

LITTLE TULIP ORPHANAGE, AMSTERDAM, 1880

Little Tulip Orphanage

Rules of Baby Abandonment

RULE ONE: The baby should be wrapped in a cotton blanket.

RULE TWO: The baby should be placed in a wicker basket.

RULE THREE: The baby should be deposited on the topmost step.

In all the years that Elinora Gassbeek had been matron of the Little Tulip Orphanage, not once had the Rules of Baby Abandonment been broken. Until the summer of 1880. Five babies were abandoned at the Little Tulip in the months that followed and, despite the rules being clearly displayed on the orphanage's front door, not one of these babies was abandoned *sensibly*.

The first baby arrived on a bright morning at the end of August, as dew glistened on the city's cobblestone streets.

Swaddled in a pink cotton blanket, and placed on the appropriate step, was a baby with cocoa-bean eyes and blonde fuzz on its head. However, the way in which Rule Two had been disregarded left no room for forgiveness. The child was snuggled inside a tin toolbox, which had been wrapped with emerald green ribbon, as if it were a present.

'Ugh!' Elinora Gassbeek squawked, looking down at the toolbox-baby in disgust. She signalled a nearby orphan to retrieve it. 'Put it upstairs.'

The orphan nodded. 'What name shall I put on the cot, Matron?'

The matron curled her lip. Naming children was tedious, but necessary.

'She's got a lotta fingers, Matron!'

The baby was sucking its thumb, making loud slurping noises that sent ants crawling up the matron's spine. She counted the child's fingers. Sure enough, it had an extra digit on each hand.

'Name it . . . Lotta.'

The second baby arrived on a blustery evening in September, as a mischievous wind rattled the orphanage's many wooden shutters.

An orphan walked into the dining hall, cradling a coal bucket as if it were a bouquet of flowers. Something was

whimpering inside the bucket. Peering in, the matron was displeased to find a raven-haired infant, wrapped in a soot-stained shawl, blinking up at her.

'Poor thing was abandoned beside the coal bunker,' the orphan said.

'Disgraceful!' Gassbeek screeched, referring to the breaking of Rule Two *and* Rule Three. 'Take it away.'

'A name for him, Matron?' the orphan asked nervously.

Elinora Gassbeek took another reluctant look at the coal-bucket baby, its charcoal-blackened nose and the shabby shawl that was wrapped snuggly round it. The cotton shawl looked like it had, possibly, been brightly coloured once. Now, however, it was a mottled shade of grey, with a barely discernible pattern of darker grey ovals. *Like rotten eggs*, the matron thought.

'Name it . . . Egbert.'

The third baby arrived on an unusually warm afternoon in October, as ladies with parasols paraded up and down the sun-warmed street.

Sitting on a bench outside, in her finest puffed-sleeve dress, Elinora Gassbeek opened her picnic hamper and was horrified to find a wriggling baby wedged in among the cheese sandwiches and almond cake. It had a shock of curly red hair and was babbling incessantly.

No cotton blanket. No wicker basket. Not on the topmost step.

The matron screeched shrill and loud like a boiling kettle. The picnic-hamper baby immediately fell silent, its eyebrows squeezing together in a frightened frown. Up and down the street, curious faces appeared in the windows of the tall, narrow brick houses and the strolling ladies came to a halt. Elinora Gassbeek gathered her wits and plastered on a smile for her neighbours. An orphan wove through the throng towards her.

'She wasn't in there a minute ago,' the girl insisted, picking the baby up delicately.

'Take it away,' Elinora Gassbeek said through gritted teeth.

'Yes, Matron. But . . . a name?'

The orphan rocked the now-silent baby, gently brushing fennel seeds from its hair. The matron shuddered.

'Name it . . . Fenna.'

The fourth baby arrived on a gloomy morning in November, as a blanket of fog curled over the canal behind the orphanage.

