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# ROSEHEAD

A  
NOVEL

BY  
KSENIA  
ANSKE



# **Rosehead**

**Ksenia Anske**

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*For mom, whose stories inspired this one.*

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**rosehead** \roh-z-hed\ *noun* **1:** a many-sided pyramidal head upon a nail; also a nail with such a head

“Her eyes and hair were of the same rich hazel colour, and her cheeks, though considerably freckled, were flushed with the exquisite bloom of the brunette, the dainty pink which lurks at the heart of the sulphur rose.”

— *Arthur Conan Doyle, The Hound of the Baskervilles*

## Chapter 1

# The Grim Arrival

Lilith Bloom had a peculiar feeling that the rose garden wanted to eat her. She surveyed it through the open car window, unable to look away. The garden seemed to survey her back. It was enormous. Its red blanket surrounded a solitary mansion at the end of Rose Street, *Rosenstrasse* in German. No other houses stood in sight, only a distant forest. Apart from tires grating on the gravel, it was eerily quiet, too quiet for a hot summer afternoon.

Their rental sedan pulled into the motor court in front of the mansion, joining a long line of cars. A sudden gust of wind washed over Lilith's face. She expected it to smell like roses. Instead, it reeked of rotten sweetness, of something decomposing. Lilith rolled up her window.

"Panther," she whispered.

No answer.

"Panther Bloom Junior! Will you kindly wake up?"

She shook the black shape curled to her left. The shape yawned, revealing a long tongue and rows of pearly teeth, then promptly sat up and blinked. It wasn't exactly a dog, not in the most typical sense of how one would describe it. It was a cat in a dog's body. In proper canine terms, it was a whippet, Lilith's pet and only friend. He possessed a unique gift. He talked, as Lilith ascertained her parents. Of course, they refused to believe her.

Lilith's father, Daniel Bloom, an avid whippet breeder and dog race enthusiast, deemed Panther as the runt of the litter. Too softhearted to part with the puppy, he gave it to Lilith last summer for her twelfth birthday. Since then, they'd become inseparable, disappearing on long walks in Boston neighborhoods and arriving this fine sunny day in Berlin, after Lilith point-blank refused to go anywhere without Panther, *especially* not to the Bloom family reunion at her grandfather's house.

"You'd think a herd of elephants died here," she whispered.

Panther raised a brow.

No matter how much Lilith pleaded with him to talk in front of her parents, he viciously disapproved of the idea, lest they parade him in some freak show like an otherworldly miracle.

"Don't look at me like that. I hate it when you don't answer," Lilith said, loudly enough for her parents to hear. They exchanged a painful glance.

"Here we are, my puppies. Looks like we made the cut," said Daniel Bloom cheerfully, attempting to diffuse the mood. When nervous, he

spoke in dog show lingo.

"Lilith, did you take your pills?" said Gabby Bloom, as she twisted in the passenger seat and gazed at her daughter through metal-rimmed glasses, her fingers momentarily paused from knitting.

Panther studied Lilith.

Lilith studied the front seat. "I thought we agreed that pills are for sick people, Mother. I must assure you that currently I don't feel sick in the slightest."

"Don't take that tone with me, missy. Look at me when I talk to you. I asked you a question. Did you or didn't you?"

Panther continued to study Lilith.

Lilith continued to study the seat.

Gabby's lower lip trembled. She looked like a lost squirrel perched on top of a roof, not knowing how she got there or how to get down. Her brown hair could pass for fur standing on end.

"Lilith, don't be puppyish. Answer your mother," Daniel muttered while patting his pockets to look busy.

An awkward silence filled the car.

"I flushed them down the toilet, on the plane. By accident. They're *excruciatingly* slippery," Lilith said with an innocent expression on her face. She liked using sophisticated words like *excruciatingly* to purposefully annoy her mother.

"You *what*? Daniel, are you listening? Did you hear what she said?" Gabby faced her husband.

He squinted at something out the window. "I'm sure she didn't mean for it to happen, love. We just crossed the Atlantic, effectively gaining six extra hours. She can skip a day, can't she? For time adjustment purposes?"

"That's ten dollars down the drain! Have you forgotten what happened last time?" Gabby's hands performed an intricate dance of opening her bag, taking out rolls of wool, one half-knit sweater, another half-knit sweater, a handful of needles, and an orange vial of pills.

Lilith and Panther exchanged a glance.

Gabby stuffed the vial into her daughter's hands and watched her reluctantly open it and take out two blue capsules.

"Now," she said.

Lilith stuck the pills under her tongue, miming a fake swallow.

Meanwhile, escaping his wife's mounting fury, Daniel stepped out of the car and busied himself with the luggage. Tall and scrawny, he looked like a whippet himself, missing perhaps only the tail.

Eager to spit out the bitter tablets, Lilith made to follow.

"Wait a second, missy. Show me your tongue." Gabby leaned in for closer inspection.

Lilith opened her mouth and, without dislodging the pills, said with a practiced smile, "Sorry, Mom."

"Do not do this again."

"I won't."

"Good. Out you go. We're late as it is." Gabby hurried out of the car, her motherly duty done.

Lilith and Panther exchanged another glance and clambered out, looking around. They were at the end of a perfectly round courtyard crammed with cars of all types, their inexpensive rental the very last.

Lilith stood with a triumphant smile on her face. Slender and petite, she dressed meticulously. Taking forever to pick out clothes calmed her whirring mind, although it caused Panther to lose his. Today she sported a navy skirt, a striped sailor shirt, red Mary Janes, and a matching beret knitted by her mother.

Lilith had a collection of these. A rosy one for ballet lessons, a black one for walking Panther, a blue one for reading, and a red one for special occasions. Festive outings rarely happened in her life, but whenever they did, she always wore red, for confidence.

Lilith peered into her handbag, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She confirmed her dog-shaped wallet with a few dollars in it, a pack of tissues, a leotard, a tutu, ballet tights, slippers, three berets, a journal, a pen, and a book. Always a book. Presently it was Arthur Canon Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a corner bent on page thirteen.

Warm wind ruffled her hair. Lilith took out a tissue and buried her face in it, overwhelmed by the sickening scent of rose mixed with other decaying sweetness.

"Lilith? You okay?" Daniel peered at his daughter, but in another second, he was distracted by a stout figure that emerged from behind heavy front doors and approached them with outstretched arms.

"Ah! Daniel...Gabby...Lilith. I see you made it. Come in, come in. We're about to start dinner."

Firm and charming, with a barely discernable accent, the voice belonged to Alfred Bloom, Lilith's paternal grandfather, still handsome for his age. Tufts of white hair crowned his head, but this is where the jolly illusion ended. His eyes glinted steel.

Suppressing an odd urge to run, Lilith scrutinized her grandfather, the famous rose gardener who commanded astronomical prices for his flowers, supplying them fresh all over the world for weddings, funerals, and everything in between. Rumor had it that he fed his garden a special secret fertilizer. None of his competitors could match the beauty of his roses, the length of their life, the brilliance of their color, or the strength of their bouquet.

That, however, didn't concern Lilith at the moment. She even forgot about the smell, letting the tissue slip out of her hand. What concerned her stood beside her grandfather's leg.

"Excuse me, but that is not a dog. That is, dare I say it, a *monster*," she whispered.

The *monster* was a big, pewter-colored mastiff, rolls of skin in place of a head, thick paws stepping in tempo with its master's polished shoes, haunches rising and falling menacingly. If Panther looked like a cat, this thing looked like a bear. It looked at the girl as if studying her like food.

Lilith swiftly picked up her pet.

"Did I mention I eat mastiffs for breakfast?" Panther growled into her ear, his first spoken words since they'd arrived.

"Unless it slurps you down as an *apéritif* first," said Lilith.

"Incidentally, I'm too bony for that," growled Panther.

"I don't think he would care."

"I understand that you love me very much, but may I ask you to loosen your grip a little? It's rather hard to breathe." Panther produced kind of a doggy smile.

Lilith narrowed her eyes and unclenched her arms. Before Panther could mutter another sarcastic remark, a balding butler emerged and took the mastiff away, to Lilith's immense relief. Greetings were exchanged in both German and English, hands were shaken, and luggage was both wheeled to the porch steps and carried over. Alfred Bloom loudly professed his desire to take care of his granddaughter and ushered Daniel and Gabby inside to join the rest of the Bloom family, who'd arrived that morning and were now unpacked and waiting for dinner.

Apprehensive of crowds, Lilith hoped she could hide in her room until this parade ended and she was flying home, back to her books, ballet lessons, and walks with Panther.

"Lilith, my dear," Alfred beckoned her.

She took a tentative step forward, when a shiver went through her, a premonition. She looked at the mansion, a big rectangular block of stone, about a hundred feet long, with its narrow windows and central tower rising from the roof like the bud of a rose. It didn't feel welcome. It felt like a tomb that came alive at night, devouring everything in its wake. Red roses only added to the illusion, making the garden look like a pool of blood.

"Do you think it's carnivorous? The mansion?" whispered Lilith.

Panther sniffed at the air. "Rather scavenging, judging by the smell. The place stinks like a dump."

Alfred called again.

It wasn't polite to drag her feet any longer. Lilith sighed, clasped Panther tighter, and forced herself up the steps and into the chatter of guests, the tinkling of wine glasses, and an otherwise merry concoction of noises usually associated with big fancy dinners.

## Chapter 2

# The Mandatory Dinner

Doors snapped behind Lilith like jaws, making her jump. A crystal chandelier reminiscent of an inverted rose dangled from the ceiling. Alfred Bloom stood with an affixed smile, leaning against the fireplace mantelpiece. Two grand marble staircases snaked up to the second floor. On the left, a long empty hall ended in a cascade of glass doors leading into the garden. On the right, in an identical hall, a crowd of people milled about, settling down for dinner.

"Well...look at you, all grown up." Alfred took a step toward Lilith and her every bone cried to run, but she stood her ground. It wasn't polite to behave like a scared little girl in front of your grandfather now, was it? Panther bit on her arm for encouragement. Lilith pinched him back with affection.

"Hello," she said timidly.

"Last time I saw you, you were...oh, about this big?" Alfred's palm hovered mid-thigh.

"A few inches higher, actually. I was almost three years old, Grandfather," Lilith said sweetly.

"You used to call me Opa. Grandpa in German." Alfred stretched his lips. Under other circumstances, it might have passed for a smile. His silky accent and annoying pauses brought Lilith back ten years, to her grandmother's funeral. Terrifying images floated up from her memory like photographs: black crowd, white faces, and blood-red roses.

"Please excuse me, Grandfather, but I don't seem to recall that. I do remember one other thing," Lilith said, pausing for dramatic effect, "the lovely smell of your roses."

Panther perked up his ears.

"And how, exactly, did they smell?" Alfred inquired.

"Dad? You with Lilith? We're waiting," came from the dinner hall.

"Coming, my dear! Your daughter is distracting me with her charm," Alfred shouted back. "Well, looks like it's dinner time. And what is this...creature?" He pointed to the whippet.

"Oh, excuse me. I thought dad told you. Let me introduce you. Panther—Grandfather. Grandfather—Panther."

Panther grinned a sinister row of teeth.

Alfred's face lost its color. "I'm afraid...we'll have to put, um, Panther, where he belongs." He snapped his fingers. "GUSTAV!"

A tall bald man hurtled out of nowhere on shaky legs, his head shining with years of polished servitude. Lilith recognized him as the one who took the mastiff away.

“*Herr Bloom?*” Gustav squeezed between watery lips.

Alfred fired off something in German.

Lilith opened her mouth to ask what he meant, when Gustav unceremoniously yanked the dog out of her grip and, accompanied by Panther’s protestant barking, carried him off.

“Panther! No! Give him back!” Lilith called, bewildered. “Where is he taking him?” She made to run after them.

“Why...to where dogs belong, of course. To the dog house. Shall we?” Alfred snatched her arm and wheeled her around. His close presence overwhelmed her senses with that same sickening smell, and his rudeness left her temporarily speechless.

They entered the dinner hall. It dazzled with its size and splendor. Numerous floor vases held rose bouquets of every possible shade of red: from burgundy, to cardinal, to shockingly bright carmine. They issued a pleasant and, thankfully, appropriate fragrance. A dinner table stood in the middle of the room, with a dozen people milling about. Lilith gasped for air, forcing herself to cool down. Her heart jumped out of her chest and her instincts screamed to run, but she was not the running kind. Years of being taunted at school taught her an excellent winning technique. By staying annoyingly sweet and calm she could drive anyone nuts, especially her mother.

Her grandfather certainly deserved a dose of sweetness.

“Please excuse my outburst. I should’ve thanked you for taking care of my pet. That was terribly inconsiderate of me.” Lilith sighed theatrically, attempting to edge away.

“Well...I’m impressed. You’ve got excellent manners.” Alfred sounded bemused. “Who taught you, my dear?”

“Why, my pet, of course,” said Lilith coolly, still wounded from parting with Panther in such a rude manner and thinking that, if her grandfather kept treating her like an idiot, she would quickly lose her polite demeanor.

Guests noticed their presence.

Lilith’s parents waved.

A loud call cut above the other voices. “Zere iz ze child!” An elephantine woman sheathed in a violet dress, excessive makeup plastered over her face, broke off from a circle of talking people and strolled toward them, pulling two preteen girls behind. Lilith immediately decided that she didn’t like her.

“At last. Mama found ze child for you, *meine mädchens*.” Her jowls jiggling, the woman huffed and puffed on arrival, addressing her twin daughters, who were fat, blond, and ugly.

“Excuse me, but I would appreciate it if you didn’t call me a *child*.” Lilith pointed one foot like a ballerina. It gave her a certain confidence. “I’m not a child. I’m an adult trapped in a child’s body.” She smiled sweetly.

The twins sniggered. Their pigtails touched as they undoubtedly discussed Lilith's appearance. They wore matching purple evening gowns, and Lilith immediately despised her choice of navy skirt and sailor shirt.

"Ooh-la-la!" the woman nearly sang. "I like ze child wiz ze character." *Karakter*, it sounded like. "Irma Schlitzberger, your grandfather's cousin." She stretched out her pudgy hand. Lilith reluctantly shook it. It felt like she was sinking her fingers into cold cookie dough. "Zis iz Gwen and Daphne. They were very much looking forward to your arrival." She pointed at the girls, and they grinned, revealing identical braces.

"Of course they were," said Lilith.

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

"I'm Daphne. Zis iz Gwen. What iz your name?" said the girl on the right with surprisingly little accent, probably the brighter of the two. Her heavy jaw stuck out, indicating utter dislike. Lilith imagined the hell she would be put through if forced to hang out with the pair, and she thought it best to end all pretense of friendliness on the spot.

"Lilith Bloom." Lilith flashed her flawless smile back. "Nice to meet you."

Daphne answered in German with a smug look on her face.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand—"

"Zat iz too bad. I suppoze American girlz don't study foreign languages like German girlz do." Daphne radiated victory. Her sister giggled.

"No," said Lilith, holding her breath steady after the insult. "We only study Martian. In case aliens take over the planet and we have to talk to them. Those of us left alive as representatives of the best human specimen. You know, the tallest, the prettiest, the *thinnest* kind."

Daphne's face reddened like a beet, the color rapidly spreading to her neck. "*Mutter!*" she wailed, jabbing a finger at her newly established enemy. Irma opened her mouth, when Alfred let go of his granddaughter's arm and took her elbow.

"My dear Irma...dinner is about to be served, I believe. Shall we?" He covered the awkwardness with his charming voice, and at once, they all moved and shuffled and pulled out chairs and settled down. Lilith promptly found herself seated opposite her parents and in between Daphne and Gwen, who immediately turned and pinched her hard on each side.

"*Willkommen* to Berlin, Lily," whispered Gwen.

"It's Lilith," she hissed.

"We will make your stay enjoyable," said Daphne.

"Ze German way," finished her sister.

Lilith silently fumed, afraid to lose control and snap at the sisters in the presence of their mother, not to mention her own mother who eyed

her suspiciously from across the table.

"Lilith! What took you so long?" she said.

"We were talking. About roses." Lilith forced herself to look serene, as if she'd taken the pills.

"Your luggage is in your room, pup. Where's Panther?" inquired Daniel.

"I...took care of him." Alfred pulled out a chair at the head of the table and sat down.

"You did, did you?" Daniel raised his brows.

They launched into an argument about dog breeds, how whippets were a joke (Alfred's opinion), and how mastiffs were unintelligent clumsy brutes (Daniel's opinion).

To tune them out, Lilith focused on getting food, pouring herself a glass of lemonade, and snatching the apple from the mouth of the roasted boar. As she ate and drank, the noise crawled under her skin. To make matters worse, Alfred Bloom delivered a welcome speech and everyone stood in turn, remembering the late Eugenia Bloom, the very reason for this family reunion. Gabby chatted up a few ladies, ran off, and came back with a bundle of hand-knit sweaters. Money exchanged hands and excited exclamations made Lilith's head hurt. The lights shined too bright. The food smelled too strong. The dishes and utensils clinked and clanked too loud.

Lilith's heart twanged too fast and her mouth went dry. It was too much, too irritating, too chaotic. She badly wanted to run upstairs, lock herself in her room, and stick her nose into *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, with Panther at her side. She looked up and spotted a skinny boy studying her from the far end of the table, untouched food on his plate, pallid face cupped in his hands. She judged him to be about her age, maybe a little older. They locked eyes, and understanding flashed between them.

He seemed to say, *Whoever invented family reunion dinners deserves to suffer...*

Lilith seemed to answer, *the terrible fate of enduring it every night.*

He squinted as if adding, *better yet, every hour.*

Lilith nodded, a smile spreading across her face.

"That iz Ed, our step-cousin. He iz mute." Daphne's hot whisper jerked Lilith out of her observation.

"He haz no tongue. Zey cut it out," added Gwen.

Lilith balled her hands into fists. "Did they?"

Daphne nearly stuck her fat lips into Lilith's ear, excitedly firing off the next bit of information. "He licked a frozen metal door. In ze winter. Would anyone *normal* lick a door? His tongue stuck to it. It froze. Zey had to cut it off with a knife."

"Zey tried sewing it back," Gwen interjected.

"Shut up." Daphne made an angry face, and Gwen promptly closed

her mouth.

Lilith was pressed between their hot bodies like a slice of bread in a toaster, and she urgently wanted to pop up.

"He hates sign language. He doesn't talk *at all*," Daphne continued testily. "He flips lights on and off in his room, like he is sending messages to someone. It is creepy." She threw a conspicuous glance at Ed.

Ed assumed the I-don't-see-you expression.

"How do you know?" Lilith asked sharply.

"We saw it yesterday," Gwen offered. "From our window."

"His face is so white. He looks like a ghost." Daphne smirked and took a deep breath to gossip some more, when Lilith decided she'd had enough.

"Well, I think he looks rather handsome," she said, and then stood up so fast that the chair fell out from underneath her.

At this point, the floor moved. Or maybe it seemed only to Lilith that it moved, because nobody else noticed anything, buzzing away merrily over their drinks, stuffing their faces with free food and meaningless conversations. Lilith stretched out both arms for balance in a practiced ballet move.

The room jolted sharply. A few glasses tinkled on the table; yet again, nobody took notice. Lilith realized she knew this would happen from the moment she laid eyes on the mansion, a sleepy tomb that woke up to greet the night.

"I *knew* it," she whispered, and felt the floor come out from under her feet as if the hall turned into a gigantic elevator cabin that descended underground.

Her heart hammered loudly, a cold sweat broke on her skin, and her mouth tasted bitter. She wanted to scream, to get someone's attention. Her parents quietly talked to each other, their heads bent. Lilith knew from years of experience that it was no use trying to tell them. Her grandfather laughed heartily at something Irma Schlitzberger just said. A little girl tugged on her mother's sleeve, demanding more cake. A group of ladies showed off their newly acquired sweaters to each other. People blurred into one nattering soup.

*Panther, I need you*, thought Lilith, and caught Ed staring at her. He held her gaze and nodded. He felt it too.

The floor lurched one more time as if the elevator stopped. Lilith lost her balance and promptly collapsed onto the floor.

## Chapter 3

# The Moving Mansion

Lilith knew that every house moved, but grandfather's mansion did more than that. Waking up the next morning in an unfamiliar bed, Lilith learned that not only did it descend underground for the night, but it also rearranged itself randomly throughout the day. None of the guests seemed to have registered this fact, peacefully strolling between rows of bushes and loudly expressing their delight. It's what woke Lilith and it's what she observed now through her second story window. Everybody seemed to love the garden. Everybody, except her. It had a hidden sinister side to it, and she was determined to uncover its secret.

Suddenly, the floor tilted and the room sped along the perimeter of the house, making a full circle and coming to an abrupt stop. Lilith clung to the windowsill, light-headed and tempted to use some very bad words. She tried to remember how she got here and who changed her into pajamas. Her rosy pajamas, that shade of diluted pink that reminded her of ballerinas and helped her go to sleep. Her other favorite colors were blue, red, and black, each represented by a different beret and acting like mood setters.

"You can turn inside out or fly to Mars, for all I care. Go ahead. I'm not scared of you," she whispered to the room.

The room didn't answer.

"That was very rude. I'm talking to you," said Lilith.

They stared at each other.

"Fine. Have it your way," Lilith scoffed, looking around in search of her luggage.

Compared to her room back home, this one had no color. About ten by ten feet, it gleamed in the morning sun with white walls, a white-painted iron bed, and white cotton bedding, as if grinning a dazzling smile. Even the doors were white, identical and unlabeled.

Lilith spotted her bag, shed her pajamas, and pulled on skinny jeans, a rosy cardigan, red Mary Janes, and her red beret, and then she cautiously opened one of the doors.

Behind it was a shared bathroom. An elderly lady smelling of soap, her head full of rollers and her face covered with green paste, turned and screamed. For the next minute, Lilith endured a gnarly finger shaking two inches from her nose and a high-pitched ululating voice telling her in bad English what a naughty girl she was to barge in without knocking. At last, the lady convulsed in a series of coughs and flung both hands to her chest in utmost distress over the girl's lack of manners.

Lilith shut the door, breathing fast. Promptly, another door swung

open and Gabby slid in, followed by an aura of woolly scent and irritation. "I see you're up and dressed. Good. We need to have a little chat."

"Um..." Lilith said.

"Good job scaring everyone with your theatrics yesterday." Gabby glared. "I had to chalk it up to jetlag."

"What?"

"You fainted. At dinner. You don't remember? I know exactly why it happened, missy. You must have spit out your pills, while your father and I were busy. No need to roll your eyes. I know it for a fact, and I don't want to hear any stories."

"I wasn't—"

"You thought you could hide them in the car?" She shook the vial, letting the tablets rattle.

"I didn't—"

"Very clever. Just so you don't attempt to do this again, you'll take three pills today. *Three*. Don't give me that accusatory look. I'm not leaving until I see you swallow them." Gabby stared her daughter down.

"But, Mom—" she tried again, although she knew that once Gabby Bloom started her wrath, nobody could interrupt her.

"Nope. No excuses." With a sigh of impatience, Gabby popped out three capsules. "Take them."

Lilith stared, wishing the pills would melt or catch fire.

"*Now*," Gabby said forcefully. Her face exuded that parental care that bordered on malice despite best intentions.

Lilith's heart fell. Desperate, she decided to go for the truth. "Mom, I'm feeling okay, I promise. Yes, I spit out the pills, and I'm sorry."

"See? I knew it."

"But I *swear* it wasn't why I fainted. It's this place. There's something going on here. The rose garden, it stinks. Doesn't it stink to you? And the mansion...it moves just like our house, only worse. It goes up and down, like an elevator. The rooms can move too, at least my room did. That's why yesterday, when the dinner hall descended..." Everything she said suddenly sounded so silly that she paused, groping for words.

Gabby sighed. "I thought I asked you not to give me any stories. It won't work, Lilith, you know it. Open your mouth, please."

Backed into a corner, Lilith had no choice but to oblige. Gabby placed the capsules on her tongue.

"It really moves, Mom," Lilith mumbled before swallowing, fantasizing about gagging herself later.

Gabby's features twitched like those of a squirrel. "Please. We've been through this before. Listen to me. I want you to have a good time while we're here, okay? Hang out with those girls, whatever their names are, Gina and Daisy—"

“Gwen and Daphne.”

“Take a walk in the garden, socialize a bit, get out of this room and forget about your books. I don’t know, maybe—”

“Mom, books are my *life*.”

“Smell the roses. Where did you get this idea about the garden smelling bad? It smells wonderful. Your dad and I are going to look at it today. Your grandfather is showing us some new bushes he planted. You’re welcome to join us, if you’d like.”

“Actually, I really need to pee.”

“Breakfast will be served soon, you better—”

“Mom, it is of *paramount* importance that I relieve myself. I don’t like soiling my jeans.” Lilith’s typical approach worked, as always.

Disgusted, her mother opened the bathroom door and pushed Lilith inside. It consisted of a tiny toilet, tiny sink, tiny shower stall, and tiny window. The elderly lady was gone.

Lilith locked the door, kneeled, stuck two fingers in her throat, and—flushing the toilet simultaneously—expertly threw up three half-dissolved pills. She had years of practice; she’d been forced to take medicine since elementary school, after teachers complained about her not paying attention, daydreaming, or spontaneously dancing in the middle of the classroom. Neither the principal nor her parents believed that the school building only stood still when Lilith moved.

Needless to say, she became the laughing stock of her class from day one. Some boy called her *loony*, and the name stuck. She escaped into books (primarily about Sherlock Holmes), into ballet lessons (which helped her concentrate), and into sniffing flowers (to block out revolting odors issuing from the ground, indicative of places where someone, or something, decomposed). After having survived her grandmother’s funeral and the reek of the cemetery at the age of almost three, Lilith could handle any stink, that is, until she smelled Alfred Bloom’s rose garden.

Shuddering in revulsion, Lilith stuck her face under the faucet, gulped water, and hurried out of the bathroom. Following her mother, she sped through the corridor lined with identical doors, down the marble staircase, and into the dinner hall, freshly cut roses already arranged in vases.

“Look. There are your friends, Gina and Daisy,” Gabby said brightly.

Lilith decided not to bother with an answer.

“Excellent, you’ll have company. Eat, please. You know it’s not good to take your medicine on an empty stomach.” Gabby whispered that last part. “I’ll go wake your father. We’ll be right back.” The next moment, she took off.

Lilith approached uncertainly. She expected breakfast to be the usual American fare, but what she saw made her gasp with glee. The

table offered all kinds of jam, marmalade, syrup, and nougat-crème; plates of rolls, bowls of yogurt, and trays of freshly made waffles that issued a delicious smell.

Gwen and Daphne already devoured their food, their pudgy bodies squeezed into matching tank tops and shorts. Lilith halted, conscious of her jeans, long-sleeve cardigan, and beret. She couldn't help it, always feeling cold, finding relief only in taking hot showers or warming her hands on Panther's belly.

"Panther," she exclaimed under her breath. "I forgot all about Panther. Oh, how could I. Oh, how *disgraceful*. Oh—"

She noticed her grandfather's studying glare.

"GUSTAV!" he bellowed.

At once, and seemingly out of nowhere, the butler emerged and placed the whippet into Lilith's arms. It happened so fast, for a moment Lilith became speechless.

"Panther!" she said, and kissed his head while he licked her face, as if they'd been separated for an eternity. "Oh, Panther, I missed you."

"I certainly missed you, too," he growled. "Oops, here comes the creep."

Lilith looked up.

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

"Yes, *unequivocally*," Lilith replied.

"Fond of big words, are you? I hear you read a lot. Just like your father...he was a bookworm. I always thought that reading books was a waste of time. Fills your head with unnecessary nonsense. I read only business books...and suggest you do the same. You need to learn how to make money." He tapped a finger on her forehead.

Lilith decided that she now had *two* perfectly valid reasons to hate her grandfather.

"I understand you missed your...creature," he continued. "I'm afraid, however, that we can't have it with us for breakfast."

*Then why did you give him to me?* Lilith wanted to ask, but she bit her lip. Her grandfather seemed to enjoy trying her patience. She decided not to give him the pleasure.

"It'll have to wait...by the door. Bär will guard it."

"Excuse me?"

"My mastiff. You had the pleasure of meeting him yesterday."

"Oh, that—" Lilith almost said *monster*. Bär, she suddenly remembered, meant *bear* in English. It matched him perfectly. From her father's several unsuccessful attempts to teach her German, Lilith only picked up the names of the animals. "Certainly, Grandfather," she said sweetly and let go of Panther, who held his tail in defiance, letting Gustav lead him away.

Brooding, ignoring Gwen and Daphne chatting her ears off, and

barely touching any food, Lilith anxiously scanned every entering face, hoping to see Ed. He failed to show up. Instead, her parents strolled in. Lilith stoically endured her father's clumsy hug and half-listened to her mother's instructions to not leave the property and to please have some fresh air and to *please* socialize and to *PLEASE* be back in time for dinner, for an important announcement. After nibbling on a waffle and upending a glass of juice, Lilith managed to escape, snatch Panther right from under Bär's nose to his loud grumble, and slink out into the garden.

Here she took a deep breath, only to cover her nose, suppressing the desire to throw up because the foul odor seemed stronger, as if whatever produced it spoiled rapidly. Or got closer.

"How can something so beautiful smell so bad?" she said.

"Kindly ask your grandfather," growled Panther. "And please *kindly* relax your grip. I don't recall ever pronouncing my pleasure at being suffocated in your loving embrace, as much as I love you, of course."

Lilith scoffed and lowered her pet to the ground.

"Thank you. Much better." Panther stretched and yawned. "And I'm eternally grateful to you for asking me about how in the blazing squirrels I endured the night."

"Oh! My apologies. How *did* you sleep? And where...*where* did you sleep..." Her voice trailed off.

The garden held her spellbound.

Numerous rosebushes formed long rows separated by gravel pathways. They started out straight, and then blended into elaborate patterns, forming a labyrinth that stretched for at least a hundred yards, all the way to the Grunewald forest, in the middle of which the Bloom property hid from public eye. The flow of the uniform red surface stumbled here and there on white-painted iron arbors covered with even more roses.

Lilith walked up to one. "Eugenia," she read on the sign. "Panther, look. It's called Eugenia, after my grandmother. And this one is called Cadenza—"

"Nice names. Now, can I go pee on them?" Panther stuck out his tail and went sniffing.

Lilith regarded him sternly. "Panther Bloom Junior!"

"What, I'm a dog, okay? Besides, I feel like doing something mean to this place. It gives me the willies." He lifted his leg, let out a shiny stream, and quickly ran back. "It stinks in here, mercilessly." He sneezed in his very dramatic doggy way.

"I know. I want to find out what's causing it. You up to investigating together, dear Watson?"

Panther looked up, obviously displeased. "I deduce that you have read too many Sherlock Holmes books. Don't tell me twelve-year-old girls partake in pretense games. I happened to have formed a much higher opinion of your maturity."

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Says he who still plays with his stuffed squirrel."

It was impossible to tell if Panther blushed, due to his face being covered entirely in black fur. He growled something incoherent.

"Look, if pretense games go against your definition of fun, I understand fully. No problem. Too bad, because I thought of offering you steak. As payment. For the job."

"Steak?" Panther growled with interest.

"Yeah, it's this thick piece of juicy meat?"

"Well, there does seem to be a rather unfortunate lack of rodents." Panther glanced around.

"Panther Bloom Junior. Do you agree to investigate the mystery of the rose garden with me?" Lilith squinted at him.

"Yes."

"You give me your word?"

"The word of a whippet," Panther barked proudly.

"Splendid."

She shook his paw.

A strange sound caused them both to perk up. Someone, or something, sighed. It sounded simultaneously like the rustle of leaves and a human voice. It came from the end of the garden, rippling across the bushes in a gust of wind.

"Don't tell me I'm the only one who heard it." Lilith stared at Panther, her heart drumming.

"Let's hope it's only a giant mutant squirrel," Panther barked, his eyes ablaze with hunting fever.

Without another word, they sprinted toward the sound, not noticing that someone witnessed their departure.

Peeking through the greenery, Ed lowered his drawing pad and followed them into the garden.

## Chapter 4

# Through The Arbor

Upon hearing a scary noise, most children typically scream and flee. Not Lilith. Excited by the prospect of solving a mystery, she ran after Panther, deeper and deeper into the sea of roses. The further they went, the taller the bushes became, changing from groomed shrubs to tangled bramble. Passages became narrower, turns sharper. Now and then stray canes stuck out, grabbing at Lilith's clothes. One of the thorns sliced her ankle, producing a few brilliant drops of blood. Panting, she stopped, letting Panther lick the wound clean, happy that she wore long clothes on this hot summer day. Presently, they found themselves in a cool shadow, the sun obscured by a tunnel of roses.

"How much farther?" Lilith licked her lips, gasping.

"Open your nostrils, madam." Panther lolled out his tongue. He liked calling Lilith *madam* when she missed something obvious. "Can't you smell it? My nose is telling me, around the corner."

"Yes, I *can* smell it, just can't tell the distance, my dear Watson. Whatever that thing is," Lilith said, bending to catch her breath, "it's *indubitably* revolting."

"Fine by me," Panther snarled. "I've been stuck all night in a cage next to Bär," he barked. "The stench that thing produces, you have no idea. He farted a million times. I thought I would faint. This"—he sniffed—"does not compare."

"Says a dog about another dog. You know, sometimes I wonder if you're a dog at all," Lilith said, perplexed.

Panther produced a noise that sounded very close to *pfft!*  
"Sometimes I wonder if you're a girl at all."

"Most certainly not. I'm a grown woman stuck in a girl's body, which is rather unfortunate."

"Are you? For a woman you lack a certain feminine nature."

"As much as you lack canine."

"I beg your pardon?"

Lilith stuck out her tongue at him.

"That's very mature," Panther growled.

They would probably engage in more banter, if not for a stray rose. It slightly brushed Lilith's face.

"What's that?" Lilith whirled around and peered at the closest flower. The flower pretended not to move.

"Your stray feminine nature?" came from below.

Lilith pretended she didn't hear and reached out. As if anticipating, a thorny stem swiftly slapped her hand, slicing it open.

“OWWWW!” Lilith jumped, sucking on the cut.

At the same time, distant voices penetrated the thick greenery: The high timbre of Daniel Bloom, the chitter of Gabby Bloom, and the low baritone of Alfred Bloom. *That’s right*, Lilith remembered, *he’s showing them his new rosebushes*. On first impulse she wanted to call out, but her gut instinct deduced that neither she nor Panther were supposed to be in this part of the garden and they’d get in trouble if discovered.

“Shhh!” She put a finger to her lips, eyeing Panther.

“Was I the one screaming?” he growled quietly.

They tiptoed away, walking backward, until Lilith’s body pressed into an overgrown arbor. In another moment, it entwined them both with its thorny creepers, knitting them into an impenetrable cocoon. Lilith’s scream died in her throat. Panther could barely whimper. They struggled to breathe as a mass of slithering leaves tried to part their lips to gag them.

Someone, or something, sighed again, this time much closer. Just when Lilith thought she would suffocate, they dropped onto a carpet of damp leaves, on the opposite side of the arbor. It stood sentinel over them, silent.

They landed on the garden’s other, more sinister side. Lilith coughed, first to get rid of the leaves, then from the overwhelming stench. Thick fog obscured her vision, making the garden look like a pool of some ghastly substance. Gigantic rosebushes wove canes into dark misty tunnels.

Lilith exchanged a petrified glance with Panther.

“Congratulations, you have successfully arrived on Mars, your favorite planet,” he growled.

“This is *not* how I would expect it to look.” Lilith pulled twigs out of her hair and fixed her beret. “So the arbors must be the entrances to other side of the garden...”

More sighing reached them, now with added cries of pain.

“It’s a her,” Lilith said, eyes round.

“The Martian queen welcomes you.” Panther nervously looked around. “You go on. I changed my mind. Giant mutant squirrels no longer interest me. I’ll wait for you back at the mansion. Bye!” He made to dart away.

“Hey!” Lilith caught him by the tail. “You’re not going anywhere. You agreed to investigate with me.”

“Did I?” Panther whimpered.

“You gave me your word. Where is your doggy dignity?”

Lilith swiftly stood, shook off the debris, and waded forward, feeling her way in the milky haze with outstretched arms. Panther reluctantly followed.

A gush of sickly warm wind tore through the fog, and a revolting odor, moldy and ancient, made Lilith cough. Her heart pounded like an

enormous bell, her stomach protested, but she couldn't turn back. She had to see what made this racket and emitted this smell.

The tunnel abruptly ended and they found themselves in a circular clearing, face to face with the mastiff. He roared and snapped so closely to Lilith that she shrieked. Panther launched into hysterical barking. Bär advanced. Lilith automatically took a step back. Her foot caught on a root and she fell, landing on a tangle of rose canes that instantly slithered over her, pinning her to the ground. Meanwhile, the whippet and the mastiff joined into a chorus of snarling, attempting to bite each other's heads off.

"Panther!" Lilith cried. "The stems trapped me. I can't move!"

"Hold on!" he barked, facing the mastiff. "Kind canine brother, I propose we resolve this matter peacefully. As soon as I get back to the mansion, I'll have a slice of very juicy steak in my possession. I'll sacrifice one half of it for your chewing pleasure, if you let us pass."

Thick saliva dripped from either side of Bär's muzzle.

"Right," said Panther. "Let's try a different approach."

"If you want to see your friend shredded alive, now is your chance!" Lilith screamed.

"Just a moment."

The mastiff crouched, ready to lunge. The whippet raised his head proudly, ready to fight to death. Lilith struggled and squirmed against the ever-tightening vines.

A piercing wail made them pause. The mastiff responded with an uncharacteristic-for-his-size frightened whining. A tall figure parted the rolling mist, and there stood Gustav, his head shiny with perspiration. He seized Bär by the scruff of the neck, produced a pair of pruning shears, and snapped the vines off Lilith in a few practiced moves.

"*Raus! RAUS!*" he screeched, waving his hand.

Lilith didn't need to be told twice. She instinctively knew that *raus* meant *out*. Oblivious to stinging cuts, she yanked herself up and sprinted, Panther at her feet. They ran into the tunnel, tore through the overgrown arbor, and came out the other side of the garden, twisting and turning and getting lost in the maze, until they hit a fence.

Lilith wheezed, catching her breath. Panther lolled his tongue, panting. They looked at each other, and after a brief pause resumed their quest, sprinting in the opposite direction, only to bump into the fence again, behind which Grunewald forest watched them with amusement.

"I can smell a way out, but it keeps shifting!" Lilith whined. "Can you smell it?"

"You're hurting my doggy feelings," Panther barked.

Lilith only grunted.

They ran and ran and ran. How many laps they did and how many hours passed, neither of them could tell. Dusk crept into shadows. They were nowhere close to the mansion, both hungry and exhausted, and

most certainly late for dinner. Lilith plopped onto the ground, fuming. "I suppose it won't let us out until it wants to. This whole investigation idea was an *ostentatious* waste of time."

"And whose idea was it, may I ask?" Panther sneered.

"How very nice of you to support me," Lilith hissed. She grabbed her head and cried in dismay. "My beret! Oh, I've lost my beret!" Horror flooded her stomach. Her mother would ask for it.

Panther cleared his throat. "If I may profess my doggy opinion, apart from the terrible catastrophe of losing your beret, *I* don't think we wasted our time. *I* think we discovered more than we could hope for."

"Did we, dear Watson? And what would it be, dare I ask?" asked Lilith irritably.

"Number one, your grandfather is a creep."

Used to keeping her opinions about people to herself, Lilith merely gave him the look. She thought it impolite to gossip about people behind their backs, preferring to tell the truth to their face.

"Number two, it's not the garden that stinks, it's something that's in the garden," growled Panther.

"Not something, *someone*. It's a *her*. I'll hazard a guess that she's very old. And in pain," added Lilith.

"And she is guarded by Bär most of the day and night." Panther stuck out his chest importantly.

"How do you know?" Lilith asked, surprised.

"That hook of a guy took him out as soon as I pretended to be asleep. Why would he take a dog on a walk in the middle of the night?"

"You mean, the butler?"

"No, I mean the spine-chilling, bald-headed butler creep."

Lilith rolled her eyes. "And you're only telling me *now*?"

"Well, pardon me. I haven't had the chance."

"Brilliant. Now we're stuck in a garden that happens to have a certain female decomposing corpse in its depth that is perhaps sneaking in between the bushes right this very second, getting ready to devour us," Lilith hissed.

"You're right. There it is." Panther pointed his muzzle.

Lilith nearly fell over from fright, peering into the darkness.

A light flickered in the distance. "You..." She glared at the whippet, her heart drumming. "It's just a flashlight."

"Nah, it's a special squirrel-firefly crossbreed. It shines if you stare at it, so if I were you, I'd stop staring."

Lilith narrowed her eyes, which lost its desired effect in the darkness. Panther grinned, which had the full effect in the darkness, due to his exceptionally white teeth.

The light shined about fifty feet away, dancing in rhythm with the movements of its owner.

"Do you think you could kindly—"

"Way ahead of you, *madam*." Panther sniffed the air. "Incidentally, it's Ed. I thought teenagers generally stink, but this one smells like cookies."

"Shall we?" Fueled with hope, Lilith brushed off her clothes and at once tore in the direction of the light, Panther at her heels.

Excited yet careful, they kept their distance. Occasionally, the light would go out, as if waiting for them to catch up, and then go on again. Soon, bushes became thinner and shorter, looking more like a groomed garden as opposed to a wild overgrowth. Back porch mansion lights came into view. Lilith sprinted breathlessly toward them. One more turn and they emerged at the exact spot where they started their journey this morning. Lilith looked around for Ed. Panther quickly raised a leg at a bush and let out a fizzing line of urine.

"Panther Bloom Junior!" Lilith cried, aghast.

"LILITH!" Gabby Bloom ran down the steps, her face yellow in the electric light.

"I was beyond myself! Your father has nearly lost his mind. Where have you been? What on earth did you do? Look at you—what happened?" She turned Lilith this way and that, recording the damage through metal-rimmed glasses.

"Have you any idea what time it is? You missed dinner!" It sounded like the end of the world. To Lilith, however, it sounded like the beginning of an adventure on an otherwise boring trip, not to mention her lucky avoidance of Gwen and Daphne.

"Mom!" She caught her breath, forgetting to sound sarcastic. "Mom, you wouldn't believe what we found!" But as soon as Lilith said it, she knew it to be true. No way would her mother believe that the garden was alive, that it hid some dead crying woman-thing in its depth, and that to get there, you had to be swallowed and spit out by an overgrown arbor.

"What could you possibly find in a rose garden?" her mother inquired.

"Nothing," Lilith said, her voice falling.

She glanced at Panther. He produced an almost human sigh. Lilith could've sworn she saw Ed flash his light once more from behind the mansion, as if saying, *I'm glad you found your way back. Happy to help. Your friend, Ed.*

"Your friend," Lilith muttered, tasting the sound of it.

Panther growled jealously.

"Whatever happened to your beret?" Gabby asked suddenly. "I thought I saw you put it on this morning."

Lilith inhaled, exhaled, and resorted to the only defense she had against her mother's wrath. "Wild elephants ate it, Mother. They thought it was a gigantic strawberry from Mars. In fact, the garden was full of them. Elephants, not strawberries. I'm *dreadfully* sorry we missed

dinner. We watched them do a private ballet performance for us. In tutus. Right, Panther?"

Panther raised his ears and flashed her a look that could only mean, *Did you really say elephants in tutus?*

"Lilith!" Gabby's lips trembled. "I've had enough of your nonsense for today. Off you go to your room." She seized her daughter's shoulder and marched her through the back door into the foyer, up the stairs, and along the dark corridor. Panther quietly trotted behind.

"We'll talk about this tomorrow. Your father is very upset, and so is your grandfather. He sent out his guests to search for you. His guests! Do you understand what that means? Those are our relatives we're talking about. What will they think—"

Lilith tuned out the rest, happy that among the confusion nobody snatched Panther away. Gabby reminded her to take the pills in the morning, shut the door, and departed.

Lilith let out her breath, without realizing she held it all this time. "Panther, we're together!" she whispered.

"May I confess that I thoroughly despise your mother?" Panther jumped onto the bed and immediately curled up. Lilith dropped next to him, not caring to change or get under the covers.

"Oh, don't mind her." As usual, Lilith held her true opinion to herself. "Mothers and daughters historically get on each other's nerves. She's just worried about me. Listen, let's talk about solving this mystery. Let's talk about...what was it I wanted to talk about? The garden's mystery? No, I think...it was the mystery's garden. No, that doesn't sound right." She mumbled some more and soon drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 5

# The Talking Heads

*Thud.* Lilith heard something heavy fall and roll. Again. And again. It took her sleepy brain a few minutes to process this information before her eyelids fluttered open. Moonlight shined into the room, coloring it silver. The stink of the garden acquired an almost metallic tang. Someone breathed laboriously outside, performing what must've been a strenuous physical task. Lilith rolled out of bed and crouched by the window, peering from behind the curtain. What she saw froze her to the spot. She didn't even feel Panther brush her leg and plop his head onto the windowsill.

On the back porch, in a pool of moonlight, a stout male figure raised and lowered an axe onto...onto...Lilith blinked to make sure she saw right. Several bodies formed a row. Alfred carefully stepped between them, lowering the axe and picking up severed heads like flower buds.

Lilith couldn't watch anymore. Her knees buckled and she staggered back, bumping into the bed. Her heart thumped erratically and her ears buzzed. She sunk into pillows to prevent herself from passing out. Panther crawled next to her, licking her face.

The chopping noises abruptly stopped. Immediately, a couple squelching sounds issued from above, as if someone pulled something out of the mud.

"He'll chop your head off too, if you won't sleep, little miss," said a woman's raspy voice.

Lilith craned her neck to look and wished she didn't. Hung on the wall like a hunter's trophies, a couple severed heads silently studied her. They resembled huge rosebuds, their necks thinning into stems and disappearing into the wall. The room filled with the smell of a butcher's shop.

Mortified, Lilith slowly crawled to the back of the bed, Panther right next to her, trembling.

"No, he won't," said the other head. It had plump lips and dark skin. "He said he'd pull out her guts and use them for bratwurst."

"Sorry we're late. Is she scared yet?" A male head broke through the wall with a wet crunch, its black hair parted neatly in the middle. Next to it another one appeared with barely a pause, that of a woman with a very angular jaw. "Norman, you could've waited for me. You know I don't like being rushed. Is she scared yet?"

"Shh! I just asked that."

"How am I supposed to know what you asked or what you didn't?"

The first head spoke over them loudly. "I was *just* saying she'll get

her head chopped off—”

“And *I* was saying she’ll get her guts pulled out.”

Lilith blinked. She didn’t recognize who the heads belonged to. Without a beat, they launched into an argument.

“I thought we agreed on the guts thing.”

“Pfft! Cutting off heads sounds much scarier.”

“Quartered. You should’ve said she’d be quartered.”

They kept talking over one another, until the first one shushed them and addressed Lilith. “You’re guest number thirteen, little miss. What an unlucky number.”

“Zat was lame, Agatha.”

“Did you try telling her she’d be eaten alive? I find it works best. Also, making crunching noises—”

“Excuse me,” said Lilith. “Are you trying to scare me?”

The heads glanced at each other worryingly, and appeared to have promptly gone to sleep. Or fallen dead, for that matter.

Lilith rubbed her eyes. The heads didn’t disappear. Horrified, she wanted to reach out and touch them, to make sure her mind wasn’t tricking her. Blood didn’t scare her. She helped her father deliver countless puppies, including Panther, who presently whimpered much like an ordinary dog.

Lilith stared at the wall. Nothing happened. After another eternity, she slunk closer to take a better look. “Panther? I think they’re part of the mansion.”

“That much is obvious,” Panther grumbled. “However, as exciting as this discovery is, I rather prefer sleeping with Bär from now on.” He crawled to the edge of the bed.

“Stop it.” Lilith caught him. “You’re not going anywhere.” She held him tight, ignoring his protests. “If they’re part of the mansion, then it wasn’t my grandfather chopping them off, and those were not real bodies. This mansion, it doesn’t just move, it can take on a shape of other people. Why do you think it’s trying to scare me? She looks familiar...” Lilith pointed to the hook-nosed head.

“I didn’t sign up for this,” mumbled Panther.

“I can’t remember where I saw her. Where did I see you?”

The head didn’t answer, taking in the room with dead calm.

“Panther, listen. This is important. I need you to tell me something,” said Lilith seriously. “All of this is real, isn’t it?” She pinched herself.

Panther grinned. “Nope.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“It’s a terrible fruit of your imagination.”

“Panther,” Lilith warned.

“What? I’m very upset, okay? You promised me steak, and I still haven’t gotten it. Your grandfather is a creep. There are no dogs to run around with. And no, Bär does *not* count as a dog. I can’t find any clean

smelling bushes to pee on. So here I am, trying to sleep it off, when this racket wakes me up from a dream. It was the most beautiful dream I've ever seen! I was chasing squirrels, a dozen fat, juicy squirrels." He rolled up his eyes. "Then I caught them, they tasted like—"

"Panther Bloom Junior," Lilith interrupted. "Answer me this second. Are they real," she said, pointing at the heads, "or am I going crazy?"

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

"Oh, is this what you want me to do? Okay, I'll touch one. No, wait. I will take one off the wall, I take all of them off—" She broke off.

A series of slurping noises emanated from the garden.

"*The bodies!*" they exclaimed, and rushed to the window.

The staircase gleamed, no sign of the bodies or blood, nothing. A few sucking gulps reached them from behind. Lilith and Panther wheeled around. The heads sunk into the wall like they were disappearing into a bog.

"Hey! Wait!" Lilith called. By the time she jumped on the bed, they vanished. She touched the wall, apprehensively at first, then banged on it in frustration.

"I'm trying to sleep!" shouted an elderly voice. "Is it not enough for you to barge into the bathroom? This is not a hotel, young *mädchen*. This is a private residence. This—"

Lilith covered her ears, waiting for the old lady to shut up. She trotted back to the window and leaned out, pondering. "What do you think all of this means?"

"Can we talk about something else? Squirrels, for example?"

"My dear Watson, I humbly ask you to give me your most *astute* opinion. As I recall, you have agreed to participate in this investigation. You gave me your *word*."

Panther scratched behind his ear, making thumping noises every time his leg missed.

"Panther?"

"I think I have fleas. Do you think I have fleas? I heard German fleas bite worse than—"

"Stop evading my question!"

"Can't a dog scratch himself? I thought you figured it out already. It's elementary, isn't it?" He tilted his head.

"What's elementary?"

"The mansion likes you because you don't get scared easily."

"And...?" said Lilith impatiently.

"And...I think it's unhappy about something. Something your creepy grandfather is doing. It's egging you on, to see how far you'll go. It must be all connected with that stinky woman-thing."

Lilith looked stunned, as if struck by a flash of genius. "I got it."

"Do you, now?"

Lilith chewed on a stray lock of hair. "What if grandfather invited everyone to this family reunion not to honor grandma's memory, but because he needs fresh bodies for the garden? What if it's not the house that's carnivorous but the garden? What if it feeds on people?" Lilith gasped. "*That's* it. Remember, he uses some secret fertilizer for his roses, something no other gardener has been able to replicate? *Of course* no other gardener can replicate it. Panther, he's a murderer. He kills people and buries them in the garden. Like plant food. That's why it stinks." Lilith trembled. "We need to stop him."

"We?"

"You said you'd help!" Lilith said, exasperated.

"We have no facts. This is a mere speculation. Besides, it's not exactly my view of a vacation. I didn't know it would involve sniffing out dead bodies."

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

Panther didn't get a chance to answer. Adventure fever overcame Lilith. "We're going to work as a team, like Holmes and Watson. I'll give you little tasks to do. While you carry them out, I will—"

Panther coughed politely. "May I interject?"

"Sketch out a plan of action. I think I'll start with—"

Panther coughed louder.

"You're interrupting me." Lilith glanced at her pet with irritation.

"You forgot one tiny, insignificant detail."

"And what's that?"

Panther puffed out his chest. "I did not realize the full scope of this affair. In light of recent changes that seem to have significantly added to my workload, I request an increase in wages. I absolutely insist. One steak is not enough. It's a joke."

Lilith folded her arms. "A joke, is it? I didn't realize how utterly materialistic you are. All right. Fine. What else do you want?"

"I'd like a new leash," Panther growled.

"Okay."

"And a new bed. The old one is falling apart."

Lilith thought about it. "Okay. A new leash and a new bed."

"And that jacket we saw at the store." Panther pushed his luck, blinking innocently.

"That pink one?" Lilith raised her eyebrows.

"So? Pink is my favorite color. Besides, it's more *blush*. Very delicate. Matches my tongue."

Lilith looked at him in disbelief. "I'm hearing this from a dog. Fascinating. Anything else, while you're at it?"

"Certainly. One hour walks, not your usual thirty minutes. I want sixty minutes, not a minute less. And I get to chase squirrels. Off-leash."

"Fine," Lilith sighed. "After we get home I'll save up to get you a new bed and a new leash and a new jacket. And I'll take you on hour-

long walks.”

“Every day,” Panther supplied.

“Every day. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes. We most certainly do.” Panther properly stretched out his paw and Lilith properly shook it.

First sunrays broke over the horizon, coloring the sky a timid shade of rouge. Lilith yawned. Panther yawned and leaped onto the bed. “Are we done? Can we go to sleep now?” Without waiting for an answer, he wiggled under the blanket and lay still.

Lilith joined him, exhausted yet too agitated to relax. The rest of the night she spent in a series of fits accompanied by angry growls from her pet, who escaped to the floor, leaving his friend to toss and turn. No matter how hard Lilith tried to make her brain stop, it kept coming up with one idea after another, letting her doze off for an hour here, an hour there, until it was time to get up.

