Lilith's parents and Ed's step-mother, both women sitting on the bed and conversing in a hushed whisper, Al Bloom strolling sullenly by the window. The Schlitzburger twins were gone too, to Lilith's relief, as was her grandfather.

Lilith bent down, picked up her clothes, muttered an excuse to her suddenly alert mother, and swiftly disappeared into the bathroom again to change. Her mother, it turned out, gave her slim black jeans, a black tee and black mary-janes in which Lilith arrived, as those were her only clean clothes left, but Lilith thought it ironic that it was all black. Ironic and dreadfully appropriate for the day. She quickly donned it on,

then toweled off her hair and put on her new beret, studying herself in the mirror.

"Perfect outfit to die in, don't you think?" She asked her own reflection, a slim petite 12 year old girl strung up like a dark stem of a rose, with a gorgeous flower blooming on top of her head. As in, Rosehead. Lilith thought that if by some miraculous chance she survived today, she would adopt it as her new nickname, not for the color of her hair like her twenty-times-removed grandmother, but for her stubbornness, like that of an iron nail. Lilith stood like this for another minute and thought of life and love and death, three big things that she had so little time to grasp, yet thinking of them in that matter-of-fact way that only children are capable of.

"It is what it is." She whispered to herself, shrugging her shoulders lightly. "There is no death without life, like there is no life without love. Does this mean that there is no love without death? Do I have to die first, to know what real love means?" She stood silently another moment. "Does it mean that I have to lose everything, before I can really begin loving?" It seemed so true to her in this moment, her thoughts turning to her mother, wishing she wasn't so mean to her, remembering all those awkward moments when her mother tried to show her how to knit and Lilith responding that knitting is certainly not fit for sick people, lest she pokes out her eyes with needles in the

process, causing her mother to press her lips into one thin line and asking her if she took her pills today.

There was movement behind the door, and Lilith decided that she couldn't dwell on her thoughts anymore, emerging from the bathroom to the first rays of the sun breaking the sky behind the window and coloring the tops of the roses a crimson gold. It was early morning, and it was the last sunrise Lilith would ever witness.

Ed jumped up expectantly, but his step-mother whispered something in his ear, then addressed Lilith, "We will see you at breakfast, darling," and ushered him out the door, his habit of being quiet not letting him utter a word. Within seconds, Lilith's mother and father were on their feet, asking her about her well being, and her mother, miraculously, not forcing Lilith to swallow her pills and announcing that perhaps it would be okay to skip just one day, it was a big day, after all, the day of the carnival and the final closing ceremony of the festivities of the family reunion which Alfred Bloom planned to announce at breakfast, the mentioning of which made Lilith's insides churn and freeze.

" - he said there will be a traveling circus, with animals, in the memory and honor of Rose Blome. She was the daughter of a traveling jester, remember?" Gabi said brightly, clearly attempting to cheer Lilith up.

"And tomorrow we are leaving, sweetie. Finally. Aren't you happy about that?" Chimed in her father, and it nearly made Lilith lose her self-control.

Her parents glanced meaningfully at each other, sat Lilith on the bed, squeezing her from two sides. Panther jumped up and curled around her back. It felt so comfortable, that Lilith didn't dare move, lest of all breathe, it was better than being tucked into bed. This was worth dying for, she thought, this moment right now, the reddish sunrise, the open window into the gorgeous rose garden, the beautiful white room, the soft bed, and her parents flanking her on both sides, neither of them lecturing her, or forcing her to drink medicine, or asking questions about anything... But here she was wrong, because, as if waiting for an opportune moment and afraid to disturb her, cautiously and carefully, first her father, then her mother, leaned into asking her about what happened.

"Sweetie, I know it must be difficult for you to talk -"  
Said Al awkwardly, ruffling his hair.

"- and we understand that it might take you some time to open up to us -" Picked up Gabi, propping her glasses up, which slid again down to the tip of her nose, making her look like a bird with two very large glinting eyes.

"- but we need to know -"

"- where you've been this whole time -"

"- and if anyone was with you or made you -"

"- do things that you, perhaps -"

"You two think I was *abducted*?" Said Lilith incredulously.

"Er..." Both of her parents were taken aback, consulting each other wordlessly on how to continue.

"Let me assure you, it was nothing of the sort." Said Lilith calmly. "The problem is, if I were to really tell you what happened, neither of you will believe me, so there is really no point in talking." Panther growled affirmatively. Involuntarily, Lilith grabbed both of her parents' hands and squeezed them hard, swallowing and forcing herself to stay in control, to keep her almost erupting emotions together, wishing for this togetherness to never end.

"Why don't you try, sweetie?" Said Al at last, squeezing her hand back.

"We will listen." Added Gabi hopefully, her hand frozen and slack in Lilith's hold.

"No interruptions?" Asked Lilith.

"No interruptions." They chimed back to her as one.

"No lectures? No scolding? No calling me sick and a danger to society? No threats to have me examined by a doctor or be locked up into some kind of institution where they will chain me to a bed and force-feed me cold soup through a tube?"

Gabi looked at Lilith with a mortified look in her face, shaking her head *no*, as did Al, both of them holding their breath, perhaps afraid to break the momentum.

"Okay." Said Lilith, took a deep breath and with a rush of gratitude and immense relief to finally being able to share her tribulations with her family, she let her story flow out of her, from the point of her grandfather leading Mad Marta to her shack house, to fleeing to Ed's house and beyond it into the field, to Grandpa and Gustav pursuing her with three mastiffs, Panther talking to them (at this Gabi opened her mouth but apparently something in Lilith's father face made her promptly close it, and Panther issued one upset bark), to grandpa beating the dogs for disobedience, to meeting Ed and fleeing to the tree house, to witnessing Rosehead's awakening and trying to save Petra (at this both parents gasped), and finally witnessing Mad Marta being devoured.

Lilith took another shuddering inhale here, then continued to weave her tale about her and Ed and Panther fighting Rosehead and Ed running off with Petra (Panther barked loudly a couple times), to Lilith seeing the rose bush woman give birth to 21 baby rose bushes who were supposed to feed on 21 women in the house (another exchanged glance between her parents), to her having a close shave with her grandfather who was feeding them blood, to her making it out of the garden and falling asleep on

the roof of the house, which was underground for the night, to her waking up in her room and consulting with the heads, meeting her paternal grandmother for the first time (at this Al nearly said something, but Gabi shushed him in time), to meeting Rosehead as one of the heads.

Lilith left out two major details, she simply couldn't bear to admit that she commanded the room to eat doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner and that she made a deal with the house, making it sound like all of the women were going to die and she was determined to stop it all.

"- and then you broke into my room." She finished with glittering eyes, looking from one parent to the other, trying to read their expressions, but it seemed as if they were wearing two immobile masks in place of their real faces, stretched into fake polite smiles and not saying a word, letting silence hang uncomfortably between them for an awkward length of minutes until Lilith couldn't wait anymore.

"Well, what do you think?" She demanded honestly, fully meaning it and not being sarcastic for once.

"We think it's an amazing story, really, and isn't it time for breakfast? Your grandfather was going to make an important announcement about the carnival tonight. I think you will have fun at it! There will be rose gathering -"

"- and wild animals, at the carnival. I had to miss the whippet race, but this will be so much more exciting!" He father sounded like a bad actor, lying was not his forte.

"You don't believe me, do you? Neither of you..." Sighed Lilith, her hope extinguished. "I didn't think so. Well, it's okay if you don't. I'm used to it, and I'm starving. Panther, let's go have breakfast. Mom, can you teach me how to knit today?" She suddenly asked. And, before waiting for her mother to answer, who sat there unblinking, as if stunned, "Dad, can I go for a walk with you and Panther after breakfast? Can you show me some whippet racing tricks? Maybe Panther can run after some squirrels? If we find any?"

Panther wagged his tail so vigorously that it thumped on the bed in rapid drumming.

On this note Lilith swiftly stood up, unable to tolerate the closeness anymore, because it turned from loving to forced, and marched to the door, pausing there and waiting expectantly, faithful Panther at her legs at once.

"Of course I can teach you how to knit!" Her mother exclaimed in a sunny way, trotting up.

"And we will go for a walk, sweetie, right after breakfast." Added her dad, shuffling his long legs across the floor.

"Excellentumonto." Said Lilith, inventing a new word on the spot and feeling like she returned to herself a little, opening the door and proceeding into the dinner hall which was still empty at this time, with servants carrying in steaming plates full of freshly made waffles, and trays of jam, and butter, and yoghurt, and muesli and other cereal, and flagons of apple juice and sparkling water. They positioned it all carefully on the long table covered with strikingly red table cloth today, multiple vases adorning it, freshly cut roses in them, as usual.

"Can I please have an omelet with cheese, American style, with bacon, sausage and blueberry pancakes on the side, oh, and with toast too?" Said Lilith to passing Agatha, who promptly stopped, eyeing Lilith with what strangely looked like respect.

"Oh, and a bowl of juicy steak for Panther?" Added Lilith hopefully.

To her astonishment, Agatha nodded, "az little miss wishes," and scurried off towards the kitchen with an empty tray in her hands. Lilith pulled out a chair, plopped down, and broke into a smile. If this was going to be her last breakfast, she was going to pig out on her favorite food. Her parents sat next to her this time, her mother closest, both of them strangely silent. Lilith didn't mind. She was looking forward to seeing her grandfather, preparing an entire speech in her head that she

thought would if not hurt him, then at least make him embarrassed in front of his guests.

Nobody chased Panther away, none of the servants seemed to be paying him any mind, and he curled under the table at Lilith's feet.

Slowly, the hall started filling up with people, many of them yawning, uttering morning greetings to each other and in general sounding grumpy after having been woken way too early, each of them passing Lilith and making a comment about her dreadful behavior and her parents not knowing how to raise their own child and Alfred Bloom not knowing what he was doing, calling her heir to the entire Bloom property. Although they spoke in German, Lilith didn't need to know the language to understand by their tone and their glances what they were talking about, and her father's glares told her that she was correct in her assumptions.

Lilith's heart kept making summersaults, as she expected each new person who entered to be Ed, but he wouldn't come.

To add to this, both Daphne and Gwen Schlitzburger sat across her, with their mother on their side, apparently distressed at something, her face still wearing creases of a pillow and her heavy makeup looking suspiciously like it was applied yesterday, her hair in disarray. Without saying good morning, Daphne, her blonde hair sleekly pulled into one pony

tail and making her head look like that of a bald pig, leaned over the table, bared her braced teeth and hissed.

"Did you find any more human bones in the garden, by chance? Were they tasty?"

Gwen followed her sister's suit. "Nah, she came across a bear in the forest, but he didn't want to eat her, because she stinks. Or was it someone else who scratched you?"

"Was it a scratch of love?" Sing-sang Daphne, and both sisters burst into suppressed giggles.

Before Lilith could answer, Ed ran up to her, flustered, pulled out a chair next on her left, slid into it and quickly leaned in to Lilith, kissing her on the cheek (Lilith felt her face grow hot and start boiling), then he turned to the twins and said in a casual matter-of-fact tone. "I'm sorry a boy... has never... kissed you." Ed was forcing himself to talk fast, but it didn't work very well. "But not to fret... there will be... an elephant... tonight... he loves fat girls... he will give you a nice sloppy kiss... I hear you sleep with an elephant... Daphne?" This tirade seemed to have left Ed exhausted, but the stung look on Daphne's face was worth it, which immediately followed by a loud yelp coming from Panther, as either Gwen or Daphne appeared to have either kicked him or stepped on his tail, at which he bit Daphne's ankle, at which she cried loudly, at which Irma Schlitzburger dove under the table and pulled out the thrashing

whippet and Lilith sprang up to rescue her beloved pet, together with Ed, and a commotion would've escalated, if not for Alfred Bloom who presently strolled into the hall, Agatha on his heels with Lilith's specially made breakfast, Katharina trotting on her heels, a bowl full of steaming steak in her shaking hands, her misty eyes looking for Panther.

"Let him go, Irma, today is a special day." Said Alfred in an authoritative tone.

"But Alfred! ..." Yet without protesting further, Irma Schlitzburger reluctantly lowered Panther into Lilith's hands, who placed him on her lap to make sure nobody tries kicking him again, flushed and throbbing with emotion after Ed's kiss and the twins' taunting.

"Please, eat." Said Alfred from the top of the table, and people dug in, all of them whispering and throwing inquisitive glances at Lilith, obviously still discussing her disappearance.

Lilith swallowed her whole plate of omelet in the matter of seconds, she was so ravenous, and had to suppress a belch at the end. Ed ate next to her, silently, the Schlitzburger twins glared but didn't utter word between helpings of waffles, butter and jam, their mother's glares evidently stopping them from talking. Then, right when Lilith thought it was safe to talk to Ed and leaned over to him, Alfred Bloom struck an empty glass

with a tea spoon several times, bringing the entire assembly to silence.

"My dear guests! Today is the *last* day we get to spend in each other's company -" (Lilith felt her bones chill), "- and, I must tell you, it has been my tremendous pleasure seeing you all at the Bloom mansion. I dare to think that I have been able to provide you with enough entertainment," he glanced at Lilith accusingly, "but it's not over yet. Tonight, in the memory of my late wife, Eugenia Bloom, and to celebrate the legacy of the Bloom family, there will be a carnival, as you are well aware of. I have invited a private circus that will be performing in the rose garden. After the performance we will have rose gathering, the lighting of the candles, and, ultimately, one *other* special ceremony -"

He fell silent, his gaze resting on Lilith only, whose heart felt like a dying animal thrashing madly in its last seconds of life.

"- the crowning of the new Bloom heir, as tradition of our family demands, to make it official, and, I am, as all of you are, immensely relieved that we have found our heir in time for this festivity, which fact, shall I remind you, I have never doubted. Lilith Bloom has demonstrated an incredible willingness to learn all there is to learn about the art of being a true rosarian and chose to spend all her time in the garden as part

of a secret preparation for the ceremony. I must apologize to you all for not telling you before, it was our secret to keep, but Lilith, unfortunately, got carried away a little and, as much as I advised her to take a break, continued helping me with pruning, which is hard and unforgiving work, as you well can see by the amount of scrapes and cuts she has suffered from the thorns. It is my belief, however, that a true rose gardener shouldn't be afraid of a few scrapes, and I, perhaps unwisely, have let her to continue into late night. Wouldn't you agree we had fun, Lilith, my dear?"

There was a collective sigh of relief at this information sunk into people's minds, breaking out into whispers here and there. Lilith only had time to hear her mother tell her father, "I told you," under her breath, when she stood up and faced her grandfather across the table, looking directly into his eyes, bracing herself.

Ed was tugging at her hand, and Panther, forced to slide on the floor from her lap, closed his teeth gently on her ankle. Both, apparently, tried to either communicate something to her or to stop her. Lilith ignored them. It was now or never, she might not have another chance to do this. There was, after all, only one day left for her to live, and this was the last gathering of the entire Bloom family with all guests present.

"I think you are absolutely correct, grandfather." She said clearly, her voice ringing across the hushed hall.

"I'm absolutely correct about what, my dear?" Alfred Bloom merely raised his eyebrows at this, but a fleeting shadow of surprise and confusion momentarily marred his face. It gave Lilith a boost she needed to continue.

"What I meant to say was, we had tremendous fun, and I'm absolutely grateful to you for intrusting me with such honor today, grandfather, to lead our guests on a special house tour, something that has never done before -" (a murmur of avid interest broke over the table) "- opening up the second red floor to everyone for the first time, showing all 20 rooms, each painted a particular red color, the shade of a particular type of rose, and the 21<sup>st</sup> room especially, the gallery with the portraits of all Bloom women of the family, 20 of them, from the portrait of Rose Blome to the portrait of Eugenia Bloom, each made by their husbands, a true family treasure, if you ask me." Lilith swallowed quickly, satisfied that she guessed right, judging by the incredulous expression on her grandfather's face.

"I believe it's right above the dinner hall, that's what you told me yesterday, correct? I would like it to open its doors and all of us to see it. Right now."

At this, Lilith swiftly picked up a pitcher of sparkling water and pretended to fill her glass, bending awkwardly and

sending the entire thing to the floor. The glass smashed to pieces and the water promptly disappeared into the marble floor. "Oh, I'm so terribly sorry!" Exclaimed Lilith in a theatrical mocking voice.

Gustav promptly appeared with a mop and a bucket.

"The gallery? What gallery? There is no such thing, my dear!" Protested Alfred Bloom fiercely, a muscle in his jaw playing dangerously.

"Oh, it's okay, grandpa, we don't have to keep it a secret anymore. I know you wanted to announce it right before the carnival, but I just *couldn't* wait. I apologize profusely. I'm such a bad girl, oh, it's simply *sanctimonious*." Added Lilith cheerfully, and heard a door open above her with a bang. The house listened, the house took her payment, the house obeyed.

Gustav got done cleaning and Lilith thought he winked to her before scurrying off on his long unbending legs.

"Iz that true, cousin? There iz a gallery of portraits? Why, you never told me before." Threw Irma accusingly at Alfred.

"Irma, dear -"

"Stupid paintings. I hate art." Drawled Daphne nastily. Gwen nodded vigorously, leaning in and whispering something in her sister's ear that made her produce an evil grin.

"My mother says she would like to see that very much!" Joined in Hanna Haas, hushing gesticulating Heidemarie who

evidently hoped she could touch the portraits to be able to "see" them.

"I didn't know you could paint. Is this some kind of a special tradition that we were no aware of, Alfred?" Norman Rosenthal, Patrick's and Petra's dad chimed in.

"I wanna see, I wanna see!" Petra added in English, very proud of herself and watching Lilith and Ed for reaction.

"What... do you think... you're doing?" Hissed Ed at Lilith from the corner of his mouth.

"It's the only real evidence we've got!" She whispered hotly back and stood up so fast, her chair fell.

"Right this way!" Lilith announced brightly to the rest of the crowd before they had a chance to doubt her, picking up the chair and feeling as though the floor licked her on contact with her fingers. Stunned Ed rose at her side, mouthing something. Panther emitted a warning bark, and Gabi and Al Bloom both stood up with surprise written all over their faces,

"This sounds rather interesting -" Al said to his wife.

"I knew there was more to your father!" Exclaimed Gabi. "Is this where you went to do your ballet lessons, Lilith? The first time you disappeared? Clever disguise." She added, eyeing Lilith with a forced look of approval, apparently afraid to contradict her, which was a new tactic for both of her parents.

There were exclamations of surprise, the moving and scraping of the chairs on the floor, people filing closer to Lilith, the last of them being her grandfather.

"Very well. I need to give you a proper scolding, my dear granddaughter. I was hoping to save this surprise for later, as we discussed. Oh well... I will lead the way." Grandfather bellowed over people's chatter, barely hidden cold fury written all over her face, his lips white, eyes blazing. He strolled up to Lilith and roughly seized her arm. Yet Lilith knew that there was nothing he could publicly do to her as long as there were witnesses, and she was determined to keep herself surrounded by a crowd until her ultimate end.

## Chapter 32. Portraits

In a fast shuffle of eager feet, guests followed Lilith's and Alfred's lead, up the wide marble staircase to the white floor, and then along the corridor to the staircase covered with a red carpet, golden pegs and rods holding it in place. Blind Heidemarie Haas screeched her displeasure at being left alone on the first floor, because her daughter informed her that there was no way she could carry her upstairs, no would she be able to see anything anyway. The Schlitzburger twins kept poking Lilith from behind, evidently trying to provoke her, to be reprimanded by their mother, but Lilith didn't utter a sound, feeling the place where her grandfather held her arm becoming numb by the second. Ed was on her left, throwing anxious glances at both of them, as was Panther from below. Al and Gabi Bloom trotted to the right, occasionally mumbling something between themselves. Petra squeaked her excitement, only to be hushed by her bother Patrick, and the rest of the guests traipsed behind.

