

## 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.

**I**n 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 left 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 snugly 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

## *Hana Tooke*

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.*



## LITTLE TULIP ORPHANAGE, AMSTERDAM, JANUARY 1892

**T**he 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 –'

## The UNADOPTABLES

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 left 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 sleeve. 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 shirt.’

Milou took Egbert's other sleeve and began rubbing at it with the inside of her sleeve. The charcoal smeared, leaving his shirt-cuff an interesting shade of grey.

‘Gassbeek wanted another portrait,’ Egbert 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.

‘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 couple 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



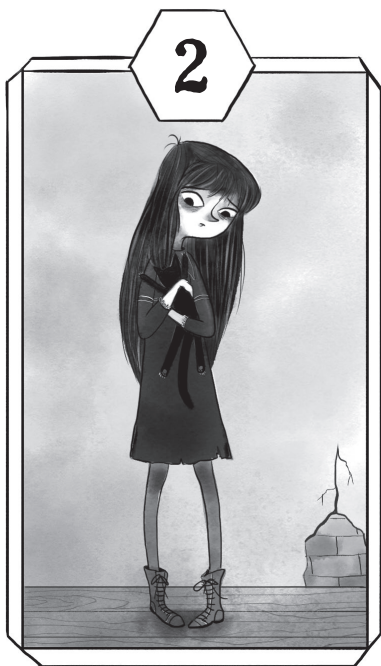
## *Hana Tooke*

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.



The golden-haired strangers shook themselves free of snow and turned to face the line-up. Milou tried to ignore her deep disappointment and squeezed her cat puppet more tightly, staring down at her boots.

*These weren't her parents.*

*'Welkom!'* Gassbeek chirped, smiling like a wide-eyed marionette. *'Kindjes,* this is Meneer and Mevrouw Fortuyn. Everybody say

*Goedemorgen!'*

*'Goedemorgen,'* chimed twenty-seven small voices.

Milou's tongue felt as if it were coated in cobwebs. She tugged on the collar of her baby-blanket dress, the tightness of which was now becoming suffocating. A hand reached into hers and squeezed, and Milou gave Lotta a tight smile.

*'Come into the warm!'* Gassbeek was cooing as she fussed round the visitors and ushered them across the marble floor. *'The kindjes* are ever so excited to meet you.'

‘We are ever so excited to meet *them*,’ Meneer Fortuyn said.

He was a tall man and his wife was even taller. They stood in the middle of the foyer and ran their eyes up and down the line as if they were perusing a shop-window display.

‘How delightful,’ Meneer Fortuyn said.

‘Delightful . . . indeed!’ Gassbeek grimaced, her joviality slipping for an instant. Obedient, hard-working and well-mannered. And the older ones can all read and write.’

Mevrouw Fortuyn smiled brightly. ‘Look, Bart, there are so many of them to choose from!’

Gassbeek’s smile took a steep climb up her powdered cheeks. Milou dug her fingers deeper into the soft cotton of her cat puppet.

‘Then by all means start your inspection,’ Gassbeek cooed. ‘We’ll begin with the smallest.’

The first orphan, a small girl with blonde ringlets and an entire constellation of freckles on her face, took a hasty step forward. The matron lowered her reading spectacles on to the tip of her nose and squinted at her clipboard.

‘This is Janneke,’ Gassbeek squawked. ‘Aged three-ish. She can count to ten and is beginning to wield a sewing needle without drawing blood. Janneke comes with a wicker basket and a yellow cotton blanket.’

The Fortuyns beamed down at the toddler. ‘*Hallo, liefje.*’

Milou felt a tug on her sleeve. She looked at Lotta, who was studying the Fortuyns with a thoughtful expression.

‘I bet you a holeless sock they choose Janneke,’ Lotta whispered. ‘Seven times out of eight, they pick the youngest one. A child with freckles increases the odds. Mathematically speaking, we’ve lost this one already.’

‘It’s probably for the best,’ Milou whispered back, eyeing the Fortuyns as they moved steadily down the line towards her. ‘They look like grave-robbers to me.’

Lotta raised her eyebrows questioningly and Milou leaned in a bit closer to her. ‘Black boots, dark cloaks. All the better for sneaking around at night, stealing corpses to sell for medical research. Perhaps they’ll choose Sem, on account of those excellent shovel-wielding arms of his.’

Sem gave them a pointed look. Milou turned her gaze back to her boots.