## Chapter 6

# On The Scent

Lilith plodded to the bathroom. Loudly knocking before entering, she jumped into the shower, not so much to wash off the dirt, but to think. Running water calmed her mind, helping her map out the day. She needed to scrutinize the rose garden, to examine its every alley, spy on its every shadow, smell, and sound. She hoped to hear the woman-thing again, but this time she'd be prepared. Panther would sniff out potential locations of buried bodies, and she'd go look for Ed. There also remained the unknown of yesterday's announcement.

Lilith looked around to make sure nobody could hear her. "I wonder what my *treacherous sleazebag* of a grandfather might have announced that was so important?"

Without warning, the bathroom moved. Screeching, it sped up, then down, then stopped, shaking like a wet animal.

Lilith held on to the shower door. "Oh, you don't like him either?"

The bathroom didn't answer, only stretched a little, cracking its joints.

"I understand. If you don't want to talk about him, that's fine." Unperplexed, she turned off the water, wrapped herself in a towel, and opened the door.

"Excuse me if I interrupted your routine. But thank you, and good morning," she said politely to the mansion at large.

Lilith chose a proper detective outfit: black jeans, black Mary Janes, black cardigan, and black beret. She checked herself in the mirror and nodded.

"Panther." She shook the whippet.

He yawned. "What? Go away. I'm on vacation." He covered his nose with both paws.

"Panther Bloom—" Footsteps in the corridor startled Lilith. "My medicine!" She grabbed the vial, shook out a capsule and twisted it open. Inside resided the powdered drug that was supposed to make her pay attention in class. She despised it. It dulled her senses, made her feel stupid and sluggish, and turned life boring. Smells lost their intensity, houses stopped moving, and her heart slowed down. It also caused insomnia, requiring her to take sleeping pills. She slept but saw no dreams.

To sum it up, on pills Lilith didn't feel herself.

She ran to the bathroom, dumped the powder out of two capsules, closed them, flushed the toilet, and returned just in time for her mother to enter.

"You're awake!" Gabby said, astounded. "And dressed." She took a lock of Lilith's hair, feeling it like yarn. "And you took a shower without me reminding you."

"Good morning to you too, Mother," Lilith said nicely. "You will be pleased to know that I'm planning to socialize today. I want to get to know every guest, to make a good impression. To compensate for my atrocious behavior."

"Really?" Her mother looked surprised.

"Really. *And* I'm taking my pills like you asked me to."

She needed to get her mother out of the way today. Exaggerating every gesture, Lilith placed two empty capsules on her tongue, grabbed a bottle of water from the bedside table, took a swig, and swallowed.

"I can't believe my eyes. What changed overnight?"

"Um..." Lilith started, very tempted to say, *Well, grandfather woke me up with chopping noises. He decapitated dead people with an axe. Then their heads appeared on the wall and wouldn't shut up, not letting me sleep. Then I discussed with Panther, who can talk by the way, how we're going to stop grandfather from murdering more innocents, because we think—well, I think—he feeds them to the garden. That's what makes his roses so bloody red. Naturally, we devised a plan to uncover his true intentions for the Bloom family reunion. Aside from this, and aside from the fact that the garden's stench makes me want to puke, nothing else significant happened.*

"Perhaps I was bitten by a flea? A German flea? I heard German fleas bite worse than American ones," Lilith said, staring at Panther who stretched, wagging his tail. He pretended he didn't hear. Gabby did, however.

"Lilith!" she chastised her daughter. "That's not a very sensible thing to say. Germany is the land of your ancestors. You have to respect your roots. Blooms date back to the thirteenth century, to Ludwig Bloom —"

"Who traveled to Berlin and discovered a wild rose garden," Lilith finished. "Mom, I know. I'm just—can we go eat? I'm hungry." Her stomach grumbled in agreement, having seen only a morsel of breakfast the day before. That, coupled with a lot of running around, made Lilith a very ravenous girl.

"We'll have breakfast in a minute."

"Mom? Where is dad?"

"Busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"He'll join us later, don't worry. We wanted to talk to you," Gabby continued, "but your grandfather—he's very pleased that you've shown such an avid interest in his garden. I'm talking about your escapade yesterday. I have an entirely different opinion about that, by the way. We *will* talk about it, missy, don't think I'll forget. Wait. I've lost my train of

thought.” She pressed on her temples. “Ah, yes. Your grandfather. He wants to spend the whole day with you. He has something important to tell you.”

Lilith’s heart sunk.

“Be nice. Eat fast, please. He’s waiting for you in the garden.” Gabby pushed up her glasses. “He wants to tell you about his announcement. *Personally*.” She smiled. It meant that the matter was serious.

Lilith swallowed, feeling dizzy. “Why can’t you tell me?”

“Lilith, are you listening? He’s taking you on a garden tour. It’s an honor, and I expect you to behave.” Gabby fixed a knitting needle behind her ear. “Anyway, your dad wants to go to a whippet race. We’ll have breakfast in Berlin and be back by dinner. You okay?” Gabby asked, her knitting needle falling as she bent to examine her daughter.

Lilith paled. The prospect of spending an entire day with her grandfather after deducing that he might be a murderer sucked all the courage from her almost thirteen-year-old heart. What could be so important about this announcement? Panther, always aware of Lilith’s moods, pawed on her jeans until she picked him up. His warmth made her feel better.

“Yeah, fine. Just hungry.”

“You sure? You don’t look so good.”

Panther coughed, producing something close to, *Said the queen of the ugly*.

Lilith pinched him. “I’m fine. Can we please go?”

“Okay then.” Gabby turned on her heels, blatantly ignoring Panther, who didn’t suffer much, blatantly ignoring her in turn.

On unbending legs, Lilith followed her mother into the vestibule. From here she could see guests already milling about in the dinner hall, piling plates high with waffles, spooning yogurt into bowls, and pouring coffee. Gabby quickly pecked her good-bye, Daniel waved from their rental car, and they took off.

“So much for being worried sick about me,” muttered Lilith, shutting the front door. “What was that for?”

“What?” Panther innocently looked up.

“You know what. The ugly joke.”

“Oh, *that*. I duly apologize, but your mother is not my beauty ideal. Not furry enough,” growled Panther. “Can you bring me some steak for breakfast? Please?”

“I can’t believe you have the nerve to ask for it.” She slid on Panther a collar that hung from a leash fixed by the door, and stomped into the hall without a glance back.

Bouquets of fresh roses graced the table, their petals painfully red. Lilith cringed, trying not to think about the source of such vivid color.

“Eat. I need to eat,” she muttered, picking out a place to sit and

automatically greeting people.

The Blooms were a very large family, its legacy firmly rooted in the gardening business. Naturally, most Blooms were floral experts, cousins and second cousins and third cousins to Ludwig Bloom's direct descendant, Alfred Bloom. He and his late wife, Eugenia, had a son, Daniel Bloom, who in turn had a daughter. Lilith. It meant that one day the Bloom mansion and its rose garden would belong to her.

*The entire property. I will own this entire property. Since dad's idea of a garden is to mow it clean and make it into a dog-race field, maybe grandfather is hoping that I can sway him to keep it. Or, wait.*

*Maybe...maybe he wants to avoid dad altogether?* Lilith froze. Could that be what grandfather announced yesterday? Giving the property over to his granddaughter? It never occurred to her until now, and it made her even more determined to uncover its secrets. No way she'd want to own a murderous garden that ate people. Never.

Lost in thought, Lilith pulled out an unoccupied chair. Immediately, everyone at the table turned to look, asking her the typical empty questions about how she slept and how come she's not at the race with her parents and what her plans were for the day and does she like the garden. Lilith frowned, her suspicions confirmed. The day before hardly anyone noticed her.

The Schlitzberger twins arrived and plopped down on either side of her.

"We heard you got lost yesterday," Daphne said with a nasty smile, stacking her plate with waffles.

"In ze rose garden," Gwen added, grabbing a roll.

Daphne slapped her sister's hand. "Zat iz mine! I saw it first." They proceeded to bicker at each other.

Lilith scanned the table for Ed. Disappointed, she turned to face the twins.

"Incidentally, one of my favorite pastimes is searching for bones of dead people," she said. "You know, skulls and such. I cover the best specimens in fluorescent paint and dangle them at night in front of people's windows. Took me a while to find one yesterday. It's a nice one, though; has all of its teeth intact. What room are you staying in, by the way?"

Daphne's face lost color. "*Mutter!*" she squealed, pointing at Lilith and firing off a string of German words.

Irma Schlitzberger, squeezed into a purple sweater no doubt of Gabby Bloom's handiwork, leaned over.

"Tsk-tsk, Daphne. It iz not nice to speak in German in front of your friend, when your friend doez not understand a word. Am I right, child?"

Other guests watched the exchange with interest.

Lilith's face turned hot. "Excuse me. I thought I mentioned it before. I'm not a child—"

"*Aber Mutter, sie...*" Daphne interrupted, throwing shrill words at her mother, which Irma returned with scolding remarks. Meanwhile, Gwen stole the roll from her sister's plate and stuffed it into her mouth.

"Hello." Someone tapped on Lilith's shoulder. She turned.

A boy around ten stood by her chair. He had a very smart look about him, his dark hair neatly parted in the middle. He smelled like hair gel.

"Um, my name is Patrick. Patrick Rosenthal. I'm from Seattle. I came here for the Bloom family reunion. It's very nice to meet you, cousin." He stretched out his hand in a practiced movement, his face splitting into a practiced smile. Even his speech sounded practiced.

"And, um...this is my sister, Petra." He pushed a little girl ahead of him, barely seven. She had an aura of sugary sweetness about her. It was the girl who demanded more cake, Lilith remembered.

"Hello!" she said brightly. "I'm Petra. What's your name?" Petra grinned, showing a missing tooth.

"Lilith Bloom."

Petra pressed a piece of paper into her hand. "It's a letter from our cousin Ed. It's probably a love letter. Our cousin Ed—"

"Petra!" Patrick said sternly. "He's *not* our cousin, he's a *step*-cousin. We're not even *related*. Mom told you—"

"Sabrina Rosenthal. Delightful to meet you." A woman shook Lilith's hand, and Lilith recognized—with horror—the face of one of the heads; the one with the angular jaw.

"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 heavy-set man, the grown-up version of Patrick, shook Lilith's hand. Lilith felt numb. His face belonged to the other head. Gripping her chair, she soon found herself surrounded by a crowd of relatives eager to chat.

"Trude Brandt, young *mädchen*," said an old lady, Lilith's room neighbor. Lilith thought she looked better with the green paste on her face. "I will talk to your grandfather about your behavior." She shook a gnarly finger.

"Hanna Haas." A mousy looking woman with large teeth and even larger glasses pushed forward a wheelchair. "My mother, Heidemarie Haas."

Heidemarie resembled a dried out ghost sitting amidst blankets, her eyes blind. She seized Lilith with shaky hands, palpating her face and relaying something to Hanna.

"My mother says you look just like your father, when he was your age. My mother says—"

Sabrina interrupted, asking something. Petra talked over Sabrina, Patrick talked over Petra, and Daphne talked over everyone else. Voices turned into a blur, smells mixed into a suffocating reek, and just when

Lilith thought she couldn't take it anymore, another horrible sigh penetrated the air.

Lilith not so much heard it as she felt it, jumping from freight. Nobody seemed to notice a thing. Her heart thumping wildly, excusing herself left and right, she gorged her food, eager to escape into the garden to start her investigation in earnest.

## Chapter 7

# The Bloom Heir

The rest of the breakfast turned into a nightmare. People chatted Lilith up, offered her food, poured her juice, smiled at her, and took pictures with her, until at last she managed to excuse herself under the pretext of a bathroom visit. She marched out of the hall, careful not to break into a run, dying to tell Panther about the sigh, and *dying* to read Ed's note. She clutched it in her sweaty palm so tightly, she was afraid the words may have melted off.

Panther waited by the door, tail wagging.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot about your steak. That woman-thing! Did you hear it sigh again?" Lilith whispered urgently, sliding off the collar.

"Not that I recall." Panther licked his muzzle, looking suspiciously smug, like he wasn't hungry at all. "I did hear an elephant sing, however. It was rather painful."

Lilith arranged her features into a scowl, when another sigh shook the air. She flinched, Panther growled. They rushed out of the vestibule so fast that neither of them noticed two servants coming from the kitchen.

She ran into them head-on, sending trays of apple strudels to the floor with a loud twang. Ed's note flew out of her hand and landed under an overturned bowl of vanilla sauce.

"No!" Lilith cried, darting for it. Two women in black dresses and white frilly aprons blocked her, picking up their fallen load. One of them straightened and Lilith almost fell to the floor herself.

The hook-nosed head stared at her. Lilith remembered this woman now. She served dinner, took dirty plates away, and brought clean ones. Her watery eyes made Lilith's skin crawl. The second servant stood up, sporting the dark-skinned head. Her plump lips parted into a smile at the sight of Panther.

"Did little miss hurt herself?" asked the first servant in that familiar raspy voice. Gray hair pulled into a bun revealed an egg of a skull, and Lilith thought that she could be Gustav's sister.

"No. Not at all. I'm fine, thank you."

Panther inconspicuously edged toward the overturned trays, snatched an apple strudel, and swallowed it whole, hiccupping.

"I'm Agatha, ze housekeeper. And zis is Monika, ze cook."

Monika waved and said, "Hallo!"

"It iz unfortunate zat we meet over ze spilled sauce."

Lilith thought that both the housekeeper and the butler matched the mansion's creepiness perfectly.

"I...I didn't see you. I'm sorry," said Lilith. "I apologize *profusely*. Can I help—"

"No need. We will take care of it." The housekeeper waved the girl aside and nudged the cook. Panther, his muzzle smudged with vanilla, jumped aside and pretended to study the ceiling. Lilith helplessly watched Monika scoop up Ed's note, together with the pieces of a broken bowl.

"Little miss didn't sleep well?" Agatha asked.

Lilith startled.

"Little miss needz to sleep, to see better where she iz going." Agatha's eyes flashed.

Dread filled Lilith's stomach. She took off at once, her soles skidding on the polished floor, until she made it out into the garden, breathless.

"That Agatha woman, if I may so observe, looked like a horse," Panther growled. "Now I will have a headache. Can't decide who is uglier, she or your mother."

"Not funny. Did you hear what she said? Did you see her eyes? She was there! How else would she know that I didn't get any sleep?" said Lilith.

Panther clamped his muzzle shut in an effort to look like a non-talking dog.

"Hey, don't ignore me. I'm asking—"

Preceded by the crunching of the gravel, Alfred Bloom strolled toward them, Bär at his side. Lilith felt the urge to flee. The garden seemed to move with her grandfather, accenting his burgundy suit with a reddish glow.

"Good morning, my dear girl!" he said with exuberance.

Lilith forced herself to smile, hoping her racing heart wouldn't betray her voice. "Good morning, Grandfather."

Bär grumbled. Panther grumbled back.

"Did you...have trouble getting away from the lot of them?"

Lilith could only nod.

"Ah, don't mind them. They're eager, of course, to make your acquaintance after my dinner announcement yesterday, the one you...missed," he said with disapproval.

*I think I know what it is, Grandfather,* thought Lilith, composing her features into a mask of attention. "Can't wait to hear it."

"I hope I'll be the first to break the news. Before I do...would you mind giving me an explanation for your disappearance? We were all rather worried."

"Oh, that. We got lost," said Lilith, shrugging.

"Lost? In my rose garden?" Alfred continued the mockery that Daphne started at breakfast, yet somehow Lilith thought that mentioning her hobby of dangling human skulls in front of people's windows

wouldn't do the trick this time.

"By *we* you mean...?" He walked closer.

Lilith took a step back. "Panther and I."

"You got lost with this...*creature*? In *my* garden? Honestly, dear. Think about it. Dogs are supposed to help you find your way out, not get you lost. I tell you, a whippet is not a dog, it's a joke. A breeder's mistake."

Panther snarled. Bär roared.

"Wouldn't you agree?" Alfred grabbed a handful of Bär's skin, at which the mastiff rumbled in pleasure. "This is what I call a dog. I can get you a puppy, if you'd like; to take home. What do you say?"

Panther stiffened. She picked him up, petting him reassuringly.

"I'm terribly sorry, Grandfather, but I have to decline," said Lilith politely. "At my age, when responsibility is merely a word that doesn't have much meaning, taking care of something as *exquisite* as a mastiff might be well beyond my abilities. But thank you very much for your incredible offer." She wanted to curtsy, but then decided it would be overkill.

"Pity," said Alfred, his smile dying. "Oh well. Perhaps it's for the best. Why don't you train on this...*parody* of a dog, before you decide whether or not you want the real deal."

Panther sneered in the most condescending way a dog has ever mastered.

"Excuse me, but—"

"Take Bär, for example. He is trained not to pollute my roses. Gustav told me that he saw your...*pet* relieve himself under a bush. I simply can't allow this to happen in my garden. GUSTAV!"

The butler seemed to appear out of thin air, as usual, and grabbed the whippet right out of Lilith's arms. Taken by surprise a second time, she snatched at thin air; Gustav had stepped out of her reach already. Panther barked hysterically. Bär launched into a series of guttural woofs that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

It took Lilith enormous willpower to suppress her anger. "My apologies. It's my fault. I wasn't stern enough with him. He won't do it again, I promise. As I recall, my mother told me you were going to take me on a garden tour?" Lilith waited, her face frozen in excited anticipation.

Alfred narrowed his eyes. "Yes...yes, of course." He seized her arm and walked her onto a pathway. Before disappearing behind a turn, Lilith glimpsed enthusiastic relatives pouring out of the back doors, evidently searching for her. Her skin crawled. On some level she was glad to escape their incessant inquiries.

She silently tugged along, breathing deeply to calm herself. If she assumed correctly, the man next to her has murdered people. Simple childish pleading didn't work with men like him; Lilith read enough

Sherlock Holmes books to know that. She had to be in complete control of her emotions to win. But to win what, exactly?

Within a few minutes of brisk walking, they waded deeper into the maze. Another turn, and there stood the overgrown arbor, its twisted canes parting like a doorway. They passed through. Instantly, a foul fog surrounded them and Alfred stopped.

"Now...where was I?" he said dreamily. "Ah, the dinner announcement. I read my will yesterday." He turned Lilith to face him, holding her shoulders. Her eyes watered from the stench. They stood in the same spot where she and Panther landed yesterday. *The sighing woman-thing must be close, she thought, somewhere beyond this tunnel.*

"Lilith Bloom, my only granddaughter. I have decided to make you the sole heir to the Bloom property after I die. Do you accept?"

He burrowed his beady eyes into hers.

Lilith felt rooted to the spot. She guessed it right, so why did her tongue feel like a stuffed sock all of a sudden?

"Oh, I'm...I'm eternally grateful," she stuttered, wanting to add, *Dead bodies included?* Her hands shook. "Thank you, dear Grandfather. I'm honored beyond words. May I ask, what exactly constitutes the Bloom property?"

"The mansion and the rose garden. Everything inside the fence belongs to me—to the Bloom family. But I would say that the garden is the best part." He sneered.

Goose bumps broke on Lilith's skin.

"What you'll see next stays strictly between you and me, is that understood?"

Lilith nodded, feeling her spine turn to ice.

"I need an actual answer."

"Yes, Grandfather."

"That's my girl." He patted her cheek. His palm felt rough and its warmth made Lilith flinch. She always thought the hands of a murderer should be cold and clammy.

"Your father...let's just say I don't expect him to change his mind. He never liked working in the dirt. The second he gets his hands on the garden, he'll uproot every bush and turn it into a racing course for his...*creatures*. I can't rely on him. You, on the other hand..." He peered into her face, his sickening breath inches away. "You seem to be rather interested in organic matter."

"What exactly do you mean by *organic matter*?"

He didn't answer, leading her to the clearing.

Patches of fog licked a circular glade the size of a small meadow. Surrounded by impenetrable bramble, the place resembled a roofless rotunda. In its center, dotted with flaming roses, grew a shrub about thirteen feet tall. It stunk mercilessly. Alfred extracted a pair of gardening shears from behind it and thrust them at Lilith. "A true

rosarian is not afraid of a few scrapes. I sense a true rosarian in you. Would you like to try? Prune it. Go on, fancy your grandfather."

"Excuse me, but..." started Lilith, struggling to hold the heavy tool upright. It looked too gruesome to be a normal gardening tool. "How do I do it exactly?"

"Let me give you a little demonstration." Fast like lightning, Alfred snatched the shears and hacked away at the bush, getting rained on by twigs, leaves, and petals.

"This," he lectured, "is how a master rosarian does it. Watch and learn, my dear girl." He danced around it in an almost feverish glee, describing what he does and cutting with astonishing speed.

"You snap off the old heads—it's called deadheading—for the new buds to bloom, see?" Lilith's grandfather never stopped moving. "Roses are delicate and capricious, you have to grab them by the throat while they're timid, then they're yours."

Lilith tried not to breathe; the stench overwhelmed her. She wondered if her grandfather sensed it. He snipped at the roses with astounding speed, breathing laboriously while carefully stepping between piles of sprigs. This reminded her of yesterday's nightmare.

A sigh of relief issued directly from the bush. Alfred camouflaged it by loudly slamming the shears shut and sticking them into the ground.

"Well..." He held something behind his back. "Do you accept my offer?"

Lilith couldn't speak, petrified and disgusted.

He thrust at her a bouquet of roses.

Distracted, she took it. Thorns dug into her palm, drawing blood. It trickled onto the ground and disappeared without a trace, as if the garden sucked in every drop and wanted more. With a cry, Lilith threw the roses away.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Please excuse me, Grandfather. I didn't mean to throw them. I'll pick them up."

"Don't worry about it." Alfred shoved the flowers aside with the tip of his shoe. "You have a whole garden at your disposal. You see, old stems need to be cut, to breathe and make room for new ones. There are plenty of old stems here." He spread his arms. "Rosebushes grow very fast, my dear girl. The only secret is...they have to eat, *a lot*, to produce a lot of flowers."

Alfred's piercing eyes studied Lilith.

She tried to look calm. "How do you feed a rose?"

"Ah! Excellent question. You feed it...*organic matter*. It's my secret, dear girl. It makes them want more, makes them hungry." His eyes sparkled. "I don't bury it in the ground like other gardeners do; I leave it on top, for them to find and eat as much, or as little, as they want. That's the key."

"What is this *organic matter* exactly?" Lilith shook visibly.

"Why, I thought you'd know this, from reading books. It's a matter composed of remains of once-living organisms."

"Once-living organisms."

"That's right."

Only now did Lilith notice what her grandfather did to the bush. He shaped it into a woman. She stood nearly thirteen feet tall, bulging with sizeable bust and hips, blossoms as eyes. *That's the sighing woman-thing*, thought Lilith, wishing Panther could witness it with her. *She must've been demanding to be cut to shape, to come alive.*

"Grandfather?" She pointed. "The rosebush. It looks like a woman. Is there a particular reason why you cut it like that?"

"Do you like it?"

The bush woman moved, or maybe it only seemed that way to Lilith, producing something small and red. Alfred took it, as calm as if he lifted a waffle from a plate.

"Well, look what I just found," he said.

"My beret."

"Have you been to this part of the garden before?"

"No," Lilith lied.

"Interesting. How do you think it got here?"

"Maybe Bär found it and dropped it?" Lilith cringed. She couldn't come up with a better lie, not while being stared at by a gigantic bush woman. "Grandfather? This rosebush, I think it's moving."

"Is it now?"

"Yes. I think I just saw it give you my beret."

Alfred grabbed Lilith by the shoulders and shook her. "Listen carefully. I thought we agreed on this. Do not breathe a word to anyone about what you saw, lest you end up not the one gardening, but the one being gardened *on*. Am I making myself clear?" He stretched his lips into a smile.

Lilith gulped.

"I'm still waiting for an answer. Do you accept my offer?"

Lilith could only blink.

"I understand, you need time to think. Is that it?"

She nodded.

"Well, I know you're a good girl. You *will* accept my offer by the end of your stay, won't you? The question is only when. The sooner you do it, the better. You know why?"

Lilith shook her head.

"Because," he said, switching to a whisper, "until you do, you may not leave my property. Nor do I want to catch you and your...*pet* wandering where you shouldn't, doing things you shouldn't be doing. When I need you, Gustav will fetch you. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Lilith croaked.

"And if I ever catch you trespassing in this clearing, I might just

find a way for you to never come out of the garden." He released his grip.

Lilith realized a terrible truth. Her grandfather played some kind of a cruel game, in which she had a part. If she wanted to collect any facts about the rose garden, about the *organic matter* it ate, and about the rosebush woman in particular, she needed to play sweet and stupid.

"Dear Grandfather, please excuse my nervousness. It's the jetlag. I must have imagined everything. I thank you for this amazing presentation. You are a true master rosarian. I only hope one day I'll match your skill, to be able to sculpt a shape like that." She glanced at the bush, noticing a hint of pride creep into her grandfather's face. "I've never seen anything quite like it." She chose her next words carefully. "I will give your offer my utmost thought."

"Good. Just the answer I wanted to hear. Shall we?" He took her arm and they strolled out of the clearing. Lilith looked back.

The rosebush woman leered.

## Chapter 8

### Ed's Story

They passed through the arbor, out of the fog and into the sun. Guests' voices trilled in the distance. A pleasant scent hung in the air. Everything looked so normal that it seemed inconceivable another side to the garden existed, dark and sinister. Lilith tried to memorize the way out, but the many turns confused her and she soon gave up. They rounded another bush and stumbled upon Ed. He had a crumpled look about him, sketching furiously in his notepad.

"Ed! My dear boy. Why am I not surprised to find you here," Alfred said cheerily.

Ed startled, his already pale face turning white.

"Drawing another rose, I take it?" Alfred snatched the notepad.

Ed and Lilith exchanged a glance that could only mean one thing, that Alfred Bloom was *an obnoxious brute*.

"Hmmm, doesn't look like a rose. More of a peony. You can do better than this, I know you can. Practice, my dear. Although...I'd prefer it," he said, as he pointed to a small cottage that Lilith hadn't noticed before, "if you sketched from the comfort of your home. Snip a rose, stick it in a vase. Better concentration that way. Too many people here to distract you." He shoved the pad back into Ed's hands.

Preceded by barely audible footsteps, Gustav materialized out of nowhere. Lilith had gotten used to it by now. She wanted to ask about Panther, but didn't get her chance.

Gustav hotly whispered something, and Alfred's face turned thunderous. "I'm afraid, I must leave you two for the time being," he said and stalked off without another word.

Lilith's stomach churned at the thought of Panther being locked up as she watched the butler's tall figure and her grandfather disappear behind a turn.

Ed looked at Lilith.

"Hi," she said, remembering her manners. "I don't think I've introduced myself properly. Sorry about that. I'm Lilith Bloom." *And this is Panther*, she wanted to add, but bit her lip.

Ed flipped over his pad.

ED VOGEL, it said in large letters.

From the distant recesses of her memory, Lilith extracted the meaning of the word *vogel*. It meant *bird*. Ed did look a bit like a bird, inquisitive and alert. And he smelled like cookies. For that fact alone, Lilith wanted to be next to him at all times.

"Er...thanks for your note," she said.

Ed grinned expectantly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't get a chance to read it. It landed in a bowl of vanilla sauce."

Ed raised a brow.

"Don't ask. It was the stupidest thing. Can you tell me what it said?" Her heart drummed wildly.

Ed wrote. I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU.

"Oh! I wanted to talk to you, too. Was it you signaling us with the flashlight?"

He nodded.

"How did you know where we were?"

Ed pointed to the cottage, to its single upper story window. Lilith could barely see it through a mass of overgrown vines.

"You live there?"

A nod and extensive waving of the arms was his answer.

"You saw us from your window? Thanks for helping. I thought we'd never find our way back. The garden—" She wanted to say, *the garden wouldn't let us go*, but bit her tongue, remembering her grandfather's threat. "Is it true you're mute?" she blurted, and covered her mouth in horror.

Ed's eyes widened.

"Oh no, I did not just say this. Please excuse me, I didn't mean to be rude."

IT'S OKAY. I GET THIS A LOT.

Lilith exhaled in relief. "Well, is it true what they're saying? You stuck your tongue to a frozen door?"

Ed shook his head, energetically miming disapproval.

"I knew it." Lilith's face turned hot. "That stupid Daphne girl." She covered her mouth a second time, unable to believe her own ears. This quiet boy seemed to make her more expressive, causing her to overstep self-imposed boundaries of never openly expressing her opinions about people in public.

Ed grinned, doodled something, and presented Lilith with a caricature of Daphne as a balloon in the sky. He poked the pencil in the middle.

"Pop goes the weasel," said Lilith.

They shared a smile, both feeling the beginning of a friendship. Muffled voices reached them. Ed grabbed Lilith's hand. Without a second thought, she followed him, running from alley to alley, until they reached a particularly overgrown arbor and plunked down next to it, wheezing.

Lilith's mind spun with questions.

"Why don't you talk—if you don't mind me asking?"

YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW? IT'S NOT PRETTY.

"I really do."

Ed flipped to a clean page. Lilith leaned to look. A sweet aroma overwhelmed her, and she fought the urge to stick her nose into his hair and sniff it. She tensed, embarrassed.

Ed drew a train and a falling man in front of it.

“A train...someone got hit by a train?”

JÜRGEN VOGEL, MY DAD.

“Your *dad* got hit by a train?”

JUMPED.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m so terribly sorry for your loss.”

Ed hung his head. IT’S OKAY. I’M OVER IT. IT’S BEEN ALMOST A YEAR.

“That must’ve hurt.”

He nodded.

“Do you mind...is it okay if I ask another question?”

Another nod.

“Do you have any idea why he did it?” Lilith hoped Ed wouldn’t mind her asking.

He didn’t. In fact, it appeared he wanted to tell her.

He wrote, THE GARDEN, flipped a few very obscene gestures at it and kicked up dirt for an added effect.

“The garden.”

I’LL EXPLAIN. For the next hour he drew picture after picture, sharing everything about his life, from the fact that he’s fourteen to the fact that last summer his father, Jürgen Vogel, Bloom family gardener by trade and painter by heart, called it quits. Grief-stricken, 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.

A misty gratitude filled Ed’s eyes. Lilith’s heart skipped a beat. She cleared her throat.

Ed kept drawing. His mom died giving birth. Three years later his dad married one of Alfred’s numerous cousins, Rosalinde Bloom. After her husband’s death she spent most of her time hugging the bottle.

“Oh,” said Lilith. “I’m sorry.”

Ed shrugged.

An awkward pause fell between them.

“So, um, what is it you wanted to talk about?” asked Lilith.

HOW MANY HEADS DID YOU SEE ON THE WALL?

“What? What are you talking about?”

I SLEPT IN THAT ROOM BEFORE. I KNOW.

Lilith fixed her beret. “Four. At first I thought I imagined them.” She hoped she didn’t blush. “Then I thought maybe they’re part of the mansion.”

YES AND NO.

“What do you mean, *yes and no*?”

THE MANSION IS PART OF THE GARDEN, BUT IT ALSO SORT OF ISN'T ANYMORE, BECAUSE IT SORT OF GREW INTO ITS OWN THING.

"What thing? How do you know?"

DAD SAID. Ed paused, and then scribbled fast. HE KILLED HIMSELF TO ESCAPE THE HORRORS HE HAD TO FACE IN THE GARDEN.

"Did he leave a note?"

HE LEFT PAINTINGS.

Lilith's feet went cold. She thought about her grandfather's threat as to what will happen if she breathes a word to anyone about the rosebush woman. "What horrors?"

Ed studied her. ARE YOU THE FAINTING KIND?

A distant sigh reached them, ruffling the leaves in its wake. Lilith's eyes went round. "No, not at all. Last time I fainted was when an elephant farted me in the face at the circus."

Ed coughed.

"I was three." Lilith glared. "Look, certain very *peculiar* things are happening around here. The place gives me the creeps. I'd love to talk to you about it. It's just that...there is a certain promise that I made to a certain individual, and that promise constituted me not mentioning a word about a certain activity involving a certain tool that looks like scissors cutting a certain shape from a certain, um, green thing of sorts, so that a congregation of certain other green things doesn't hold me hostage. Sort of."

Ed raised an eyebrow. EASY. YOU SAW ALFRED CUT A BUSH INTO A WOMAN. HE THREATENED TO MAKE YOU DISAPPEAR IN THE GARDEN IF YOU TOLD ANYONE.

"Excuse me, but, is it written on my face?"

HE DID THE SAME TO ME, OLD MONGREL.

"You're not saying..."

HE MADE ME WATCH HIM CUT IT, BUT IT DIED.

"The woman?"

THE BUSH. GOT ALL BROWN AND FELL APART.

"Why?"

I DUNNO. WRONG BUSH?

To solve this mystery, Lilith knew she'd have to get used to breaking promises made to loathsome individuals who didn't deserve any better. "All right, I'll tell you what happened. He pruned a bush today, in a clearing in the back of the garden. You have to fall through an arbor to get there. Anyway, that bush thing, I mean, *that bush woman*, is huge and she stinks. The whole place stinks like there are bodies decomposing everywhere. Grandfather mentioned feeding organic matter to it. What I want to know is, does he kill people and feed them to the garden? Is that what he means by *organic matter*?"

YES. AND NO. I MEAN, TO ANSWER YOUR FIRST QUESTION, YES AND NO. TO ANSWER YOUR SECOND QUESTION— Ed's pencil slipped in his haste.

"What do you mean, *yes and no*?" Lilith didn't notice that she leaned very close to Ed.

Loud smooching noises made them jump apart.

Stomping like a pair of baby elephants, the Schlitzberger twins made their appearance.

"Hallo, Lily." Daphne waved.

"It's *Lilith*."

"Look, Gwen. Ed has got himself a *girlfriend*."

Gwen sniggered. "Hey, Ed, why don't you give your girlfriend a *flower*?" She grabbed a nearby rose and cracked its stem. Lilith thought she heard the rosebush produce an angry moan in response. She hoped she was right, seeing a vivid picture of both Daphne and Gwen being swallowed by the garden.

"Leave him alone," she said, standing up.

"Did you loze your puppy? What waz hiz name—Kitty? We saw him in the kitchen. Zey are cooking him for dinner." Daphne flashed her braced teeth.

"Monika iz skinning him alive," Gwen added.

Lilith's stomach lurched. "Are you sure about that? I thought you couldn't see much beyond your nose from those piggy little eyes of yours."

Ed presented Daphne with his latest drawing. Her face went purple, and she seemed to inflate. Temporarily speechless, she grabbed the paper and tore it to pieces.

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

Daphne jumped with a shriek, bumped into her sister, and they both toppled over each other, scrambling to their feet like two over-sized piglets, their knees scraped bloody. Lilith thought the bushes rustled closer, as if drawn to the scent of blood.

"You're *mental*!" yelled Gwen.

"You're *both* mental!" screamed Daphne. "*Komm!*" She pulled up her sister and they waddled away, sniffing.

"Hi, Ed! Hi, Lilith!" Petra came running, her brother behind her.

It became clear to Lilith that they'd have no peace.

Enraged, Irma Schlitzberger stomped their way, wailing twins by her side. "Iz zat true, *child*? How dare you..." She caught her breath. "How dare you hurt my daughters, you, you disgrace to ze Bloom family."

"Lilith! There you are." Sabrina Rosenthal strolled up with her husband.

"Why, we were looking all over for you," said Norman. "It would be nice if you spent some time with Patrick, he wants to show you his collection of butterflies." He prodded his son forward. "Go on, tell her."

Patrick launched into a rehearsed explanation of his hobby. "Um, a butterfly is a day-flying insect that can be spotted...um..." He screwed his face, trying to remember.

"Butterflies," muttered Lilith. "All I need right now is *butterflies*," she whispered to Ed. "Please. Save me from this lot. Can you?"

Ed furrowed his brow.

They were trapped. On their left, Irma Schlitzberger gave a lecture on manners. On their right, the Rosenthals demanded Lilith socialize with their children. Ahead of them appeared a wheelchair with the blind Heidemarie, pushed by her daughter Hanna; behind them stood the overgrown arbor.

There was only one way out.

Ed mimed something that looked like, *Trust me, I know what I'm doing*, knocking off Lilith's beret in the process. She picked it up. They clasped hands, pressed backward, and promptly fell through, into fog, stench, and the loud growling of Bär.

Two figures stepped out of the mist.

"Well, well, well. Who do we have here?" Alfred Bloom said cheerily. "Ed, my dear boy, didn't I ask you to draw from the comfort of your own home? Lilith, my dear girl, didn't we agree on you not being seen where you're *not supposed* to be seen? I thought we just talked about this, didn't we?" He advanced, but then all of them froze, because an ear-splitting and blood-chilling shriek pierced the air.

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

## Chapter 9

# Panther's Liberation

A foul vapor rolled over them in waves. Its misty tongue licked everything into oblivion, carrying the type of smell that penetrated bones, putrid, as if something long dead stirred to life. Lilith coughed and felt as if the little breakfast she managed to eat demanded to come out. The ground shuddered under thunderous steps of someone heavy. A rush of wind followed, swirling with rose petals, and then that too passed and all was still.

Bär snarled. Gustav grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

Ed and Lilith nervously awaited their trial.

"What shall I do with you?" said Alfred. "I think I'll have to separate you two. You see, my...*gardening* business is a rather important affair. It can't be meddled with by two naughty children. I tried talking to you, didn't I? But you don't listen. Well, you're forcing me to resort to drastic measures." He motioned Gustav and the mastiff away.

Only now Lilith noticed rips in his suit and scratches on his face. Did the bush woman do this?

"Ed, I'll talk to Rosalinde tomorrow. Long overdue. I believe I need to hire a new gardener. She's not being much help lately."

Ed swallowed.

"It's time for you to move on. Get out of this place, change schools, find new friends. No use sulking. You have to keep on living, my dear boy. Put those silly ideas of becoming an artist out of your head. Learn how to make money."

He tapped Ed's forehead.

Ed balled his hands into fists.

"Lilith, I'd prefer it if you stayed in your room from now on, unless I tell you otherwise. I will take your...*creature* away for the duration of your visit if you don't humor me with excellent behavior. What do you say? Sound fair?"

Lilith's heart froze at the idea of parting with Panther. She nodded miserably.

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

"Yes, Grandfather," she mumbled.

"Good." Alfred let out a sigh, and for a moment, Lilith thought she saw her true grandfather flash underneath the mask of the eccentric, the wealthy owner of a successful business, and the Bloom family patron. He was simply a tired old man. A pang of pity stung her. Whatever gruesome things he did took a toll on him.

"Shall we?" Alfred seized the children's arms and led them along

the hedge until they reached a tunnel and exited through the arbor. Ed and Lilith quietly trotted behind their guide who changed direction so often that Lilith left all hope at remembering the way. The garden kept going on and on, gradually changing from wild and foreboding to groomed and transparent.

Lilith regretted not asking Ed more questions about her grandfather and the rose garden. She fixed her beret now and then, trying to get Ed's attention, but he appeared deep in thought.

At last they arrived by the mansion, at a side door Lilith hadn't seen before. The housekeeper pushed it open. A couple delivery people filed out with a stack of empty crates, said their hellos, and sauntered off.

"*Herr Bloom.*" Agatha nodded and let them in, not a muscle twitching in her face at the sight of her master's ragged appearance.

Unbearable noise crashed over Lilith. Pots were slapped on the stove, dishes stacked, silvery thrown into drawers by a portly woman who generated as much noise as ten people. Lilith recognized her as the cook. Delicious smells compensated for her racket, and Lilith inhaled a lungful of them: a whiff of roasting bratwurst, fried potatoes, and freshly baked bread.

"*Herr Bloom!*" exclaimed Monika, wiping her hands on an apron.

Alfred waved her off, turning to Lilith. "I believe you skipped lunch. You must be hungry. My presentation got rather long, didn't it?"

"Long and fascinating, Grandfather. I'll certainly remember it for life." Lilith smiled.

"Why, thank you. You may have lunch now. Monika will serve you. After you eat you're to go to your room. Remember our agreement." His tone didn't invite arguments. "Your friend has an unfortunate knack of disappearing, I might add."

"What?" Lilith glanced around. In the hassle of their arrival, Ed slipped away. Lilith wanted to cry from disappointment. "Oh."

"You're rather fond of him, aren't you?"

Lilith blushed and hated herself for it. "We're friends."

"Not to worry, my dear girl. I shall go find your friend for you. Will see you soon." Alfred strolled out of the kitchen.

Monika let out a breath and picked up something wiggly from behind a stack of crates.

"Pan—" Lilith began, her heart beating wildly.

"Shhhh!" Monika shushed her.

Panther peeked from between two fleshy arms, a piece of steak clutched in his jaws. Lilith felt a twinge of jealousy, watching him swallow the meat and lick Monika's face, who giggled like a schoolgirl, eyes wet with adoration.

Lilith darted forward.

Panther leapt to her.

"She iz zo sweet. She iz *meine kleine Prinzessin*," the cook said

with a loud smooch. "If zey take her away, come see me." She winked conspiratorially and began slapping food on a plate.

Ravenous a minute ago, Lilith lost her appetite.

"Excuse me. It's very sweet of you to feed me outside of normal lunch hours. However, I'm not hungry at the moment. Thank you very much."

Pressing Panther to her chest, Lilith ran out of the kitchen and sped up the marble staircase, grateful for the absence of guests. Her back crawled, sensing a penetrating stare. She skidded to a halt. Gustav stood at the end of the corridor, no doubt making sure she got into her room. Lilith entered, shut the door, and sunk to the floor.

"I can't believe she called you a *princess*."

"I can't believe you called Bär *exquisite*."

"Excuse me, dear Watson, but that was for the purpose of sweetening up my grandfather. You know that."

"Well, dear Holmes, this was for the purpose of sweetening up Monika," Panther growled. "She can call me anything she wants. Unlike *some* people, she went through the trouble of sneaking me out of the cage. And she fed me steak. If I may be so bold and remind you that you promised me steak as payment for—"

Lilith didn't bite. "Didn't she see that you're *male*?"

"She didn't take a particular interest in that part of my unique personality, if that's what you mean." He wiggled out.

"Look," Lilith said as she held Panther's head, "I'm sorry for not coming to your rescue sooner, okay? An enormous multitude of miraculous and dreadful things have happened. In fact, so many things have happened that I don't know where to begin telling you."

"It depends on where you ended," said Panther, and burped. Full of exceptional steak, he slid out of Lilith's embrace and rolled onto his back, inviting her to scratch his belly.

Lilith made to stand and slipped. She sat on a piece of paper.

"Look! He left me a note!"

Panther looked at her quizzically. "He?"

"*My friend* Ed. Remember? The one with the flashlight? Smells like cookies?"

"Your *friend*?"

"Yes." Lilith migrated to the bed.

"You're *friends* with him already? That was fast. I was only gone for a couple hours."

Lilith ignored him, deep in the thrill of discovery.

Ed must have taken precautions, in case someone else came across the sketch. To an unsuspecting eye, it would've looked like childish squiggles. Not to Lilith.

"It's a map of the garden." She traced it with her finger. Unable to hold back his curiosity, Panther leaped onto the bed. They bent their

heads.

An intricate ornament of dots and lines covered the page. Along the edge ran the line of the fence between the rose garden and the Grunewald forest. Tiny rectangles indicated arbors. One of them connected with a large circle that held a fat dot in the middle. An arrow pointed to it.

"That's *her*. The rosebush woman. And that's her clearing, see? We got there by accident, remember?"

"Not at all. The only thing I recall is sucking a mutant squirrel dry."

"Panther."

"Do I get to hear the story of the tour that creep gave you or what? I don't want to be overly dramatic, but I'm dying here."

"I'm sorry. Please pardon my forgetfulness, dear Watson. How dare I deprive you of such important information while you spend your time gorging on steak, leaving me to face the monstrous beast alone." Lilith fumed.

"I duly apologize for lacking the ability to pick locks with my claws, dear Holmes. Rest assured, I'm working on this important skill day and night." Panther bit her.

"All right, fine. I was just getting to it, okay? Grandfather named me heir to the Bloom property."

"Heir?"

"And then he cut her out."

Panther looked puzzled. "Cut who?"

"Listen. When grandfather dies, I will inherit the entire property, the mansion and the rose garden. It's in his will. He announced it at that dinner we missed. Anyway, he pruned a giant rosebush to a woman's shape. The sighing woman-thing. I think it's why she was in pain; she demanded to be cut into shape. She's alive, Panther, I saw her *move*."

"Charming. So you will become her boss. Got it. May I ask what she eats?"

"I told you before. I think grandfather kills people and feeds their bodies to the garden. He must be feeding the same thing to her, since she's part of it. *Organic matter*. That's what it is, dead bodies. Why else do you think she stinks so badly?"

"Captivating information. Let's assume you're correct. In view of this, may I ask, what, dear Holmes, do you propose we do?"

"I have a plan." Lilith's eyes flashed.

Panther raised an ear, as if astounded. "Do you?"

For the next hour Lilith relayed everything that happened: the bush pruning, her grandfather's threat, the meeting with Ed, his dad's untimely death, Ed's awareness of the heads and the mansion and the carnivorous garden. She told him about the Schlitzberger twins interrupting them and guests swarming them, about their escape through an arbor, about the rosebush woman shrieking, and Lilith's punishment if she left the room without Alfred's permission.

Lilith paused to catch her breath.

“Let me make sure I understand correctly,” growled Panther.

“You’re speaking with such conviction, like your assumptions are true. I have yet to hear a single fact pointing to this possible existence of dead bodies, or *organic matter*, as you claim your grandfather calls it. On top of that, you’re proposing we blatantly break his rules, which will gift me with spending every night in the gloriously flatulent company of Bär the mastiff?”

“Look. It’s obvious, isn’t it? Whatever is happening here, we have to stop it. We only need to find out a few more details, that’s all.”

“A few more details.”

“Yes, details. I wish you’d been there. I wish you could’ve seen her and heard her. It was horrible. I thought I would die.”

“That is a rather dramatic statement. I wish I was having another slice of steak at the moment.” Panther licked his coat.

“Really. Is steak the only thing you care about? How can you be so *desultory*?” Lilith said with feeling.

“It’s not that—whatever *desultory* means—it’s just that I knew it already.” He grinned.

“Excuse me? First you don’t believe me, now you’re telling me that you knew it already? Please, explain yourself.” Lilith crossed her arms.

“Gladly. Servants talk, in case you haven’t noticed, and bad news spreads fast, faster than a squirrel running from wildfire. Gustav told Agatha, Agatha told Monika, Monika told me. I know something else too, something you *don’t* know.” Panther scratched his ear, determined to drip out information only in exchange for appropriate affection.

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“I’m only doing my part of the job for which you *promised* you’ll pay me. In the absence of steak, I ask you to scratch my back please.”

Lilith narrowed her eyes.

“I never break my promises, just haven’t had the time yet—”

“Right there. Yes. A little to the left. Yes, yes, now to the right, ohh...” Panther made a noise more appropriate for a cat.

“Well?” Lilith demanded.

“Well. Monika didn’t mention anything about *organic matter* or dead bodies or anything of the sort, but she did mention something big is going to happen. As big as an invasion of mad squirrels.” Humor vanished from his growl. “She doesn’t know when *it* will happen. She was talking about it being *due*—*like* there is a deadline, or someone is in debt to someone else.”

“You know, a curious thought crossed my mind. Since when do you know German? Her English struck me as fairly shallow.”

“Your father talks to us in German. It’s his trick to keep secrets from other breeders. Silly if you ask me.” Panther stood, his ears erect. “We’re about to have company. Your parents are back.”

“No,” exhaled Lilith.

A car’s rumble floated through the window. A couple doors opened and slammed. Feet ran up the stairs.

“Quick! Let’s hide in the bathroom!” Lilith rushed from the bed, but her foot got caught in the blanket and she fell. By the time she righted herself, the door slammed open, and there stood her mother, eyes furious, hair askew.

## Chapter 10

# Gabby's Wrath

Lilith gulped. Her mother offered a frightening sight. Knitting needles stuck behind her ears, two bags bulging with what could only be new yarn, Gabby marched in and slammed the door so hard it made Daniel jump. She pushed up her glasses and leered at her daughter. Lilith cringed, expecting the tirade of the month to be forever etched in her memory. She slid the garden map under her thigh, Panther barked, and all hell broke loose.

"Don't you bark at me!" Gabby snapped. "And you, missy, what did you do this time? I want to hear *all* about it. Your grandfather says you've caused trouble and are not allowed in the garden until he changes his mind. What could you possibly do to upset him so much? I have a very sneaky suspicion where this is coming from." She snatched the orange vial from the bedside table and examined it, counting the pills.

"Gabby, now, don't be so hard-knuckled," Daniel put in hesitantly. "She's just jetlagged."

"Jetlagged?" Gabby spun around. "You call this *jetlagged*?"

Lilith used the moment to stuff the map into her jeans pocket.

"We've talked about this a million times."

"I'm aware of that. It's not—"

"Then you weren't listening to me. What if she's going into relapse? Here, away from Dr. Crawford? Jetlag? I don't think it's simple jetlag." She turned back.

"But, Gabby, love—"

"Dad, it's okay. I've got it from here." Lilith composed her face, ready for battle.

"You've got *what* from here?"

"Jetlag, Mother, 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. Do you think they have pills for that?" Lilith forced a smile.

"Don't start your nonsense with me, missy."

"But it's not nonsense, Mother," said Lilith. "How can a girl like myself produce nonsense if she has no sense whatsoever to begin with? I must have *some* to counterbalance it with its opposite, don't you think?"

Her mother glared. "Here we go. She's doing her thing again."

"Love, I don't think we should—"

"There is no *should*. We must, before it escalates into something else—something we can't handle. Listen to her. Do you hear how she talks? There is absolutely no emotion in it. None. It's scaring me, Daniel.

It's getting worse." She propped up her glasses. "She's your daughter, too. Don't you care about her wellbeing? Don't you ever think what would happen if she simply wandered off into the street? *Here*? She doesn't know any German!"

Daniel opened and closed his mouth.

"Didn't think about that, did you?" Gabby continued throwing terrible scenarios at her husband, while Lilith increasingly felt like a third wheel. Her parents often discussed her in the way people would discuss an object—a disabled adolescent to be fed, medicated, educated, and properly housed. Well, rather her mother issued long monologues, and her father pretended to listen. Nobody asked Lilith how she felt, not even Dr. Corby Crawford, an overpowering, inquisitive matron buttoned in knit jackets made by Gabby Bloom. Her soft talk seeped under Lilith's skin and made her feel stupid.

"...said she ruined his most precious rosebush, tore off every single bud and had Panther pee on it!"

Panther produced a few coughs that sounded suspiciously like *That's a load of cow poop*. Lilith gave him the stare. She listened with avid interest, adding a third reason to her mental list of why she had every right to hate her grandfather, a brute, a book-hater, and a liar.

"I didn't hear him saying—"

"He said it on the phone, so of course you didn't."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to listen!"

"I *am* listening."

Lilith coughed.

Frowning, both parents looked at their daughter as if aware of her presence for the first time.

"If you'd like an explanation for that, I can give it to you," she said calmly. "Number one, Panther is a dog and doesn't know any better." Panther bit her, she pinched him. "Number two, I thought I could *excavate* something, you know, to decorate my room."

"You're *not* going back to collecting bones," said Gabby.

"Of course I am. This rose garden inspired me, actually." Lilith clamped Panther's muzzle to stifle his bark. "Found a few skulls in the back, over there..." She waved at the window, where evening gathered with cunning speed. "They were, er, *diaphanous*. Children's skulls? I wonder. Anyway. I already asked grandfather for permission to—"

"STOP IT!" her mother shrieked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mother." Lilith took time to pronounce each word. "Did my story upset you? I'll tell you a different one."

"No more stories! That's enough for today. Your grandfather is an old man and you made him chase you across the garden. He's paying for you to be here. It's an honor. He named you heir to the entire Bloom property!"

“Love—”

“Don’t touch me! And what do you do in return? You refuse to take your pills,” she said, rattling the vial. “You wake your neighbor in the middle of the night, and you shun your cousin who wanted to talk to you about butterflies. You promised to socialize. His mother told me he was very upset. You hang out with that mute boy, making your poor grandfather—”

“I—did—not—make—him—*anything*,” said Lilith, her head throbbing. She was tired of unfounded accusations, tired of being treated like a sick child, tired of people not understanding her when she tried to relate things she saw or heard or smelled.

“Between your grandfather and you, who do you think has more credibility? A well respected businessman, perfectly sane for his age, or a twelve-year-old girl who’s severely disabled—”

“Gabby!” cried Daniel in horror.

“What? She needs to accept the truth. It’s a dog-eat-dog world, you say so yourself. I don’t want her growing up wearing rose-colored glasses.”

Lilith seethed.

Gabby’s lips trembled. “Who do you think I’ll believe after you feed me stories about children’s skulls buried in the garden?”

That did it.

Unable to hold back anymore, on an insane impulse to make her mother pay attention to the *real* her and not to the disabled daughter who requires medical care, Lilith screamed.

“He’s a murderer!” She took a deep breath and screamed louder. “GRANDFATHER IS A MURDERER! HE KILLS PEOPLE AND FEEDS THEM TO THE GARDEN! THERE IS A BUSH WOMAN WHO LIVES THERE! THAT’S HIS SECRET. IT’S WHY HIS ROSES ARE SO RED. DON’T YOU GET IT? THEY FEED ON PEOPLE’S BLOOD!”

Dead silence fell over the room.

Lilith had a sneaky suspicion that Trude Brandt, her elderly neighbor, was eavesdropping from their shared bathroom. She heard a pair of slippers shuffle across the floor and out the door. The old lady no doubt went to spread the news about Alfred Bloom’s mental granddaughter.

“Well, the squirrel is out of the bag,” muttered Lilith.

Panther gave her a disapproving look.

Seconds stretched. Lilith wished she could put on her rosy beret to do ballet moves, or the blue one to escape into *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, anything but suffer this pressing silence.

“Well?” said Gabby, sniffing. “What do we do now?”

