

Roses

By Jacob Duarte Spiel

So you're the one from insurance? Yeah, I know you need a statement. No, I don't mind talking about it now, but let's make it quick. I'm leaving for the cottage in a few hours.

And shut the door.

I'd obviously heard about the house before: you can't work at Kincaid Gold Ltd. and not hear about it. Y'know, every few weeks I still get a breathless email from some new underling who's found one of the old 80s tabloid articles: you know, the ones with screaming, 72 point font headlines? Articles detailing the tragic-slash-bizarre deaths of the Kincaids while on vacation in South America. Articles filled with leaked details about the miserly will, which left almost nothing to the family or charity. Articles that speculated about "hidden treasure" in the sealed-off home of Canada's "most paranoid power couple".

It's interesting to some, but old news to me. I mean, sure, I used to daydream of smashing through the drywall to find rubies the size and colour of raw ribeye steaks, but who didn't? It's just idle fantasy.

And then the CFO called me into a closed-door meeting.

At that point I'd never spoken to the CFO, not even at the Christmas party. By choice. Upper management was and is notoriously fickle: one wrong move and suddenly your career plan is 5 years behind. So I was fighting serious nerves when I sat down in his corner office.

I wasn't alone. Anton, the CFO's other invitee, sat on my left. Anton was a rising star in the Kincaid management firmament. I knew him from the long, invective-filled nights I'd spent drinking with other managers, ones he'd backstabbed on the way to another promotion. From the sound of it, he was almost as devious as me. Almost.

The CFO explained that he was offering us a special assignment. Several newly-elected South American governments were brazenly ignoring Kincaid Gold's legal mining rights. The foundation of their claims was that the deeds never existed. Obviously they **did** exist, but, and here the CFO had us sign an NDA, the company had been... unable to locate the originals.

While the deceased founders of Kincaid, Arthur and Liliana Kincaid, had not literally hidden gemstones in the walls, it was true they had been very careful with every single asset. If they hadn't been destroyed, the original deeds were almost certainly somewhere inside the Kincaid Mansion. After all, as stipulated in the will, the house and its contents had been left totally untouched for nearly 40 years.

The South America situation had become so dire that the executor of the estate had relented to the company's team of lawyers, allowing Kincaid Ltd. access to the house for the first time.

In exchange for a generous compensation package, Anton and I were being formally asked to search the house for the original mining rights and any other, quote, "useful documents."

Anton immediately accepted the offer. He grinned at me, flashing two rows of expensive veneers. By taking the initiative he'd impressed the CFO and, if I accepted now, I would seem weak, a follower, not VP material.

So instead I leaned back thoughtfully, as if weighing my options. And then I asked about the roses.

A smile plucked at the corner of the CFO's mouth.

Liliana Kincaid was known for her expansive rose garden, rumoured to contain thousands of species along with unique cultivars found nowhere in the wild. I say "rumoured" because like any good garden they were never open to the public. Cultivation for some exotic species was thought to be impossible in this climate, but Liliana's mercenary botanists had managed to create frost-tolerant versions of every species she'd brought back. Their findings were protected under the most punitive of non-disclosure agreements, which were still viciously maintained by the estate.

However, there were whispers that a series of notebooks had been kept by Liliana and filled with handwritten instructions, techniques, diagrams - in theory they contained everything you'd need to reproduce her gardens.

Were those books the other "useful document" the company wanted?

That smile widened across the CFO's face. Yes, if the books were real they could be very useful. After all, multi-billion dollar horticultural giants had been trying to buy the Kincaid estate for years just to scavenge the greenhouses. They would pay handsomely for the information.

How had I known? You pick things up when you pay attention, I replied, earning me a glare from Anton. I saw no reason to mention the specific employee who'd clued me in. Not that I remembered his name.

The estate had some unusual conditions for our treasure hunt: We would have to bring our own food, water, and supplies. The estate's electricity had been shut off, along with all the water mains. The only running water were outdoor hoses used by the gardeners, who came three times a week to do meticulous upkeep on the grounds. But the strangest condition was the last one: that under no circumstances could the search continue beyond two days.

Unusual, I thought, but who am I to argue with the Kincaids? Even in death they were successful beyond my wildest dreams.

With that, we were dismissed.

The following Friday I cruised through the wrought-iron gates of the estate, listening to the white gravel pathway crunch and pop under the weight of my tires.

The sounds of the main road faded. Trees now lined the path, embraced my car with their branches as I drove along. It was peaceful, almost quaint. And then I turned the final corner.

