**My Little Flower**

“Lily, wake up…” A voice called to me.

“Just another 10 minutes, little talking squirrel” I murmured woozily from underneath the large blanket with my face stuffed into a pillow. I was still engrossed in a struggle between another adventure in good old dreamland and reality, not realizing someone was trying to wake me up.

“Lily…I’m sorry for what is about to happen.” The tone was clearer but more of whisper with a hint of sadistic joy.

“Oh squirrel, sorry for….” I said before I heard the blaring sound of an airhorn going off near my face. I don’t think I had ever screamed as loud as I had this morning. “Where’s the fire?! Is the house fine?!” I shouted clearly awake with panic. It was only after that I realized what happened. I saw my husband Alex lying, rolling on floor, laughing so much that his face was a red as a tomato, hands clutching his stomach and was gasping for air. I was not sure whether to just stare daggers at him and attempt to turn him to stone with my Medusa-like bed hair or jump off the bed and elbow-drop him like a wrestler. I did neither and opted to throw what little water I had left in my bottle onto him.

“Very funny” I said sarcastically as I forced myself out of bed. He still couldn’t respond due to laughter, and I did not leave him any chance. I went to the bathroom to wake up properly while he attempted to regain his composure. Lord knows how long that would take. I took a nice, warm shower to warm myself up after last night’s chilly weather. Today is a sunny day, so I don’t feel obliged to wear office clothes nor put on makeup, I just dress to make myself comfortable. As I dry my hair, I hear the telephone ring for a few seconds. I’m guessing Alex picked up the phone as I no longer hear laughter. Who could call this damn early in the morning?

Once I left the bathroom, I saw my husband had finally calmed down, yet I thought he looked completely different from this morning. He wore a grimmer, more tragic face from what I was used to. Almost as if his personality had completely flipped from his usually way too cheery self. Must have been my imagination.

“What was so important that you needed to use a damn airhorn to wake me up so early!” I interrogated him. “You know how much I love a long sleep”.

He just looked at me very perplexed and somehow words just came out in a cold and monotonous manner. “She passed away…your mother I mean. We just got a call from the government. It seems that she passed away a few days ago and you are her only next of kin.”

So that’s who called so damn early in the morning.

“I don’t have a mother; she has been dead to me for years. Do you mean Cecilia?” I spat.

“Cecilia is…was still your mother, and she just died in her sleep. Must have been a heart attack.” He responded in grief. “Don’t you think you should at least go there one last time? She would have loved to have you there, it may let her be at peace” he continued.

“I’ll pass. Why would I even think of returning there! You know why I refuse to go there!” I shouted back.

“Please….just this one time, do it for me” He begged. It was truly the first time he begged me for anything, aside from new games. It’s as if he cared more about her than I did, which I won’t deny.

“Fine.” I sighed “But don’t expect me to be happy about this! “ Happy”, what a word I thought to myself.

“Thanks, Lily. Let’s leave in an hour, try and put on something nice for the occasion and not the sweat pants you love to wear” He cheekily said. Was all that an act? He just quickly returned to his normal cheeky self. I walked towards the wardrobe and looked at the dresses hanging inside the closet. My gaze was over to a tall, black dress imprinted with various white flowers, lilies to be exact. This was a gift from Cecilia before we parted ways. I try not to spit on the floor looking at it, Alex kept the damn dress thing despite the nauseous feeling I get from it. I then looked at a plain fiery-crimson dress and thought that it said out loud what I felt despite the sad occasion. I put on the dress and straightened out my blow-dried hair. I sprayed on a little of my favorite sweet-smelling perfume and waited for Alex by the door. I waited for 10 minutes till Alex came out. He was more dressed for the occasion; he combed his usually messy blond hair and had put on a pitch-black suit, a suit he usually reserves for special occasions. Was this really a special occasion? All we were doing was going to see a dead woman’s house! Although, he did look sharp and handsome in the suit. “You look good” I told him.

He responds to me “Don’t you think that the dress is a bit too bright? You should have worn the black….” I continued the circle of interruptions by saying that I couldn’t care less. He just shrugged at me and we both enter the car.