“Pup, you okay?” asked Daniel.

Lilith’s parents proceeded along their usual pattern. Mother

screams, father endures, father cajoles, mother cries.

Daniel sat next to her, feeling her forehead. "Sleep okay?"

Lilith decided she had nothing else to lose and went for the truth. "Nope."

"You didn't? Did you have another nightmare?" He took off her beret and smoothed her hair.

"It wasn't a nightmare. It was real."

"What was it?"

"Well...grandfather killed his housekeeper, Agatha, his cook, Monika, and two guests, Sabrina and Norman Rosenthal, then he lined them up on the back porch and chopped their heads off."

Panther stuck his nose under a pillow.

Daniel passed a hand through his hair.

Gabby leaned on the wall and covered her mouth.

"Want me to continue?" Lilith asked politely.

"Sure, sure, go ahead."

"Okay. The heads came alive on the wall, right there," she said as she pointed, "and told me that grandfather will chop off my head too, if I won't sleep. They said I'm guest number thirteen, which is supposed to be a very unlucky number. Then they disappeared. That's the nightmare part. The reality part is Panther thinks that the mansion likes me and is trying to tell me something, because those heads weren't really real, they're part of the mansion. It can morph into them. Ed has seen them too. Oh, and Monika told Panther something big is going to happen, in the garden. Ed's dad said—*before* he died—he said that the mansion—" Lilith broke off.

Her parents stopped listening. They launched into a hushed exchange about arranging for Lilith to sleep in their room and calling a local doctor first thing in the morning. She was definitely getting a dose of sleeping pills tonight.

A knock made them look up. The door opened, and there stood brightly smiling Petra inviting them to dinner and wondering if Lilith would be taken to a madhouse before or after.

"Bad news spreads faster than a squirrel running away from wildfire," Lilith whispered.

By the authority of her mother, Panther was left behind, and both parents marched Lilith out of the room and into the dining hall. She noticed a sharp contrast in the atmosphere. Whereas earlier guests vied for her attention, now they parted around her like a cold river, throwing pitiful looks or beaming in that artificial manner one smiles at crazy people. Even the Schlitzberger twins turned civil, their knees covered with purple bandages.

"Good evening, Lilith, how are you?" Daphne said, prompted by a nudge from her mother.

"Thank you for using my correct name. I'm splendid. Never been

better," said Lilith, pulling out a chair. "How about yourself?"

"Good." That took another nudge.

"Your coat matches your eyes," Gwen chimed in under the studying glance of her mother.

"Does it?" Lilith looked at her black cardigan.

"Ooh-la-la! Nice compliment, *mein mädchen*." Irma kissed Gwen on the temple, at which she beamed and stuck out her tongue at her sister. Lilith wanted to puke, desperately wishing for Ed to appear. Instead, Alfred Bloom waltzed in, the scratches on his face dressed and barely visible.

At his entrance chatter ceased. He inadvertently joined the laughing stock club. How could a man of such stature write off everything the family owned to a girl who isn't right in her mind? Does this mean he didn't know? Does this mean he might change his mind? Eager whispers broke out. Even Lilith's parents bent their heads together, no doubt discussing their daughter's bleak future.

The floor moved.

"Here we go again," Lilith muttered, not bothering to see if anyone noticed. The entire hall sped down. Black night behind the windows turned to underground darkness. The mansion seemed to rearrange itself to close...

"Like a flower." Lilith's skin broke into goose bumps. "It's closing for the night like a flower. A rose. What if its rooms are petals—" She felt a stare and looked up.

Alfred studied Lilith from across the table, as if saying, *You talked. I asked you not to talk.*

Lilith's heart plummeted.

Her grandfather raised a wine glass and tinkled on it with a fork. Everyone stopped talking, expectant.

"My dear guests, I would like to propose a toast." He stood. "I'd like to drink to my only granddaughter, Lilith, future heir to the Bloom property."

Lilith froze. What was he up to?

"I'm sure she will do an excellent job. I'd like to ask you to be gentle with her. Adolescents are especially prone to the debilitating side effects of jetlag. It was a long journey from Boston to Berlin, wasn't it, my dear girl?"

Lilith nodded, experiencing a strange connection to her grandfather. For a second, it didn't matter what evil things he did, he was the only adult who didn't think her delirious.

Everyone looked at her. She stood.

"Er...yes, it was, dear Grandfather," Lilith said uncertainly. "However, it's a *miniscule* price to pay for the *exaltation* of my stay." Seized by inspiration, she stood taller. "To spend a week of wonder and enchantment in a rose garden that seems to live and breathe."

A muscle twitched in her grandfather's jaw.

"The splendor, the aroma, the vastness of it. I'm at a loss for words. I bow in gratitude for your offer." She bent.

A collective sigh washed over the room and exploded in applause and congratulations. Even her parents clapped. Lilith's face turned hot.

"Does this mean you accept my offer?" asked Alfred, putting her on the spot in front of everyone.

"Was there ever any doubt, dear Grandfather?" she retorted, her gut telling her not to say yes, no matter what.

"I would like a yes, please," he said coldly.

"A toast! A toast for the heir! I'd like to propose a toast!" Norman Rosenthal boomed, already tipsy.

Much jovial banter and drinking followed.

Relieved, Lilith sat.

Alfred stared her down in an open warning.

Lilith smiled back. *Yes, Grandfather, I talked. And I will talk more, because I declare war. I think I have a pretty good idea about what it is you're feeding to your garden, and I intend to stop you.*

## Chapter 11

# The Ordinary Morning

The night proved uneventful. Gabby and Daniel stood over their daughter until she swallowed two sleeping pills and passed out on a guest daybed brought into their room. Lilith saw no dreams and woke to the grumble of trucks and Panther licking her face. She yawned and propped herself up, wondering about the commotion. Both her parents snored quietly. Layers of white covers separated them down the middle, their faces turned to opposite sides.

“Did you hit me with a thousand pillows? Because it feels like it,” Lilith said, rubbing her eyes.

“No, only with one paw, and *only* because I’m a dog and don’t know any better,” Panther growled under his breath, to make sure he wasn’t overheard.

“What? Oh, that. I’m sorry, okay? What else was I supposed to say?”

“Good morning, for starters.”

“Good morning.”

“And you still owe me steak.” Panther curled his tail and gamboled to the window.

Lilith stumbled behind him.

It rained. The air smelled of dust and warm summer. Water seemed to have washed the stink away. Lilith took a deep breath, watching a slew of activity unfold below.

Her parents’ room faced the motor court. Several large Bloom & Co. freighters occupied most of it. Workers in red uniforms loaded them with crates full of roses, to be shipped all over the world.

People paid astronomical amounts of money for Bloom & Co. flowers. While a typical rose lasted up to twelve days, a Bloom & Co. rose lived for over a month. It didn’t wilt and its blossom was perfectly round, ranging in shade from light scarlet to deep ruby. Never losing its color, after a month it dried out and was reused in dry bouquets. No wedding, no funeral, no important celebration was possible without Bloom’s roses. They became a legend, started in thirteenth century by Ludwig Bloom who stumbled on a wild growth of bushes and settled to culture them.

Lilith heard this story from her mother numerous times. Her father could care less. He was out of touch with Alfred Bloom precisely for the reason of not wanting to continue the family business, migrating to America to breed whippets, the very *creatures* his father despised.

Lilith took another lungful of air.

It was an ordinary morning, and she desperately wished for it to stay this way. First, the house wasn't moving. Second, the usual rotten sweetness in the air was replaced by the delicate fragrance of roses, the type you'd expect to dwell in a florist's shop. And third, there were no weird noises, no chopping sounds, no sighs, no—

Something, or someone, knocked on the roof.

Lilith jumped, her heart hammering. "Did you hear that?"

"I heard several things," Panther growled between licks. "One of them was your question on whether or not I heard *that*, depending, of course, what *that* in your universe means, because in my universe—"

Gabby mumbled and turned over. The mattress creaked. Both Lilith and Panther froze. Neither of them wanted to spoil the morning. It took several painful minutes for Gabby's breath to slow down, when another sharp knock made Lilith start.

She looked at Panther. He shrugged, as much as you can imagine a whippet shrugging. More knocks rained down in a rapid staccato. Curious, Lilith leaned out and craned her neck to look, which was a very bad idea, because that same moment the ordinary morning came to an end.

A huge crow took off from the roof and swooped down, cawing. Lilith shielded her face, lost hold of the windowsill, and nearly toppled out onto the trucks below. The crow nabbed her head and zoomed into the garden, complaining all the way.

"Owww!" Lilith cried, slipping.

Panther seized the bottom of her pajamas, but only ripped them. Lilith felt her feet lift, when a hand caught her.

"Lilith! What on *earth* are you doing?" The wrath of Gabby Bloom came at last.

"Feeding—crows—with—my—blood," she squeezed in between gasps. "Good morning to you too, Mother." Lilith slumped to the floor.

"You realize you could've fallen out the window? What are you, five?" Gabby glared, arms akimbo. "Cut it out, or I'll ask Alfred to lock you up."

Panther whined.

"He acts like he understands."

"He *does*, Mom."

Panther barked again.

"I said, cut it out! Both of you."

Lilith recoiled. "You should open up a club with grandfather and call it Whippet Haters," she whispered, scooping up Panther.

"What did you say?"

"What's going on?" Daniel shuffled up, yawning. "Pup, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just that—"

"Your daughter managed to get in trouble before breakfast, that's what. She almost fell out the window."

“She *what?*”

“Your grandfather was right, missy. I think it best you stayed in your room today. No need to go out in the garden in this weather anyway.” She propped up her glasses.

“But Mom—” Lilith began.

“No buts. You will stay in your room and that’s the end of it, you hear me?”

“But I—”

“You’re bleeding!” Daniel cried, as he kneeled next to Lilith and examined her head. “Love, did you see this?” He wiped the blood with the sleeve of his pajamas.

“Of course I saw. Not like she doesn’t deserve it.”

“Gabby!”

“It will teach her not to hang out of windows first thing in the morning, before brushing her teeth and getting dressed. Which reminds me...” She disappeared into the bathroom.

“Pup, can you tell me what happened?”

“I was just—”

“I told you what happened,” said Gabby crossly, coming back with a glass of water and two tablets, which she shoved into Lilith’s hands.

“I want to hear it from Lilith.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“I *do* trust you. Can I have a minute with my daughter?”

“Our daughter.”

“Okay. *Our* daughter.”

Both parents peered at her.

“Um.” Lilith was cornered. No matter what she did, she knew they would wait until both capsules dissolved in her stomach, sending the drug to work. She decided to succumb to her fate, when a rap on the door made Gabby and Daniel look away, giving Lilith a perfect opportunity to throw the pills over her head and begin chugging the water, her face a mask of innocence.

“Good morning, Mister and Missis Bloom. Breakfast iz ready,” said Agatha.

By the time her parents turned back, Lilith finished the water. It worked. They didn’t ask questions.

After cleaning blood from Lilith’s hair and listening to her story, Daniel disappeared into the bathroom, and Gabby launched into a lecture on Lilith’s behavior.

Panther studied the ceiling. Lilith studied Panther.

The bathroom door opened. Lilith darted inside, dragging along her messenger bag. Since she declared war on her grandfather, she needed to solve the garden’s mystery. A shower alone wouldn’t do. A serious investigation required an emergency ballet practice. Lilith wiped herself with a towel, dried her hair, and expertly donned ballet tights, slippers, a

leotard, a tutu, and her rosy beret. She checked herself in the mirror, stepped out of the bathroom, and halted.

Her parents sat on the bed. Her father rocked her mother like a child, back and forth, her face red and puffy from tears. Lilith had never seen her mother in this state. She'd seen her cry, but it was usually for show. This looked real.

They started.

Gabby looked away, wiping her face.

Daniel cleared his throat. "Washed all the blood out, did you?"

"I most certainly did." Something stirred in Lilith's chest. "Mom? Dad?"

"Yeah?" said Daniel.

"I was thinking, and, I wanted to..." She sighed. "I'm sorry I'm such a nuisance. I know it takes a toll on you, looking after me, making me take my medicine and all."

Panther gave Lilith a puzzled stare.

Daniel sighed. "You're not a nuisance. We love you, pup."

"Love you too," said Lilith, studying her mother.

Gabby sniffled, trotted to her daughter, and pecked her on the cheek. "Don't. Don't look at me like this. I look terrible." She propped up her glasses. "I'm so worried about you, you see what it does to me?"

*You're worried about my physical wellbeing, you mean, Lilith wanted to say, not my emotional wellbeing, of which you have no idea. Neither of you. I wish you'd listen to me, if only once. Wish you'd believe me.* But she didn't say anything. Instead, she kissed her mother back and returned her father's clumsy hug.

A few minutes later, she was in her room. Daniel took Panther on a walk and brought him back, to Lilith's immense relief. Agatha showed up with a tray of steaming waffles and a bowl of chopped up steak. Lilith was to stay locked up all day and eat in her room, while her parents sought Alfred's help in finding an English speaking psychotherapist who specialized in extreme cases of adolescent mental disorders.

On the cusp of turning thirteen, Lilith had already been through four specialists before landing on Dr. Crawford, who stuck. Lilith suspected it was not because her treatment made any difference, but because Dr. Corby Crawford adored her mother's knitting skills, which caused her mother to adore Dr. Crawford's therapeutic skills in return.

Panther licked his bowl clean and burped. "You know, I'm faced with a very difficult decision."

"What's that?" said Lilith, chewing a waffle.

"I can't decide whom I loathe more, your mother or your grandfather."

"Panther."

"You apologized."

"It's not her, it's me, okay?"

"You said you love her! And what did she say?"

"I shouldn't have erupted yesterday. Shouldn't have lost control. It was completely and utterly foolish. You know how she is, so don't give me that look. I have other things to worry about."

"Like what?"

"Like I thought for sure grandfather would take you away. Wonder why he didn't." Lilith finished one waffle and started on another.

"He's afraid I'll fart in his face and make him die of canine flatulence suffocation," Panther growled.

"Very funny." Lilith brushed the crumbs off her bed. "I know what you're thinking."

"I didn't know you're telepathic."

"You're wrong. *Contrary* to what you think, I don't think mom or dad told grandfather anything." Lilith rubbed the spot where the crow nabbed her, looking out the window. Rain droned on, worse than before.

"That is not what I was thinking about."

"What *were* you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about a nap." Panther yawned in an obnoxiously loud manner.

"A nap."

No response.

"Panther!" She shook him. "Aren't you worried? We're supposed to be investigating!"

"Your grandfather is a creep, he kills people, and the rosebush woman eats them. Done." Panther rolled away.

"These are merely guesses. You're the one who always insists on facts, whatever happened to that? We don't know anything for sure. I asked Ed if grandfather kills people. He said *yes and no*. I think what he meant was that grandfather lures them into the garden and leaves them there for the bushes. Or something like that. Regardless, how they die doesn't change a thing. It's the fact that they are dying that's hair-raising."

"My hair is perfectly smooth, thank you."

"Listen. We've got to stop it, period. We need to find out what big thing is going to happen. Whatever Monika meant by *due*. We'll be saving lives, think about that."

"Since when are you so concerned about the lives of strangers?"

"What kind of a question is that? Aren't you?"

"I'm a dog."

"Panther Bloom Junior."

"Fine. Let's investigate, in blazing squirrels. Where do we start?"

"This room is too small." Lilith slid from the bed and twirled in front of the mirror.

"Too small for what?"

"For an emergency ballet practice. I can't think properly, my brain

is fuzzy. It's too quiet, like before a thunderstorm. I don't like it. Why doesn't the garden stink anymore?" She jumped, overtaken by inspiration. "Let's escape! Right now. Let's sneak out of here and find a bigger room to practice."

"I'm perfectly comfortable here. Besides, didn't your grandfather promise to take me away in case we, you know..."

"Oh, come on," Lilith said, inclining her head. "We'll be extra careful. We can swing by the kitchen to see if that cook—"

"Monika," growled Panther with affection.

"If Monika can give you the steak I promised you."

Panther perked up. "Well, in that case..."

They exchanged a mischievous glance.

As logical as Panther was, he was a dog. As much as Lilith wanted to solve the mystery of the garden, she was a twelve-year-old girl, and neither girls nor dogs liked being locked up. Overtaken by the fever of pursuit, they didn't care much about what their actual pursuit was, as long as they did something dangerously exciting as opposed to sitting idle. The only missing thing was Ed's presence, and Lilith decided to pay him a visit. The fact that she could be spotted on her way, and that neither she nor Panther had the key to the door, never crossed her mind.

## Chapter 12

# The Emergency Ballet Escapade

The next hour flew by as Lilith prepared for their adventure: taking things out of her bag, dusting them off, and putting them back in. Ed's map of the garden, a pack of tissues, a journal, a pen, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a corner still bent on page thirteen. She slung the bag over her shoulder and fixed her beret. It kept her thoughts together, making them work while she danced.

"How do I look?" Lilith spun in front of the mirror, not to make sure that she looked good, but to make sure there were no snags or creases. Her appearance had to be perfect because ballet demanded perfection, which is why Lilith loved it.

"Splendid, as always, *madam*." Panther yawned. "I thought we were supposed to get steak? About an hour ago?"

Lilith gave him the look.

"Women," he grumbled. "Dogs are where it's at. Take me, for example. 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. Who asked for a pink jacket?"

"Not *pink*. Rosy. Big difference."

"Whatever. Let's get out of here." Lilith patted her bag and marched to the door. "You know what I realized? I haven't had any time to read lately. It's dreadful, really. I should—" She stopped and twisted the doorknob. It was hopelessly and indisputably locked.

"Great."

"What is it, dear Holmes? Has your genius left you in tatters?" Panther scratched his back.

"Go on. Pretend like *you* remembered." Lilith peeked through the keyhole, studied the knob from the left, then from the right, leaning in so closely her nose touched it. "Why haven't I noticed before?"

"Noticed what?" Panther eyed the knob curiously.

"My dear Watson, surely you do not wish to tell me that you have not deduced a pattern to this mansion's behavior?"

Panther's fur covered his blushing.

Lilith motioned to the room. "It moves. It opens up in the morning and closes off at night, right?"

"And?"

"And." Lilith waited.

Panther looked genuinely puzzled.

"It behaves like a flower. It's a *rose*. No, it's a rosebush. One giant stone rosebush. Remember the heads?"

"I'm afraid this new concept is rather irrelevant to our current problem. Would you care to explain in more detail how it will help us open the door?" Panther scoffed, but Lilith was already off to test her theory.

She emerged from the bathroom, unceremoniously moved her pet aside, and upended a glass of water on the doorknob.

"Watch," she whispered.

They gaped at the knob. It was carved to resemble a bloom.

Nothing happened.

"Are we supposed to stare at it until we go blind?"

Before Lilith could answer, the knob shifted. It shuddered. It shook. It slowly sucked in every drop of water and began to unravel, petal by petal, turning at the same time. Another second and the door swung open.

They exchanged an astounded glance.

"Wicked! What did I say?" Lilith's heart raced.

"I bow to your genius, dear Holmes." Panther kneeled on his forelegs. "Please accept my apologies for doubting you."

"You're graciously forgiven, dear Watson. Now, please get up. You're embarrassing me."

They peeked out. The corridor was deserted. Servants were off packing roses for delivery. Guests hid from the rain in their rooms, gossiping and waiting for lunch. What else was there to do? Alfred's distaste for technology resulted in zero TVs and one ancient rotary phone that Gustav answered each time it trilled in the vestibule.

Elated by her discovery, Lilith couldn't wait to show her mother, to prove that she wasn't imagining things. She put down the empty glass.

"Where do you propose we go?" grumbled Panther.

"Out," said Lilith.

Panther took a few steps into the corridor and sat on his tail. "Okay, I'm out. What's next?"

"Can you please be quiet? We're supposed to—"

But what they were supposed to do, Lilith didn't get a chance to finish. Shuffling movement told them that Trude Brandt successfully eavesdropped on their entire conversation and prepared to make an entrance, or outrance, if such a word existed, to describe her hobble out of her room.

Lilith carefully clicked the door shut and they took off, running like two convicts escaping prison, stopping every few paces and pressing themselves into the wall, as if that made them invisible. Lilith desperately tried flattening her tutu, and Panther thought that by standing still he could pass for a statue.

Perhaps Trude changed her mind, as she never surfaced.

Their hearts drummed in unison. Any minute a guest could open a door and cause an end to their adventure. So far, they almost made it to

the staircase and neither had the faintest idea of where they were going, when a shriek made them freeze. A long drawn-out string of German words followed.

Behind the nearest door a heavy body fell and fists pounded on the floor in rhythmic smacks. The voice belonged to either Daphne or Gwen, who performed a teenage tantrum.

"What's she saying?" Lilith stole a glance at Panther. He perked up one ear. Behind the door, Irma Schlitzberger proceeded to murmur something soothing to calm her daughter.

"I daresay, quite the demand. Sounds like one of the elephantine piglets wants your beret." He sniffed. "And if I were you, I'd step away from that door."

Crashing footsteps preceded furious twisting of the door's knob. Both the girl and the whippet took off, fleeing along the corridor, bypassing the staircase, and skidding to a halt by an empty room, its doorway yawning wide. Lilith grabbed Panther and ran in.

Without a beat, the door slammed shut and they sped upward. Lilith recalled her mother saying on the plane that Alfred's rose fertilizer laboratory took up an entire floor. The mansion had only three floors, not counting the tower in the middle. They were clearly headed upward. Lilith's spine turned to ice at the thought of *where* they were headed and *what* her grandfather did there.

The room jolted and came to a halt. The girl and her pet found themselves splattered against the floor. Scratching at the parquet to stand, Panther growled. "This mansion indeed appears to have a mind of its own."

"Perhaps it's trying to help us," Lilith panted, fixing her beret.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Would you be so kind as to remind me why we had to leave your room?"

"For an emergency ballet escapade. To think."

"Ah, how forgetful of me. I thought we were getting steak."

"After. We were going to get you steak *after*."

"I thought we were going to get me steak *before*. I must've heard you wrong. My fault. Well, if I may so humbly observe, this room appears to be rather identical to yours in size. Try watering it, maybe it will grow?"

"You're being incredibly helpful, as always." Lilith stood, trying the doorknob. "It's locked."

"Naturally. It requires payment, don't you think?" Panther sneered, his pride restored.

Lilith scowled at him.

"I'm sure if you asked it politely, it would tell you what, how much, and how bloody, which reminds me. I'm certainly in the mood for bloody steak, which someone promised me, if I may mention." Panther licked his muzzle.

Ignoring him, Lilith turned on her heel, marched to the bathroom, and returned with water cupped in her hands. She splashed it on the knob. Every drop got sucked in, but nothing happened.

"Obviously, it wants more."

"Obviously."

It took Lilith several trips until the knob shook in smug satisfaction, having absorbed every drop.

"I tell you, I've seen things," Panther growled philosophically, "squirrels chasing their tails like dogs, dogs climbing trees like squirrels, but I've never seen a house behave like a flower, demanding to be watered."

The door flew open with an upset thud. The next moment they were spit out into the corridor. The room behind them sealed itself and descended to its level, clearly upset. They didn't have time to contemplate, because a new curiosity stole their attention.

As much as the second floor was white, the third floor was red. It glowed like the pulsing guts of someone alive, stinking faintly. To make matters worse, the floor gleamed with a polished sheen that reminded Lilith of coagulated blood. She wanted to hang in the air, so that her feet didn't touch it. Panther whimpered, demanding to be held, his ability to talk forgotten.

"Excuse me, dear red color. You're one of my favorites, but this is, frankly, a little bit much," Lilith said.

Two voices and two sets of footsteps, one heavy and one trotting, rang through the corridor. Gustav fired off what sounded like complaints, and Alfred answered with a curt, "*Ja, ja.*"

Panther whined. Lilith shushed him.

They had to run, but where? Lilith's heart pounded in her head, preventing her from thinking clearly, and Panther's thrashing in her arms only added to her panic. Instead of running toward the staircase, risking to be seen yet having a chance to pass their unsuspecting pursuers, she ran toward the end of the hallway. Panther squirmed. Lilith's ballet slippers slid, their soles worn smooth; and with a shriek she collapsed into a wall, sprawling and banging her head. Blood shot out of her nose. The voices and footsteps paused, then Alfred shouted something and they broke into a run.

"Just spectacular. Absolutely, *spiffing* spectacular," Lilith complained, thinking there was no point in keeping quiet. "And the reason you couldn't keep still is...?"

"I suddenly needed to relieve myself of a certain liquid," Panther growled.

Lilith stared. "What?"

"Pee! I need to pee!"

A new gush of blood prevented Lilith from answering. She wiped it as best she could and cleaned her hand on the wall to prevent from

staining her ballet attire. Without a warning, the wall split open and sucked in both the girl and the dog, closing itself shut.

Darkness and silence surrounded them like velvet.

"Panther?" Lilith whispered.

"It's best we stay quiet, *madam*," Panther growled under his breath.

"Just making sure."

Lilith put her hands on the floor, propping herself up, and stifled a cry. Something lapped the blood off her fingers, and it wasn't the whippet.

## Chapter 13

# The Red Gallery

Lilith sniffed her hands. They were clean. Too petrified to speak, she felt warm liquid seep out of her nose and hit the floor. The floor slurped it up. In the same way the room below drank water, this one drank blood. Lilith went rigid with horror, expecting it to bleed her to death. She didn't dare feel around for Panther, who wisely didn't dare feel for her.

Both girl and dog sat still for what felt like an eternity, listening for any disturbance. Not a single sound reached them. In fact, it was eerily quiet. The air had a weird tinge to it, as if something dehydrated and died, leaving the faint memory of its original odor. It gave Lilith the creeps.

Gradually, light spilled from nowhere and everywhere.

They found themselves in a large windowless room, its every surface painted red. Dozens of portraits in heavy frames, shiny at one point, covered the walls floor to ceiling. There was no furniture except a pedestal in the middle of the room that resembled a thick thorny stem, the flower missing.

"It's a gallery," Lilith whispered.

"I haven't noticed." Panther inched closer.

"I think it feeds on blood. It licked the blood off my fingers."

"That's encouraging. I must say, we're having incredible luck with your emergency ballet escapade. Not to mention me getting my promised steak. Anything else it eats?"

Lilith gaped at one of the paintings. A woman's face looked back at her, and she could've sworn its eyes moved. "Don't know. Only, I get the feeling that the heads on the wall were nothing compared to these."

"Lucky for you. I get no such feeling. The only feeling I have is an intense desire to get out of here as soon as possible." Panther scratched at the wall.

Lilith regarded him. "Please stop behaving like an *incongruent* coward. What's the matter with you? Are you a dog or not? Can't you smell it?"

She stood and walked to the wall.

"I'll bark if you touch it." Panther shook. "I mean it."

Lilith cocked her head. "Sorry to disappoint you, but it appears this gallery is soundproof, or at least it hushes the sound, because by now grandfather would've heard us and extracted us from here. Thus, I don't think anyone will hear you. You may bark to your heart's desire."

Panther licked his muzzle. "Don't get me wrong. I love juicy steak, *love* it, but I'm in no particular hurry to become one."

"Thank you for deeming me idiotic enough to stick my finger into one of these," said Lilith. "And thank you for being so concerned about me. To inform you, my nose has mercifully stopped bleeding and I'm in no rush to slam my head on the floor in order to produce more blood to get us out. In case you haven't noticed, there is no bathroom in here. Not that it would help. This gallery takes blood as payment, and I'd expect it to be your turn to produce a certain fluid that will get us out of here."

"Do you propose I bleed myself to death?"

"Do you propose *I* do?"

Panther hung his tail.

"If you have nothing else to say, I will proceed with our investigation, dear Watson, while you stand guard." Lilith leaned closer to the portrait.

A dead face stared at her, a mask of a woman with long hair. It looked as if it could come alive any second. Something was very wrong about it, and it smelled bad.

"It's just the mansion trying to tell me something, like the heads. It's just a portrait, just a portrait..." Lilith soothed herself, but she knew perfectly well it wasn't. She sensed it on a gut level. Thick brush strokes of layer upon layer of paint covered what looked like—

Lilith swallowed, rooted to the spot. "*The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance observes.*" She whispered Sherlock Holmes' words. "Panther?"

Panther grudgingly shuffled over. "I must regretfully report that I haven't figured out a way to squeeze out of myself more blood than a thimbleful. On the other hand, a certain other liquid—"

"Smell this. I think it's skin. Smells like dry leather."

Panther sniffed. "More like dead rats?"

"No, listen. I don't think it's the mansion. These paintings are not part of it. Look at this one, it's like a face that's been"—Lilith's heart chilled at the thought—"peeled off." She covered her mouth.

"*Madam*, may I interrupt your important ruminations?"

"Do you understand what this means?" Lilith's hands shook. "These are...they are—"

"I'm in a dire situation here."

"*What?* What is it?"

"I really need to pee. Sorry, can't hold it any longer." Panther lifted his leg on the pedestal and shamelessly let out a shiny stream. His urine momentarily upset what promised to be the biggest discovery Lilith made to date in her pursuit to understand the rose garden's secret.

"Panther Bloom Junior! Oh no, you didn't!" she shrieked.

Too late. The room noticed. While it adored offerings of blood, it despised any other liquids, particularly those of animals, *particularly* waste products, and it began to spin, getting ready to expel them in the rudest manner possible, revolving around the pedestal.

Lilith lost her footing and slid across the room, bumping into Panther.

"My apologies," he barked, "but you suggested I produce a certain liquid."

"Not *that* liquid!" cried Lilith.

"It worked though, didn't it?"

The gallery spun faster. Portraits swung from their hooks, gawking at both the girl and the dog, in the blur of the movement, looking less and less like faces and more and more like roses.

They bumped into walls, speeding up, and Lilith thought she'd lose her breakfast. She clutched her beret with one hand and Panther with another. The gallery groaned. The ceiling unzipped with a crack and ejected them into the sky.

Rain drenched them. Lilith couldn't see where they were flying, but she could tell that at the end of that destination an imminent death awaited them with abated breath. For the first few seconds Lilith cried her terror and Panther barked hysterically, but then the uselessness of it silenced them both. And about time. Their flight ended as quickly as it started.

Something leafy and tangled caught them, cushioning their fall. They landed deep inside a very thick, very wild, and very large rosebush, coming to a crashing stop in its middle.

"The rosebush woman!" Lilith yelled, blind from panic. "She's tearing us apart! We need to get out of here! She's eating us!" Lilith thrashed, cutting herself and ruining her ballet attire.

"It's rather futile to escape! In case you thought she hasn't noticed us by now, you're terribly wrong!" Panther yelped. "I think we're being digested *alive*!" He gave a few exaggerated cries of pain.

"Don't you fall apart on me, Panther! Let's show her!" Lilith broke stems left and right, oblivious to cuts, furiously fighting the beast she thought was the rosebush woman.

It took them both a good minute of battering the poor shrub to realize that nobody was attacking them. They landed in an ordinary bush, and it blissfully ignored their presence like any normal bush would. On top of that, it oozed a deliciously normal rose fragrance.

Panting, Lilith and Panther looked at each other and then at a face that appeared through the thicket of leaves.

"Ed? Is that you? Oh, please excuse my tattered appearance," Lilith croaked, wiping her filthy face and smoothing her torn tutu. "How did you find us?"

Ed pointed up.

"You saw us flying?"

Ed grinned affirmatively.

"But how did you...do you just know where to expect people to drop from the sky?"

"Dogs, not people," Panther growled quietly.

"Okay, if you want me to be absolutely grammatically correct, a dog and a person."

Ed waved his arms about, slapping his forehead.

Lilith felt her face stretch into a silly smile.

It took them a few minutes. After much grunting and heaving and puffing, they rolled onto the wet grass.

Rain turned to an annoying drizzle.

Panther shook with a grace that would make any wet dog jealous. Lilith brushed herself off as best she could. "Thank you so much for getting us out. You're amazing. You always happen to be at the right place at the right time. Remarkably, you also happen to have a knack for disappearing when—"

Ed stared at Panther.

Panther produced a doggy smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I don't believe I've introduced you. Ed—Panther. Panther—Ed. Ed, Panther is my best friend, and he can—"

Panther bit Lilith's ankle.

"Ow! I mean, he can be rather irritating sometimes."

Panther coughed what sounded close to *cow manure*. He extended a paw.

Ed shook it.

"Where are we, anyway?"

They stood by a tall rosebush that grew in front of Ed's cottage. Lilith wondered if it moved. A small traditional fachwerk house, it sprouted from the ground like a dwarf covered in beams. Its backside bordered the garden's fence, beyond which the Grunewald forest stood sentinel. Its façade faced the sea of scarlet roses.

"This is where you live, right?"

Ed nodded and mimed energetically.

"Wait. We flew all the way *here* from all the way over *there*?"

Lilith gaped at Panther, who pretended to be an ordinary dog in front of this strange mute kid, grinning idiotically.

The drizzle trickled out and stopped.

"Please, excuse me while I try to comprehend this. The mansion spit us out. We flew over half a garden, landed in a bush, and survived. Wow. This is crazy." Lilith felt her well-controlled demeanor crack, as it habitually started doing in Ed's presence.

He studied her with utmost concern. His cookie aroma enveloped her. Embarrassed, Lilith had to admit that she missed him. There was a swell in her chest, a flush in her face, and a ridiculous desire to hug him and sniff his hair. Lilith fought it, fought it, and lost. She promptly flung herself on Ed in an attempt to express her gratitude for saving them, surprised at herself for doing it.

Driven by some mysterious force to share, clutching on to Ed for

dear life, Lilith recounted every event that transpired since she lost sight of him in the kitchen, from finding his note, to Alfred demanding her to become the Bloom heir, to the sleeping pills, to the crow pecking her head in the morning. Here, Lilith took a shuddering breath and launched into explaining how she and Panther were locked in her room, how they escaped, how the second floor drank water and the third one drank blood, and how they stumbled into a gallery full of dead faces. She conveniently avoided mentioning Panther's ingenious escapade invention.

An awkward pause spilled into the air.

Lilith let go.

Ed stood very still. His pale face was pink, as were the ends of his ears. His eyes turned slightly misty, and it wasn't because of the moisture in the air.

Panther raised an ear and unashamedly shook the water from his coat. Lilith was about to chastise him, when an echo of distant shouts reached them, punctuated by Bär's barks and crow cries. The garden moved as if disturbed by a multitude of people running along pathways.

"Fantastic. Let me hazard a guess at who they're looking for." Lilith wiped her face with the sleeve of her leotard, which was also uncharacteristic of her. "You don't happen to have some sort of a hiding cave, do you?"

Ed flipped two thumbs up and motioned for them to follow. They trotted to the cottage. Only now did Lilith notice that her ballet slippers were sodden, she was wet and cold, and—

"My beret," she gasped. Her insides turned to ice at the thought of Alfred finding it in the red gallery, knowing that she'd been there, that she broke his rules again.

Ed pressed his ear to the door and listened. After a minute or two he put a finger across his lips, carefully turned the handle, and beckoned them in.

## Chapter 14

### Jürgen's Paintings

Warm air smelling of liquor enveloped them. They crept in semi-darkness across the hallway, Lilith's ballet slippers making chewing noises. Panther's claws clicked, causing him to freeze every few steps. They made it up the staircase and sidled along the wall. Ed masterfully stepped on boards that didn't creak, arrived first, and pushed open a door. Lilith only had enough time to register that every surface in the room was covered with canvases, when a woman's voice trailed from below.

"Ed, darling, is that you?" It sounded drawn out, like that of a fortune-teller or a dreamy radio announcer.

Ed mimed that he'll be right back and left.

"Well, that was quite a tumble." Lilith tiptoed around a patchy rug. "You and your liquids."

"You're welcome."

"Why, thank you."

"At least now we know how to get out in case we get locked up again and happen to have no water or blood to spare," Panther growled proudly, licking himself dry. "Since my bladder is very small, in case we run out of my urine, you could, you know..."

"No way. Don't even think about it. I did not hear you and you did not say it," Lilith scoffed.

"Why so pedantic? I thought when matters concern life and death, anything goes. Isn't that what a proper detective would do?"

Lilith played deaf, smoothing her hair and looking around.

Ed's room resembled an artist's studio shaken just enough to have a messy appearance. It smelled of paint, and she liked it immediately. There was something cozy and lived-in about it, in contrast to the incessant order of the mansion, more suitable for a hotel.

A bed heaped with blankets squatted against a wall. Across it, next to a window, stood a desk, its surface covered with a higgledy-piggledy of notepads, papers, brushes, and pencils. Lilith pulled out a chair and plopped down, taking off her sodden bag that miraculously survived their tribulations. She checked inside to make sure nothing got lost.

"I should've packed a change of clothes," she mumbled, eyeing a drawing that looked suspiciously like her portrait. "Ed is quite an artist, don't you think? It's too bad his parents died."

A voice shouted below. Someone slammed something, and someone turned on the radio.

Lilith and Panther exchanged a glance.

"I don't see how this makes him special." Panther sneezed, for emphasis. "I've never even met my parents. What terrible fate could've beheld them? Yet I still talk."

"Panther. This remark was very much uncalled for. You know perfectly well that I love you from the tip of your nose to the tip of your tail, but your jealousy is starting to get old. Ed is my *friend*, okay?" Certain pride swelled within Lilith's chest. "Besides, we're supposed to be investigating cruel murders and not discuss your doggy feelings. That red gallery, for example, what do you think it's for?"

But Panther wasn't easily swayed. "Have a heart, *madam*. I still don't see how boys could be cuddlier than dogs."

"Oh, come on, get off it. Admit it, you want him to hug you as much as I do. How could you not? That cookie smell..." said Lilith dreamily.

"*Stale* cookie smell," Panther rumbled. "Stale hormonal teenage—"

The door opened, letting in the sound of a radio turned up to full volume.

Both girl and dog caught their breath, but it was only Ed.

Lilith jumped up, blushing. She realized she must look absolutely dreadful—her ballet attire turned unrecognizable, leotard wet and muddy, tutu torn and hanging askew. She glanced at Panther who didn't look much better, resembling a wet cat.

"I'm sorry. I only wanted to sit down."

Ed shook his head so violently Lilith thought it might fly off.

"Thank you for allowing us to stay in your room. Er, is there a bathroom? Can I...?" She raised her eyebrows.

Ed took her hand and led her to the opposite end of the landing. Lilith's heart threatened to steam right out of her ears.

"Don't forget to turn off the water!" came through the blaring music.

Terrified of being discovered, Lilith did her business, washed her face, and wrung out her hair. Panther stealthily slunk inside, causing the door to creak.

"Shh!"

"Pardon me. I don't think she can hear us through all that racket. Can I? A dose of toweling, please?"

Lilith briskly rubbed him off.

They slowly crept back to Ed's room.

"Dinner at six, darling!" the voice announced in between songs.

"Is that your step-mom?" Lilith inquired, once the door was locked and they sat on Ed's bed, Panther in Lilith's lap.

Ed nodded.

"She won't come up and check on you, will she?"

He shook his head.

Lilith let out a breath of relief. "Why is she talking to you in

English?”

Ed scribbled on a pad. SHE SAYS ENGLISH IS KEY TO SUCCESS. SHE'S GETTING ME READY FOR LIFE.

“Oh. I know what you mean.” Lilith let out a long sigh.

DID YOU PISS ON IT?

“What?” Lilith looked at Ed, bewildered.

THE GALLERY. DID YOU PISS ON IT? IT'S THE ONLY WAY TO GET OUT.

“I—Oh. No.” Lilith shook her head. “No, not at all. Panther did, actually. It was a dreadful thing to do, in my opinion, and to think that it was me who suggested he produce a certain liquid to get us out...”

Panther perked up, a smug look about his muzzle. Mutual understanding flickered between him and Ed, something that excluded girls from the appreciation of certain boyish pleasures.

“Wait, how did you know we were in the gallery?”

IT'S THE ONLY ROOM ON THE THIRD FLOOR THAT ANYONE CAN ENTER, APART FROM ALFRED. AND IT LIKES SPITTING THINGS OUT, WHEN IT GETS BORED.

“Curious. It took my blood to let us in.”

IT PREFERS TYPE O.

“Does it?” Lilith raised her brow. “What's it for, anyway? The paintings, they're not really paintings, are they?”

FACES OF BLOOM HEIRS.

Lilith swallowed. “Real faces?”

FACIAL SKIN.

“I was afraid of that.” Lilith shuddered, thinking about her grandfather's demand. “Did your dad tell you all this?”

Panther stopped purring, listening intently.

HE TOLD EVERYONE.

“I don't understand. Then how come nobody knows?”

Ed put a finger on his lips and motioned to the canvases.

Without frames, they had a raw unfinished look about them. Lilith carefully rolled Panther onto a blanket, stood, and walked up to one. It depicted a wild rose, brilliantly crimson against rich greenery. When she looked closer, she saw a tiny woman's face framed in petals, the same one that peered at her in the gallery. Lilith suppressed an impulse to look away. It wasn't polite to freak out in front of a new friend, especially not about his dead father's paintings.

She glanced at another canvas. It portrayed a rosebush turning into a large monstrous woman. The canvas next to it made her hair stand up. The rosebush woman stuffed a fistful of apparently dead people into her mouth, splats of blood flying everywhere. Each painting was signed with the same name, *Jürgen Vogel*.

Lilith wheeled around. “Did you—did he, your dad...did he see this happen?”

Ed nodded, stroking Panther, who conveniently migrated to his lap. Lilith hardly noticed, her blood boiling.

"*This* is why grandfather wanted to separate us. He was afraid I'd find out. He's a creep, he kills people, and the rosebush woman eats them. I wonder if it's something I'll have to do once I inherit this *squalid, abominable, incarnadine* property." Lilith glared, her face hot. "Is that what he does in his laboratory? Takes faces off previous heirs? To paint over them? To preserve them as Bloom family legacy trophies? And who will have to take *his* face off when he's dead? I think I'm going to puke."

Ed began writing.

Lilith shook.

"Is it part of a Bloom heir duty, to fashion the previous one into a painting?"

Ed broke the pencil, jumped to the desk, grabbed another one, and kept scribbling.

"You know what, it doesn't matter." Lilith took a few deep breaths. "Dearest Ed, please excuse my vigor and directness, but what I'm about to say is very important. I would like your complete attention. Although you never answered my question about how exactly grandfather kills people, I think I guessed it myself. He probably lures them into the garden and lets the garden deal with them in its own preferred manner. How it happens is rather irrelevant. What matters is that people are dying." Lilith breathed heavily, trying to contain herself. "You have helped us before. Tremendously. Therefore, Panther and I would like to invite you to join us in stopping Alfred Bloom from doing any more of this outrageous, *despicable* massacre." She took another breath. "We just decided," she added, to Panther's puzzled stare and Ed's questioning look. "Yes, Panther can talk."

She waited anxiously.

Ed looked at Panther, mystified. Panther threw Lilith a glare that was supposed to burn her to the ground.

"Friends don't hide secrets from each other, so don't give me that look. Besides, we need Ed's help. Come on, say something," commanded Lilith.

Ed froze, pencil hovering in his hand above the notepad.

Panther cleared his throat and professed in his most courteous manner, "Well, since the squirrel is out of the bag, so to speak...very nice to meet you, Ed, and I wanted to thank you for being so kind as to spot us earlier today flying in the sky. As to the current point of conversation, what *madam* Lilith Bloom means is, time is running short. If by some unfortunate circumstance we happen to be interrupted in the next few minutes or, worse, *seconds*," he said, as he sniffed at the air, "she's afraid she'll be separated from you again and might not be able to confirm her theory regarding the rose garden's mystery and perform the elephantine task of saving the lives of all guests currently residing 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 rosebush woman's thorny clutches." He threw Lilith a quick glance. "It also means that *madam* here is a saint and has never, *never* in her most terrible dreams imagined neither Daphne, nor Gwen Schlitzberger, being devoured by said monstrosity with extensive crunching and slurping and chewing."

"That's right, I didn't," Lilith snapped.

Panther triumphantly curled his tail.

Ed blinked. He opened his mouth, closed it, and finally wrote. AMAZING. A TALKING DOG THAT KNOWS HOW TO PISS OFF STUPID MANSIONS. COURSE I'LL JOIN YOU. He flipped to a new page. ONLY ALFRED DOESN'T KILL PEOPLE. ROSEHEAD DOES.

"Rosehead?"

THE ROSEBUSH WOMAN.

"Oh. She has a name. Splendid." Lilith let out a shattered sigh and sat next to Ed.

"Then who does the paintings?"

SHE SUCKS PEOPLE DRY. THE SKIN COMES OFF ITSELF? DUNNO WHO DOES THE PAINTINGS, DAD NEVER FOUND OUT.

"That fact makes my grandfather less of a monster, I suppose. What role does he play in the whole affair?"

Ed stared at Panther. It took him a moment to hear Lilith.

GETTING TO IT. He threw Panther another look.

Panther rather enjoyed the attention, stretching out his neck and positioning himself on the bed in a way he thought dignified talking dogs should sit.

"Can I help you with something?" he growled.

Ed unfroze. EVERY DECADE A BLOOM HEIR CUTS ROSEHEAD OUT OF A BUSH AND FEEDS PEOPLE TO HER. HIS ONLY JOB IS TO GET THEM INTO THE GARDEN.

"Then I was right. Is that what you meant by *yes and no*?"

Ed nodded once, his eyes on the dog.

Panther shifted uncomfortably.

"And then what?" Lilith said impatiently.

DUNNO. SHE DIES? He wrote it without looking at the pad.

"How many people does she have to eat? Can we stop her somehow?" Lilith elbowed Ed.

He startled. ONLY A BLOOM HEIR CAN STOP HER. I THINK.

"But, this doesn't make any sense," said Lilith, bewildered. "If only a Bloom heir can stop her, why would grandfather try to make me one? Stopping her is not in his interest, is it?"

WHERE DO YOU GET A DOG LIKE THIS?

"Oh, dad gave him to me for my twelfth birthday."

DOES HE HAVE MORE?

There was a loud clearing of a doggy throat. "If I may just share with you this important bit of advice? It's not polite to talk about a person in a person's presence without mentioning said person's name. For example, you don't say *he*, you say *Panther*."

Now both Lilith and Ed stared.

"I'm sorry, Panther," said Lilith.

Panther grinned. "Apology accepted. And, by the way, if there is going to be extensive written communication between you two, I daresay I request to leave this group. In case you forgot, I can't read."

Lilith ignored him, nudging Ed out of his stupor.

"So, why would grandfather want to make me heir?"

DUNNO. MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE—

Ed's pencil broke again. He grunted in disappointment, which was the first noise Lilith heard from him. He walked to the desk to grab a new pencil and froze, pointing at the window.

Lilith and Panther scurried over.

Black crows swarmed the garden.

"There must be hundreds," Lilith breathed.

"I would appreciate it if somebody explained what makes your grandfather less of a monster? I missed that part," came from below.

Ed startled, staring down.

Lilith rounded on her pet. "Number one, you're interrupting. Number two, I'm sure you have already deduced the basics. In case you didn't, let me recount them to you. The rosebush woman is called Rosehead. A Bloom heir cuts her out of a bush every ten years and lures people into the garden so she can suck them dry. The paintings in the gallery are peeled off faces. Only a Bloom heir can stop her. Rosehead. Exactly why grandfather is trying to make me one, we don't know. Is that enough of an explanation?"

Panther bit her ankle lightly.

"Ow! Would you stop it?"

Ed opened the window. A sickly sweet stench rolled in.

"Oh, how refreshingly foul," Lilith coughed.

Ed covered his nose.

The crows screeched, occasionally fluttering from bush to bush as if in anticipation of a meal.

Lilith winced at the thought of what exactly they might be waiting for. "One of them nabbed me in the head this morning," she said, pinching her nose shut.

A horrible drawn out sigh came from the depths of the garden. It grew, became a sharp intake of air and turned into a shriek, causing the birds to take off, squawking.

They started.

Ed grabbed Lilith's hand. She followed his gaze.

Bär, chewing on something pink, appeared on a pathway that led

directly to Ed's cottage. Holding his leash, Alfred followed, Gabby and Daniel behind him.

## Chapter 15

# The Unexpected Interrogation

Anger contorted Alfred's face. Lilith recognized her rosy beret in the mastiff's jaws. Ed pulled her away from the window, pointing under the bed. Lilith protested in urgent whispers, arguing that Bär would sniff them out in no time, Panther especially. It would constitute the end of their campaign, and all three of them would be punished for breaking the rules. She rushed to the door. Ed blocked her, sticking the pad under her nose.

TRUST ME.

Their eyes locked.

"Why? Why should I trust you?" said Lilith.

"Does anyone care for my opinion here?" Panther's grumble got lost at about two feet above the floor. Ed seemed to be getting used to the idea of the talking dog, his eyes on Lilith.

She didn't breathe.

BECAUSE I'M YOUR FRIEND. IT'S WHAT FRIENDS DO.

"You *are*? Oh. I'm...I didn't...It's so...okay, I trust you." Seized by a multitude of feelings, she kissed him on the cheek, scooped up Panther, and slid under the bed, tucking herself as close to the wall as possible, hugging her whippet tightly and clamping his muzzle shut. Her heart chittered like a squirrel.

"I'm not an idiot, you know," mumbled Panther.

"Shhh!"

"What, he gets a kiss and I don't?"

"Panther! Will you kindly shut up?"

There was a knock on the front door, and the entire cottage shivered like a leaf in the wind.

"It *does* move," Lilith whispered. "I think it might be afraid of grandfather, did you feel that?"

"I thought we were supposed to keep quiet?"

Below, someone turned off the radio.

"Ed, darling?" The woman's voice cut through the sudden silence. "Get the door, please."

Ed, anticipating his duty, was already stepping out.

Lilith got busy blending in.

"Don't know why you decided to trust him," Panther grumbled under his breath.

"Will you be quiet?"

"How can we possibly hide from anyone under the bed when any fool, upon sticking his head down, will spot us like a pair of shiny

morons?”

“That’s enough.”

Panther scoffed.

Lilith tucked her legs as close to her body as possible and breathed as shallowly as was tolerable. Dust tickled her nose. She sneezed into Panther’s neck. He snarled. Lilith hissed at him, but the next moment, unable to suppress the urge, sneezed again. Panther bit her arm in warning. Lilith pinched her nose. Panther squirmed out of her embrace. At last, they lay still, breathing hard.

Indistinguishable voices echoed through the floor. A door slammed shut and the rush of footsteps followed. Bär must’ve been leading the party upstairs.

Lilith’s stomach twisted into a knot.

The door opened. A pair of bright pumps strolled in.

“I tell you, Alfred,” drawled the same female voice, “the kitchen would’ve been a better choice. I could offer you...”

Ed’s sneakers shuffled in, then Gabby’s flats, Daniel’s loafers, and Alfred’s polished lace-ups.

“Something to drink?”

“Ah! How quaint. I see you turned it into a studio. Very well. I rather like it here, Rosalinde, thank you. No time for a drink, I’m afraid,” Alfred said cheerily. “Ed, my dear boy, I hope you don’t mind.”

“You’re such a bore, Alfred.” Rosalinde issued a forced chuckle. Her remark went unanswered.

Four paws blundered in. To Lilith’s horror, Bär lowered his enormous head and sniffed the floor. Panther went stiff, the fur standing on his back. The mastiff peered right at them, dropped the beret, and barked something close to a mini-thunder.

At the same moment, the edge of the bed met the floor and clamped shut. Both Lilith and Panther were plunged into darkness filled with a delicious fragrance. They found themselves inside a giant flower, roomy enough to sit up. Light seeped through its veined petal-walls.

Lilith gave Panther her most penetrating glare. He shrugged, pretending to focus on the silhouettes of the people moving about the room.

*Wow, thought Lilith. A wild rose. Grandfather’s mansion is a groomed rosebush, and this cottage is a wild rose. The runt of the litter, just like us.*

“...never fails,” Alfred boomed. “Dogs don’t lie, my dear. She was here, wasn’t she?” Alfred walked over to Ed. “Would you like to tell us what happened? How she got here, where she went? Or, dare I ask, may she still be present in your room...hiding, perhaps?”

Ed remained motionless, his figure hunched by the desk.

“Really, darling? You let a girl in our house without letting me know?” Rosalinde issued a fake laugh. Her profile reminded Lilith of a

movie actress more than a gardener. She turned to face Gabby and Daniel. "Ed would never let in a girl without my knowledge. We trust each other. It's very tragic that your daughter disappeared. I can't imagine—simply can't imagine. Is there anything I can do to help? Please, search the entire house if you must."

Ed hung his head deeper.

"I don't know what we're doing here, Daniel, we're wasting our time," said Gabby in a tone that could scare ice into a double-freeze. "It's obvious the boy won't talk. He doesn't talk in general, does he?"

"Ed talks when he deems suitable." Rosalinde sounded hurt.

"How often is that? Once a decade?" Gabby snapped.

"Gabby, please!" Daniel exclaimed in horror.

"If he has nothing to say, there is no point for him to say anything. He has the right to remain silent for as long as he wants." Rosalinde's voice fell an octave lower.

A mutual intake of air fizzed through the room.

"Ladies, we're not here to discuss Ed's choices, are we? We're here to find Lilith." Alfred padded the air around him in an effort to suppress the tension.

Rosalinde muttered something. Gabby sat stock still.

Daniel sighed. "Ed, anything you want to tell us, buddy?"

Lilith held her breath.

Ed shook his head no.

"He doesn't know anything. Sounds like the issue is closed." Rosalinde stood.

"No, it isn't." Gabby leaped to her feet. Lilith detected the beginning of her mother's wrath. "Easy for you to say. Your step-son is sitting in front of you and you have nothing to worry about. My daughter, however, might be wandering the streets right now, lost, confused, and scared. For heaven's sake, can't you *make* him talk?"

"Is that how you raise your daughter, by *making* her do things?" Rosalinde retorted.