The Kincaid Mansion had been poorly-named. The Kincaid Palace, perhaps, or maybe Duomo della Kincaid. It reclined in the centre of a great field, a city block's worth of stone, brick, and marble fronted by a gaping maw of a door and flanked by east and west wings, each of which contained living quarters, kitchens, libraries, smoking rooms, larders, and who knew how many bedrooms and bathrooms. The sprawling architecture called to mind a dollop of hot tar that oozes slowly outward in all directions, until it hardens in the sun.

I'm salivating just thinking about it.

One other car was parked in the driveway. A sporty number, sleek and low to the ground like a stalking predator. Two curved skid marks trailed from the back wheels.

Anton stepped from its driver's side door and made a big show of stretching his arms and yawning before turning to look at me.

I didn't grin, but I showed him my teeth. He shrugged and walked around to the back of his car. He popped the tiny trunk and removed three pieces of Louis Vuitton luggage.

I'd brought three bags of my own. Less luxurious, but far more practical. My wheeled suitcase also had the advantage of a hidden pocket I'd made by tearing into the lining, something Anton wouldn't have had the stomach to do to his Vuitton.

See, I never intended to hand the Liliana's books over to Kincaid Gold. Through a few well-placed emails, I'd started a substantial bidding war between Breck's, David Austin, and a few other major players. This was my shot at real money. Kincaid money.

Quit daydreaming, said Anton. I've got money to make.

He mounted the steps, and I followed.

The Kincaid Mansion was as advertised. Sky-high vaulted ceilings, walls busy with paintings, suits of armor, and hallways you could drive a tank through that branched off into other areas of

the house. With the help of the blueprints we were able to locate the two guest bedrooms allotted for our weekend stay.

My rooms were furnished with a four poster bed built from a rich, deep softwood. The vanity, chest of drawers, and two chairs were all intricately carved in the 1700s Hepplewhite style, which made sense after I found Hepplewhite's signature unobtrusively scrawled on the bottom of one of the drawers. The furnishings alone could've paid off the mortgage on my condo, and I have a *nice* condo.

The final touch was a thick animal skin rug laying at the foot of the bed. After all the opulence it seemed almost quaint, despite the fact it was unmistakably from an endangered snow leopard.

It was the nicest thing I'd ever seen, and I seriously considered how long it would take before anyone noticed it was missing.

Anton and I ate lunch in a cavernous dining hall where the scrape and clink of the 200 year old silverware reverberated around the room before being swallowed by the massive tapestry that hung above us. It portrayed a vicious battle scene: clearly a lopsided one. Blood spurted from the throats of countless men and horses. The swords of the victors were haloed with golden thread. It must've been a few hundred years old, at least.

Anton was chatty. His amazement at the house had overridden his contempt for me, and, mouth-full, he excitedly described the luxuries of his bedroom, and then listened intently as I described mine. But what he really seemed enamored with was the tapestry. He went on and on about how great it would look in his office and that all he'd have to do was chop it up into smaller pieces.

After a few moments, both Anton and I were surprised to find we'd already finished the lunches we'd packed. At the time it made sense we were so hungry. The excitement of the day and all. We both cracked our second containers of food as we began evaluating the blueprints.

Guided by our private divinations, we took turns choosing which rooms to search. Anton took Arthur Kincaid's office, a choice I thought was too obvious, while I took the private library, reasoning that the mining rights or cultivation instructions could be squeezed between the pages of any book.

We picked until our blueprints were scrawled with red As and blue Es, along with a light dusting of crumbs. I packed away empty tupperware and prepared to work, even though I was still hungry.

The library's grandeur exceeded even my high expectations. Spiral staircase, overstuffed leather armchairs, coffee tables inlaid with exotic wood. But the real attraction was the collection itself. I rifled through first-editions of everything from Shakespeare to Karl Marx. Most of them

had never been removed from the shelves. Many more had been carefully preserved in plastic or under glass. These weren't the kind of books you "read". You'd have to be an idiot.

I ditched the library. I had a feeling Arthur and Liliana were too paranoid to leave something so valuable in a space they clearly never used.

The rest of my search tore through a guest bedroom, wine cellar, and the abandoned stables with equally bad luck, my mood sinking lower with each failure. It didn't help that I'd worked up a healthy appetite. Luckily, halfway through checking the walls of the personal bowling alley I noticed it was dinner.

Of course, we'd eaten our dinners at lunch, so Anton and I dug into some of the food we'd portioned for the next day. Our conversation was muted, partly due to exhaustion and partly to mutual failure. Begrudgingly, Anton admitted his search had turned up nothing.