"I'm trying to save your life, you idiot girl." Puffed grandfather into Lilith's ear the moment they separated from the wake of the rest of the group, taking wide strides up the carpeted stairs. "Now... look what you've done. In the matter of

days you have managed to thoroughly mess up 35 long years of preparation." He tightened his grip, and Lilith thought her arm would break in two.

"Are we finally speaking without pretense? I can hardly believe it." Said Lilith sarcastically, wincing at the pain in her arm and walking up the steps automatically.

Panther caught up with them.

"If you don't remove this... creature out of my way -" started grandfather with deep loathing in his voice.

"Fall back, Panther, I'm okay!" Shrieked Lilith, and she heard a yelp of acceptance from her pet, whisked away by alfter Bloom and not being able to turn to look back.

"You *cannot* put yourself in danger, you have to continue the Bloom family bloodline, you're the only direct descendant left!" Alfred kept whispering in her ear, dragging her along. "Aside from me and your father, of course, but I don't think your father is planning another child, to spite me." He blustered. As zealous as he tried to sound, Lilith didn't find his speech convincing. Something didn't feel right.

"Really?" She retorted suppressing helpless tears. "I see. I must be of precious value then. So you, my esteemed grandfather, were trying to save my life for this reason alone? To - what's the word - *procreate*? At what cost, if I may be so bold to inquire?" Snarled Lilith viciously.

The crowd was gaining on them, her parents calling on them to slow down.

"Do not meddle into the matters you don't understand. You do as I say, you will be *out of here* tomorrow." Said grandfather harshly, throwing a worried look over his shoulder. There was something terrible in the way he said *out of here*.

"And if I don't?"

"You don't have a choice. You've agreed to inherit the entire Bloom property."

"What was the use of naming me heir to your property then, if I'm the one who tends to mess up things - to not understand things - to - to - to do things wrong?" Lilith attempted to twist out of her grandfather's hold and look directly into his shrewd beady eyes. Meanwhile, they made it to the red floor.

Grandfather didn't answer, bent on walking ahead of the crowd and shifting his head left and right, as if he expected something to be wrong with the corridor or the closed doors and what's behind them.

"Why don't you explain how the rose garden - Rosehead - works? I need to know!" Pressed Lilith, angry at being ignored.

"Shhh! I *told* you, everything in its own time, which means that you have to wait. I'll be honest, I was hoping you have more intelligence in that loony head of yours." He pushed her around the corner and stalked off along the corridor,

maintaining a safe distance to the rest of the group, so that they could not be overheard. Lilith couldn't tell if her grandfather knew about kids at school calling her *Loony* and used it on purpose, or if it was an accident. It didn't matter, the button was pushed and she was seething.

"I don't think time will make much difference with this loony brain if mine." Hissed Lilith fiercely, anger bubbling up her chest and seeking an exit, at the same time making her forget the fear. "It's not too late, grandpa, you're still alive and breathing, as far as I can see, unless you're a particularly gifted corpse that can imitate a living man with such conviction. Go ahead, change the will. What's stopping you?" It felt particularly exhilarating to Lilith to be able to speak like this, her courage fueled by the knowledge of her impending death, and it reflected in her grandfather's eyes like in a mirror.

"You don't know what you're playing at, you're ignorant - spoiled - ungrateful girl." He swirled her around, letting go of her arm. Lilith almost cried out in pain, rubbing it. They stood in the same spot she remembered from her first night here, at the end of the hallway, right above the place where the entrance into her room was on the floor below.

"Well? You think you figured it out, don't you?" There was a malevolent glint in her grandfather's eye.

Lilith momentarily was at a loss of words, a pin-prickle of panic shaking her confidence. What did she know for sure? Most of it was guess work and the few things she witnessed, piecing them together. What if, indeed, she was wrong? What if what she thought was the Bloom family secret was a cover-up for something worse? What was the real purpose of this gallery? What if there were things more terrible than Rosehead? Could there be? Were there?

Lilith didn't know what to say.

"Quiet for once, are we? Well... I don't particularly care if the house does the job for me." He leaned in closer, his eyes glinting dangerously. "I'll have an evening off, for once. Don't tell me I didn't warn you. Have *fun*." It was the last thing that Alfred Bloom supplied to Lilith with a jeering smile, his voice back to charming, before out of breath Ed reached them from around the corner, Panther at his heels, and the entire assembly afterward, huffing and puffing and oohing and aahing and turning their heads around, taking in the impossibly rich redness of the walls, the floor and the ceiling.

Ed apparently wanted to tell Lilith something, his face agitated, but he didn't dare do it under the unwavering stare of his grandfather, and so he stuck his hands in his pocket, took out his notebook and started scribbling on it furiously, his preferred method of communication.

Meanwhile, there was a slew of questions shot at Alfred Bloom in German, everyone's manners of speaking English in Lilith's presence evidently forgotten in the thrill of discovering the ancient portraits of the Bloom women, and Lilith could only take out a few phrases uttered by her parents behind her.

"I don't see any doors - " Began Gabi.

"Dad, why didn't you give us a mansion tour before?" Asked Al, clearly playing up as he has already seen this floor before.

"Are there really 21 specimen of roses -"

"May I present... the Bloom gallery." Alfred Bloom boomed over the clamor, silencing it, and touched the wall where the handle to the door should've typically been. But after an awkward pause... nothing happened. He tried again, noting again. His face contorted with rage, and he drilled Lilith with his eyes. The house was not obeying him as usual. People started craning their necks, when Lilith stepped in.

"Allow me." She said victoriously, pressed her hand to the spot and felt a sharp piece of something hard cut into her palm and begin sucking in her blood. The sensation was that of burning and rising fever. Just when Lilith started wondering when it would be sated enough, it stopped and the door swung open with a soft swoosh. An ancient stench like that of a buried tomb opened up for the first time in centuries washed over

Lilith, and she cringed, noticing that Ed and Panther did the same, but the rest of the extended Bloom family didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary.

She flashed her grandfather a smile, and it was met with an expression of utmost deterrence and a trace of fear.

"Thank you, my dear girl." He quickly composed himself, sounding charming again. "As I was saying... May I present to you, the family Bloom portrait gallery." Grandfather gestured grandly for everyone to come inside, himself not entering and staying by the door.

"How did you open it, Lilith? I didn't see a handle -" Began astounded Gabi, coming closer, and Lilith, in a desperate dare to make her mother see, grabbed her arm and spoke urgently into her ear.

"The house took my blood, see?" She stuck her cut hand under her mother's face. "Dad?" Lilith held up her palm.

"It did? Really... We will need to bandage you up later, okay?" Uttered perplexed Gabi, motioning Al to join her and smiling broadly, like Lilith knew her mother smiled whenever she didn't mean it but decided she was not up for a row, for mysterious reasons.

"What is it, sweetie?" Al leaned over anxiously.

But they could talk no more, swept by the movement. Lilith bit painfully on her lip wishing that her mother was back to her

stern self, instead of faking this soft understanding parent that was very much not like her at all, and that her father didn't play along so badly, even if it meant for him to go back to his succumbing self.

Chattering merrily, the crowd of guests cautiously stepped over the threshold, speaking suddenly in whispers as if they were visiting a museum with a particularly valuable piece of art in its bowels, filing in.

Soft glowing light illuminated the gallery of 20 paintings, 5 on each wall, every single one of them set in a thick lacquered crimson frame, shining dully from under the layer of dust. Each painting, as Lilith remembered it vividly, was hidden behind a pane of thick glass, forcing observers to step closer and peer inside, to be able to see what was behind. In the middle of the room, as it was last time, stood a waist-high pedestal like a thick thorny stem of a rose, still empty but clearly missing something important to display. Lilith leaned on it, exasperated, clasping the top with her hand without thinking.

At once, a thorn sprung up in the middle and dug itself painfully in her hand, drawing more blood. Before she could realize what was happening, a rush of wind flew around the room, chilling the temperature from comfortable warm to biting cold.

Lilith glanced up in alarm, and saw several disturbing things happen in a rapid succession.

The closest painting that she happened to see, its sallow skin and matted hair swirled around on the canvas, intermixed with the layers of acrylic paint, its nose and cheeks and forehead dry like paper, shifted as if grimacing, and then its closed eyelids... fluttered, opening at once. If only that was the worst of it. It wasn't. The worst of it was that there were no eyes. There was nothing, only complete and utter blackness, seemingly oozing out of the two holes that were supposed to hold eyeballs, but then of course they wouldn't have preserved as well as skin did, and with horror Lilith realized that she was staring into two empty eye-holes of her twenty-times-removed grandmother, Rose Blome, the resemblance to the head she saw on the wall the previous night in her room striking.

There was a muffled cry, and Lilith saw that Petra hid her face behind her two little hands and sinking to the floor to hide.

"Petra, do you see -" Began Lilith, but promptly forgot how to speak.

At once, the rest of the portraits opened their eyes, oozing more darkness and a low rustling noise. Distracted, Lilith both saw it and felt it, sensing her skin erupting in goose bumps and the hairs on her neck stand up. None of the rest

of the guests, however, seemed to have noticed anything, taking it as part of the art, talking in hushed tones between themselves, Patrick looking down and scolding Petra, and Sabrina Rosenthal scolding Patrick. People broke into familial or hobby groups, as was the case with women who adored Gabi Bloom's knitting, clumps of them gravitated towards a particular painting and were compelled to either trace the frame with their fingers or place their palms on the wall beneath, absentmindedly, staring into the painting without blinking. Lilith saw both Daphne and Gwen gaze into one, little trickles of blood running from their fat palms down the wall, vanishing almost instantly. As much hatred as she harbored towards the twins, she felt an urge to warn them.

At the same time, Ed finally broke through the packed crowd to Lilith, grabbed her hand, squeezed his crumpled note into it and whispered in her ear. "We need... to leave... right now... they will... feed on them. I wanted... to tell you..."

Panther growled from below in agreement, too scared to talk openly with so many people around.

But before Lilith could answer or do anything, she felt a stare burn a hole in her head. She looked up. Her grandfather stood in the doorway, questioningly studying her, as if asking, *Well, my dear girl, have you see enough?* and motioning with his head to the opposite wall, where, to Lilith's horror, she saw

her mother mesmerized with yet another portrait, both of her palms planted on either side of its frame, evidently glued to the wall which nearly shuddered in delight of sucking out Gabi Bloom's vital juices. Her dad leaned in as well, so close in fact, that his face almost touched the glass pane.

"Mom! Dad!" Squeaked Lilith, ripping her hand away from the pedestal and making to run to them. Everything happened so fast that she hardly had time to think, only determined to lead everyone out of this wretched gallery, when on top of everything else Gustav appeared in the doorway, bobbing his bald egg-head up and down and calling out to his master.

"Herr? Der zirkus ist da." He croaked in his ululating elderly voice polished with years of servitude.

Lilith wheeled around, understanding the word *zirkus*. It must have meant only once thing, circus, which in turn meant that the artists and their animals have arrived and will be preparing for the evening's performance, asking to be lodged and properly fed and shown to their quarters. Whatever it was, something prompted her grandfather to make one dangerous step away from the door, sending it to close with a soft swish.

"NO!" Yelled Lilith, running to intercept him and skidding to halt long enough to not bump into Ed, who, ahead of her, already sprinted to the door and stuck in his leg to prevent it from closing, Panther by him.

A nasty fight erupted by the door. Grandfather strained to push Ed inside, to fully close the door. Ed resisted stoically and quietly, in his typical self-reserved manner. Lilith ran up and joined the struggle. She stuck her head on top of Ed's shoulder, her hands wedged above together with his, both of them trying to pry the door to open wider. Lilith, panting and feeling a trickle of sweat running down her temples, peered into the gap and sensed Panther barked his head off, frantically attempting to climb on top of her, scratching fruitlessly on her jeans and yapping.

"Help us! Please - the door - it's jammed -" Lilith wheezed. "DAD! HELP!" Yelled Lilith.

"What is it, sweetie? Just a second..." Al Bloom answered dreamily from behind, apparently deeply engrossed in observing a painting, mesmerized to the point of dismissing his daughter's cries for help.

Hearing his son's voice was enough for Alfred Bloom, however. He hastily stepped away, brushed the sweat off his forehead, straightened his suit and stood calmly outside in the corridor, a mere five feet away, surveying the commotion with avid interest, his servant Gustav standing by and studying the floor. Lilith noticed that he didn't participate in the struggle.

"Get them... out! I will... hold... the door!" Forced Ed fervently, gesturing Lilith back at the gallery. Panther yapped and jumped at Lilith. Lilith was afraid to look. Instead of a rush of stomping feet and loud exclamations of distress behind her, which should have followed logically, what with all the noise they have created, she heard nothing except a growing silence and sighing, and Petra's quiet whimpering.

She turned her head to look so violently, that she was sure she cricked her neck. What she saw made her stomach drop into her knees and make her legs go numb. It appeared that the paintings have overpowered its victims, drawing their faces to their frames to the point of where it looked like they would fall inside, of only the paintings happened to open up into holes, into some underground tunnels...

A memory of this gallery locking itself and spinning, only to spit Lilith and Panther out into its bowels underneath the Bloom property spurred Lilith into action.

"YOU'RE EVIL!" She shrieked at her grandfather through the gap in the door, tears sprinting up in her eyes.

"Let me make sure I understand you correctly." He said nonchalantly. "Are you suggesting, perhaps, that it was my idea to show everyone the gallery, my dear girl?" And he cracked a smile so wide that Lilith would've have gladly given up her life just to witness it being wiped cleanly off his face and see him

suffer, see him entangled in a thorny rose bush, see Rosehead advance on him, see her take him into her arms and lower his thrashing body into her toothless vast mouth and..

She was rudely yanked out of her loathing by Ed, whose arms she was clutching very tightly without realizing, shaking them and digging in her fingers.

"No use." Ed loosened her hold, barely tilting his head in their grandfather's direction. "The door... it will... break my leg." He pointed at the door, which evidently was pressing to close itself on its own accord, without Alfred's help.

"Well, my dear children, this will be a good lesson for you. I would be delighted to stay and watch its full effect take place, but I have some important carnival business to attend to. You're looking forward to tonight's festivities, after you get out of the gallery, am I right? Now, if you'll excuse me - I take it you will handle this situation yourself, like you demonstrated to me already on multiple occasions. Gustav -" And with this Alfred Bloom snapped his fingers, firing off instructions at Gustav in German and both of them strolled off, but not before Gustav throwing back a meaningful look, and Lilith could've sworn, there was pain written on his face, pain in his distress of wanting but not being able to help. She still didn't dare call his name, didn't dare appeal to him for help,

mortified at his appearance and believing that he must be as evil as master, yet her belief ebbed just a little.

They were left alone in silence, because not one person spoke up in the gallery, as if, indeed, all of them have vanished, there was not even the sound of Petra's crying anymore.

"Now!" Wailed Ed, and Lilith heard one of his bones snap like a dry brittle twig.

## Chapter 33. Locked doors

Lilith obeyed without a second's hesitation, spurring Panther with her. For the next several minutes they were running from Blooms to Schlitzburgers to Rosenthals to Brandt sisters, to Hanna Haas, to the knitting women, to Ed's step-mother, to Lilith's old lady neighbor, attempting to tear them away from the portraits by shouting at them (barking in Panther's case), tugging on their clothes, then outright trying to rip them off (Panther dove into this task with indescribable zeal), attempting to climb them and hang on them, biting them and slapping them and kicking them, all to no success. People quickly drained color, standing mesmerized and frozen, their skin ice cold, their eyes glazed, their reflexes seemingly evaporated, their ability to hear or see or smell or feel anything beyond the empty eyes in front of them close to null. Their palms were firmly glued to the wall, their feet were stuck to the floor.

"Nothing works!" wailed Lilith in desperation. "They're like - frozen, or stunned, or something! Ed, what do I do? Smash the glass in the frames? Take down the paintings?"

She ran up to the pedestal and stuck her hand to it, but it seemed to have had enough of her blood. Nothing happened. The room was obviously busy sucking the juices of a ton of deliciously new individuals.

"It won't take my blood! What do I *do*?" She wailed.

"I don't know... kiss it... promise it baby elephants delivered - freshly - for breakfast... Anything... Because if you won't do something soon... I will lose my leg!" Ed croaked each word with effort, in his agony sounding more fluid than ever before.

Without any other idea of how to get out of this predicament, scared and angry at herself for her own stupidity, for luring in these people here, for all of this being her fault alone, Lilith rounded on her beloved whippet.

"Panther, what are you doing, sniffing corners like some dog. Think of something!" She shouted nervously.

"If I may explain myself?" The whippet cleared his throat. "This is one of those cases where what I'm about to do will *piss* you off, Lilith." Panther growled in a voice that suggested a brilliant idea hidden behind his words, but what it was, Lilith couldn't grasp, watching Panther come up to the pedestal in the middle of the room and raising his hind leg like dogs do in their typical doggy manner.

"Are you out of - what are you *doing*?" But just as she said it, understanding downed on her.

"Peeing, of course." Said Panther with a triumphant expression on his muzzle and let out a hot stream of urine.

The second steaming liquid touched the pedestal, the entire gallery shuddered in disgust, every painting opened its mouth and shrieked, promptly closing their eyes and severing the contact with their observers, who broke into a collective sigh of relief, gazing around and massaging their injured palms like one sleepy squirming mass of dizzy people who are not sure what happened to them but haven't woken up enough yet to be worried about the fact that something strange indeed happened to them and they can't remember it.

"You're brilliant! Brilliant!" Yelled Lilith at Panther, scooping him into a hug and kissing him all over.

"Took you long enough to notice." Panther growled crossly, and with a sigh licked both of Lilith's cheeks. Her beret askew, she let her pet slip out of her hands and turned to look at Ed.

"I'm free! It let me go!" Screamed Ed in the voice almost close to a normal voice of a 14 year old boy, his hesitation and stuttering gone. The door swung itself open with a loud bang, slamming angrily into the wall, but they were facing a new problem. The room slowly began shrinking, apparently getting ready to expel the entire crowd in the rudest possible manner. But instead of getting out, Ed hopped closer to Lilith, holding up his injured leg.

"How is your foot? Is it broken?" She breathed.

"Nah... it's... fine." Lied Ed.

"Ed! Ed! Ich habe angst..." Petra ran up to her favorite cousin, interrupting him and burying her head into his crumpled t-shirt. She never really has been mesmerized by any of the paintings, either because she was too short to really see them, or because she also believed in Rosehead like Ed, Lilith, and Panther did.

"That makes... four of us. We need to..." Ed said, as if he read Lilith's mind, but she didn't let him finish.

They stood at the door, and Lilith's heart ached at the possibility of it closing again any second.

"Get Petra out, I will take care of the rest." Lilith said quickly, gently pushing him out into the hallway, thinking it was way too small of a number to convince the remaining adults as to what was really going on in the Bloom mansion. As much as Lilith wanted to think about her next tactic, it was a bad time to think. It was a ripe time to act, because if they didn't, in the next several minutes the room would perhaps decide to crush everyone to death, and Lilith couldn't let that happen.

Lilith positioned herself in such manner that if the door decided to close, it would slam into her body and fail.

"Everybody, you have to leave this gallery now! NOW!" She shouted as loud as her wheezing lungs would permit her.

There was a general stir and murmuring. People called out to her dreamily.

"Where is Alfred?"

"What happened?"

"Why?"

Dizzy voices echoed here and there, guests reluctantly tearing themselves away from the paintings and looking at each other in bewilderment, perhaps still not sure how they ended up here, like a horde of perplexed sheep.

