

Chapter One

Autumn, 1686

The great oak doors parted with a loud creak and in rushed my parents' voices. Startled, I glanced at the print of the merman, with his lion's face and devil's horns, his fishtail and webbed fins. I shut Aldrovandi's *Monstrorum Historia*. I needed somewhere to hide in the vast library, with its floor-to-ceiling shelving, its dark-wooded curiosity cabinets and sumptuous settee and tables. The stuffed Siberian bear near the window, frozen in a pose of attack up on its hind legs, claws and teeth bared, seemed a likely cover. Quickly, I slipped behind it, stowing the heavy book under my skirt.

Walking in step, my parents entered the draughty room. Papa had laid aside his silk breeches and jacket for the Labadists' plain attire, which enabled work in the fields, the iron forge or dairy; Ma wore the dress of the sect's women: black woollen habit, *bos-roc* cap, heavy dull black shoes.

'You needn't have come,' said Ma.

'Why won't you believe me?' replied Papa. The pleading in his voice made my stomach twist.

'It's not me you must convince.'

'But you have sway,' protested Papa.

Ma was sitting on the edge of a settee, as if sinking into its cushiony depths might soften her will. Lips drawn into a line, she studied Papa as if he were one of her caterpillars: she was distant and all-seeing, though I knew it was an act. He sat in the opposite armchair, right boot propped on his knee. His left foot shook ever so slightly. Peeping from around the side of the bear's furry haunch, I saw the apprehension in his features and, underneath, a wild desperation.

'You know our rules,' said Ma, level-voiced. 'You must demonstrate your commitment.'

Papa slowly breathed out. He picked at a stray thread near the button on his knee; ran his precise and sensitive draughtsman's fingers through his hair. 'I have. I've lugged stones, carded wool. I've hoed and watered. Isn't that enough?'

'You know very well what I mean.'

Papa placed his boots on the floor and leaned forward, closer to Ma. I glanced at the door, pulse ticking in my neck. Like me, my parents were not supposed to be here. To meet like this. Papa did not live in Walta Schloss with the other members of the elect. He resided in a tiny cottage, one of the many outbuildings dotting the estate, alongside every other individual and family who longed to be accepted as one of the Labadist elites. Unless he was welcomed into the community, he was not permitted to eat or take shelter in the grand manor.

'I know what you're doing, Maria. Hiding behind all this piety.'

'This is about your conscience and God,' replied Ma. 'It has nothing to do with me. If you wish to remain a part of our family, to join our people—'

Papa interrupted her, a tremor in his voice. 'I hardly recognise you. What happened to my strong-willed wife? Where has your defiance gone? Why are you so ...' He stumbled for the right word. 'Hidebound?'

For a long time my mother didn't respond. When she finally did, her voice was strained. 'Do not make this my mistake. You made your choice.'

'But you are the brothers' agent. Won't you persuade them?'

Why can't you let him stay? I silently begged Ma, long ago having taken Papa's side in my parents' disputes. *Where did you disappear to, Ma?* I felt like shaking her by the shoulders. I could not fathom her inability to accept Papa as he was. As he had always been. How could she not miss sitting with him of an evening and listening to the stories he made up? His soft, deep voice like the purr of a cat. I used to snuggle next to him, feel the comforting weight of his arm around my shoulder, weave my fingers around his and know I was safe.

'Why must you punish me? Is this worth it?' He opened his palms, gestured at their surrounds. 'Don't you care what happens to our daughters? How can the brothers' preaching be righteous when it splits our family in two?'

'It's too late,' said Ma, voice a whisper.

Papa spluttered, furious. 'I won't confess that my most natural actions, my very thoughts, are sins! I've demonstrated my repentance. Oh, I am not lofty like you. I'm but a man. But you ...' He paused. 'It pains me if this is what's become of your spirit.'

'Don't,' whispered Ma, tightening her lips.

Papa continued. 'I'll tell you what I renounce! I renounce the Labadists' insistence that earthly life's a dreary misery to be endured and not enjoyed. I reject all notion we live only to prepare for the afterlife. What of beauty? What of art? How can you turn your back on your very history?'

'You give yourself away,' said Ma. 'You chose worldly pleasures over your family. Over God. It's no mystery.'

I clenched my teeth. I'd not heard my parents quarrel with such finality. So much distance and desperation, as if something

irreversible had come between them. Each set against the other, to be swayed no more.

As if to confirm my suspicion, Ma rose from the settee, straightening the cuffs of her sleeves. Papa followed. Briefly they each met the other's gaze, looked away. Papa asked if there was any outstanding business she wished to discuss with him. Ma simply cleared her throat. Shoulders low, Papa shuffled towards the double doors, holding them open for Ma to pass through. Attempting to make my mother see sense, expressing his frustrations about the Labadists' many rules, seemed to have drained his very lifeforce.

I felt unwell. The end of my nose tickled and I rubbed it hard. Remaining behind the bear, I waited for the doors to close before daring to move. Safe, I crept out into the enormous room. I looked longingly at the thick volume one last time and slid it carefully back into its secret nook.