That night I lay alone in the four-poster bed staring at the dark ceiling, trying to use a self-calming technique I'd picked up from a junior management seminar. Just one day left and I had nothing to show the CFO. I could feel his disappointment, hear the quiet sigh signalling the end of my upward mobility at Kincaid. I'd been so confident I hadn't considered what would happen if I failed. It didn't help that I was so **hungry**. The hollow feeling in my stomach was getting worse and worse, and I was almost out of food.

It quickly became clear that sleep wasn't an option. I flicked on my booklight and spread the estate blueprints across the bed. With pen in hand I scoured for the possible locations of hidden chambers, fake walls, and secret gardens, all while trying to ignore the twisting emptiness in my guts.

To distract myself, I thought of the beautiful things I could buy if everything went according to plan tomorrow. The sale of Liliana's books alone could finance an estate almost as luxurious as the Kincaids'. Perhaps more so. The thought was enough to make me salivate.

I was preoccupied with these plans when a loud, brutal crack broke the silence.

I whirled around, half-expecting to see Anton in the doorway, a smoking handgun levelled at my heart, but the door was closed.

I scanned the room frantically for the source of the noise, but finding nothing. It was only after rechecking the locks on the windows that I saw my reflection in the darkened glass. My mouth was coated in a black substance. I touched my lips and a drop came away on my finger. It was ink.

At Christmas, Kincaid upper management would hand out gold pens to promising young executives who'd had particularly good years. I was a proud owner of four: now I was down to three. The loud crack had come from me, when I bit my pen clean in half.

The bottom half was still in my hand. The top half could only be in one place. The nausea hit all at once.

I made it to the toilet with seconds to spare. The purged remains of yesterday's meals were stained blue-purple by ink. A few minutes' search yielded the top part of the gold cylinder, now flattened. It had been unmistakably chewed, even though I had no recollection of chewing it.

Looking at the remains of my pen, I found myself suddenly ravenous once again. This time I managed to wrestle the feeling down. I pulled myself into bed and waited for the adrenaline to subside.

Somehow, near dawn, sleep found me.

The next morning, having eaten breakfast for dinner last night, I skipped a meal and made my way across the grounds towards the silent rows of glass and metal that comprised the greenhouses. The fresh air and dewy grass were nearly enough to make me forget about the previous night.

The gardeners had done a beautiful job maintaining the grounds, but Liliana's private greenhouses were considered part of the house. In that time since Liliana died they'd turned wild. Thorns raked my skin as I searched and I cursed myself for forgetting to bring gardening gloves. Not that I owned a pair.

By the time I reached the last greenhouse my hands were as bloody as they were empty. I hadn't found the mining rights or any sign of The Book, if it even existed. I hoped Anton had had better luck. There was still time to push him down the stairs.

Rust flaked from the hinges as I opened the greenhouse door, releasing a blast of heavy, perfumed air. Inside, a massive thicket of thorns and flowers filled the space. The delicate roses had been out-competed by the hardier ones. The remaining plants had twisted around each other in a cyclone of flowers as each tried to choke out the others. Leaves and stems bled chlorophyll where they were scarred by thorns. The plants' manic upward growth was stopped only by the greenhouse ceiling, where the stems had grown thick enough to completely block the sun. The scene had a ferocious beauty, even if the ground was littered with dessicated foliage.

I searched the edges of the greenhouse, mindful of the thorns, and found my prize sitting in a lone sunbeam that sliced down through a back window.

A blue rose. I swear to god, a real no-bullshit sky blue rose.

Why is that amazing? Because blue roses don't exist.

Did you know that? Not in the wild, not in cultivation, not at all. I know you think you've seen one on Instagram or whatever but you haven't. It's either been photoshopped or it was a white rose someone picked and then dyed blue. A cheap lie. A blue rose... it's one of those impossible things, like a dry ocean or a round square.

And yet... there it was.

Liliana had made something impossible and then locked it up tight. I have no doubt she could have cultivated the blue rose, made it widely available, but what would be the point? Why have money if you can't use it to make yourself happy? All these years, she had her own private miracle, just for her. Incredible.

I immediately forgot about the mining rights, the cultivation documents - I forgot it all and dropped to my knees to search for a pair of garden shears. If I could smuggle out one single healthy cutting of the blue rose I'd never have to work again in my life. I found a pair of rusted clippers, and my hands shook so badly I could barely hold them. Carefully, I removed a portion of the rootstock and some stems. The roses were carpeted in needlelike thorns that pierced and rended my skin at the lightest touch. It was slow, painful going, but the value of those stems? In my head I was already buying my second boat.