Both the girl and the dog squirmed closer, to hear better. A shadow fell over them. Bär pressed his nose to the petal and sniffed loudly. Lilith stiffened. Panther pretended to be dead. The mastiff sucked in the air a couple times, snorted, and waddled off. Lilith felt Panther's tongue on her cheek. She hugged him, straining to listen.

"My dear ladies, we won't succeed if we continue in this fashion." said Alfred.

The women faced each other in what looked like a glowering contest.

"Ed, my boy, let me ask you a question. Do you want to see your friend again...alive?"

Lilith's heart drummed. Her mind filled with images of blood-thirsty Rosehead tackling her in the deepest corner of the garden.

Ed snatched a notepad, scrawled something, and presented it to Alfred with force.

"I see. Very well."

"May I?" Gabby asked.

"I'm afraid this is between Ed and I," Alfred said venomously.

Gabby's mouth audibly clamped shut.

"Rosalinde, do you mind giving Gabby Ed's doctor's number?"

"Doctor Baumgartner?"

"Yes, the one and only."

Rosalinde clacked to the desk and rummaged for a piece of paper and pencil. "Why? Is something wrong with Lilith?"

"She's a very—" started Gabby. Daniel grabbed her hand.

"No, no. Nothing of the sort," said Alfred smoothly. "Only a precaution. She's been through a lot of stress lately. Thank you, my dear. Gabby and Daniel simply wanted their daughter to be evaluated, once she...turns up, of course."

"Thanks for clarifying, Dad. Appreciate it."

"Which I'm sure she will," Alfred continued.

"And if she doesn't?" said Gabby hysterically.

"You asked me for help, I'm helping. Your daughter is twelve years old and she's very resourceful. I don't think she's lost, I think she might be escaping our company out of boredom. She'll eventually get hungry and thirsty and will decide to grace us with her...erudite presence once again. I must say, I enjoyed it immensely at dinner the other night."

Lilith's stomach grumbled. She clutched at it, terrified. For a second, time stood still. Nobody seemed to hear anything. But the way her grandfather spoke, it was as if he knew she was present in the room. In effect, he gave her a warning, to resurface or else.

"Is that what you propose, Alfred? That we sit here and wait for her to turn up? Doing nothing? Doing absolutely *nothing*?" The wrath of Gabby Bloom arrived, and she dominated the room. "She is sick! Don't you understand?"

"Gabby!" cried Daniel.

Lilith wanted to fall through the floor, her eyes on Ed. He didn't flinch.

"I don't care who knows! She needs help!" Gabby shouted. "She is so naïve, she can't tell the difference between a kind stranger and a stranger who would take advantage of her. What if she got killed? We need to call the police. Right now!"

"Dad, Gabby is right. It's been long enough. I think we should," said Daniel.

"I don't think we need to go to such extreme measures," said Alfred.

"Why not? What harm will it do?" Daniel raised his voice.

Lilith couldn't remember hearing her father speak in such an

agitated manner.

"If you won't call, I will!" Gabby collapsed into her husband's arms, sobbing. Startled, he carefully hugged her.

For the first time in her life, Lilith wished for her mother to continue, to succeed in calling the police, in asking them to turn the entire Bloom property upside down, to find the bodies in the garden and the terrible red gallery. Surely their trained dogs would sniff it out, surely they would realize that those were not paintings but remains of dead people. Lilith could almost see their uniforms, so unlike American ones. She imagined them filing out of cars and seizing Alfred Bloom, shock on his face. They would take him away, make him pay of his hideous crimes, make him leave her alone.

*Rosehead can't kill me if I tell her not to*, she suddenly realized. *Ed said only an heir can stop her. That means once I'm heir, I can stop her.*

A commotion filled the room. People were leaving. Lilith bit her lip, listening.

"Yes, almost forgot," said her grandfather. "Rosalinde, my dear, I regret to inform you that I'm looking for a new gardener, a bit more...suitable for my needs. Nothing personal, you understand. I know you despise dirt and all things organic. You wanted to help me out. I thank you for that. But really, I'm doing you a favor."

"Oh!" Rosalinde's voice trembled. "You never told me you were unhappy with my work."

"Well, I apologize for such short notice. I believe two days will be enough for both of you to pack? There isn't much, is there?"

"Oh," said Rosalinde again. "Let me...it's hot in here." She fled the room. Her pumps produced a rapid staccato down the stairs. Gabby and Daniel must have left already, as Lilith saw only three remaining outlines, those of Ed, Alfred, and Bär.

She waited breathlessly, Panther at her side.

"I warned you before, boy." Grandfather stuck his finger into Ed's chest. "If I find out you helped her in any way—"

Ed pushed Alfred's hand away.

Lilith's heart sunk.

"I see. Very well. We talked about this before, didn't we? I trust you don't want to meet your father's fate. Am I correct? My dear boy, let's not make this more difficult than it already is."

Alfred turned on his heel and strolled out.

Bär barked one more mini-thunder and waddled after his master.

Ed slammed the door behind them.

## Chapter 16

# The Risky Plan

Ed waited for the commotion to die, then carefully pried open the petals of their enclosure. It flattened itself back to the wooden floor and the underside of the mattress. Preceded by a puff of dust, Lilith climbed out first. Panther followed, yawning and stretching. From below came distant sobs and the tinkling of bottles. Lilith threw a mortified look at the door.

SHE'S DRINKING. Ed's hands shook as he wrote. SHE WON'T HEAR US. He watched Lilith digest the information.

"Oh. I forgot. I'm sorry," she said.

Ed shrugged.

Panther sneezed loudly, startling Lilith. Her nerves sang from tension. She didn't know what to say. Too many things had happened too fast. Ed said he's her friend. She kissed him. His bed behaved like a flower. Lilith's parents were probably calling the police this very moment, or the doctor, or both. Ed's step-mom got sacked and now he had to move. Alfred threatened him, and it was all Lilith's fault. *She* got him involved in this investigation. On top of everything else, Rosehead seemed to be more restless. They had to do something about it. The crows alone signified an onset of a terrible feast. Plus one more thing. Lilith bit her lip, waiting for Ed to ask about her sickness. In school, at the ballet lessons, *everywhere*, everyone always did.

"Where did you buy it?" Panther growled nonchalantly.

Ed stared. Panther's talking had a freezing effect on him.

"What?" said Lilith.

"The bed." Panther wagged his tail. "I'm asking where Ed bought his bed. I enjoyed it immensely. If I could upgrade my request from the doggy bed to, you know, this one, it would make me work that much harder."

"Really? Did you really just ask that?" Lilith glared.

"What can I say, I enjoy my comfort. I imagine chasing flowery monstrosities across the garden will be very uncomfortable."

Ed smiled.

"That's Panther for you," said Lilith with exasperation, although secretly she was grateful to him for pulling her out of her stupor. "Ed, I'm...look, I apologize I was afraid to trust you."

Ed shook his head no.

"Thank you for covering for us. You have the wickedest hiding place ever." She bit her lip. "And I'm sorry your step-mom got sacked. It's my fault. I should've never—"

Ed put up a hand to silence her.

"Are you mad at me?"

Ed waved his arms so hard he knocked a pile of papers from his desk and sent them flying.

"You're not? Oh, okay. I thought you were. It's hard to tell...well." Lilith sighed. Words deserted her, causing her usual polite demeanor to crumble and her logic to backfire. "My parents are worse, if that makes you feel any better," she said quickly, pondering a second too late why she said it in the first place. "My dad only cares for his dog racing, and my mom...she knits. Day and night. She's obsessed with knitting." *And with feeding me pills*, Lilith wanted to add. "I don't think it's healthy. At least drinking makes you get out of your skin. I mean...Oh, that came out wrong. Excuse me. I'm so sorry." She covered her mouth in horror. Her face flushed. She positively didn't feel like herself around Ed.

IT'S OKAY. I'M GLAD YOU DON'T KNOW. LIVING WITH A DRUNK IS HELL.

"I can't imagine. Please excuse my temporary lack of manners," Lilith whispered, thinking that in another moment her face would simply boil off her skull.

"I think chasing squirrels is a much better alternative to getting out of your skin. If my humble opinion matters here, of course," came from below.

Ed froze, but only for a moment.

He glanced at Lilith. She held his gaze. Both friends communicated something important without words. Panther looked from one to another, scratching himself nervously.

"We need a plan," said Lilith, at the same time as Ed flipped his notepad and wrote, WE NEED A PLAN.

They gasped.

"Did we just..."

A curious tension spilled in the air, the kind that transcends staring contests into the anticipation of a kiss.

Panther coughed.

The friends jumped apart, looking down.

Unable to read or see what the deal was, Panther desperately tried to be a part of the conversation. "Don't you think, *madam*, that *before* we come up with any plan whatsoever, perhaps it's time for you to part with your lovely habit of wearing various berets? Incidentally, they tend to land us into all sorts of trouble. Incidentally..." He fell quiet, miffed by the fact that the object of his reverie stopped paying him any attention. He rolled into a ball, curling his tail in defiance.

Lilith and Ed were back to gazing at each other. Their wordless exchange came to a breaking point. Notepad tossed aside, Ed opened and closed his mouth, emitting a frustrated groan.

"Were you going to say something?" Lilith held her breath.

"Please? Just for me? I won't tell anyone, I *swear*."

Ed shook his head dejectedly and rubbed his nose, leaving charcoal smudges. He grunted and started picking up fallen papers.

"Sorry I asked. So sorry."

Panther snapped his jaws. Lilith thought if she said sorry one more time, he'd probably bite her.

"A *flummoxing* hiding place. Your bed. Awesome, I mean," she added hastily, prompted by Ed's puzzled look. "My house in Boston, it also moves, but it can't do things like that."

Ed's face lit up.

"Your cottage is like a rose, isn't it? A wild rose?"

Ed grabbed a notepad. YES. I THINK—

Lilith couldn't stop herself now. "And grandfather's mansion, it's more like a groomed rosebush, right?"

RIGHT. BUT—

"When grandfather said, *Do you want to see your friend again...alive*, what did you tell him?"

TO PISS OFF. HEY, WE NEED TO—

"Do you think I'm sick?" Lilith blurted, her heart going wild.

NO, I DON'T. LOOK. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOUR MOM SAYS. YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT MY RELATIVES SAY ABOUT ME. RIGHT NOW THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS—

"So you're still my friend?" Lilith interrupted.

OF COURSE I AM. BUT WE NEED TO—

"I'm still your friend, too," Panther grumbled. "I was your first friend, by the way."

"Panther, cut it out." Lilith took him in her lap. "Ed, can I ask you about your doctor? Is he..."

HE'S A CLOWN. TRIED MAKING ME TALK. YOU'LL HAVE A FIELD DAY WITH HIM. LISTEN, WE REALLY NEED TO—

Lilith's mind slipped into an anxious frenzy. "Do you think grandfather is planning to feed me to Rosehead? To hang my portrait in that gallery?" Her eyes widened.

Ed dropped the pencil and pulled his hair, looking at Panther, who shrugged with a knowing grin. "What can I say, that's Lilith for you."

There was a loud bang and a yelp, as if someone tripped and fell. "Ed? Ed!" The rest Lilith didn't understand. The dreamy voice of Rosalinde Vogel was now a drunken drawl.

"Your step-mom."

Ed dismissed it with a wave of his hand. WRITING TAKES FOREVER. UGH. He groaned. WE NEED A PLAN. I THINK ALFRED WANTS TO USE YOU FOR SOMETHING.

"For what? You said an heir can control Rosehead. It seems only prudent for me to become one. Although...I don't understand."

Grandfather doesn't strike me as idiotic. He'd have figured out by now that you told me everything you know." She stared into nothing.

"I can just see you strolling up to that leafy hippo, saying, hey, Rosehead, care to become a vegan?" Panther yawned.

Ed stared at him, but only for a moment. LET'S ASK HER.

"Ask who?" Lilith exclaimed.

ROSEHEAD.

"Ask her? Can she talk?"

Ed migrated to his desk.

Lilith carefully put Panther onto the bed and trotted over. The whippet promptly turned away, pretending to be very upset. It didn't have the desired effect.

Lilith watched Ed work. He held his pencil the way one holds a feather. It flew across the page, covering it with rows and rows of words.

Neither of them noticed dusk advancing. It was too quiet in the garden, with not a soul in sight. Even the crows sat still, dosing.

HERE IS WHAT I KNOW. ROSEHEAD GETS REBORN EVERY DECADE. SHE REQUIRES A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF PEOPLE TO SATISFY HER HUNGER.

Lilith's stomach clenched. "How many?"

DUNNO.

"And you propose we *ask* her? Like, hello, Rosehead, nice outfit. Hey, I was wondering, for what purpose do you think grandfather wants to use me, exactly? Oh, and how many people would be enough for your breakfast today?"

Ed grinned. WHY NOT?

"Did you talk to her before?"

NO, I DUNNO IF SHE CAN. IT'S WORTH A TRY. I ONLY KNOW THAT SHE NEEDS PEOPLE FOR SOME PURPOSE. DAD SAID TO WATCH FOR THE STINK, THE SCREAMS, AND THE CROWS. I WAS FOUR LAST TIME IT HAPPENED. HE WOULDN'T TELL ME MORE.

"Wait, were you at grandmother's funeral? I don't remember seeing you."

I DO. YOU WERE SNIFFING ROSES. He tilted his head.

"Oh, was I? I suppose I was. They stank."

THEY STILL DO.

Lilith's eyes widened. "Her casket was sealed. What if...What if it wasn't an accident. What if my grandmother died from...Could she have been..." Lilith stopped breathing, mortified.

Ed raised a brow.

"You figured this out already, didn't you?"

Ed nodded.

"And you didn't tell me?"

Ed slapped his forehead.

"All right, all right. Sorry. It's just that...it's so *unequivocally* and *morbidly* fascinating. So terrible. So absolutely and unashamedly disgusting." A choking noise escaped her throat. "So, does this mean that grandfather..." Lilith couldn't say it. She mentally added one more reason to hate Alfred. Her top reason. A brute, a book hater, and a liar paled by comparison. He was a murderer. Her heart drummed. "I can't believe this. You think it's true? That he could've fed grandma to Rosehead?"

"Wouldn't surprise me," growled Panther.

"Is that why you hate him so much?" Lilith addressed Ed in a shaky voice. "You planned on stopping this outrageous massacre yourself, didn't you?"

Ed nodded. **SINCE DAD DIED. THEN YOU SHOWED UP.**

Panther scowled and turned away as noisily as he could, fluffing up the blankets and taking time to curl his tail.

Lilith chewed on her hair, thinking about her parents, little Petra and her brother, the Schlitzberger twins, their mother, the blind lady, her daughter, and all the other guests. They had no idea what danger they were in, and they wouldn't believe her if she flat-out told them.

**THERE IS THIS SECRET PLACE—**

"We have to stop him," croaked Lilith.

**YES. TOMORROW MORNING. I HAVE A PLAN. MEET ME AT THE BACK OF THE COTTAGE.**

"What plan? Oh, to talk to Rosehead? Why not now?"

**IT'S ALMOST NIGHT. YOUR MOM WILL CALL POLICE IF YOU DON'T SHOW UP SOON.**

"Let her. I hope she does. I hope they turn this entire place upside down."

**BUT ROSEHEAD WILL SUCK THEM DRY. POLICEMEN.**

Lilith never blushed so hard in her life. "Right. You're absolutely correct. My head has not been functioning properly, please excuse me. Tomorrow, then." She paused. "Wait! What if they lock us up again?"

Ed pointed to the whippet, who turned around with aplomb. "Not to worry, *madam*. I will pee, and we will fly."

A particularly loud crash echoed from below, followed by stomping up the stairs.

All three of them jumped. Lilith had enough time to press Panther to her chest. The door swung open and a leering figure of a disheveled Rosalinde barged in. Her heel caught on the rug and she crashed to the floor, pumps flying.

Ed pushed Lilith and Panther out of the room.

"Does she get like this often?" whispered Lilith.

Ed averted his eyes.

"I'm sorry," said Lilith and, before her girly cowardice seized her, she leaned in and pecked Ed on the lips, then scurried down the stairs so

fast she nearly fell at the very bottom, her ballet slippers sliding this way and that on the polished wood.

"You never kissed *me* on the lips," came a disgruntled growl from between her arms.

"Oh, shut it, Panther." Lilith closed the front door and lowered him to the ground. "If you want to be jealous, now is not the time. It might be possible that my grandfather sent my grandmother to death ten years ago. Can you believe it? Do you understand what this means? I need to tell Dad."

Panther rumbled something sounding like *silly speculations again*.

Lilith stood, fuming.

The Bloom mansion had on its every light, plunging the garden into darkness. The sky turned purple. It was beautiful, if not for the sickening stench that oozed around her.

"The crows must know what's coming," whispered Lilith grimly. German swearing floated from Ed's bedroom window, then another thud. Lilith's insides twisted.

"I did say that your grandfather is a bloody creep, didn't I? This question has been consuming me lately, if I may? Do you have a single normal relative, or are they all, dare I say it, a bit unbalanced?" Panther growled crossly.

"How can you be so insensitive?" Lilith flared up. "What if *your* mom was—"

"What? Crazy about squirrels?"

"Very clever." Lilith glared.

"I'll take it as a compliment. So, what's the plan?"

"The plan is to get back to the mansion. It's not my fault you decided not to participate in our discussion."

"It's not my fault I can't read." Panther stalked off.

Lilith marched after him.

The garden parted in a clear path, as if directing them to the front of the mansion. Deep in their own thoughts, they hardly noticed, walking along in silence, emerging in the motor court and halting by the front doors.

"Hey," Lilith said, as she leaned in and held Panther's front paws. "I'm sorry, okay? I promise I'll read Ed's notes for you next time." She gave him a smooch. "There, I kissed you on the lips. Friends again?"

Panther rolled his eyes, but his tail betrayed him, wagging like mad. "Only I was your *first* friend."

"Yes, of course. You were my *first* friend." Lilith stood. "Ready?"

Panther pawed at the door.

Lilith took a deep breath and reached for the handle.

## Chapter 17

# The Grand Return

Lilith picked the perfect time for her comeback. An hour earlier and she would've been facing her parents and grandfather separately, not to mention the Schlitzberger twins who planned to tease her about the escapade. Now, however, the entire Bloom family was sitting down to dinner, mulling over her misfortunes. Irma proclaimed she was kidnapped. Patrick told Petra she was snatched by aliens. And Gwen and Daphne agreed that the corpses she found in the garden ate her, but couldn't decide if they chewed her first or swallowed her whole. Unaware of any of it, teeth clenched for courage, Lilith hiked straight into the dinner hall, causing an abrupt silence.

It took several seconds for Gabby and Daniel to register their daughter's presence, and another minute for the rest of the guests. They didn't recognize Lilith at first. Her beret was missing, her tutu torn, and a fine layer of dust covered both her and Panther, who didn't look much better.

A collective gasp was quickly replaced by excited voices, moving chairs, and running feet. Lilith wisely closed her eyes, ready to endure the scrutiny.

First came her mother. "Lilith! Where on *earth* have you been?" She methodically examined her daughter, turning her around to check if anything was broken. "Open your eyes!"

Lilith squinted harder.

"Look at me! How did you get out of your room? Your face is scratched. Who did this to you? What good are *you*, not leading her home sooner?" This was directed at Panther.

He growled something that conspicuously sounded like, "Watch it."

"Daniel, she's not talking to me!"

Daniel moved Gabby aside and hugged his daughter. "Hey, pup, we're so happy you're back. You scared us. We thought...we didn't know what to think. Your grandfather..."

His voice drowned in the chatter. People pressed in, eager to touch the girl who returned from the dead, to give her their version of how she must have felt when she got lost, *how* she got lost, what she should do to prevent this from happening in the future, what her parents should do to prevent this in the future, how they should raise her, how child rearing in America was not at its best, how child rearing in Germany was superior, and a slew of similar observations.

"Daphne said you found graves in ze garden. Did zey invite you over for dinner, ze corpses?" Gwen squeezed in closer.

"You got it wrong," said Daphne. "Zey wanted to have *her* for dinner."

"Zat iz what I said."

"No it wazn't."

"It waz too."

They switched to German, then to slapping, then to crying. Lilith couldn't help it and peeked out of the corner of her eye.

Irma intervened to try to pull her daughters apart. It could've easily been a hippo caught in the middle of two giant piglets gone berserk.

The crowd pressed on.

"Petra, let go of her tutu, it's dirty!" said Sabrina.

"...was looking forward to a peaceful night," muttered Trude Brandt. "Alfred, I request you move her to another room. This is not a hotel, this is a private residence. At my age, I require—"

"I'm sorry, but can you please let us through?" Daniel patiently waited for people to part.

"Oh, this is ridiculous. Leave my daughter alone," Gabby hissed, elbowing her way through. "She's had enough excitement for today."

Talking hushed. The soft steps of Alfred entered.

A sickly fragrance enveloped Lilith. She opened her eyes.

Her grandfather's stare pinned her. "Lilith, my dear girl," he said with a chill. "It's good to have you back...alive."

Lilith bristled. "Kindly, thank you for your concern about my wellbeing, dear Grandfather. Incidentally, I happen to have a knack for returning from the dead."

"Pup? You feeling okay?" Daniel glanced at his daughter.

"Lilith, enough of your jokes," Gabby snapped.

She didn't hear, oblivious, her attention on Alfred. An open war commenced between them. They both knew it. There was no use pretending anymore. "Grandfather very much hopes to see me dead, only I manage to escape his clutches every time, much to his annoyance," said Lilith icily.

Alfred raised his eyebrows.

Gabby sucked in a mouthful of air. "How can you say something like that, *missy*. It's morbid and uncalled for."

"Please, love, don't be so apple-headed. We don't know what she's been through, do we?" Daniel interrupted.

"Apple-headed, is it? I'm sick of your dog terms, you know that? Can you speak like a normal human being for once? What about us? Does she ever think what we've been through—what we *have* to go through every day? Tell me, does she?" Gabby's lip trembled. They launched into an argument, the typical fare of a high-pitched voice against a softly spoken one.

Guests greedily devoured the unfolding drama, commenting in German.

Lilith decided to go for the shock effect. "Grandfather, may I ask you how many people you plan on feeding to Rosehead?" She said it clearly and loudly, counting on the wild off-chance that her assumption was correct.

A few people chuckled.

Her grandfather's face turned from pasty to green.

"What's this you're talking about? She doesn't know what she's saying." He clasped his hands in mock horror. "She must be delirious. Gabby, dear—"

"What happened to my grandmother? I want to know," Lilith said louder, cutting him off. "How did she die, exactly? Something in the rose garden killed her, didn't it? And that something was Rosehead, wasn't it?" Lilith pressed on. "Was it, Dad? Why was her casket sealed?"

"Pup. This is not—" Daniel's mouth drooped. "What Rosehead?"

A few uncomfortable murmurs broke out.

"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 by inventing wild stories." Gabby gripped Lilith with the intent of marching her out.

Lilith resisted vigorously. Panther bit Gabby's ankle. She let go with a shriek. An awkward upheaval ensued, with Gabby trying to snatch Panther's tail, Daniel trying to stop Gabby, and Alfred trying to restrain them both.

Terrified of missing her chance, oblivious to the danger of being permanently categorized as mentally ill, Lilith yelled at the top of her lungs.

"Grandfather, come on! It will save us both precious time. Why do you want me to be the heir to this property? So I can do the dirty work for you, is that it? I have the right to know. If you won't tell me, I *will* figure it out on my own, no matter where you lock me up. Why don't you tell your lovely guests where you found my rosy beret. Or what exactly you're hiding in the rose garden. Why don't you tell them about Rosehead?"

"What's she talking about?" Daniel said, bewildered.

"Son, I know as much as you do. Please take your daughter to her room. I believe she needs rest." Alfred threw a falsely pitiful look at Lilith, fixing his suit.

"Daniel, he's right," said Gabby.

"She's not a dog to be stuffed in a kennel. She deserves the courtesy of being asked." Daniel's voice had the acidity typically reserved for quarrels regarding whippets and mastiffs.

Lilith smiled.

"Pup," he said as he kneeled, "do you want to go to your room? You can groom yourself, eat some food, we'll talk. What do you say?"

"No use asking, let's just carry her. I want to call that doctor

immediately.” Gabby seized Lilith under her armpits, ready to heave her if that’s what it took.

“Gabby! Let go!” Daniel said aghast.

“I’d appreciate it if you let me walk on my own, Mother.” Lilith wiggled out. “I can still tell left from right, thank you very much. Worst case scenario, I’ll pour water on the floor, or blood, and the mansion will carry me where I need to go.” She cast a venomous glance at her grandfather, whose face remained a sorrowful mask.

Guests watched them exit, their mouths open, eager to erupt into delicious gossip. Just as they mounted the staircase, Petra’s voice tinkled brightly from behind. “Mommy, are they taking her to the mad house?”

Lilith’s chest constricted at the thought of her being slaughtered, together with the others. For what? To benefit Bloom & Co., to feed the rose garden, to make Alfred Bloom more money. That much was obvious. Anger surged through her veins in hot ropes.

She had to stop this, no matter the cost. She had to make people believe her. Sherlock Holmes would’ve said, *there is nothing more stimulating than a case where everything goes against you*. Only that was the famous Sherlock Holmes, easy for him to say. And who was Lilith Bloom? Just a twelve-year-old girl who’d been labeled mentally unstable for most of her life. She bitterly regretted her outburst. Who’d listen to her now?

There remained the hope of talking to Rosehead tomorrow, with Ed’s help, provided they weren’t eaten first. Deep in thought, Lilith barely noticed how her mother heatedly opposed the idea of Panther spending the night in her room, and how her father argued back that this is precisely *why* he gave the puppy to Lilith in the first place. He wanted her to have a loyal friend, and tonight she needed him more than ever. She barely registered Panther’s satisfied yapping and soon found herself seated on her bed, a tray of dinner placed on the bedside table by Monika, and a bowl of chopped up steak on the floor.

Lilith picked up the fork and stuck it into the sausage, biting and chewing automatically.

Meanwhile, her mother dialed the doctor’s number and, apologizing for the late call, explained the dire need for him to come out first thing in the morning for a session with her daughter. Several times she had to repeat herself.

Daniel watched Lilith eat, his face blank.

“Dad,” Lilith whispered urgently, eyeing her mother’s back, “what kind of an accident caused grandma to die? I know we don’t talk about it, but I’d really like to know.” She swallowed, waiting.

Shadows circled her father’s eyes. “Why don’t we talk about this tomorrow, after you’ve had a chance to rest? Not a very easy story for me to tell.”

“I don’t remember her at all. Have I ever seen her?” Lilith grabbed her chance by the throat, ready to stop at a moment’s notice.

Panther protectively curled around her feet, ears flitting back and forth to catch every word.

"No, you'd never met. She—we were going to visit, but then she had...an accident," said her father dully.

Lilith's hand stopped, the sausage inches from her face. "*I know* it was an accident. But what happened?" She lowered the fork to the plate.

"What happened?" Daniel glanced back nervously.

Gabby negotiated the time, repeating herself to the recipient on the other end who apparently didn't understand English very well.

"All right. You see," he said, then scratched his chin, "she had a similar disorder as you. Er...I don't mean anything bad by this word, pup, it's simply—"

"It's okay, Dad, don't worry, I don't mind. *And?*" Lilith urged him on, dinner forgotten. Panther, his bowl empty, carefully pulled the sausage off her fork, dragged it to the floor, and gulped it as fast as he could.

"This disorder, it's—it's genetic, in many cases. Really, it's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed," Lilith said firmly, having read numerous books on a quest to understand what was wrong with her, because she felt perfectly normal.

Daniel massaged his temples. "She didn't have agility, I mean, no sense of direction. She could get lost in a clump of trees, like a stray dog. She'd panic, hyperventilate, or even pass out. Happened many times. Dad—your grandfather—had to take care of me alone. Often. You see, the rose garden was the only place where she didn't feel lost. She loved the flowers, loved smelling them and making bouquets. Your grandfather planted special bushes for her, named them after her. Eugenia."

"I saw that," said Lilith.

"Gustav or Agatha were always there, always keeping her company."

"And?"

"And, their job was to make sure she was okay; to come help if she needed it, but to stay hidden. Let her think she was on her own. They never let her out of their sight. Of course, your grandmother was a very clever woman. She figured out they spied on her, and somehow managed —"

"Daniel! Are you out of your mind?"

Neither Daniel, nor Lilith, nor Panther—busy with his sausage—noticed that for the past minute Gabby stood over them, arms akimbo, eyes vicious behind her metal-rimmed glasses.

"The last story she needs to hear right now is this, especially before bedtime! I can't believe it. Have you got no sense?"

"But love, it's her pedigree, she'll find out eventually. There's no harm."

"No harm? Am I the only one here who has to keep a straight head? It's not made of steel, you know?" Gabby's voice rang with tears, and one of her knitting needles was dangerously close to falling out. "I thought I lost my baby forever—our baby, Daniel, *our* baby. But somebody has to call the doctor. Somebody has to keep the tabs, keep moving things forward, and it's always me, *always* me. I can't function like this anymore. I simply can't." She issued a dramatic sob.

"Gabby, love." Daniel reached out.

"Don't touch me!" She sniffled. "And you, missy, go take a shower and take these." Lilith received two tablets in her hand. "You'll sleep in our room, and you—" She pointed at Panther.

He growled.

"Gabby!" Daniel turned his wife around forcefully. "Stop it! Let her be, okay? Lilith, pup, do you want us to stay, or do you want us to leave you alone?"

Both parents peered at her, mother speechless from shock, father speechless from expectation.

"Um..." Lilith gulped, uncertain. "Would it be okay if I slept in my room? With Panther?" She composed her features into what she hoped constituted as pure innocence, and added, "No pills?"

Gabby took in a lungful of air.

Daniel beat her. "Sure. If you need anything, just knock on our door. We'll see you in the morning. Now, rest, please. Sleep. You must sleep." Before he could wrestle his wife out of the room, she broke his embrace and, to Lilith's utter surprise, scooped her into a hug and kissed her. Lilith's arms hung idly. The pills rolled onto the floor.

Panther barked at them in the way dogs bark at a pair of hideous cockroaches.

"I know you don't like me much," Gabby whispered. "Still. I love you, never forget that." She let go, grabbed her husband's hand, and they rushed out of the room.

Lilith stared at the door, and then at Panther, who licked his muzzle, feeling very pleased with himself for scoring a fine meal without being scolded.

"Can I pee on them?" he asked hopefully, sniffing the tablets.

Lilith blinked. "What was *that* about?"

Panther sighed. "That, *madam*, was about parental love dispersed liberally in an alarmingly short amount of time due to strenuous circumstances that forced the display of such affection in order for the child—"

"Panther."

"Pardon me. In order for the *adolescent* to feel secure despite the typical familial chaos and lack of appropriate agreement between parents as to how they should deal with their delicate daughter who is extremely sensitive—"

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Lilith interrupted. “Eloquently said.”

“Thank you. I’ll take it as a compliment. Now, however, I ask you to please put all of this out of your *adolescent* head. We’ve got business to attend to, my dear Holmes.” Panther stuck out his chest importantly.

“Why, my dear Watson, I’m happy you’re willing to continue our investigation.” Lilith smiled.

This evening proved to be a successful affair. She stood up to her grandfather, her father stood up to her mother, and her friend Ed promised to lead them to a secret place, to talk to a *real* monster. They were going to save people’s lives.

Lilith grinned. The dangerous investigation into the Bloom heir legacy has matured into its prime.

## Chapter 18

# The Fortuitous Ally

Night rolled over the garden. The air stilled, subsiding the stink. In another place and time, Lilith would've taken it as a peaceful prelude to a good night's sleep. Alas, the quiet disturbed her. She imagined Rosehead lying low in anticipation of the perfect moment to strike. Stripped out of her ruined clothes, Lilith took a shower, combed her hair, cleaned her bag, wiped Panther with a wet towel to his loud displeasure, and changed into her reading outfit—a navy skirt and cardigan, with her blue beret as the final touch.

"You're not planning on sleeping then?" Panther yawned.

"What? I thought you said we needed to attend to business?"

"An hour ago. I changed my mind now. I'm tired. And your grandfather is a bloody moron."

Lilith climbed onto the bed, one leg dangling over the edge.

"You've said that a million times. Is anything else new?"

"Actually, I *am* trying something new. Wouldn't you humbly agree with my opinion? At least *once*, would you take off your carefully constructed composure and tell me what you really think about him? So far I've only heard you yell, *He's a murderer! He's a murderer!* Well, it doesn't count. I'm interested in your calm observations, please." Panther lolled out his tongue.

Lilith thought of her mental list: brute, book hater, liar, murderer. "I don't think about *anything* apart from how to stop him," she lied. Panther's banter annoyed her. "Anything else you want to tell me? About anyone else, by chance?"

She plopped onto the pillows. Panther plopped onto her lap.

"Certainly. Gladly. Let's see here. Your mother is a fussy squirrel-brain, your father is a hesitant pillow-breath, and your friend Ed is a hormonal cookie-cake."

Lilith raised an eyebrow. "Is that all?"

"There is more, mind you. Bär is a bag of skin three sizes too large for his bones. The Schlitzberger twins are two elephant-hugging piglets. And Rosehead," he said, scratching his ear, "is a blood-sucking, stinking, mega-hairy plant-freak."

"Interesting. May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"What about me?"

"You? You're my beloved friend." He wagged his tail.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"You're very bad at lying, you know that? I can see you blushing."

"It's the warmth of friendly love in my precious doggy face. I mean it, with the most wholesome sincerity of a purebred whippet. You're my friend and that is all." He stuck his nose under a pillow.

"Okay, if that's the case, thank you. It was extremely accurately observed, oh Panther, my forever amicable good-humored partner. Now, please kindly get ready as we are about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime."

"Sounds horribly dangerous. What's the plan?"

"The plan is to ponder what grandfather is up to and how we'll get out of here tomorrow. Unnoticed."

"I thought we found the solution to that?"

"Flying through the sky and hoping to land in a friendly rosebush is not precisely my idea of exiting with grace, if that's what you're implying."

"You'll barf out your breakfast and the mansion will make us invisible. Vomit is one of the liquids we haven't tried yet."

Lilith threw him a look.

"Fine. I'll ponder with you. But can I at least have a nap first?"

"No. And stop acting like a cat," Lilith said crossly. Surveying the contents of her bag, she found Ed's map of the garden, a pen, a journal for notes, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a corner still bent on page thirteen.

"You're sure this is the most desirable position for the night?" Panther waddled over to the other side. "May I suggest we sit here, so that in the tragic event that more heads appear, they won't be breathing down our necks."

Lilith's eyes fired up with excitement. "That's it! Brilliant, simply brilliant." She kissed an uncomprehending Panther and disappeared into the bathroom.

"What's brilliant?"

A full glass of water in hand, Lilith hastily walked back and doused the liquid on the wall above the headboard. Every drop was absorbed, and the entire room heaved, as if asking for more.

"Remember what happened last time when you fed it?" Panther grumbled disapprovingly.

Undeterred, Lilith made several enthusiastic trips to the bathroom and back. Water kept disappearing, but nothing happened. Tired of the repetitive task, Lilith dropped onto the bed, tossing the empty glass aside.

"It's not doing anything," she muttered. "Why isn't it working?"

Panther strolled to the window, tail curled in defiance. "You're asking me? Pfft. You may have registered the fact that whenever I give you precious advice, you dismiss it. I feel like it doesn't matter *what* I say, you won't listen, so why bother?"

"Suit yourself. I'll investigate on my own." Lilith fiercely leafed through the book.

"What are you doing?" Panther craned his neck.

"Seeking advice from someone who doesn't demand steak or fancy pink—"

"Rosy."

"*Pink* jackets, or twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week uninterrupted attention. Someone who doesn't throw a fit not worthy of a true crime investigator."

Panther's ears flattened. "I hate it when you do these spontaneous things without explaining what you're up to."

"I was of a higher opinion of your intelligence, dear Watson. There is no time for me to explain everything. Please use your brain."

Panther issued a wounded bark.

Lilith shrugged, opened the book, and pointed to a random spot—her method of getting answers to life's problems whenever her father wasn't around, because whenever she asked her mother, she received an extensive lecture on a topic that had nothing to do with her original question. Of course, there was Panther, but, number one, he didn't appear in her life until a year ago, and, number two, asking him typically resulted in an onslaught of sarcastic responses from the first day she discovered he could talk, when she contracted a fever and jokingly requested a cup of tea. Panther yapped that he'd be happy to bring her one in exchange for ten sugar cubes. *No*, he corrected himself to the gaping girl, *make it twenty*.

Smiling at the memory, Lilith read out loud, "*When a crisis comes, as it will do...*" Her face drained color. She couldn't help but glance at Panther, who couldn't help but glance back, their conflict forgotten. She continued reading. "*I will direct how you shall act. I suppose that by Saturday all might be ready?*"

Lilith felt a chunk of ice slide into her stomach. "Saturday. Panther, what day is today?"

The whippet took his sweet time answering. "Generally, dogs are not supposed to know days of the week. I, however, happen to have studied—"

"Oh, come on, you don't need to prove to me that you're the smartest dog on earth. You're genius, brilliant, super-intelligent, canny, clever, and keen. And I love you more than anything or anyone, always and forever, with my whole heart, okay?" She scooped up her pet and kissed him. He licked her cheek. Thus their peace was sealed, for the moment.

"Thursday, I think," Panther growled happily. "We arrived on Monday. It's our fourth night here."

"Right," echoed Lilith. "That means we have one day left to figure things out, and that's tomorrow. Whatever it is that's due, is happening

on Saturday." Her eyes widened.

Panther coughed. "Since I'm supposed to be the sounding board, may I voice my opinion?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. I'd like to point out one very important fact." He cleared his throat. "I may be a young dog, but even a young dog knows that we live in the twenty-first century." Panther paused.

"And your point is?" Lilith raised an eyebrow.

"My point is, in the twenty-first century most children know that sticking their finger into a book and deeming whatever is written in it as the accurate prediction of the future is, how to say it politely, not necessarily a good idea. Books are not exactly the right tools for that sort of thing."

"Oh, I see. May I add to your statement?"

Panther tilted his head, which in dog was a nod.

"Well, in the twenty-first century most children are not aware of the fact that houses can *move*, gardens can *eat* people, and, oh, dare I forget, dogs can *talk*." She crossed her arms.

Panther shifted uncomfortably.

"I also believe that writers write 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," she added.

"Fine. You win," Panther rumbled. "Can I try?"

Lilith triumphantly offered him the book.

Panther nudged through pages with his nose and pressed it at random.

Lilith read aloud. "*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.*"

By a curious coincidence, the moon trespassed the clouds at the same precise moment. Lilith startled. "My grandmother," she said breathlessly. "It's about my grandmother Eugenia. She must have gotten lost and—"

A hideous noise pierced the night. The entire mansion groaned and moaned and stretched. Miraculously, Trude Brandt didn't offer a peep in the wake of this racket. Lilith gripped the blanket, staring at the spot above the headboard. It swelled like a balloon filled with water. Thin lines formed a web until a fissure ran swiftly from floor to ceiling and the wall split open. In the darkness beyond, something resembling a gigantic rose clawed its way to freedom.

Lilith held on to Panther, Panther held on to Lilith. They sat stock still, mesmerized.

Chunks of plaster flew, dust swirled in the air. A slithering sound signified the passage of something long and twisted. The heads emerged,

bringing with them that characteristic stench of the garden. There were more of them this time. They hung from enormous stems like flower buds.

"I told you he'll chop off your head if you won't sleep, didn't I?" Agatha's raspy voice filled the room. Lilith couldn't answer, staring at one head in particular.

"Do you see..." she croaked.

Panther whined nervously.

The head in question smiled at them. Lilith pinched herself, wanting to wake up from this horrific dream, because that head belonged...that head belonged...to *her*, with Gwen's and Daphne's flanking it on either side. Worse, it had on her rosy beret.

Lilith touched her face, to make sure it was still there.

"Hello," said the head. "Excuse me. Do you terribly mind adjusting my beret? It keeps sliding down."

Lilith, cold sweat breaking out on her skin, crawled over in a trance and pulled the beret slightly back, before scurrying back to the trembling Panther.

"Oh, thank you. This is so much better," said Lilith's head.

"I'm thirsty," said Daphne's.

"Yeah, can we have more water?" chimed in Gwen's.

On unbending legs, Lilith made it to the bathroom and back, a full glass quivering in her hand.

"Don't just stand there, little miss, go on."

Seeing Lilith's uncertainty, Monika's head said encouragingly, "Just pour it on us, *meine kleine*."

Lilith did. She watered them like flowers, glass after glass, and the more she poured, the more they demanded, growing into a gigantic bush with human heads in place of blooms and canes in place of arms, torsos merging and disappearing into the darkness. The ceiling dropped lower, the walls shifted closer, and Lilith could've sworn that she was no longer in a guest room but in a grotesquely intertwined garden.

The heads advanced, rustling like leaves on a breeze, and both girl and dog retreated until there was nowhere else to go.

"You still think watering it was a good idea?" hissed Panther from the corner of his muzzle.

"At least now we have someone else to talk to about Rosehead," whispered Lilith.

"So that was your brilliant plan? I see. Excellent. Why don't you go ahead and ask them?"

"And so I will," said Lilith, clearing her throat. "Excuse me, may I ask you a question?"

"Little miss wants to ask us a question," sneered Agatha. Monika chuckled, passing on the virus of laughter to Sabrina and Norman Rosenthal, to Gwen and Daphne, and, to Lilith's horror, her own head.

"Is that why you summoned us?"

"Well, er...yes. Yes, it is. Excuse me if it sounds strange, but may I ask you whose side you are on?"

"Zere are no sides, little miss, zere iz only ze garden." Agatha's head shifted closer and hung merely inches away.

Lilith swayed, overwhelmed by the sugary stink, close to fainting. "Are you—all of you—are you part of the garden?"

"Everything iz part of ze garden, little miss. And ze garden is part of everything," she sneered.

This wasn't going very well, considering the fact that the stem-arms were poking the girl with their thorns, enveloping her and the dog like a cocoon. Lilith picked up Panther while there was room to move.

"May I ask you about Rosehead? What's going to happen on Saturday?"

"She knows the day. Little miss knows the day." Agatha's head seemed impressed, judging by its thin eyebrows flying upward. Others murmured their agreement.

"I'll water you some more. If you tell me," added Lilith.

"And why should we? Why should we tell you anything at all?" asked Agatha.

"I'm...my grandfather...I'll be heir to this property—to the entire Bloom property; the rose garden, too. I think I have a right to know." Lilith's confidence slowly returned. "One way or another, I'll find out eventually."

The heads congregated in a semi-circle to consult. Their voices crackled unintelligible gibberish. Neither Lilith nor Panther could understand what they said.

At last, they parted.

"You've been exceptionally nice to us. You've fed us water, unlike zat unworzy imbecile." Agatha's head leered at the girl.

"And blood!" came from the back.

"And blood. We will show you."

"We will show you, we will show you!" echoed through the bush. The heads giggled, cackled, and screeched. Their stem-arms scooped up Lilith and Panther off the floor and the entire party dashed upward.

## Chapter 19

# Rosehead's Secret

The ceiling split open with a groan. A thick cloud of dust filled the air. Lilith choked back a cry, afraid the noise would wake everyone, her grandfather especially; but she soon relaxed and allowed herself to breathe, to Panther's relief. He suffocated in her grip. It seemed nobody heard a thing. Oblivious to the discomfort of being pressed between thorny canes, Lilith stared at the unfolding sight, as room partitions crumbled.

For a moment, she caught a glimpse of her neighbors. Trude Brandt snored under a multitude of blankets, removable dentures glistening on her bedside table. All four Rosenthals slept quietly, their beds neatly lined in one row. Irma Schlitzberger's ponderous shape spread over a bare mattress, covers bunched in a corner. Next to her, shrouded in layers of lavender, wheezed the twins. Gwen sucked on her thumb. Daphne clutched a stuffed elephant. The floor was littered with candy wrappers, empty snack packets, and shopping bags, their contents spilling.

"What a mess," whispered Lilith.

"I said they're elephant-hugging piglets, didn't I?" growled Panther; but they already crashed by the red gallery above, broke through the roof, and emerged into the chilly night.

"Wonder where grandfather sleeps. Why did we stop?" said Lilith with alarm.

The heads congregated, swaying dangerously.

"Where's the mansion?" Lilith eyed the ground three stories below. A monstrous trunk protruded from a mound of dirt, with no sign of the mansion.

"Think, *madam*, think," growled Panther. "I was of higher opinion of *your* intelligence."

"Oh, of course. Make fun of me now, why don't you," said Lilith miserably. "How dreadfully forgetful of me. It's underground for the night. May I ask what's going to happen now?"

"Whatever ze garden wants to happen," said Agatha's head solemnly, peering into the distance.

"What exactly does it *want* to happen?" Lilith pressed on.

"Little miss iz asking too many questions. Little miss iz trying our patience," Agatha's head hissed, while others sneered in an unpleasant way. "Simple water and a little blood won't do for questions like zese."

Lilith's stomach shrunk. "I'll give you more of my blood, if that's what you want."

"*Madam!*" Panther barked.

"Will you, *meine kleine*? We liked it. It waz zo sweet." Monika's head passed a tongue over its lips.

"I want a bloody lollipop," said Daphne's head hungrily.

"Lollipops are too hard. I want a bloody licorice," chimed in Gwen's.

"Never had a bloody licorice. What's it taste like?" asked Lilith's head.

Others called out their preferences for potential blood consumption, until their muttering turned into indiscernible babble. They encircled Lilith greedily. Monika's arms gravitated toward Panther.

A sigh full of pain made them freeze. It gradually turned into a drawn-out moan, escalated to a cry, and died with a reverberating echo. Lilith's hair stood on end. Panther's fur bristled.

"Rosehead," they whispered in unison.

"Little miss, please do hold on."

Lilith hastily removed her blue beret, lest it decided to slide off. With a jolt, the rosebush grew, shooting into the sky and arching over the garden. Flocks of sleeping crows dotted the bushes in patches of breathing feathers, yet none of them stirred at their passing.

Fog unspooled in thick waves. They stopped and hung directly over the clearing shaped like a roofless rotunda.

"Now watch, watch clozely," said Agatha's head.

Dangling nearly upside down, terrified that the roses might let go at any moment, Lilith peered into the misty darkness.

There were no crows here, no wind, only a stagnant smell of decay. The glade appeared to be breathing around a massive figure crouched in its middle, exactly where Lilith saw her grandfather shear Rosehead from a shrub. Her heart beating like a mad squirrel, she understood what was going to happen on Saturday and immediately wished she didn't.

Rosehead lay on her side, eyes closed, mouth gaping. Her midriff bulged. It appeared to be stuffed with...stuffed with...

"Panther. I think she's—"

"Obviously pregnant."

Lilith's eyes rounded. "But how?"

"Fortunately for you, I'm erudite enough to know that plants reproduce via pollen transferred by pollinators." Panther sniffed the air. "Insects and animals. And birds. Incidentally, plants that rely on birds for their reproduction develop red petals. Birds happen to not care if they—"

"Stink or not. They have no sense of smell. You don't suppose the crows..."

"Given that there are no squirrels in the garden, nor did I see a single insect mad enough to live in this bog of stench, I don't see what other purpose they would fulfill except that and to help with the disposal of the remains?"

The heads listened with apparent interest.

“Then what exactly is she going to give birth to?”

“Little miss haz a very insightful pet. Ze pet iz correct. Now shush,” said Agatha’s head.

They fell quiet.

Rosehead stirred, emitting moans and rolls of vapor from her leafy mouth, each smelling fouler than the first. She rolled on her back and began pounding the ground. As if on cue, Bär waddled into the clearing from one of the pathways, snarling.

Panther tensed. Lilith clutched his muzzle.

A wave of thuds shook the garden. Fully awake, Rosehead lurched up and sat. Torn leaves swirled around her. Her blood-red eyes rotated wildly; she spotted the dog, kicked it, and released an ear-splitting scream. Bär flew to the edge of the glade and landed in a bush, roaring from anger.

“She’s having contractions!” yelled Lilith over the racket, and promptly stuffed the beret in her mouth to prevent herself from speaking again.

“Hush!” Agatha’s head snapped.

But it was too late. The mastiff heard them. He shook off the dirt, raised his ugly head, and howled for his master.

The heads moved uneasily, murmuring.

“Zey are coming. We have to go.”

Within seconds the entire assembly retreated, shrinking and speeding back so fast that both the girl and the dog barely had time to blink. But just before they disappeared into the mansion, Lilith saw a light flash in the forest.

As strangely as their journey began, it ended stranger still. They were rudely dumped onto the floor. By the time Lilith sat up, the room looked undisturbed as if nothing ever happened—no wall broken apart, no ceiling opened. The mansion stood still, like normal mansions should.

Crawling toward the bed, Lilith feverishly told her pet, “She’s pregnant, Panther.”

“Oh, is she? I hadn’t noticed.”

“What do you think she carries?” Lilith’s eyes blazed. “Another mutant shrub like herself? It’s like pollination gone wrong.”

“You’ve delved inside her belly to confirm your mutant theory, did you?” Panther inquired.

Lilith stared into nothing. “You saw that light in the forest? I bet it’s Ed waiting for us. Bet it’s his secret place. I wonder...”

“Ed. Your new *friend*, is it? Smart boy. I need to learn from him. Let’s see here, so he’s waiting in the comfort of his hiding place, while I’m working off my doggy behind by facing a horrendous monster in the uncomfortable manner of hanging upside down, not to mention the fact that—”

“What if she *does* talk?” Lilith’s face attained absolute blankness.

Panther scoffed. "I simply love your attention to detail and your inability to hear what others are saying once you set your mind to something. Truly, it's a talent one—" He didn't get a chance to finish.

The door banged open and there stood Gabby, dressed in a nightgown, the only article of clothing she didn't attempt to knit, to Lilith's relief.

"What's going on?" she said sharply. Whatever love she professed toward her daughter in the evening, seemed to have evaporated in the course of several hours.

Panther snarled.

For a moment Lilith felt disoriented and wanted to dive into an explanation of the looming danger, which, according to what she just witnessed, meant a feast for Rosehead's newborn baby, or both of them, though Lilith seriously doubted it could harm her mother who'd easily rip apart anyone bold enough to try.

"Gabby, love? Something wrong?" came from the corridor. By the sound of it, Daniel, slow to wake up, searched for his slippers.

"Why are you dressed?" Gabby grilled her daughter.

"Would you rather me strip naked?"

They were back to their usual familial exchange of affectionate pleasantries.

"I asked you a question, *missy*."

Hand on Panther's muzzle, Lilith racked her brain for a passable story, until it hit her, simple yet brilliant.

"My apologies for not answering right away, Mother." She cleared her throat. "According to the latest research, adolescent children with mental disorders such as mine tend to sleepwalk. The stress of facing a strange doctor tomorrow morning, a doctor with whom I haven't gotten acquainted yet, wouldn't let me sleep. I thought it would be embarrassing if I was found patrolling the halls in the middle of the night in my pajamas. I feared it would only add to the *scurrilous* gossip that is already circulating about me among grandfather's guests, who also happen to be our relatives, as you have mentioned. My *temerity* is at fault here, mother. I apologize profusely for rousing you out of bed. How *rancorous* of me, wouldn't you say?" Lilith looked up innocently. This was by far the longest tirade she delivered uninterrupted, scoring not two, but three sophisticated words.

She let go of Panther's muzzle. He yapped approvingly.

Gabby tugged at her hair, eyes darting to her husband, who just appeared.

"Pup, you all right?" He rubbed his face.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Dad. Just a little nervous about tomorrow," said Lilith truthfully, thinking about the impossible task of talking to pregnant Rosehead, and the equally impossible task of sneaking out of the house undetected.

“You see what I meant now? She should’ve taken the pills. How exactly do you propose we keep her awake for tomorrow’s session? I can’t reschedule it, Daniel. I told you it would happen. You should’ve listened to me, you should’ve—”

Daniel cut her off. “Pup, if you want to sleep in your clothes, it’s okay. We understand. Dogs do it all the time.”

Gabby silently sizzled.

Daniel paid her no mind. “Panther loves sleeping in his fur, don’t you, buddy?”

Panther stared. It was the first time he was addressed directly in the presence of all the Bloom family members.

“Dad, in case you’ve forgotten, I’m almost thirteen, not five?” said Lilith.

“Ah? Yes, sure, pup. Just an allegory, is all.” He scratched his chin.

A painful second passed.

Lilith worked up the courage to tell her parents everything she learned, yet words deserted her. She chewed on a lock of hair. Daniel nudged his wife. They exchanged an unspoken sentiment, clearly the result of a late night talk about proper parenting techniques.

Gabby hastily recomposed her face. “Lilith, would you like us to put you back to bed?” she said in a small voice.

“Yes. I’d like that, actually. Me and Panther, please.” She climbed under her blankets. The whippet wagged his tail at the prospect of spending yet another night away from Bär and burrowed himself in between pillows.

After exchanging a few intense whispers, both parents sat on either side of the bed and properly tucked their daughter in.

Lilith hugged Panther, feeling his warmth and grinning happily. If this was what it took, she thought, she’d be glad to travel to her grandfather’s mansion and go through the pain of solving his garden’s mystery again and again, as many times as it took, to arrive at this moment. To feel normal, to feel loved and cared for. For a few minutes, they were a real family. Nobody mentioned her sickness, nobody scolded her, and nobody gave her pitiful looks or fed her pills or tried to take away her best friend.

By an unspoken signal, both parents kissed her on either cheek and quietly left the room.

Panther’s nose steadily puffed into her hair. Lilith thought this night deserved to be called the best of her family reunion so far. Exhausted by the investigation and their dreadful discovery, she drifted into a dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 20

# The Desperate Warning

Incessant cawing of the crows woke them with a start the next morning. Lilith sat up, her head reeling. The house readjusted itself for the morning with one final shake that caused her to fall back into her pillows. She hardly paid it any attention. Panther yawned and crawled deeper under the blankets, slinking by Lilith's knees to hide beneath her feet.