"Because - " Lilith was at a loss for words. If she were to tell them, *because the gallery just sucked out half of your blood and it will crush you if you stay here*, she had a feeling it wouldn't have been taken very well. She couldn't let them be crushed to prove her point either, although it seemed like a few people have noticed at least the fact that the room felt small and stuffy, looking around and making for the door.

"Because -" Began Lilith again, glancing at Panther for help. Panther raised one of his ears in question. A brilliant idea seized Lilith. "Because there are wild animals outside! The circus is here! Grandpa is calling everyone to go look!"

"What animals?" Asked Daphne with interest, unceremoniously squeezing in between two Brandt sisters, shaking her head, as if she was shaking off sleepiness. Gwen followed her, looking as dazed, if not more.

"Elephants... a whole herd of them." Supplied Ed from behind Lilith with such hidden sarcasm, that Lilith immediately wanted to turn around and kiss him right there and then, but she had to save it for later, to do it properly. It was going to be her first kiss, and her last, and she wanted it to be special. She wasn't used to anyone supporting her, and the fact that Ed backed her up made her heart soar.

"That was quite an experience. The painting - it literally made me dizzy!" Chuckled Gabi Bloom to her husband, both of them strolling up to their daughter, their eyes suggesting the fact that they have mistaken the gallery for a park and were in no real rush to get back to reality. "There was something about it - like Mona Lisa - I could've sworn it looked at me as I moved." She cast her eyes about, not settling on anything in particular, her words were slurry.

"Mom! Are you al right?" Cried Lilith. Her mother found her and studied her quizzically as if she was seeing her own daughter for the first time.

"It was peculiar, I agree." Said Al absentmindedly, noticing Lilith and slowly turning his head. "Are you feeling okay, sweetie? Your mother and I are not feeling very well. We will be in our bedroom, okay?" This he said in passing, leading his wife swiftly out of the room, both of them continuing

talking to each other in that same dreamy manner, Gabi Bloom occasionally producing a girly giggle.

"Mom! Dad! What's wrong with you? Wait!" Called Lilith, unable to move away from the door, but one of the Schlitzburger twins cut in again.

"Elephants? How many?" Daphne squawked slowly, opening her eyes wide, her excitement lowering the threshold for her usual nastiness.

"Three!" Made up Lilith on the fly, watching with relief the group of ladies wearing her mother's knits pass, then the Brandt sisters, Ed's step-mom, to immediately saunter up to him on her high heels, asking why he stood on one leg.

"Mama elephant and two twin daughters." Supplied Ed loudly, and for a second or two both of them witnessed a complete look of serenity on Daphne's face, until Gwen poked her in the ribs and whispered something in her sister's ear, making Daphne's face turn purple and her fists curl, ready to brandish at Lilith's face, if not for Irma Schlitzburger, who by now has thawed long enough to come up and join the conversation.

"Oh-la-la! Daphne adores elephants, they're her favorite animals." (Daphne turned from purple to burgundy.) "Zat it? No other attractions?" Asked Irma in a disappointed voice.

"Oh, yes, there is also..." Lilith saw the room growing smaller by the second, and glanced at her favorite pet, "- a - a

panther!" (Panther looked at her quizzically.) "A *real* panther!" A menacing rumbling issued from Panther's throat, as he marched out of the room, his tail raised high in indignation.

"That iz very exciting!" Clapped Irma. "Did you hear, girlz? Let's go see." They shuffled past Lilith, and to her sigh of relief, there were almost the last leave. Sabrina and Norman Rosenthal passed her without a glance, Sabrina calling sternly on Petra to leave Ed alone and join them, and ordering Patrick to stop lingering. Because Patrick was the last one, and he stopped right in front of Lilith, his head hung low.

Lilith couldn't help herself, she reached out to grab Patrick and drag him out, but the fact that his parents were watching her from behind stopped her at the last second. She lowered her arm. Her nerves were about to snap.

"Beats butterflies." Said Patrick finally, looking up. His round face conveyed the fact that he experienced guilt, his extremely business-like demeanor gone.

"Of course it does! Don't you want to go see them? Three elephants? And a panther?" Said Lilith encouragingly, thinking that another minute, and she wouldn't care for his parents witnessing her grabbing their son and throwing him out of the room. From the size of about 20 by 20 feet, it now shrunk to 10 by 10, moving its walls and ceiling seamlessly, without noise, stealthily advancing, making the portraits swing on their hooks

and move in closer together, much on the same manner the heads on the wall rounded up on Lilith the night before. She shuddered at the memory. Patrick's voice brought her back to reality.

"Um... That's not what I mean."

"What?" Asked Lilith. "What do you -"

"Beats butterflies." He repeated, embarrassed, waving his hand back into the room. "*That.*"

Lilith understood at last. "You - you saw them too?" She whispered, stretching out her arm despite herself and gently guiding Patrick out, slowly slipping out herself, hoping that the room wouldn't notice.

"They wanted to suck out my blood. All of it." Whispered Patrick, a look of horror written all over his face. He turned his palms up, showing Lilith the cuts made by thorns that protruded from the walls.

"That's why we need to get out this instant!" Whispered Lilith back, gripping his hand and stepping over the threshold, pushing him ahead of her.

The room noticed. It immediately slammed the door shut with such force, that if only Lilith stood there another second, she would've been smashed to pieces. Yet it didn't shutter her, as angry as it was. Lilith let out a sigh of relief, watching Rosalinde argue with Ed over the need to see the doctor in case his leg might be broken, which came down to her throwing

accusations at him and Ed shaking his head silently and stubbornly. Patrick wanted to say something else, but his mother snatched him, with a reproving glance at Lilith, though weakened by the gallery, talking fast in German to her son and her husband, who nodded. Lilith watched Rosenthals lead away both of their children, Patrick and Petra glancing back, all the way until they disappeared behind a turn.

"You're one stubborn boy, darling." Exclaimed exasperated Rosalinde in long drawling words. "I think you were more agreeable before you started talking again." Lilith winced. That must have hurt. On the other hand, she thought all of the adults behaved rather weirdly after the whole gallery experience, like they were lightheaded and not fully in their mind. Would her mother leave her alone like that after everything that happened? It seemed very much out of her character.

Only now Lilith noticed that Panther was gone. First her parents, and now this.

"Panther!" She called out, her heart hammering fast.  
"PANTHER!" He didn't bark in response, didn't come.

Without a word, Ed hopped up to Lilith, dragging his right leg behind him. He seized her hand and pulled her away with him, wobbling forward in his attempt to get away. "Panther... left. I saw him." He said urgently.

"He didn't tell me where he was going!" Said Lilith in an injured tone of voice. "And my parents -"

"Ed! I will ask your grandfather for help, if you won't listen to me!" Threatened Rosalinde threateningly from behind them, her high heels producing an echoing staccato on the polished marble floor, yet not fast enough to catch up to them, weaving around as if drunken. "Don't you dare doing this to me, darling! Think about your father..."

Ed squeezed Lilith's hand tighter, and in the next few minutes they made it to the staircase.

"What's happened to them? What did the gallery do to them? Do you know?" Lilith whispered urgently. She couldn't wait to get down, away from this floor, and look of her faithful pet, wondering what he was up to. The redness of the floor started crawling under her skin, and her eyes watered from merely looking around. The color was too loud, she needed a break.

"It makes you... forget things. Dad said. Makes you... want to... go into the rose garden. Look at the... flowers."

Lilith's mouth opened. Ed missed a step and yelped.

"Are you all right? You said it's not broken..." Lilith began tentatively, as Ed hopped on one leg from step to step, holding on to the railing for balance.

"I'm... fine." He repeated stubbornly. "We don't... have... much time... left."

Lilith bit her tongue. Logically, she needed to start freaking out, to start telling Ed how they needed to stop people from going into the garden. What she really wanted to tell him was not to worry, because nobody was going to die tonight except her. She bit on her lip, stumped.

"What's... wrong?" Said Ed worryingly.

Lilith decided to divert the conversation, before it got down this dangerous path.

"So did you know that they - those paintings in the gallery - feed on people? While they make them want to visit the garden.. Is that what you wanted to tell me?" She looked around, making sure nobody could hear them. It seemed pointless to ask it, but she couldn't come up with anything better, her mind was going blank with terror of what she was about to do, it's reality gripping her stomach tighter and tighter.

Ed nodded, studying her suspiciously. "Yes. Like I said... Dad... told me. The day he died. I didn't... believe him. Until... today."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Grandpa... the way he... got. In the dinner hall." Finished Ed with difficulty. It seemed that talking a lot for a long time wore him out.

"I hate him." Said Lilith, letting out all air from her lungs, feeling as though admitting it aloud to her true friend

made her feel better. *I will stop this, I found the way*, she wanted to add, but suppressed the words before they tumbled out. "Did you hear what Patrick said?" Lilith asked, forcing herself to sound cheerful.

"No." Said Ed grimly, wincing at every jump.

They made it to the white floor.

"He saw the paintings - the walls - suck out the blood!"

Lilith desperately groped in her mind for something else to add to this, to convince Ed of her concern. "He - if we were to tell him about Rosehead -"

"You're not asking me..." Interrupted her Ed. "About... what we're going to do next... Tonight... About... Rosehead's babies. To stop... feeding. If I have a plan... Why?"

"I - well -" Lilith mumbled, trying to buy time, thinking feverishly.

They were going down the marble staircase on inertia, enthralled in their conversation and not really paying attention to what was happening around them, and both gasped as they rounded the second flight of stairs, because distant muttering of angry people reached them. Without a second thought, they nearly toppled down the stairs and made it to the entrance into the hall opposite the dinner hall, peeking inside. A small crowd has formed by the door that led out into the rose garden. They

moved and waved and shouted and pressed on, evidently wanting to be let out.

"Look! My mom and dad!" Lilith saw her parents, the Rosenthals, the Brandt sisters, everyone who was in the gallery, was now here. Both Daphne and Gwen were brandishing their fists in the air, their mother doing the same. Alfred Bloom was addressing everyone in his clear charming voice.

"- for your own safety! We have wild animals roaming the rose garden right now! I'm afraid I can't let you out until the animal trainers have given me a green light! The animals have to get used to the new setting. It will be a performance of a decade, without cages, and it takes a good deal of preparation! Please, I ask you, let's move to the dinner hall. Dinner shall commence shortly!" He continued shouting over the murmur of the crowd, evidently repeating what he just said in German.

Lilith had a sudden suspicion. Without explaining anything to Ed, she ran off to the front door and tried opening it. It was locked. Moreover, the door handle itself wouldn't move, like it was stuck.

"Where... are you -" Began Ed quietly.

Lilith mimed that she was going to be back soon.

Her heart beating fast, Lilith ran into the dinner hall, dodging the servants who started preparing the table for dinner already, and skidded to a halt in front of the big glass doors

that led out to the other side of the house, where tall linden trees grew. Lilith tried it. It was locked, and the handle wouldn't turn. She also noticed a sharp metallic odor around it, as is something... as if someone poured blood on it.

"He locked down the house. He's holding everyone hostage!" Breathed Lilith, noticing dark shaped move behind the glass, one of them black, three grey, each silhouetted clearly against the growing dusk of the day.

"Panther!" She exclaimed.

Panther didn't see her.

She banged on the glass. She banged some more.

He either didn't hear her or pretended like he didn't hear her, opening and closing his jaws, as if relating important information to Baer, the mastiff, who in turn made a few jerky jaw movements, as if answering back, woofing at his companions. Overall, if you didn't know that those were dogs, you would think them four businessmen discussing a new important deal, one thin, lithe and black, the other three stout and portly, with several chins and quivering jowls.

Lilith slammed the glass in earnest now, and then felt cold clammy fingers grip her wrists firmly. She turned around.

"Little miss will break ze glass." Sneered Agatha, letting Lilith's arms fall. "Please, don't break the glass." She glanced

back over her shoulder. "Little miss shouldn't go into ze garden tonight." She added hastily and quietly.

But Lilith was not in the mood to converse with the stern looking servant who might have been only pretending to be nice, for all she knew, on her grandfather's orders. She burned to give this new information to Ed, and so she twisted out of Agatha's hold and sprinted down the hall, across the foyer, to the other hall's entrance, only to bump into the sunny looking crowd, filing out of it and shuffling into the dinner hall, all talking excitedly, even blind Heidemarie Haas relating something to the old lady, Lilith's neighbor, while being pushed in her wheelchair by her daughter, Hanna Haas.

Everyone chatted away merrily, happily, passing Lilith, greeting her, asking her how she was, and if anything was wrong, and if she was excited for tonight's celebration. They resembled a sea of ignorant faces, faces of people refusing to see the truth underneath all this mirth. Lilith weaved her way in and out, looking for Ed, for her parents, getting desperate, because she couldn't find either. Nor did she see Patrick or Petra.

For one fleeting second, Lilith thought that maybe her parents were right, maybe her doctors were right, maybe indeed she has lost her mind. Maybe for real she was crazy, imagining things, when this looked simply like a normal assembly of relatives who came to the Bloom family reunion for 1 week, spent

it eating and drinking and enjoying themselves, waiting for the traveling circus to start its performance, for the closing ceremony to commence, the crowning of the heir, her, Lilith Bloom, and now they were simply walking into dinner hall, in anticipation of a good meal.

But then she saw her grandfather, at the end of the stream of guests. A smug smile made him look like a withering dandelion, his white hair puffy around his shiny head, his bushy eyebrows dancing up and down in a jolly way, his shrewd little eyes drilling into Lilith without mercy.

"Why so sullen, my dear girl?" He professed, nearly bouncing on his feet from complete and utter happiness. "Care for dinner?" He offered her his hand, sticking it out in a way a gentleman would offer an arm to a lady in the old movies, to take a stroll across a park and chat about sweet nothings.

Lilith blinked. A million thoughts rushed through her mind in the matter of seconds.

Everyone has deserted her. Her mother didn't nag her about pills anymore. Her father has grown even more distant. Her pet has abandoned her in favor of new friends, dogs, no less, who of course were much more interesting to him than a 12 year old girl. Her newly found friend Ed has disappeared without a word, and she still didn't even know his phone number and didn't kiss

him. Who else could she confide in, pour out her heart to, ask for advice?

There was no typical stench wafting from the garden into the house, no wailing of Rosehead from the garden, not even a single crow cawing madly and flying around. They all either departed or hid somewhere.

Lilith suddenly felt very alone and scared and unsure of herself, and the figure of her waiting grandfather loomed at her like the onset of something terrible and inevitable. There was one thing left to do, thought Lilith. Her last resort, to when everything else failed her. Her book. Her favorite book. The Hound of the Baskervilles by Arthur Conan Doyle. She will open it, stick her finger inside, and read the sentence her finger landed on. It will tell her what to do.

Shunned and misunderstood, Lilith grew up not used to asking for help, always relying on herself only. The thought of other people worrying about her and maybe doing something this very moment for her didn't cross her mind. She zeroed in on escaping into her room to get ready for tonight, and be done with it.

Resolved, Lilith raised her eyes at her grandfather and froze on the spot. She could see the gigantic glass doors leading into the rose garden over his shoulder, and there, her gigantic grimacing face pressed into the glass, her blood-red

rose-eyes rotating wildly, stood Rosehead, vine-tongue flicking in and out of her mouth, her foul breath fogging up the glass.

Lilith swallowed. She hasn't gone crazy after all.

## Chapter 34. Ed's plan

Lilith couldn't remember how she managed to twist out of her grandfather's grip, or, rather, how she avoided it, because he never had the chance to close his hand on her arm. She whirred around and jogged up the marble staircase, taking two steps at a time, attempting to do three at the very end, wheezing from effort, running so fast she thought her knees would buckle, coming to an abrupt stop only when she reached the door to her room, yanking it open, slamming it and sliding down next to it, panting heavily. Next, she spotted her knit bag lying on her bed next to her open book, and, forcing herself to stand up, rushed to it, taking the book, still soggy from the rain it had to endure, its pages now dry, stuck together and curled, rustling weakly when touched. She noticed that somebody underlined a few sentences in pencil. She pressed her finger to the spot, took aim to read, squinted and...

"You can't do this... We... won't let you." Ed's raspy voice said from the other side of the room.

Lilith turned around, bewildered.

"I - What?" She mumbled.

In her haste she didn't notice the fact that she was not alone. Conspiratorially bent to each other, a pack of figures sat on the floor around what appeared to be some sort of a drawing, Ed's map of the rose garden, in fact. It was the most peculiar company of individuals. They were all here. Ed, a scrawny teenager, his expression somber, Patrick, a 10 year old professor-boy, his round face somehow mature looking, Petra, her nose scrunched up in a very serious way for a five year old, her demeanor very quiet, Panther, her faithful whippet, his muzzle shut tight, and... Baer.

"What are you talking about? What are you guys doing in my room? What's he doing here?" Shrieked Lilith, pointing at the mastiff, whose piggy eyes shrewdly slid along her body, perhaps trying to judge how much meat she had on her bones.

"Baer graciously agreed to help with necessary diversion tactics." Answered Panther.

"What diversion tactics? Diversion tactics for what? What are do you mean by -" Began Lilith.

"Um... Panther told us." Said Patrick grimly.

"I like you. I don't want Rosehead to eat you." Said Petra shakily, tears welling up in her eyes, her dark hair hanging loose and framing her heart-shaped face, making it look pale and determined.

"Panther, no! You didn't -" Began Lilith, feeling dread rise in her chest and consume her like an angry virus.

"I'm sorry. Turns out, I love you more than steak." Panther growled and tilted his head to the side in that adorable manner that always caused Lilith to stop scolding him, because she simply couldn't anymore.

"You told them? You - *told* them?" She gasped, momentarily speechless. "I thought we had a deal. I thought I asked you to keep it secret!"

"We had a deal about steak and my new rosy jacket, yes, but not about what you promised Rose Blome you would do. You never *explicitly* asked me to keep quiet about it, if I may remind you."

"I -" Lilith fell silent. She indeed couldn't remember asking Panther not to tell anyone.

"Besides, a secret, naturally, is something that all of your friends happen to find out about almost immediately, it's what secrets are for. How is it a secret, if only one person knows? That's no fun. You told *me*, didn't you? I had to share it with your friends, Lilith." Added Panther.

"It's not... his fault." Added Ed hastily. "I... asked him."

"Wait! How did you two get into the house?" Lilith, the book still in her hands, made her way to join them, addressing both Panther and Baer, who woofed once. "I saw you lot outside,

talking to - to him and those other two mastiffs - in the linden alley, I thought -"

"Agatha let us in -" Grouched Panther.

"Agatha? The servant? Why on earth would she -"

"- and Gustav... he wants... to help." Ed cut in.

"Really? How do you know? *Why?*" Asked Lilith in bewilderment.

"Because they like you." Panther answered confidently. "I overheard them talking in the kitchen in German multiple times. Of course none of them would ever think to censor their conversation around a whippet, would they? They often complained of being tired of the killings, tired of covering up the Bloom garden secret, tired of this burden to carry around. They just want to retire peacefully and forget everything they saw."

"How long have you known this?" Lilith seethed, pressing her hands into her hips much like her mother.

"For a while..." Started Panther, suddenly very interested in the white ceiling above him.

"And you *never* told me?"

"I was going to, I swear! Just needed to make absolutely sure they weren't pretending on -"

"- grandfather's orders." Finished Ed for him.

"Please! We want to come with you! I'll fight Rosehead!" Exclaimed Petra, folding her hands in front of her in that

irresistible childish gesture of pleading for sweets or a new doll.

"Yes, um... we want to. To fight too. Together." Added Patrick.

"We might... not need to fight... after all." Said Ed quietly, but it got drowned in the pounding of Lilith's heart. She didn't quite hear him, fury rising in her and blinding her.

"WHAT? NO!" Lilith rounded up on all of them, fuming. "You can't do that! Why sacrifice 4 people when it can be only 1? Are you guys out of your minds?"