It was not a long drive but the silence in the car was deafening. We arrived at Cecilia’s villa. It had not changed from when I used to live here. The same scents and the same reflection of the sunlight from the eastern wall. People say that familiar spaces tend to get smaller from what one remembers them as one gets older but somehow the house, strangely, was the same. Years ago, it was a beautiful 1-storey villa with only 3 other villas nearby. It was built near a small forest, so it was completely isolated from the urban lifestyle and even quieter than the usual suburbs. The building looked bright white as if a new layer of paint was applied over the building. It was as if the house was welcoming me back after not returning here for years. I hated it. Why did Alex want me to come here so bad? I noticed there were a few flowers left outside of the house. I guess this must have been her neighbors, paying their respects to Cecilia

As we enter the villa, I saw a big dog lying near a turned chair and a lit fireplace. It’s Oberon! When did he get so big? I walk over to him and give him a huge hug “It’s me buddy, you remember me?” I whispered. He sniffed me for a few seconds then proceeded to lick my face. Maybe I could keep him, I did truly miss him. As soon as I finished playing with him, I realized why he was near the seat in the first place. I saw a body shaped indentation lying there, Cecilia’s indentation. I felt uneasy as I have not seen anything like this before. It must have been the police or medics. Oberon just whimpered and stayed near the couch, maybe just waiting for Cecilia to return. He doesn’t know she died. I feel sorry for the poor pup. I thought to myself how could you break this news to a dog. I looked at the couch and just said angerly “So, you died before you could apologize… How sad”

“Hasn’t anyone told you not to badmouth the dead. They can come back and haunt you!” He says extending his arms to mimic that of a zombie or cartoon ghost.”

“Very funny” I respond sarcastically.

Suddenly, we hear a large thud nearby. I turned around and saw a large bookcase with a few books lying on the floor. I guessed that must have made the sound.

“Alex, lets pick up the books, I hate to see a mess in a beautiful house despite who owns the place” I said. We approached the bookcase and picked up majority of the books that had fallen. As I wondered how the books had fallen, I noticed a book that seemed out of place. An album. I don’t know what came over me, but I decided to open the album. It was empty. I flipped through the pages to see if there was anything. “Of course, there isn’t anything.” I said. Just as I was about to close the album, I turned to the last page and saw an old photo of a young girl holding a picture smiling with a man and woman behind her. It was Dad, Cecilia and me on my first ever day of school. I let out a small smile as I remembered the occasion.

“Lily, hurry up, you’ll be late for school!” My dad shouted.

“She’s nervous honey, give her some time” Cecilia responded.

“D…Dad, I’m ready” I said in tears. I was still crying as I didn’t want to leave home nor Cecilia or dad.

“My little buttercup, you look amazing!” Cecilia said smiling.

“Don’t be nervous dear, I made you your favorite sandwich; grilled chicken pesto.” She followed up as she waved to a brown paper bag.

“I don’t wanna go!” I cried “It’s too scary!”

“Tell you what. If you can go through the day without crying and talk to a few people, I’ll take you out for an ice cream.” Dad said with a cheeky grin and a cheerful voice.

“Promise…?” I sniffled

“Promise, we’ll let Mom pay!” He joked with that same cheeky grin.

“Hey don’t say such things to my little buttercup.” Cecilia laughed.

“Alright.” He laughed “Lily, let’s get a picture by the fireplace. Now, show me your biggest smile”. Dad then stretched out his lips to make a smile.

“I’ll try” I responded as I wiped the tears from my face.

“Alright everyone, say cheese!” Cecilia said.

I end the little nostalgia trip to return to present time. “Good old times…I miss Dad” I said out loud.

“What happened to your dad? I understand if you are still uncomfortable to answer but you never explained what happened” Alex asked.

“He died when I was still a kid, a hit and run accident” I respond.

“I see….I’m sorry for asking.” He responded with regret.

“Since you’re here, do you want to see if my old room is still here?” I asked

“Sure!” He said. As we headed to the room, Oberon followed us slowly.

We walked down the long walkway to approach my old room. Along the walkway, there hung a bunch of pictures of the three of us as a family. They ranged from when I was just a young baby to the day I left for university. I thought to myself when did she ever care about me. Since Dad died, she couldn’t care less about family. All she cared about was that dumb garden of hers that I wasn’t even allowed to visit.