As I finished, my stomach clenched so hard I nearly bent double. It was time for an early dinner, which excited me almost as much as the rose. I'd been hungry since, well, since before I went to bed and I vaguely wondered if I should set up a doctor's appointment. I could even go to the States, I would certainly have the money. Almost on cue, my hunger spasmed again and pure misery began rippling up and down my abdomen.

I stiff-armed the door to the dining area, not even breaking stride, but then froze. Anton was already sitting at the table, his tupperware lying empty next to him, licked clean. He had moved on to *my* containers, opening one to stare at the stir fry inside. When I entered he looked up at me and, for a moment, his eyes smouldered with rage. Then he looked away, blushing slightly.

"I was... just checking that you had enough food," he managed to stutter.

At four in the morning, I awoke writhing in pain.

It was a hunger like nothing I'd felt up to that point. Like a force of nature. A vacuum needing to be filled.

I tried in vain to sleep, to turn my thoughts away from eating and onto anything else, the blue rose, my future plans, my investment portfolio, literally anything. But it was no use.

I got up, dressed quickly, and left the room. My brain was empty. The planet of agony in my stomach had eclipsed all thought. I was an animal, moving on instinct to the dining room where I'd hidden my last morsels of food after my run in with Anton at dinner.

My focus was so single-minded that as I walked down the main hallway, I didn't notice the dinner table until it was right in front of me.

Someone had pulled from the dining room and its weight had left long gouges, illuminated where moonlight touched the hardwood floor. Ten or fifteen serving plates cluttered the table, the contents of each hidden by a silver cloche. At the far end of the table was a single place setting. Behind it sat Anton.

He was illuminated by the small brass candelabrum that burned to the right of his plate. His head was bowed, as if in thought or prayer, but I could hear the squeal of steel on ceramic and beneath that the snuffling, snorting sounds of a man gorging himself.

My appetite roared at the sight of the spread. I moved closer to the table. Anton didn't even look up.

I lifted the cover nearest me, expecting to find roast chicken, dumplings, or bread, but instead the platter was piled high with solid silver ingots. I resisted a sudden impulse to pop one in my mouth and moved farther down the table.

Under the next one was a collection of antique ceramic figurines, their clear lacquer shining like sugar glaze.

The flickering candlelight fell across a pile of discarded, half-full trays, with their contents strewn across the ground: shattered brooches, scraps of Chanel dresses, even first-editions from the library, their spines broken and the binding thread scooped out like marrow.

I reached for another cloche. The platter was full of papers: yellowed documents written in English and Spanish. The original mining rights. Well, half of them: someone had torn the pages apart.

I looked up across the table. Anton was staring at me. His mouth was full and something greyish red hung from his lips. I leaned closer to see what it was but he slurped it back.

“Anton,” I said, carefully. “I thought you said you hadn’t found the documents.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. And then he growled at me.

It was such a primal sound that, for a moment, I didn’t realize it had come from Anton.

Instinctively, I stepped back. Anton shook his head, as if to clear it, and smiled.

“Ha, yeah I guess I did,” he said through whatever he was eating.

I looked over the table and again had to steady myself against a wave of senseless hunger. I turned back to him.

“What did you do to them, Anton? They’re ruined.”

He didn’t answer. Just shook his head again.

“Anton, I think we need to get out of here. Now.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, just take a seat and enjoy the meal,” he replied.

“We can eat once we’re out of here, come on.”

Suddenly, Anton’s chair toppled backward with a bang. He’d leapt to his feet, shaking with rage.

“I get it. You want me to leave so you can have it all for yourself, don’t you?” his voice was low and threatening as he stepped out from behind the table. I staggered back, wide-eyed.

It wasn’t visible when he was sitting behind the table, but I could see it now, even if I didn’t understand it.

There... there was something wrong with his stomach.

It protruded from beneath his untucked shirt and flowed over his belt, hanging almost to his knees. The skin was mottled with black and purple bruises. In some places, corners of something were outlined through the skin. I looked closer and saw sharp points of metal and wood that were coated in black blood, resembling the legs of an insect escaping its cocoon.

With each step Anton took toward me, a sickening jangle emanated from his stomach, like a sock full of broken glass.

My eyes darted back to the table. I noticed for the first time just how many of the trays were empty, licked clean. The one Anton had been eating from held the remains of that tapestry from the dining room. Only a pile of decapitated bodies remained of it, cut into steak-sized portions.