They collectively shook heads, all of them, except Baer, who kept staring at Lilith menacingly, making her skin crawl.

"Lilith..." Began Ed.

But Lilith was on a roll to confirm that she was perfectly sane, she had to make sure, to hear it, as an actual fact. "So - so you guys believe me - you don't think I'm crazy? You see and hear and smell it too? Her? All of this Rosehead stuff?" Lilith momentarily deflated, her finger still stuck to the page in her book. She slid down on the floor between Ed and Panther, facing Rosenthal brother and sister and Baer to their left.

"Of course... not." Said Ed. "Of course... we do. We're in the same... club." He grinned reassuringly, making the rest of them pick up his smile. "And... I have -"

"Well, it's too late now, anyway. There is nothing we can do - nothing *you* can do - I gave my word, so -" Lilith said with a dreadful finality in her voice.

And, as if to confirm Lilith's correct assumption, there was a dull thump on the window, properly closed and locked like perhaps every window in the house at this very moment. As the kids and the dogs whirred around to look what the disturbance was about, they saw an enormous leafy hand grope on the glass, attempting to break it, but the glass held. Low hungry grumbling issued from the garden, and then a titanic head emerged, pressing itself into the window, momentarily blocking the afternoon sky and making the room grow dark.

They all started.

"Rosehead!" Cried Lilith involuntarily, jumping up at once and backing away forwards the door.

Upon hearing her name, Rosehead revolved her ruby rose-eyes and pinned Lilith under her stare, vine-tongue flicking out and licking the window, attempting to wiggle itself into the crack between the panes, her foul breath producing an unpleasant fug on the glass and oozing stink into the room. Her height of 20 feet was perfectly lined up level with the second floor, making Lilith feel like she was an animal on display in a cage, in a zoo, and any moment the feeble glass barrier will collapse and Rosehead will stretch out her thorny hands and seize her. But it

held tight, probably because it was not time yet. Rosehead must have been simply impatient, having waiting for her exclusive meal for the last 35 years.

Panther bared his teeth, his fur standing up on his back, as did Baer's.

Children retreated to the door slowly, backing away. Ed took Lilith's free hand, and Patrick guided whimpering Petra by the shoulders, muttering his horror under his breath in German. It was his first encounter with Rosehead.

Somehow, instead of running flat out, they all moved slowly, terrified and mesmerized at the same time, Lilith wishing with her whole heart that at this precise moment her parents or some other adult would care to look out the window in the dinner hall and see what kind of a monster the Bloom rose garden had in store for them. To see that what she was telling them was the truth, to see that...

Their backs hit the door. There was nowhere else to retreat except to get out of the room, but none of them had enough control of their muscles to simply reach out for the door handle.

"How do you propose - we fight - *that*?" Whispered Lilith to Ed. Both Patrick and Petra looked up at this, inquisitively.

"I have... a plan." Said Ed quietly yet triumphantly. Something in the tone of his voice made Lilith feel instantly better.

"And... your plan is?" Prompted him Lilith, barely moving her tongue, her lips dry, her throat parched.

Ed looked at her importantly. There was a trace of mischief in his eyes, as he said one single word.

"Fire."

For a second none of them spoke, dumbstruck. The idea was so simple and ingenious for this very reason at first Lilith didn't know what to say, neither did Patrick or Petra, both gaping from Rosehead back to Lilith and Ed, back to the dogs, back to Rosehead, attempting to digest the information. Lilith groped for something to say, astounded at how she didn't think about this before.

According to the Bloom family history, multiple fires have wiped out multiple houses, only to be rebuilt afterward. Yet there was no mention of the rose garden ever being on fire, at least Gabi Bloom never mentioned it to Lilith, and Lilith was sure her mother studied the facts inside and out. That meant that the rose garden survived all these 700 years without ever being touched by flames. From reading books, Lilith knew that, depending on the severity of the fire, forests that burned down took well over a century to replace, resembling throughout this

period of time a charred piece of land with no vegetation and no living trees. She was sure this could easily be applied to gardens. She also knew that if the fire occurred during the growth season, some plants, particularly bushes and grasses, could reemerge back within days. Did this apply to rose bushes, to flowers? It was almost July, and the roses were blooming in grandpa's garden like mad, being harvested in humongous quantities judging by the number of trucks Lilith saw the other day out of this same window.

All of this flashed in her mind in a matter of seconds.

"That's... *bedazzlingly - fulgently - brilliant!*" Lilith wanted to add more sophisticated words, to beat her 5 sophisticated words in a sentence record and to express her delight, but curiosity burned her. "How did you come up with it?"

"I thought... I'd use... your method." Ed pointed to the spot where Lilith pinched her finger between two halves of the book. "I'm sorry... I didn't ask... permission. I hope... you don't mind." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't - I don't mind at all!" Beamed Lilith, cracked the book open and read the underlined passage aloud.

*Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a*

*disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog.*

Lilith's stomach shriveled into a tiny icicle. She slammed the book shut and looked up, directly into Rosehead's staring scarlet eyes.

"This is genius. Will it work?" She squeaked, but before Ed could answer, there was a click and the door flew open, throwing them all on the floor in a large pile, sending them asprawl on the polished parquet.

"Ah!" Jiggled Alfred Bloom's charming voice above them. "I thought I would find you here."

He stepped in, surveyed the room and noticed Rosehead glaring at him from behind the window, but hastily rearranged the features on his face as if she was noting more than a stray shrub poking its overgrown branches in the most innocent way, on other words, no big deal and nothing to worry about.

"Up you go, my dears. Incidentally... your parents are asking about you. We can't start the festivities without you, now, can we?"

Lilith was planning on retorting, but she didn't get a chance. Alfred Bloom's eyes fell upon Baer, who trembled, his jowls quivering, his small piggy eyes suddenly sad and frightened.

"I see you want more belt, don't you?" Grandfather swiftly unsheathed a belt from his pants, and smacking it on his palm, made a step. It was all it took.

Panther, yapping wildly, launched at him and hung on his arm, his jaws locked together. As if in the spirit of comradery, Petra jumped up and with loud wailing - "Don't touch him! Don't touch him!" - proceeded pummeling her grandfather's legs with two tiny fists. Patrick grabbed his other arm - "You are a - a murderer!" - and hung on it, and, encouraged by this sight, Baer woofed warningly and launched for Alfred's ankles. Lilith and Ed, both in shock, took another second to process what's going on, before joining the pile, eventually felling Alfred on the floor, muffling his stifled cries with their sheer mass.

"Gustav! GUSTAV!" Bellowed Alfred.

"Herr?" Came from the door.

Gustav appeared out of nowhere, as always, perched on top of his shaky bent legs, his egg of a head sparkling with the absence of a single hair, his watery lips pressed into a smile of servitude. Both his arms were stuck behind his back, and he leaned over slightly, awaiting instructions. However, he made no movement at all to free Alfred.

Baer reached Alfred's neck now, and Alfred could barely talk, mumbling something.

"Herr?" Gustav squeezed again between his lips. "Ich kann Sie nicht hoeren..." And he pressed a hand around his ear to emphasize the point. Lilith promptly understood what he meant, loosening herself from the pile and grinning despite herself.

There were sudden loud shouts from outside of the house, and Lilith distinctly heard the trumpeting of an elephant, and the growl of a panther or some other large cat, the calls of animal trainers and the jeering and the commotion that sounded so unmistakably like the circus. She looked at the window.

Rosehead was gone. Lavender dusk settled itself over the garden. A warm summer evening was approaching. The sun was setting, giving the sky a certain blushing glow.

Everybody must have heard what Lilith heard, and they disentangled themselves from their grandfather, who lay on the floor, wheezing and panting, his shrewd eyes rotating dangerously in their sockets, his fine black suit ruined. Baer promptly waddled up to Gustav's leg, Panther ran up to Lilith, Petra escaped under her brother's wing, and Ed and Lilith held hands. They stared down at Alfred Bloom, who was groping for words, it seemed, left alone, grunting with effort to pull himself up into a seating position and eventually standing up.

"YOU!" He brandished his finger at Gustav, his other hand on his knee, a layer of sweat glistening on his forehead.

"Herr?" Inquired Gustav politely.

"Stay." Grandfather wheezed. "You." He pointed at the kids. "Get - out - of - my sight."

They didn't need to be asked twice. In a rush of hope and the promise of a dangerous adventure stretching out before them, they ran along the corridor, Panther ahead of the pack, then Petra and Patrick, and last Ed, hopping on his healthy leg and leaning his weight on Lilith's shoulder, who felt strangely flustered at being so close to him, that she could feel his ragged breath on her cheek and smell that distinct cookie aroma coming from his hair.

"Fire! Where will we get fire?" Panted Lilith.

"Kitchen." Threw Ed back at her in between inhales and exhales of his laborious breathing. "But first... we have to tell... everyone."

"You will? You will say it together with me?" Gushed Lilith, unable to believe what she heard.

"Yes... I will... we agreed. All of... us."

In the next few minutes, they made it down to the first floor and burst into the dining room, to the noises of clinking dishes, clanking glasses, scraping forks and knives and creaking chairs, the entire hall illuminated with gigantic crystal chandelier and adorned by the usual multitude of brightly crimson roses in vases strewn along the table. Dinner was almost over and it was time for the carnival to begin.

## Chapter 35. Last dinner

They were greeted with a stunned silence at first. It appeared as though all adults were still under the spell of the red gallery, their eyes vacant, their faces relaxed and expressionless, their mouths chewing mechanically, their bodies slumbered in the chairs. That is to say, everyone was lethargic except Heidemarie Haas, the energetic blind elderly woman in the wheelchair who didn't witness the wrath of the portraits, but precisely because she was blind, she also couldn't tell why all of a sudden everyone was quiet and voiced her displeasure loudly in the stillness of the room, calling out to her daughter, Hanna Haas, who sat with her fork frozen and her mouth open, taking in what stood in the middle of the dining hall, which was an odd assembly of children, disheveled, flustered and on the verge of professing the terrible truth about the Bloom property and what's lay hidden in its garden.

"What exactly are we going to say?" Lilith found herself whispering to Ed, which was very much unlike her. Her typical manner was to charge forward without consulting anyone, since she never had anyone to consult before, until she received Panther last year as her birthday present gift. But this was

different. It was new, it felt good, and she fleetingly thought she understood how wonderful it was to have friends, even if for simple moments like these.

"I haven't... thought about it." Confessed Ed in an equally quiet whisper.

"Rosehead wants to eat Lilith!" It was Petra, after all, who woke up the assembly with her bright childish voice and truthful statement. Immediately after she delivered her line, she took off in the direction of her parents.

"Yes, I saw it - um... her, Rosehead. She's a monster, a rose bush monster. She lives in the garden, and she wants to eat all of you. Tonight!" Patrick chimed in in a high-pitched tone, nervously fiddling with a button on his jacket all the while. "I'll go, um... tell them." He said in a way of asking permission from Lilith and followed his sister.

"We came... to warn... you. Because... you were all... supposed to be..." Said Ed forcibly.

"- her food." Finished Lilith victoriously, and she launched into her tirade, the one that's been circulating in her head for days now. She straightened her rose-shaped beret, brushed her cardigan and took a step forward.

"Dearest guests," She began, clearing her throat, and speaking firmly and loudly, "as you well know by now, my name is Lilith Bloom, and I have been named heir to Bloom property just

recently. In the light of this fact, I feel that it is my duty to inform you that Alfred Bloom, my esteemed grandfather, dare I say, has been feeding women to the rose garden ever since he inherited this property from his father, exactly 70 years ago. This terrible ordeal has been happening from the advent of Rose Blome's death, whose husband, Luedke Blome, buried her in the garden under a rose bush and inadvertently has woken up a deity that has devoured the remains of my 20 times grandmother and has been demanding women to feed on ever since. We, that is to say, me, Ed here," she gestured, and Ed nodded, "Panther," - (Panther scowled at being named after Ed and not before) - "Patrick and Petra," Lilith motioned to the end of the hall where they stood, "want to put an end to it, once and for all, and we need your help."

There was a swelling ominous silence that stretched for several seconds, and Lilith's heart fell. She waited with abated breath, not daring to move or say another word. It was her only chance left to address everyone in one place, and she thought she just failed spectacularly.

But the hall started waking up, albeit slowly. It was nowhere close to the rush that Lilith experienced when she appeared here after being lost in the garden, dirty and shaken. Back then her mother ran up to her swiftly, then her father, then the rest of the guests. This time, however, they moved like

sleepy flies, lowering their food on the plates, shaking their heads, glancing about incomprehensively.

Heidemarie Haas began questioning her daughter, demanding she translate what the children have just said. Petra disentangled herself from her mother's embrace and ran over to Heidemarie, whispering vigorously into her ear.

Panther suddenly produced an angry rumbling noise, and Ed gripped Lilith's arm, turning her around. Lilith smelled his sickly sweet fragrance before she saw him.

Alfred Bloom stood erect in the middle of the doorway, his arms spread apart in a welcoming gesture, a fake smile plastered on his beaming face. Yet for all the clamor and pretense, she could tell that he was shaken. There was certain greyness to his face, and the skin under his eyes seemed to sag. His posture was somewhat beaten, and his beady eyes shifted restlessly from windows, to Lilith, to guests, to windows again. He took time to change into a clean suit, the same burgundy suit Lilith remembered him pruning Rosehead's likeness out of the bush when he took her on a rose garden tour for the first time.

"Commendable, commendable." Alfred Bloom broke the silence with a few feeble slaps of applause. "What an extraordinary story, children, wouldn't you agree? I was hoping, however, that you wouldn't spoil the plot of tonight's circus performance. So many years of careful preparation, gone into the ground." Boomed

Alfred Bloom's voice from behind them. "Naughty, naughty! *They won't remember a word you have said anyway. I'm duly impressed, however, I have to thank you again. It never occurred to me do it in such an uncivilized manner.*" This he whispered directly to Lilith.

Lilith stared, unable to believe her ears and his boldness. "What do you mean, uncivilized?"

"Why... it was supposed to be a celebration attendance out of curiosity, out of free will. You only made it easier."

Lilith didn't know what to say, self-blame and remorse surging through her veins like hot melting lava.

"Don't you... lay a... guilt trip... on my friend." Ed squeezed out between heavy breaths. Grandfather ignored him, like he wasn't there, looking over his head.

A murmur broke out in the hall.

"I must say," her grandfather addressed the dinner guests again, raising his charming voice, "I deeply regret that -"

"Don't listen to him!" Screamed Lilith on top of her lungs, wheeling around, losing her control and quivering from head to toe. "He's lying!" But her protest had little to no effect. She made to lunge at her grandfather, attempting to twist out of Ed's hold to no success.

"Don't... waste... your time. Scum. Not... worth it." He said in an undertone, his quiet voice trembling with rage.

"But I hate him!" Retorted Lilith hysterically. "I hate you!" This she threw into her grandfather's face, who merely sneered.

Behind them, people stood up in a trance-like manner, none of them making a concentrated effort to say anything in return or acknowledge what they heard, watching the unfolding struggle with an indifference of a zoo animal.

"What did you *do* to them?" Rounded Lilith up on her grandfather, her hands balled into fists.

"I did, my dear? Why... nothing. As I recall, it was you who decided that a tour of the gallery was a good idea, did you not?" The exultant smile was playing again on her grandfather's lips.

But something happened. Either dazed Hanna Haas managed to translate what she heard, or Petra managed to retell the whole story to Heidemarie, because she suddenly shrieked, and screaming Lilith's late paternal grandmother's name, "Eugenia! Meine arme Eugenia!" on repeat, began rotating the wheels of her chair with such asperity that Lilith didn't think a fragile old woman like her could possess, advancing on her grandfather speedily, the resin of the tires squeaking on the marble floor mercilessly.

A paroxysm of fear contorted his features. He thrust his right arm forward, in an attempt to snatch Lilith. Ed wrapped

his arms around her waist and yanked her out of reach just in time, so that her grandfather's hand closed on empty air. Ed's bad leg gave out and they toppled on the marble floor, on top of each other. Simultaneously, Panther crouched and jumped at Alfred's feet, biting into his right ankle. Alfred leaned to hit him, caught himself mid-strike, and straightened, grimacing and talking through pain.

"Well... without further ado, may I present to you - the carnival!" He proclaimed like a seasoned compere, his voice shrill with anguish over Panther's growling and biting. He jumped out of Heidemarie's trajectory, and, dragging the whippet on his leg, ran out into the foyer, jogged across the other hall and banged the tall glass doors leading into the garden open, beyond which the cacophony of fanfares, drums and poorly tuned violins erupted in one festive march.

Lilith lost sight of him but heard an injured yelp.

"Panther!" She cried. "Panther! Hang on, we're coming!" She scrambled to find her footing and help Ed to get up, but then bent down in a rush of nausea.

"Get off him... Panther! Don't! He is... poison!" Yelled Ed, and then his face turned green, and he let out a few choking noises.

Lilith coughed violently several times into her sleeve.

The air issuing from the garden resembled a wave of intoxicating odor of sweetness, multiplied tenfold from what Lilith remembered when she first rolled down the window of the rental car upon their arrival. It slithered into the dining hall on a long tongue of evening breeze, and at once every single person hurried away from the table, dropping whatever cutlery or drinks or food they were holding, knocking down chairs and overall behaving as if they were only waiting this whole time to get out of the mansion and smell the roses.

It's like a switch has been turned on.

Lethargy has gone out of the air, to be replaced with urgency and feverish eagerness.

Daphne and Gwen ran ahead of the crowd, their round faces pink with effort, Irma Schlitburger on their heels, her heavy makeup smudged, her pavonine shape bubbling. They were followed by the Brandt sisters holding hands like little girls, the elderly woman whose name Lilith never learned, the group of ladies clad from head to toe in her mother's knitting, the Rosenthals, and Hanna Haas. From the top of the stairs they heard Rosalinde, Ed's step-mom, clack her high heels on the floor, joining the commotion in the direction of the rose garden. The last to leave were Lilith's parents, passing her without a glance.

"Mom! Dad!" Screamed Lilith, reaching out and grabbing her father's pant leg, but it slid out of her hands.

"No use." Said Ed grimly.

Panther emerged from the doorway, making his way against the tide of moving people, barking in his loudest most annoying yelps and attempting to jump at Al and Gabi. They dismissed him, stomping out, their eyes wild, their legs moving fast. Within a minute, they were gone, leaving stunned Lilith, Ed, and Panther behind. Patrick and Petra ran up to them. Patrick helped Lilith get Ed up from the floor and lean him on the wall.

"I told her! I told her!" Cried Petra excitedly.

"Shhhh!" Patrick shushed her standing up and waiting patiently for instruction on what to do next.

"Panther, are you all right? Did he hit you?" Asked Lilith with concern, inspecting her faithful pet like her father always did, turning his head this way and that, feeling his haunches, running her hand over his ribs.

"I'm certainly feeling better after such a thorough examination. Can you also - yes - right there - by the tail?" He rolled up his eyes in doggy ecstasy as Lilith felt the spot on his back, before she realized what he was doing.

"How can you do this, right now, when we -"

"I'm a dog, remember?" He grinned, revealing rows of sharp teeth.

"Did you see that? They were like in a trance!" Exclaimed Lilith to everyone, shivering, although it was perfectly warm in the house.

"Yes... I did." Said Ed sadly.

"But did you see grandpa? He is scared! Did you see his face? He is *scared!*" Lilith said with agitation.

Distant sounds of a clown attempting to cheer up the spectators reached them from the other hall.

"He's coming... back." Motioned Ed, and sure enough, an unmistakable silhouette of her grandfather was advancing on them from the hall.