We stopped outside a dusty door, my old room door. Without a second thought, I entered the room. To my surprise, nothing had changed from when I was last here. The old video game posters still hung where they were. The old books remained where they were on the small bookshelf my dad had made me. Even that old band poster from a group I used to listen to hung right above my bed. What surprised me even more was that the room wasn’t dirty, nor did it reek. It smelt fresh, clean and even the bed sheets were changed. Why? The more I remained in this house the more I wondered, did she expect me to come back after all these years? How confident was she that I would run back to her?! My emotions for Cecilia were getting so intense that I just wanted to punch the wall.

“Lily are you ok? You seem hurt?” Alex questioned as her put his arms around me.

“How can I be after she hurt me!” I yelled

“How…” Alex asked before being interrupted by another loud thud. This time, it came from my bookshelf. More books had fallen. What is up with this house and falling books? I bent over to pick up a few books before Oberon barked at me. He appeared to have found something among the books. “What is it boy?” I ask. He runs over and picks up a small jewelry box that is covered in dust which is strange as the whole room was dust free. To my surprise, it was the same box that my Dad carved for me as a present.

This box had started everything.

As soon as I saw the box, I wanted to throw it out the window. Alex noticed this and asked me “What is up with this box, I don’t see anything wrong with it. Why are you so mad?”

“It’s a long story…” I responded

“Tell me honey. If you can’t confide in me who can you confide to?” He voice was reassuring and for some reason, that alone calmed me down.

“Fine, I’ll try to simplify things. But there is another important thing you will need to know before I can tell you the story of this box” I responded.

“After my dad passed away, our family’s dynamics changed. Cecilia spent most of the time in her stupid garden and would only leave to go to the bathroom or eat. I began to pass most of my time playing games and studying in my room alone. No interaction at all. One particular day, I had a tough day had school. I came home crying and ran to my room. Cecilia came to my room to ask ‘Are you ok my little rose?’.

I just lashed back at her as if she was the reason of my tough day ‘You don’t care. You never do unless it’s about your damn garden! Leave me alone!’

Cecilia was surprised and looked hurt. She knew she was doing something bad. It showed on her face. But all she said was ‘I’m trying my best. Life hasn’t been easy since he died’. She then reached out and gave me a box. ‘It was from your dad, he told me to…’ I snatched the box from her and shouted ’Why did you hide this from me?! You know how much I loved him! How could you! Get out!’

‘My little…’ She tried to respond before I cut her off saying ‘I’m not your little rose or buttercup or daisy or whatever! I’m in my senior year now and my name is Lily.

Cecilia just looked at me and nearly began to cry before saying ‘We both are still grieving; I will just leave you alone for now. I will try harder but I…’ She forced it out till I responded ‘I don’t care, get out Cecilia!’ and just continued to cry alone.

After that day, we drifted further and further apart.

It seemed my anger had turned me to an excellent student. I got into the University on a full scholarship both for under and post graduate so I lost contact with Cecilia. 6 years had passed and I was going to graduate from my Master’s program. I felt sorry for and sent her a letter telling her I was going to graduate and that she should come and that we needed to talk. Needless to say, she never responded, nor did she come. After graduation, I stopped by her place and saw that she was still in her garden. I just snapped. She noticed that I came in and left the garden before closing the door. I still wasn’t allowed to see the damned secret garden. I was even more livid. I shouted at her saying that she couldn’t care about me anymore nor she about Dad. All she cared about was her garden. After the outburst, I ran out of the house before she could say anything. After that, I never saw nor spoke to her ever again.” I finished monologuing.

“ Don’t you think you should have heard what she had to say?” He questioned me.

“You wouldn’t have understood! How would you have felt if you grew up like I did?!” I yelled back. “She didn’t care about me, she never even called me nor asked about me! So as far as I am concerned, she died after my graduation!”

Before anything could be said, one more loud thud was heard. This time, from that accursed garden. “I need time, I’ll check it out with Oberon, wait here” I told Alex. I was still angry, and I needed to breathe a bit. A little fresh air could probably soothe my anger.

As I entered the garden, I couldn’t believe what I saw. There was a wide array of flowers. Lustrous in their glory, beautiful in their scent and their bright, inviting colors, a glorious scene. I wondered why wasn’t I invited, if the colors were so inviting? I just laughed it off. I noticed a small rock-like structure in the middle of the large garden. Its grey faded color that stood out in the sea of red, yellow and multicolored flowers. Yet, I dreaded looking at it. It made me feel a tiny bit sad it had an air of sadness about it. Just what was this rock?