"No, you're not. Come on, Ed is waiting. We have one day left, and that's *today*," Lilith said, unceremoniously pulling out her pet by the tail, to his disgruntled protests and an attempted bite.

"Owww!" She blew on her fingers. "You didn't just do that."

"Oh, yes, I did. I'm sleeping. I need my thinking sleep for future thinking; otherwise, my thinking will not be 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 inched under the covers.

"Panther Bloom Junior. You know I can't do this alone. You *promised*."

"All right. Then I demand steak. You still owe me steak, remember?" he grunted. "And your father has been behaving strangely lately. I'm terribly distressed because of that. Makes me itchy." He scratched himself.

For a moment, Panther reminded Lilith of her mother before she had her morning coffee. "You're *excruciatingly* impossible sometimes. Maybe dad is starting to believe you can talk, did you think about that?" She stroked his ears, irresistibly warm and velvety.

Panther stretched out his neck. "Oh, that's more like it."

"My beret! Where did I put it?" Lilith cried suddenly, looking around. An empty blanket and stack of pillows stared at her with the vacant expression of, well, an empty blanket and stack of pillows. "First the red, then the rosy, now the blue. My head has holes in it, I swear." She jumped out of bed, skidded on the polished floor, and looked underneath. Nothing there, except dust. With shaky hands, she took her bag from the bedpost and emptied its contents. Not there either.

"You and your berets," Panther yapped. "I thought I suggested you stop wearing them?"

Lilith waved him off and ran to the window, squinting at the flying crows. The weather seemed to be coming from the other side of the garden. Tongues of noxious vapor rolled in, together with the stench unusually sharp in its potency, as if Rosehead's bad breath curdled overnight, overwhelming the atmosphere with its poisonous reek. Lilith

clamped her nose shut and stared at Panther, who licked himself, sneezing occasionally.

“One might think she’s giving birth to moldy cheese,” he snarled.

“Look!” Lilith pointed.

One of the crows broke off from the flock and zoomed to the other side of the garden. An enormous leafy arm snatched it right out of the air, cutting off the squawking.

“Wonder why she wouldn’t eat Bär. What is he, not juicy enough?” Panther grunted. As if the mastiff heard him, he appeared from a garden alley, a taut leash extending from his neck to Gustav’s bony hand. Alfred, however, was absent.

“Where could grandfather be? What do you think he’s doing right now? I’d give anything to know,” Lilith mumbled.

The door opened. Lilith and Panther wheeled around.

Hair pulled back in a bun, Agatha walked in with a tray of breakfast. It filled the room with the delicious smell of freshly made waffles.

Lilith wanted to say good morning, but her tongue got stuck.

“Good morning,” said Agatha tonelessly, her eyes glinting. “Little miss better get ready, before her grandfazer wakes up. She better eat. She haz a long day ahead of her. Ze doctor iz arriving soon.” The housekeeper pressed her lips into a line, indicating that she will say no more. She placed the tray on the bedside table and marched out.

Lilith stared. She was in a stupor that follows particularly vivid dreams, when you see someone you know performing something unimaginable and then see the same person in real life. Agatha’s head floating in mid-air contrasted sharply with Agatha walking on two legs.

Lilith squinted. “You saw her yesterday, right? Her head?”

Panther appeared deaf, devouring finely diced steak that, no doubt, was prepared for him by Monika. Within seconds it was gone, and he licked the bowl, looking up. “Did you say something?”

“I said, did you see Agatha’s head attached to a rose stem yesterday? And Monika’s, and mine, and Daphne’s, and others? I want to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating.”

“Of course I did.” Panther eyed the waffles.

“Don’t even think about it.” Lilith seized her breakfast and gave a little cry of triumph. Her blue beret peeked out from under the plate.

“She found it. She brought it back.” Lilith smiled. “The mansion must be on our side, Panther. You think she knows? Think they’re all connected somehow?”

“First, who do you mean by *they*? And second, whoever *they* are, what of it? What if they are connected? That doesn’t mean you will suddenly start calling that hideous walking stick of a housekeeper a *friend*, does it?”

Lilith chewed, thinking. “I never fathomed that such a little dog

could harbor such an incredible amount of jealousy.” She burped and wiped her mouth.

“Don’t mind me, of course, I’m just a *little* dog. But if my opinion matters here at all, I never fathomed that such a *little* girl—” Panther broke off.

After a mandatory knock, Daniel squeezed inside. His face looked haggard.

“Pup? Done with breakfast? Doctor Baumgartner is here. He’s ready to see you in your grandfather’s study. Your mother—”

The rest Lilith tuned out. She forgot about Ed waiting for them, about Rosehead due to give birth tomorrow, and about the guests being in mortal danger of her carnivorous baby. *Grandfather’s study*. Two magical words danced in her head, making her tremble with anticipation, eager to see his thinking place.

“...need more time?” Her father’s voice brought her back.

“Yes. No. I mean, yes. I’m ready. Sorry. Just a moment.” She scooped Ed’s map, her journal, a pen, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* back into the bag, slung it over her shoulder, stepped into Mary Janes, and donned her blue beret.

“Dad?”

He opened the door. “Yes?”

“I can’t take Panther with me, can I?”

“No, pup.”

“Can I take him out on a walk after I get back?” She bit her lip, willing herself to look guiltless.

“Sure, sure. I’ll come with you, if you don’t mind?”

“No. I don’t mind at all,” Lilith lied. She whispered urgently into Panther’s ear, “I’ll try to be fast. See if you can gather more vital information while I’m gone. We’re leaving to see Ed as soon as I’m back, okay?”

“How do you propose we get rid of *him*?” Panther waved his nose at Daniel.

Lilith gave Panther a look that meant, *we’ll figure it out later*, and was off. She hiked behind her dad at a brisk pace, smoothing her skirt and pulling up her knee socks, hopping on one leg, then on the other. She had no reason to give a false impression to this new doctor. Those games didn’t apply anymore. This time she intended to turn the session around, using many of the tricks she learned from Dr. Corby Crawford and her predecessors, to get a positive reevaluation report and to prove her mother wrong.

They passed the second floor and emerged on the third, its flaming intensity making Lilith cringe.

“Stunning. Such a smooth coat, isn’t it?” Daniel mistook her facial expression for awe, absentmindedly descending into dog speak again. “First time I was here, I couldn’t believe it. Every room is painted a

different red, for each breed of rose. Isn't it something? A kennel the size of a room. Wish I could have one for each of my whippets," he said dreamily.

Their steps echoed dully. They appeared to be alone.

Lilith took a deep breath. It was now or never. "Dad, I wanted to thank you for not asking me to take the pills."

"Ah? Yes, yes, no worries," he said vaguely, deep in thought.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you mind finishing that story about grandma's accident, about how she died?"

Daniel stopped. "No...no, not now. We don't have the time. You feeling okay?"

"Yes, I'm absolutely fine, Dad."

"Don't be puppyish with me. Give me an honest answer, will you? If this is too stressful, we don't have to wait till Sunday. Let's go to the airport right now, see if we can buy tickets and race home, huh? What do you say?" He passed a hand through his hair. "I don't care how much it costs, pup, just say the word."

"No!" Lilith exploded. "No," she repeated quieter, seeing a look of alarm on his face. "No, really, I'm fine. I'm very much looking forward to meeting Dr. Baumgartner. He might just have a fresh outlook on my problem; exactly what I need right now, a runt of the litter like me," she said, biting her lip. Instead of warning her father about Rosehead, she kept talking gibberish.

"You're *not* a runt of the litter. Never say that." Her father straightened.

"Dad, I need to tell you something important. Something..." She sighed. "It's not a secret, okay? You need to tell mom. I ask you to."

"All right," Daniel said cautiously. "What is it?"

"Well, you have to promise you'll believe everything I say."

"Promise. Out with it, pup." Daniel eyed his daughter curiously. The walls appeared to be listening in, sparkling crimson.

"Excuse me for saying this. I don't mean anything bad by it, and I'm *not* inventing this to somehow make grandfather look bad, okay? I swear." She clutched her hands. "I'm simply stating a fact. And the fact is something I've seen with my very own eyes. Panther saw it too, ask him. And Ed. Ask them both. Actually, Agatha knows about it, and Gustav and Monika."

"Seen what?"

Lilith took in a lungful of air. "Dad, grandfather is breeding a monster in the garden, a plant-freak. Well, Panther calls her a plant-freak. Anyway, her name is Rosehead."

The mansion passed a shiver.

"Rosehead?" Daniel repeated.

"Yes. She lives in the garden, on the other side, closer to the forest. She's almost thirteen feet tall, Dad, *and* she's pregnant." Lilith's eyes glistened.

Her father rubbed his eyes, then his temples, then his hands, as there was nothing else to rub. "I'm listening."

Lilith sighed. "Her baby...we don't know what it is, but we think—me and Panther—well, it's me, mostly, because Panther doesn't quite agree with me. Anyway, I think it's some sort of a plant mutant like her. We need to warn everyone, to get everybody to leave the mansion. She's giving birth tomorrow. Ed told me—actually, his dad told *him* before he died—he said that Rosehead sucks people's blood. I guess that means her newborn will do the same thing?"

Daniel's face turned ashen. "That's possible. Anything else?"

Lilith licked her lips. "Yes."

"I'm here. Keep going."

"I think that grandfather fed grandmother to Rosehead. The other Rosehead, ten years ago. Or her newborn. It explains why her casket was sealed and why nobody would talk about her *accident*." She waited for a reaction.

"What?" Daniel grabbed his head.

"Sorry to say it like this. I didn't know how else to tell you. Ed, Panther, and I...we plan on talking to Rosehead, to convince her to stop." She caught her breath, realizing she said too much.

Daniel stretched out his hand to feel her forehead.

Lilith took a step back. "You don't believe me, do you? You think I'm sick, you and mom both."

"No-no-no, it's not like that, it's..." He fisted his hair. "It's a very serious accusation you're making against your grandfather, do you understand? I'm willing to chalk up your stories to imagination, but this..."

"To chalk them up?" asked Lilith quietly.

"Listen, it's a little overboard, you understand. Nothing personal, pup. Try putting yourself in my shoes for a second."

"I see," whispered Lilith.

Daniel shifted uneasily. "Where did you hear about Rosehead, anyway? I looked up the name in the family archives, out of curiosity. It's Ludwig's wife's nickname. Even I didn't know about it. Did grandfather tell you?"

"I thought of all people, you'd believe me. I'm sorry. I was gravely mistaken." Lilith hung her head.

"Oh, Lilith. I didn't mean—"

Footsteps interrupted them.

A jolly middle-aged fellow trotted up the staircase and swaggered toward them, flocks of copper hair bouncing in rhythm.

"Ask Agatha, the housekeeper. She knows. And Gustav. Ask them,

ask them!" Lilith whispered urgently.

Her father appeared torn, mulling over the information, tilting his head to the side like a puzzled dog.

"Dad, I'm very much looking forward to my therapy session," she added in a loud voice.

"Looking forward, eh? Zat iz ze spirit! I love patients like yourself, Liliz Bloom." The doctor's shoes clicked on the marble floor, his arms moved as if directed by an unskilled puppeteer, and his belly jiggled. He held a bulging attaché case and snapped his fingers repeatedly. A strong odor of bad coffee and sardines reached Lilith. She stifled a gag, pretending to have hiccupped.

"*Dr. Wilhelmus Baumgartner, Psychologischer Psychotherapeut, Kinder- und Jugendlichenpsychotherapeut, Heilpraktiker für Psychologie, Diplom-Psycholog*—" the doctor fired off rapidly, shaking Daniel's hand.

He mumbled something in German.

The doctor turned to Lilith.

She involuntarily took a step back. She'd seen different therapists, some somber, some inquisitive, some pitiful. But she'd never seen anyone as enthusiastic as Dr. Baumgartner.

"I'm a very, very buzy man. My schedule iz packed, it iz packed. I made very special arrangements to be here today, very special. Alfred Bloom iz an old friend. If you don't mind, I will take over from here, Mr. Bloom. We have a lot to cover in one hour. How very exciting."

Daniel glanced at his daughter. "You'll be all right."

"I'm sure I will," said Lilith dully.

"I'll see about your request," he added quickly, sticking his hands in his pockets and stalking off.

"Oh." Unable to believe what she just heard, in a kind of delirious glee of hope, Lilith hastened to follow the doctor and climbed up the staircase after him, without noticing her way, until they stood in front of a heavy black door at the very top.

"After you, Liliz." The doctor motioned her in.

Lilith realized they were inside the mansion tower, on the fourth floor. She halted, stunned by the sight.

## Chapter 21

# The Fatal Therapy Session

As transparent as the mansion was on its ground floor, decorated with glass and crystal, as white as it was on the second and red on the third, its fourth floor was completely and utterly black. Polished dark stone encased a circular room, about thirty feet in diameter. Illuminated by individual spotlights, golden frames with awards to Bloom & Co. crowded the wall. In the middle of the floor, on top of a furry rug, three leather chairs surrounded a desk with a gilded lamp and an old rotary phone, which explained the mystery of Alfred's communication with the world. Black curtains draped the windows shut.

Reminded of her first impression about the mansion being a tomb, Lilith took a nervous step forward.

"Here we are, Liliz. How very, *very* gracious of your grandfazer to let us uze hiz study. Zis iz ze only room where we can have privacy. It iz soundproof," said Wilhelmus in the cheery way an executioner might boast about his torture chamber. He shut the door.

Lilith's throat constricted. She wondered if anyone would hear her yell, on the off chance there was a need to. The room pressed down, sending her a signal that she didn't belong here with her silly blue beret.

Unperturbed by his patient's silence, the doctor sauntered to the desk, dropped into the chair, and—whistling some merry tune—shifted the phone receiver to make it ring as busy. Next he ruffled through the contents of his case, finally holding up a piece of paper with a loud, "Aha!"

Lilith sunk into the chair opposite him.

"Zo," the doctor proclaimed, leaning over the desk. "How very, *very* delightful to meet you, Liliz Bloom."

"It's Lilith," she said coolly, thinking that if he said the word *very* one more time, she'd have to restrain herself from saying a *very* rude remark.

"Pardon me. Liliz it iz."

Lilith sighed.

"Tell me about yourself." Wilhelmus assumed a professional stance: the expectant face, the calm anticipation, but no empathy, only a heightened curiosity attributed to such a colorful subject to work on. Lilith's typical fare.

She bit her lip. Time ran short. She couldn't afford to spend it on her own insecurities when other people's lives were in danger. After all, she'd soon become heir to the entire Bloom property, and it was her responsibility to start behaving like one now, wasn't it? *You know my*

*methods*, Sherlock Holmes would've said, *apply them!*

Lilith smoothed her skirt, adjusted her beret, and went ahead with ferocity typically reserved for dire situations.

"Excuse me, dear Wilhelmus Baumgartner," she said politely, "you said you were a very, *very* busy man. I'd like to assure you that I'm also a very, *very* busy girl. Let's not waste each other's time. You're doing a favor to your friend, and I'm doing a favor to my parents. We both despise it. We both would rather be doing something else."

Wilhelmus blinked.

"In light of these facts," Lilith continued, "may I ask you, what exactly do you wish to know, which you currently don't?" She pointed to the paper.

A heavy pause stretched to a breaking point, but then the doctor's eyes sparkled, and he cracked a fake smile.

"You are, indeed, a true Bloom." He snapped his fingers.

"I'm delighted to have amused you," said Lilith.

"Very, *very* well."

She cringed.

"As you wish. We'll go straight to your diagnosis." He consulted the paper. "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, anxiety, onset diagnosed at age five..." He scanned the document, mumbling under his breath. "How very, *very* interesting. A *very* nice bouquet."

Lilith struggled to come up with a way to let the doctor know that the unnecessary repetition of words acts like a knife on a glass bottle.

"Tell me, Liliz, what happened when you were five?"

"I started school," she said irritably, drifting into memories of taunting, mocking, and teasing that ensued from the moment she stepped into the classroom. Books and ballet lessons were her only refuge until she got Panther, her first real friend.

"School?" The doctor's eyebrows flew up. "*Very* interesting. Tell me, how did it make you feel?"

"How did *what* make me feel?" snapped Lilith.

"Starting school, Liliz."

Blood throbbed in her ears, as it always did when her emotions were questioned. How could any of these people possibly understand what it felt like to be in her shoes without having been subjected to what she was subjected to, every single day? What benefit could they derive from listening to her awkward attempts at describing moving houses, future-predicting books, or talking pets? How could they comprehend that standing still was the worst torture in the world, and that ballet and books were her only paths to sanity? And how could she explain her acute sense of smell, something nobody else around her possessed? Nobody

except Panther and, most recently, Ed.

"It made me feel *murderous*," said Lilith honestly.

"Pardon?" The doctor produced a pen and started taking notes. "That is a very, *very* interesting way to feel. Please explain more?"

But Lilith was done answering questions. "Did you know that my grandfather helps murder people?"

Wilhelmus blinked. "Pardon?"

Lilith continued calmly. "That's why his roses are so popular. I'll explain. Apparently, once a decade or so, Rosehead"—the room visibly shrunk at this—"a plant-freak that grandfather hides in the garden, gives birth to a mutant shrub. A copy of herself, perhaps. It feeds on people, possibly to produce exceptional flowers for the next ten years. Don't ask me how. I'm merely guessing, of course. In fact, I had to conduct my own private investigation to dig up this information. Why, you might ask. Well, I'll gladly explain. As future heir to the Bloom property, I'd like to stop it."

Wilhelmus's eyebrows slid high up his forehead.

"I need your help," continued Lilith. "Please. Write me a positive report. It'll calm down my parents, my mother especially. And, it will allow me to continue my investigation, before the inevitable claims innocent lives. Tomorrow, in fact. Oh, one more thing. If you happen to know anything about this matter, it would be very, *very* helpful if you told me right now."

The air between them crackled.

The doctor drummed his fingers on the desk. "That's quite a story, Liliz. Tell me more about Rozehead."

The room tightened another foot.

Lilith startled, wondering if they were in serious danger of being crushed every time one of them said the monster's name.

Falsely interpreting her fear as hesitation, the doctor leaned back, fingers interlaced on his belly. "I understand it must be hard for you to talk about zis. You are almost thirteen yearz old, yes? Zis iz a safe place, Liliz. Anything you say will stay between you and me."

Lilith raised a brow. Whenever a therapist promised her not to spill her secrets, they ended up neatly typed into a report to which her parents had direct access.

Wilhelmus made a note and grunted in delight. "Aha! I think I know. Iz zis Rosehead your imaginary friend?"

The room trembled. The ceiling dropped a few feet. The spotlights dimmed perceptibly. Lilith felt the mansion's anger at the doctor's dismissive tone. An inkling of fury slid over her vision.

"Yes. Yes, she is." Words tumbled from her lips before she could stop them. "I'm very good at imagining things. In fact, sometimes 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 one hour for which he was paid, yearning to leave this mansion as soon as possible because it gives him the creeps and because he knows that what I'm telling him is the absolute truth." Lilith caught her breath, glaring.

Wilhelmus sniggered unpleasantly. "Do you know ze meaning of ze word *delusion*, Liliz Bloom?" Professional warmth deserted his voice.

"I'm not delusional," said Lilith. Her face turned hot. "I'll show you. Right now." Her hands shook. If she succeeded, she'd prove a doctor wrong for the first time and clear her lifelong history of being called sick.

"You will show me who? Your imaginary friend? I'd be very, *very* delighted to meet her. Or iz it a he? A boy?" Wilhelmus mocked.

Lilith had it. Years of suppressed tension exploded. The pain of being called an idiot, a psycho, and a loony at school, the constant disappointment of trying to communicate what she felt and never getting through to anyone, the whirl of emotions she kept a tight lid on, erupted. The lid flew off. She jumped to the desk, seized the lamp, and threw it on the floor. It cracked and fizzed out. The room descended into semi-darkness, illuminated only by the spotlights. Lilith picked up a shard of glass and sliced her palm open, letting the blood drip.

"Look!" she yelled. The floor arched itself in glee from tasting the warm liquid, demanding more.

"Liliz Bloom!" Wilhelmus hastened out of the chair. "Give zis back! Give zis to me!" He shouted something else in German.

Lilith sprinted away, younger and faster on her dancer's legs. They made several laps around the desk. Lilith ran wider and wider circles, reaching the wall and trailing her bloody hand along its cool surface, feeling the tingling sensation of her blood being lapped up.

"I'm paying!" she screamed frantically. "See? I'm paying you! Like you asked! I'm your future heir, Lilith Bloom, direct descendant of Ludwig Bloom! And of Rosehead! I want to stop her! I command you! **SHOW ME HOW TO STOP HER!**"

The room rattled and halted.

Lilith gazed around, waiting for some kind of an answer.

Clutching his heart, the doctor jabbed an admonitory finger at the girl. "*Verrückt!* Mad. I pronounce you mad." He mopped his forehead. "Zey need to lock you up. I will notify your grandfazer and your parents right away." Squinting in the gloom, Wilhelmus leaned over the table and hastily wrote a report.

A rush of images flooded Lilith: kids at school calling her loony, their laughing faces, their painful pinches, girls yanking off her berets, boys upending her schoolbag, teachers giving her time outs. Faces multiplied, their mouths opened wide in laughter, and Lilith's pain flared

up anew.

She tore the report out of the doctor's hand. "No!" she screamed, her manners replaced with pulsing anger. Tears prickled her eyes. "You will *not* notify them! You will not notify *anyone*."

Her beret askew, one hand bloody, another holding a piece of glass, she looked murderous. Wilhelmus Baumgartner darted for the door, his professionalism taking a hike in place of self-preservation.

Lilith couldn't let him go. On some instinct, she whispered, "My answer is *yes*, Grandfather. I accept. I declare myself heir to the Bloom property. Dear mansion, I command you to take this man. Don't let him leave this room."

The mansion happily obliged.

All spotlights went out.

A great rustle of leaves filled the darkness, as if colossal roses sprouted from the walls, gaining on the trembling doctor. He yelped once, twice. Lilith stood bolted to the spot, knowing that not a single soul would hear him through the soundproof walls. There was a sickening crunch of breaking bones, a shrill cry of agony, a disgusting sucking noise. Then all went still.

Hair stood up on Lilith's neck. Her anger evaporated in an instant, replaced with a heavy bloating in her stomach. She understood why the room was black. The first floor was transparent because it fed on air, the second floor was white because it fed on water, the third one was red because it fed on blood, and grandfather's study was black because it fed on people's lives.

## Chapter 22

### Alfred's True Colors

How long Lilith stood in total darkness, she couldn't tell. She felt numb. Her acute sense of smell picked up a metallic tang; her mouth tasted bitter. White spots danced in front of her eyes. Doctor Baumgartner's death-scream bounced around in her head, making her want to part with her half-digested breakfast. At some point, her every thought evaporated and was replaced with one clear message: *You're a murderer, just like your grandfather.*

On the periphery of her senses, Lilith detected movement. A sickly sweet smell reached her. She wheeled around.

"Grandfather?"

Alfred switched on the light. "Well...I'm impressed. Nice work, my dear girl, nice work. I knew I was not mistaken in my choice. That wasn't so hard now, was it?"

Clothed in a black suit, he stood by the door, a charming smile making his eyes twinkle.

Lilith's tongue wouldn't move. She glanced around for any sign of struggle. The room looked exactly as it did when she entered an hour ago. The floor sparkled with a polished shine, the circular wall sported golden frame upon golden frame of Bloom & Co.'s achievements, and the rug lay unruffled, pinned by three leather chairs and a desk, on which stood the gilded lamp, whole. Lilith studied her hand. A long cut decorated her palm, still bleeding.

"How did your session go?" asked Alfred.

"Is he dead?" croaked Lilith.

"Is *who* dead?"

"The doctor." Lilith began to shake.

"Doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner? Why would he be dead, my dear? He hurried off to his next appointment. Asked me to apologize to you for his quick departure. A busy man; very sought-after psychotherapist, one of the best in his field. He left me a report on you." Grandfather pulled a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket.

Lilith stared. A minute ago she held it in her bloodied hand. Now it vanished.

"Did the room eat him?" she asked anxiously.

"Are you feeling all right?" He stretched out a hand.

"Don't touch me!" Lilith jumped back.

"Let's sit down, shall we? No good talking on your feet. Amuse your grandfather." Alfred motioned to the chairs.

"What happened to the doctor?" Lilith pleaded, realizing she had no

witnesses to rely on. Who would believe a twelve-year-old girl pronounced mad by a certified professional?

"What do *you* think happened to him?" Grandfather stuck the report back into his pocket.

A sudden inspiration seized Lilith. "You were spying on us the whole time, weren't you?" She stepped behind a chair.

"What makes you say so? It would be inappropriate for me to participate in your private therapy session unbeknownst to you, wouldn't it?" said Alfred cheerily.

It took an enormous effort for Lilith to steady her voice. "Excuse me for saying this, dear Grandfather, but I believe that it is equally inappropriate to lie to your own granddaughter whom you yourself have decided to appoint as your heir. About Rosehead, especially."

The room quavered.

Alfred glanced about suspiciously. "Lie? I never lie to my family. By the way, glad you agreed, my dear. Never doubted you for a second."

"Agreed to what?"

"Why, to becoming the Bloom heir, of course," he said, his attention on the ceiling.

"You couldn't have possibly heard me saying that unless you were in the room. The doctor said it's soundproof."

"Did he?" Alfred craned his neck, looking around.

"How did you—I don't remember smelling your revolting odor—where did you hide?" Lilith blurted.

"Where did I *what*?" He felt the wall, straightening the golden frames one by one.

Infuriated, Lilith exploded. "When will you stop pretending and start talking honestly to me? Coward. Stinking, creepy, freaky, bloody, *mendacious, squalid, abominable* coward!" She gripped the back of the chair.

Her outburst had an immediate effect.

Alfred looked at his granddaughter as if he saw her for the first time, with the appraisal of a predator, his charming mask gone. For a second, his fingers spread in a strangling motion. "Your acceptance of becoming my heir means nothing, dear girl. I demanded it for my convenience. I'll be using you for a certain task, if you will. This is still *my* house, *my* garden, *my* property. I will do as I please," he said in a controlled voice. "Who do you think you are, judging me? What do you think your little life is worth? You don't know? Would you like me to tell you?" He advanced.

Lilith gulped.

"It's worth nothing. You're *nothing* to me. You're *bait*," he said, glaring.

Lilith felt her spine turn to ice. She was looking into the face of a killer, cold and calculating. "So my acceptance means nothing?" she

managed.

"That's correct, my dear." He sneered.

"And it's still your mansion?"

"It is."

Lilith licked her lips. "Dear mansion, did you hear my grandfather? We happen to have a dispute of ownership here. Do you mind showing us, please, who's your current boss?"

Without a warning, the floor bulged and threw Alfred off balance. He hit his head on a frame. A trickle of blood spilled down his temple and disappeared into the stone.

Lilith gaped, her heart pounding.

Alfred pulled himself up and leaned on the wall, eyes darting left and right in utter incomprehension.

Emboldened by her power, Lilith stepped out from behind the chair. "Well, dear Grandfather, now that we've straightened out the insignificant mansion ownership details, let's get on with the other important matter. You mentioned I'm bait. I would very much like to find out, for what, or for whom. Please?"

Alfred touched his head and examined his stained fingers. "You're imagining things," he said sweetly. "Now, if you could help your poor grandfather."

"Oh, I'm imagining things? Did I imagine this, or did the floor just throw you down? I can't tell."

"Will you help me up? I'm afraid I've lost my balance," Alfred commanded.

Lilith balled her hands into fists. "I was actually going to thank you for being honest with me for once. I was going to tell you how much I appreciated it, how it was rather a breath of fresh air, after days of rotten pretense. But I changed my mind."

Grandfather smeared his fingers on the floor and hissed, "Get her!" He tensed, ogling the room in clear expectation of its obedience.

Nothing happened.

An idea gripped Lilith. "When did she do this to you? Rosehead? When did you see her kill for the first time?"

Alfred looked up. A glimmer of fear flashed across his face. He opened his mouth, but Lilith interrupted him, inspired.

"Did your father show you? Your grandfather? Who was it? Who passed the knowledge?"

"What are you talking about?" He edged back, toward the door.

"You were just a kid, weren't you?" Lilith pressed on. "It was an accident. Just like what happened to doctor Baumgartner. There was nothing you could do, so you thought it was your fault."

"I might have to agree with Wilhelmus, I'm afraid. Perhaps you are a *loony* after all." Alfred attempted to stand, but the floor tilted him off balance again.

"A loony, am I?" Lilith repeated. "How would you like me to ask the mansion to crush you to death, dear Grandfather. Who would call me a loony then?"

"You don't understand half the things you're talking about. Everything comes at a price. If I were you, I'd choose my words carefully," Alfred said with a tense smile.

"Oh, why, thank you for the validation. Means I'm not crazy after all." Lilith tilted over her grandfather's crumpled shape. "You said I'm bait. Let me guess. Bait for Rosehead's baby?"

The room screeched, shrinking another few feet.

"I can yell her name on repeat, see if we get smashed into pulp, would you like that, Grandfather?" Lilith said sweetly.

"My dear girl, let us take a stroll in the garden. I'll explain everything. Would you like that?" Alfred offered, his eyes rotating wildly. He reminded Lilith of an animal that's been caught by a predator and about to be consumed alive.

She narrowed her eyes, not buying the lie. "You excel at avoiding my questions. A useful skill; perhaps I need to learn this from you. Dad doesn't know, does he?"

Alfred winced. Deep inside his eyes Lilith thought she saw a frightened boy who came to possess a ferocious rose garden that threatened to dispose of him if he didn't take care of it, and so he did, until he saw his chance to pass the responsibility on to someone else and retire. He has shielded his son from it, going as far as forcing him out of the country, but somebody in the family had to take over, somebody strong enough to command it. And that somebody happened to be Lilith. Alfred must've sensed her strength when she came to his late wife's funeral. Little Lilith was the only one who detected the stink, but she was too small back then to take over.

Lilith's chest tightened. She studied her grandfather, his ashen face, his callused hands. "You're scared. I can see that. I'm sorry." She sighed. "Listen, I'll find a way to stop her, Opa," she called him affectionately, as she had many years ago. "I declared myself heir to stop her."

"You don't know what you're saying." Alfred stubbornly shook his head.

"I *will* stop Rosehead," said Lilith firmly.

The mansion heaved. The windows burst open. A horrific blood-curdling drawl issued from the garden. Lilith thought it sounded like a cry of birthing pain, reminiscent of dog whines right before they passed their litter. Wind swirled the curtains, bringing stench in its wake.

Alfred sidled toward the door.

The room protested by careening. He slipped and fell.

"It's okay," said Lilith to the room, "you can let him walk. Will you help me, Opa? It's what you want to do, *wanted* to do for years, isn't it?"

"What do you know about what I want? Did you care to ask me?"

Alfred threw over his shoulder, carefully edging along the wall.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It never crossed my mind." Lilith felt caught off guard. Guilt spread its cold fingers in her gut. She didn't know much about her grandfather and only assumed the worst instead of taking the time to find out his story.

"Of course it didn't."

"I apologize profusely. What is it that you want, Grandfather?"

"I don't suppose it matters at this time," he said.

Lilith deflated. "So you won't tell me what Rosehead will give birth to?"

Alfred reached the door and stepped out. He wore the victorious look of a boy who'd escaped severe punishment. "Well, I have some important business to attend to, if you don't mind."

Sadness filled Lilith. "You don't want to tell me. Fine, I understand. Can I ask you what you meant by feeding *organic matter* to the roses? It's people, right? That mutant thing will be born tomorrow and it'll feed on people, correct?" She followed her grandfather.

But Alfred hid behind the protection of his charming mask. "Not sure what you're talking about." He peered at Lilith in mock sadness from the safety of the staircase. "Tomorrow we'll have a good-bye carnival. There will be a circus, rose gathering, fireworks. We'll end with a special heir crowning ceremony. I didn't want to spoil the surprise for you, you see. But your nonsensical view of tomorrow's events is forcing me to. Such a young mind, so much promise." He shook his head. "I'm not sure what to do with you, my dear." He descended a few steps.

"Wait." Lilith reached out. "You don't need to do *anything*, just let me stop her. Don't be scared. A true rosarian is not afraid of a few scrapes and drops of blood, remember?"

Another scream pierced the air.

"You can't possibly deny that you didn't hear that," said Lilith.

"Stupid girl," Alfred whispered. "She'll suck you dry and throw you away like a piece of trash. Nobody can stop her. *Nobody*."

He skidded down the steps.

"Wait!" Lilith rushed after him and snatched his arm. "Thank you so much for being honest. But, Opa, what if I can? As an heir I can command her, can't I?"

They faced each other in the gloom of the red floor.

"You think I haven't tried?" Alfred snapped. "Every try came at a price. She took my Eugenia." His face contorted. "You don't know what you're dealing with."

Another wail reached them. This time it lasted longer.

Alfred pushed Lilith. "If you'll excuse me."

"Dear mansion, please stop him?" she said.

The floor curled and threw Alfred backward, to her feet.

He moaned, massaging his sides and staring up with unconcealed

contempt.

"I'm sorry, Grandfather," she said. "I truly am. I tried being nice, but you don't seem to understand. Unfortunately, I'll have to resort to your nasty tactics."

"Let me go," he hissed.

"No. Not until I tell you what I want you to do." She fixed her beret. "I'm sure my parents will want to know the results of my session. You will tell them it went *very* well, but that, given the fact that Doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner had to depart in a hurry, he had no time to write up a report."

Lilith jerked the paper out of grandfather's breast pocket and tore it up. He glared but didn't attempt to stop her.

"He wanted to relay to them that I'm suffering from jetlag, a rare week-long occurrence. He suggested I take frequent walks in the garden *and* in the forest."

"Certainly. You may stroll in the garden and in the forest at your leisure," Alfred said, injecting poison into every word. He slowly pulled himself up. "I'll ask Gustav to accompany you."

"No. No Gustav. I want to walk alone," Lilith demanded, pocketing the torn paper. "And Ed doesn't have to move out of his cottage, he can stay there if he wants to. With his step-mom."

"Anything else?" Alfred's voice turned cold. He took a cautious step back.

"Yes. Please tell all guests to vacate the mansion at once. Tell them that the carnival was canceled due to, I don't know, due to a circus elephant falling ill. They might not believe you if you told them the truth. Don't say anything to my parents, I'll tell them myself."

"Would that be it?"

"Yes, I think that's it for now," Lilith said thoughtfully, and gestured to the stairs. "After you."

## Chapter 23

### Petra's Diversion

They descended in forced silence. In the middle of the foyer, holding Panther by the leash, Daniel conversed with Gabby. Other guests scurried past them into the dinner hall for lunch. The Rosenthals strolled with Patrick and Petra in tow, Hanna pushed the wheelchair with her blind mother, and Trude shuffled by in a frilly dress smelling of soap. She gave Lilith a curious glance. There was no sign of the Schlitzberger twins, who must've already ventured inside to load their plates early.

Lilith lost her appetite. The fact that people could think about food seemed unreal to her in light of the future massacre that she had to stop, yet not knowing how.

"Alfred!" Gabby called. "What did the doctor say? May I speak to him? Where is he?" Not a greeting to Lilith, not a question about how she felt or how the session went.

Daniel's face fell. "Pup, what's wrong?"

Panther energetically wagged his tail.

Lilith rushed to her pet and felt her knees give out. The enormity of the task ahead sapped her energy. She badly wanted to collapse into her parents' arms and confess.

Mom, Dad, I killed the doctor. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to, I promise. Well, it's not me who did it, it was the room, but still...I declared myself heir. I commanded it, and it did it. It ate him, in seconds, bones and everything. I'm so scared. Tomorrow Rosehead will give birth to some monstrous baby thing and it will eat everyone in the mansion. They both will. Opa knows, but he's not doing anything about it because he's scared. I want to stop it but I don't know how. I need to see Ed, we're supposed to talk to Rosehead, but I feel so weak, like I've forgotten how to walk.

Lilith wanted to cry. Her self-imposed courage quickly crumbled. She buried her face in Panther's neck.

"Anything exciting I missed?" he grunted in the merest suggestion of a doggy cough.

"Later," she whispered.

"What did the doctor say?" Gabby repeated.

"Well, nothing major, as it turns out. Simple adjustment issues, dissociative behavior due to time and climate change." Alfred's voice sounded strained. "He said she needs fresh air, which may be conveniently provided by the garden. The fragrance, the splendor, it will do her well. I think we'll go on a little stroll before joining you for lunch, won't we, my dear girl?"

Lilith sniffled, too embarrassed to show her face.

"Thanks, Dad. But I think I'll take her with me," said Daniel. "We'll walk Panther around the property, if you don't mind. How would you like that, buddy?" He ruffled Panther's coat.

Panther obediently wiggled.

Lilith's heart hammered. Did her father believe her?

"Thank you, Alfred, thank you so much. I'm glad it's nothing major. I'm so grateful for everything you've done for us. Truly. Didn't know what else to try," Gabby trilled. "I'm sure Lilith would like your company."

Lilith had a sudden urge to vomit on her mother's shoes.

"Love? You didn't hear me, did you? I'm taking Lilith on a walk," Daniel said louder.

Just then a shrill high-pitched scream came from the dinner hall, together with the sound of breaking china, a collective intake of breath, and a child's explosive crying.

Alfred darted in. Always incessantly curious, Gabby followed, Daniel after her. Lilith used the commotion to relay her news to Panther, half-crouching, half-running next to him.

"The doctor is dead," she whispered. "I declared myself heir and I asked the mansion to take him. The room crushed and ate him, Panther. It was terrible. And it's all my fault." She crammed in as many details as she could in just a few sentences.

They arrived at the crowd. Panther stuck his nose into Lilith's ear, growling in the lowest register he could muster, "Old news, madam. Bär told me already."

"What? You talked to Bär? He can *talk*? Wait, since when are you two on speaking terms?" she asked a little too loudly.

The mastiff arrived behind them and woofed angrily. Gustav shushed him, but not before giving Lilith and Panther the meaningful look of one who knows everything, including thoughts.

The crying escalated.

"Poor girl. I wonder what happened?" Daniel's voice finally forced Lilith to stand up and look.

Sitting on the floor, surrounded by broken china, little Petra wailed uncontrollably, pointing at the floor-to-ceiling windows that faced the garden. Flustered, Sabrina and Norman knelt next to their daughter in a fruitless attempt to calm her down. Patrick stood to the side, his face white.

"Pup, I'll go see if I can help." Daniel gave the leash to Lilith and walked over.

Gabby threw her arms in the air. "I can't stand this noise. Can't stand it." She stalked off in search of coffee on the table, where Gwen, Daphne, and Irma—unperturbed by the racket—stuffed themselves silly. Trude and Hanna relayed something to the blind Heidemarie, their heads

touching.

Lilith gave a startled gasp.

A shadow covered the window. A gigantic leafy shape peeked inside, rotating its ruby eyes, exactly at the moment when the only people she saw looking in that direction were Petra, Patrick, and her grandfather. Lilith sensed with her back that both Gustav and Bär stopped breathing for a moment. They must've seen the monster as well.

Petra screamed anew, choking on her tears. Alfred rushed to the window and jerked the curtains shut, Gustav and Agatha at his aid. By the time the others looked up, the source of the agitation disappeared. The butler and the housekeeper proceeded to close every curtain in the hall and turn on all the lights.

"She's here," mumbled Lilith to no one in particular, her skin erupting in goose bumps. "Dad!" She ran up to her father and tugged on his sleeve. "Dad, did you see her?"

"Yeah, I saw her. Poor girl," he echoed.

"No! I don't mean Petra, I mean—"

"My dear guests," Alfred boomed. "I apologize for the interruption of your meal. I'm sure little Petra got scared by a crow. We have an unusual number of them this season. We've closed the curtains, they shouldn't disturb her anymore. If I may hold your attention for a little bit longer, I have an important announcement to make."

Petra's crying changed to hiccups.

Lilith held her breath. At last, her grandfather would tell everyone the truth. She was gravely mistaken.

"I wanted to keep this a surprise, but, alas, the circumstances dictated otherwise. In the best tradition of the Bloom family, tomorrow we'll have a good-bye carnival!"

Norman forced a fake cheer.

Gwen and Daphne picked it up, squealing.

"I'm glad you're excited. I'm excited too. As you may remember, we owe our roots to the daughter of a circus jester, my twenty-times great-grandmother Rose Bloom." Scattered applause ensued. "Thank you, thank you. In honor of Rose, and in memory of my late wife Eugenia, we'll have a traveling circus perform in the garden tonight. There will be trained elephants, and clowns, and—"

The pounding in Lilith's ears prevented her from hearing the rest. She tried to think logically and couldn't. Her grandfather tricked her, in the most cowardly manner. She had to act, but how? Ask the mansion to do something? What? Could she risk it coming alive in front of these unsuspecting people? No. It would cause panic, would make them flee and run straight into Rosehead, who probably patrolled every exit this very moment in hopes of scoring a meal. Then what? Disoriented, Lilith resorted to the only method she knew. *You need not fear to speak the truth*, Sherlock Holmes' words rung in her head.

"Don't listen to him. He's lying!" she said loudly.

All heads turned toward her.

Alfred tensed. "My dear girl—"

This infuriated Lilith. "I'm not *your dear girl*, stop calling me that! Liar! You're hiding a monster in the garden! Tell them!" she screamed, deliberately working herself into hysterics. "I saw her just now! Petra did too, that's why she's crying!"

Petra nodded, sniffing.

Daniel started saying something, as did Alfred, but Lilith screamed over both of them. "Her name is Rosehead! Like Rose Bloom's nickname! She's some possessed bush-freak that feeds on people!" Lilith sucked in air, stepping away from her parents, who both advanced cautiously.

"SHE'S REAL, I SAW HER! SHE'S PREGNANT! WHATEVER COMES OUT OF HER TOMORROW, IT WILL EAT YOU! ALL OF YOU! AS HEIR TO THE BLOOM PROPERTY, I COMMAND YOU TO GO! LEAVE WHILE YOU CAN! GET OUT OF HERE! NOW!" Her voice broke from strain.

An uneasy silence descended on the room.

Alfred lurched at her, apologizing to everyone. Gabby darted after, but Daniel restrained her.

Not wasting any time, Lilith jerked on Panther's leash and sprinted for the vestibule.

"She iz mental, didn't I tell you?" Daphne blocked her, a crumbling bun in her hand.

"You're right. Mom sayz her nickname iz loony." Gwen materialized next to her sister, chewing on an identical bun.

"Out of my way, you elephant-hugging piglets!" Lilith shouted. Panther barked, and the twins parted, squealing.

"Where you off to? Back to the madhouse? Togezer with Kitty?" Daphne shouted.

Panther grumbled angrily.

Lilith halted and turned around. For a second only, a picture of Rosehead swallowing Daphne dominated her vision. This was the girl whose life she was about to save.

"I'd choose being mad over sleeping with a stuffed elephant any minute," she said sharply.

Daphne's face contorted. "*Mutter!*" she howled. "She spied on me! She broke into our room!"

Irma sauntered over. "What iz ze matter?"

"Incidentally, it's nothing compared to,"—Lilith turned to Gwen—"sucking your thumb. Do you smear jam on it, to make it less revolting?" Gwen joined her twin, yowling.

The rest of the guests erupted into gossip.

"Lilith!" Gabby and Daniel reached their daughter, but Lilith was

off, sprinting through the foyer, skidding to a halt, yanking the front door open, and shutting it behind her.

“Dear mansion, please don’t let them follow me.”

The walls shivered in agreement.

“Thank you,” whispered Lilith, thinking it’s the least she could do—lock them up inside for their own safety until she located Rosehead and figured out what to do next.

“That was quite the exit. A bit melodramatic for my taste,” growled Panther. “So the mansion is your new friend now? You just ask it to do things and it does them? Very convenient.”

Lilith didn’t get a chance to respond.

The doors shook. She jumped away. There was vigorous pounding and energetic tugging on the handles. They wouldn’t budge. Muffled voices expressed puzzlement. Crows squawked, dotting the sky in a shifting blanket. The familiar rotten odor enveloped the garden, intense and overpowering. Moans of agony trailed on the wind, alarmingly close.

“I can’t believe she came right to the house,” Lilith said. “We need to find Ed, and then try to talk to her.”

“I don’t think there’s need for that,” Panther squealed.

The ground shook. Crows scattered. The rose garden parted like a bloody sea, and a tall figure towered over them.

“Rosehead,” they said simultaneously, staring upward.

The bush woman stood about thirteen feet tall. An enormous belly protruded from her midriff. She located the girl and the dog with her scarlet eyes and, arms outstretched, took one thunderous step forward.

## Chapter 24

# Up the Oak Tree

Lilith and Panther ran for their lives, using bushes for cover. Rosehead didn't seem to be very agile when it came to following her prey. She crushed after them, uprooting everything in her wake. Neither girl nor dog dared to look back as they sprinted along the alley to Ed's cottage. At last, panting, they smashed through the gate and, slipping on the grass, reached the fence at the back where they were supposed to meet. An angry stitch poked Lilith's side.

"Where is...he?" she wheezed. "I can't...see him."

"I can't *see* him either, but I can *smell* him, most unquestionably." Panther lolled out his tongue. "Stale, hormonal, teenage cookie-cake."

"Where?"

"All over the place. He must've been here not too long ago. Unfortunately, I can't give you his precise location at the moment."

"What? We're about to be eaten!"

A loud thud and a bellow indicated the fall of their chaser.

"Not anymore," commented Panther.

"Very funny," snapped Lilith. "Do you mind sparing me your ruminations and focus on the task at hand, namely, on not being eaten by a plant-freak and on finding Ed?"

"May I remind you that I still haven't received my payment? Oh, and that you rudely interrupted my very important conversation with Bär? But never you mind. I will oblige, of course, the faithful pet that I am," Panther grumbled crossly.

"Panther." Lilith narrowed her eyes.

"What? I'm working here. Working, as I may add, on the promise of future wages." He sniffed. "The trail of his precious fragrance indicates—"

"Indicates?" Lilith prompted.

"Indicates, that precise location."

"You just said you couldn't give me his precise location."

"The atmospheric aura of his adolescent odor has nothing to do with this, madam. If one were only to apply a certain logic and use certain other senses..."

Panther scowled at the forest. It leered back with its twisted trees in place of teeth. It surrounded the entire rose garden, their only separation a tall white-painted iron fence.

"There!" Lilith squinted.

A light blinked deep in the greenery.

"I was about to say *precisely* that," growled Panther. "Do you

mind?" He stuck out his neck. Lilith took off the leash.

Both skinny, they easily squeezed in between the bars and disappeared into the woods just as three figures rounded Ed's cottage—Alfred Bloom, Gustav, and an ominously woofing Bär. Two of them shouted Lilith's name with intermittent success.

The earth shook again. Rosehead must have lifted herself and, by the sounds of it, was stomping away. Where and why, Lilith didn't have time to ponder. She knew that if she tarried, their chances of escape would cease to exist. This thought must not have occurred to Panther, who suddenly skidded to a halt and issued several prolonged barks. Lilith, running on inertia, stumbled over him.

"Panther! What are you *doing*?"

Unworried, he barked again.

Barely visible through the trees, Bär howled in response, doubled back, and closed his jaws on Alfred's ankle. He fell face forward. Gustav toppled over both of them. The wild rosebush that once saved Lilith and Panther observed the pile at its feet with the calm of, well, a rosebush that doesn't care.

"What did you tell him?" Lilith demanded, fixing her beret and bag, both of which were astoundingly still present.

"I told him that you're the Bloom heir now, and that you command him to stop your pursuers."

"How very considerate of you to read my thoughts and construe them in a such public manner."

"You're welcome."

"Why, thank you. How did they manage to get out? I thought I asked the mansion not to let anyone follow me."

"Perhaps Bär pissed on it and it threw them in the air?"

Lilith scowled.

"If you don't mind, we need to get a move on," Panther growled.

Gustav hovered over Alfred, helping him up.

"Excuse me," said Lilith. "A thought just occurred to me. Why would Bär turn against his master? It's rather curious. What is he, part of the property?"

Panther smirked.

"Wait. That's not exactly what you told him, is it?"

"It wouldn't accurately translate from doggy to English, I'm afraid. Please, continue the uncomplicated process of putting one foot in front of the other, madam, we need to get going." Panther nudged her forward.

"Look who's bossy now." Lilith stared at her pet.

He grinned.

Confusion broke out by Ed's cottage. Alfred chased Bär with a stick, the clear intention of discipline confirmed by his shouts. Bär gamboled away, eyeing his former master's ankles. Gustav ambled between them, arms apart.

"You're right. It's time to go," said Lilith.

They stalked off, weaving in and out of clumps of trees, hopping over fallen trunks, and tearing through the undergrowth. Their journey ended as swiftly as it started.

"Owww!" cried Lilith.

In her haste to get away, she didn't notice where she was going, and bumped straight into Ed.

He rubbed his forehead.

"Ed! You scared me. What are you doing here? Please excuse me for not seeing you. I didn't think you'd be standing in the middle of the forest," Lilith mumbled, inhaling Ed's irresistible cookie aroma. "Did I hurt you?"

Ed shook his head no.

"Where else would he be standing?" Panther inquired. "In the middle of the sky?"

Ed froze, and looked down.

Satisfied with the desired effect, Panther wagged his tail.

"We're sorry we're late. Have you been waiting for a long time?" asked Lilith.

Ed wove his arms about, pointing one way, then another, his usual notepad and pencil absent. Lilith followed his every move, attempting to understand what he wanted to say. Grunting in frustration, he snatched her hand and led her along a trodden path.

Panther trudged behind, mumbling. "Oh, hello to you, dear Panther. How are you? Why, I'm fine, thank you very much, and how are you? Why, I'm very well myself."

"Look, he can't talk, so will you stop it?" Lilith snapped. She had a hard time concentrating on anything, least of all to pay any attention to her pet's complaining.

Ed grinned and squatted next to Panther, patting him affectionately. Panther acted wounded for a little longer, to prove his point, then licked Ed's cheek.

Lilith bit her lip. Bursting to share, she didn't know how to begin explaining everything that happened since last night. The heads breaking through the wall, their journey over the garden, pregnant Rosehead and her mutant baby. She shuddered, thinking about the therapy session. How could she possibly tell Ed without making him hate her for life? And what about shouting the truth at her distant relatives, in the naïve hope that they will suddenly change their minds and believe her? Lilith felt so stupid, her face burned.

The path wobbled.

If they didn't know better, they would've thought it an earthquake. They hastened their pace.

Soon, the trees became taller and thicker. The air smelled of damp earth. They reached a glade at the edge of which squatted a large gnarly

oak, its trunk polished with use. It grew right by the fence, beyond which roses bobbed at them disapprovingly.

"Is this the far end of the garden?" asked Lilith.

Ed nodded.

"Wow, it's huge."

He gestured up.

Lilith's heart leaped. "A tree house! Your secret place." She stared into Ed's eyes a little longer than required by proper etiquette, suppressing the urge to sniff him. "What about Panther?"

"I'm a dog, remember? I can stand guard. You go on," the whippet said bravely, eyeing the tree house with obvious longing.

Ed urged Lilith to climb, throwing worried glances at the garden.

"All right. Bark if anything happens."

Grabbing handholds, Lilith ascended with grace, until she clamped the edge of a platform and scrambled onto it. A minute later Ed joined her.

Lilith gawked, awestruck. The tree house was nothing more than a crudely put together wooden floor the size of a large dinner table, balancing on two boughs, a higgledy-piggledy of boards propped around as walls. Heaps of paper covered one corner, a pile of blankets another. There was no roof, nor was it needed. Even rain would've had a hard time breaking through the woven mass of leaves.

"Wow!" gasped Lilith. "Simply extraordinary."

Ed smiled.

Lilith prodded the floor. It held firm. "Did you make it yourself?"

Ed's ears turned pink. He nodded shyly.

"You've got the best, most awesome, most spectacularly *lavish* hiding places I've ever seen," gushed Lilith. Her euphoria didn't last long.

Panther barked in warning.

Ed perked up, listening.

A familiar reek rolled over them, causing Lilith's eyes to water and bringing her emotions to the surface. The heaviness of her guilt, the gnawing remorse at commanding the room to stop the doctor, his cries, the sound of his bones breaking...

Lilith squeezed her head.

Ed peered through the boards, beckoning her to look, a finger over his lips for silence. Lilith scurried closer.

They were about fifteen feet above the ground. A blanket of patchy fog hovered over the garden, giving it the illusion of a restless sea. A stray crow passed by. Directly across from them, a circular wall of shrubs formed a roofless rotunda. The garden's surface rippled. Rosehead thrashed into the clearing and collapsed, filling the air with loud snores.

Lilith whispered, "Did she just fall asleep?"

Ed slapped his forehead, fetched a piece of paper from the pile, and almost tore it with his speedy writing. SHE'S PREGNANT! Struck by this new bit of information, he pulled on his hair as he peered at Lilith.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away. I found out with Panther yesterday. The heads broke through the wall, and I asked them to show me."

AND? THEY DID?

"Um, of course. I fed them water and blood, didn't I? They said I'm rather nice to them."

Ed calmed down enough to write. THIS EXPLAINS EVERYTHING.

"Yes. Yes, it does!" Lilith forgot herself and grabbed him by the shoulders, dying to share her theory. Apparently, Ed had the same theory, as for the next few minutes they engaged in an exchange of broken sentences that nonetheless provided them with a complete understanding of the garden's mystery.

IS THAT WHAT THE CROWS ARE FOR? POLLINATION?

"Exactly," confirmed Lilith. "So an heir cuts Rosehead out of a bush. The crows pollinate her."

EVERY DECADE.

"And that makes her pregnant. With what?"

DUNNO. FREAK OF NATURE?