Children, seized by momentary paralysis of not knowing where to escape, as their way into the garden was blocked, and they didn't immediately think of the dinner hall doors as a way out because they blended perfectly into windows, stood transfixed, when Gustav and Baer suddenly appeared out of nowhere and intercepted Alfred, Gustav bending in servitude, firing off something in German, and Baer positioning his body so that his master would have to step over him, in order to go forward.

"Now what?" Breathed Lilith, gripping Ed's hand, quickly getting used to the pleasure of finally being able to voice her uncertainties and run them by a real friend, instead of letting

them cook in her head in silence, showing off a polite unruffled façade to anyone who happened to glance at her in that moment.

Ed looked at Patrick, Patrick looked at Petra, Petra looked at both of them, and all three of them looked at Lilith.

"Kitchen!" They said together as one.

"This way!" Barked Panther, his tail high and wagging madly.

"That's not the -" began Lilith.

"We'll go around!" Woofed Panther and took off to the opposite side of the dinner hall.

"It's locked!" Screamed Lilith, remembering checking the doors not too long ago. She reached the handle and tried twisting it with no success.

"Stand... aside!" Yelled Ed, balancing precariously on his healthy leg, a chair in his hands.

Lilith ducked, pulling Petra - ("It's a race! I like races!") - and Patrick - ("Hush, Petra, it's not a race!") - aside.

Ed leaned back and smashed the chair into the glass. It didn't break, it merely wobbled back and forth, and an angry sigh went through the house.

"Stop! Don't!" Shouted Lilith, grabbing the nearest water pitcher and turned it over the handle, only to realize that it was empty. She dropped it on the floor to a resounding crash and

dashed for another one, but the only full pitched stood on the other side of the table, and there... there...

Her grandfather walked towards them briskly, Gustav and Baer on his heels. "Doesn't seem like there is enough water for you, my dear? It's pointless to run, you know. You can't leave the rose garden until it takes what it wants, I take it you learned this lesson well by now." His merry voice echoed across empty hall, his footsteps drawing closer.

"It will take what I tell it to take, and you have no say in this matter anymore!" Shouted Lilith.

"Herr! Herr!" Gustav muttered, attempting to slow his master down.

Grandfather snapped something in German that sounded angry and obscene, and then Baer let out a long horrific howl and lunged at him again.

Lilith, not wasting another second, grabbed a dinner knife from the corner of the table and rammed it into her palm to Patrick's gasp and Petra's cry of horror. Lilith smeared her blood all over the handle, and the doors split open on their own accord. Panther ran out, yapping hysterically, eager to lead the way. Patrick pulled Petra by her hand, Lilith tucked her shoulder into Ed's armpit, allowing him to lean on her, and together they hobbled into the darkening evening, through the

copse of linden trees, around the house and towards its back side that eventually ran into the rose garden.

They were greeted with an unforeseen surprise.

The back door that led into the kitchen stood open for them expectantly. Agatha's stern figure and grim face greeted them, ushered them in and shut the door swiftly.

## Chapter 36. Carnival

It took a moment for Lilith to adjust to the gloom. The light in the kitchen was turned off, and small windows let in only a trickle of gathering twilight, coloring everything in rich tones of purple bordering on black. There, amidst the rows of cutting board tables and hanging pots and pans and stoves and other kitchen equipment stood every single servant that she saw in the mansion. Agatha was in front, her eyes glittering in the dark, her hands in the pockets of her apron, behind her peeked out Katharina, to whom Panther ran up and whom she petted vigorously, flashing her white teeth in a dazzling smile. She passed him something that looked suspiciously like a piece of a very juicy steak, in which he bit noisily. Other servers, cooks, and even the gardeners, about a dozen of them total, all stood silently, waiting.

Distant jeering from a clown and collective laughter reached them from outside, but it seemed so unreal in the dimness of the kitchen, with all these people staring at Lilith expectantly, with Rosehead patiently waiting for her meal somewhere in the back of the rose garden, that there could be

celebrations of any kind, circus shows, people enjoying themselves.

"Err... hallo." Said Lilith finally in a German manner, waving her hand stupidly.

"Little miss iz trying to save our lives. Little miss iz very brave." Said Agatha almost scoldingly, yet there was warmth in her voice, hidden behind the mask of professionalism that she perhaps gotten used to wearing over decades of servitude.

"I - um..." Lilith felt a hot wave of blood rush into her face and was grateful for the darkness. "Wait, what? How -"

"I told... them." Whispered Ed into her ear, but before Lilith could react, Agatha cut in.

"We know little miss needz fire. It is our duty to fulfill little miss wishes. We have it. We want to help. Katharina?" Agatha called, and Katharina scooted away, carrying her voluptuous body with such grace that she didn't make a single noise.

"Wait, how did you -" Began Lilith again, bewildered.

"My husband Gustav gave me zis, he found it in your room." Agatha took out Lilith's book, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, from her big apron pocket and thrust it into Lilith's hands.

"Oh! My book - that's right - " A dried rose was sticking out of the book, marking the spot where Ed has underlined several sentences, a passage about the monster and the fire.

"It's brilliant, isn't it? It was Ed's idea!" Exclaimed Lilith, looking around, but Ed hung his head, and his face was barely visible in the shadow. He was not used to being the center of attention.

Petra started chatting happily something to another servant, who gave her a jar of cookies, and that made her fall silent, only emitting an occasional crunching noise, which Patrick started to produce shortly after, helping himself to his sister's cookies.

Lilith's stomach rumbled, she remembered she hasn't had dinner, and her breakfast has burned off a long time ago.

Katharine came back with what appeared like a multitude of iron sticks in her hands, with white spongy stuff on one end, looking like gigantic one-sided Q-tips.

"What are *those*?" Whispered Lilith.

"Cast iron... torches. From... the circus?" Offered Ed, his voice full of awe. "This is... perfect. Danke shoen!"

"Are you sure it will work though?" Asked Lilith apprehensively. "There have been multiple fires on the property, my mom told me, but none of them damaged the garden, right?"

A loud thud on the outside kitchen door made them jump. Alfred Bloom has finally made it, apparently held back by Gustav, Baer, and the other two mastiffs, and was now shouting commands in German and banging on the door like mad, making it

shake and groan. The door, extraordinarily, bulged outward and threw Alfred Bloom off itself, getting back to normal within seconds.

Lilith blinked. "Did you see that?" She asked Ed tentatively.

"The house... I think -" Started Ed quietly.

"- it likes you." Finished Petra, biting into another cookie.

"Mad Marta said." Added Patrick, and Lilith was painfully reminded of how her distant aunt has been flinched by Rosehead into the air and devoured on the spot, leaving only skin and bones behind.

Meanwhile, Agatha, without flinching and so much as a glance at the door, gave everyone in the room a torch and a lighter, reaching for each deep into her apron pocket, shaking her head at Petra who also wanted one and began crying in disappointment, Patrick trying to console her, his voice trembling because he also got skipped.

"Zere will be fire eating. We do it zen." Said Agatha sternly, as the banging on the door seized and they heard Alfred's echoing footsteps making it around the house to get in on the other side.

"Zis way." Agatha rolled one of the kitchen tables away from the wall and opened a hatch door in the floor. A smell of damp earth wafted from the hole, moist and moldy.

"It's the tunnel... I told you... about." Pointed Ed, but Lilith was preoccupied with another burning question.

"Wait!" Called Lilith frantically. "How do you know if it will work or not? The fire? What if it doesn't?" Lilith was aware that in the worst case scenario she will have to go with her original plan of giving herself away to Rosehead, to save everyone else. She was not willing the hope of staying alive to take hold of her fully, so that in the end she would fail at giving herself away to Rosehead, overcome with fear which she so successfully managed to suppress in the course of the day.

Agatha took a step into the hole, the rest of the servants obediently lining up behind her into a line, ready to follow.

"Wait! You didn't answer my question!" Lilith ran up to her. "What if it won't work? And what is our plan? What are we supposed to do? What are you going to do? What -"

Agatha silenced her with a cool uncomprehending stare, even mocking somewhat. Her watery bulging eyes looked not at all trustworthy, and Lilith doubted her for a second. What if this was all simply a plan to lead her away from the rest of the guests? While they were being fed to Rosehead in secret? What if

this was all her grandfather's doing? Could she trust her servants who knew him longer than she was alive?

"There izn't time for zis. Ze garden can't burn. We tried it."

"Then why -"

"Fire iz the only thing Rozehead iz afraid of. We don't know if it will work on her, but you gave us ze courage to try." Her eyes were suddenly very sad and round, like those of a basset hound.

"Why are you doing this? You've been serving grandpa, you've been - you've seen - you *helped* him - why all of a sudden - why do you want to help *me* stop her?" Lilith nearly wailed.

"You are heir to Bloom property -" Agatha began.

"No, I'm not, not yet, anyway, it's only when grandpa -" She wanted to continue, but she didn't need to finish her sentence, as Katharina explained it, plain and simple.

"Tonight your grandfather is supposed to die, darling. It happens when the new heir is named. The old heir dies. The new one takes over. But we think your grandfather is trying to revert the rules to stay alive. There has never been a woman heir until now. And all women present on the Bloom property the night after regeneration... die."

"I was supposed to be... heir. The only Bloom boy... left. But the garden... rejected me. I'm not Bloom... by blood. Your dad

refused him too... back when he was ready... to give over the reign... he knew he would... perish. My dad said..." Chimed in Ed.

"That's right..." Echoed Lilith.

"I think... grandpa... when he lost grandma - Eugenia - something snapped," continued Ed, "he changed. He became bitter. He was desperate... maybe by accident... he got this idea... to try and buy himself -"

"- another 35 years of life az heir. Unless we burn Rozehead first." Added Agatha coldly. "We are lozing time."

"How do I know you're not lying?" Croaked Lilith desperately.

"Little miss iz hurting our pride. No Bloom servant haz ever lied to Bloom master. We pledged ourselves to you, little miss, the night you declared yourself as the heir to ze whole Bloom property. We are part of ze property. You are our mistress and it iz our duty to do your bidding."

Lilith felt dumbfounded.

There was a shuffling of arms and heads, all of the servants and the cooks and the gardeners bowed to Lilith, muttering something in German under their breath, apparently the only two servants speaking English were Agatha and Katharina. Lilith flushed, but still she couldn't fully accept this fact, it simply didn't fit in her mind.

"But grandpa made me -"

"He was thinking he would get rid of you before it was too late, darling." Supplied Katharina.

"We ask out mistress to pliz hurry." Said Agatha.

"Is this for real?" Asked Lilith Ed in a trembling voice.

"Do you want me to... pinch you?" He offered with a sly smile.

"Please. Owww!"

"Better?" Ed said, sounding more like his raspy self, and Lilith suppressed the urge to plant a big kiss on his lips in the dark of the kitchen, restraining herself at the last second.

"Yes." She said, flustered. "Okay. I - I accept it, I suppose. I am forever and *eternally* and *everlastingly* -" At this Panther nibbled at her ankle lightly, "- grateful." Lilith finished, embarrassed. "Let's do it."

"Follow me." Prompted Agatha, and one by one they descended into the pit of complete darkness, Agatha first, then Lilith, Panther, limping Ed behind them, Katharina, three other serving women and the gardeners. Two of the servants stayed behind, holding back protesting Petra and her disappointed brother Patrick.

As soon as all of them were in, the remaining servants closed the trap door above and rolled the cutting table in place.

Agatha lit the torch. It came to life, sputtering and spitting bits of fire, illuminating earthen walls with an eerie glow. The tunnel itself had no decoration of any sort, it was simply a long corridor dug out directly from the ground, about 8 feet tall and 5 feet wide, with only enough space for one person to pass at a time, and a small pack of dogs at the most. *This must have been the passage Gustav used with the mastiffs,* thought Lilith, *when he answered his master's call, only how could he hear him from such a distance...*

Lilith's thoughts were broken up by the need to move fast, until after what seemed like an eternity, they emerged on the edge of the other garden, in the middle of the rose garden, right by the overgrown archway where Lilith sat with Ed not too long after they met for the first time and through which they fell into the other side.

Cool evening air mixed with the sickly sweet stench and linden blossoms aroma hit Lilith's face, as she climbed out after Agatha, gagging, her mary-janes slipping on muddy stairs, and stood by the archway, peering into the darkness and watching Ed and Panther emerge.

"How is your leg?" She asked Ed promptly, pinching her nose and breathing through her mouth.

"It's... fine." Ed lied swiftly, not wanting to draw attention to himself.

"How about asking me how I am? I received quite a blow from your dear grandfather, if I may remind you." Came from below in a disgruntled growl.

Lilith opened her mouth to answer, when Ed pointed.

"Look!" He said breathlessly.

While the rest of the servants were emerging from the hole, a total of nine of them, including voluptuous Katharina, huffing and puffing and grunting with effort, Lilith stood enthralled, looking in the direction of Ed's hand.

What she saw filled made her momentarily forget her discomfort, her horror, in fact, it made her forget everything for a second, it simply didn't look real.

Ahead of them, where the garden came up to the mansion, a reddish glow radiated in a half-circle of light amidst inky black bushes. The circus show was unfolding in plain sight, the make-shift arena about twenty by twenty feet framed on all sides by beautiful roses. Every possible light in the mansion was turned on, as well as a multitude of lanterns standing on the ground, surrounding rows of portable seats where the Bloom family reunion guests sat motionlessly, apparently enthralled in what they were witnessing.

The velvety stillness of the evening was punctured with circus performance noises. Currently, an acrobat was riding a small elephant in circles, juggling what appeared to be scarlet

glowing orbs. A small group of musicians stood to the left of the cleared ring. They were beating into drums to accentuate the adrenaline rush in the spectators. A brightly painted clown with a white face, a red button of a nose, and yellow checkered costume cheered the elephant on, running around the pitch a safe distance away from the animal. A group of other circus performers huddled to the side, every one of them wearing a sparkling glittering costume, one of the girls dressed in a tutu that made Lilith catch her breath and miss her ballet attire. They all looked like they were awaiting their turn. In the corner to the right, in the shadows, an enormous black shape growled quietly in a portable cage on a wooden platform with wheels. An animal trainer dressed in all silver stood next to it, eating what looked like an apple.

Lilith unclamped her nose.

The terrible stench of the decaying organic matter mixed in with the animal stink coming off the elephant, that characteristic reek that was always present in the places that housed large animals, wormed itself deep into her nostrils. Coughing from disgust, she clamped her nose again, holding the iron torch firmly in her other hand.

She dimly realized that Panther was urgently tugging on her pant leg, rumbling in panic.

"Zere!" Shouted Agatha frantically, and Lilith reluctantly tore her gaze away from the circus act and wheeled around to peer into the darkness to the left, closer to the backside of the house. Ed seized her elbow, pointing.

A mere ten feet away from the spectators, hidden in the shade of tall linden trees by the mansion, silent and enormous, expanding with every breath she took and evidently present there the entire time it took Lilith, Ed, Panther and the servants to make it out of the hole, stood Rosehead in her full height, leaning on the wall and gazing intently at the show, the light reflecting in her gigantic rose-eyes, her vine-tongue flicking in and out of her mouth hungrily.

If you didn't know who it was, you could easily mistake her for just an enormous rose bush, or an almost rose tree, if there was such a thing.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. It was Rosehead all right, and she was waiting for something. Or someone.

To add to the horror of the picture, the roof of the mansion appeared to be moving and breathing. But it wasn't the roof that did it. It was a thick blanket of crows, perched there, silently waiting for the scraps from their master's table.

Lilith felts her insides turn to liquid ice and flood her with a terrible dread that made her knees weak and her breath

shallow. One clear thought pounded in her head at this moment filling her with ghastly and irreversible knowledge. Their journey was in vain, they should have stayed where they were. Who in their right mind would trust a monster, trust a promise from a head hanging off a stem on a wall? Who was to say that this rose garden's deity didn't fool Lilith the entire time just for fun? What was she thinking about, taking her word for granted?

The circus performers, the animals, the extended Bloom family, the Bloom mansion servants, were all a perfect target for her and her baby rose bushes, who, Lilith noticed, have been slowly edging along the garden rows like dark shadows, coming closer and closer to the showground, undetectable by the audience who were blinded by the dazzling light, but perfectly visible from the spot where Lilith stood.

The way Rosehead leaned, the way she stuck out her massive hands ahead of her, as if groping, it appeared that she was getting ready to strike. Any second she could lunge at the crowd, pressed from all sides by her offspring. There was no way for Lilith, Panther, Ed, or any of the servants to cross the entire garden on foot in time to distract her, not mentioning to attack her or to set her on fire.

"They are doomed." Whispered Lilith.

## Chapter 37. Feast

In an instant, Lilith felt as if an ice-cold guillotine sliced her in half, cutting her apart into a will to live and a will to love. There, illuminated by the reflection of the dancing lantern lights, their faces childish and full of indescribable joy, she saw her parents sitting next each other, their hands clutched, their mouths open in wonder, gazing at the circus performance, their worries forgotten, their troubles gone. They both looked happy, especially her mother, as happy as Lilith has never seen her before. She knew she had to make a choice, right now, pick one or the other. Live or love. And she understood that she loved them more than she loved herself, and that it will be how she will remember them for whatever remained of her life. Because it wasn't worth living without them. It made Lilith feel strangely calm and serene, and she knew what she had to do, for the first time, on her own, without consulting her book. She knew it in her heart.

Merely a few seconds have passed since she made her decision. Agatha began firing off something in German, other servants responded to her curtly and were walking towards Ed and Lilith, but to Lilith they appeared like dark moving shapes in a

fog, in a distant land that was no longer hers, that belonged somewhere else where she didn't anymore. She heard them say something to her, she recognized their voices as scared and nervous, she saw Ed look at her worryingly, saw his lips move and say something. It didn't reach her ears, it got lost in the drapes of her inner distance. She has separated herself from the living already.

There was a solid curtain between her and reality.

A fleeting memory pierced her. Her stomach felt like a heavy stone. She didn't go on a walk with her father, like she asked him to, she didn't watch her mother knit, like she wanted to, she didn't chase squirrels with Panther, like she promised him to. There was one more thing she wanted to do, and she could do it right now, before it was going to be over.

Time has turned into an elastic band, stretching into a slow running movie. Faces surrounded her, faces talked, but it seemed like opening their mouths took them forever. Lilith smiled, it gave her a peculiar feeling of eternity. She would stretch it longer than that, if she could, to feel what she wanted to feel, for the first time and the last time.

Lilith gently put her iron torch on the ground, stood up, took one step closer to Ed, looked into his brown eyes, inhaled his cookie smell, took his face into her hands and kissed him, kissed him in an awkward way a 12 year old girl would kiss a 14

year old boy, pressing her lips firmly at first and then parting them, feeling hot tears rolling down her face and tasting salt on her tongue. And tasting Ed. Something must have woken up in him because at once, in a rush, Ed was kissing her back.

*If that's what it's like kissing boys, thought Lilith, I sure am sorry I didn't do this before. Beats kissing Panther.*

Just then the elephant produced a jocular trumpeting call that ripped through the curtain Lilith draped herself in and brought her back to reality. The circus act was over, it was her signal to stop dragging her feet and act. She fiercely disentangled herself from Ed's astounded hold, bent down to Panther, who was starting to growl his usual displeasure ("I don't believe you. You *kissed* him - *on the lips!* In front of all these -"), scooped him into a bone-crunching hug, tenderly put him down, picked up the torch, and before anyone realized what she was doing or why, before anyone could stop her, she staggered back, and with words, "I love you both, forever!" took off, simultaneously pulling the lighter from her pants pocket, clicking it once, twice, then finally igniting the torch, holding it high above her head and yelling at the top of her lungs.

"I'm here! Rosehead - look - I'm here! I'm coming! Remember our deal? Don't touch them! Take me! TAKE ME!"