"I knew I couldn't trust you," Anton croaked, his voice like sandpaper. He grabbed a large serving fork and waved it in my face: "Get the fuck away. This is mine, you hear me?"

I stumbled backward and fled.

Even though Anton didn't chase me, I still knew I was being pursued. The hunger wasn't a part of me, it never had been, it was something else altogether and it was getting stronger. I began to crave impossible things. My constant thoughts of food were replaced as I imagined how good it would be to devour a gold watch, to drink perfume, to unwind a silk dress with my teeth. As I ran, I had to screw my eyes shut at the sight of the delectable things in the hallway: paintings, carpets, the molding above the door. I would have eaten them all if not for the overwhelming fear that pushed me forward.

I stumbled into my room and felt blindly for my bags, knowing that if I caught even a glimpse of those Hepplewhite chairs I would devour them down to the very last woodchip.

Finally, my grip landed on the wheeled suitcase and I pulled it from the room on my hands and knees. I could feel my clothes falling out of it onto the floor, but I didn't care. All that mattered were the rose clippings, safe in their hidden pocket.

I ran for the door as my contorted guts threatened to fold me in half. The full force of the hunger was very close now. I could feel it rise up, preparing to break over me like a wave. I put my hand in my mouth and bit down hard. The pain refocused me, but I could not resist lapping at my delicious blood.

I ran by Anton as I made my way to the door. He'd moved from gorging on the tapestry to eating the silver platter itself. He bared his teeth at me as I passed. The veneers had been chipped away.

I dashed along the lawn, weeping freely now. I... I nearly made it to my car. I think I could have made it.

But a few feet away a brutal cramp knifed between my ribs and I toppled over, collapsing onto the grass. It was too much to bear. My stomach wrenched itself free of my mind. I was more hunger than human.

Without thinking, I dug my fingers deep into the cool earth and pulled up a handful of soil. My mouth seemed to open of its own accord, and I crammed my fist inside.

Chew, swallow, second handful. Chew swallow, now a third. A fourth. A fifth. I ate the grass, dirt, worms, stones, whatever was in reach. A screaming nausea urged me to vomit, but I ignored it, jamming another clod of earth into my mouth. My throat swallowed dutifully. I tried to rise, but the hunger wouldn't let me. I was pulled flat against the ground again. Closer to the food.

Whimpering, I tried to drag myself to my car with lacerated hands, devouring fistfuls of whatever my fingers touched as I clawed myself forward. Suddenly, my fingers were entwined in a silk scarf. I'd reached my bag.

In horror, I watched my hands reach into that secret pocket and reappear bloody, clenching the rose cuttings in their grip.

The cuttings had no taste, or none that I can remember. Just a searing pain as they sliced my gums and ripped my throat open from end to end.

Three. Three handfuls of thorns and bramble before I felt an iron grip grapple with my wrist. A second hand ripped the last of the stems from my grasp. I heard a hiss of pain as the thorns dug into someone else's flesh.

And then I was airborne, slung over a shoulder and carried away from the roses, the greenhouse, Anton, the entire estate. I strained my arms down until the muscles twanged like harp strings, trying to scoop up something, anything, I could devour. But it was no use. Tears of pain flowed freely as I felt myself starving to death, unable to do anything but watch as The Kincaid estate receded into the distance, until it was no larger than a mouthful.

The legs that carried me away wore dirt-encrusted boots. The CFO's words trickled through my mind: "the gardeners come three times a week."

Then, darkness.

I woke up in a nearby hospital. That's where I heard Anton was dead.

He'd been found filled with, well, you name it. The objects had ruptured his stomach, filling his entire abdomen before piling all the way up to the brim of his throat. An 18th century table runner was found dangling from his mouth, like a long cotton tongue.

I, on the other hand, had been lucky. Probably would have died if the gardener hadn't driven me directly to the ER. The internal damage wasn't so bad, even after the... additional procedure.

You can still see the scar on my stomach. Right here. That's where the CFO had them cut me open to get at the rose cuttings. I couldn't walk right for a few months but I get it: you can't leave money on the table. That's business 101.

Me? I got to head up the blue rose product roll out, a perfect opportunity for Kincaid Botanicals to move into the European market. Got a fat bonus out of it too. I'm thinking about spending it on an original Hepplewhite chair, or some Balzac first editions, or maybe a new gold pen or maybe a... a...

Ah, nevermind. Hey, do you wanna grab lunch? All of a sudden, I'm starving.