Watching Ed confirm her every guess by feverishly scribbling on multiple sheets of paper, Lilith talked nonstop. She managed to relay the story about how she declared herself heir, how the mansion obeys her now, how she surprised her grandfather, and what she thought he meant by calling her *bait*. She even mentioned her talk with her dad, carefully avoiding the topic of her therapy session.

Ed didn't question her. He passed a hand through his hair. BAIT FOR ROSEHEAD? LET'S POKE HER WITH A STICK. SHE'LL WAKE UP, AND WE'LL TALK TO HER.

"What? No! What if she decides to make a meal out of us? We don't even know if she'll understand!"

WHO CARES. WE'LL TELL HER TO PISS OFF. IT'S UNIVERSAL.

He made to descend.

"Wait." Lilith touched his hand. "There is one more thing."

Ed grunted impatiently.

"If you decide to stop being my friend after I tell you—"

Ed shook his head so hard the tree house trembled.

"It's okay, because...I did something horrible." Lilith cast her eyes down. Her heart drummed. "I declared myself heir so I could order the mansion to kill your doctor. In the black tower room, grandfather's study to be specific. I swear I didn't mean it. But it obeyed me, Ed, it *did* it. I'm a murderer, just like my grandfather." She fell quiet.

Seconds trickled by.

Lilith smoothed her skirt over and over, expecting Ed to shove a piece of paper under her nose, telling her to vacate.

MORON SCHEDULED YOUR SESSION IN THE TOWER?

Lilith nodded.

I'D LIKE TO SEE HIM SKEWERED ON A POLE. I'D LIKE TO — He chewed on the pencil, as if contemplating various ways to torture Alfred.

Lilith switched from smoothing her skirt to fixing her beret.

IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S THE MANSION. IT DOES THINGS TO PEOPLE.

She looked up timidly. "But I commanded it."

YOU DIDN'T KNOW IT WOULD DO IT FOR REAL, DID YOU?

Lilith shook her head no. "Well, not exactly."

ONE LESS SHRINK WILL MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE. ALFRED MUST'VE WANTED TO TEST YOU. WHY ELSE WOULD HE SEND YOU TO HIS STUDY? IT EATS PEOPLE IT DOESN'T LIKE. He paused. HE TRIED LOCKING MY DAD IN THERE.

"Oh, how horrible! What happened?"

THE MANSION LET HIM OUT. IT LIKED HIM.

"So you're still my friend?" Lilith whispered.

COURSE.

Lilith flung herself at Ed, sticking her nose in his hair. She stole a sniff before letting him go. "I'm incredibly happy you are! I was so worried, so worried you wouldn't be."

Ed's face turned scarlet. He got busy writing. IT'S COOL ABOUT THE MANSION. THAT YOU CAN COMMAND IT. LUDWIG BUILT IT WHEN HE DECIDED TO SETTLE. HE ADDED THAT TOWER TO MOURN HIS WIFE, AFTER HE FOUND HER DEAD IN THE GARDEN.

"How did she die?"

DUNNO. HE BURIED HER AND—

"Where?" asked Lilith.

UNDER THAT BUSH. Ed pointed to the glade.

Lilith stared, understanding dawning on her.

As if picking up her train of thought, Ed wrote more. AND BINGO. HIS ROSES STARTED SELLING BIG TIME.

"Are you saying she possessed the bush, turned it into a monster, and started feeding on people? Producing exceptional flowers?"

Ed shrugged. FOLK AVOIDED THIS LAND EVER SINCE.

Lilith chewed on a lock of her hair.

MIGHT BE THE PLACE ITSELF? IT TASTED HUMAN BLOOD, LIKED IT.

Panther barked.

A malicious groan came from the clearing.

Ed and Lilith peeked out.

Burned by the late afternoon sun, the fog gave way to the reddish glow of the garden, an uncomfortable shade of brewing danger.

Rosehead yawned, rose to her feet, and spotted them. They pulled in a little too late. Her flaming eyes fixed, she stomped toward the fence.

## Chapter 25

# The Daring Face-Off

For a second everything stood quiet. Then stillness erupted into shrill barks, high-pitched cries, and the hungry bellows of a monster. Rosehead shook the fence, beginning what looked like the laborious task of climbing over. Mortified, Lilith held on to Ed. Ed held on to Lilith. Unsuccessful, and weighed down by her enormous belly, Rosehead passed a series of screams that caused the boy and the girl to unfreeze and head for the safety of the ground.

Ed made it first, stretching out his arms for Lilith. Her hand slipped and she tumbled the last few feet, landing on her bottom. Ed and Panther rushed to her.

"I'm all right! I'm all right! I think." Lilith yelled over the racket. "Nothing's broken. I'll stand in a minute." She flexed her arms and legs, her heart hammering.

Rosehead made another fruitless attempt. Her enormous shape looked positively gigantic from the ground level, not to mention her eyes that spun around in search of elusive food.

Lilith scrambled to her hands and knees, and all three of them hid behind the oak's trunk.

"How do you propose we talk to her?" whispered Lilith.

"May I profess my humble opinion?" Panther interjected. "I'm quite positive that demented hedge crazies can't talk. Dogs, on the other hand —"

"Wait! She can't climb over the fence, can she?" Lilith exhaled in relief.

Ed waved his arms about, which seemed to be his universal reaction for everything, and ran off.

"Where are you going?" cried Lilith.

"No answer. All right. Thank you very much for offering me your gratitude for my tireless service." Panther made as if to stalk off, but there was nowhere to stalk off without exposing himself, so he resolved to turning his back to her.

"Panther Bloom Junior, would you stop it? Now's not the time."

Ed returned with a large stick, holding it up victoriously.

"What's that for?"

He made a few vigorous poking motions. Then a few more. And a few more. Lilith reached out to stop him.

"Okay. I understand. What if she decides to poke us back? You know, with one of her sharp fingers?"

Ed grunted as he energetically swung the stick about as a mighty

warrior might to prepare for the battle of his life. The stick caught on the oak tree and flew out of his hand.

Lilith sighed. "Listen, you *can* talk, I know you can. Just *say it*. I won't tell anyone. Panther won't either. Right, Panther?"

No response.

Ed picked up the stick and aimed it in such a way that could be interpreted as an adamant wish to beat himself up.

Rosehead's howling subsided to angry rustles. She stomped about rhythmically, cracking twigs in her way.

"Oh, please. Don't tell me she likes to dance. Here." Lilith dug into her bag and produced a journal and a pen.

Ed set to work.

Lilith took out *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, cracked it open and pointed blindly. She read aloud. "*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. "She'll eat us. She's getting ready to eat us. Panther, did you hear that?"

The whippet didn't move, as if pretending to be a stump.

Ed flipped the journal around for Lilith to read. **YOU'RE RIGHT. LOOKS LIKE SHE CAN'T GET OUT OF THE GARDEN. BEHIND THE FENCE WE'RE SAFE. WE'LL TALK TO HER FROM HERE. IF SHE DOES ANYTHING STUPID, PANTHER WILL DISTRACT HER. SHE DOESN'T SEEM TO LIKE DOGS.** He stuck the journal under the dog's nose.

"I may have mentioned that I can't read?" Panther, unable to keep his curiosity in check, stole a glance at the journal.

Just then, an ominous calm spread over the forest. Lilith's skin prickled with a sense of something having gone awry. She jumped to her feet and peeped out.

Rosehead was gone, as was evident by a wide trail of uprooted bushes. She crouched a little ways off, at the opposite end of her rather violently created passage, prepared to lurch.

"Patrick?" came from the garden. "Mommy? Daddy?"

Lilith could hear the rustle of little feet trotting along. "Petra," she breathed. "How did she get out of the mansion?"

"Pissed on it?" offered Panther, and then fell quiet when nobody laughed at his remark.

Paralyzed by momentary shock, they stood frozen. Petra stumbled into the pathway, her festive dress in tatters, her hair in disarray. A trickle of rose petals dripped out of Rosehead's mouth. The girl looked up and let out a scream.

It acted like a signal.

Ed darted forward, stick held high. Lilith bolted, yelling. "Run, Petra, run!" Panther sprinted between them, barking.

Too late.

Rosehead pounced, snatching the girl and raising her high in the air. A triumphant shout of glee spread over the garden. Petra yelled for help, arms flailing.

Ed tried squeezing through the bars. Considerably bigger than Lilith, he didn't quite fit, so he threw the stick away and began to climb, using the filigree protrusions as leverage.

"Hold on, Petra, we're coming!" shouted Lilith, sliding through the bars.

Panther reached the monster first and bit her on the shaft of woven canes that constituted her ankle. Rosehead roared, glanced down, and with a swipe of her arm, sent the whippet flying. He disappeared into the greenery with what sounded like a string of very mature obscenities the likes of which Lilith hadn't heard from her pet before.

"Oh no you didn't!" she screamed, not caring if Rosehead understood English or German or talked at all. Anger banished her fear. She ran up to the pair of massive legs and slapped and pounded and kicked everywhere she could reach. "DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH MY PANTHER, YOU STINKING, BLOOD-SUCKING, MEGA-HAIRY PSYCHO-HEDGE!"

Ed made it to the top of the fence, eagle-spread his arms, and jumped in a spectacular dare, landing right on the bush woman's back. He started breaking twigs, inflicting as much damage as was possible upon a thirteen-foot shrub oddity.

Rosehead let out a wail, fell to her knees with a thunderous crash, and let Petra roll out of her hand. Lilith narrowly avoided collision, wisely stealing out of the way at the last moment. By the time she scrambled back, the giantess shook Ed off her back and threw him into the bushes. Petra crawled deep into the bramble and hid.

Somewhere close, Panther yapped.

Somewhere closer, Ed moaned.

"Ed! Panther! Petra!" Lilith called. "Guys, where are you?"

But it was Rosehead who answered, blocking the light with her massive girth, her eyes red and blood-thirsty.

For a brief moment, the girl and the creature faced each other with ferocious intensity. A dozen split-second decisions rushed through Lilith's mind. Her first impulse was to run, but then she decided the better of it. She wasn't going to be a coward like her grandfather. She was heir to the Bloom property. Everything that grew in the garden belonged to her. If she couldn't find a way to control Rosehead now, she'd never be able to control her.

*It's a dog-eat-dog world, her father always said. You've got to show the dog who's the boss the moment you meet to establish your alpha position. Remember, a dog that knows its place is a happy dog.*

Trembling, Lilith took a step forward, head raised high.

"My name is Lilith Bloom," she said forcefully. "I'm heir to the

Bloom property. *You* are part of this property, and, therefore, fall under my authority. I command you to stop eating people at once. Do you understand?" She looked straight into a pair of flolid eyes.

Rosehead inclined her massive head, as if listening.

"I don't want you to eat any more people, you idiot rosecake! DO YOU GET IT?" Something leafy bumped into Lilith's back. With horror, she realized that the bramble behind her intertwined into an impenetrable wall and slithered closer, shrinking the clearing to about ten feet in diameter. In the next instant, knocking off her beret, the giant monstrosity grabbed the girl and dangled her above a vast open mouth, stench rising from it.

"Ludwig loved you!" yelled Lilith on a whim. "He would've never wanted you to turn into a monster! Doesn't the word *love* mean anything to you? Anything at all?"

Rosehead halted. Lilith heard rustling, which might've indicated a crude thinking process as the creature recalled her distant past. She stood for a minute, perplexed. Lilith stealthily began to wiggle out of her hold.

Hostile barking preceding him, Panther squeezed between twigs and broke into the glade. He circled Rosehead, yapping his head off. She stomped back, bumped into the hedge, and loosened her grip involuntarily. Without waiting for another chance, Lilith pried open the twigs of the giant fingers and hurtled down, landing on her feet and rolling on inertia. She heard the monster suck in air and launch into a disappointed cry, generating a foul wind that rippled through the garden, throwing dirt and leaves into Lilith's face.

Somebody moaned not too far away. Lilith peered into the shadows. "Ed?" she croaked. "Ed, is that you? Where are you?"

But of course Ed didn't talk. It took Lilith another few minutes to find his slumped figure. "Are you all right?" She helped him sit up.

He blinked affirmatively and pulled himself up, brushing off the leaves. His visible damage consisted of a few facial scratches.

"Are you sure?"

He put a hand over her mouth, working his lips into one word. *Petra*. Lilith briefly wondered if she should say more arbitrary things, just to feel his smooth hand on her face again.

But the barking escalated, as did the howls.

"You're right. She doesn't like dogs. Better, I think she's scared of them," mused Lilith. Ed didn't shush her, this time beckoning. She followed. Disoriented, they waded through the greenery trying to find their way into the clearing. Evening fog unspooled around them, heavy with stench.

"That was unbelievable, what you did," whispered Lilith. "You jumped *right* onto her back! Wow! Did she hurt you?"

Ed mimed an urgent need to write.

"My journal? Just a—oh no! I forgot my bag over by the tree. My

beret..." She patted her head, and sighed.

Ed expressed comical disappointment with a multitude of facial features, squirming and shifting and otherwise doing things Lilith thought incapable of a human face.

"Look," she said, "you *can* talk, I *know* you can. Please, for Petra. We've got to find her. Nobody is coming for help; they're all locked up in the mansion."

Ed opened and closed his mouth, pointing at it, his eyes misty with effort and emotion.

"Please," she repeated, placing her hands on his shoulders. "Think about it. What would your dad do? Did he die in vain? Will you stay silent your entire life? Draw pictures? Is that it? What good is drawing pictures if your cousin is eaten by some *stinking maniacal loser of a bush-weirdo*?"

Ed looked like he swallowed a fly. He produced a choking noise that almost formed a word.

Bushes around them slithered closer.

Lilith paid them no attention. "Think about Petra. I know you can talk. Do it!" In her fervor she spoke too loudly.

Howls stopped, as did the barking. There was a pause, and then Rosehead walked in their direction, breaking through the bramble. Panther resumed his yapping.

"She's coming!" Lilith's eyes rounded.

Ed blew out his cheeks with an effort to utter an intelligent string of letters.

"Oh, forget it. Come on." She tugged on his hand.

He didn't budge, pale from straining.

"Okay, if you want to stand here, stand here," she said, with a trifle of irritation. "I'm going after Petra." Lilith took off blindly. "Petra, where are you?"

Behind her, something broke through the air. A croak, a cough, and then a voice. "Petra," Ed called, sounding winded, like an old man.

"Ed!" came from the bushes to the left.

Lilith couldn't help herself. Flustered, she turned around and flung herself at her friend, covering his face with kisses. Ed turned into a rather sizzling, yet awkwardly rigid, version of himself, his arms hanging limply.

"You talked! You talked! I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I got mad, it's just that—I knew it—I knew you could do it, but you wouldn't, wouldn't listen to me, but then you did and I—I...well, the thing is...I love you." Lilith's face boiled. Ashamed at her own daring admission, she let go, hastily stepping back. It was the worst possible moment to profess her love. You could say that the rose garden was a romantic place, yes, but you couldn't possibly agree that an ugly thirteen-foot tall monster trimmed from a shrub and waddling this very moment toward you to take

your life qualified as an added romantic element. Candles would've been more appropriate.

All of this crossed Lilith's mind very quickly. She stood immobile, perplexed. Due to the dusk, she couldn't quite determine if Ed blushed, but a characteristic warmth came off his face, together with a delicious cookie smell.

"I. You," he wheezed uncertainly. "Petra."

By an unspoken signal, they clutched hands and took off in the direction of the little girl's calls, turned a corner, and bumped straight into Rosehead, her huge shape silhouetted against the darkening sky, Panther on her heels.

"Er...what do we do now?" said Lilith, in a small voice.

"Scatter," Ed croaked, and darted to the side. "Hey, Rosehead." He yanked the flashlight out of his pocket, flicked it on, and brandished it above his head.

Rosehead followed the light with her eyes and lunged.

Ed threw the flashlight to Lilith. She caught it and understood at once. The only way they could escape was to confuse her, to disperse in all directions. Lilith ducked, passed right between two massive legs and yelled, "Hey, you, stupid cow! I command you to catch me! Think you can?"

"Cow? More like a whale," came from Panther, between barks.

Rosehead turned around, which was not an easy task given her gigantic belly. Ed's flashlight acted like an annoying firefly. She kept following it, lured by its brightness. Panther caught on to the game and split, barking his head off.

"Ed!" yelled Lilith. "Catch!"

A glowing dot traced an arc in the evening sky. Then again. And again.

"Here. Rosehead," croaked Ed.

Wailing like an injured bear, the giantess stomped around.

"I got her! I got it, I got it! Get Petra and go!" screamed Lilith.

"Sure?"

"Positive!"

"Okay. I. Home. Back. Help." Ed disappeared behind a turn, and then reappeared with Petra on his back as he jogged out of sight.

"Behind you!" Panther snarled.

Lilith whirled around a tad too fast, suddenly feeling nauseous and dizzy. She remembered having eaten only breakfast. Her vision blurred, noises hushed, and the garden spun until the ground hit the back of her head.

Rosehead blocked the sky, a ravenous grin splitting her face, her rose-eyes sparkling.

Lilith tried to sit without success, promptly falling back. Panther ran up and licked her face. "Madam, don't toy with me, please. This is a bad,

bad place for a nap. Up you go. *Madam?*" His growls faltered.

"I don't feel so good..." She took a deep breath, and focused on staying calm in the face of certain death.

## Chapter 26

# The Repugnant Birth

First stars flickered to life, watching the scene with unblinking interest. Crows screeched in the distance, not daring to fly closer. Panther snapped at Rosehead. She kicked him aside like an annoying fly, reached for the girl, and lifted her. Terror numbed Lilith. She wondered about her parents trapped in the mansion, if she'd ever see them again, if Ed and Petra made it to his cottage, and where her grandfather was...

Time slowed down. The evening air blew on Lilith's face, calming her. There was no point in crying or yelling, because no matter what she did, it didn't have any effect on Rosehead. Lilith felt like a small frightened girl who tried to wear a façade of bravado and failed miserably. There was only one thing she had left to do.

"Panther. You there? Can you hear me? If you can, I'm sorry if I was ever mean to you. I love you." She took a breath, willing the dizziness to go away. "Tell mom and dad I love them. Tell Ed—"

"Don't you start dying on me, *madam!*" growled Panther from below. "You still owe me steak. I simply cannot allow you to vanish without delivering my payment. Personally."

Lilith's face broke into a smile.

"Let her go, you disgusting, bloated, leafy-brained, club-footed, maggot-eating idiot!" Panther yapped. "I will *piss* on you!" An unmistakably liquid noise issued up.

Rosehead opened her mouth wider, unperturbed.

"Listen here, you illiterate bush-cake. My name is Lilith Bloom," said Lilith, encouraged. "I hope you *choke* on my blood."

Rosehead hesitated.

"I hope it *poisons* you—make your roots rot. I hope it makes you sick." Lilith's voice grew louder. "I hope it gives you a stomachache so *vociferously* fierce, that you wished you were dead." Just as Lilith's feet dangled a foot away from the lipless hole, Rosehead let out a moan and convulsed, clutching her belly.

For a second, Lilith thought she'd miraculously cursed the creature, but then understanding dawned on her.

A great shiver went through the giantess. She recovered, and then doubled down again, another spasm seizing her. Her belly shifted restlessly. Firmly pressed to it, Lilith glimpsed disturbing flashes of red through gaps of interlaced stems. They appeared to be eyes, dozens of them, so bright that they glowed in the dark.

Lilith licked her lips. "Panther? It's starting. And, er...I just saw something? She's not having a baby mutant. We were wrong. She's

having a whole litter of them!"

"I'm very much aware of this, thank you," Panther growled. "Hang on just a little more, okay?"

A violent fit slackened Rosehead's hold. Lilith wiggled, her heart jumping out of her chest. Another powerful cramp and the monstrous bush crashed to its knees. Lilith crawled out of the prickly palm and turned in time to witness Rosehead collapse and bellow, holding on to her middle.

A wet nose brushed Lilith's cheek.

"Panther!" She hugged him. "Are you okay?"

"Why, my dear Holmes, I think I've been traumatized for life by this investigation. However, a healthy dose of steak will positively nurse me back to health."

"I'm not dead, Panther. I'm not dead, I'm not dead, I'm not dead!" Lilith's teeth chattered. "She didn't eat me."

"Do you need me to bite you, to confirm your aliveness?"

A series of powerful blows shook the ground. Rosehead pounded on it with her arms and legs, mashing everything into pulp. Lilith and Panther scrambled out of the way to avoid an accidental punch. They watched her for a while.

"I love these names you come up with. Maggot-eating idiot. That was a good one," said Lilith.

"I'm glad you approve."

They grinned at each other.

Rosehead appeared temporarily incapacitated, moaning and arching and overall behaving like a woman in labor, if not for her tangled leafy appearance and huge size.

Emboldened by this observation, Lilith stood. "Do you want to stay and watch? How long do you think it will take?" She wiped her scratched face with a sleeve, studying their surroundings.

The mansion was nowhere in sight. Whatever part of the garden they occupied, it was smashed to smithereens, resembling an upturned cropland. Some bushes were uprooted, some flattened, and some stood erect like solitary survivors. Worse, it seemed as though the roses were dying. A thin fog trailed on the breeze. A curious flock of crows formed a writhing circle around Rosehead, who reclined on a mound of dirt, feverish, periodically slamming her fists down or emitting piercing cries. She seemed to be unaware of anything around her, except her pain.

Having delivered numerous puppies, Lilith was well versed in medical terms such as *dilation* and *effacement* and *expulsion*. Rosehead's dark silhouette, however, provided no information on any of these accounts. A reddish glow broke through the gaps in her midriff.

"Whatever these things are, they're about to be born," Lilith warned.

"Glad you noticed." Panther made to depart.

“How did you know? You said you were aware?”

“The view from below provided me with ample information, madam. Enough for me to deduce the exact nature of what this oddity of a cracked bush-brain has been carrying inside her for the past week. Quite damaging to my psyche. I might require therapy upon return, I must warn you, as an added benefit for performing this—”

“I missed you.” Lilith scooped up her pet and kissed his nose.

Panther choked on his last word, unsure how to react. He most certainly wasn’t expecting a display of affection.

“I want to see it through, don’t you?” Burning curiosity blinded Lilith’s common sense, and her recent horror of being almost eaten by a monster faded away in light of her new excitement.

Rosehead heaved, roared, and clutched her bulging sides. Her foul breath covered the girl and the dog with a shower of leaves and soil.

Lilith crept closer, wanting to see better.

Panther cleared his throat politely. “For my personal sanity, may I inquire about your plans, dear Holmes?”

“Huh?” Fascinated, she barely heard him.

“I was just wondering. Simple curiosity on my part. But...are you planning, per chance, to deliver the babies yourself? Or, perhaps, you want to invite them to join their mother in the fun game of hunting us together?”

“Aha,” said Lilith absentmindedly.

“I see. May I remind you that it’s not just us? If by chance Ed and Petra haven’t reached his cottage yet—” His next words were drowned in noise.

Lilith slumped on the ground and covered her ears. A fresh wave of contractions made Rosehead holler a cry of such magnitude, it must’ve been heard over the entire property.

“Where is grandfather?”

“Happily on his way.” Panther pointed with his nose.

Lilith’s stomach shrunk.

Two circles of light danced in the distance. Unlike Ed’s flashlight, these were clearly big and powerful electrical lanterns.

“As you don’t seem to be in appropriate shape to perform any kind of running, and as your faithful pet, I do not dare to even fathom the idea of leaving you alone. I suppose hiding this very moment would be in high order?” Panther tugged on Lilith’s sleeve.

“I can run,” said Lilith uncertainly. She was torn. Part of her wanted to flee, yet another part wanted to stay and watch. She chewed on a lock of hair. “Although, I must say, I really want to see what happens. Concrete facts observed firsthand are a requirement in any serious investigation, dear Watson.”

Panther let out an exaggerated sigh. “A convenient excuse for adolescent nosiness, if you ask me.”

Lilith scoffed.

"Well, it's too late to attempt an escape now. How about that cluster of bushes? Over there, yonder?" He took off.

Too tired to argue, Lilith staggered after Panther.

Keeping a safe distance, they rounded the convulsing monster and crawled deep into shrubs directly opposite. From there they could observe the labor in plain view.

"Why do I feel we'll regret this choice not one hour later?" grumbled Panther, squirming to make himself comfortable.

"Oh, you've developed psychic skills? Excellent. It relieves me of the burden of consulting a book every time, which is, of course, not appropriate for children growing up in the twenty-first century," hissed Lilith.

They bickered some more, eventually exhausting the argument and falling quiet. The cold night won over talk and forced them to concentrate on mutual hugging to keep warm. Although, naturally, it was mostly Lilith hugging Panther and not the other way around.

Minutes trickled by.

At last, two male figures appeared from the darkness, flooding the area with light. It took Lilith a few blinks to get used to the brightness and to recognize Alfred and Gustav, both clothed in gardening suits and heavy boots. They exchanged a few shouts in German. Rosehead's shrieks grew irregular. Alfred carried huge gardening shears. Gustav pulled on a leash. Bär sniffed around with dutiful interest, purposefully avoiding one obvious direction, giving a warning roar.

Lilith and Panther held their breath.

For the next hour, illuminated with unforgiving electrical light, they observed the most fantastical, repugnant, and spine-chilling birth.

Alfred opened the shears and proceeded to hop around Rosehead, clipping and snipping and cutting much in the same way he did when he fashioned her out of a shrub; only this time, he cut her apart. She produced an unbelievable racket. Lilith thought her grandfather performed something close to a miracle, avoiding blows, jumping around, and still doing his job, unscathed. His arms moved with incredible speed, as the shears clicked and clacked. Canes broke with horrible creaking. He let out a cry of triumph.

Rosehead hollered one last time and fell silent.

First one, then a whole lot of what looked like balls of tumbleweed, shot out of her and filled the air with hideous screeching, their bodies wriggling, writhing, and squirming, their eyes throwing an eerie crimson glow.

"What *are* those?" whispered Lilith.

"Mutant baby elephants, of course. Very, *very* small ones."

Lilith gave Panther the look.

All newborns were miniature copies of their mother, colored

painfully bright. As soon as they stopped rolling, they unfolded and surrounded the two men, gurgling. The noise reminded Lilith of a hungry stomach rumble, multiplied exponentially. Gustav danced around his master, letting Bär do the protecting. The mastiff howled and roared and woofed and snapped, chasing off the creatures and forcing them to scatter into the garden.

“Why do I feel like it was not a good idea to stay?” said Lilith, mortified.

“Can I use the proverbial ‘I told you so’ as an answer?” growled Panther.

Lilith sniffed the air. The usual stink vanished, replaced by a pleasant floral aroma. It’s as if the birth replaced it with the enticing scent expected from roses in a flower shop. She suspected it’s how the newborn garden lured in its victims, and her heart plunged into her stomach.

Another wave of newborns tumbled out. And another. And another. Lilith lost count. A pack of them had to be continuously scared off by Bär or poked with a stick by Gustav. Alfred snapped shears at those that dared to come closer. At last, done and empty, Rosehead dozed off, snoring into the sky.

One of the newborns tumbled to their hiding spot, barely a few feet away. It sniffed the air and ogled the bush where Lilith and her partner in crime hid. Panther growled, causing the thing to jump, screech, and burrow itself into the ground with a satisfied chuckle; it darkened and turned into a rosebush like any other, its eyes multiplying into flowers, their glow fading until they vanished.

All around them the garden repaired itself, rapidly growing anew. By contrast, the bush cluster they were sitting in wilted and shed leaves at an alarming rate.

“She gave birth to a whole new garden,” Lilith whispered. “It’s regenerating. Look.”

“Are you implying I’m blind? I’ve seen enough, thank you. I tell you, I’ll never pee on one of those things ever again,” Panther growled. “Forget it.”

“They must be possessed like her. So the old garden dies and the new one grows every ten years. Is that how it works? I think I know what’s going to happen at the carnival. They will suck people dry.” Lilith swallowed. “Down to the very last drop. Um, I just thought of something. How are we going to get out?”

“You *just* thought of that? Your lack of foresight astounds me,” Panther rumbled out of the corner of his muzzle.

Alfred picked up something, shining a light on it.

“My beret!” exclaimed Lilith a little too loudly. She covered her mouth.

“You and your berets!” hissed Panther.

Alfred looked up, wiped his sweaty brow, and marched directly toward them, rudely pushing Gustav and Bär aside. They followed a short distance away, apparently for safety reasons.

Lilith's spine turned to ice. Panther's fur bristled.

Alfred squatted by the shrubs, shining his lantern directly at the girl, just as more and more shriveled leaves and flowers floated down, exposing them.

"Lilith. Why, how nice to have finally found you. I must say, part of me expected you to be here. Fascinating things, aren't they?" He shined his light at the nearest bush.

Lilith grabbed Panther, who licked her reassuringly. Pulsing afterimages floated in front of her eyes.

"My dear girl, you just witnessed the work of a true rosarian—a glimpse of your potential future. You're demonstrating a real aspiration with your presence here. I've seen the beginnings of your talent and, I must say, I'm duly impressed. You've exhibited exemplary characteristics of a Bloom heir, with a proper green thumb." He stood and stamped his foot.

The remaining leaves fell with a soft rustle.

Lilith stiffened. They sat behind naked canes, plainly visible. There was no use hiding anymore. She took a deep breath, carefully parted thorny stems, and stepped out.

## Chapter 27

# The Mad Gardener

Only a short while ago, Lilith thought that facing Rosehead was the scariest thing she ever did. She changed her mind. Rosehead was only a mutant bush, a giant creature worthy of children's nightmares. The true horror lay ahead of her. She had to confront her grandfather out in the open, in the dead of night, armed with nothing but her wit and fury, painfully aware of the fact that he was both a killer and a Bloom, which made him family. Part of his blood coursed through Lilith, and she hated him for it.

"You're a *monster*," she said, her face contorted, fists clenched. Panther snarled his approval. Lilith thought about her mental list and recited it. "You're a brute. A book hater. A murderer. And a liar. You tricked me." This was fair game, she thought, not gossiping your opinions about people behind their backs, but relaying the truth to their faces.

"Is that so?" Alfred inquired, lowering the lantern. "Please, kindly explain what you mean."

"You think nobody will believe me," said Lilith, struggling to control her voice.

"Hmm. I thought we established this fact earlier today, didn't we?" Alfred exuded his usual charm.

"Petra and Ed saw Rosehead, too. Oh, and Ed started talking, for your information. He'll back me up. I'll tell my dad you fed grandmother to her. I'll keep telling everyone until they believe me, or I'll come up with a story to make them leave. Either way, there won't be anyone for you to feed to the garden tomorrow. The mansion will help me."

"Remarkable. I see you know everything better than I do. You've got it all under control. I'm impressed," said Alfred smoothly.

"Hello. I apologize that on our first encounter I didn't introduce myself properly. Let me correct my grievous mistake," Panther yapped, his head held high. "My name is Panther Bloom Junior. I will proudly join Lilith in spreading the word about recent events, you money-thirsty, slow-witted creep."

Lilith gaped at her pet, barely discerning him in the dark. "You talked? In front of an adult?"

"Can't a dog change his mind?"

Grandfather chuckled in surprise, surveying the speaking hound miracle. "Well, well, well. Wouldn't you say. Bizarre. Truly bizarre. I thought I've seen things in my life. Turns out, I haven't. I suppose I wasn't mistaken in my assessment. A whippet is not a dog; it's a joke, a

breeder's mistake. You, my dear, belong in a freak show, in one of those exhibitions of biological rarities as a specimen of canine intellectual deformity. You might earn my son some real money finally."

He poked Panther with his boot.

Panther twisted to avoid it and snarled.

"You try biting me, and I'll cut you into a kitty. Understood?" He snapped his shears for dramatic effect.

Panther mumbled something incoherent, retreating.

Satisfied, grandfather turned to Lilith and spoke directly into her face, his putrid breath coming in waves. "As for you, my dear, please, correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought I just heard that a girl and a...*talking mutt*...will accomplish what generations of men were unable to do. Be my guests, my dearies. You have approximately thirteen hours to fulfill your goal. I'll be watching you with avid interest."

He straightened.

Lilith felt her tongue turn to cotton. She couldn't produce a single word. Panther grunted. Bär grumbled. Newborn bushes shifted restlessly around them, creeping closer. Alfred threw a command in German. Gustav prodded the mastiff to work. His brooding woofs caused a scuffle and a shuffle. The bushes retreated, jostling in disappointment.

"Who, I'd like to know, will believe a twelve-year-old mentally unstable girl, a fourteen-year-old psychotic boy, a seven-year-old, and a yakking pooch?" said Alfred, clearly enjoying himself.

"You think just because you're big, you can piss on those who are little?" rumbled Panther.

"You keep talking to me in that condescending tone of voice, creature, and I'll make sure you don't say another word," Alfred said pleasantly.

Panther snapped his muzzle shut.

"I'll tell everyone that the doctor is dead," Lilith interjected. "I'll tell them how I ordered the room to murder him. They'll call him and they'll find out that he's missing."

"Will you? Quite commendable." Alfred sneered.

"So you admit to it!" Lilith shrilled.

"Admit to what, my dear?"

"I thought I asked you to stop calling me 'my dear!' And stop pretending like you don't understand what I'm talking about!" Lilith's voice caught. "Stop making me think I'm crazy! Because I'm not! I commanded the mansion. And it listened. I heard it do it! I HEARD IT BREAK HIS BONES!"

"Did you now?" Alfred raised a brow.

Lilith decided to push a little further. "I figured out the bait thing with Rosehead. Guess what, you're bait for her now. Didn't see that coming, did you?" Lilith realized she sounded rather immature, but she didn't care at the moment, hoping to squeeze more information out of her

grandfather by shocking him into it.

It didn't work. He lost interest and made to walk away.

Desperate, Lilith reached out to him. "Why do you keep doing this, Opa?" She was on the verge of crying. "Why don't you want to stop this stupid massacre? How *could* you not? Is that why you want me as heir? You got tired of it and you wanted to pass it on to someone else? What kind of a—"

Alfred grabbed his granddaughter's shoulders and shook her, kicking Panther hard when he tried to bite. "You're an annoying know-it-all, aren't you? Well, in that case, please fancy your dear grandfather. Tell me, what else do you know about me that I don't?" Bits of spit flew from his mouth.

Panther received another kick and flew into the darkness, yelping. Bär tore at the leash, Gustav shouting in an effort to hold him back.

If Lilith thought she was frozen before, she was wrong. Her body turned to brittle ice. She stared at her grandfather's face, eerie in the glow of the lantern.

"TELL ME!" he shouted, giving her another shake

"You're scared," Lilith said quietly. "I know what you're scared of. You're scared of dying."

Alfred let go of her so fiercely, she fell to the ground. He threw the beret in her face. "I'd appreciate it if you stopped littering my garden with your things. Now, get out of my way."

He yelled at Gustav, who answered back hastily. They huddled together and took off.

Lilith slowly picked up the beret, her heart fluttering like a caught bird. The rustle and bustle about her intensified. The bushes rapidly closed in. *You're nothing to me*, rang in her ears. *You're bait*. She understood the meaning of it now. Nothing special hid behind these words. Her grandfather truly didn't care. He simply designated her as yet another body to feed to the garden, albeit extra tasty because she was a direct descendant of Rose Bloom, the first human this place feasted on.

Panther limped toward her, baring his teeth.

"Don't," said Lilith. "Not worth it."

A burning wish to hurt her grandfather flooded her, yet she suppressed it. He was clearly blind to anything but his own gruesome self-preservation. Lilith had to finish her task, to get everyone safely off the Bloom property; and the sooner she did it, the better.

"I can't believe you talked," she told Panther.

"I'm still pinching myself. And you're welcome."

"Thank you."

"It's that German flea—must have bitten me." He scratched his ear. "I'm rather proud of you for confronting him like that."

"Do I get a medal?" asked Lilith.

"How about I rip out his throat?"

"Don't waste your breath. I'd rather you work a slightly different angle at the moment. How about you keep these fantastically hungry and miniature elephants out of our way before they eat us alive?"

While they talked, a dark mass of shrubs surrounded them. Leaves and twigs and flowers wobbled and hobbled, slowly scuttling closer.

"Why, you don't want to pet them? I think they're rather cute," grunted Panther, his fur bristling.

A hushed clatter came from all sides, as if pincers of giant insects rubbed and rattled against each other.

"Which way would you like to go?" inquired Panther. "You better decide quickly."

"Er...out?" Lilith pointed at the light shining through the gaps in the hedge. "Let's follow them." She pushed away stems, even as one of them swiped at her face. "Now!"

"As you wish," growled Panther. The slithering mass hurried apart, screeching in frustration.

They dashed, weaving in and out of rose clusters, knocking moving canes aside and avoiding what looked like thorny welcome hugs from all sides. As quiet as Lilith tried to be, twigs crunched under her feet. They came within about twenty feet of her grandfather when he suddenly turned around and flashed his lantern at them. "I said, go!" He opened his shears and set off toward them.

Lilith and Panther didn't need to be asked twice. Without any sense of direction, they broke into a blind run, dodging newly grown bushes, skidding along pathways, darting under overgrown arbors, and rousing croaking crows in their wake. After a few minutes, they abruptly ran into the fence on the other side of the garden, its gate closed. Dark *Rosenstrasse* stretched into the night behind it.

Lilith wheezed, a stich tearing at her side. "We're late."

The garden stretched seamlessly from fence to fence, rustling ominously. Not only was there no sign of the mansion, the motor court disappeared as well, as if the whole thing never existed.

"I imagine the mansion has folded for the night like a respectable flower. What did you expect, for it to wait for us?" growled Panther.

"I thought maybe it would, yes." Lilith's back pressed into the gate. The garden advanced, an occasional crimson eye blinking from excitement. "I think it would be wise for us to get out of here." She felt behind her. The gate's bars crisscrossed into an ornament of woven roses, and the gate itself was locked. They had to shift left or right to squeeze between the bars of the fence, except they couldn't. A thick hedge pressed in on them in a semi-circle, slithering closer by the minute.

"Couldn't agree more," growled Panther. For the next several minutes he barked fiercely, holding off the bushes, until it became clear that at some point his vocal cords would give out and they'd be eaten alive.

"Would you kindly ask your new, er, *friend* for help?" yapped Panther, breathing hard.

"Who, Ed?" cried Lilith, slapping the advancing flowers.

"No, the mansion!" Panther yelped. A cane cut his back. Another slithered under his legs and attempted to turn him over. His barking turned hoarse.

"Okay, I'll try! Dear mansion, excuse me for asking you for another favor, but we're in a dire situation, and, well..." She choked, a prickly arm circling her neck.

"I don't think this an appropriate time to be polite!" wheezed Panther.

"Mansion, I command you to rescue us!" shouted Lilith.

Not a second later, the ground beneath them parted and both the girl and dog fell into a black hole. Multiple hands caught them and multiple faces peered at them, whispering something soothing. They carried Lilith and Panther to her room, gently placed them onto the bed, and crowded around, shaking their heads in disapproval.

Lilith opened her mouth to thank them, but instead, found herself yawning. Panther yawned next to her, plopped his head onto a pillow, and drifted off to sleep.

The heads shuffled closer, their lips blurry, their whispers drowsy. Lilith struggled to stifle another yawn. Her eyes itched. Strength rapidly drained out of her. She stretched out her tired legs and hugged Panther, so smooth and warm to the touch.

"Dear mansion," she mumbled, her speech slurry, "I wanted to thank you. Thank you for..." Her eyes closed. The repercussions of today's events covered her with a blanket of sleepy exhaustion. She fought it for another few minutes, muttering, until the warmth of her pet relaxed her, and fatigue took over.

## Chapter 28

# The Generous Offer

Lilith woke with a start and sat up, glancing around, fully expecting to find herself in her own room, in her own bed, in their cozy house in Boston. Instead, a living breathing mass of heads surrounded her like a dome. She recognized the Schlitzberger twins, their mother, Agatha, Monika, Gustav, even the blind Heidemarie Haas. Lilith closed her eyes, opened them, and pinched herself. Nothing changed. She took a deep breath. A noxious stench hung in the air, confirming she wasn't dreaming. Lilith groped for Panther, who wheezed nearby.

"Panther." She shook him. "Panther, wake up!"

The whippet stretched and rumbled something that sounded like a desire for her to *please* stop shaking him, to *please* not wake him up, so that he could *please* sleep in peace, because...

As if bitten, he jumped, producing an involuntary whimper. Daphne's head giggled, retracting its arm.

"Can't a dog have a nap?" he yapped and immediately fell silent, observing his surroundings with a wild expression in his eyes. "Where are we?"

"In the beautiful Bloom mansion," stated Lilith, attempting to withhold her usual sarcasm with little success. She blushed. There was no telling how the heads would react to anything but politeness. After all, the mansion remained her only powerful ally in defeating Rosehead.

"Little miss iz awake?" Agatha's head shifted closer, her sallow skin more wrinkled than before.

"Yes, I am. Thank you for helping us escape from the garden. And thank you very much for not letting anyone follow me, like I asked."

"We are happy to serve, az long az you pay," sneered Agatha's head, passing on the appreciative rustle to the squirming, shifting congregation behind her. Lilith's stomach twisted into a pretzel.

"Anyzing else little miss wants us to do?"

"Yes, please. Don't let anyone out into the garden. You can let people in, but not out."

"We will do zo."

"Can I ask you a question? If you don't mind my curiosity, how did Petra get out? And Gustav and my grandfather?"

"Zey paid," the head said as if it was obvious.

"Paid with what?"

"We don't discuss buziness tranzactions wiz anyone but ze client," it hissed.

"Oh." Lilith bit her lip. "I'm sorry I asked. Please excuse me, it's

just that, my head hurts, and my thinking is not—”

“Your head hurts? You didn’t take your pills today, did you, *missy*?” said a sharp voice.

“Mom?” Lilith looked for the source of the voice.

“She never listens to me. Never!” shrieked her mother’s head hysterically, breaking into sobs.

“Now, now...” Irma Schlitzberger’s head patted the top of Gabby’s. “One girl iz nothing. Imagine raising two at ze same time.”

“*Mutter!*” twin heads exclaimed.

As the heads argued, more continued popping through the wall until all of the guests were there, squabbling, grotesquely distorted without their bodies. “Will you kindly shut up, all of you!” Lilith thumped her fists on the bed, her mind reeling.

The heads fell silent, drawing closer in one rustling horde. “Little miss wants us to be quiet,” sneered Agatha’s head; the rest of them sniggered.

Lilith nervously stroked Panther. “Why are there so many of you?” she blurted. “Why are you here? Who *are* you?”

The heads exchanged a grim look.

“You’re part of the mansion, aren’t you?” Lilith backtracked, hoping she didn’t offend them.

“We are. Sort of,” Daphne’s head said matter-of-factly.

“And we sort of aren’t,” added Gwen’s.

“We *are* the mansion,” said Norman’s head.

“Nonsense. We are the garden,” contradicted Sabrina’s.

“Mansion and garden both!” screamed Petra’s head gleefully.

“In my professional opinion, we are ze *very* phantoms of zose whoze *very* blood ze rose garden or ze mansion haz happened to taste.”

Lilith gulped. “Doctor Wilhelmus Baumgartner? Are you—did the room really eat you? I must apologize to you.”

“No need, no need. We only wanted to thank you for ze payment.”

“Payment?”

“You have prepaid us! Very wize; very, *very* wize,” said the jolly voice of the unfortunate doctor. “You let us feed on a man. We haven’t tasted a man in ten yearz, and ten yearz iz a very, *very* long time.”

Other heads murmured their appreciation.

“That funeral master was too salty,” said Hanna’s head.

“Dry and sinewy, more like it,” echoed Heidemarie’s.

A murmur of agreement washed over the room.

“Alfred Bloom iz a devoted rozarian, but he never fed us like zis. Never gave us his blood eizer,” said Irma’s head.

Lilith’s thoughts were elsewhere. “Wait. If you’re phantoms of *everyone* that the garden or the mansion has ever tasted, does that mean that my grandmother Eugenia is here?”

“Yes?” A new head approached Lilith. White curls framed its

leathery sympathetic face, which looked exactly like the pictures on her father's desk. "And who would you be, young lady?"

"Grandmother!" exclaimed Lilith.

Eugenia's head retracted.

"Please excuse me. I'm simply happy to meet you, although I know you're not *really* real. Grandmother, may I ask you, did Rosehead eat you?"

"She sucked me dry, young lady, that she did, but after I was dead. I died from the fright of seeing her, bless my poor heart."

"I'm sorry. That is a dreadful way to go."

Panther slightly bit her ankle.

"Ow! What?" said Lilith angrily, having forgotten his presence with all the excitement.

Panther stuck his nose in her ear. "Didn't you tell your grandfather that the mansion will help you stop him? I think it's high time you ask. For help, I mean. Instead of yammering about dinner choices for the rest of the night."

"I remember. Just waiting for the right moment," Lilith hissed in his ear, blushing.

Panther squinted at her.

"All right, all right, it slipped my mind. I got sidetracked a little. What would I do without you, oh faithful partner?"

"Do I get extra steak for this?" Panther wagged his tail.

Lilith gave him the look and addressed the heads. "Dear phantoms," she began, "as heir to the Bloom property, I humbly ask you to help me stop Rosehead, newborn rosebushes, old rosebushes, well, those that are still alive anyway, the rose garden, the mansion, all of its rooms, all of its floors, all of its—"

Panther bit her.

"At any rate, everything carnivorous that lives inside the iron fence that defines the Bloom property. I'd like it to stop performing the abominable despicable carnage of—"

She caught a few puzzled stares.

"I mean, eating people. Please, help me stop it."

A buzz of anger filled the air. Every head voiced its opinion, shouted, cursed, and in general behaved viciously, throwing venomous glances at the girl and the dog.

"They don't seem to be too happy," Panther rumbled.

"If you have a better idea, go for it. Actually, I do," whispered Lilith. "Excuse me! If you're indeed phantoms of *everyone*, then I'd like to meet my many times great-grandmother Rose Bloom. If she's here?"

They hushed and parted. A new head came to a dangling stop inches from Lilith. Its stunning heart-shaped face was framed with long hair that shined through the dimness of the room like flaming copper.

"Rosehead?" breathed Lilith, her heart thumping.

"Rose is my name. Rose Bloom. Ain't nobody called me Rosehead except my late husband."

"My apologies," said Lilith. "I didn't mean to offend you. It's very nice to meet you, my many times great-grandmother. I'm in dire need of your help."

Rose's head studied her. "What is it?"

"I'd like to stop this, *all* of this. I'd like to stop the whole property from murdering people."

"Why?"

This stumped Lilith. "Because I don't want to inherit a killer garden. I..." She faltered. It wasn't the real reason.

Rose's head waited.

"Because I care for these people. I don't want them to die. I love my mom. Yes, she can be a bit controlling and scatter-brained and pushy at times, but I still love her. I love my dad, even when he pays me no attention, gone into his thinking or racing or..." She talked of everyone in the mansion, every single person, including the twins.

Panther studied Lilith with an open jaw. He couldn't remember his friend openly expressing her opinions on people in her life to anyone but those specific people, which in itself rarely happened.

"You might think I'm crazy, but I care for Daphne and Gwen," Lilith continued. "I feel sorry for them. They're lonely. I wish I could be their friend, but they'd never understand it if I offered. And I love my grandfather. I want to take away his pain. That's why I want to stop this." She fought the itching in her eyes, fought it, fought it, and lost.

There was an appreciative silence.

"We will discuss this," said Rose's head and then it withdrew, joining the others. They congregated, murmuring. Lilith held her breath. Panther ogled her, struck with awe.

At last Rose's head spoke. "We understand your desire. We will help. For a price."

"I'll pay anything you want," said Lilith, her heart pounding.

"That's *not* how you—" Lilith clamped Panther's muzzle shut. He squirmed, trying to wiggle out.

"Anything?" the head repeated.

"Anything."

Lilith thought about her parents, about them tucking her into bed a few nights ago and how it felt like a real family. She thought about her mother's obsession with pills and suddenly understood that her mother loved her and cared for her the only way she knew how.

"If it's to be our last meal, it ought to be the heir."

"What?" Lilith blinked, unprepared.

"Esteemed Roze Bloom means that you will have to give yourself up. Your whole self. Willingly. To us. For our very last dezzert," explained the doctor's head cheerily. "How very, very delicious."

Tongues clicked in anticipation, and the squirming mass around the bed tightened.

"Me?" Lilith's mouth went dry. She didn't want to die, not if she could help it; yet given the choice of saving the lives of her family and her first true friend, she simply couldn't do otherwise.

Panther squirmed out of her hold. "Rubbish!" he barked. "Don't listen to them! Let's go wake your parents and get out of this deluded dirt-for-brains pile of nutty bricks!"

Oblivious to her pet's protests, Lilith made her choice, before fear stopped her.

She looked straight into Rose's eyes. "Deal."

"Are you out of your *girly* mind?" yelped Panther.

"We need a yes or a no," said the head.

"If it will stop this absurd, atrocious slaughter, my answer is yes. Only..." Lilith thought about the way the doctor died. "Can you make it quick? And painless? Please?"

"You have our promise. At the end of the carnival everyone will go home, *everyone* except you, my twenty-times great-granddaughter."

"So the garden won't eat anyone anymore? And the mansion won't either? People can go safely in and out and enjoy themselves?"

"They can enjoy themselves."

"Enjoy themselves—"

"Enjoy themselves—"

Sniggering, sneering, hooting, and chanting the words "enjoy themselves" on repeat, the heads vanished one by one into the walls with a rapping noise like that of a firecracker. It steadily grew louder, until Lilith realized that someone was knocking on the door. With a bang, it burst open. The light flicked on, taking away the night.

## Chapter 29

# The Dramatic Reunion

For a moment, two solitary figures stood outlined in the doorway, and then rushed inside. Gabby scooped up her daughter. Daniel hugged them both, petting Panther who attempted to squeeze into the pile.

"Lilith!" Gabby sniffled. "I lost all hope." She sniffled some more. "What happened? Where have you been? We were waiting by the door. How did you get in?"

"Pup," said Daniel, tightening his hold.

Gabby blew her nose. "We nearly lost our minds! We couldn't get out of the mansion. Every door lock jammed. Your father tried breaking the windows, but they're made of some unbreakable glass. Our phones wouldn't work. And your grandfather disappeared!" She said it like it was somehow Lilith's fault.

Neither of them mentioned their daughter's outburst prior to her departure, as if it never happened.

Lilith barely listened. Relief flooded her. Nobody was going to get hurt. She concentrated on soaking in every detail about her parents, the way their hair shined in the light, the way the wrinkles traced their faces. She let them examine her scratches, feel her temperature, and study her eyes and tongue and throat.

"Where were you this whole time? In the garden?"

Lilith took a long look at her father before nodding.

"Alone?"

Lilith thought it safe to shake her head.

Daniel frowned. "Who were you with, if you care to share?"

Lilith thought about retelling everything that happened since her disappearance, but whatever strength she had left deserted her. She closed her eyes.

"It's okay, pup, it's okay. Never mind us. You can tell us later, can't you?"

"Lilith, you can't simply disappear like this ever again. We thought you *died*!" Gabby's voice caught.

Lilith wanted to say, *I'm about to*.

"Gabby, would you stop, please?" There was an irritated tone in her father's voice that Lilith hadn't heard before. He didn't call his wife *love*, which in and of itself was an entirely new development. The hushed tones of her parents' disagreement reached her as if from the end of a tunnel. Part of her wanted to cling to reality, part wanted to be alone to shut down; the latter part won out. Her mind already stepped out of life, passing into limbo.

Acutely aware of his friend's moods, Panther was the only one who felt the change, licking Lilith's face to bring her back.

"Lilith?" Ed edged into the room.

Lilith opened her eyes. "Ed!"

Her friend grinned. "It is. Okay. She is. Sleeping," he stuttered, still croaking like an old man and evidently testing his speaking ability in short declaratory sentences. "Is that. Okay. If I...?" He looked expectantly at Daniel and Gabby.

"Hey, buddy! Where have you been? You're talking again?" said Daniel. "How does it feel, stiff tongue, eh? Did something prompt you or..."

"Lilith. Asked me."

"She did?" Daniel smiled and ruffled Lilith's hair. "That's my girl."

"See? I knew it. When you need to, you can talk," Gabby snapped, and was about to add more before Daniel interrupted her.

"Come in, come in. Close the door though. We don't want people snooping. You're a different deal. Friends are welcome. Lilith needs more friends, don't you, pup?"

"You could've told us where she went, you know," said Gabby. "This not talking pretense was not necessary."

Daniel spoke over his wife in German, addressing Ed.

Gabby closed her mouth with an audible snap.

Ed sat next to Lilith, timidly taking her hand. They exchanged a glance. Lilith soundlessly moved her lips, *I'll tell you later*, knowing it was a lie. She'd never tell him what she agreed to do.

Lilith's parents, as expected, launched into a sophisticated match of exchanging insults, only this time both sides were even. After a short while, Gabby gave up, mopping her tears and watching her husband get a wet towel from the bathroom to clean his daughter's cuts. She stood a bit to the side, like a frightened squirrel, her eyes puffy.

"Mom, I love you," croaked Lilith. She couldn't remember the last time she said that to her mother.

"What—what did you say?" Gabby sidled to the bed.

Daniel paused, Panther ceased licking, Ed stifled a cough.

"Mom, Dad, I wanted to tell you both that I love you."

"We love you too, pup."

"Thank you for caring for me, for raising me, for—for everything. I'm sorry I wasn't more *cooperative*." A desire to spend time with her mother flooded Lilith, and a pang of regret prickled her gut.

"Oh, baby. I love you, too!" Gabby squeezed her daughter, rocking her back and forth, until Lilith felt the need to breathe, rolling her eyes at Panther, who barked.

Gabby let go, embarrassed. "About the pills, if you ever need a break, all you have to do is ask."

A cloud of sickly sweet fragrance filled the room.

Alfred silently materialized by the bed, dressed in a festive suit of burgundy velour with a strikingly bright rose in his lapel, his hair puffy as if he just took a shower.