She sprinted along the path between rose bushes, a good hundred feet separating her from the arena, but maybe for the reason that there was a momentary pause between the elephant's trumpeting and the beginning of applause, maybe for the reason that a light wind was blowing on her back, picking up her call and carrying it forward, Lilith's voice reverberated brightly across the whole garden, reaching the front of the mansion and making people look up to detect the source of the noise.

For a fraction of a second, everything stood still, even the night's velvety darkness held its breath, dim and solid, and then chaos erupted. Several things happened in a rapid succession.

Rosehead wailed loudly, leaning forward, causing the flock of crows take off from the roof, cawing madly. Momentarily, Rosehead took a giant step back, making the ground shake. At the same time a dozen jugglers, all of them with at least three lit fire torches, stepped into the ring, getting ready to perform the next act. Rosehead's cry seemed to have woken up the spectators, who stood up in a messy upheaval, shouting, waving their arms, some of them craning their necks upward to see what was the source of the cry, others dropping on the ground and covering their heads, thinking it was an earthquake. To add to this, a few of the jugglers promptly dropped their torches on the ground and made for the front gate, out of the garden, some

of them swearing loudly. A few of them stood transfixed, apparently having detected the gigantic moving shape above them and standing stock still.

Either due to the fact that Panther was chasing Lilith, barking madly, shaking the air with shrill high-pitched yaps, or because both the real panther in the cage answered with a series of blood-curdling snarls, or because all three mastiffs, together with Baer, broke into their throaty wolf-like howls, it was hard to tell, but the elephant, being currently led away by the animal trainer, suddenly reared on its hind legs, yanked the rope out of the trainer's hand and charged, running head first into the shadow where Rosehead stood.

There were shouts in German behind Lilith, and a stampede of feet indicating the servants running after her, perhaps helping Ed as well, since he couldn't run properly with his broken foot, but Lilith didn't have time to turn and investigate. Her focus was on Rosehead, she held her blazing torch high, the heat coming off it threatening to melt the right side of her face, the crackling bursting into her ears in a savage rhythm. She brandished it left and right, running forward and screaming.

"Rosehead! Here! HERE, YOU STUPID COW!"

Panther was now running along side Lilith, barking at her to stop this madness, to listen to him, to... But Lilith ignored

him. There was a certain exhilaration that gave her energy, making her weightless, propelling her forward with uncanny speed, her legs carrying her forward and jumping over the low growing rose bushes as if on their own accord. This was the biggest mischief she has ever attempted to do, this was daring death, and it lifted her spirits, making her bubble with ultimate terror and a mad indescribable glee, the feeling that she was going to put an end to the terrible Bloom family history, and that although she would die in the process, she'd die spectacularly, going out in a fountain of flames and roses.

Panther, evidently deciding that it was time for drastic measures, launched at Lilith's leg, but by some unlucky streak, only managed to rip off a part of her pant, not slowing down her pace in the slightest.

Lilith's attention was elsewhere. She saw the enormous bushy figure take another step back, heard a terrible scream of pain coming from a large animal, felt the rush of a foul stink wash over her face, and witnessed the elephant colliding with Rosehead, Rosehead hollering her surprise and what sounded like disgust, then lifting the poor thrashing and screaming thing high in the air in her colossal thorny hands and lowering it over her vast open mouth, her vine-tongue sliding out once, circling around his head, and sticking it inside.

A woosh, a crunch, a slurp and a thunderous burp later, Rosehead threw what remained of the elephant triumphantly into the ring where it trotted merrily only minutes ago, now resembling an empty skin sack full of bones, grey and mangy one second, black another, instantly covered by a cloud of hungry crows, immediately beginning to peck and tear and rip into the elephant's remains.

Whatever was looking like chaos before, now positively turned into a catastrophe of gigantic proportions. People were running around without any direction, bumping into each other and screaming, sending portable chairs flying everywhere. The circus performers attempted to gather their equipment, several of them trying to push the wooden cart with a distressed panther in a cage on top of it, only to abandon the effort because they couldn't breach the crowd. Birds flew up and cawed loudly, and a mass of servants, their torches now lit, ran behind Lilith, shouting and whistling and otherwise trying to get Lilith's attention unsuccessfully.

Lilith made it within 10 feet of the arena, weaving around to avoid Panther's pursuit, searching the crowd and locating her mother and father standing in the midst of the turmoil, their faces turned upward, gazing at Rosehead, their jaws slack and hanging open, their eyes horrified and bulging out a little. All looked well so far, except one thing. There was no sign of

Alfred Bloom anywhere, it's like he disappeared into thin air or was simply hiding out in his black room in the mansion.

Lilith, continuing screaming Rosehead's name, hopped across still lit torches that littered the ground of the pitch, her right arm high and numb, fire still blazing fiercely and lighting the path to her death.

Rosehead stopped wailing and was ogling straight at Lilith with her huge disquieting rose-eyes, her sides heaving from heavy breathing, her army of baby rose bushes crouching behind their mother like a flock of infant predators that don't quite know their strength yet.

"Lilith! What are you - wait!" Came from the chaos. Al Bloom has spotted his daughter.

"Lilith! Where are you doing? Are you out of your mind? *Turn around this instant!*" Gabi Bloom joined in.

"Lilith, don't!" Ed yelled in his raspy voice from behind. "Don't... do it!"

But it was too late. Lilith made it right to Rosehead's feet, and seeing how the giant rose bush woman flinched at the sight of the fire, threw it away as far as she could into the rose garden, stepping up to her unarmed.

"TAKE ME! I COMMAND YOU! NOW!" She screamed, and Rosehead happily obliged, opening up her one thorny hand and snatching Lilith right from under the nose of her parents, her faithful

whippet, Ed and the servants, who have made it across the garden just now and were poking at the giantess with torches, attempting to light her on fire.

Lilith felt the rush of cold air cooling her face pleasantly, yet at the same time sharp rose prickles cut through her clothes and dug painfully into her skin. A flood of relief surged through Lilith. She made it. She saved the Bloom family, the monster deity held to its word after all. She won't die in vain. And, ready for the worst, hoping that it won't be painful and will be quick, like the death of the elephant she saw, Lilith squinted her eyes shut, pressed her head into her shoulders, tensed all over and waited for death.

But it didn't come. Instead, she felt being carried away, deeper into the other side of the garden, heavy footsteps echoing in her ears, the air turning moist and cold, making her cardigan and her pants feel clammy and stick to her skin. And, as absurd as it was to think about it in the vicinity of being devoured by a massive rose bush beast, Lilith felt with dismay that in all this commotion, she has lost her rose beret, the one her mother has knit for her several days ago, and somehow this loss made her heart ache, made her wish for one more hug, one more kiss, one more gentle word from her mother.

And Lilith, unable to hold her brave façade anymore, horrified beyond any fear she ever felt, fell apart and began to

cry in earnest, quivering, trembling all over, and sobbing loudly like an upset toddler, fully letting go, because it didn't matter if she was polite anymore, she was about to die and she didn't care what Rosehead or anyone thought about her anymore.

Lilith lost her sense of time and eventually felt herself being lowered to the ground. She promptly sat up and opened her eyes.

She sat in a clearing, surrounded by wild tangled shrubbery covered with red roses, looking nearly black in the silvery light of the moon. It was the same clearing where Lilith saw Rosehead up close for the first time, peering out of Ed's tree house. It was littered with torn leaves, petals and twigs like the last time, the only difference being a mass of moving rose bushes, the babies, that hovered about 10 feet away, close to their crouching mother, and something... someone, emitted muffled moans from their midst. Producing excited yelps, they parted, their bright red eyes casting an eerie glow on the sorry crumpled shape in the middle, when Lilith recognized who it was.

Alfred Bloom, disheveled, his face swollen and scratched, his fine burgundy suit torn to shreds and hanging in ropes off him, sat up dizzily, blinking and eyeing his surroundings, taking them in slowly, then suddenly realizing where he was and letting go of one anguished scream high into the night, at the

same time looking up. Lilith felt a shadow cover the clearing, instinctively raising her head upwards.

Above them, about 25 feet away from the ground and almost level with standing Rosehead, hung the house, the Bloom mansion, stretched like a huge shank of a rose bush. Shaking slightly in the wind, it hovered above, or, rather, the very tip of it did, the roof on which Lilith slept once before, the top of the black room, only it was gone, revealing the dark walls inside. A multitude of heads sprouted out of it, like a bouquet of stems that were crowned with heads instead of flowers, as many as a couple hundred of them, if not more. This was bound to give fright to anyone but Lilith, who rather felt elated having company with her last minute, company of those who, as horrible as they were, became her friends of sorts over the course of the week she was here, and Lilith smiled at them and waved despite herself. She thought that she saw her own head wink back at her, or maybe she imagined it. It didn't matter. What mattered was the fact that she was still alive and that for some reason the house decided to interject in the process of her death, or maybe it had an important message to deliver.

But Lilith's thinking process was rudely interrupted by her grandfather coming to his full senses at once.

"There! There she is! Seize her! Get her! Get her, I tell you! She's the culprit!" His face was livid, his puffy hair

stuck out this way and that, crowning his balding head like a mad dandelion, his bushy eyebrows flew up so high, they threatened to climb on his scalp, and his shrew beady eyes scorched a hole in Lilith's forehead, and yet Lilith saw the little boy in her grandfather once more, scared and willing to do anything it took to blame someone else for his faults, to hopefully escape punishment, which in this case, if Agatha was right, constituted death.

Rosehead inclined her massive head slightly, leering at him, as if she was listening intently. Encouraged by this and by the fact that nobody was attacking him, grandfather stood up and took a shaky step to Lilith.

"You!" He breathed with difficulty through his rage. "You - have - nearly - ruined - everything. You rude - ignorant - stupid - child." He took a few deep calming breaths and suddenly burst into cackling laughter. It was so out of place, that it startled Lilith. He laughed so hard that he bent and as holding his stomach. Rosehead, her baby bushes and the heads from house remained silent, watching him with eerie intensity.

"Well... my dear granddaughter, guess what?" Alfred came up for air, sounding like a child more than adult. He suddenly beamed in a mad way of a lunatic, wiping tears of laughter off his face and stepping closer. "You didn't! You didn't ruin a *thing*! In fact, you made it easier for me! Oh yes, yes, you did.

In a moment, you will perish, my dear girl, and I will live! I will live on, continuing the legacy of the Bloom family. How unfortunate is that?" And he doubled over again, sputtering saliva everywhere, and then slowly straightening, gasping, and turning his head around, evidently unnerved by the silence.

Lilith said nothing, disgusted, watching him in a detached way, numb to his insults and only wanting for it all to end.

"Well... what are you waiting for?" He shouted at Rosehead, walking closer to her and stabbing his finger in the vicinity of her stomach, as much as you can imagine a 5 foot 6 inches man do that to a 20 feet tall rose bush woman. "Eat her!"

Rosehead didn't move, and then something miraculous happened. One of the heads detached from the mass of the others, lowering itself on the stem and turning around in such a way that it positioned itself in front of Rosehead's enormous face, and then growing through it, merging with it, expanding to its size and obscuring it completely, turning Rosehead's face into a normal looking one, that of Rose Blome, albeit a bit grey in color, her eyes pupils still looking like roses.

"You broke the rules, Alfred. You picked a girl as heir." Rose's voice rolled over the clearing in a silky drawl, hushing the rest of the night noises. Even the birds fell silent, the wind died, everything seemed to be listening.

"What does it matter?" He screamed at the top of his lungs. "A heir is who I name the heir! She's a girl! She's what you want!"

"I cannot kill the heir, not until her time comes. And it hasn't come yet. It's your time, Alfred, your time to go. You knew it from the start." It was weird watching those phantom lips move in the air. Lilith found herself observing the whole scene as if she was not a participant in it, but a guest in a theater play, detached and maybe a little bored.

"But I don't want to die! I nurtured you! I fed you! I brought you fresh meat whenever you desired! I - I - I sacrificed my wife to you. My Eugenia - my -" He suddenly fell to his knees, sobbing. And Lilith felt a stab of pain, a stab of pity that woke her up from this self-induced apathy. She sprang to her feet and marched over to Rosehead.

"Please, don't do this to him." She said in a clear voice, devoid of any fear. "Please, take me, I can't stand this anymore - I don't want to see any more pain - I just - I just want it to be over with. Please?" She folded her hands by her heart, staring up into gigantic orbs of the monster that looked so scary not too long ago and now only resembled an enormous doll that was not threatening at all.

Rosehead softly fell to her knees and lowered herself as much as she could to be level with Lilith. In the background, it

appeared as though Alfred Bloom made a run for it, only to be intercepted by baby rose bushes and brought back.

"I cannot, little girl. I must do what I must do."

And with this, without any warning whatsoever, she straightened, snatched screaming and protesting Alfred Bloom from the pack of rose bushes nearby and sucked him dry in one go, lightningly fast, dropping his remains in the middle of the clearing to a resounding smack and wiping its enormous mouth with the back of her hand.

For a split second Lilith was simply stunned, and then she lost control. She ran up to Rosehead, screaming, and kicked her, tore at her leaves, blindly, only trying to do as much damage as she could, wailing and sobbing.

"Why did you do it, you monster, why? Stop it! I want you to stop it! You can't kill people anymore, you hear me! I want you to stop! I want you to stop! I COMMAND YOU! I COMMAND YOU TO STOP!" Lilith's voice cracked in effort, yet she continued screaming this last phrase on repeat, until her strength deserted her and she disentangled herself from thorny vines, wiping her sweaty face and crying in earnest.

## Chapter 38. Rose Blome

It was a moment that ends most stories, where a terrible beast faces the hero, and one of them is bound to win, one of them is bound to lose. We know, of course, who will win, but we want to know how it will happen, because it seems an impossible victory. So it was this time with Lilith and Rosehead. A petite 12 year old girl faced a titanic 20 foot tall rose bush woman who was possessed by a mysterious rose garden deity, its being taking roots in the very bones of Rose Blome, the beautiful daughter of a traveling jester that has married Luedke Blome some 700 years ago out of pure love, her oval-shaped face and fiery hair forever trapping his heart in hers, her 5<sup>th</sup> child proving to be too much for her to bear, like that fifth petal of a rose, ending the cycle of her life.

"I was waiting for this. I was waiting for one of them to say it." Boomed Rosehead, her face still merged with the one of Rose Blome, the stem trailing up into the sky and connecting with the house. Her shifting facial features a jumble of flower stems, rose buds, and the actual features of a young woman, shining through like a misty ghost.

"Waiting for what?" Said Lilith, bewildered, her heart hammering against her chest and tears welling up in her eyes again against her will. After all, she just witnessed yet another death, that of her only grandfather.

"Waiting for a Bloom heir to command me to stop."

"What - *why?*" Lilith asked, wiping the tears, brushing the hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ears, unconsciously wanting to make sure that she heard it correctly and avoiding to look at the spot where Alfred's remains lay crumpled. The first flock of crows arrived, but instead of swooping down on him to feast, they landed quietly on surrounding shrubs and folded their wings, as if waiting for something.

"I'm tired of being trapped here." Said Rosehead dreamily. "I want to roam the fields. I want to run through the forest. One last time. And then I want to rest in peace." Rosehead sighed and her foggy face shifted in sadness. "I tried to make them request it of me. I became greedy. I demanded more and more victims, but they all simply obliged. Not one of them told me stop. Not one. And then you came." She stretched her enormous face into a semblance of smile. "You asked me to stop. I will, at last, as it is my duty to fulfill the word of the true Bloom heir. 700 hundred years is a very long time, little girl. I miss

my dear husband. I miss my children. I want to join my bones with theirs."

"I - you - will you run away?" Lilith couldn't find anything else to say, imagining Rosehead roaming the woods and shuddering at the thought.

"In a way. In a way I will." Rosehead paused, gazing into distance, into the dark forest. "It is my turn to ask something of you, to make your request final. There is only one way for your wish to be granted, and it has to be done at your hand." She motioned to multiple dots of light blinking through the shrubs like dancing fireflies.

"Wait, what? You want to - you want me to light you -"

"- on fire." A wet nose nudged Lilith's leg.

"Panther!" She exclaimed, beyond herself with glee.

"Panther!" She scooped him up, he licked her face like mad, all over, but then Rosehead spoke above their heads.

"You will need a torch. Take one from them."

Trembling, still not sure what she was being asked to do and how she will do it, Lilith nodded, watching the servants cautiously arriving together with circus acrobats still dressed in their sparkly leotards. One by one, they stepped out of the misty twisting rose bushes, each carrying a lit torch. Upon reaching the clearing, each of them stopped, some gasping, some stifling cries at the sight of what remained of Alfred Bloom,

though it was not immediately visible in the darkness. Then there was someone else. Lilith's parents ran up to her, grabbed her from both sides and nearly carried her away, to the edge of the clearing. It seemed like their gallery daze was gone. Their faces looked pale and frightened in the flickering light.

"Mom! Dad!" Lilith exclaimed. "Stop, wait! I have to do something! Don't -" Lilith thrashed.

"Careful, now." Said her father, holding her tight.

"Oh... oh..." Her mother couldn't produce anything coherent, yet her fingers dug into Lilith's arms fiercely.

"Let me go!" Lilith shouted, and when it didn't help, she pointed. "Grandpa! There! He is dead! She ate him, and I have to set her on fire to stop it!"

Her parents let her go at once. Lilith dropped on the ground like a sack of potatoes, picked herself up and edges towards Agatha who stood nearby.

Gabi Bloom whimpered, putting her hand to her mouth to stifle a shriek. Al Bloom produced a sound close to a whistle as if he was an inflated balloon that just popped.

"She - that thing - what... Dad?" He called out tentatively. "Dad!"

Rosehead stood motionlessly, behind her baby rose bushes rustled lightly. All around the perimeter of the clearing people with torches didn't dare to move. Even the crows, their numbers

having tripled in the last minute, perched motionlessly on rose bushes all around.

Al, his long legs buckling with each step, first walked, then broke into a run and nearly collapsed next to Alfred's body, taking it in in silence, then bending down and sitting still for a whole minute. Lilith by now made it to Agatha and was about to whisper to her that she needed her torch, when Al Bloom issued a cry of rage unlike Lilith ever heard from her father. It ripped through the night like an agonizing howl of an injured animal.

Without a single word, he stood up, tramped to Agatha, seized the torch from her hand, marched back and thrust the fire into one of Rosehead's legs.

"Burn!" He cried, overtaken by a tremor and shaking. "Burn! I want you - whatever you are - I want you gone! I want all of this - gone! I always wanted - I knew it - somehow I knew it - I told him - I asked him - he wouldn't admit - Dad, why, oh, why..." He convulsed in silent sobs, poking the torch in and out without a real aim. But the fire only smoldered in the leaves and died. Rosehead watched this quietly, inclining her head. Baby rose bushes, however, hissed and lunged at Al, who staggered back, flailing his arms to keep his balance.

"Dad, it won't work like this!" Lilith cried. "It will only work -"

"- if the Bloom heir sets me on fire." Finished Rosehead calmly, rotating her huge eyes and setting them on Lilith. "I admit, it is hard to restrain myself, when there is so much juicy meat walking around freely." She sneered and let out her vine tongue.

There was a collective sharp intake of air and people took a step back into the darkness of the shrubs.

"Who, Lilith?" Al asked tentatively, looking around as if disoriented. Gabi ran up to her husband, and whispering urgently into his ear, led him away, shushing his attempts to call to his daughter.

Lilith was grateful, she couldn't face her father's questions. Suddenly someone hugged Lilith from behind, someone was handing her a lit torch. She wheeled around. "Ed!" Ed grinned at her, leaning on Gustav's shoulder. "Go." He whispered, thrust the torch handle into her hand and gave her a slight push in the small of her back.