The delivery bell on the second floor jangled, rung from a boat on the canal below. Using the pulley system attached outside the window, an orphan hoisted the bucket winch up. As it emerged from the fog, Elinora Gassbeek's left eye began

to twitch. Inside the bucket was a baby wearing a wheat sack and a sad frown. Two holes had been cut in the bottom of the sack to allow its unusually long legs to poke through.

The matron hauled the wheat-sack child inside, cursing the madness that had befallen her orphanage.

'Put some clothes on it,' she cawed to the orphan hovering beside her.

She looked at the baby's wonky ears, its gangly limbs and the wheat-coloured hair that stuck out from its head at the unruliest of angles. Printed on the wheat sack were the words: SEMOLINA FLOUR. The matron groaned.

'Name it . . . Sem.'

The fifth and final baby arrived under a full moon in December, as the constellations shone brightly above Amsterdam's skyline.

Elinora Gassbeek had sent an orphan out on to the Little Tulip's roof to investigate a strange noise. Wedged behind the chimney stack, inside a coffin-shaped basket, was a baby, cooing contentedly up at the starry night sky. It had hair as dark as midnight and eyes that were almost black.

Gingerly, the orphan brought the coffin-basket baby inside, where it immediately began to wail. Careful not to touch the infant, the matron reached down and pulled a toy

from its clutches: a cat puppet made from the softest Amsterdam cotton and dressed in fine Lyonnais silk. A faint ticking noise emanated from the toy, but the matron was tutting too loudly to hear it.

'Ridiculous!'

She tossed the puppet back in the basket, on top of the black velvet blanket in which the baby was swaddled. On the corner of the blanket, embroidered in white thread, was a name:

Milou.



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LITTLE TULIP ORPHANAGE, AMSTERDAM, JANUARY 1892

The Little Tulip Orphanage was an unusually tall house, wedged in the middle of a long row of unusually tall houses. In the small window of the very top floor, a girl with unusually dark eyes gazed down at the frozen canal below.

Milou tracked the falling snow as it settled over the ornate rooftops like a layer of cake icing. Crowds were gathering on the ice below, their pink-nosed faces beaming. Bicycles had been swapped for toboggans, clogs for skates, and cries of delight mingled with the neighing of carthorses.

The view became steadily more blurred as Milou's breath misted up the cold window and, with a final heavy sigh, she turned away. As she did so, a frozen piece of peeling paint

on the wall beside her fell to the floor with a *clink*. Even the dormitory's floorboards were covered in a thin layer of frost, and Milou's eyeballs were so cold that it hurt to blink. The small fireplace on the adjacent wall was empty and dark, as always.

'Frozen orphan,' Milou said to the red-haired girl sitting on the bed opposite her. 'Sounds like some sort of fancy dessert, don't you think, Fen? I wonder if that's Matron's new plan: if she can't market us as potential sons and daughters, perhaps she hopes to sell us as ice cream.'

Fenna grimaced and rolled her eyes, then went back to feeding stale crumbs to a small grey rat nestled in her lap.

Milou scrunched up her nose and pushed her mouth into a pinched pout. 'Iced orphan!' she cawed, in a perfect copy of Matron Gassbeek's squawking tone. 'Come and get your iced orphan! Best iced orphan in all of Holland! Only five cents a scoop!'

Fenna relaxed her furrowed brow and the corners of her mouth twitched. Milou felt a twinge of satisfaction that warmed her gently from inside.

'We'd better hurry,' she said, turning serious. She rubbed a circle on the window and squinted at the clock tower at the other end of the road. It's only four more minutes until laundry inspection; Gassbeek will pull out our arm hairs if we're late again –'

A prickling shiver started at the tips of Milou's ears and ran down the back of her neck. It was not a shiver of cold, but a shiver of *warning*.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. The girls shared a panicked look. Milou jumped down from the windowsill. Fenna rolled backwards over the bed, the rat clutched to her chest. As Milou grabbed an armful of laundry from the end of a bed, Fenna hid the rat in her picnic basket, a mere moment before the dormitory door burst open.