"Well, well. I told you she'd turn up eventually, didn't I? There was no need to worry after all."

"Hello, Grandfather," pronounced Lilith clearly, her fear of him gone in the face of death, her sense of sarcasm returning full force, bringing with it renewed energy.

"Alfred! Where have you been? What is the meaning of this?"

"Dad? *Now* you decide to show up?"

"Actually, it's my fault. I asked the mansion not to let you guys out," Lilith interjected, staring into Alfred's unblinking eyes. "Dear Grandfather, I apologize profusely for causing such an uproar in your house and for disturbing your guests. It was very inconsiderate and egotistical of me, but I assure you that after tomorrow's carnival I will vanish from your life, never to bother your sacred presence again."

If there were crickets in the mansion, you'd be able to hear them. Alas, even crickets were wise enough to avoid living here.

Alfred threw his hands in the air. "Son, sorry I was gone. Had some important business to attend to. Your daughter must be very tired. Listen to her, she doesn't know what she's saying. What did you say, my dear girl, can you repeat it?"

"On the contrary, I'm starting to believe that she might actually know exactly what she's saying," Daniel responded stiffly.

All attention on her, Lilith composed herself. It didn't matter if her father believed her or not, she had one day left to live, and it had to count. There were things she wanted to do, and those things were: scaring her grandfather out of his socks, watching her mother knit, taking a stroll with her father, looking for a squirrel with Panther, and kissing Ed. She definitely wanted to know what it felt like to properly kiss.

Lilith marched up to Alfred.

"What I said, dear Grandfather, was that I'm sorry I caused such a racket, and that it was my fault for locking everyone up. What I *meant* was that it's between me and the property now. You, sadly, are out of the picture." She flashed her grandfather a smile, elated at his perplexed expression, turned on her heels, and hiked into the bathroom, shutting the door and locking it.

Once alone, she slid to the floor, buried her face in her hands, and let go. Silent convulsions shook her. Muffled talking seeped under the door. Lilith ignored it, trying to look at her life from beginning to end. It was a small and fragile thing, packed with worries and problems and grudges that seemed so unfounded now, so silly, so childish.

Frantic scratching issued from the door. A long pink tongue flashed under it. Lilith turned away, but the scratching only intensified, with an added whining that could drive even the most patient dog breeder nuts. Lilith knew that once Panther started, faithful to his stubbornness, he

wouldn't stop.

"What?" She opened the door a mere hairline.

Immediately, a black paw pushed its way in, so that if Lilith wanted to close the door, she'd have to crush it. "What do you want?" she snapped.

Panther pushed in his head, and was in the process of squirming in entirely, when Lilith caught Ed staring at her tearstained face from the back of the room. She let in Panther, swiftly shut the door, and rounded on him.

"Can't you tell I want to be alone?"

"Clearly. If you'll allow me to explain why I've violated your desire, it's only because I agreed to help you. We are partners, like Watson and Holmes. And partners don't give up on each other. Besides, you're the best pet owner I've ever had the pleasure of serving. Well, considering the fact I only had one." He grew quiet. "Dear Lilith..." He inclined his head.

Lilith couldn't remember the last time Panther addressed her by her first name, so she knew it must be important to him.

"That deal you made with the mansion, it was foolish."

"Oh, spare me the lecture, please," Lilith scoffed. "Don't look!"

Panther politely averted his eyes.

Lilith peeled off her clothes, threw them on the floor, and stepped into the shower. It felt wonderful to let the water wash off the dirt, although it painfully stung every cut.

"I'm not looking." Panther stuck his nose to the glass shower door. "Only want to make sure you hear me clearly."

"And what is it that 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, making a concentrated effort to shampoo her hair.

"Dear Lilith," Panther began again, which was so unlike him that Lilith paused.

"What? WHAT?" she almost screamed.

There was rapping on the door. "You okay in there, pup?"

"Sorry, Dad, talking to myself."

"Lilith? When you're done, I put clean clothes here for you on the floor," added Gabby.

"Thanks, Mom!" Lilith rinsed her hair, turned off the water, wrapped herself in a towel, and squatted next to Panther. "I'm sorry I yelled. And can you be quieter, please?"

"I don't care if they hear," he growled, his jewel eyes misty.

"You don't?" Lilith felt her brows travel upward.

"Dear Lilith," he began tentatively for the third time, his nose twitching nervously.

A squabble broke out in the room. It sounded like a father—son

argument, and it transpired in German.

Lilith cupped her face, patiently waiting for the rest. "All right. Out with it."

Panther cleared his throat. "I, Panther Bloom Junior, adore you from the tip of your nose to the tip of your toes. I'll lick your feet every day. I won't complain about the lack of squirrels. I'll gladly sleep on the filthiest rug you give me." He passed a tongue over his muzzle in that characteristic doggy way. "I'll never call you madam again, or make fun of you." He sighed heavily. "I don't need that rosy jacket; I'm fine being, um, nude, if only you'd call off your deal with the mansion. I don't want it to eat you. *Please*, let's find another way to stop this. 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 barked dramatically.

Lilith held his head by the ears.

"There is no way back, Panther, you heard them."

"How do you know they're not lying? We don't even know who they are. Some crow-scaring, dust-biting bunch of plants that decided they have brains."

"They're phantoms of those whose blood—"

"Madam—er, I mean, Lilith," Panther corrected himself guiltily, "how do you know they're telling the truth? Tell your dad! He seems to be warming up to the idea."

"Doesn't warm up fast enough."

"Let's just get out of here, this exact moment."

"And leave all those people to die? No, I can't do that."

"Since when do you feel responsible for them?"

"I'm heir to the Bloom property, Panther!" Lilith said with certain pride, towering above him. "I'm responsible for the mansion, for the rose garden, and for everyone who happens to be residing here, don't you understand?"

"Then I'm going with you," growled Panther quietly.

"What? No."

"Me. Too," said a familiar voice through the door.

Outraged, Lilith unlocked the door and nearly bumped into Ed, who apologetically stretched out his arms with Lilith's clothes neatly folded on them.

"How long have you been standing here?" She rounded on him.

"Only. A little." Ed shrugged. "Sorry. I'm. Friend. Coming with you."

Lilith battled with herself for a moment. "It's not like I can stop you two, is it?"

Both Ed and Panther shook their heads, grinning. Lilith narrowed her eyes. Her parents whispered something to each other, Alfred apparently having departed.

Lilith sighed. "I don't approve of this idea, and don't look at me like this. A new beret!" she exclaimed, only now noticing what lay on top of the pile. "It's beautiful."

"Had to do something. Couldn't sleep," said her mother from the back of the room.

The beret was knit from yarn of various reds, forming a familiar pattern. "It's a rose," whispered Lilith. "If I wear it, will it make me a Rosehead?"

As if she heard her, the bush woman moaned from the depths of the garden. In answer, the mansion shuddered, creaking and stretching in the preparation for its final exquisite meal.

## Chapter 30

# The Unsuccessful Plan

A hushed silence filled the room, giving Lilith the false hope that perhaps her parents felt something. They didn't, and just looked at their daughter with worry. Muttering an excuse to Ed, she grabbed her clothes and disappeared into the bathroom. It was her last clean outfit, a red shift dress, matching cardigan, and flats, intended for the pompous good-bye dinner. Lilith dried her hair and dressed reluctantly, studying herself in the mirror. She didn't approve of formal dresses; they restricted her movement.

"Bloody perfect dress to die in, isn't it?" she asked her reflection, thinking that if by some miracle she survived, she would adopt Rosehead as her new nickname, out of spite. She stood like this for another minute, thinking about life, death, and love—three big things she had so little time to grasp.

"It is what it is." She shrugged. "There is no death without life, like there is no life without love. Does that mean there is no love without death? Do I have to die to know what love means?" She fixed her new beret, contemplating. "Do I have to lose everything, before I can gain anything?" It seemed true to her in the moment. Her thoughts turned to her mother, to her awkward attempts at teaching her how to knit. Lilith always commented that knitting was certainly not an activity suited for sick people, lest she managed to poke out an eye with a needle. Gabby would typically balk and ask Lilith if she took her pills.

Deciding that she ought to stop dwelling and enjoy her last day, Lilith emerged to the day's first sunrays coloring the room gold.

Ed was gone, perfectly in line with his annoying habit of disappearing. Panther snored on a pillow. Gabby and Daniel rushed to their daughter. Her father asked about her wellbeing. Her mother announced that today it would be okay to skip her medicine.

"You look great!" said Daniel.

"A traveling circus is coming tonight, with trained elephants. Your friends Gina and Daisy asked me if they could sit next to you, such sweet girls," said Gabby.

Lilith's stomach churned. "Gwen and Daphne, Mom."

"We're leaving tomorrow, pup. Aren't you happy about that? We'll be home in no time," chimed in her father.

Lilith suddenly swayed. Not enough sleep, not enough food, and plenty of exhaustion finally took its toll. Her parents exchanged a glance and led her to bed, sitting on either side. *This is worth dying for*, thought Lilith, *this moment, this golden sunrise, this view of a stunning rose garden, Panther wheezing on a pillow, mom and dad hugging me, no*

*lectures, no annoying questions.*

She leaned on her mother's shoulder and closed her eyes. Gabby asked something. Daniel answered something. Lilith couldn't detect their words. *I'll just sit like this for a bit. It's so cozy, it's like sitting in a pile of sleeping whippets, it's like...* She struggled to think and then wasn't thinking anything anymore, drifting off.

When she opened her eyes, hours later, her head was propped on a pillow, she was covered with a blanket, and the sun hung low over the horizon.

"What?" Lilith bolted upright. "I fell asleep!"

The evening colored the sky lavender. A sweet fragrance drifted in on a light breeze. The serene atmosphere would've fooled anyone but Lilith. She felt the throbbing in the very walls of the mansion, in the ground of the garden. It hummed with anticipation like a hungry predator.

"How long did I sleep?" Her heart hammered.

"I may have mentioned that I don't happen to own a watch. Nor do I know how to read." Panther yawned, sitting up.

"Panther!" Lilith covered her mouth in horror. "We slept through the day!"

The whippet jumped, looked out the window, looked at Lilith, and barked wretchedly.

"Gabby! She's up." Daniel cracked the door open, his wife behind him. "That was a long nap. You slept like one happy puppy. Hungry?"

"Dinner is soon." Gabby felt her daughter's forehead. "Our last dinner here."

Lilith's stomach shrunk at these words. The recollection of past events rushed into her head. "Why did you let me sleep for so long? What time is it? When does the carnival start? Where is Ed? I need to get up!" She made to move.

"Hang on, we'd like a word with you." Daniel squeezed her shoulder. "If you don't mind?"

Her parents exchanged a conspiratorial glance.

"What about?" asked Lilith suspiciously.

"We know it might be difficult for you to talk about this," started Daniel.

"We understand that it might take you some time to open up to us," said Gabby, pushing up her glasses.

"But we really need to know—"

"Where you were all night—"

"And if anyone, even if it's anyone we know, was with you or maybe wouldn't let you come back—"

"You two think I was *held hostage*? By grandfather?" said Lilith, breaking into laughter.

Her parents were taken aback, consulting each other wordlessly on

how to continue.

"Let me assure you, it was nothing of the sort. My grandfather had nothing to do with it, but he also had everything to do with it. In a way," said Lilith, flustered. "The problem is, if I were to tell you what happened, neither of you would believe me, so there is really no point in telling." *Plus, I have things to do, and there isn't much time left*, she wanted to add.

"Why don't you try?" said Daniel at last.

"We'll listen," added Gabby.

"No interruptions?"

"No interruptions," they chimed back 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 in some kind of an institution where they'll chain me to a bed and force-feed me cold soup through a tube?"

"No, nothing of the sort!" Gabby said, mortified.

"Okay." Lilith took a deep breath and, with a rush of relief, let her story flow—from ordering the room to kill the doctor (both Gabby and Daniel gasped), to facing her grandfather, to asking the mansion to not let anyone follow her, to being pursued by Alfred and Gustav, to Panther making Bär bite his master (Gabby's mouth opened and closed).

Lilith took a shuddering inhale and continued weaving her tale about Ed's tree house, Rosehead attacking Petra (Gabby covered her mouth, Daniel rubbed his face), their fight, Rosehead giving birth to dozens of carnivorous rosebushes with Alfred's help (by now both parents just stared), her face-off with grandfather, their escape, her plea for the mansion's help, her conversation with the heads, and meeting Eugenia and Rose Bloom.

Lilith left out only one tiny detail, namely, her promise to give herself up to the mansion.

"...and then you came in," she finished with glittering eyes, looking from one parent to another, trying to read their expressions. They seemed to be wearing immobile masks in place of real faces.

"Well, what do you think?"

"We think it's quite a story. Isn't it time for dinner?" said Gabby quickly.

"I think we need to talk to dad," added Daniel.

Lilith swallowed. "Why? Because I'm young? Is that why you don't believe me?"

"No-no, it has nothing to do with age," began Daniel.

"For a second I thought maybe...never mind. Doesn't matter now. I'm starving." Bitter regret filled Lilith. Angry tears threatened to roll down her cheeks. She held them back, swiftly slid down the bed, and marched out of the room, before anyone could stop her.

Panther trotted at her heels.

"You could've backed me up, you know. Could've said something. *Partner.*" Without giving her pet a chance to answer, Lilith ran down the steps and into the dinner hall. It was empty except for Agatha carrying in steaming trays of roast and potatoes, positioning them carefully between bouquets of freshly cut roses. Lilith wanted to grab every vase and smash it on the floor, then stomp on it until it turned to paste.

"Can I please have breakfast for dinner?" she said to the housekeeper. "I'd like an omelet with cheese, American style, with bacon, sausage, and blueberry pancakes on the side. Oh, and a bowl of steak for Panther."

To her astonishment, Agatha nodded. "Az little miss wishes," she said, and scurried toward the kitchen.

Lilith pulled out a chair and plopped onto it, smiling. If this was going to be her last dinner, she was going to pig out on her favorite foods. She looked forward to seeing her grandfather, preparing an entire speech in her head that she thought would, if not scare him, then at least embarrass him in front of his guests. Despite the fact that she averted the massacre, she badly wanted to show everyone she was right all along.

Panther curled by her feet, mumbling something about working up the courage to speak in front of her parents. Lilith remained silent, restraining herself from asking him about Ed's whereabouts and jumping at every noise.

Slowly the hall filled with people. First came Trude, then Hanna with her blind mother, and then the Rosenthals with Patrick and Petra, who tried to dart to Lilith but was stopped by her mother. Lilith automatically answered everyone's greetings, her eyes on the doorway.

Preempted by the whiff of sour milk, the Schlitzberger twins, in tow with their mother, sauntered in and slumped across.

Daphne, her round face shiny, leaned over and hissed, "Hallo, Lily." "*Lilith.*"

"Did you find more human bones in ze garden to munch on? Were zey tasty?"

Gwen joined her sister. "*Nein*, she met a bear in ze woods, but it wouldn't eat her becauze she stinks. It only scratched her, see?"

"Or maybe it was a scratch of *love*?" sing sang Daphne.

The sisters burst into giggles.

Before Lilith could answer, Ed—breathless from running—dropped into a chair next to her, evidently having heard the last bit of the conversation. He purposefully pecked Lilith on the cheek, making her face turn scarlet.

"You disappeared," she whispered.

"You. Look. Great," he said, and then added in a casual matter-of-fact tone to the twins, "Sorry. A boy. Never. Kissed you." He took a breath. "Don't fret. There will be. An elephant. Tonight. He loves kissing. Fat girls." The tirade exhausted him, but the stung look on

Daphne's face was worth it.

A loud yelp came from under the table. Either Gwen or Daphne kicked Panther, who bit Daphne, who cried out, prompting her mother to pick up the thrashing whippet by the tail, which in turn caused Lilith to spring to her beloved pet's rescue, together with Ed. The commotion would've escalated, if not for Alfred. He strolled into the hall, Agatha on his heels with Lilith's specially made breakfast and a bowl of steak.

"Put him down, Irma, today is a special day," he said authoritatively.

"But Alfred, *zis hund* bit my daughter! Iz not supposed to be in ze dinner hall." She reluctantly lowered the dog into Lilith's hands, who put him on her lap for safe keeping.

Gabby and Daniel walked in, engrossed in conversation.

"Please, sit down. Let us eat," said Alfred.

Guests obediently dug in, gossiping and throwing baffled glances at the girl who inherited Bloom & Co.

Lilith didn't pay them much attention. Ravenous, she swallowed her omelet in minutes and had to suppress a belch. Ed delicately picked at his food next to her. The twins chewed with fierce determination.

Alfred struck his glass with a spoon.

"My dear guests! Today is the *last* day we get to spend together," he said, making Lilith's bones chill. "I must tell you, it has been my tremendous pleasure seeing you all at my mansion. I dare to think that I've been able to provide you with enough entertainment"—he glanced at Lilith accusingly—"but it's not over yet. As you are all aware, tonight there will be a good-bye carnival, in memory of my late wife Eugenia Bloom, and to celebrate the legacy of the Bloom family. I have invited a traveling circus that will perform in front of the mansion."

"Alfred, what happened yesterday? I say, you locked us up on purpose!" said Norman, brandishing his wine glass.

"We couldn't go shopping!" complained Irma.

Other guests added commentary in German.

"Why did you leave?" Lilith whispered to Ed.

"Sorry. Had to. Have plan."

"You do? I have a plan, too. Watch." Eager to showcase her idea, Lilith disregarded Ed shaking his head no and focused on her grandfather. It didn't matter anymore what he said or did, but she wanted to repair her reputation.

"Ah, yes. I apologize for doing that to you, my dearies," Alfred droned. "It was a necessary precaution to get the garden ready. You see, there will be a surprise ceremony tonight."

He gazed at Lilith, whose heart fluttered like a dying animal. She just now realized that he planned on disposing of his own son as well as the other guests. This knowledge made her want to puke.

"As is our tradition, we will have the crowning of the new Bloom

heir, to make it *official*, if you will. I'm sure all of you were wondering where our heir disappeared to yesterday. Well, we needed to keep it a secret. Lilith was helping me. In fact, she demonstrated an incredible willingness to learn all about the art of growing roses, choosing to spend almost an entire night in the garden as part of our preparation for the carnival."

"What? You never said she was helping you," said Daniel sharply.

"Why didn't you just tell us?" Gabby added. "You put us through a horrible ordeal."

"Please, let me finish." A muscle on Alfred's face twitched. "I apologize for not telling you earlier. It was our secret to keep, mine and Lilith's. She couldn't hold to it and acted out part of her performance yesterday. Didn't you, my dear girl?"

Speechless, Lilith struggled to process the audacity her grandfather had to lie like this in front of his own family.

"Wait. I don't understand," said Daniel.

Alfred spoke over him, his voice turning silky. "I'll explain later. You see, we got carried away. As much as I advised Lilith to take a break, she continued pruning, which is hard and unforgiving work. You may have noticed the scrapes she has suffered from the thorns. But we still had fun, didn't we? We're sorry we had to fool you all." His eyes sparkled with a delirious glee that bordered on madness.

Lilith exchanged a terrified glance with Ed.

A collective sigh of relief rippled over the table as the information sunk into people's minds. Gabby and Daniel, however, were engaged in a heated argument, her holding him back as he tried to get up.

Lilith had to act. She gently put Panther on the floor and stood, looking directly into Alfred's eyes.

"No. Don't." Ed yanked on her sleeve. Panther bit her ankle lightly, to no effect.

"You're absolutely correct, Grandfather," she said clearly, her voice ringing across the hall.

"Correct about what, my dear?" Alfred frowned. A shadow of surprise passed his face.

It gave Lilith a boost of confidence. "About the fact that we had tremendous fun. In fact, we're about to have some more." As if by accident, she struck a whole pitcher of water. It fell and broke, splashing water all over the floor. "Oh, no! I'm terribly sorry," she cried out in theatrical horror. "Look, everyone! The floor drank the water!" She now had the attention of the guests, but as she looked down, her face fell. The water behaved as spilled water usually behaves, collecting itself into a puddle. Lilith stared.

"Oops!" said Alfred, wearing a triumphant smile.

Just then Gustav stumbled in, announcing loudly, "*Herr? Zirkus ist da.*"

## Chapter 31

# The Book's Advice

Lilith's plan to showcase the miracle of the water-swallowing floor, and to prove her sanity, fell through. Disappointed, guests turned to Gustav. There were exclamations of delight, the pushing of chairs, the shuffling of feet. The entire assembly got swallowed by anticipation frenzy. Amidst the chaos, Alfred peered at Lilith and cracked a smile so wide that she wished for Rosehead to burst in and swallow him whole.

"Lilith." Ed nudged her urgently.

She stared blankly, in a trance. "Why didn't it work?"

Panther pawed at her leg, blinking in a way that implied, *It's incredibly simple, silly, if you care to entertain that thing you have over there called a brain?*

Lilith only gaped.

"Need. To show you. *Now*." Ed flung his arms about, sending his fork flying.

"You can *tell* me, you know." Lilith frowned.

"Now!"

Before Lilith could say anything else, before her father and mother reached her, Ed pulled her away from the table, tugging on her hand. They broke into a run, Panther gamboling at their side, narrowly avoiding Agatha who carried a mop and a bucket. "Little miss shouldn't go into ze garden tonight," she said sternly.

Wiping her hands on an apron, Monika came out of the kitchen, evidently to see what the commotion was about. "*Meine kleine Prinzessin!*" she called after Panther.

Somebody shouted Lilith's name. She paused to look. Ed snatched her arm. "No time. Please."

Lilith's heart hammered. "Where are we going?"

"Your room."

"What for?"

But Ed didn't answer, his face set on the task of escaping. They hopped two steps at a time, sprinted along the corridor, and stopped in front of the last door on the left. Ed pushed it open, ushered them in, and locked it.

"Hey! Where did you get the key?" said Lilith breathlessly.

"Agatha." Ed wiped his brow. "Gave me."

"She just gave it to you? Just like that? Wait, is there something you know that I don't, something I need to know?"

"Long story." Ed scrunched his face in concentration.

"Not to worry. I have all the time in the world," said Lilith, crossing

her arms and eyeing the door.

"Not now." He touched Lilith's bag. "Please. Don't be mad. I looked. At your book. Sorry. Okay if I...?"

"Well, if you already looked, I don't see why you're asking for my permission now. Go ahead."

Panther glanced from Ed to Lilith, and from Lilith to Ed, following this exchange with interest.

"Thanks," said Ed. He lifted the flap, took out *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and leafed through it.

A knock on the door startled them.

"Pup, you there?" Daniel's voice came from the other side.

Lilith, Ed, and Panther froze.

There were a few more knocks, the hushed voices of Lilith's parents, and then the doorknob rattled a couple of times. At last, their voices and footsteps trailed off into the corridor.

"They'll be back, I'm sure of it," said Lilith, letting out her breath. "Wait, guys. Before you do anything, there's something important I need to test." She disappeared into the bathroom.

Ed and Panther exchanged a glance and a shrug.

Lilith came out with a glass of water, marched to the door, and upended it onto the knob. Nothing happened. She stood, waiting.

"What. You doing?" croaked Ed.

Lilith stubbornly shook her head, ran off, and came back with another glass, spilling it onto the floor.

Ed looked at Panther. "Why water? Dinner hall? What. She doing? Calling heads?"

Panther nodded to ascertain his knowledge of the mystery at hand. He cleared his doggy throat and growled, "Er...may I say something?"

Lilith didn't pay him attention, busy with her task of making the room completely and utterly wet.

Panther tried again. "I know I promised not to call you madam again, but I wish I didn't, as this occasion requires it." He trotted after his friend, tail curled, while Lilith tried surface after surface, pausing by her bed and dowsing water on the wall after a brief hesitation. "We're all aware of the fact that this floor drinks water. You may also well remember that the third floor sucks blood, and the black room ate the doctor. Whole. Now, we have never determined what the first floor feeds on, did we?"

"Easy. Air," stated Ed.

Lilith stopped in her tracks, staring.

"Why didn't you say so before? I looked like a complete idiot." She was too flustered to continue.

"Why didn't you ask?" It was by far the longest sentence Ed produced without stuttering, and he gazed at Lilith, beaming. "I tried. Stopping you. I wish. You'd share your plans." He huffed and puffed, a

trifle exhausted from the effort of talking.

Lilith only moved her lips soundlessly. She wasn't used to having friends, wasn't used to sharing her thoughts and ideas with anyone, even Panther.

The whippet raised a paw. "If I may add to this observation?" he growled. "When you, um, conversed with the heads upon offering yourself as a sacrificial lamb, I recall you asked them not to do anything naughty."

"Did I?" said Lilith uncertainly.

"Well, you didn't specifically use the word *naughty*, but that's how I understood it. In any case, that must be it. The mansion's currently pretending to be a normal house, like you asked it to. At least, that's the explanation that comes to my poor doggy mind. I might be wrong, of course."

"Sounds legit," said Ed. "Your dog. Is genius."

Panther proudly stuck out his chest.

Ed petted him. "Why not. Ask it?" he said.

"Ask who?" said Lilith.

"The mansion," chimed Ed and Panther as one.

"Oh. Right. The mansion. Er, dear mansion? Is this true? Are you behaving like a, well, like a normal house? I suspect it's hard to move around all the time when you're built of stone, isn't it?" said Lilith almost affectionately.

The mansion passed a tremor. Not a menacing tremor that warned them they were about to become dinner, but a nice tremor of agreement, as if someone understood it at last. It even sighed.

"Obviously. I'm losing my mind," said Lilith, and then sunk onto the bed, thinking that her brain must have taken a hike due to recent events.

There was a clacking of claws and an awkward growl. "I understand that this is the worst moment for a confession, but I must admit that I was a coward." Panther hung his head dejectedly.

"What?" Lilith looked at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Not speaking up in front of your parents?"

"Oh, that." Lilith slid off the bed. "My dear Watson, everyone makes mistakes. I'm being a prime example at the moment. It's perfectly okay." She petted Panther's head. "And, to be honest, I don't blame you. I'd be afraid too. I wouldn't want to be paraded into a dog show like an otherworldly miracle either, trust me. I don't think dad would ever do something like that to you, though."

"You're absolutely and unquestionably certain?"

Lilith nodded.

Panther sighed. "Okay, I promise I'll talk."

"You *will*?"

"Yes. Friends again?"

“Positively.” Lilith kissed him. Panther purred.

Meanwhile, Ed finished leafing through the book. He stuck his finger in and proudly professed, “Found it.” His face exuded excitement, his eyes danced with the fever of adventure.

Lilith studied him, suddenly wishing herself sick. She hoped her parents were right, that indeed she imagined things, because right this second everything felt normal. She didn’t want it to end. She wasn’t going to die tonight; she was simply visiting a friend in Berlin. They’d pore over books, take Panther on a walk, and watch the sunset. Then they’d visit Ed’s cottage and maybe he would draw a portrait of her. She’d sit on a chair in her festive red dress, inclining her head ever so slightly...

Panther woofed. The room darkened.

A gigantic face pressed against the window, its bloody eyes rotating wildly, its foul breath fogging up the glass. Lilith swallowed. She wasn’t crazy after all.

“Duck!” Ed grabbed her arm.

“I don’t think I need to, do I?” Lilith struggled against his hold. “She can’t touch me, can she? Since the mansion is going to eat me and not her?” It sounded strange speaking it aloud, as if she was talking about someone else. She shuddered.

The mansion bristled at Rosehead.

She grimaced and took a thunderous step back.

“Incidentally, this crumbling stone-brain of a house never told you *how*—um, how to say this politely—it plans on eliminating your glorious presence. Don’t you want to find out?” growled Panther.

“Does it matter?” threw Lilith. “The end result will be the same anyway. I’d rather not know.”

“What, you don’t care how it plans to kill you? What kind of a deal is that?” yapped Panther crossly. “I wonder if it will, in the unfortunate case of me extricating something rather unpleasant...” He sniffed and lifted his leg.

“Panther, no!” cried Lilith.

“Lilith! Guys! Plan!” Ed snatched her arm, pointing inside the book.

“And...all hell breaks loose,” commented Panther.

The doorknob jerked.

“Still locked. I can hear her,” said Gabby. “*Missy?* Open the door at once!” A pair of fists pounded on the door.

There were muffled mutterings.

“Pup? We know you’re in there. Please, let us in?” said Daniel. He hesitated for a while. “We have the key. We’ll wait for a few minutes, in case you’re, um, taking a shower or something, then we’ll come in, okay?”

“That’s just great,” Lilith breathed.

“Bathroom,” ushered Ed.

They dashed inside and locked the latch. Immediately, Ed opened the door leading to Trude's room. A strong whiff of soap and elderly possessions that tend to gather dust, and an odor of mold, washed over them.

"Clever. I didn't think of that. This is better," whispered Lilith, "if not for the smell. We won't be able to stay here for long, before they figure it out."

"Long enough," said Ed, as he quietly clicked the door shut.

As much as Lilith's room was clean and airy, Trude's room was stuffed with everything frilly, from pillows to blankets to slippers to suitcases, covered in flowery patterns of such tastelessness, Lilith thought her eyes would go berserk.

The muffled voices of Gabby and Daniel reached them. They tried the bathroom door with no success.

Rosehead appeared in the window, mouth opened wide.

"I can't believe I signed up to conquer this foliage-covered, plasma-sucking imbecile," growled Panther. "I must truly love you more than steak."

"Your exquisite descriptions never cease to astound me," said Lilith. "There she goes again."

Rosehead struck the glass with one heavy fist. The window merely stretched inward without breaking.

Lilith let out a breath. "Honestly, I think being crushed by a mansion is a better way to go than to be sucked dry by *that* thing."

Ed shook his head. "Don't have to."

"I don't see what choice I have," said Lilith. "If I stay in the mansion, it will eventually eat me. If I try to get out, the garden will eat me. Let's say I manage to get out—which is highly unlikely, given the fact that I promised my life to it—how do you propose I fight Rosehead and a million of her little mutant babies?"

A strange smile played on Ed's lips. He gave the book to Lilith and said, "Fire."

There was a pause. Then another pause.

Then Panther growled, "Bloody brilliant."

The mansion passed a tremor.

Lilith remained silent, dumbstruck. The idea was so simple yet so ingenious; she wished she came up with it herself.

"Fire," she repeated, thinking back to the Bloom family history. No stories of fires came to mind. Did that mean that the rose garden survived for seven centuries without being touched by flames? And if it was, would it burn to the ground and die, never to regenerate?

"How did you—" Lilith began.

"Your method." Ed placed the tip of his finger on the page, tracing several sentences.

"May I remind you—" Panther started.

"Ahead of you, dear Watson," said Lilith, and read the entire passage aloud. *"Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smoldering 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 shut the book. "Genius," she gushed. "Will it work?"

Carried away by their conversation, they didn't notice a slew of dangerous noises. The walls shifted uneasily, followed by soft footsteps, metallic jiggling, and a snap of the lock.

Without a warning, the doorknob turned and Alfred entered the room. "Ah! I thought I'd find you here." He towered over them. "Lurking in guest's rooms, are we? Up you go, my dears. Your parents are worried sick, wondering where you went."

Panther was the first to act. He yapped and lurched at Alfred's arm, locking his jaws. A paroxysm of hate contorted Alfred's features. "You little..." Attempting to shake the whippet off, he made to snatch Lilith. Ed yanked her out of reach, and her grandfather's hand closed on empty air. With a grunt, Alfred bashed Panther on the bedpost. The whippet let go, whimpering, and slid to the floor, immediately biting his ankle. Alfred cried out and leaned to hit the dog, but Ed bumped him from behind, sending him sprawling.

Fuming, Lilith commanded, "Mansion, don't let him up, do you hear me?"

It grudgingly obliged, sinking Alfred into the floor with an earsplitting creaking, trapping his body under the boards and leaving only his face visible.

"Gustav! GUSTAV!" he bellowed, coughing up dust.

"*Herr?*" came from the door. Gustav appeared out of nowhere, as usual, perched on his shaky legs, his watery lips pressed into a smile of servitude. Arms behind his back, he stooped, awaiting instructions.

"Get me out of here!" Alfred sputtered.

"*Herr?*" Gustav pressed a hand around his ear.

Muffled cheers and jeers erupted outside. There was the distinct trumpeting of an elephant, calls of animal trainers, and the general commotion that sounded so unmistakably circus-like.

Lilith looked at the window. "The carnival!"

Rosehead was gone. Lavender dusk settled itself over the garden. The setting sun gave it an ominous reddish glow. Everything stood threateningly still.

Lilith had an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. The guests were surely already outside, sitting down to watch the performance. With Rosehead and her rosebushes on the prowl, the entire spectacle could easily turn into a massacre. It shouldn't, if the mansion held its promise;

but who was to say they didn't conspire against her together? It must have heard them talking about the idea of a fire just now. And how exactly were they going to set the garden on fire with all those people out there? Lilith's palms felt clammy. Who was to say the mansion wasn't carrying news to Rosehead this very minute? After all, the entire property must have been possessed by the same spirit of Rose Bloom, wasn't it?

Lilith bit on her lip. "Guys? We have a problem," she whispered, too quietly for anyone to hear.

"Gustav..." Alfred wiggled, a layer of sweat glistening on his forehead. "Lilith? My dear girl. Ed? Help me out of here, will you? Hey, puppy." He chuckled uneasily.

The boy and the dog stood over the old man, watching him with disgust.

"Brute," said Ed with force. "You. Deserve it. For my dad." He balled his hands into fists.

Lilith touched him. "No. Not worth it. Let's leave him; we have a bigger problem on our hands."

Panther cleared his throat. "Ed?"

Gustav's eyes popped. He ogled the whippet, launching into a series of prolonged wheezing coughs and gurgling noises. Apparently, he had never seen a talking dog before.

"I'd like to show you my support," continued Panther. "I disagree with Lilith. I think you should pummel this moron into a juicy pulp. Lilith, it's one of those cases where what I'm about to do will *piss* you off."

"Excuse me?" said Lilith.

Panther, tail curled, sauntered over to Alfred's trapped head and sniffed it. "You filthy, stinking, money-chasing, dung-eating, repugnant face of an ape. I, Panther Bloom Junior, am a proud whippet, and I will piss on you!" He lifted his leg.

"Panther!" Lilith made to snatch her pet, but this time it was Ed who stopped her, an evil grin playing on his face.

There was a hissing noise, a spitting noise, and a string of malevolent German curse words. The mansion protested by quivering in revulsion.

Panther slapped a paw on Ed's outstretched palm.

"Boys." Lilith narrowed her eyes. "I suppose it would be wise to get out of here before the room spits us out."

Gustav held the door open. As they passed he winked, his first attempt at friendliness.

In a rush of hope, and the promise of a dangerous adventure, they ran along the corridor, Panther in the lead.

"Guys, we have a problem," panted Lilith.

They halted.

"I think the mansion heard us." She fixed her festive beret nervously. "Of course it heard us, why didn't I think about this before. We can't openly talk about it, you know. About the thing we just talked about, that gave us the idea to use that other thing, on that big thing?"

Ed stared at Lilith uncomprehendingly.

"Wait, where are we going to get it? The...you know. The *thing*? It's, um, red? Well, orange and yellow sometimes." Lilith hesitated to say the word.

"She means, conflagration," interjected Panther. "Inferno? Pyre? The sea of devouring incandescent petals that swirl with incredible warmth, sparks, and glow?"

It took Ed a minute. Then his face cleared. "Agatha. She's got it," he said.

"Oh, Agatha again. Can we trust her?" Lilith hesitated.

Ed nodded and put a finger across his lips.

They crept down the stairs. The first floor was deserted. Distant laughter and applause indicated that the circus performance had started.

"Where are mom and dad?" said Lilith, her heart pounding.

"Maybe they got bored looking for you and decided to ride the elephants?" Panther yapped innocently.

"Not funny. What if they're in the garden? Looking for me?"

"I thought you made a deal with this new friend of yours? What's the name. Manure? Manor?"

Ed shushed them.

They inched along the wall and slid into the kitchen. The place was usually full of clinking dishes, clanking glasses, and banging pots, but was now eerily quiet.

## Chapter 32

### Agatha's Pledge

It took a moment for Lilith to adjust to the gloom. Small windows let in only a trickle of light. Between rows of boxes and the looming refrigerator stood Agatha, her eyes glittering in the dark. Behind her, Monika's white teeth sparkled in a dazzling smile. She made a kissing noise and dropped something on the floor. It made a wet smack. Panther produced a sound of sheer doggy happiness, rushed over, and bit into it.

An echo of distant merriment reached them. In the dimness of the kitchen, it seemed unreal that somewhere out there people could enjoy themselves.

"Er, hello," said Lilith, waving her hand.

"Little miss wants to save lives. Zat iz very brave," said Agatha without any preamble.

"I..." Lilith's face turned hot. She felt grateful for the darkness. "Excuse me, but how do you know?"

"I told them," said Ed.

Lilith grabbed his arm and whispered hotly, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. "You told them *what*?"

"Everything."

"Everything? Everything, *everything*?"

Ed nodded, retreating to his old habit.

"And they believed you? I mean, they don't think I'm crazy?" Lilith trembled.

"They've known. All along," he said.

"I suspected. I mean, it's great to hear it confirmed. It's *excruciatingly splendid* news, but, you know. You could've asked me first."

"Sorry. You were sleeping?" Ed suddenly became very interested in the windows.

"Naturally." Lilith narrowed her eyes and released her hold, fuming. "Once you tell a friend a secret, everyone knows about it."

"We heard little miss needz fire," professed Agatha.

"Shhhh!" shushed Lilith. "Don't say the word!"

Alas. The kitchen shook as if a herd of cows ran across its perimeter. Plates rattled, glasses tinkled.

"Please don't say the *word*," pleaded Lilith, miming the rest as Ed would. She waved her arms about and moved her lips in an exaggerated manner, hoping it spelled out to everyone, *don't talk about fire, the mansion can hear us*. Of course, given the darkness of the room, the servants hardly understood what she meant.

The kitchen's tremor didn't seem to phase Agatha one bit. "We want to help," she continued, her eyes glinting. "Zere iz little time. Monika?"

Monika petted Panther who pretended to be an ordinary dog with no extraordinary speaking abilities.

"Monika!"

"*Ja, Frau Agatha!*" Monika startled, disappeared into a dark corner, and emerged triumphantly, holding a bunch of arm-length iron sticks, their ends wrapped in spongy foam.

"Are these..." said Lilith.

"Torches. From the circus," said Ed.

Hanging pots clanged. The floor heaved, shaking the stove and the refrigerator dangerously. Lilith reached out to Ed to hold on.

"Well, this is spiffing spectacular. Um. Everyone? Perhaps it's better we talk outside?" suggested Lilith irritably, horror sliding into her stomach.

"Too late," said Ed. "It knows."

All window latches snapped shut as one. Both door locks turned, clicking into place, shutting them off from the rest of the mansion as well as from the way out into the garden.

As if this was not enough, a loud thud outside made them jump. It sounded as if either Rosehead stomped her foot, or an elephant tripped and fell. Then there was a distant shifting of the floors above, indicating either Alfred's victory over the room, or the room's victory over him, or something else. In fact, it sounded suspiciously like someone or something was being ejected into the sky.

Panther produced a noise very similar to a chuckle.

Lilith gulped. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I hope. He lands. In a pile of dung," whispered Ed.

"At least he's outside. As opposed to us, lovingly trapped and about to be crushed alive," said Lilith, eyeing the ceiling.

The ceiling didn't fall short of her expectations. It dropped a foot, thought about it, and dropped two more. The walls joined by muscling over a good chunk of the floor, pushing the stove, the refrigerator and all the counters with them. The racket was unimaginable.

Ed and Lilith covered their ears, while Panther hopped about as if escaping a horde of biting fleas. The servants, on the other hand, didn't mind the situation one bit. It appeared they were quite used to this sort of behavior from the house.

"Monika," commanded Agatha, adding something in German.

Monika produced a lighter and lit one of the torches. It sputtered and spit, filling the kitchen with the burnt smell of resin. Agatha snatched it out of her hand.

"Zere will be fire eating. We set fire to ze garden zen," she said, ignoring another stony vibration. "Zis way." She lowered the torch so

that the flames licked the doorknob.

It squealed horribly, twisting and squirming and throbbing. Every surface in the room bulged and creaked. The entire mansion seemed to be squealing, passing whistles like those of a gigantic teakettle about to burst. And it stunk unmercifully of smoldering dirt.

Lilith and Ed covered their faces, coughing.

Panther yelped in fright.

Agatha held true until the knob, blackened and smoking, bleated defeat and the door blasted open.

The party dashed out, just in time for the door to snap behind them with an upset twang. They halted, separated from the first line of the rosebushes by about ten feet of gravel. The garden rustled as if pulsing with hunger.

“Wait. Wait!” said Lilith. Things happened too fast. Could she trust the servants who knew their master longer than she was alive?

“Zere izn’t time,” Agatha hissed.

“She’s right. Come on,” said Ed.

“I need to know.” Lilith shook her head stubbornly, torn by doubt and fear. “Could you kindly elaborate as to *why* you want to help me?” She licked her lips, eyeing one of the bushes that slowly inched closer. “You served my grandfather for several decades, correct? Why turn against him all of a sudden?”

“Little miss iz all questions,” Agatha snapped. “Always questions.” She suddenly rushed close, glaring. “It iz not eazy watching people die—watch ze lady of ze house die. We tried getting rid of ze spirit. We failed. Only heir can do zat. Master won’t do it, master iz afraid. You are a brave girl wiz brave friends. We will do anyzing to stop zis.”

Lilith’s heart thrummed in her throat. “You saw Rosehead eat my grandmother?”

“We were too late to find her. Too late.” Agatha looked away, and in time. A bush rushed at her. She stuck out the torch. It hissed and retreated. They were safe under the protection of fire, but not for long. More bushes surrounded them, a hideous chatter issuing from their depth.

“Thank you for believing me,” said Lilith. “Thank you for not thinking I’m nuts or cuckoo.”

“Come on!” breathed Ed feverishly, throwing up his arms.

Panther snarled, baring his teeth.

“One more thing.” She looked at the servants. “It seems like everyone here has their own agenda, the mansion included. Esteemed Agatha, I don’t mean anything by it, please excuse me for saying this, it’s nothing personal, you understand, but how do I know you’re not lying?”

“Dad trusted her,” said Ed firmly.

“Little miss iz hurting our pride. No Bloom servant haz lied to

Bloom master." Red splotches climbed up Agatha's cheeks.

"I don't buy this for a second," retorted Lilith. "You lied to my grandfather about my beret, didn't you?"

"Not saying zings iz not lying," Agatha snapped.

"It iz our duty to do your bidding," chimed in Monika, to extinguish the argument.

Another heavy thump shuddered the ground. A piercing wail full of rage tore through the sky.

The housekeeper winced. "She knowz. Ze mansion told her."

"How do you know? And how is it that nobody except us can hear her?" asked Lilith, unable to withhold the questions that burned in her head since she heard the monster for the first time.

"People hear only what zey want to hear," hissed Agatha. "Will zis help little miss decide faster? I, Agatha Weber, ze houzekeeper, pledge to you my service." She elbowed the cook.

"I, Monika Pflaume, ze cook, pledge to you my service."

They bowed.

Lilith fixed her beret. "Um," she began uncertainly.

Rose stems gnashed against each other like teeth, a tight circle of them barely a few feet away from the party, seething and swaying.

Panther barked. Ed snatched the torch from Agatha's hand and poked the bushes. "You stinking garden. If you have guts. I'd like to see them. Pop and sizzle."

The shrubs retreated, but only for a moment.

Lilith said hastily, "Okay, okay. Dear Agatha and Monika, please excuse my hesitation. I, Lilith Bloom, heir to the Bloom property, accept your pledge of service. I'm forever and *eternally* and *everlastingly*—"

Panther bit her ankle.

"Grateful," Lilith finished. "I'm ready." She took a torch and a lighter from Monika, her hands shaking hard.

"Zis way," prompted Agatha.

They pressed their backs to each other and, thrusting the torches into the dark green mass of leaves, slowly made their way around the mansion.

"Where are we going?" asked Lilith in between attempts to make her lighter work.

"Ze motor court," said Agatha, waving her blazing torch. "We will hide by ze fence."

Lilith frowned, finally succeeding in lighting her torch. It crackled, caught fire and issued smoke. Monika pressed behind her, slashing at the bushes. Ed's arm flew left and right in wide arcs, his face glistening with sweat.

"Hold on." Lilith tapped Agatha's shoulder. "How do you know Rosehead will be there?"

"She alwayz comez to watch," Agatha threw out, without turning.

Ed's eyes blazed with excitement. "Can't wait. To burn her. Down." He brandished his torch so energetically that he swiped it a bit too close to Monika. She yelped. Panther woofed. Agatha shushed them.

The garden seemed to have gotten the message, letting them pass unharmed. But from deep inside it came noises akin to dripping saliva and hungry stomach gurgles.

They tiptoed close to the fence. Echoes of clown jokes and bursts of laughter told them that they were close. A ringmaster's booming voice announced the next act. A carnival tune pierced the evening air with a clash of cymbals, a beat of the drum, and a buzz of trumpets.

They reached the front gate and halted, peeking through a gap in the greenery. Lilith held her breath. What she glimpsed made her momentarily forget her fear.

Golden lantern light illuminated the front of the mansion. Guests were seated on the steps, captivated by the show which unfolded in the middle of the makeshift arena temporarily cleared of cars. Every light in the house was turned off, making the stage stand out that much more.

Juggling sparkling orbs, an acrobat rode a lavishly decked elephant. A small orchestra played music. A clown ran around the pitch, cheering on the audience. A group of acrobats in glittering unitards huddled to the side. One of them wore a tutu that made Lilith miss her ballet attire.

"Zere she iz." Agatha pointed, and Lilith reluctantly tore her gaze away from the circus to peer into the darkness above.

Hidden in the shade of the mansion, silent and enormous, Rosehead leaned on a wall and gazed intently at the seated crowd, dancing light reflecting in her rose eyes.

If you didn't know what you were looking at, you could've easily mistaken her for a tree. Sadly, that was not the case. To add to the horror, the roof of the mansion appeared to be breathing. A thick blanket of crows perched there, waiting for the scraps from their master's table. The mansion itself loomed over the crowd, slightly inclined.

Lilith's insides turned to acid and flooded her with dread. She desperately searched the spectators' faces for her parents. They weren't there. Her heart hammered. One clear thought pounded in her head: The mansion knew she planned to break their deal, and it was probably angry, especially after being attacked with fire. Nothing prevented Rosehead from lunging at the crowd and sucking them empty like juice packets.

*What did I do? I fell for the cowardly idea of saving myself, putting the lives of everyone—including mine—in danger. Excellent, dear Holmes. You deserve a medal of honor.* She tightened her grip on the torch, furious.

Bushes inched closer from the shadows, undetectable by the blinded audience but clearly visible from their hiding place. The mansion shivered. Rosehead straightened, suddenly alert. If she were to lurch at her prey right now, not Lilith, not Ed, not even Panther would reach her in time.

Lilith's nerves snapped. "She's about to pounce!"

"Agatha," stuttered Ed. "We have to. Warn them."

"No. When ze firebreazers start. Zen. We make it look like accident," Agatha wheezed. "You don't want to be known az fire starter. Not good reputation."

"But the mansion knows!" said Lilith in alarm. "It's no good now! The whole plan, it's—"

The front doors burst open.

Lilith's palms turned sweaty. Gabby and Daniel stepped out, searching the crowd. Illuminated by the yellow lantern light, they looked haggard, especially her mother. Lilith knew then that she had to make a choice, pick one or the other. Live or love. In that moment she understood that she loved her parents more than she loved herself. It made her strangely serene. She knew what she had to do, on her own, without consulting her book, or Panther, or Ed, or anyone else.

It was her decision to make, hers and hers alone.

She turned to face them.

As if sensing her decision, Agatha snapped. "Not yet. Little miss haz to wait!"

But Lilith couldn't wait any longer; she already separated herself from the living. A pang of pain stabbed her chest. She didn't watch her mother knit, didn't go on a walk with her father, and didn't look for a squirrel with Panther like she planned. There was one more thing she could still do.

Lilith leaned, took in a lungful of Ed's cookie smell, and kissed him.

Ed tensed. Then he un-tensed. Then his knees went soft and he was kissing her back.

*If that's what it's like kissing boys, I'm certainly sorry I didn't do this before.*

The music stopped, applause erupted, and Lilith launched into action. She disentangled herself from Ed's hold, bent down to hug Panther, and before anyone realized what she was doing, with a cry "I love you both, forever!" Lilith took off, thrusting her burning torch high into the air, yelling at the top of her lungs. "Hey, mansion? I'm here! See me? Right here! Remember the deal! I'm coming! Tell Rosehead not to touch them! You hear me? TELL HER NOT TO TOUCH THEM!"

She sprinted along the pathway, the flickering flame making her dress look like the wings of a butterfly headed for its death.

## Chapter 33

# Lilith's Sacrifice

For a second, everything stood still, even the night's silky darkness held its breath, and then chaos erupted. Rosehead hollered. The crows took off from the roof, cawing madly. Fire breathers lifted their torches, uncertain. The spectators craned their necks to detect the source of the disturbance. Rosehead took one staggering step, then another, and emerged into the light.

People screamed. Some fell, cowering, others froze, transfixed, the rest scattered. The elephant trumpeted in fright, reared, and charged.

Lilith waved her torch. "Mansion! Over here! Like promised. Take me! Take *me*! Tell her to leave them alone!" She acted on impulse, hoping to distract Rosehead long enough to appeal to the mansion and recover their deal, assuming it was, indeed, broken.

Panther caught up to her, barking. Ed shouted not too far behind. Lilith paid them no heed. A frenzied exhilaration gave her energy, propelling her forward with uncanny speed. This was the biggest mischief she had ever attempted, taunting a deadly spirit of unknown origin. It strangely lifted her mood, making her bubble with terror and glee at the same time. It also made her realize that all of these things—the mansion, the garden, the bush woman—were one and the same. It simply took on different shapes. Ed was right; it must've been the place itself. She felt it throb under her feet.

*I don't care who you are, I'm going to put an end to you. Yes, I'll have to die, but I'll die spectacularly, for everyone to see that I was right all along.*

An agonizing bellow tore through the darkness. The elephant collided with the giantess, who howled in surprise and fell on it. Their enormous shapes rolled into one. A whoosh, a crunch, a slurp and a thunderous burp later, Rosehead threw what remained of the poor animal into the ring, where it trotted only minutes ago, now resembling an empty skin-sack full of bones. Squawking, hungry crows swooped down, tearing and ripping at the carcass.

There was an awful pause, and then the chaos turned into a catastrophe of gigantic proportions. People ran around without any direction, bumping into each other and shrieking. Those who attempted to escape the rosebushes pressed into their midst with a sickening gurgle. Their muffled cries subsided to moans that would set anyone's teeth on edge. Gabby and Daniel stood on the porch as if spellbound, gazing at the monster.

Lilith burst into the court.

The giantess towered over her, leering.

"Lilith!" cried Daniel and Gabby in unison.

"Lilith, no!" Ed yelled from behind. "Wait!"

"Madam, I forbid you to do this!" Panther barked. "This is outrageous! Stop this instant! I'm warning you! I *will* bite you!"

Their shouts had no effect. Lilith threw her torch to the ground. "Mom, Dad, I'm sorry," she said, and then, "dear mansion, I apologize profusely for whatever it is you might have heard. Please, excuse my friends, they only meant me well. Nobody is going to set fire to you or the garden or Rosehead, rest assured. I'm Lilith Bloom, heir to this property, and you have my word and my promise."

She felt the ground underneath her shift. It was unquestionably and indisputably alive. Struggling to hold her footing, she continued. "Whoever you are, phantoms of those whose blood was spilled on this land, a garden possessed by the spirit of my twenty-times great-grandmother Rose Bloom, or both, or neither, or *something* else, I know you're all one. So it doesn't matter. I made a deal with you. Well, here I am. Take me."

The earth shuffled and scuffled and shivered. The mansion shook. It shuddered, it rattled, it gnashed its doors and windows like teeth. Rosehead looked back at it, as if waiting for a signal. The porch steps throbbed and burst, sliding ahead until they hit her feet and nudged her forward. She happily obliged, snatching the girl into a massive palm right from under the nose of her parents, her faithful whippet, and her friend, who, together with servants, poked the giantess with torches, attempting to light her on fire.

Sharp prickles cut through Lilith's clothes and dug painfully into her skin. She felt a flood of relief. She did it. She saved the Bloom family. She closed her eyes and waited for death, hoping it would be over quickly.

A second passed, then another. Then a minute. Nothing happened. Lilith didn't dare open her eyes. She swayed. Heavy footsteps echoed in her ears. Her scalp erupted in goose bumps. As absurd as it was to worry about such an insignificant detail in the face of being consumed by an otherworldly beast, Lilith realized that in her haste to get to the mansion, she lost her new beret. Somehow, this loss made her heart ache; it made her wish for one more hug, one more kiss, one more word from her mother.

Unable to hold the brave façade anymore, horrified beyond measure, Lilith burst into tears. So big was her grief that she lost all sense of time and orientation, crying in earnest and hoping against hope that maybe somehow she'd escape this nightmare and come out of the garden alive.

All movement stopped. Rosehead lowered the girl and set her on the grass. Lilith sat up, cradling her legs under her skirt and wiping her face. She was in a clearing, surrounded by a wall of tangled shrubbery so tall that it formed a roofless rotunda. The silvery moon hung in the black

sky, watching the girl with interest.

"The lair has grown anew," she whispered, looking around.

In the middle of the glade a cluster of bushes shivered, and something—no, someone—grunted. Slowly, the greenery parted. Dozens of flower-eyes cast a ghostly reddish glow on the crumpled shape in the middle.

Lilith covered her mouth.