"Little miss must do it now." Professed Agatha's voice from behind, more voices joined, from other servants, urging her in German, Baer produced a bark, and a few of the circus artists waved their hands, indicating the direction for Lilith to go.

It was as if the circus performance has turned itself inside out. It was Lilith now in the ring, walking to the center to face the beast, the torch held high in her arm, her legs

embarking on what seemed like an unending journey, only interrupted by the crunching of twigs under her mary-janes and an occasional gruff screech from a crow. At last, Lilith stopped, mere feet away from Rosehead. The girl craned her neck, hesitating. She didn't know what the rose bush woman felt, but she knew that she felt pity. Pity and sadness.

"I'm - I'm sorry." She said nervously. "I'm sorry you had to suffer through this. I'm -"

"Do not apologize, granddaughter. Do what must be done." Rosehead's voice was stern and cold. "I must make my farewell now. Goodbye." She inclined slightly in an almost graceful bow, and straightened back up. "Make good use of this land when I'm gone, promise me this." Her words boomed across the garden and Lilith thought that if anyone was present within miles of the rose garden, they would've positively heard her.

"I promise." Said Lilith, raised her hand and let the fire lick the nearest stem on a Rosehead's leg.

The fire leapt up, devouring hungrily leaf after leaf, and instantly set cracking across the branches, climbing up Rosehead's legs like a fiery red flower, blooming and issuing clouds of acrid smoke. And then at once, the flames took charge and shot into the sky, licking the shape of the giant rose bush woman and erupting into a bouquet of yellow, orange, and red tongues.

Lilith took a step back, caught on a root and fell, the torch rolled out of her hand.

With an agonizing cry of pain, Rose Blome threw her head up and separated itself from Rosehead, vanishing into the black room of the Bloom mansion. Within seconds, the rest of the heads that were still hanging retracted into the house, and with a loud whoosh the house traced the sky and shrank back to its normal position, leaving Rosehead and her children writhe and scream and ultimately blacken into a mass of charred twigs. Only the fire was not done yet. Greedy, it sent crows flying in a mad rush of wings and cries. It sprung from bush to bush, igniting the roses into little lava explosions, producing an intolerable hiss and a cacophony of crackling, spitting, popping, and snapping.

Lilith couldn't speak, the emotional aftermath of everything that happened burying her in a type of stumped presence, where she felt like her throat has gone dry and she lost her voice, her legs and arms too numb to move. She heard shouts, she felt someone grab her under arms and drag her away, but she couldn't take her eyes from the sight that was unfolding in front of her.

The fire was not only consuming Rosehead and her baby rose bushes, it was also consuming the remains of her grandfather,

Alfred Bloom, and the entire rose garden, producing a sharp and sickening stench of burning organic matter.

Lilith gagged involuntarily, her eyes watering.

All round her, shouts and screams mixed in with the splattering of the inferno. They were retreating. But Lilith kept looking straight ahead of her, feeling her feet trace the earth, watching how a line of rose bushes ignited, and then another one, flames playing hide-and-seek along the pathways, until it seemed like fire took over the entire garden, the other part of it. Whoever was dragging Lilith away, evidently got tired. Lilith felt herself being picked up and hoisted over a shoulder.

Now people ran in earnest, ran until they made it to the porch of the house and burst through the tall glass doors, shutting them and watching the heat rise over the garden, hearing the crackling and the breaking and the rupturing noises rise into the sky even from behind the glass. Strangely, the blazing flames contained themselves to within the perimeter of the iron fence. Not a single spark touched the forest behind the property, not one drifting fleck of ash reached the mansion itself or landed on one of the many linden trees on Lindenstrasse.

The fire did, however, spread into the manicured public part of the rose garden, eating at it with smug triumph.

And then, when the intensity of the heat seemed to become intolerable, when the brightness of the fire illuminated the entire garden and the night beyond a screaming shade of yellow, the burning turmoil was pierced with an anguished wail, and a silvery misty shape erupted into the sky, as if a phantom rose grew from the middle of the flames. It bloomed into the dark sky, opening fully, petal by petal, and, finally, grew old. Its petals flew off and dissolving into nothing, until the entire thing was gone, blown away by the wind.

Silence fell over the garden, punctured by distant cawing of the crows that took off from nearby linden trees and disappeared into dying night.

Silence fell over the crowd of Bloom guests, standing behind the doors and gaping at what they just witnessed.

Lilith stood at the very front, her nose pressed into the glass doors of the hall that led into the garden, her mother on one side, her father on the other, when she felt someone tap her on the shoulder from behind. It was Ed, held up by his step-mother this time. Lilith only now noticed his foot, bandaged up, and a crutch that stuck out from under his arm.

"Ed..." Whispered Lilith and promptly buried her face in her hands, the memory of the kiss suddenly flushing her, making her face boil harder than it did from the heat of the fire. She didn't dare take another peak, didn't dare take hands off her

face, breathing into her palms, and standing like this for what seemed like an eternity, when she felt that the heat subsided.

In fact, it was no longer there.

Panther nudged at her feet.

She looked up.

The rest of the guests shifted behind her, but no one dared to speak, or perhaps no one *could* speak, stunned by the sight of what remained of the famous Bloom family rose garden, the home to BLOOM & CO, the most successful rose business to date.

## Chapter 39. Aftermath

Dawn broke over the sky, shedding pinkish light at the rose garden. Except it wasn't a rose garden anymore. It was a charred and blackened expanse of what used to be a magnificent sea of roses that licked the west side of the enormous Bloom mansion like a hungry red tongue, forming a spectacular dead end. Its very scarlet heart got ripped out from the bounds of its painted iron fence, no longer white, its paint curdled and cracked and scorched. Burned stumps of rose bushes covered the ground like broken bones of a giant prehistoric beast that has perished in flames, leaving trails of feeble smoke rise into the sky, smoldering and staying dead silent in the wind. There was no more rustling of the leaves, no more nodding of the flower heads. There was only one enormous black wasteland surrounded by an ornamental blackened fence, a line of linden trees on one side, a field on the other, and a dark ominous looking forest at its very back.

An overwhelming acrid stench of smoke seeped under the glass doors and into Lilith's nostrils. She shuddered, feeling frozen, despite the house being exceptionally hot, having absorbed the heat from the disaster.

"That was a brave thing to do." Out of all people, it was Gabi Bloom who broke the silence first, gazing at her daughter with misty eyes from behind her glasses sitting on the tip of her nose, as always, her bushy hair mangled and smelling of smoke, her entire demeanor like that of a mama bird, spreading her wings protectively over her offspring.

"Was it?" Echoed Lilith in astonishment, taken a little aback by her mother's unexpected compliment.

"Yes. Yes, it was." Nodded Al on her other side, his messy black hair messier than ever, his small head inclined on his long neck, his face ashen, mirroring his recent loss.

"I'm - we're very sorry we didn't believe you." Added Gabi Bloom, sniffing.

"It's okay." Said Lilith dismissively. "I understand. I didn't expect you to."

The rest of the crowd seemed to be absorbed in listening in on the conversation, when a wail broke on the right of Lilith.

"Juergen! My Juergen!" Rosalinde Bloom shrieked hysterically, a tinge of alcohol on her breath, her fancy dress smudged and torn in places, her blonde curly hair a royal disorder. "He tried telling you all! He -"

"Then why didn't he? Why didn't you tell us, I would like to know?" Irma Schizburger's voice yelled from the depth of the crowd.

"He couldn't. I couldn't... Uncle forbade me, but Juergen thought he found a way! Oh, he tried painting it! He - he - None of you saw it... None of you knew how -" Sobs interrupted Rosalinde Bloom, sobs and more of her teary muttering in German.

"I did... I saw it, I knew... Don't cry... *mom*." Ed's raspy voice spoke soothingly behind Lilith, and she noted that he called his step-mother *mom*, which she didn't hear him use before and which apparently caused her to sob even harder and fling herself on him, to his yelp of pain (his foot was still very much broken), and then to her yelp of surprise and then a strong of apologies.

Irma Schlizburger scoffed something back in return, rounding up her sniffing daughters, Daphne and Gwen, and marching them out of the hall to their shrill protests.

The wake of the passing seemed to have loosen the shock, and people gushed into uneasy and jumpy conversations, mostly in German, so Lilith couldn't understand what was being talked about, except the demanding calls from the blind Heidemarie Haas who was asking for what seemed a detailed report on what exactly happened, when, how, who did it, why, and how come nobody told her until now.

There were happy exclamations from Petra to her parents, that sounded very much like, "I told you!", except in German, and a timid voice of her brother, Patrick, this time not shushing her but backing her up, Lilith could tell by his tone,

met with embarrassed phrased tossed by Sabrina and Norman Rosenthal at their children in turn.

Circus performers huddled into one group, eager to leave, knitting ladies into another, servants into the third, and the old lady, Lilith's neighbor whose name she never learned, loudly demanded quiet and ultimately shuffled across the floor, with an obvious intention of going to her room, pack, and be gone. The Brandt sisters did the same, talking to each other fiercely, but the rest stayed, looking at Lilith and her parents, perhaps awaiting instructions as to what will happen next and looking at Lilith, knowledge of her grandfather's death now confirmed, her image portraying the true Bloom heir in their minds after what she has done in front of their eyes, which were now filled with respect for the little girl who never wavered in her story.

But Lilith's attention was back with her parents, her mother especially, who kept stroking her head over and over again, tucking it behind her ears, and ultimately holding her face between her trembling palms.

"All this time -" She began tentatively.

"Gabi, it's okay. Let's -" Al cut in, but Lilith interrupted them both. She needed to get two facts off her consciousness, or, she knew, they would burst her apart later and it will be more painful then confessing to them now.

"I need to tell you something. Both of you. It's important." Lilith paused, uncertain. Both of her parents looked momentarily panic stricken. "Mom, I'm sorry, I lost your beret - the one you knit for me - looking like the rose - I lost it in the garden, and now, well -" She looked over at the charred field.

"Who cares for that beret!" Exclaimed Gabi in a relieved sort of way. "I will knit you ten more, if you'd like. Any color - any shape - would you prefer orange this time? Or how about pink -" (Lilith winced) "- all right, not pink, purple, maybe? I can do polka dots on it. Or pom poms. Anything you like." And she leaned over her daughter, eager for her response.

"Actually, I don't want any. Not anymore. Thanks. I don't want you to knit things for me from this point on, is that okay?" Lilith said quickly, afraid at her mother's reaction more than she was afraid of setting Rosehead on fire, because Gabi Bloom's wrath was the most terrible thing in Lilith's world to behold.

A look of utter disappointment flashed across Gabi's twitching face. She looked up briefly at her husband, who did the merest suggestion of a shake of his head. Gabi peered back at her daughter, her face smooth, her lower lip trembling.

"Of course, sweetheart." Lilith couldn't remember the last time her mother called her sweetheart, and that was saying something. "I won't do it anymore."

"That's not all." Lilith continued, biting her lip in return and for some reason feeling Ed's stare on her back, as if he knew what she was about to say, quietly listening to her this whole time, Rosalinde still sobbing into his shoulder. "I - " Lilith was looking for the perfect word that wouldn't sound too harsh, and then decided to just say it as it is, and be done with it. "I ordered the black room to kill the doctor, Wilhelmus Baumgartner, and it - ate him."

Lilith squinted her eyes shut and stood motionlessly, her head hanging, waiting for both her parents to desert her.

"You didn't know it would do it. You were simply very upset." Panther said from below in a clear growl, which made both Gabi and Al jump, but didn't cause any reaction in the servants who now stood closer to the small Bloom family, quietly observing them, nor did it startle the circus performers who edged into the crowd, listening intently. The rest of the people have already left, probably to pack and leave at once, now that the Bloom property has lost all interest to them, as there was no rose garden anymore to produce the fame and fortune of BLOOM & CO.

Early morning broke the dimness in the hall, and the sun rose over the tips of the trees, sending slanted rays full of dancing dust across the hall and coloring Lilith's face a warm rosy shade.

"You - can talk?" Asked Al incredulously, kneeling next to Panther and petting him. "You - the runt of the litter?"

Lilith was very tempted to say, *I told you so*, but she bit her tongue.

"They say it's the small things that make a big difference." Panther, obviously full of himself, thrust out his chest and received Al's affection with proud almost purring, adding in an undertone. "Incidentally, I can speak German." At this Al opened his mouth, speechless, and Petra appeared out of nowhere, hugging Panther and giving him kisses, which he gladly gave back. Patrick joined them, explaining with an air of a little businessman the intelligence of dogs to Lilith's father, mentioning the fact that he decided to give up butterflies and study whippets instead.

Gabi, meanwhile, appeared thunderstruck by the news about the doctor. "The room? You said, the room...?" She glanced about aimlessly, seeking support of her husband, but he was happily engaged in the talk on his favorite subject in the world, eager to escape the very personal pain of losing his father.

"The house is alive, mom. It's part of the garden. This floor," Lilith motioned with her arm, "eats our breath, next floor feeds on our water, and the one above, the red gallery, remember?" (Gabi shuddered) "It sucks out your blood. And, well, the last room, where the heir is supposed to sit, it gets rid of you whole, so I think it devours your very life, and it's painted black for death.

"Are you saying -" Began Gabi timidly, which was very much unlike her. "Are you saying that it was eating people -"

"Together with the garden, yes, mom. I've been trying to tell you from the very beginning, I knew it from the moment we arrived, because it stunk, because I can smell things, you know? I can smell things other people can't, I can feel, I can - but you never -" Lilith choked.

"I'm so very sorry." Gabi hugged her daughter and pressed her to her body, her tears falling into Lilith's hair. "I never imagined anything like this was possible."

"Yes, you did." Lilith wrenched herself out of her hold. "When you were a little girl, you did. You must have!" This struck a chord.

A grimace of pain contorted Gabi's features. Lilith noticed that the chatter around them died promptly, but she couldn't take her eyes away from her mother, sensing that something

important was about to be discovered and not willing to miss a second of it.

Her mother looked embarrassed when she opened her mouth to talk.

"Lilith." She began, studying her hands, callused from constant knitting, and then looked up. "I was like you." Her voice trembled, it was obviously difficult for her to say. "I was diagnosed early on with severe ADD and ADHD, I also felt rooms move, it drove me crazy, but my mother refused to give me medication. She was against it, she believed I would grow out of it. She didn't believe it being a disorder. She fought with the school doctor. I hated her for that. I wanted pills, I would take anything to stop it. I was bullied, I - " She noticed Lilith's distress.

Lilith felt the ground to go out from under her feet, and thought she would collapse any minute. "You?" This fact simply didn't fit in her head. "You had it too? And you never told me? You never..."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, I wanted to shield you from it, from what I had to grow up with, I made sure you have the best doctors, the best medicine out there..."

But Lilith lunged at her mother and cut her off, hugging her tight and wailing into her knit sweater. Her mother stood frozen at first, perhaps expecting a fit of rage and not this

sudden affection, and then she hugged Lilith back, and so they stood, for how long, Lilith didn't know, only after a while she couldn't cry anymore, and just then someone tapped her on the shoulder. It was her dad.

"We need to pack your things, sweetie. Out flight is in three hours, and we need to be at the airport 2 hours before our departure time."

"What about the garden?" Exclaimed Lilith, catching Ed out the corner of her eye and blushing profusely.

"Oh, I don't know. I certainly don't want to grow any more roses here, and Rosalinde has graciously agreed to oversee the funeral arrangements while we are gone. I don't expect you wanting to come back, so I will see you safe home and then fly back alone and..."

"No!" Yelled Lilith suddenly, her eyes finding Ed again, his face grief-stricken and then momentarily delighted at Lilith's outburst. "No, I want to come back! I want - I want to live here!"

"You do? Are you sure about that?" Al asked wonderingly.

"Yes. I'm still heir to Bloom property, am I not?"

"Why, yes, you are. With a guardian, of course. Legally, you won't be able to own this outright until you turn 18."

"That's fine. I still have a say in what becomes of it, don't I?" Asked Lilith with mischief in her voice.

"What? Of course." Al was blinking at his daughter.

"Well then, I think -" Lilith made a dramatic pause, glancing at Panther, then at Petra, Patrick, and their parents, and at Agatha and Katharina who stood nearby, and at Rosalinde and Ed, at Gustav and Baer, who woofed quietly, and then at Panther again, winking at him, to which Panther raised one ear in wonder.

"- *I think it would make for an excellent - exceptional - first-rate - spiffing - splendid - marvelous - spectacular -* whippet race field, what do you say, dad?" Lilith was proud of herself was cramming as many as seven sophisticated words in one sentence.

A look of utter bemusement and then delight stole over Al Blooms face, bringing color to his cheeks and glint to his eyes. "A whippet race field?" He repeated, as if tasting how it would sound.

"Yeah, of PANTHER & CO." As soon as Lilith said it, Panther abandoned the soft embrace of Katharina and jumped at Lilith, yapping loudly and licking anything his longue curly tongue could reach.

"May I put in a request? May I? Squirrels? Will there be squirrels?" He panted between jumps. Lilith only giggles at his attempts, gazing at Ed now.

"You know, Ed could draw you an emblem." Lilith smiled at Ed, who positively grinned back.

"I would... be delighted... sir." He said.

"Sir? Don't call me that, it makes me want to itch my head. Just Al, okay?"

"Darling, that is a brilliant idea!" Professed Rosalinde, swaying on her heels and stepping closer to Lilith.

But Lilith was looking up at her mother. "Mom, are you okay?"

"Me? Oh, yes, I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm -" She dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a sleeve. "You don't have to take your pills anymore, if you don't want to."

And this sealed it for Lilith. She felt an enormous pocket of warm air spread through her chest and flood her with happiness, the likes of which she couldn't remember when she experienced last, perhaps only comparable to discovering that Panther could talk, and to her first kiss. She glanced at Ed and promptly looked down at her shoes.

The adults have burst into a frenzy of activity, urging Lilith to go and pack, but then Agatha professed something to them in a low voice, and they all fell into whispers and strolled off, telling Lilith they'll be back for her in 1 hour, and, together with the servants and the dogs, they left Ed and Lilith alone.

## Chapter 40. Departure

Lilith barely noticed their disappearance, she was absorbed in studying her dirty nails and attempting to flick black much from under one of them. She then brushed her cardigan nervously, and began twiddling with one of its buttons, when Ed's hand stopped her, touching her fingers and withdrawing swiftly, as if afraid of the interruption. They stood still across each other for a moment or two, neither risking to look up or to begin talking. Shadows crept across the muddy parquet floor, shadows in the shape of a crisscross pattern formed by square windowpanes. It was a fully blown summer morning, the first day of July, and nothing indicated the catastrophe from the previous night except the smoky odor lingering in the shadows and sticking to Lilith's clothes and hair, making her smell like campfire, and making Ed smell like a burned cookie instead of his usual delicious fragrance. Lilith stomach rumbled at the thought of cookies and she glanced up.

Ed raised his eyes together with hers. His hair was matted into a shock of a dark bird's nest, his t-shirt and jeans have lost their color underneath the soot and ash and plain dirt. He leaned on one of the crutches, the white of his bandages on the

foot contrasting sharply with his other filthy sneaker. His brown eyes studied Lilith, absorbing her whole, in that innocent way only children can absorb each other, without shame or guilt or any secrecy or fear. There was only one feeling Lilith could read in them, and it was...

"I think..." Ed said thickly, red creeping into his tanned face. "I think... I love you." He fell silent, embarrassed.

"I think... I love you too." Said Lilith, and, miraculously, they broke into laughter, filling the deserted hall with mirth and miracle, the miracle of young love, and next moment they were kissing, clumsily and tenderly at the same time, leaning forward slightly and tilting their heads just enough so they wouldn't bump their foreheads, both their arms limp at first and then timidly finding each other's shoulders.

It didn't last long, this heavenly second kiss.