Her Book of Theories suddenly felt like a dead weight in her sleeve. Perhaps her parents would arrive after the worst of winter had passed. It made sense. Travelling was difficult at this time of year, she reminded herself. She just had to be more patient.

‘And what is your name, *liefje?*’ Meneer Fortuyn said, now only a few children away.

Milou's stomach fluttered once more as she noticed Fenna fiddle with the hem of her apron.

'This is Fenna,' Gassbeek cawed, reading from her clipboard. 'Aged twelve-ish. Fully literate with adequate handwriting. Her cooking skills are second to none. Fenna comes with a picnic hamper, but, alas, *no* blanket.'

'What lovely red hair,' said Mevrouw Fortuyn, gripping Fenna's chin. 'It reminds me of my favourite shade of lipstick. Tell me, Fenna, do you sing?'

The foyer fell suddenly silent, except for the clunking gears of the grandfather clock. Mevrouw Fortuyn cleared her throat. Fenna's shoulders scrunched together; she squeezed her eyes closed.

'Oh, it's no good asking her questions,' Gassbeek sighed. 'She doesn't speak. *However* –' the matron's voice rose – 'she would make a gloriously *quiet* daughter.'

'A mute?' Meneer Fortuyn said thoughtfully. 'I suppose it might be good to have a silent child –'

'Oh, absolutely not, Bart!' his wife cried. 'What would our friends think?'

Fenna shuffled backwards as Egbert stepped eagerly forward. He wiped a charcoal-stained hand on his trouser leg, then held it out. The Fortuyns made no move to take it.

'This is Egbert,' the matron said. 'Aged twelve-ish, of unknown Asian heritage. He can name every capital city in

the world and shows plentiful promise at both calligraphy and cartography. Egbert comes with a coal bucket and –’ she scowled down at Egbert – ‘that shawl.’

‘An artist?’ Meneer Fortuyn asked, and grimaced as he pointed to the stick of charcoal that was wedged behind Egbert’s left ear.

‘Egbert is, well, yes, he is *artistically inclined*,’ Gassbeek said as if she were admitting that Egbert liked to eat dead frogs. ‘*However*, he’d be very useful for drawing portraits, or –’

Fortuyn held up a hand. ‘We’d prefer a child with more sensible career aspirations.’

‘Art is messy,’ Mevrouw Fortuyn added, looking pointedly at the charcoal smears across Egbert’s shirt. ‘And frivolous.’

They moved down the line.

Sem tumbled forward as if the floor had suddenly tilted and the Fortuyns took a hasty step back. Sem managed to lock his legs rigidly and slap his arms to his sides. His nose turned bright red.

‘This is Sem,’ Gassbeek said. ‘Aged thirteen-ish. An expert in dressmaking. Handwriting is . . . well, let’s say his handwriting has *character*. Sem comes with a wheat sack, but no basket and no blanket.’

‘I thought *girls* learned sewing?’ Meneer Fortuyn said.

His wife turned to Gassbeek. ‘Why is he not apprenticed if he’s thirteen?’

‘Clumsier than a three-legged donkey,’ Gassbeek sighed. ‘He keeps getting sent back from every job I’ve found him. *That said*, his height makes him my number-one cobweb duster. Very useful indeed. I could give you a discount on this one.’

Sem reddened in embarrassment and his smile faltered.

Mevrouw Fortuyn shook her head. ‘I don’t think so. Look at him, Bart. How would I ever find suitable outfits for such a beanpole of a boy? And don’t even get me started on that disastrous hair. No. He won’t do at all.’

Sem slunk back into line, his shoulders slumped lopsidedly. Milou let out a small growl, ignoring the sudden needle pricks on her ear tips telling her to watch herself. She shook her hair over her face. Peeking through a thin slit of ebony, she saw the adopters turn enthusiastically to Lotta. Mevrouw Fortuyn’s eye twitched slightly at the sight of Lotta’s waistcoat, but her friend’s beautiful golden pigtails, tied with emerald ribbons, seemed to reignite the woman’s interest.

‘Lotta, aged twelve-ish,’ Gassbeek sighed, reading from her clipboard in a monotone. ‘Mastered the twelve times table by the age of four. She is familiar with concepts such as Pythagoras’ theorem and pi. Lotta comes with an

empty toolbox, a pink cotton blanket and three reams of emerald-green ribbon.'

Meneer Fortuyn scoffed. 'What use does a *girl* have for knowing about Pythagoras?'

Lotta's fists clenched at her sides.