A boy's head appeared in the doorway with two oddly proportioned ears and a straggly tuft of blond hair. A gangly, spidery-limbed body followed immediately.

'There you are!' he said breathlessly, his long fingers fiddling with the hem of his grease-stained shirt.

'Oh, Sem, it's only you.' Milou breathed a sigh of relief. 'What is it?'

Sem grinned lopsidedly. 'We have *visitors*.'

He spoke with such breathless hope, a ghost-like fluttering started in Milou's belly. There was only ever one kind of visitor that could make Sem so eager.

Adopters.

'Visitors,' Milou repeated. Fenna gave a tiny gasp.

It had been months since anyone had come to the Little Tulip to look for orphans. What if today was the day? What if her parents had finally returned for her? She couldn't

remember them, of course, but she had theories. An entire Book of Theories, in fact, which at that moment was tucked into the left sleeve of her smock. In all of them, her parents were clever and brave. In all but one, they were desperately making their way back to her. Perhaps, after twelve long years, they'd finally succeeded.

'Milou,' Sem urged. 'We need to hurry.'

'Just a moment.'

She clambered over three beds to get to the one she shared with Fenna and Lotta, reaching under the bed to pull out her coffin-basket. It was always packed and ready, just in case. Inside, on top of everything, was her cat puppet. Milou ran a finger over its foot, where the words *Bram Poppenmaker*, *Puppeteer* were written in swirling red letters. The puppet was cradling a lock of red, curly hair, which had been tied with an emerald green bow. Milou put it to one side and reached into the basket to move two pieces of paper: a charcoal portrait of herself and a poster advertising the famous Parisian circus troupe Cirque de Lumière. Tucked beneath these treasures was a neatly folded bundle of fine black Amsterdam velvet.

Sem sat on the bed beside her, his legs tucked up under his chin. 'Milou –'

'Just one minute.'

He gave her that look again; the one she knew said he thought she was silly for holding on to the hope that her parents would come back for her. He'd never felt like that: he'd only ever shown disdain for his birth parents. Milou reckoned that if *she'd* been abandoned in nothing but a wheat sack she might have felt the same way. Sem didn't understand that she just *knew* she'd find her family one day.

It was a question of *when*, not if.

Milou slipped the black velvet dress over the stained cotton one she was wearing. If it *was* her real parents arriving, they should recognize her old baby blanket. It was rather snug; Sem had taken it out as much as he could over the years and soon the dress would not fit at all.

Sem looked at her outfit with a frown, then carefully adjusted the collar. Milou repacked her basket and grabbed her cat puppet, holding it over her thumping heart. When she'd been much younger, she'd been certain the puppet had a heartbeat of its own. It had soothed her through many cold, sleepless nights until, several years ago, it stopped and Milou realized that she'd likely imagined it all along.

Perhaps the cold, sleepless nights would finally end now. Perhaps today would be the day she finally left this place.

'Perhaps we should hurry?' Sem said impatiently, walking towards the door with Fenna.

Milou followed them. Their dormitory was on the fourth floor of the old, narrow canal house – a building mostly constructed of deep shadows and loose floorboards, and barely held together by peeling paint. They stomped down the treacherously steep staircases, past the mending room on the third floor, the laundry room on the second and the schoolroom on the first. Sem practically flew ahead of her, hopping down three steps at a time. Fenna seemed to glide, her feet as silent as they were nimble.

The ground floor was the only part of the orphanage that didn't look as if a mere sneeze would demolish it. In the main foyer, the marble floor was polished to a shine, the walls were painted a charming shade of violet, and a tall grandfather clock *ticked* and *tocked* in the corner. A motley collection of children were arranging themselves in a line against one wall: youngest at one end, older ones at the other. They were all frantically trying to make themselves presentable: rubbing at grease stains, tucking in shirts, adjusting petticoats, pulling up socks. But there was no disguising what they really were: scruffy, hungry, *desperate* orphans.