"Awww... Guck mal! Little Eddie found himself little Lillie." Daphne was standing in the doorway, clutching her stuffed elephant to her chest, her blonde hair tucked into neat pigtails, her face purple with envy, a bright violet bag in her hand, bulging from her possessions, although she lived next door and could've ran over and taken anything she needed any minute.

"Mutter is calling! Come on!" Hissed Gwen from behind her, dressed in an identical lilac tee and the ever-present shorts,

showcasing her solid mass of two legs and sparkling iridescent sandals featuring nail-polished toes the shade of a pink piglet.

She nudged at her sister once more, but Daphne appeared to be in a stupor and wouldn't move.

Lilith, still holding on to Ed's shoulders, stunned and stung, was opening her mouth to retort, when she glimpsed a shy tear roll down Daphne's cheek. She exchanged a glance with Ed, who noticed it too, promptly closing his mouth, evidently also in the process of concocting a sarcastic reprieve.

"And Daphne -" Daphne sniffed, to the horrified face of Gwen, who now whispered urgently something in German and pulled on her twin sister's t-shirt sleeve so fiercely, it was about to rip. "- and little Daphne has only little Moppel. Ahhhhhh!" At this Daphne broke into a catastrophically painful wail and stuck her face into the head of her stuffed elephant, who absorbed the moisture quite stoically, serenely gazing at both Lilith and Ed with his jewel amethyst eyes.

Lilith tilted her head and stole a peek at Ed, who nodded, as if he understood what she was about to do, and on an impulse of overwhelming happiness that spilled out of her chest and made her heart flutter with butterfly wings, unable to hurt anyone at this moment and only wanting to share what filled her to the brim, Lilith took off, ran up to sobbing Daphne, flung her arms

around her and kissed her plump teary cheeks, salty and hot to touch.

Daphne stood as if thunderstruck, her little eyes blinking rapidly, and Lilith noticed, to her astonishment, that Daphne's eyes were of a striking opalescent shade, not quite indigo and not quite violet, but somewhere in the middle, a shade of a young eggplant touched with a delicate tinge of pearl.

"Your eyes are a beautiful color. Both of yours. They're the color of... lila. I never noticed before." Said Lilith kindly to the twins, proud of herself for using a German word and letting go of Daphne.

Daphne only stared back, her quivering mouth opening and closing, her sister equally mortified and immobile next to her. There was irregular scarping behind them, and Lilith turned back swiftly, to witness Ed shuffle forward on his crutches and making it in front of both Daphne and Gwen in the next minute. Both girls eyed him with a mixture of loathing and awe, because he was just one of those boys that didn't realize how much his chocolatey appearance was attractive to girls, who in turn fought against it fruitlessly, struggling to understand as to why they were drawn to him in the first place and perhaps ashamed of it, misunderstanding it for something they shouldn't feel, as all young teenage girls do.

"I didn't mean that... drawing." Said Ed apologetically, flushing scarlet. "Well... I did. A bit. But I sort of... don't anymore, dear... step-cousins." And he planted two quick pecks on both their cheeks, causing their faces turn from purple to that deep shade of mauve that borders on the possibility of explosion from embarrassment.

Ed looked at Lilith for approval, and Lilith beamed, thinking that now she managed to make her distant relatives happy, but she was gravely mistaken, of course.

"You - you didn't - you -" Daphne sputtered.

"He's making fun of us!" Shrieked Gwen fiercely.

And Daphne began pummeling Ed with her stuffed elephant, issuing a swear word upon swear word which were so intimately German, that Lilith couldn't understand a single one of them, but she felt their meaning clearly all the same, and it sounded like the foulest expression of intense dislike that this girl could muster. Before long, Gwen joined her, dropping her violet bag on the floor and rolling her fat fingers into fists, brandishing them at Ed who only leaned away to avoid her feeble attempts, first shock and then amusement stealing over his face, only to dissolve under Lilith's menacing glare that looked so much like her mother's.

"What iz going on here?" Irma Schlizburger's pavonine figure strolled into the hall, packed into a skin-tight sequin

dress that sparkled almost painfully, her lade bag sporting same peacock feathers that Lilith so badly wanted to dip into chocolate when they first got acquainted. "What haz zis child done to you?" She screamed hysterically, rounding up her girls and letting them sob into her heavy bosom.

"We... err..." Began Ed tentatively.

"Kissed them goodbye?" Offered Lilith, making her best innocent face, the one that she typically reserved for begging stuff out of her father.

"Kissed them? KISSED THEM?" Irma's chest was rising and falling like a mountain of fleshy rage, but she couldn't come up with an appropriate scolding. Her daughters were still hiding their faces in their mother's stomach folds.

"I wanted them to feel welcome, the *German* way." Lilith racked her brain, trying to come up with a smart answer on the fly. "I, um... I read that cheek kissing is considered appropriate among family members, friends, and acquaintances in Europe, which is not as customary in America, unfortunately. Since I will be moving here, I wanted my cousins to feel like they can come and visit me any time - visit *my* house any time - any second as they deeply desire to do so, that is, of course, until I decide that I, perhaps, want to move into the house the Bloom family has so graciously rented to you. I will, of course, inform you of such decision, giving you an appropriate time to

vacate the premises." Sneered Lilith despite herself. "It's only polite to offer warm affection to family members, isn't it?"

"You are worze than your grandfazer! I cannot tolerate this! I won't!" Irma glared at her, and with a swish of her high heels on the floor, picked up both her daughters' bags and led them fiercely out of the house, slamming the door in her wake so hard that the frame rattled, sending reverberations across the whole foyer.

"I wanted it be a good thing! I really meant it - at first..." Stated Lilith to Ed, blushing regretfully.

"Will you kick me out of my house too... if I don't... live up... to your expectations... oh dear Lilith Bloom... who is my *not* really cousin... for which fact... I am immensely... grateful?" He bowed deeply and nearly fell off his crutches, causing Lilith to giggle and feel her face grow hot again.

"I will kick you out right now, if you don't stop clowning around."

"But I thought... you liked clowns in the circus performance? Would you me... rather... impersonate an elephant?" And he kicked off both crutches on the floor, hopping on one leg and comically raising one arm to his face making it look like a trunk, trumpeting out of it what sounded more like snorts.

"Can I be a ballerina? Can I make pirouettes on the elephant's back?" Exclaimed Lilith and forgetting everything

that has happened to them, overtaken by that childish joy that makes no sense to adults whatsoever, but doesn't make sense to children either because it doesn't *have* to make sense to them, in their opinion, for the simple reason that it's fun and that's all there is to it, Lilith spread her arms, masterfully stuck out her leg, pointing it into second position, *a la seconde*, and with glittering aplomb cruised up to Ed and began circling him, making swan wing movements with her arms and overall attempting to look like a first class ballet dancer.

Before long, Panther joined them, apparently having heard the commotion and escaping Katharina's loving hands in the kitchen, to chase after his mistress' feet and bark brightly into the hall, narrowly escaping Lilith's revolving leg as she attempted to make a pirouette, standing flat on one foot and extending the other leg to make herself spin, ultimately falling on the floor, pulling herself upright again and trying to do it once more.

And this is how their parents have found them, galloping around, jumping, gamboling and in general working themselves into a kind of frenzied higgledy-piggledy jumble, a 12 year old girl who only felt still when she was moving and who could smell things that other people didn't, a 14 year old boy who found his voice again and who could see things and draw them to an almost photographic resemblance, and a dog who was really a cat in a

dog's body that could talk, loved steak and rosy jackets, and nearly purred if scratched in that one particular spot on his belly and behind his ears.

There was suddenly a scuttling of luggage being pulled on its tiny wheels across the marble floor, calls to hurry up, passing feet and goodbyes thrown at Lilith and her parents by the Brandt sisters, and by the group of knitting ladies, who professed their last minute admirations to Gabi Bloom, promising to order more of her spectacular knit sweaters, the squeaking of Heidemarie Haas' wheelchair and her daughter's fast stepping feet, the grumpy tirade from the old lady who shook her frilly coat to emphasize whatever the point was she was making, and, finally, Rosenthals in tow with their children Patrick and Petra, who promptly ran up to Ed, hugged him and then hugged Lilith.

"Mama said you are moving in?" Petra chimed in her glittering voice to Lilith, and Lilith glanced up at her parents, who both nodded enthusiastically.

"I am. Will you come visit me?" Lilith asked.

"Yes! I love dog races! Mama said -" but her brother interrupted her, stepping up and apparently bursting to deliver this bit of his personal news.

"I have decided that butterflies are not a worthy subject to study." Said Patrick importantly. "I have decided to study

whippets." He broke into a smile then, as Panther leapt at him, licking his hand.

"*Talking* whippets, you forgot to mention." Yapped Panther.

"Yes. Yes. I wish you had wings, though, it is a disappointment that whippets... no, no, I didn't mean that!" Patrick cried in alarm, as Panther growled and turned him back on the boy, his tail stuck high in the air in indignation.

But Lilith felt something on her skin, and as she looked up, she saw her father gaze out into the hall, and a chill crept into her stomach, making her remember the terrible ordeal she had to go through, making her wonder if indeed it was all over, if the house would stop moving, if the red gallery would stop entrancing anyone who looked at its paintings, if the black room would stop devouring people. On impulse Lilith decided to test her theory, taking off and sprinting away from Ed, Panther, Patrick, and Petra, darting between her uncomprehending parents who, for once, didn't try stopping her.

"Lilith, wait!" Panther took off after her, his longue tongue lolling.

Lilith didn't wait. She pushed lightly aside both Sabrina and Norman Rosenthal who attempted to corner her with polite inquiries into the future of the Bloom property, and jumped two steps at a time, running up the marble staircase to the second floor, where everything was white, but not stopping there,

jogging up the steps into the red floor, dashing along the corridor and then finally making it in front of the door that led into the gallery, and seeing with surprise normal door knobs where there were none just yesterday. Lilith banged the door open and cautiously stepped into the cardinal gloom.

Panther trotted quietly inside after his mistress. "Why didn't you wait?" He growled under his breath, but Lilith didn't answer, enthralled by what she felt with her very skin.

The room was dead. It didn't move, didn't breathe, it had lost its ominous atmosphere, and the paintings... Lilith leaned in so close that her nose touched the glass, to make sure that she saw right. The paintings were simple depictions of roses, typical still life, 20 naturmorts, a different rose portrayed in each, petals open and immobile. The faces were gone, and the pedestal in the middle of the gallery held a stone vase, like one that crowned the balustrade on top of the mansion. In it was the most magnificent sculpture of a rose Lilith has seen in her entire life. Each petal, each thorn was carved out to such likeness that one could easily mistaken it for a real flower, the effect magnified by its material. It was carved out of red marble.

"Rosehead. This was always meant for you, this pedestal, wasn't it?" Whispered Lilith stroking the stone gently, and maybe she felt a shudder, maybe she felt warmth flood the cold

chiseled shape, maybe it was only her imagination, because it was momentarily gone. Lilith looked around one last time, stepped out and slowly clicked the door shut, then changed her mind and left it wide open.

"Let's air it out!" She shouted to Panther and proceeded opening other doors one by one, finding each of the rooms empty except for a display table in their middle and a bouquet of dry roses in a dusty vase. Every room was identical, albeit painted a different shade of scarlet, or incarnadine, or ruby, and before long Lilith was running into each and throwing open the windows to gleeful barks of her pet, leaving the doors open in their wake, progressing like this until she was done with all 20 of them, wanting to air them all out and finally making it to the red marble staircase and ascending with her heart hammering against her skull and pushing open the floor trap door, unlocked, and emitting an involuntary gasp. Panther, impatient, squirmed past her legs to see.

"It's gone!" Cried Lilith.

It was no longer a room, but an open space on top of the mansion, with waist-high balustrade running along its perimeter, five stone vases gracing the façade side, as they did before. Lilith climbed out, sun painting her face golden, and walked up to the parapet, looking down, where Panther was already sniffing around.

"Look!" She pointed.

A police car was parked by their rental car, its red and blue light revolving silently, and a policeman was chatting to Lilith's father and mother, taking notes and occasionally asking a question from Rosalinde Bloom who stood shivering, her arms wrapped around herself, her high heels digging into the gravel. There was an urgent bark and Lilith saw another policeman searching the scorched rose garden with a dog sniffing at the ground, pulling on its leash impatiently, until it stopped on the spot where Rosehead has resided and where she sucked out Alfred Bloom dry. The dog, a German shepherd, barked hysterically, turning around itself, sniffing and sniffing, as if it found something but doesn't quite know where exactly it is. The policeman was running after it, shouting something and peering at the ground, evidently not seeing anything and being angry for this, attempting to make the dog to be quiet.

"Are they looking for your grandfather's, forgive me for saying it, *bones*?" Inquired Panther.

Lilith couldn't answer. A horrific idea has seized her. It bounced around her head, then leaked into her chest and lodged in her stomach like a heavy block of ice, causing her knees to go slack and her legs to feel numb. She turned around and, without fully registering what she was doing, sped down the stairs, ignoring Panther's upset barks, down all the floors,

across the now deserted hall, through the open doors and into the charred wasteland covered with stumps of burned rose bushes, until she made it to the spot where the policeman stood, studying her quizzically.

"I'm Lilith Bloom. I'm - this -" She said just as Panther bumped into her legs and growled at the German shepherd who growled back.

"Please. No dog! No walk! Parents." The policeman uttered in bad English, waving Lilith and Panther away, indicating that they were interrupting his work and were not supposed to be here. Lilith nodded obediently, not daring to push her luck further, but before she took off, she looked around one more time, searching the ground, seeing that Panther did the same, sniffing. Lilith could tell that she was in Rosehead's clearing by the circle of the charred stumps all around, and where her grandfather's bones should have been, there was nothing. It appeared as though he vanished together with the fire. Lilith decided that she would think about this later, about how it was possible, yet she noted one wonderful fact.

"The stink is gone." She yelled to Panther. "Is it gone for you too?"

"Why, let me sniff, well, it smells of smoke and burned wood, yes, but the foul odor of decomposing *organic matter* has

disappeared entirely." He answered proudly, lifting his hind leg and pissing on the nearest stump. "It stinks now."

"Panther!"

"What?" He retorted and too off, apparently pissed at his mistress for ignoring him. Lilith skidded across the burned out field after him, but then stopped dead in front of a burned remains of what looked like a crow.

"Panther, come here! Look at this. I wonder how a crow would taste, if dipped in dark chocolate." She said absentmindedly.

Panther doubled back and peered at the bird in disgust. "That? You want to dip *that* in chocolate? Ewww." He wrinkled his nose.

"Why not? What's with the face? You're a dog. You're supposed to like dead things, aren't you?"

"I think I've seen enough dead things this week, and I'm in no particular hurry to start dipping them in chocolate." Yapped Panther and took off.

"Wait!" Lilith ran after him and arrived at the front porch just in time to see the policeman disappearing into his car to make a report, Gabi Bloom stashing their luggage in the trunk, Al Bloom chasing Panther into the back seat, breaking up what looked like a beginning of an important conversation between him and Baer, who sat pompously by Gustav's legs without the leash.

Gustav stood stock still, slightly bent, his bald egg-head tilted in his usual servile manner. Behind him stood Agatha, behind her Katharina and the rest of the servants and cooks and gardeners. The Rosenthals and the rest of the guests were gone, but Rosalinde Bloom was still here, and Ed with her.

Lilith paused, unsure how to proceed, when Ed, apparently shy, stuck out his hand and handed her a piece of paper. Lilith took it into shaking hands. It was a drawing of her, of her how she arrived here a week ago, with her festive red beret on her head, her hair brushed neatly, framing her face, her big blue eyes forever open in wonder, Panther tucked safely into her arms, her navy knit bag slung over her shoulder, and her marine shirt and skirt hovering over her striped knee socks and patent leather mary-janes. It was signed, *To Lilith Bloom, with love, from Ed Vogel.*

"Wow. Thank you." Whispered Lilith. "I've never had anyone draw a portrait of me before."

"I hope... it's not... the last." Said Ed, and made a motion toward her, in that childish yearning, as did Lilith, but midway they stopped. They simply couldn't be close in front of all these people looking, not when it was light out and when the events of the previous night seemed so far away and unreal, it was easy to think that perhaps none of it ever happened.

"Lilith, sweetie, we have to go. We'll be late for our flight." Her father placed a hand on his daughter's shoulder, gently guiding her away.

"Bye!" She cried to Ed. "Bye! I'll be back soon." She repeated to Rosalinde and Gustav and Katharina and Baer and the rest of the servants, who waved back.

Lilith plopped back into the seat and shut the door, seeing Panther already curled up the way he was when they arrived.

Al Bloom slid into the driver's seat and closed the door.

"Everyone all right?" He asked. "Ready?"

"What happened to grandpa?" Asked Lilith promptly. "They didn't find his -"

"We'll talk about this later, okay? On the plane. I'm not sure what happened and I'm not sure I want to talk about this right now." And he started the car, sounding both irritated and relieved to leave.

"We're coming back though, aren't we?" Pressed Lilith.

"Yes, we are. We just need to take care of a few things at home, before we can return." Gabi said softly, her usual brisk demeanor gone, as were her knitting needles.

"Like my bothers and sisters, for example." Offered Panther grouchy, and stuck his nose back under his paw.

The car moved. Lilith glanced up and waved to Ed, who waved back enthusiastically, grinning and then even lifting his crutch for more effect and brandishing it.

"I'm glad to see you have a... boyfriend." Gabi said, turning in the front seat. "At least something good happened out of this disaster of a trip." Her voice migrated from unusual softness to her typical brisk tone.

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Mom, he's just a *friend!*"

"Gabi, let's not start now." Al muttered, and, to Lilith's astonishment, her mother, instead of launching into an angry tirade, placed her hand on his and said, "Of course. I'm sorry." She also noticed that her father squeezed her mother's hand back, which was most unusual.

"Well, here is your bag. I thought you might want it, so I packed it... packed all the things you need..." Her mother trailed off, giving Lilith her knit bag. Lilith took it, promptly opened it and found her journal, Ed's dried out drawings, and her book, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, warped and misshapen after surviving a horrible rain, but intact. There were no pills. She looked with a smile on her face, but her parents were engaged in hushed whispering, and she decided to leave them to it.

"Panther. Panther? What, you're not talking to me anymore?" She hissed urgently yet with relief that she could talk openly

to her pet in front of her parents, without them thinking her crazy.

"I am. After I have my steak. Besides, right now I'm in the middle of my beauty sleep, having just endured an exhausting night, so if you don't mind..." And he stuck his nose under his paw again. Lilith scowled, and then smiled. This was the Panther she knew.

She turned to look back, to see the rectangular three-storied shape of the mansion disappear behind rows of emerald linden trees, feeling a certain triumph over the fact that the house didn't swallow her whole like she thought it would. Its white silhouette stood out clear against the black of the charred field that once enclosed in its iron fence a magnificent rose garden that one day, Lilith hoped, would turn into a whippet racing field. With the image of a field covered in brightly green grass, rows and rows of cheering spectators, and a pack of whippets chasing a mechanical rabbit, Lilith turned back and, as was her habit, without thinking, automatically pulled out her book, cracked it open and stuck her finger into a page blindly.

*"Learn then from this story not to fear the fruits of the past, but rather to be circumspect in the future, that those foul passions whereby our family has suffered so grievously may not again be loosed to our undoing."* She read inaudibly, only

moving her lips and nodding, mouthing soundlessly, *I won't let them.*

And behind her, in the burned out garden, abandoned now by every living being, even by the crows, a tiny sapling nodded, as if confirming her words. It just shot out from underground, growing quickly, one single stem of green against the expanse of black, precisely on the spot where Alfred Bloom has met his last breath. It looked like it might grow into a flower of some sort, perhaps a rose, perhaps something else.

Only future would tell.