'Oh, don't worry,' Gassbeek said quickly. 'I assure you, she's house-trained and docile, as a girl should be.'

Milou felt Lotta bristle beside her and the two girls shared a side-eyed look of contempt.

'That ghastly waistcoat will have to go, and the dress will need more frills.' Mevrouw Fortuyn bent down so that her nose was level with Lotta's. 'But, oh my, aren't you a pretty little doll?'

Lotta narrowed her eyes.

'Say *hallo*, Lotta,' Gassbeek warned.

'*Hallo*,' Lotta said in a voice as sweet as syrup. She raised one hand and gave them a six-fingered wave. Then she uncurled her other hand and made it a slow, twelve-fingered wave.

There was a long pause, in which Milou could hear some mumbled counting. Then the Fortuyns sidestepped hastily and, despite the wall of ebony hair covering her face, Milou felt their gaze land on her. It was time for her performance.

'This is Milou,' Gassbeek said. The matron cleared her throat, but Milou kept her hair over her face. 'Aged twelve-



ish, she can recite the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales and has a pleasant enough singing voice. Milou comes with a small coffin, that strange little dress she's wearing and a puppet.'

'But does she come with a face?' Meneer Fortuyn asked.

'Milou?' The matron *clacked* her boot in warning. 'Move your hair immediately.'

'Mill-oo,' Mrs Fortuyn mused. 'What kind of a name is *Mill-oo*?'

'Not one I would have chosen,' Gassbeek sighed. 'You're more than welcome to pick a proper name for her.' *CLACK*. 'Move your hair, girl.'

Milou felt another prickle on her left ear, like a needle of cold air, but she ignored it. She didn't need her Sense to tell her that she was risking the matron's wrath.

'Is she deaf?' Mrs Fortuyn asked.

'No,' Gassbeek snarled. 'She isn't.'

The ear-prickling returned a mere moment before the matron seized a fistful of Milou's hair and pulled her head up. It was all the time she needed to rearrange her expression. She scrunched her nose, bared her teeth and, with her head tilted away from the light, she knew her almost-black eyes would look like dark, empty pits.

The Fortuyns gasped.

Milou smiled. It was not a sweet smile. There were no dimples. It was a smile the matron herself had taught her: all teeth and no soul.

‘Goedemorgen,’ Milou growled, using her best werewolf voice.

Their wide eyes roamed across her face, travelled down her ill-fitting black dress, then back up again. Milou stared up at them through spider-leg lashes. The Fortuyns shared a look: crinkled noses and a not-so-subtle shake of their heads.

‘We’ll take that one,’ Mevrouw Fortuyn announced, pointing to a dark-haired boy in the middle of the line. ‘He seems ever so sweet.’

Milou’s heart did a little dance of triumph.

Gassbeek twisted her fist one more time, then let go of Milou and gave an oily smile.

‘An excellent choice!’ she cried in delight, *click-clacking* towards a side table upon which lay a huge, leather-bound tome. ‘Let me prepare the adoption certificate for you.’ Her smile vanished as she faced the orphans. ‘The rest of you, back to your . . . studies.’

The grandfather clock *ticked* and *tocked*, rats scratched in the darkest corners of the room and the orphans moved on silent feet to attend to their back-breaking chores.

As they made their way up the stairs, Milou smiled to herself for a well-executed performance. Then she cast a sideways glance at her friends. Lotta was scowling, Sem seemed bewildered, Egbert was still trying to wipe charcoal from his cuffs, and Fenna looked like she wanted to climb into one of the many shadows and hide. Milou's smile slid to the floor.

'She won't forget what you did,' Sem said quietly. 'It'll be worse than head-shaving and caned fingers this time.'

Milou swallowed. 'I had no other choice. I can't get adopted; you know that. Whatever the matron does to me, I can take it.'

Sem didn't look convinced, but he gave her a small smile. 'I hope it's worth it.'

Milou clutched her puppet and ran her fingers once more over the label on its foot, ignoring the tiny stab of doubt that was trying to worm its way into her heart.

She hoped it was all worth it, too.

Hope was all she had left.

## Milou's Book of Theories

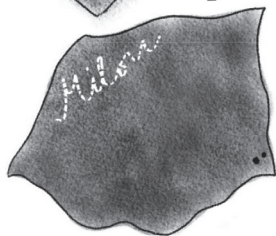
Lotta says all theories must be based on evidence and that the power of deduction can solve any mystery. I was left here with more clues than any other orphan I've ever known. My family would never leave me without good reason.