Alfred Bloom, his face swollen and scratched, his suit torn, sat up dizzily, taking in his surroundings. As comprehension dawned on him, he let out an anguished scream.

A shadow covered the clearing. Lilith instinctively raised her head. Above them, level with the hedge top, hovered the mansion. In place of its roof gaped a black hole. Hundreds of heads sprouted from it like a bouquet of hellish roses, jawing and yakking and gossiping all at once, apparently excited. It was their turn to witness a spectacle that was bound to give a nightmare to anyone but Lilith, who felt rather elated by having familiar company; company of those who—as horrible as they were—became her friends of sorts over the week she spent here. Lilith smiled involuntarily. One of the heads winked at her, or maybe she imagined it. It didn't matter. She was still alive. For some reason the mansion, or Rosehead, or some other deity, delayed her execution. Why? To give the audience enough time to settle in for the show?

"There! There she is!" Alfred yelled, brandishing a finger at his granddaughter.

Lilith balked. Throbbing fury filled her to the brim. "Why, it's very nice to see you too, Grandfather. Did you enjoy your flight?" she said levelly, scrambling to stand. If she died tonight, she'd die with dignity. "Did you wipe the piss off your face already, or would you like me to bring you a towel?"

Alfred clambered to his fours, talking to Rosehead. "Well, are you blind? There's your food!"

"I see you made a deal with Rosehead," said Lilith hotly. "A special meal for a special monster. Bait, that's what you told me I am, bait for Rosehead. So much love for your granddaughter, I can feel it pulsing in your heart. You would be delighted to know, however, that I made a deal with the mansion in turn. Want to know what we agreed on?"

The ground heaved. Lilith shifted uneasily.

Alfred stared at her. His eyes sunk, his arms and legs shook with the effort of propping himself up. "Keep quiet," he spat. "You have no idea what you're talking about. You're only making things worse for yourself."

"Worse than death?" Lilith chuckled despite herself. "Truly astounding. Do you care to elaborate?"

"What do *you* know about death? How much death have you seen in your short, miserable life? Answer me." Alfred darted at her, but the bushes held him back. He winced and whimpered like a caged animal.

"Answer me!" His voice caught at the end. He sagged to his knees, shaking and mumbling.

Pity stirred in Lilith at the sight of his sad old figure. She tried, but she couldn't feel angry anymore. It escaped her with a whoosh. "Is that what you've been doing your whole life, Grandfather, keeping things quiet?" she said wretchedly. "Must've been very tiring. Well, worry no more. I'm paying for your freedom, with my life. You can go now. And..." She bit her lip, making herself say it. "I'm sorry it was so hard for you. I know you didn't choose your burden, so I'll take it over from here. I wanted to let you know that—that—I love you, Opa," she added quietly.

"What?" Alfred looked at Lilith as if he saw her for the first time. His face contorted. For a moment he looked like a little boy, scared and willing to do anything to escape his obligation, yet ashamed of himself for it.

The uneasy silence stirred above them. Lilith didn't notice that both the heads and the bush woman listened intently to their conversation. Now, crackling and creaking, the heads descended on the clearing and formed a domed roof, obscuring the moon and plunging everything into darkness. The only light came from the scarlet glimmer of roses. The glade turned into a chapel with pulsing walls and a talking ceiling.

Alfred put up a shaking hand. "You...you...ignorant stubborn girl, you believe you can stop it, don't you? You think you can succeed where your grandfather failed? Well, you're wrong!"

Lilith looked at him with sadness.

He managed to put on his usual charm, calming. "My dear girl, I'm impressed, impressed by your chivalry. But you're mistaken. Nobody can stop this, nobody. In a moment you will perish. It saddens me to do this to you, it truly does, but I have no other choice. I'm sparing you a life of misery."

"It's unfortunate that you think so, but it's not up to you to decide what to do with my life," said Lilith softly.

The air around them grew ominously quiet.

"You needed Bloom heir blood, I gave it to you. Take it!" bellowed Alfred. "There she is! What are you waiting for?"

The rosebush woman spread her arms and howled in hunger.

Lilith had seconds left. She had no time to doubt anything; the prospect of imminent death wiped her mind clean. An overwhelming sorrow filled her. She knew now what it meant to die. To die was to let go. There was no fear in death, only forgiveness.

She looked up. "Dear Rosehead, dear mansion, dear spirit of Rose Bloom or whoever you are, before you dine on me, may I have one last request? I hear those sentenced to death have the right to speak before their execution. I would love to say a few more words to my grandfather, if you don't mind?" She waited breathlessly.

Rosehead lunged. The heads erupted in protest. They snaked out

hundreds of stem-arms and suspended the monster inches from Lilith. "Talk! Talk! TALK! LET THE GIRL TALK!" reverberated around her. The monster squirmed and thrashed, but the heads wouldn't let go, waiting.

"Dear Grandfather," said Lilith quietly, "I feel very sorry for you. I wish I could help you somehow, but I think you're beyond help at this point, and this makes me very sad."

"What are you waiting for?" Alfred shrieked. "Get her!" He purposefully avoided looking into Lilith's eyes.

She took a step forward. "I don't know if you truly loved my grandmother, but if you did—"

"GET HER! NOW!"

Rosehead moaned. The heads hissed at her.

"I'm sorry for your loss. I know you're scared. You're scared to die. But I'm not, not anymore. I declared myself heir to this property to free my family from the nightmare of a carnivorous rose garden that has been hovering over their heads for seven hundred years. I promised my life to the mansion. In turn, it promised me to stop this massacre, stop it for good. If my short miserable life, as you call it, will pay for many, I imagine it's a good use of it." Lilith took a shuddering breath.

There were shouts from above.

"Oh, this is beautiful!"

"Would you shut up? I can't hear a thing—"

"Shush, the both of you!"

Lilith composed herself and continued. "I hope my mom and dad will forgive me. I hope Panther and Ed will forgive me. And I hope you will forgive me. Because tonight I'm putting a stop to this *contemptible, wayward, squalid, abject, unbearable, gruesome, odious, sordid, turbid, and innocuous* slaughter—once and for all." She exhaled. Nobody interrupted her. She squeezed ten sophisticated words into one sentence, her personal record.

Alfred's face was the shade of a dirty rag. He opened and closed his mouth, but no sound came out. He stared at his granddaughter, speechless.

Lilith stood straight. "I'm ready."

A fight erupted. The heads yelled, bashing Rosehead, who produced a roar of such magnitude that Lilith covered her ears. Leaves and roses rained down upon her. The entire enclosure shuddered under the blows of the giantess. Then it felt like the giantess wasn't fighting the mansion any longer, but both of them fought something else, something bigger and stronger and scarier.

There was a crack, and a howl, and a hideous hiss.

Rose Bloom's head detached itself from the mass, expanding and turning into a thing that looked ancient and faceless. It hung over Alfred and boomed at him in a thousand voices, "You broke the rules."

Lilith stiffened from terror.

"What rules?" croaked Alfred. "Who said there were rules? You wanted an heir, you got an heir."

"Do not defy me," thundered the thing, its voice rousing swirls of torn leaves.

"What did I do? What did I do wrong? I spent my life serving you. And you pay me back by taking my family? By taking my love, my Eugenia? You said you'd spare her." Alfred cowered, shielding his face.

"Grandfather?" Lilith took a tentative step.

"You take care of me," boomed the thing, sinking lower. "You give me blood. You die when you can't give me blood. You kept me hungry for too long. You're too old. Your time is over. *You* die tonight, not the girl. She is young and strong. She will take care of me now." It grew bigger, folding down on Alfred in a slithering, hissing mass.

"Please, let me live. Please. I don't want to die," he said, convulsing in silent crying.

"Opa..." Lilith heard herself let out a shuddering exhale, without realizing she was holding her breath this entire time. "No, let him live, please," she said to the thing.

It barely regarded her, focusing on its caretaker. "Do your duty." Its voice rolled over the clearing, ruffling it.

Alfred shook like a leaf in the wind. "My dear girl," he said meekly, his posture broken, his eyes dull. "I hope one day you will forgive your grandfather. Give my regards...to your dad."

"Of course I'll forgive you. I've already forgiven you," said Lilith hastily. "But Opa—"

"Farewell," he said and faced the deity. "I, Alfred Bloom, rightful heir to the Bloom property, acknowledge the end of my service to you and give myself up, as is my duty. I declare my granddaughter, Lilith Bloom, as the new heir. May she serve you well."

"At last," said the thing.

"*Liebe Eugenia. Ich komme.*" Alfred closed his eyes.

"Wait! Opa, no!" Lilith bolted, only to be thrown off her feet by a slithering mass of stems that seemed to have sprouted from everywhere, obscuring her grandfather from view, weaving him into a cocoon, and burrowing him with a soft whoosh underground in a matter of seconds.

The smell of freshly dug earth enveloped Lilith. For a moment she stood, stunned, then she lost control, ran up to the tangle of brambles that quickly disappeared into the ground, and tugged at them, tearing and kicking blindly.

"Why did you do it, you monster, why?" she screamed. "Stop it! I want you to stop it! You can't kill people anymore, you hear me! Stop! I COMMAND YOU! I COMMAND YOU TO STOP THIS NOW!" Her voice cracked, but she continued yelling her plea until her strength deserted her and she collapsed onto the ground, sobbing.

## Chapter 34

# The Dazzling End

Rosehead, her rosebushes, and the mansion heads all merged into one coiling and uncoiling mass of canes, shanks, and stems, interrupted here and there by a flash of red. The rotunda vanished, and Lilith found herself in the middle of a flower sea that throbbed and thrummed, speaking at once and from everywhere.

"I was waiting for this," it said. "Waiting for you to say it." Its voice rustled, echoing under the night sky. Its leaves brushed her face, played with her hair. The whole garden became fluid, as restless as an ocean before a storm. It shifted and changed, as if it didn't have roots but danced across the earth any way it liked.

Lilith sprung to her feet.

"Who *are* you?" she asked, bewildered.

"I'm the rose garden. Isn't it obvious?" said the garden, lapping gently. It smelled overwhelmingly sweet, like too much of a good thing. Lilith wanted to bury her face in its fragrance forever.

"I don't understand," she said cautiously. "Please excuse me, but...you were waiting for what, exactly?"

"Waiting for an heir to stop me."

"To stop you?"

"That's right." The garden swished.

Lilith glanced about. "Where is Rosehead? Where are the bushes and the phantoms? Are they part of you now?"

"Everything is part of me. Always," said the garden.

"Thank you. That's very self-explanatory," scoffed Lilith, despite her wretched state. "What did you do to my grandfather?"

"What I do to every Bloom heir, when they prove useless to me." The garden smacked its gigantic lips.

"You *ate* him?"

"Wish I didn't. Not very tasty, the old fellow. Sinewy and bony. I prefer soft juicy caretakers, haven't tasted one in a while." It lapped around Lilith, ruffling her hair.

Lilith swallowed, her heart hammering. "Dear rose garden. Did I hear you correctly—you said I *stopped* you? Does that mean you will stop eating people from now on?"

"*Here*, I will," said the garden slyly.

"But you might continue elsewhere?"

"I might."

Lilith shifted uneasily. It was very disconcerting to stand up to your neck in a moving, living, talking mass of twigs that changed shape and

behaved as if it could gobble you up if it so desired. "May I clarify something? I asked Rosehead to stop," said Lilith, "but it didn't work. Why not?"

"Only the heir can command me. You weren't the heir then. You are now." It rustled around her.

"But Grandfather said—"

"You become the new heir when the old heir dies." There was an irritated edge to its voice.

"I see," said Lilith.

"I'm tired of being trapped here," said the garden, licking the fence. "I want to roam the fields. I want to run through the woods. And when I'm done running, I want to find a new resting place." Rising and falling, the thing congregated around Lilith, as if looking directly at her. "I tried to make them say it. I turned greedy. I demanded more blood. They simply obliged. Cowards. Not one of them told me to stop. Until you." Its landscape stretched into a strange semblance of a smile. "You asked me to stop. For that, I thank you. I have fulfilled my last obligation to the last Bloom heir. Seven hundred years is a very long time. I'm bored of this place. Let me go. Set me free," it said, as petals brushed Lilith's face, "and I might spare you."

Lilith bit her lip, feeling the rise of panic. "But you said you're not going to—"

"A deal is a deal," said the garden sweetly. "Once spoken, it can't be broken."

Lilith went rigid. She cleared her throat, stretching out the conversation as long as she could, to try and wiggle her way out. "Excuse me, dear garden, please correct me if I'm wrong, but are you implying that after you're done here, you will simply run away?" She shuddered, imagining a carnivorous garden on the move, crawling across fields, towns, and cities, consuming everything living in its wake.

"In a way. In a way I will." The garden paused, as if it gazed beyond the darkness of the forest.

Something wet nudged Lilith's leg. She nearly shrieked, catching herself at the last moment.

"You don't need to pretend," said the garden. "I know your talking dog is visiting you. I'm only allowing it to live out of fascination. It makes my dwelling here less boring. For that, I thank you as well. Haven't had much entertainment of late, not with that old fellow." It scowled at Panther. "I despise dogs. They poison my flowers with their excretions."

Panther curled his upper lip in an unpleasant way.

Lilith sighed. "I'm very sorry about that, but he's a dog. It's what dogs do." She squatted under the mass of leaves. "Panther! Oh, Panther, I didn't think I'd ever see you again!" She kissed him and sniffed his fur, filling up on puppy smell.

"Neither did I," he growled.

"Where's mom and dad? Where's Ed? Are they okay?"

"One question at a time, please. You're making my doggy head spin. Yes, they are okay, and no, unfortunately—"

Lilith gasped. "What happened?"

"Please, kindly let me finish my sentence. Unfortunately, humans are not as swift as whippets. Therefore, your parents and your *friend* are about ten minutes behind me."

"Where?"

"*Behind* me."

"Oh. Good. I was worried. How's everyone else? Anyone injured?"

"Everyone is just fine. Thanks to you, I must say. No casualties except for that poor elephant. The circus people departed already."

Lilith let out a shuddering exhale.

"I see you're engaged in a rather curious conversation with a rather curious piece of talking shrubbery," growled Panther.

"I'm letting this comment pass only out of gratitude to your owner," said the garden coldly.

Panther ignored it. "I hope I'm not interrupting?"

"You? Interrupting? Never," said Lilith. "Panther. Listen to this. You'll never guess what happened. The mansion heads, the bushes, and Rosehead—"

"All merged into an oversized backyard that thinks it has the intelligence of a thousand peacocks. Ed and I have been observing from the tree house."

The garden rustled angrily.

"You *have*?"

"The only bit we missed—one minute your lovely elderly relative of a creep was there, another he vanished?"

"He was swallowed underground. Where Rose Bloom is buried," said Lilith.

"As is every heir's destiny," said the garden. "Ludwig was the first. Nice fellow. He fed me his wife. Not very tasty, I must say; already dead but fresh enough. Her blood woke me up. I let him live a bit longer out of gratitude."

"Oh, how thoroughly revolting," whispered Lilith.

Panther growled conspiratorially. "Astounding. Your *friend* Ed was correct after all. I think it's only appropriate we finish our job here, dear Holmes. That's precisely why I brought you something. Something you dropped? Also, I suggest you don't mention its name, nor the word of the thing it produces, you know? The orange thing? For obvious safety reasons." Panther energetically rolled his eyes as if pointing.

Lilith gazed at him, puzzled.

Panther sulked into the greenery and came back with a torch and a lighter clumped in his teeth. He placed them at Lilith's feet, tail wagging.

"Excellent, my dear Watson," whispered Lilith, her eyes ablaze with mischief. "Simply excellent." She weighed the torch in her hand.

"What is this?" asked the garden suspiciously.

Lilith thought it probably never saw a torch before, not until last night, unless some of her ancestors had tried to set it on fire. She hoped it wouldn't make a connection between a rod wrapped in white sponge and the black burning poles from the circus performance. "It's a...it's a..." She racked her brain.

"A stick for chasing squirrels," supplied Panther.

"Yeah. Squirrels. It's Panther's toy," echoed Lilith.

"There are no—" began the garden.

"Shhhh!" whispered Lilith. "Don't say it. You see, Panther doesn't know. It would make him very upset if—"

"I don't care about your dog!" bristled the garden. Its voice grew into a booming chorus. "You let me go," it roared. "You send me away, and you stay alive." It rushed at Lilith. She raised her arms high, desperately trying to ignite the sponge. Panther yapped at the wriggling mass, to no effect. It circled both of them, tightening. Flowers covered Lilith's face. Petals pried her mouth open, sliding in. Stems circled her neck. Choking, she tried to flick the lighter one more time. The torch sputtered, sizzled, and caught fire.

A hideous cry shook the air. The garden jerked, dousing Lilith in a cloud of sweetness and lessening its hold. She coughed, regaining her breath, and triumphantly poked it with the torch.

"Hot! Hot!" hollered the garden. "Take it away from me! Put it out! Put it out!" Its voice multiplied, screeching. It heaved and slammed down on Lilith, knocking her off her feet and sending Panther flying.

Lilith fell, stubbornly slashing the torch left and right. "Burn!" she screamed, spitting out petals. "Burn, you evil thing! I want you to burn!"

And just like that, as if awaiting her command, the garden caught on fire.

"Panther," croaked Lilith. "Panther?" Soot covered her, smoke filling her nostrils. Engulfed in flames, the garden retreated with a deafening noise, shrieking and squealing. Lilith pulled herself upright. Her eyes watered. She blinked, trying to make out her surroundings.

Behind a veil of smoke, the gloomy shape of the mansion stood out like a white ghost. Lilith stumbled in its direction. "Panther!" she called. "Where are you?"

"Right under your feet. I'd appreciate it if you stepped off my tail, thank you," came from below.

"You're alive!" Lilith bent to pet the whippet.

"No, I'm dead. But I'll live," he purred.

The scent of scorched flesh unspooled around them. "What's that smell?" Lilith coughed.

"I'd be more preoccupied with getting out of here, if I were you,"

yapped Panther. "This way, if you please."

"This is not how burning rosebushes are supposed to smell," said Lilith, dashing after her pet between two walls of blazing inferno. Sweltering heat engulfed her.

The garden fought. It stretched its tentacles at the girl. She beat them with the torch until they crumbled to ash. Her hair flapped around her, threatening to catch fire. She barely noticed, encouraged by Panther's barks and her own wild beating heart. She was alive. She was more than alive; she felt reborn, as if a part of her childhood left her, letting her grow into someone else, into a new Lilith. She let out a cheer of triumph.

They ran and ran, dodging flames, aiming for the mansion. Panther made it first, barking loudly. Lilith, a hand over her eyes, burst after him into the cool air, and bumped into someone. A pair of hands lifted her off the ground. Daniel hugged his daughter, carrying her to the safety of the back porch. "Pup. You're okay. You're alive. You're alive," he kept muttering into her hair.

"Daughter delivered, sir. Safe and sound." Panther wagged his tail, a doggy grin on his muzzle.

"Dad!" Lilith cried. Then her mind processed what she just heard. "Panther?" She looked from one to the other. "You talked?"

"It just so happened that your parents heard me shouting at Rosehead, and, well, you can imagine what happened after. So I thought, since I promised anyway..." He pawed at the ground.

"You're the *noblest*, most *honorable*, most *virtuous* pet I've ever had. I love you," said Lilith.

"What, only three sophisticated words? I thought I deserved more. And you still owe me steak," Panther grumbled.

"What did I tell you?" said Lilith to her dad.

He gently pried the torch out of her clenched hand. "You were right. I'm sorry, pup, so sorry I didn't believe you."

"It's okay. It's fine. Where's mom? Where's Ed?"

"Your mom and Ed are inside. I told them to wait for me," said Daniel. Then, as if suddenly remembering his presence, he leaned toward Panther. "Thank you, buddy. Sorry, it still feels a bit strange to me talking to you."

"No offense taken. It's all perfectly fine," professed Panther, beaming. "I understand."

"Where is everyone else?" asked Lilith.

"In the dinner hall. Still shaken by what happened."

They gazed at the garden. It stopped making noises. Fire consumed it, spreading from the middle outward. An orange glow illuminated the sky, both from the flames and from the first sunrays spilling over the treetops.

Daniel looked at his daughter. "Where is your grandfather?"

She held her breath. Their eyes met. She simply couldn't bring herself to say what happened. A dark shadow passed over Daniel's face. "He's gone, isn't he?" He gently let her out of his hold. "Get inside. I'll be right there." The torch held high, he lurched down the steps to the edge of the silent green mass and slashed at it.

"Burn," he said, his voice thick with grief. "I want you *gone*. I want all of this *gone*." He switched to German, muttering and poking without a real aim.

"Dad," called Lilith. "You don't need to do this. It'll burn on its own. Let's get out of here."

"I concur with what your daughter suggests, if my doggy opinion matters, of course," added Panther.

Daniel didn't hear them, concentrated on his rage, stabbing and slashing. Fire leapt up around him. Lilith had never seen her father in this state.

"Dad!" she called, alarmed. "You need to get out of there! Panther, help me!"

They scurried down. Lilith covered her face, coughing from the smoke. She snatched her father's arm and pulled. Panther yapped. Daniel stubbornly thrust the torch a few more times, and then threw it deeply into the garden. He grabbed Lilith's hand and they rushed to the mansion, Panther ahead of them.

Lilith barely reached the steps when a single bloodcurdling cry tore across the property. She turned to look. Daniel tugged at her, but she couldn't move, enthralled. The flames leaped up and spread from fence to fence like a fiery red flower, issuing clouds of acrid smoke. Everything but the mansion was now aflame.

Suddenly her legs gave out. The emotional aftermath of her tribulations finally caught up with her. Her ears buzzed. She felt her father drag her up the stairs, burst through the doors, and carry her into the dinner hall. He sat her on a chair by the window. She pressed her face to the glass, staring, dimly aware of the people who surrounded her.

"Where did you find her? What happened? Daniel!"

"Pup, you okay?"

"Lilith?"

She didn't get a chance to answer.

One last horrible wail pierced through the turmoil. A colossal smoky rose grew from the middle of the garden. Within seconds, it bloomed and withered. Its petals flew off, dissolving into nothing, until the entire thing was gone. The fire died. Stillness rolled over the property, punctured by the distant cawing of the crows.

Lilith hardly breathed, sensing people all around her.

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 growing business to date

that existed for close to seven hundred years and perished in less than one hour, leaving behind an empty wasteland.

## The Somber Remains

Sunlight spilled across the blackened expanse of what used to be a magnificent garden. Burned stumps covered the ground like bones of a prehistoric beast. There was no more rustling of the leaves, no more nodding of the flowers, only rising trails of smoke, a scorched fence that used to be white, and the dark mass of forest behind it.

Ash seeped into Lilith's nostrils. She sneezed.

There were multiple calls. "*Gesundheit!*"

"Thank you," she said, turning around.

Blank faces greeted her. Her parents stared as if eager to talk, but perhaps not knowing where to start. Ed smiled at her with unmistakable admiration. Panther looked up in a way that could only mean, *okay, we're done here, can we go home now and chase some squirrels?*

There was a collective breath, a brief pause, and an explosion of questions, congratulations, and complaints.

"Lilith, you feeling okay?"

"What on earth was that *thing*?"

"It's burned to the ground!"

"*Mutter!* It was her! It was her who did it!"

"Where iz Alfred? I'd like to tell him what I think about zis unacceptable barbarity."

"Can your dog really talk?"

Voices merged into a gibbering, yammering cacophony.

Lilith sighed. She wanted to squeeze her mother tight, hug her father, kiss Ed, and cuddle with Panther. She wanted to tell them how much she loved them, but it had to wait. She had to make one final speech, to explain everything and to set everyone at ease. After that she could fall apart. She wiggled out of her mother's embrace. "Mom? Dad? I need to do something important."

"What is it?" asked Gabby.

"Mom, sorry, I have to ask Dad something in private. Nothing personal, okay?" She stood on tippy toes, whispering into her father's ear. "Can I tell everyone about Grandfather? And Grandmother? Her phantom said she died from fright, before Rosehead ate her, so it wasn't Grandfather's fault. You wouldn't mind if I told them, would you?"

"Lilith," Gabby began, reaching out with a trembling hand.

"She did?" croaked Daniel, his face white.

"Yes. That's what her phantom said. I want to tell everyone, may I? I think they deserve to know." Lilith caught Ed's eye. He gave her two thumbs up. She winked.

"Lilith," said Gabby again, hesitating.

"It's okay, trust me." Lilith regarded her mother with surprise. Hesitation was never one of her virtues.

Gabby fell quiet.

"Dad, I promise, it's the complete and utter truth," continued Lilith. "I only want to set the record straight and repair my reputation. It's something I need to do as rightful heir to this property. Everything that happens here is now my responsibility. Including the fire."

Daniel took Lilith's hand. "Pup, I'm—I don't know what to say. I had no idea. You know I'm not big on words..." He waved his hand. "Ah, go ahead."

"Thanks. I'm sorry about your dad, and mom, and everything."

"Don't be. Not your fault." He looked out the window, blinking. "You have my support."

"And mine," added Gabby. "For whatever it is you're about to do." She propped up her glasses.

Lilith nodded. With a heavy heart, she faced the crowd. People stopped chatting, as if anticipating her to address them.

"Dearest Bloom family reunion guests," she began, "as you well know by now, I am the new heir to the Bloom property. In light of this fact, I feel that it's my duty to inform you that Alfred Bloom, my grandfather, has been feeding people to the rose garden ever since he inherited this land from his predecessor."

There were gasps and a few cries of anger.

"Please," Lilith said, putting up her hand. "Let me explain. If I may remind you, I've been trying to communicate this fact to you multiple times, yet I have failed miserably. Before you rush to any conclusions, I must stress that it wasn't my grandfather's fault, he merely did what he thought was his job. Eugenia Bloom, my late grandmother and his wife, whom he loved dearly and in whose honor we have gathered here, unfortunately, based on the evidence I have gathered, met the same fate when she got lost in the garden. She was eaten by it; specifically, by the enormous monster you all witnessed killing the elephant. Except my grandmother's death was an accident. She died from fright before the monster found her. My grandfather didn't mean for it to happen. He was devastated when he found out. This is why grandmother's casket was sealed at her funeral; I know many of you wondered about it, including me, albeit, I was hardly three years old back then."

There were shouts now. Hanna Haas translated the speech to her blind mother, who belatedly shrieked "Eugenia!" and fainted.

Lilith raised her voice. "*This* terrible ordeal has been happening from the advent of Rose Bloom's death, whose husband Ludwig Bloom buried her in the garden under a rosebush and inadvertently woke up some malevolent deity that absorbed her remains and has been demanding human sacrifices ever since. We, that is to say, me, Ed, and Panther, who *can* talk, by the way"—Panther scoffed at being named

after Ed and not before—"discovered this fact and tried to put an end to it once and for all. We succeeded, at last, with the help of the loyal Bloom family servants, Gustav, Agatha, Monika, and Bär." There was a satisfied rumble. "I thank them profusely, as they each contributed greatly to our investigation. I must also mention that Jürgen Vogel, Ed's father—"

Lilith paused, watching Ed tug on his hair.

"Had been trying to communicate the truth through his paintings for years. Desperate to escape the horrors of tending to a carnivorous garden, he took his life. I'm truly sorry for your loss." Lilith looked at both Ed and Rosalinde.

Ed studied his shoes. Rosalinde produced a silk handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. There were uneasy murmurs.

Lilith took a deep breath and continued. "That monster's name was Rosehead, after my twenty-times great-grandmother's nickname, naturally. I don't know who called her that for the first time. I suspect it must've been Ludwig who, in his grief, cut a rosebush to his late wife's liking. It's my belief that from that moment on, Rosehead became possessed by an evil garden deity which, most likely, acted as a primary culprit in the murders that have occurred since. This is the explanation behind Bloom & Co.'s success. The roses that my grandfather sold fed on human blood, which explains their extraordinary characteristics."

The room crackled with electricity, all eyes poised on Lilith. Murmurs grew to agitated whispers.

She continued, nonplussed. "I must, regrettably, spoil your mood furthermore. Every Bloom heir's destiny was to eventually perish in the clutches of the garden, including my grandfather. He is no longer with us. I'm very sorry I wasn't able to save his life; I honestly tried. However, the rose garden is dead now, the spirit thing that possessed it has been expelled by fire, and it will trouble us no more."

She took a deep breath, feeling quite proud of herself. People gaped at her, dumbstruck. She misinterpreted their stares. "Yes, it was me who set it on fire. It was the only way."

A swelling silence stretched for several seconds.

Lilith's heart fell. She waited with bated breath. Did they think her a loony once more? Did she manage to fail spectacularly yet again?

"Nice speech, pup, nice speech! You sure can talk, can't you?" Daniel hugged his daughter. "This thing you did..." He shook his head. Gabby fidgeted, opening and closing her mouth without sound.

Lilith blushed. "It wasn't just me, really. If not for Panther's incessant reminders and Ed's generous help...you should see his secret places, Dad! If you hide under his bed, it—" She fell silent, horrorstruck. Panther gave her a warning look.

The stupor left the crowd, replaced with urgency, not so much to grieve, but rather to leave the mansion as soon as possible.

"Good job!" cried Norman Rosenthal over the chatter. He walked

up to Lilith and slapped her shoulder a couple times. "Good job. My condolences. Good riddance, if you ask me." He shook Daniel's hand, Gabby's, and then leaned over Panther. "I say, who cares for flowers? This is where the money is. Talking dogs!" He stretched out his hand to pet him.

"Pardon me, but I'd prefer it if you asked my permission first," snarled Panther.

Norman backed off, dumbstruck.

Next came Sabrina. "Abominable, simply abominable. Words seem inadequate to express my sadness. It was a very brave thing you did, very brave." Red spots crawled up her neck as she attempted to quiet Petra who flung herself at Lilith.

"You burned the monster! You burned it! You burned it!" Petra let go and squeezed Panther, nearly making his eyes pop.

"Sorry for your loss. Better than catching butterflies, though. Setting gardens on fire," said Patrick with shining eyes, edging closer to stroke the whippet.

"Simply heroic. My deepest sympathies," chimed in Hanna Haas, whispering something into her mother's ear, who spread ten spidery fingers to feel Lilith's face.

Next came Rosalinde Vogel, balancing on high heels and expressing her gratitude to Lilith for clearing her late husband's memory. Trude sauntered up and gave advice on how to turn the ruined property into a profitable pig farm, with her talking dog as a shepherd. Bär glowed with pride, as much as you can imagine a mastiff glow. Gustav pledged his servitude to the Bloom family. Agatha's condolences were short and curt. Monika said something quick in German and stuck a bowl of steak right under Panther's nose. Last were the Schlitzberger twins with their omnipresent mother. She nudged both girls forward.

Daphne stumbled, "I'm—we—are saddened to hear about your loss. We are sorry we didn't believe you. *Lilith*." She tried to make a convincing face and elbowed her sister.

"Yes. We are," added Gwen.

"It's okay," said Lilith dismissively. "I understand. I didn't expect you to. Sorry about the elephant joke, and the sucking finger one, and everything."

"It iz okay," said Daphne through gritted teeth.

They scowled at each other.

"Doezn't fit in my head. Alfred. I can't imagine. My heart iz wiz you in zis difficult time." Irma passed a pudgy hand over her brow. "I alwayz said you had a fierce child. I love fierce children. My girls are fierce, look at zem. Zey would've helped, if your daughter only asked zem to. Too bad she didn't. We hope to see you again soon. Good-bye." She scooped her twins and quickly marched them out of the hall to their shrill protests.

Ed shuffled up last in an inconspicuous manner, as if simply passing by, and whispered feverishly, "Thanks. About dad. Did it. Rip him apart? I missed that bit."

Lilith rolled her eyes. "No, it sucked him in like a nasty leech and didn't even burp."

"Bummer." Ed pursed his lips, disappointed.

"Ed, darling." Rosalinde raised her brows.

Ed blushed. "Daniel. Gabby. Lilith. Panther. My condolences." He looked at Lilith. "I want to give you. Something. I will come back. Don't leave." He staggered out behind his step-mother, leaving the little Bloom family alone.

"Lilith," started Gabby. She took off her glasses, cleaned them on the corner of her cardigan, and put them back on. "I—I just wanted to tell you—I've never—your stories were always so...will you ever forgive me?"

"Absolutely and unconditionally," said Lilith, hugging her mother. "Can I make a request though?"

"Of course. Anything you want." Gabby gazed at her daughter, squeezing her hard.

Lilith wondered how long this display of affection would last. "Can you please stop knitting from wool? It stinks," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Oh," said Gabby.

"Actually, yes. Plus one," added Daniel.

"Plus two," came from below.

"Mom, I lost your beret, the new one?" Lilith disentangled from her mother's hold, which by now escalated into the bone-crunching variety.

"Who cares about it!" exclaimed Gabby a trifle too enthusiastically. "I'll knit you ten more. Any color, any shape. Would you prefer orange, like the flames? No? How about pink?" Lilith winced. "All right, purple? With polka dots? Or pompoms?"

"Actually, I don't want any. No more knitted things. No berets. Nothing. Is that okay?" said Lilith quickly.

"At last," grumbled Panther with a sigh.

A look of utter disappointment flashed across Gabby's face. She glanced at her husband, who shrugged. Gabby's lower lip trembled.

"All right. If that's what you want..."

"Wool stinks of sheep piss, in my opinion," growled Panther.

"Who would've thought?" said Daniel incredulously, kneeling. "The runt of the litter. I still can't get used to you talking, buddy."

Lilith was very tempted to say, *I told you so*.

"It's the small things that make the biggest difference." Panther thrust out his chest and received Daniel's affection with proud purring. "Incidentally, I can also speak German."

Daniel's jaw dropped open.

"You won't parade me in a freak dog show, will you?" added Panther hastily.

"Never," said Daniel.

They launched into a dog conversation. Panther professed his opinion on whippet breeds and how it related to successful racing. Daniel listened with avid interest, occasionally supplying a comment or two.

Gabby pulled her daughter aside. "Lilith," she began, studying her hands, callused from constantly knitting. "I have a confession to make."

"Sure," said Lilith, uncertainly.

Gabby propped up her glasses, fixed a knitting needle behind her ear, and propped up her glasses again. Her hands shook. "I was like you when I was your age," she said quickly. "Same diagnosis. I also felt buildings move."

"You *did*?" gasped Lilith, unable to believe her ears. Her mother, so prim and proper, so obsessed with pills and doctors. It simply didn't fit.

"Yes," continued Gabby. "It drove me crazy. My mom—your grandmother—didn't believe in drugs. She told me I'd grow out of it. I hated her. I wanted a pill that would stop my head from spinning. I was bullied, laughed at...you know what my nickname was?"

Lilith slowly shook her head.

"*Loony.*"

Lilith's knees buckled. "And you *never* told me? You never even mentioned—"

"I'm so sorry. I wanted to protect you, make sure you had the best doctors, the best medical care."

"Oh, Mom!" Lilith opened her arms. They hugged. Then they hugged some more.

Finally, Daniel cleared his throat. "Love, I hate to interrupt, but we need to pack. Our flight is in four hours."

"What?" said Lilith. "What about the garden? The property?"

"I don't think any of us would want to grow any more roses, do you?" said Daniel bitterly.

"I certainly don't think I'll ever knit another rose motif in my *life*," said Gabby, straightening.

"I don't expect you'll want to come back. I'll get you guys on the plane, stay here for the funeral arrangements, and catch a plane home later. Unless you want to stay for the funeral?"

"No!" yelled Lilith suddenly. "I mean, yes. I mean, no, I don't want to go back! Yes, I want to stay—I want to live *here*!"

"You want to *live* here?" Daniel and Gabby said in unison.

"Astounding. Most curious turn of events," commented Panther.

"Yes. I'm still heir to the Bloom property, am I not?" said Lilith hotly.

"Yes. You are. With us as legal guardians, of course," confirmed Daniel.

"So I still have a say in what becomes of it, don't I?"

"Of course." Daniel blinked, staring at Gabby. She shrugged, which was highly uncharacteristic of her.

"Well then, *I think...*" Lilith paused dramatically, then winking at Panther who raised one ear in wonder. "*I think it would make for,*" she wanted to say *exceptional, spiffing, splendid, marvelous, spectacular, breathtaking*, then decided perhaps she ought to let go of this habit of trying to impress people. It sounded immature. She cleared her throat. "It would make for a first-rate whippet race field. What do you say?"

A look of bemusement and then delight stole over her father, bringing color to his cheeks. "A whippet race field?"

"Yes. Panther & Co."

"It's what you always wanted, isn't it?" said Gabby to Daniel. His face broadened in a smile.

Panther barked and jumped, behaving like a proper dog for once. "May I put in a request? May I? May I? Squirrels? Will there be squirrels?" He wagged his tail furiously.

"Ed can draw a sign for it," Lilith said.

"Could he?" said Daniel enthusiastically.

"Yes. He's good at drawing. Mom, are you okay?"

Gabby conspicuously dabbed at her eyes. "Why? Oh, yes, I'm fine. I'm—Lilith, you don't have to see Dr. Crawford anymore or take the pills, if you don't want to." She blew her nose.

"Really?" Lilith felt warmth spread through her chest and, a second later, an intent stare on her back. She wheeled around. Ed leaned in the doorway, hiding something behind his back.

"Can I have a word. With Lilith. Alone?" he stuttered, stepping from one foot to another.

"I think I have a pretty good idea about what kind of word that might be," growled Panther.

"Of course!" exclaimed Gabby, a bit too loudly. She seemed to be fluctuating between her old self, the stern and controlling mother, and the new over-permissive one, both of which she enacted to an extreme. Lilith certainly preferred the old manner as she knew how to deal with it. The new one nearly made her jump.

"Ah. A word?" said Daniel, scooping up a grumbling Panther. "Sure, sure, I don't see why not. Don't be too long. She needs to pack." With that, they all exited, leaving the girl and the boy alone.

## Chapter 36

# The Glorious Departure

Lilith suddenly became very interested in her dirty nails. Then she brushed her cardigan and twiddled one of its buttons. Ed's hand stopped hers and withdrew swiftly. They looked at each other, neither risking being the first to talk. Shadows crept across the muddy floor. It was a fine summer morning, the first day of July, and nothing indicated the catastrophe from the previous night except the smoky odor lingering in the corners.

Ed flattened his hair. "This is. For you." He handed Lilith a piece of paper.

Her mouth hung open involuntarily. It was an almost photographically accurate pencil drawing of her standing in the garden, complete with a beret, Panther tucked in her arms, and a bag slung over her shoulder. A signature at the bottom said, *To Lilith Bloom, from Ed Vogel.*

"Wow. Thank you," whispered Lilith. "This is amazing. Nobody ever drew a portrait of me before."

"I can do more. If you want," said Ed, taking a deep breath.

Lilith energetically nodded. "Yes, please!"

"I think," said Ed thickly, his face turning a deep magenta. He dropped his gaze. "I think I love you."

"Oh," said Lilith. Everything inside her shrunk, and then expanded, pulsing at an alarming speed. She thought her face would melt off if she didn't immediately stick it in the freezer. "Oh," she said again, feeling her cheeks. Her heart fluttered. "I think..." She bit her lip and grabbed the sides of her dress skirt, for something to hold on to. She told Ed she loved him before, albeit in passing and in a rush. Somehow this felt different, *this* felt proper, and it gave her the fright of a lifetime. "I think...I love you. Too." She didn't mean it to be funny, but it mimicked Ed's way of talking so well that they both broke into laughter.

Lilith bent over. Ed followed suit. Their heads bumped. They caught each other, gasping. There was a dazed pause, and the next moment they kissed, clumsily at first, then more confident, assuming a passionate stance they picked up, no doubt, from watching movies.

Alas, their bliss didn't last long.

"Awww...*guck mal!* Little Lily found little Eddy." Clutching a stuffed elephant and dragging a bulging suitcase behind her, Daphne stalked in, her blond hair tucked into pigtails, her face purple with envy.

"*Mutter* iz calling!" hissed Gwen, but Daphne appeared to be in a stupor and wouldn't move.

Ed and Lilith jumped apart as if stung. Lilith, flushed from embarrassment, took a breath to retort, and suddenly stopped. She peered at Ed. He noticed it too.

A tear rolled down Daphne's cheek. "And little Daphne," she sniffled, ignoring Gwen's horrified protests, "haz only little *Moppel*. Ahhhh!" She broke into a wail and buried her face in the elephant. It absorbed the moisture quite stoically, gazing into nothing with its plastic eyes.

Lilith looked at Ed. He nodded, understanding her without words. On an impulse of overwhelming happiness, she rushed to sobbing Daphne, flung her arms around her, and kissed her plump cheek.

"Not true. You have me. I'm your cousin. I'm coming back to live here. We can hang out together or something, if you want." She let go.

Daphne stood thunderstruck, blinking rapidly.

Lilith decided to try another angle. "Um, your eyes are a beautiful color," she said kindly. "Both of yours. It's the color of...*lila*. Is that how you say lavender in German? I never noticed before."

Daphne stared, her mouth quivering, her sister equally mortified next to her.

Ed shuffled up, one hand in his pocket, another absently ruffling his hair. The twins eyed him with a mixture of loathing and awe, because he was just one of those boys who didn't realize how much his appearance and cookie smell were attractive to girls.

"Hallo, Daphne. Hallo, Gwen. I didn't mean that. Balloon drawing," he said. "I mean. I did a bit. Dunno why. But I don't. Anymore. If I kiss you, will you forgive me?" He planted two quick pecks on both of their cheeks, causing them to turn from purple to that deep shade of mauve that borders on the possibility of explosion from embarrassment.

Ed looked at Lilith for approval. She beamed.

"You—you didn't—you—" Daphne sputtered.

"He iz making fun of us!" shrieked Gwen.

Daphne pummeled Ed with her toy, bellowing. Gwen dropped her suitcase and joined the battle. Ed shielded his face. First shock then amusement stole over his features, because none of the blows hurt him one bit.

"What iz going on?" Irma Schlitzberger's ponderous figure stomped into the hall. She loomed over her girls, turning them around to face her. "What have zese children done to you?"

"We. Um," began Ed.

"Kissed them good-bye," offered Lilith, making her best innocent face.

"A boy? *Kissed* them?" Irma's chest rose and fell like a mountain of fleshy rage. "I cannot tolerate this! I won't! Out you go! Out! *Out!*" She rounded her daughters and pushed them out of the mansion, slamming the front door.

"What was that about?" asked Lilith.

"She won't let them. Hang out with boys. Only with stuffed elephants." Ed comically raised an arm to his face and stomped around, issuing a series of trumpeting noises. Giggling, Lilith joined him, spinning around like a ballerina. Panther ran into the hall, barking brightly.

And so they danced in kind of a frenzied higgledy-piggledy jumble, a twelve-year-old girl who only felt still when she was moving and who could smell things other people couldn't, a fourteen-year-old boy who found his voice again and who could draw with photographic precision, and a dog who was a talking cat in a dog's body with an unrivaled passion for steak, rosy jackets, and squirrels.

"Little miss? Breakfast before departure?" Agatha appeared with a tray of waffles, Monika behind her, a pitcher of water in her hands.

A chill crept into Lilith's stomach. She thrust the portrait at Ed, darted, and grabbed the pitcher out of Monika's hands. "Sorry," she told her friends, and took off.

"Wait!" Panther ran after her.

"Your portrait!" called Ed.

Lilith jumped two steps at a time, splashing herself, until she made it to the second floor. She poured out the water and placed the empty pitcher on the floor, watching the puddle. It slowly spread across the marble like any self-respecting puddle ought to do. Satisfied, Lilith sprinted up another staircase to the third floor. Here, she methodically flung open every door, noticing with astonishment that each had a doorknob, unlocked.

The rooms were empty. Nothing moved or breathed, and the gallery of paintings at the end of the corridor...Lilith stepped in and squinted. None of the portraits shifted or winked at her or moved, hanging dusty and forlorn. On the pedestal in the middle stood a stone vase with a carved marble rose inside. That was new.

Lilith touched it. "Rosehead," she whispered. "It was always meant for you, wasn't it?" It passed a slight tremor, or maybe Lilith imagined it. She tore her fingers away, then touched it again, but it stood still. She turned around.

Ed and Panther panted in the doorway.

"You don't like. To wait," said Ed.

"Waiting has never been her strong suit," growled Panther.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies," said Lilith. "I had to make sure that the mansion was completely and utterly lifeless."

"Let's. Air it out." Ed walked up to the window and threw it open. Lilith picked up the idea gleefully. They proceeded to open windows in each room, letting in the sun and chasing out the decay, until they stumbled upon the last staircase. It led to the tower. Ed and Panther paused, but Lilith sprinted up without hesitation, fighting her horror with

action.

"It's gone!" she cried from above.

"What's gone?" Ed followed her.

"Grandfather's study. It turned into a balcony!"

"A sewer would be more appropriate," Panther yapped, jumping up the steps with his tail curled.

They walked out onto a flat circular terrace surrounded by a balustrade, blue sky over their heads.

"Did it just disappear? Just like that?" said Lilith.

"Look!" Ed pointed.

They peered over the railing.

In the middle of the motor court a police car flashed its lights. Next to it stood a fire truck and a black van. A couple uniformed men gathered the remains of the elephant into huge plastic bags. A policeman chatted to Lilith's parents and Ed's step-mother, as another policeman walked around with a sniffing German shepherd.

"I would imagine that hairy sheep-herder is looking for your grandfather's—forgive me for saying this—*bones*," growled Panther.

"That brute never had. A single bone. In his body," stuttered Ed. "He was made of. Spoiled pudding."

Lilith stood quietly. "I want to see the place. To make sure I didn't imagine it." She spun around and sped down the stairs.

"See *what*?" said Ed. "I hate it. When she does this."

"Join the club," grumbled Panther.

They followed Lilith, who by now ran out into the charred expanse behind the mansion, sprinting fast to the spot where Alfred vanished. Everything looked the same uniform black. It took her a while to reach the opposite fence. Here she stopped, frantically looking around. Miraculously, none of the forest trees were touched by the fire, gazing solemnly at her from their height. She spotted the large gnarly oak with the tree house still intact in its branches.

Ed and Panther caught up to her.

Lilith carefully stepped between crumbling twigs, her legs covered in soot. The ground was littered with scorched leaves and other debris that issued clouds of dust when touched.

"Nothing," she said, disappointed. "So it did suck him into the ground. For good, I hope."

"What did you expect to find, his skull?" growled Panther.

Ed touched her hand. "Your parents. Want you."

Gabby and Daniel waved at them from the back porch.

With a sigh, Lilith took one last look. "Good-bye, Opa. Good-bye, Rosehead. Good-bye, phantoms. Good-bye every Bloom heir who perished here. Good-bye garden spirit, whoever you are. I apologize for setting you on fire, but I had to. I hope you rest in peace."

"That brought a tear to my eye," whimpered Panther.

"You're good at. Talking," said Ed, impressed.

"Oh, stop it. Both of you," said Lilith, embarrassed. "Let's get out of here."

And so they took off, arriving in front of the mansion just in time to see the black van, the fire truck, and the police car leaving. Daniel stashed their luggage into the rental sedan. Gabby chatted with Rosalinde and the servants. Panther galloped up to Bär, seated by Gustav's leg. They were immediately engrossed in a doggy conversation.

"Why did you have to go there, *missy*?" Gabby said with disapproval. "Look at you, you're covered in soot. I packed your things, so now there is nothing for you to change into, and you're going to dirty the car." She propped her arms on her hips, glaring.

"Oh. Sorry," said Lilith, brushing herself off as best as she could. Her mother's tone of voice was a welcome comeback to that familiar upset manner she always used on her daughter. "Wait, we're leaving *now*?"

"Do you want to be late for our flight?" parried Gabby.

"No," said Lilith. "I thought we were staying. I thought—"

"The tickets have already been paid for. It's enough that we're losing your father's fare. We'll go home, take care of things, and come back. Go say good-bye and get in. I don't want to hear any lip." She waved to the car and stalked off to help her husband.

"How splendid. We're back to normal," said Lilith under her breath.

Ed produced the paper from his pocket. "You forgot."

"My portrait!" cried Lilith, smoothing it. She leaned to kiss him and stopped midway, aware of the looks. They resorted to touching hands.

"Pup, we have to go. I don't want you guys to be late." Daniel opened the driver's door, waiting.

"I forgot something! I'll be quick!" Lilith jogged up the stairs to Monika. She had to set the record straight. "Excuse me, Monika. Number one, I wanted to thank you for all the steak you fed to my friend. Number two, I wanted to communicate to you that Panther is not a girl, he's boy, okay? A boy. Not a princess."

Monika ogled her with large eyes, and then broke into a dazzling smile. "*Ja! Ja! Mein kleiner Prinz!*" She scooped up an unsuspecting Panther, interrupting his conversation with Bär, and covered him with smooches. He licked her cheek, throwing a sly stare at Lilith.

She rolled her eyes. "You're impossible, you know that?"

Ed tapped her on the shoulder. "I think. They want you to go. Now." He gestured with such ferocity, his feet slipped down the steps and he nearly fell.

Gabby and Daniel beckoned from the car, urging Lilith to get in. "Just a minute!" She looked at Ed. "I'll miss you," she said, and added, "*excruciatingly*." *Just one word*, she thought. *Hey, I only said one word!*

"Likewise," Ed answered laconically, enacting a whole bouquet of

emotions with his arms.

"We'll see you soon, darling." Rosalinde tugged on Ed's shirt. He shuffled over.

"Little miss." Agatha nodded. Gustav bent, acquiring his typical servile posture.

"*Tschüss, mein kleiner Prinz!*" Monika kissed Panther one more time and lowered him to the ground. He galloped after Lilith, who already made it to the car.

"I'll be back soon! Bye!" She waved, opened the passenger door, and hopped in. Panther jumped in after her, sneezing and grumbling at Lilith. "All this ash will positively give me an allergic reaction. You're one filthy girl, you know that?"

"Exactly my sentiment," echoed Gabby sternly. "You know, I'm starting to like this whole talking dog idea."

Panther didn't answer, still miffed at the coldness between them, but Lilith noticed him hiding a satisfied smirk.

"Whatever," she scoffed, brushing her dress that hardly resembled the festive number she put on the day before.

"And, we're off to the races, my puppies." Daniel started the car.

"We're coming back, aren't we?" asked Lilith.

"Yes, we are. I told you. We need to take care of a few things at home first," said Gabby, pulling out her knitting.

"Like, special-ordering fat juicy American squirrels and transporting them here?" said Panther.

"Um. Is that wool?" asked Lilith timidly.

"What will I tell my client?" exploded Gabby. "I'm sorry, but my daughter doesn't like the smell of wool? I can't simply leave this sweater unfinished, I've already started!"

The car filled with thick silence.

Daniel gave her the look. "You okay, love?"

"I'm sorry," Gabby mumbled to her daughter. "Sorry, baby. It's a lack of sleep and—I haven't forgotten. Of course I'll switch to cotton after this." Trying on the new nice personality certainly gave her trouble, but she managed a smile nonetheless.

Daniel reached out and squeezed her hand. She didn't yell at him like she usually did, but squeezed it back, a guilty look on her face, like that of a squirrel that's been caught stealing food.

Lilith glanced at Panther, but her pet, upset by the lack of response to his request, yawned several times in an exaggerated manner and covered his nose with both paws. "You still owe me steak," he grumbled. "And the jacket. And—"

"I know, I know. Once we get home," said Lilith, turning around and waving. Ed waved back so enthusiastically, he managed to slap Gustav.

"I'm glad you have a...*boyfriend*," Gabby told her daughter in an

effort to smooth things over. "At least something good happened out of this disaster of a trip."

"Disaster for sure," Daniel sighed, shifting speeds. They passed the front gate and rolled out onto Rose Street, *Rosenstrasse* in German.

Lilith raised a brow. "Mom, he's just a *friend*."

"Of course. Just a friend." Her parents exchanged a glance.

"Here is your bag. I packed your things." Gabby handed the bag to Lilith.

"Thanks, Mom! You're the best."

Gabby smiled.

By sheer habit, Lilith pulled out *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and cracked it open, pointing to a random spot. "*Learn then from this story not to fear the fruits of the past,*" she read soundlessly, "*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.*"

"They won't. Not anymore," she whispered, rolling down the window. Warm wind washed over her face, bringing with it the faint smell of smoke and not a whiff of the stink.

It was gone.

Lilith let out a sigh of relief.

They were leaving *Rosenstrasse*. At the end of it, surrounded by burned landscape, the forlorn shape of the mansion stood out like a sore thumb, ghostly white in the sun. The forest rippled behind it. A lone crow flew by, screeching. Lilith frowned. She had a peculiar feeling that something, somewhere, stirred. But it couldn't have; it died. She shook her head, chasing the premonition away, and closed her eyes, letting the car's movement lull her to sleep.

At this precise moment, in the back of the scorched wasteland that used to be a magnificent rose garden, on the spot where Alfred Bloom vanished, a tiny sapling shot from beneath the ground, growing quickly—one line of green against the expanse of black. It looked like it might grow into some type of a bush, or maybe into a tree, or maybe, just *maybe*, into something else entirely.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ksenia was born in Moscow, Russia, and came to US in 1998 not knowing English, having studied architecture and not dreaming that one day she'd be writing. *Siren Suicides*, an urban fantasy set in Seattle, was her first novel, in three parts; *Rosehead* is her second novel. She lives in Seattle with her boyfriend and their combined three kids in a house that they like to call The Loony Bin.

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*Blue Sparrow: Tweets on Writing, Reading, and Other Creative Nonsense*

*Siren Suicides*  
*I Chose to Die*  
*My Sisters in Death*  
*The Afterlife*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Rosehead* was expertly edited by Colleen M. Albert, The Grammar Babe. Final formatting was completed by Stuart Whitmore of Crenel Publishing. Text is in Libre Baskerville. Final digital assembly of the print edition was completed using LibreOffice and Adobe Acrobat. The electronic edition was mastered in ePUB format using Sigil.