Sem and Fenna slipped into the line as three small brown rats darted across the marble floor in different directions. A girl with a waistcoat over her blue cotton dress was

scrubbing at a raven-haired boy's fingers. She shot Milou a worried look.

'What took you so long?' Lotta asked, then noticed Milou's dress and the cat puppet in her arms. 'Never mind. Quick, help me get this charcoal off Egg's hands.'

Milou took Egg's other hand and began rubbing at it with the inside of her sleeve. The charcoal smeared, leaving his hands an interesting shade of grey.

'Gassbeek wanted another portrait,' Egg said, his voice full of worry as he peeled his hands from theirs and carefully adjusted the soot-stained shawl that hung round his neck. 'I didn't have time to wash.'

'Don't worry,' Milou said. 'It's just –'

The prickling shiver started at the tips of her ears again. The sensation intensified until it felt as if a thousand needles were jabbing at her earlobes. Milou pulled Lotta by the arm and shoved her in line beside Sem. She had just positioned herself next to Lotta when a familiar sound echoed out from the hallway leading to the Forbidden Quarters.

Click-clack-click-clack.

All twenty-eight children straightened as if pulled by invisible strings.

Click-clack-click-clack.

Twenty-eight staccato breaths were sucked in in quick succession.

Click-clack-click-clack.

Twenty-seven sets of wide eyes stared fixedly at the opposite wall. Milou peered through lowered lashes at the darkened hallway to her left.

Click-clack-click-clack.

Matron Gassbeek's boots emerged a moment before the rest of her: twin points of polished, blood-red leather, with low, pointed heels that were just as sharp as the expression on the matron's face when the rest of her appeared.

Every monster that Milou had made up for her bedtime stories was based in some way on Gassbeek: the brutal sneer of a gargoyle, the soulless eyes of a werewolf, the skin-itching screech of a banshee. If the matron hadn't been so filled with hatred and menace, she would probably have looked like any other middle-aged woman, but her vileness had transformed her features into something monstrous.

Gassbeek walked agonizingly slowly up and down the line, sneering with every *click* and scowling with every *clack*. Milou kept her eyes lowered and her spine straight, her shoulders not too low, but neither scrunched up to her still-tingling ears. Finally, the matron clucked her tongue in disapproval and stamped one boot.

CLACK!

All twenty-eight children flinched.

The doorbell *dinged* and then *donged*.

'Our guests are here, so do *not* disappoint me,' the matron cawed, already looking thoroughly disappointed in every single one of them.

Gassbeek *click-clacked* to the front door, paused to pat her tightly coiled hair and stretched her mouth into a hideous smile.

The door swung open and snow swirled in. Milou couldn't help herself. She leaned forward from her spot at the far end of the line as the adopters stepped over the threshold: two dark silhouettes in the midst of a snow cloud. Milou squeezed the cat puppet to her chest, right up against her jittery heart. Her ears tingled again; her breathing grew shallow.

The door slammed shut and the snow dropped to the floor, revealing two tall figures in black cloaks with hoods drawn over their heads. Even from the other side of the hall, Milou could see their cloaks were made of Amsterdam velvet; the subtle shimmer was unmistakable.

Her fingers sought the little label on the cat puppet's foot. Could this be Bram Poppenmaker? Had he brought her mother, too? She knew without doubt she would recognize them. They would look like her. *Different.*

As the adopters reached for their hoods, Milou felt as if she had an entire graveyard of ghosts fluttering around in her stomach. But it was not midnight-dark hair and almost

black eyes that emerged from those hoods. The ghosts in Milou's belly turned into solid, heavy tombstones.

Two heads of honey-blond hair.

Two pairs of ice-blue eyes.

Two *disgustingly* cheerful smiles.