Cat puppet made by Bram Poppenmaker.  
Had a heartbeat.

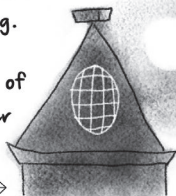


Coffin-basket, with claw marks  
down the left side of it.  
A length of white silk thread  
stuck inside the wicker weaving.



Blanket made of expensive  
Amsterdam velvet.  
Name stitched in white silk thread.  
Two drops of blood on  
blanket stitching.

Left on rooftop of  
orphanage, under  
a full moon.



My Sense, which warns me of danger.

## The 'Werewolf Hunter' Theory

My parents are werewolf hunters (Sense, claw marks and full moon). They were being chased by werewolves, so they climbed to safety (rooftop). Worried that I might get hurt (babies do not make very good werewolf hunters), they decided to leave me somewhere until it was safe to return for me (orphanage). To let me know that they cared for me, they left clues to both my identity and theirs: they quickly stitched my name on to the blanket, pricking a finger in the process (thread and blood drops); and my father left me a clue to show he is Bram Poppenmaker (cat puppet). They'll return for me, no doubt, when I am old enough to train as a werewolf hunter.



**A**fter a meagre lunch of Fenna's signature cabbage broth, Milou spent an hour helping Lotta winch down bucketload after bucketload of clean laundry to a sledge waiting on the frozen canal. She then spent the following hour helping Lotta winch bucketload after bucketload of *dirty* laundry up from a different sledge. By the time the grandfather clock began to chime seven,

Milou's arms felt like noodles and her hands were covered in friction burns.

'Holy Gouda, I can barely feel them any more,' Lotta said, wiggling all twelve fingers. 'At least if Gassbeek does cane you, you probably won't notice much.'

Gassbeek had gone into the city shortly after the Fortuyns had left and was yet to return. Even when the matron was gone, her malevolent spirit still filled every shadow-strewn nook and draught-battered cranny of the Little Tulip. It

wouldn't have surprised any of the children if she had eyes in the walls or spies at the windows. If they slacked at their chores even slightly, Gassbeek would know. And so the orphans worked diligently, as if the matron were hovering over them, barking her endless orders.

Milou was growing increasingly anxious about what punishment Gassbeek had in store for her. The matron would be planning something terrible, Milou was certain of it. Her Sense was certain of it, too, it seemed. Even a mention of the matron sent a wave of shivers across the tips of her ears.

'Maybe she's fallen into the North Sea Canal,' Milou said hopefully, gazing out of the laundry-room window towards the smog-blurred docks to the north. 'She could be floating off to some faraway ocean as we speak.'

'Doubtful,' Lotta said as she retied a blonde pigtail that had come loose. 'Her buoyancy would be compromised by all those heavy petticoats she wears. It wouldn't take her long to sink.'

The grandfather clock continued to *dong* in thunderous tones, and Milou heard the hurried footsteps of orphans spilling out of rooms and hurrying upstairs. She closed the laundry-room window and then rubbed at her prickling ears.

'Come on,' Lotta said, a hint of exasperation in her voice. 'Let's get you to bed before your ears convince you that Matron is plotting your murder.'

Milou followed her out of the room, worry twisting her insides. When they reached the dormitory, there were ten children elbowing each other for room round the single bucket of water, into which they dipped their toothbrushes and hastily scrubbed their teeth. When the children moved on, Milou peered into the bucket. It was now slightly yellow with bubbles of spit floating on the surface.

She went to the open window and plunged her toothbrush into the snow on the window ledge. Egbert was sitting on the roof, his charcoal pencil scratching away on the corner of an old pillowcase. He lifted a makeshift telescope, made of metal piping and recycled spectacle lenses, and pointed it towards the horizon, seemingly unaware Milou was there. She put her toothbrush in her mouth, shuddered as the cold touched her gums, scrubbed, then spat into the snow.

‘You’re letting even more cold in, Egg.’

‘Yes, but I’ve nearly finished adding the eastern docklands. Look.’

Milou peered over his shoulder at the pillowcase map. ‘The tiny ships on the river look wonderful. With your leg shaking like that, it’s as if they’re bobbing up and down on the water.’

Egbert beamed at her, then shivered again. ‘I suppose it is rather cold. I’ll finish this tomorrow.’

He carefully handed her his map-making supplies and climbed back in through the window and closed it behind