Oma, Ma, my sister, Johanna, and I had joined the Labadists at Walta Schloss only two seasons ago and I knew already they did not like children. The Labadists preached that parents should not grow too attached to their daughters and sons, lest it make them weak. Children were to be raised by the whole community. We ate in our own dining hall and attended chapel at a separate time to the adults. Night-time was hardest. It was difficult to sleep in a draughty dormitory with the smells and sounds of a score of girls my own age. Most of us were frightened by the least little mouse, the shadowy flicker of a candle, a harsh reprimand, the threatened switch. A terrible hunger in all of our bellies.

I suppose we were lucky to live with the elect inside the castle complex, surrounded by a gated moat, unlike many in the community.

The estate was a former medieval fort, known for centuries as the house of Walta, and I would never forget my first encounter with its grandeur, the castle at the end of an avenue fringed with stately lindens. Though at close quarters the estate wasn't quite so splendid. As we were travelling from Frankfurt, Ma had told us that the van Sommelsdijks – the richest family in all of Friesland – had purchased the manor several generations earlier, repairing and refurbishing the dilapidated dwellings.

'I don't care!' I had replied, sour-voiced.

Ma had glanced at me and frowned. But rather than reprimand my behaviour, she turned a page of the book she was reading. My older sister, Hanna, drew her eyes from the window – she had been studying the farms and paddocks of the Dutch Republic – to offer me a consolatory smile. I was feeling confused and on edge, my stomach twisted in knots.

I glanced down at our feet, the tips of our boots poking out beneath our dark woollen travelling cloaks. Oma had playfully knocked her toe against mine. Each time one of the coach's wheels encountered a pothole or rock I would wince. Wonder how Ma's trunks of vellums and pigments and brushes, her jars and nets for insect collecting, were faring as they lurched and jostled behind us in their separate coach. Were the rest of my family not troubled, relocating to a new country? Perhaps it was just me; after all, I was only eight years of age.

When I began to sniff, Oma had taken my gloved hand in hers. 'There, there, child,' she said, touching my chin, turning my face towards hers. I gazed into her kind, green-blue eyes, studied the texture of her soft cheeks, the crinkles around the corners of her mouth, the wispy silver curls escaping her cap, and attempted to smile. Oma had nudged her shoulder into mine, urged me to cheer up. We were embarking on a grand adventure, she said, could I not see it?

An inventive storyteller, she'd amused me all the way to Friesland with tales of armoured princes and bejewelled princesses, so that when we arrived at the schloss's medieval drawbridge my frayed nerves were wholly smoothed. Indeed, I was almost excited to begin our new life. But, oh, what disappointment when I discovered the conditions under which it would be lived.



Later that evening, after supper and confession in the children's room, I had an idea. Perhaps, when it came to my papa, I was not as helpless as I imagined. Just as the elect were expected to draw their own conclusions from the Holy Bible, I, too, might think for myself. Although Sisters Henrietta and Elsa walked between our dormitory beds, chiding us to be quiet, tapping our shoulders with sticks to stiffen our spines while we prayed, making sure our candles were snuffed, they did not linger in the children's wing. They seemed impatient to return to the main house's better lit and better warmed rooms. Instead, one of the maids, a sect member but of the outer circle, was sent to guard us through the night.

Carefully removing the cloak from the peg near my bed, I crept out into the hall. Checking up and down the wood-panelled corridor, I tiptoed along the carpeted floorboards, the occasional wall-torch lighting my way. As I hoped, the maid had dropped off to sleep at her station; she was curled up on one of the upholstered chaises and, every now and again, emitted a bear-growl of a snore. The bottom-floor kitchen was quiet, the low fire making strange shapes of the bowls and pots and forks on the enormous worktable. I skirted around the cook's cupboard bed – I could not chance waking her – and slipped out through the service doors. It was almost a full moon, and I was able to pick my way past the long buildings of the

stables and outhouses towards the cluster of dwellings and Papa's cottage.

He opened the door to my knock, glancing around before pulling me inside. 'What are you doing?'

I smiled and raised my shoulders. 'Shall I leave?'

'Dear Doda!' he said, shaking his head and laughing. He had me sit at the table in the centre of the room where he had been working. There were pencils, a knife and scraper, measuring rules. Papa had ground and stretched a whole calf's vellum, on which a map was being drawn. Like Ma, Papa was an artist. Where Ma was brilliant with colour, Papa possessed enormous skill with detail, sketching under the magnification of custom-made lenses. While Ma excelled in miniatures, Papa's speciality was the panorama of a stork's or pelican's eye.

'Why are you drawing the estate?' I asked.

'Why not?' replied Papa, raising his shoulders and winking, as if he kept a secret from me. 'You must tell me what I've missed.'

'There's a fountain in the middle of the courtyard,' I offered.

'So there is.'

Ma's stepfather, Opa Marrel, who'd been responsible for her artistic training, had also apprenticed Papa – and Albertus Mignon too – in his Frankfurt studio. Opa Marrel himself had learned from the best painters of the day: Georg Flegel, Jan Davidsz de Heem. Although Papa could draw floral still lifes, he honed his skills in fine ink drawings, cathedral interiors and townscapes, which were etched and engraved into prints. Early in their marriage, he had helped Ma with the background detail and copperplate for the volumes she published on caterpillars and flowers.