As my thoughts remained on the rock, Oberon barked loudly. It appeared as if he was trying to call me. I followed the sound of his barks to where he was. I just saw a metal shovel beside what it seemed to be a tipped can or a container. Perhaps this was what caused the noise. But how so? As I thought about this, a letter had fallen in front of me. What is going on here? Where did this letter come from? I open it up and read the contents of the letter.

“My little Lily,

If you are reading this letter, I probably have passed away. Did you get this in the garden as I intended on the day I died? I truly hope so. First of all, I need to say I am sorry. I’m sorry, that I left you without a mother during your toughest times growing up. I’m sorry, I couldn’t attend your graduation. I’m sorry I have not been able to call you after all this time. I was afraid that you hated me so much. I truly tried to attend it so I could see you and talk to you and it broke my heart that I couldn’t. I had fallen really ill on your graduation day and my doctor forced me to remain in bed despite my pleas and complains. I know this won’t serve much of an apology but I hope it helps. As for why I remained in this garden of mine. Gardening was how I met your Dad and how we came up with your name. So, when he passed away, I felt something from me went missing. I made a little stone monument for him, which you just saw a few seconds ago, and overstayed myself in the garden as it helped me grieve and stay close to him. I never should have left you alone but I couldn’t force my troubles on to a young girl who was already facing her own troubles. For that I am sorry. I couldn’t let you in the garden because I was afraid it would hurt you more. I am sorry

How is Alex? Your husband I mean. I hired a PI to find out where you lived. As I tried to approach your house, I saw you with him. He looked so much like your father that I hesitated to approach you both.

I am truly sorry for all the pain I caused you Lily. I hope this letter is enough for your forgiveness. I have written you more letters that should arrive to you soon that could help you out in the future. Please look forward to them!

Finally, my last request for you! Please go the center of the garden. I left for you a special present there. It should be where the flowers I have grown (Rose, Buttercups, Daisies and Tulips) meet each other.

Love,

Cecilia, Your Mother”

I didn’t know how to react to this. Was this truly from Cecilia? Did she truly try her best to come to my graduation? Was I in the wrong the whole time? No, that’s impossible. She should have called me! Whatever, where was it she needed me to go? Oberon licked me and ran off in a specific direction. Was that his way of telling me to follow him?

I ran after him and reached a place where the four flowers stopped each other as if they were four nations declaring their borders. I stared at this marvel; Cecilia truly put in the effort for these flowers. In the center of this marvel, there laid a lone, blossoming, white flower. As if acting in neutral territory, I stood there. I notice that it is was a lily. How sentimental was she? Was this her way of saying she wanted a redo? It was only then I realized something. I looked at the letter she sent me and looked at the flower’s names. The flowers she grew were the names she called me over all these years! Sadness slowly began to swell inside me like a limp balloon gaining air slowly. Cecilia, in her own way, may have cared about me all this time. Is that why she chose to grow those flowers in particular?

Still in my train of thought, Oberon barked at me and approached me with an ornate box with a lily carved on it in his mouth. He drops it at my feet and disappeared into the house. I opened the box and see three things. The first thing I saw was my letter that I sent to Cecilia with the details of the graduation, with the date and venue circled in red. In the back I saw the words, “I am so proud of you!”, written on the back. The second item was a sapphire necklace and earing pair. They were the most beautiful pair of jewelry I had seen. The third was a small note saying “Congratulations on your marriage. Here is a small present from me and your dad”.

At that moment, that balloon of sadness popped. I fell onto my knees and landed on the mud. I started crying out loudly. Suddenly, it started to rain as if in tune with my emotions. I couldn’t care if I got soaked. I couldn’t care if my dress got dirty. I couldn’t care if I got sick. I just wanted my mother back! “Cecilia…no Mom!” I cry “I’m sorry! I’m sorry I left you behind. Please don’t go! Please don’t leave me alone!”

Suddenly, I feel a jacket thrown around me and the soft touch of fur nearby. Oberon just leaned on my body and Alex just stood there with tears in his eyes as well. “There, there. I won’t leave you alone…” he then hugged me.

I just cried “Mom…I miss you so much! Don’t leave your little flower behind!”