'What about Rabbit Island?' Unless you counted the moat and drawbridge, Rabbit Island was the estate's most interesting feature. Along with the pond, it had a tumbledown maze, the hedges overgrown.

‘I was leaving that for you.’

His plan, he explained, was to curry the favour of Brothers Yvonn and Copper with a meticulous map of the estate’s grounds, which he could help them print on their presses. The Labadists already published materials about the community, distributing pamphlets and treatises written by their founder, the late Jean de Labadie, as well as one of their most famous adherents, the brilliant artist and wordsmith Anna Maria van Schurman.

‘Don’t forget the apple trees,’ I said, pointing to the left of the granary stores, where the orchard was planted.

‘Would you like to draw them?’ He handed me a pencil.

There was much to add to the sketch’s rudimentary beginnings. Walta Schloss sold the productions of its industries throughout Friesland and beyond. Papa must not forget the buttery, the mills, the tannery, foundry and brewery, the kitchen gardens, the chapel and pastures, and of course the rows of linden trees surrounding the entire complex.

I drew a cluster of apple trees. There were also peach, apricot and plum to be added in, all of which made me aware of the tightness in my belly. I could almost see a bowl of fruit glistening in the centre of the table. ‘I’m so hungry, Papa.’

Papa put his pencil down and looked at me. ‘I have something. From Nuremberg.’ He drew open a cupboard, taking out a bottle of herrings, another of apricots in honey. My mouth watered as he buttered what remained of the bread. The Labadists practised self-discipline as a pathway to God and we were told to relish our empty stomachs. I could not recall the last time I had felt full.

Jamming the honey-bread into my mouth, I scanned my eyes over the simple interior of the cottage. I had never lived in such small lodgings. The lime-plastered walls and heavy low beams of the room made it appear unfinished. There were just two cabinets, one of food and another for the meagre items Papa had been permitted to keep.

The room's only decorations were the two small paintings he had packed inside his trunk and hung either side of the fireplace: a still life of roses, beetles and tulips by Opa Marrel and a vellum watercolour of a dandelion and tussock moth in all its stages of metamorphosis painted by my mother.

'I have something else for you,' said Papa, disappearing into the alcove where he slept. Ever curious, I hopped down from my chair and inspected the kitchen. In the tiny larder a turnip and gourd, an onion, a half-eaten sausage, herbs, a near-empty milk jug. My thoughts strayed to my father's immense belongings: the equipment for his printing business, his art collection, his house full of heavy furniture, his chests of clothing. I could only hope he had not sold them like Ma had done with ours, presenting the proceeds to the community to be divided amongst the worshippers.

'I made it for you.' Sitting on his palm, a walnut shell. Inside, a wooden girl – so small and fine.

'It's lovely, Papa.' I did my best to not cry. I took the figurine and put it on the table near my pencil to look at.

'Careful,' said Papa, as I drew another fruit tree. 'Not too many.'

A rap sounded on the door. Startled, I glanced up, meeting my father's eyes. It had grown late. All of a sudden, I felt frightened to return to the girls' hall.

'Dort,' whispered a young woman's voice. Hanna, my sister.

'You'd best go with her,' said Papa, opening the door.

Hanna, ten years older than me, was dressed head to toe in black, except for the white bib of her habit, its collar buttoned at her throat so as to cover every inch of her chest from prying eyes. She wore a black cloak around her neck and had twisted her hair into a simple bun. The *bos-roc* cap was secured atop, making her unrecognisable from the fair young Frankfurter woman she'd been, who would never step outside our house without first intricately dressing her hair. Impressed

speechless, I would resolve to copy each and every one of her tricks just as soon as I was old enough. But time spent on one's appearance was considered a vanity by the Labadists and Hanna had given it away for God.

Standing in the doorway in the lantern's dim light, my sister's silhouette could easily have passed for Ma's. They had the same broad cheekbones, flaxen hair and deep, dark blue eyes; their heart-shaped faces finished with a charmingly cleft chin. The two were of similar build, possessed of no greater height than a middling German woman and naturally slender. Dark-haired and pale rather than golden-skinned, I'd been told many times about my resemblance to Papa; I had inherited his blue-green eyes and upturned nose, his high forehead and wide mouth. With my square shoulders and long fingers it was assumed that I would one day grow tall and sleek and slim, just as he was.

'How did you know I was here?' I ventured, alarmed.

'You'll get us into trouble!' Hanna whispered, curling her fingers to beckon me. She caught me by the shoulder, guiding me outside, as if claiming me back from Papa. For the briefest moment I met his eyes. I glanced at Hanna and saw the wavering in her will, as if, face to face with the physical presence of our father, the firm resolve she professed to Ma began to falter. But then, as if tearing apart a cobweb in her path, the conviction returned to her eyes and she turned away from him. Wordlessly, she steered me down the side of the cottage, her lantern flickering shadows on the pebbled path all the way back to the schloss.

